

The book cover features a close-up of two muscular men. The man on the left is seen from the back, showing his shoulder blades and arm. The man on the right is facing forward, showing his chest and abdomen, with a blue flame tattoo on his right shoulder. They are holding hands. The background is a deep red with a subtle, swirling pattern. A dark red banner is positioned across the middle of the image.

Faerily Imperfect Series

# Freeze Frame

Mia Watts

# *Freeze Frame*

*A Faerily Imperfect Story*

By Mia Watts

*Resplendence Publishing, LLC*

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*To all the men I've ever loved before.*

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## *Chapter One*

Dill Harper leaned against the outside of the club and spun his car keys around the key ring on his finger. *Eden*, already alive and hopping, had a line circling the block out of sight. He watched the muscled bouncers stonewall another underage kid before turning his attention to the lot.

Rough-hewn brick plucked at his leather coat. Dill settled in, stretching out his long legs. He watched club wannabes though the long, black fringe of his bangs. Midnight breezes sifted his hair across his vision as he sank deeper into the shadows and waited to see the only reason he had come tonight: his mark, Mason Haliday.

Dill's cell phone buzzed at his waist. He ignored it, looking intently out of the darkness. Sage, his brother, would have to wait. After having followed Mason for almost a month, Dill knew the other man's haunts. Mason would be arriving any minute, and so far, Dill hadn't been able to get the DNA sample he'd been hired to obtain. There was always breaking and entering, but Mason's apartment overlooked the entire alley. It made sneaking in difficult.

It's why Sage had asked him to take the job. Only Dill could freeze time and escape with the sample. Neither one of them had counted on the fact that Mason fired every one of Dill's carnal fantasies.

Well, Sage still didn't know, so long as he hadn't been peeking into Dill's thoughts.

The faery curse had only worked in Dill's favor once, he rationalized. There was no reason to think he could freeze time without consequence when it really mattered and not get caught. The faeries had seen to that, and he had wondered why there'd been one moment's reprieve from the faery curse.

Freezing time had worked on command only once. He'd relived those perfect minutes over and over—always wondering if there'd be another aberration, another time he could stand in Mason's presence without being seen.

He should have taken the sample then, but Dill hadn't been able to do more than look at him, taking in Mason's darkly clothed form, inch by luscious inch, as Dill's heart had pounded almost painfully with want. His fingers had shaken to touch the other man. How he refrained, Dill would never know.

"Where are you?" Dill whispered into the night. He twisted his wrist to see the face of his watch, which had slid to cover hidden pulse points. *Midnight. He'll be here*, he assured himself.

As men went, Mason wasn't Dill's type. Usually, Dill wanted someone easy to leave. He liked transient boy-toys who danced to throbbing acoustical beats under strobing club lights, who laughed too loudly and shivered when he kissed them. He liked being the one who walked away when things got clingy, breaking ties before they'd bonded, and moving on before the sweethearts pinned their futures to him. The boy-toys Dill dated expected quick fucks and speedy departures.

Mason wasn't a boy-toy. God, no, he was a solid wall of unrelenting muscle. Getting a glimpse of him made Dill's thighs tighten and his breath catch in stupid effeminate ways that Dill laughed at from the prissy set. Mason freaked him out and turned him on, scared the shit out of him and brought him to full, erect discomfort with the sound of his voice.

*He's a mark, not a fuck-buddy*, he reminded himself, trying to keep his libido in check. But anticipation didn't seem to care that this job made Dill feel differently.

Dill was dominant, had always been a leader in relationships, yet Mason out-alpha-ed him in a way that made his inner guy cower with respect and intimidation. God, he wanted to get fucked by that cock. He wanted the right to hang out in Mason's posse of friends like he belonged.

Unless he invested in some serious body art, that wasn't likely to happen.

Unless he dropped the job, risked the reputation of Harper Security, Mason would always be off-limits. Dill was fairly certain that the kind of guy Mason appeared to be wouldn't take it lightly that he'd been under surveillance for the past month and that Dill had been the one to invade his privacy.

He grimaced. Yeah, there was that. Mason was definitely a private sort of guy and spying on him wouldn't win Dill any Brownie points. Shattered trust before there was ever a chance to earn it. Not the thing on which strong relationships were built. Assuming that's what Dill wanted.

A roar of motorbikes entering the lot at the opposite end tore him from his thoughts. Dill straightened in expectation. They'd take their time getting off the bikes. They'd dismount their *hogs* in that lazy way which suggested they didn't really want to leave the throbbing beast behind. Even after they were off, their thighs would continue to vibrate from the powerful motors.

He admired the relaxed way Mason drew his leg up and over. It always had Dill's balls in a pinch because he couldn't help but think Mason would use the same sexy move after fucking his brains out.

With any luck, Dill could make that man's inner thighs tingle and thrill with the same kind of powerful rush. Dill kept his eyes on him, watching through lowered lashes and downward tipped chin. Mason wouldn't be able to see him in the shadows, but Dill didn't take the chance. The man had that kind of charisma and sex appeal which makes one's teeth hurt and lungs ache if looked at fully.

Mason's guys congregated in a mass of jeans and leather, testosterone and tattoos. The last guy joined the group as they began moving toward the club with hoots and shoves. Mason seemed above the ruckus, at a distance while standing amidst them and untouched by the jibes and nudges of the others. He fucking coasted.

Rubber squealed in the distance. Engines revved and tires thump-thumped over the curb as three cars poured into the lot. The rear car blocked the exit. One plowed down the bikes as the bikers' laughs turned to raging shouts. Men with chains spilled out of the vehicles, advancing on the bikers.

*Shit! A beat-down? A fucking beat-down?* What had Mason's crowd done piss someone off that bad?

"Run," Dill shouted, breaking every rule about getting involved with a mark's interests.

Too far away, too engulfed in the miasma of clinking chain on cracking bone, of popping fists and cries of pain, Dill's shout went unheard. He leaped forward, racing toward the fray without a second thought on what he hoped to accomplish. As quickly as the fight started, it was over. The club pulsed on, behind him. The line and bouncers out of view around the corner had missed the whole cut up.

The bikes were destroyed. Two guys were down. One stabbed through his leather vest, blood pooling on concrete beneath him. The other, Mason, lay face down. Dill ran to him as the other bikers took off behind the cars, leaving their fallen men behind.

"Mason. Mason, answer me, goddamn it," he demanded, squatting down beside him.



Dill gripped Mason's shoulder, and rolled him. Mason roused, swore, and swung a fist. It connected and Dill's teeth clacked together sharply. He shook his head to clear the brightly exploding pricks of light in his vision as Mason fell back, losing consciousness.

"Hey! Hey, you," a man shouted by the club.

Dill looked up. The man waved a cell phone in the air.

"You stay right there. The police are coming."

It didn't sound like a Good Samaritan call. It sounded like a threat. Fuck if he'd stick around for that. "Sorry, buddy," he muttered at Mason. "I'm not leaving you here, and I'm not sticking around. You gotta come with me." And fuck if that didn't make Dill's cock jump a little in anticipation.

Sage let out a long, low whistle. "This one's a brute, bro."

"Yeah." Dill's lips twitched with a hint of pride. His arms folded across his chest, he was the standoff-ish version of his brother's stance. "This is the guy you assigned to me."

Sage relaxed with his hands on his hips.

"Did you call Mom?" Dill asked.

"She's coming. She has to pick up some mini-quiche for her class," Sage said. He motioned to Mason. "What happened?"

"Beat-down swarm. What class?"

"Your Vagina: The Cave of Creation," Sage answered.

The two men looked at each other and shuddered.

"God, vaginas and mushy food with cheese? Who thought of that?" Dill asked.

"Fuck if I know." Sage motioned to Mason's sleeping form by way of changing the subject. "Can we get back to this guy?"

He didn't want to. Mason would want privacy and Dill wanted to give it to him. The truth was, Mason was still a mark. He was their contract. No matter how much Dill wanted to protect him, he wasn't the reason they were there. Jensen Price was.

He pulled back the sheet, revealing the gauze that already showed red from the seeping wound in Mason's side. "He took a knife."

Sage looked at Dill askance. "The best place for him is the hospital."

"They'd ask questions, call the police."

"It's not your problem," Sage said. "You shouldn't have touched him."

"You aren't that cold, and neither am I."

"No, but it complicates the job by a lot," Sage pointed out. "If nothing else, you can get your sample and turn it in. That was your job. Now it's over."

He thought about the blood soaked gauze in the sterile bag. He didn't know why Jenson wanted it. It wasn't his business to know why, just to *do*. Well, he'd *done*. He could have just taken Mason's shirt and sent it off to Jenson instead of washing it. He told himself it was because he didn't want Mason to know someone was testing his blood.

It came down to shame. Dill liked what he'd seen of Mason. Every last sneer and each unforgiving edge of roughness he longed to soothe. A guy like Mason wouldn't forgive him for invading his space, stealing his fucking DNA, and sending it off to a stranger. Hell, Dill didn't forgive himself for doing what he knew he had to do.

"It's not," Dill said, trying to think of a reason to keep watching Mason, reasons to stay near him.

"Walk away, Dill."

He shook his head. "What if Jenson needs follow up? What if those guys come back and attack Mason? Don't you think that a man interested enough in hiring us to acquire his DNA sample might have some curiosity about anyone trying to kill his mark?"

"Maybe. Did you call him and tell him you had the sample?"

"Not yet."

Sage shot him a look of disbelief. "You brought the mark home. Not only is that a conflict of interest, but it puts a crimp in my plans to get paid. Call him. Send the sample to the drop-off point. Bill him. That's all we need to do."

"Were you this snake-hearted with Joe on *his* job?" he asked, referring to Sage's husband.

"Joe wasn't my mark. He was my employer." Sage sighed. "Look, I get that you don't want this guy to die. I knew you'd be a soft touch with some of our jobs, and I have to compensate for that. Let Mom heal him and then send him on his way. If you occasionally keep tabs on him, *after* you've told the contact what happened tonight, it should be because the job was extended. First, get the invoice in, and take care of the original job."

Dill nodded. His gaze fell on Mason's sleeping form. He had no idea the turmoil he'd caused. Sage was right. He should call the client and finish it. If Jenson employed him further, then so be it.

*God, he's sexy.*

Dill shifted his weight and refolded his arms. He'd been tempted to peel Mason's jeans off his body. He should have. He wanted to. If he happened to get a slow look at the man's bulge, it couldn't be construed as more than examining the mark, could it?

"Did the faeries grant you X-ray vision, too?" Sage asked on a snort. "You're boring holes through the sheet with your smolder-vision."

"I didn't look for other wounds. This shouldn't have knocked him out. I hope Mom gets here soon to heal him."

"Well, clearly he's brain damaged," Sage said, bending to study the markings on Mason's bald head.

Alarm sped through Dill. *Concussion? Head trauma?* "What do you see?" he asked, sharply. Dill's fingers brushed the visible side of Mason's smooth scalp.

*I don't see any marks. The pillow isn't bloody.*

"I see an enormous tattooed skeleton claw cupping the back of his head with some wicked metallic looking talons. Jesus, how far down does his tat go? A guy with this much death art has some serious brain deficiencies." Sage stood, shaking his head. "Why are you protecting him? I don't get it."

Dill breathed a sigh of relief. "Is that it? Is that all you see? There isn't a cut somewhere, is there?"

"Relax, bro. No slice and dice on his head. Just sharp pointy objects injecting copious amounts of black ink not two inches from his central nervous system and biological mainframe."

"Well, if that's all," Dill said, smiling through his relief at Sage's humor.

Sage snorted. He clapped his hand on Dill's back. "Good luck. When this beast wakes up, he may not be too keen on finding himself in another man's bed. Call the client while you're waiting for Mom."

Dill cocked his head. "I will."

"Next time you play nursemaid to a mark, and need to carry him, change your mind. I'm going to be sore for a week." Sage flexed his arms, ruefully.

"Pussy."

"Nah, that's Mom's department." Sage gestured to Dill's face. "You might want to put some ice on that. You're going to have quite a shiner when that thing develops."

"I will," Dill said, waving off his concern. "Why's he still out?"

"You're asking me?"

"Yeah, you're the brother with the ability to read minds." Dill's fingers tightened on his arms in exasperation.

"High tension moments, this isn't. You know how it works." Sage faced him, narrowing his eyes. "What aren't you saying?"

"Nothing." Dill eyed his brother nervously. The fuck if he wanted his thoughts read by a nosey sibling. "Cut it out."

"What is it about *this* mark?"

"Mason Haliday," Dill replied as though saying his name answered the question.

"You don't fucking *know* him, do you? Tell me you didn't cozy up to a mark," Sage said, sharply. "Dill, for fuck's sake, you didn't, did you?"

"No. He just seems like a guy who's had it rough."

"And you're his avenging angel," Sage summarized.

"What if he dies?" Dill argued, feeling like they were ten and eleven again. He made a determined effort to change the subject. "Do you think he's concussed?"

"If he is, you'd better wake him up. Sleeping through a concussion could be dangerous."

Dill sat down on the bed at Mason's hip. Leaning across his torso, he dropped a hand on Mason's shoulder and lightly shook him. "Mason, wake up. Can you hear me?"

Mason didn't move.

"God, I wish Mom would hurry up and get here."

"Soon."

"Fuck. I should have taken him to the emergency room," Dill muttered. "I just didn't want the cops hauling him off to jail until he had a chance to defend himself."

"Bullshit. His life *saga* isn't for you to clean up."

Dill shot a glower over his shoulder at Sage.

"Bullshit," Sage repeated, this time chuckling, too. "They'd have fixed him up first and then questioned him. What *you* wanted was to play nursemaid to the pile of ink and leather. *You* wanted to see him occupying your space. I bet it'll provide a lot of great jack-off sessions later."

"I acted, okay? Is that what you want me to admit? That I acted without thinking the whole thing through?"

"Pretty much," Sage answered, grinning reluctantly.

Dill let out a sigh of disgust, resumed gently shaking Mason's shoulder.

"Bet you were hoping I could tell you whether or not he has the hots for you, too, huh?" Sage asked gently.

"Crossed my mind," Dill confessed, glancing back. "He's still out, Sage. It's more important that he not die, wouldn't you say? For the client's sake?"

"He's not. He's dreaming about the parking lot fight. It's pretty choppy and mixed up with flashes of dry grass and a broken, white fence." Sage shrugged. "Looks like any other dream I've seen but none of it is deep or sluggish like a hard sleep or a comma."

Dill looked at him speculatively. "I thought you said you couldn't read him."

"Ever since Joe, I've had a little more flexibility about when I see things. Flora said the same thing about her transportation gift after she and Tate got together. Right now, Mason is having some major anxiety, though I don't get why being stabbed in a parking lot has anything to do with open fields and dry grass."

"Free association," Dill supposed.

Sage checked his watch. "I gotta go. Mom's gonna be here any minute and you know how she is. She's on this kick for me to hire some faery kid. I'm really not interested."

Dill snorted. "You think you'll win that fight?"

"Between Mason in your bed and Fauna not being married yet, I'd say I like my chances a lot better."

"Good point."

Mason moaned incoherently. Dill turned his attention back to the unconscious man, barely grunting when his brother threw a *see ya*, and left. Mason's head jerked to the side, his brow furrowed and tight.

"You're okay," Dill said, softly.

"Oh. Oh, dear," his mom said from beside him.

Dill startled, not having heard her approach. "Hey, Mom. Can you help him?" Looking up into his mother's pixie face, he noted the concern in her blue-eyed gaze as she moued her lips and tipped her head in consideration.

"My quiche is going to get cold," she said randomly. "You boys play so rough sometimes."

"I didn't do this."

"No one is assigning blame, Dill-weed," she assured with her affectionate term.

He hated that nickname, and frowned to express it.

"The universe doesn't work randomly. For you to have been there for this moment does mean you have something to do with this poor boy's state." Her look leveled on him.

She always seemed to approach problems from the back end. Most of the time, he didn't bother picking through the tangled mess of meaning because, most of the time, there wasn't one.

"Mom, if there were any way to have stopped this, I'd have done it."

"I know, Dilly."

*Oh, God, not another one. If she was whipping out the Dilly already, the next one would be Dilly-boy.*

"That's why you were there."

"Whuh? I thought you said it wasn't my fault, right before you said it was. Now you're saying that my being there caused it while it also didn't?"

"Uh huh," she agreed, brightly. She patted Dill's cheek. "You're so smart."

Dill closed his eyes, and took a deep, calming breath. "Mom, can you fix him?"

"Sure, I can."

"Mom, please fix him," he said, hoping she'd get the hint.

She put her tiny, pale hands on Mason's thickly muscled chest. Catching her bottom lip under her teeth she stared off into space as the skin beneath her palms glowed, spreading outward until Mason looked like a human light bulb. Just as suddenly, she got up and caressingly patted Dill's cheek.

"I fixed your eye, too. Now. I have to get my quiche back in the oven, Dill-doh. Why don't you come over and say hello to the ladies?"

"Mom! Do *not* add that nickname to your repertoire."

She blinked, a vaguely hurt look crossing her face. "Why not, Dilly-boy? I like dildos."

He felt the blush climb his neck. "*Because* I don't want to think of my mother's fuck toys. *Ever.*"

"Oh. Why didn't you say so?"

He sighed with increasing exasperation. He loved his mom, really he did, but she could be kind of oblivious sometimes. If she whipped out that new nickname at Thanksgiving or something, he'd never live it down.

He looked from his mother to Mason. "Is he done?"

"Resting. Being well takes a lot out of a human. Come meet the ladies."

"I'll pass, Mom, but thanks, vagina caves aren't my thing. I want to be here when he wakes up."

She tapped her foot on the floor, reminding him all over again how tiny she was, how faery-like. "Dilly, you just watch your step. This boy's injuries aren't your fault even though you caused them."

He wondered if he looked as confused as he felt.

She kissed his forehead. "I'll save you some quiche."

*God, no.* Wedge shaped warmed cheese and mushy egg casserole with a bunch of vaginally curious women was definitely something he could take a pass on. Especially if she called him *Dildo* in their presence. But he smiled and nodded since it facilitated her exit.

Now alone with Mason, he carefully peeled back the gauze to see that the cut had healed perfectly. Only trace redness remained. Mason breathed easier, and his brow had smoothed.

Dill put his hand over Mason's heart, telling himself all he meant to do was check the steadiness of his pulse. It didn't stop him from running his fingers through the sparse nest of hair on his pecs, or from tracing the line of dark, crisp curls that traveled to Mason's waistband.

A man as hard and unapproachable as Mason should have had rough skin. It wasn't though. Its firm texture heated the pads of Dill's fingers with smooth resilience. Dill wanted nothing more than to nibble the strange combination of delineated muscle and pliable abdomen.

He knew from stripping the man's shirt off, that the skeletal claw design morphed into a tattoo of a spinal column that tracked Mason's vertebrae, making him even more intimidating.

Mason's large frame, thick wrists, and well-muscled physique had always been dressed in negligent fashion. Sometimes with worn jeans and black cotton shirt, he nevertheless always sported a chain attached to his black leather belt. His biceps were circled with tribal tattoos and, on the inside of one of his wrists, inked scar tissue spoke of a homemade design given to him sometime in the past.

He looked like a mean sonofabitch and, for the life of him, Dill couldn't figure out what drew him to Mason like a moth to a flame. All he knew was that Mason filled his eyes, lurked in the spare moments of his thoughts, permeated his pores with danger and life, and captivated his curiosity with heart-pounding certainty.

"Mason. Wake up."

Mason stirred.

Dill's heart felt like it was in his throat. What would Mason say when he woke? Mason didn't know he existed. Dill's job was to lurk in the background, watch, and snag some DNA for a client.

While Dill knew a helluva lot about him, technically, they'd never met. Just that one moment when Dill had first seen Mason and time stood still. His faery gift in action, he supposed. It had been enough for Mason to take the risk, walk around the frozen man and his posse, to look in his charcoal eyes, and shiver when he felt as though Mason had *seen* him.

That wasn't possible, though. That wasn't how the gift worked. When time stood still, everything in that moment ceased to move, caught between one second and the next while Dill existed out of time as a misplaced observer.

"Mason," Dill murmured, eager to see those pitch eyes trained on him.

Mason inhaled sharply. His eyes opened, narrowed.

"*You*," he growled, acidly.

His arm cocked, and Mason's fist connected with Dill's cheek, knocking him senselessly to the side. Mason fell off the bed, rolling unsteadily to his hands and knees.

Stunned, Dill shook his head trying to clear it of the throbbing pain in his cheekbone and the high whistle ringing through his hearing.

"Get the fuck away from me, you freak," Mason snarled.

Dill watched him, trying to make sense of what was happening. Mason leaped to his feet. Instantly, his face turned ashen and he clutched his side where the stab wound had been. With a grunt, he collapsed to his knees.

"What the fuck? What the fuck?" Mason rambled, urgently.



## *Chapter Two*

Mason Haliday's side burned like deep searing fingers of fire had pierced him. Pressing a hand over it as he winced against the pain, he kept his eyes on the tall man in front of him.

He tentatively tried his feet again, still clutching his side. Physical pain, he could handle. People were different. People destroyed. The man across from him made the rule. He reordered Mason's perceptions, things he'd always taken for granted, and tossed them into the wind.

"You know me?" the man asked, surprised.

Warily, Mason nodded, rose to his full height as his fingers spasmed on the stitching pain in his side. "Stay away," Mason rasped. "Stay the fuck away from me."

Confusion knit the man's brow and his gaze narrowed. Instinctively, Mason winced, preparing for an unknown blow. How did he manifest his ungodly power? Would narrowing his eyes make everything cease to move, or was it an incantation, or a wave of his large hands? Whatever it was, Mason knew he could do it. He'd seen it happen. Hell, he'd been there when it had happened and it still made him sweat.

The man held up his hands and took a step back. He continued to watch Mason as the silence stretched. Gaze darting around the room, Mason saw his shirt within reach and swatted his hand out for it. Flames of pain burned his entire left side and he grunted half in anger, half in frustration, for appearing weak when he most needed to appear strong and imposing.

The man shouldn't see this side of him. He was a predator, lurking in the shadows, watching, waiting. Like he was now. Like he *had* been for the past several days.

"You were stabbed," the man said, calmly. His low tones resonated across the short distance with buttery warmth.

It was enough to pause Mason, then send him into overdrive as he tugged on his torn shirt. He felt the slice in the side of the knit, glanced to see that the cut fabric opened over the

place from which his pain radiated. The fabric smelled freshly laundered, and blood could have been washed from it, but that didn't explain the one glaring piece of proof that made this man a liar.

"There's no wound. What did you do, drug me?" Mason snarled, suddenly feeling violated.

Dill shook his head. He appeared steady, his feet slightly apart, and his arms folded across his chest. He made an imposing figure standing well over six feet tall and every line of his body focused on Mason. His chin had lowered until he had leveled a look on him as though Mason were an errant child bent on misbehavior.

Mason didn't like it. He'd seen that look too many times in his youth. This time, Mason was a fully-grown man living his own life, having kicked his years of foster care to the back recesses of his mind. Usually. Sometimes. Occasionally. Almost never.

It was a truth he fought. Those years would never go away. Fuck every one of them to hell.

"No wound, asshole. No stabbing. I'm just gonna walk out of here and you're going to let me." He'd work it out later. He'd figure out what happened, how he'd gotten there, and what the fuck interest this guy had in singling him out for his sick inhuman time freezing shit.

Later. When he was safely away.

"Someone healed you," he murmured, as though it were no more unusual than the sun going up in the morning, or descending in the evening.

Mason knew better than that. No one did anyone favors without a reason. He'd learned years ago that even a skinned knee didn't get a kid a band-aid. That kind of shit happened on TV, not in the real world. Suck it up. Take your licks when you get 'em and go back for more. Pain was fleeting. People lingered, eating you up from the inside until you were a shell of a person for trying to please them. Until you'd lost yourself, your integrity, your strength and then they disposed of you like so much rubbish.

That's how he knew the guy was lying. Yeah, he could do some fucked up stuff that broke the laws of physics—Mason had *seen* him do it once—but no one did a good turn without expecting a favor. So whether or not he'd been miraculously healed, *he* wanted Mason to think so, which meant one thing—the fucker wanted something and Mason sure as hell wasn't going to owe him *shit*.

"Without a mark?" Mason asked, buying time as well as an explanation. He scanned the room for an impromptu weapon.

"She's good."

"Who?"

"You don't know her," the man said, shrugging off the answer. He took a step forward.  
"You'll be sore for a couple of days."

"Stay where you are, fucker."

The man cocked a brow at the insult, but didn't move. "You're welcome."

Standing upright hurt. Badly. Mason wrapped his arms around his torso and bent to ease the uncomfortable stretching of muscles and flesh over the affected spot. Wooziness made the floor tip. If he could just keep the insane guy talking, he'd buy himself some time to grit his teeth against the pain and make a run for it.

"You'll be sore for a few days. The wound is healed, but your body sustained a lot of trauma," the man murmured.

It was times like this Mason wished people walked around with those blue and white name badges. *Hello, my name is...* would be so helpful in clearing up his pseudo-stalker's identity. Not that he had much faith in the legal system, but at least there would be a record of a restraining order.

Mason didn't feel drugged, yet he wouldn't put it past the other guy. He remembered the fight. He remembered the sickening sound of his gut puncturing which joined with remembered sensation. It had been like a dull knife piercing a milk-filled balloon. The same resistance. The same thickness of seeping fluid. He remembered watching Diego fall, his mouth working like a beached fish and his eyes looking back at him, sightlessly. Then it had been over. Because that's when Mason had fallen. The pain from the stabbing hadn't begun at that point. Sure, he'd felt it. He could even logically process what had happened, but other than the poker of ice—he supposed that's how his body had interpreted the fine cutting edge of the knife—filling his side, there'd been nothing. Until now.

"I'm going to leave," Mason said cautiously.

His mind struggled to process that moment against this. Cold, dark asphalt verses warm, plush carpet. Staring at Diego as he died and faded from his sight verses the virile, sharp-eyed gaze of this man.

One had to do with the other. He was certain of it. No, they didn't match up. Didn't appear to be from the same world, yet Mason *knew* this guy had information.

All Mason had to do was decide if he wanted to get it now, or later. His twinging side said *later*. The tight hitch in his breath said *both*. Lord, but his crazy stalker psychopath was sexy. He had confidence and stability and gazed at him solidly with a look that spoke of concern and determination.

"You can leave, if you can stay on your feet. I'd tell you to call one of your pals, but they ran," the man said.

Mason didn't need anyone. He never needed anyone. That's why he hung out with the fly-by-nights. They were little more than moving mannequins. Except Diego. With blinding certainty, Mason knew he couldn't go without knowing what had happened to him.

"Did you leave Diego?" Mason asked, swallowing his pride.

Diego, the only brother he had. One of many faces from one of many foster homes. One runny-nosed kid that wouldn't go away no matter how hard Mason had pushed him.

"Who's Diego?"

Mason sneered. "Guess you don't know me so well."

The man's eyes grew wary. "Boyfriend? Lover?"

Mason didn't answer. Why give this guy more information than he had?

"Groupie?" the man added.

"Did you bring him?" Mason asked, instead of answering.

The man's gaze faltered. "I only brought you. You were the only one still alive who didn't run."

A knot formed in Mason's chest. A blast of cold overshadowed the paltry pain in his side. This one centered in his sternum, then crept outward with icy fingers. It became nausea. So this is what it felt like to lose family. Mason swallowed through the tightness in his throat.

He'd always been alone. Now he had the body count to prove it. He didn't know how his mother had done it, but he supposed she'd been a cold-hearted bitch.

"Ah. Your brother, then."

Mason's gaze jerked to his. How had he known?

"I have a brother. He's an ass most of the time, but I'd miss him if he weren't around."

"Did I ask?" Mason snapped.

"I'd have brought him, if I'd known," he said gently.

Mason rubbed his side. Nothing made him pissier than pity. Pissy was great for finding his strength. He felt for his back pocket.

"Your knife is in the other room."

"Fuck," Mason swore.

"I'd enjoy that. Buy me coffee and we'll talk about it."

Mason bit back a surprised laugh. So this guy swung his way. Good to know. He could almost forget that he could freeze time. The reminder set Mason back on edge.

"Where's my cell?" he asked, feeling trapped again.

"With your knife. Didn't know if you had an Uzi app for that thing."

"Says the guy who can freeze time."

The other man stilled. His gaze sharpened. "Excuse me?"

"Don't try any funny stuff. Just give me a phone and I'll get out of your hair." Mason wobbled, stretching his hand out to the black console beside the bed.

"You'd call one of the guys who left you to die?" the man asked.

Mason stumbled. The man lurched forward. Mason's fall ceased, freezing him at a forty-five degree angle, his head inches from the corner of the small table. His body cemented, refusing the commands he sent them to move. Fingers in half-reach for the phone, body neither held up nor falling, sinew and bone stilled. His voice quieted. The need to breathe, his heart to beat, ceased.

There'd been one other time when that had happened. This guy had been there, too, inches from him. His eyes had traveled over Mason's body with a look that joined curiosity and lust. It was a look Mason had never seen on another human being and one which made him shudder at the core of his being.

However the man did it, he had stopped...everything. *He* had forced Mason to hold still and let himself be examined. He had stolen Mason's freewill, something he'd sworn never to lose again after his eighteenth birthday. But with a look, this man had controlled him.

And Mason had hated it. Like before, he simply lived in that moment between the last and the next.

Trapped. Bound in time. His mind screamed for freedom. His voice had gone the way of his heartbeat. Yet he *saw*.

"Shit. Sorry about that. I never know when this ability will fire off."

The man talked as though he didn't think anyone heard him. There was a sigh, too. Mason couldn't see him since he'd been in the process of turning away when time stopped. He willed his fingers to move, focusing the entirety of his attention on the tip of one finger only to fail.

Hands clasped Mason's waist. Sensation spread out from where the man touched him, wakening Mason's skin like the numb tingles of a sleeping limb.

The man pushed him to the side so that he wouldn't crack his head when his body came back to itself.

"What's...going...on?" the man muttered sluggishly.

Mason's heart galloped to a beat. Air exploded from his lungs and he fell toward the bed. The man behind fell heavily on top of him, pressing Mason's face and chest to the mattress.

A grunt puffed over his ear and then all motion, sound, stopped from his dubious savior. At least this time it wasn't Mason who froze. Mason smiled, triumphantly pushed up causing the man on his back to roll away.

Shakily, Mason looked over. His strength was minimal. His side still ached. Diego was still dead. But success shivered over him as he grinned down at his would-be captor. Now frozen on his back and staring up at Mason with stunned awareness in his eyes as his only communication tool.

"See how you like it, fucker," Mason said. "It's my turn. Who the fuck are you?"

\* \* \* \*

Dill watched helplessly as Mason climbed over him, straddling his hips. He tried to wake his body, but didn't know how. This had never happened to him before.

Mason tucked a hand under Dill's ass and withdrew his wallet. With a look of purpose, he flipped it open and sat back on Dill's thighs. Normally, he'd have been happy to have this position under Mason. Today, he just felt...scared, actually.

"Dill Harper," Mason read. "I see even you don't take a good DMV photo. Doesn't capture that predatory glint in your eyes."

The corner of Mason's lips quirked with droll humor. Dill supposed that Mason had to be feeling a little more secure with the roles reversed and it exhibited in the illusive smile. Dill stared into obsidian eyes. Helpless underneath the man that had captured his fantasies. Of all the ways this could have gone, this was not one he'd imagined.

Mason flipped through the pictures, snorted, then pulled out Dill's card. "Harper Security." Mason grew silent. He extracted the business card and slipped it in his own pocket, without taking his eyes off Dill, before tossing the wallet.

He dropped down, hands on either side of Dill's head. "Interesting. You spy on people for a living."

Clearly, he wasn't expecting Dill to answer.

"I remember reading about Harper and a bank theft," Mason mused.

*Attempted theft*, Dill corrected silently.

"You're paid to protect things and spy on people. I think we can establish that you weren't trying to protect me," Mason said, rubbing his side then putting his hand up by Dill's head again. "Unless you're really bad at your job. So why are you spying on me?"

Dill's mouth felt dry. Considering that most of his biologic functions had stopped, Dill disjunctedly wondered about the moisture leaving his mouth and being able to process what he saw yet not having breath or pulse. Still, it *was* suddenly dry, and Dill's nerves *were* on edge. All of it spurred by the loathing, distrust, and danger radiating from Mason's visage.

It was a look that made grown men crap their pants. Being frozen had its benefits.

Mason leaned in, touching his nose to Dill's. "I don't want to see you again. You stay away from me, and you'll continue living. Change that, and your life expectancy changes too. A brother for a brother."

Mason crawled off him and out of Dill's line of sight. He heard the heavy breathing of a man pained by his condition. Heard the uncertain drag of his feet on the pile and the front door open, then close.

How fucking long would Dill be like this, he wondered? How long would he have to chew on Mason's words, while the rest of the world stayed frozen in time, allowing Mason revenge for the death of his brother? Because if someone killed Sage, Dill would be hard pressed to keep from doing the same.

The answer had been two hours, he estimated. After Mason had left him, Dill had begun counting minutes—assuming minutes could be counted when time ceased to be recorded.

The first thing he'd done after that was to call the client. The second had been to drive the sample to the drop off point, a blood work lab. And the third had been to call Sage to tell him the most recent way the faery curse had fucked him over. Because this one was a doozy.

As he expected, hoped, Jenson had called earlier that morning, requesting that Dill keep Mason under surveillance. It had been a week. A long week and Dill would have driven over to keep an eye on Mason today whether or not the client had called.

He would have wanted to watch him anyway. Not only did the new development fascinate him, but the other man held Dill's attention all on his own. Mason, the wet dream.

Mason, the battered and lonely soul who, even in a crowd, was alone. Mason, who haunted his dreams with a *new* fantasy. One in which Dill couldn't move, and Mason exacted his erotic revenge by swallowing inch after inch of Dill's throbbing cock.

He got hard just imagining it. Maybe that's why, after a week of keeping a low profile, Dill sat within easy sight of anyone entering or leaving Mason's den.

Dill and Sage stared out the windshield of Dill's car, still trying to figure out how Mason had gotten the jump on him. Sage had pulled his car in front of Dill's, refusing to stay away when Dill had insisted on doing the surveillance alone.

"I have no recollection of time freezing."

Dill had expected that.

"Mom and Dad have the same clock time across town as you do," Sage added.

It was the most telling truth about what had happened. Dill had called immediately upon coming out of the freeze. There'd been ample time to think about his next course of action while movement had stilled. Like Dill, Sage muttered the pieces of evidence to himself, trying to make sense of it.

"If only you and the area around you had been frozen, that wouldn't have been the case," Sage went on. "You wouldn't think the full extent of your ability would transfer to him like that."

Dill let him explore the questions aloud. Maybe he'd draw a different conclusion. But the way Dill saw it, since the clocks had been the same, *all* time had stilled—as it would when Dill froze it—which meant somehow he had transferred the ability to Mason at the same strength. Secretly, he'd hoped that the transfer had been partial and would have only frozen the local area. But this was worse, much worse than explaining why one zip code had a slightly different time zone.

It translated to a couple of problems. Mason could be anywhere, have done anything to anyone, without consequences. Free to roam for approximately two hours. And holy shit, but transferring that ability made Mason something of an Achilles' heel to be avoided at all costs, regardless of his threat.

"How did it happen?" Sage asked, putting his hand on the dashboard. "There had to have been a trigger."

Dill hadn't tried to freeze him, he'd merely been thinking that he didn't want Mason to crack open his head. Then he'd moved him. It had to have been that touch. That was where he'd first noticed the numbness in his own body. It had grown sluggish, and Mason had broken free.



*We switched places.*

"Well, that complicates things," Sage muttered aloud.

Dill shot him a glare for seeing his thoughts. Siblings were supposed to be off limits, by an agreement made between the five of them a long time ago.

"I should cover your mark. He could do it again," Sage reasoned.

"No," Dill said simply. He didn't feel like explaining the threat to Sage, nor did he feel like arguing about who should be first in the line of fire. Or why Mason, or any other person, could use a gift, a curse, when Dill was barely able to use it himself.

"He won't kill me," Sage said.

"Get out of my head."

"It's a dark, lonely place in there."

"Next time, I'll roll out the red carpet," Dill muttered sarcastically.

"Bullshit. You'll give me spikes."

"Yet you keep coming back for more."

"Because I love you, bro," Sage agreed, grinning.

"Get in your own car and say that as you drive away." Dill leaned across him and pulled the passenger door latch.

"Harsh."

"Apparently, not harsh enough." Dill pushed the seatbelt release. "Go."

Sage sighed heavily and got out.

"Hey, Sage," Dill called.

Sage leaned in through the open passenger window, his brows raised expectantly.

"I love you, too."

He laughed, slapped the doorframe and walked away.

Dill returned his attention to the mouth of the alley. At the end of it was Mason's flat.

Mason stepped from the shadows, his bald head gleaming in the afternoon sunlight. He paused, met Dill's gaze and smirked. Mason put his hands on his hips, and Dill thought he looked impossibly more sexy than usual.

## *Chapter Three*

Mason's loose hipped stride made Dill's stomach do summersaults. There was danger in the determination of the other man's approach, but nothing staunched the easy recognition that Mason moved like a predatory lover.

Dill supposed he should be a lot more nervous than he was. He had followed Mason to his lair, and cornering the sexy, animalistic Mason couldn't have been the best idea Dill had ever had. Except right now, watching Mason's lithe body move while his long-legged walk ate up the ground kept Dill's attention firmly trained on his mark.

Mason stopped outside Dill's car door and hammered a fist on the roof. "Open it."

He stepped back as Dill pulled the keys from the ignition and unfolded his large frame from the mid-sized car. He stood, shut the door and leaned back against it with his arms folded across his chest. He hoped to hell Mason couldn't see the how fucking turned on he was, staring him down.

Mason's thin cotton shirt covered the wicked tribal tattoos circling his upper arms. It did nothing to disguise the unearthly steel-tipped claw tattoo clutching the back and sides of his skull. Dressed in well-worn clothing, the gray cotton and distressed cargo pants shouldn't have softened his appearance, but it did. He looked more approachable—if Dill didn't look directly into his piercing black gaze.

His upper lip had a slight curl to it at the moment, and Dill wondered if there was a trace of fear underlying the threatening glare. Whatever it was, worked. Dill's mouth had gone dry, and any words he might have had worth saying, died well before reaching his vocal chords. It was to Dill's benefit that he folded his arms across his chest because it kept his hands from shaking, and Lord, did Mason make him feel shaky.

Mason's glance took Dill in completely, without changing in expression. "I told you to stay away from me," he said, his voice low and gravelly. "Now I find you outside my place. I'm going to pretend that you don't know what a stupid idea that is and give you twenty seconds to get the fuck gone."

"No," Dill answered. For a crazy split second, he wondered what the fuck was wrong with him. Who questioned a big-ass dude with freaky-assed tattoos and whose muscles had muscles? Him? God, Dill was a moron.

Mason's nostrils flared. His lips pressed tightly together. Taking another step, he bumped his chest against Dill's folded arms. Their gazes locked, Mason's fuming. Dill hoped he looked even half as intimidating as the other man. Doubtful.

Mason's warm body permeated the thin cotton, seeped straight into Dill's forearms. Mason's heart thudded sedately near where Dill's elbow pressed his chest. Nothing at all compared to the racing pulse surging through Dill at the moment.

He felt good. Hell, Mason even smelled good. Spicy, musky, like he'd stored his clothes in a cider barrel, and now Dill really wanted to sample him and see if he tasted as heady as he smelled.

"Reconsider," Mason growled.

Yeah, that would be the intelligent thing to do, but Dill's voice stayed frozen.

"Who hired you?"

Dill shook his head.

Mason's gaze dropped to Dill's lips, before lifting again.

Dill's throat tightened. Had that been attraction? Had he been waiting to see Dill speak or thinking about the same thing Dill had been thinking about?

"You'd risk your life for a job?" Mason asked, silkily.

"You won't kill me," Dill answered, finally.

"How do you know? Whoever hired you sure seems to think I need babysitting."

"That's between you and the client," Dill said.

"So who's the client?"

"Can't say."

"Sure you can. I won't let on who told me, when they ask," Mason promised.

Dill smiled, despite himself.

Mason inhaled sharply. Without warning, he reached behind Dill's head, grabbing a fistful of hair, and yanked his head to a slight angle. Then closing the distance, Mason's mouth crashed down over Dill's, punishing him for his silence with erotic flicks of his tongue. He pinched Dill's bottom lip between the sharp edges of his teeth until Dill, too, grabbed Mason's head in his hands and engaged in the battle of lips and tongue and teeth.

Mason pulled off suddenly, dragged the back of his hand across his lips as he took several steps backward into the quiet street. "Stay away."

"Pretty much impossible, now," Dill answered, breathing hard.

Mason smiled, a wicked, slow unfurling that transformed his angular, handsome face into a thing of stark beauty. Even Lucifer himself didn't possess the dark appeal of Mason Haliday. Dill reflexively licked his bottom lip, tasting the moist sin of Mason's kiss. He wanted another, and if he didn't miss his guess, Mason did, too.

But Mason had returned to his side of the street. Casually, he reached up and used the side of his thumb to rub the corner of his mouth, as though he were drying a spot there, his eyes crinkling with mild humor.

"Consider yourself warned."

Dill watched him walk away, frozen to his car not because of any faery curse but because his feet had forgotten how to move, his brain how to think beyond the last five minutes.

Mason turned a corner and disappeared from sight. Dill swore, ran a hand through his hair, and reluctantly pulled out his cell phone. Dialing Sage, he waited for his brother to pick up.

"I let him get away," Dill confessed.

"Is he on to you?" Sage asked.

He thought about the street-crossing saunter and the slow smile, the ravaging press of lips, and his heart stumbled over itself at the memory. "Yeah."

"Shit, Dill. Don't fuck up this case. It's the stepping stone to the French job, which will take us international this year."

"I know."

"Then for fuck's sake," Sage pleaded. "Find him, and make sure we don't piss off Jenson."

Dill ended the call. He scrubbed his hand over his face, and glanced in the direction Mason had left. He had no idea how long he'd be gone, but he did know the mark's lair was unoccupied. Reaching into the backseat, he took out his tool kit, hit the lock button on his car, and crossed the street. He shot one more watchful eye along the sidewalk, then disappeared into

the alley with his prize at the end. One way or another, he'd get the client his information and take himself off the case. Then, if he was lucky, he'd spend the rest of his time protecting Mason from the assholes who'd attacked him, because sure as shit, they were a specialty job and they'd be back as soon as they figured out that Mason Haliday hadn't died.

\* \* \* \*

It was always a risk planting a kiss on another guy. If Mason had actually taken a second to think about it first, he might have decided it wasn't worth chancing. He was glad he hadn't thought about it.

He waited a few more minutes to make sure Dill hadn't followed him, then convinced he was in the clear, he pushed past an idealist waving hot pink flyers, and headed toward the Blu Tattoo. Mason turned the next corner, saw the broken glass on the ground where the storefront window should have been and cops swarming the scene. Someone hooked his arm, spinning him around, and ushered him into the porn shop next to where he stood.

"They're asking about you, Haliday."

Scutter, the artist who kept the tattoo table next to his, looked solemnly back at him.

"Someone came in and trashed your station. Only yours, but he got the plate glass out front, too. Felix wants you to stay away. You can pick your shit up later," Scutter said. He nervously glanced at the door.

Rage swallowed what Mason would have said next. That and the only word that suited his state would require stringing expletives together like a chain-cussing bitch.

"What are you into, man?"

"Nuthin'," Mason said through gritted teeth.

"That ain't *nuthin'*. First the parking lot—yeah, I heard about that—now this? You pissed off some powerful people. Get it right, and don't come back until you do." Scutter, hands on his hips, shook his head. His spiked black hair didn't even tremble. "I gotta go. I'll tell Felix the message has been delivered." He turned on his heel and left.

Mason rubbed his hands over his head in frustration. Lacing his fingers together at the back of his head, he groaned at the ceiling. "What the fuck is going on?"

As far as he knew, the only one with any answers was Harper. If he wanted some, Mason would have to shiver through more of his dark, brooding looks and try not to stare at Dill's gorgeously sculpted bottom lip.

He jammed his hands into his pocket, distantly hearing the familiar jangle of the long chain attached to his wide leather belt. Would he be where Mason had left him? He thought so. Of course, he would have expected a *tail* to actually tail him.

"Holy fucking hell," Mason swore, suddenly realizing why Dill hadn't followed. "He's casing my fucking flat." His jaw tightened in renewed anger. "Sonofabitch!"

"Dude! This is a respectable store. Take that filthy language out of here before you scare off the paying customers," the guy behind the counter shouted.

Mason glanced around at the hot pink plastic cocks and a display of weighted nipple rings. Cock rings filled a fishbowl by his elbow, while whips and flails lined the wall behind the counter. Grabbing a cap off a display stand, Mason dug in his pocket for a ten-spot, which he tossed onto the counter.

He crammed the cap over his bald head, turning the bill around to cover most of the distinctive tattoo. "Keep the change."

Poking his head out, he looked both ways before tucking his chin and retracing his steps back to the apartment. If they trashed his station, best guess was they'd trash his home. If they knew where he lived.

Dill was in his flat.

Mason's steps quickened. What if they came to trash the place while Dill was still there? His car was still parked out front, empty.

"Fuck!" Running now, he made the corner, barely glanced into the shadows as he flew up the metal grate fire stairs to the top floor, four levels up. Already, he could see something was wrong, from the loosely swinging door and busted frame.

"Dill," he called loudly, not caring if intruders heard him, not willing to think about why he didn't mind deflecting attention off Dill and back onto himself.

Racing through the open door, he found his apartment half trashed. His couch cushions had been sliced and foam guts spilled out in frozen, yellow slabs. His plant, the only one he had, lay on its side, the dirt knocked from the roots. His kitchenette chair had been turned over and every cupboard flung open. A man in a mask darted out of his makeshift bedroom, yanking the thick curtain aside. Another man held a knife on Dill.

"Get him!" the one holding Dill barked.

"Freeze them," Mason bellowed at Dill.

"I can't."

"The fuck you *can't*," Mason yelled back, crouching into a fighting stance as the second guy approached.

His attacker arched out with his arm, swinging the blade. Mason dodged then tried to knock the back of his attacker's hand, hoping to surprise him and jar the blade from his grip. No such luck. He advanced again, brandishing the blade. Mason dove low, tackling the attacker at the knees and feeling the sharp hot-cold sensation of the blade scoring his back and ribs.

"No," Dill yelled.

Mason jerked, bit back the pain. His limbs grew increasingly stiff until all motion stopped. His cheek smashed the attacker's hip, arms pinned around and underneath the other man with one of Mason's knees digging into thin, unpadded carpet and cement. The toes on his other foot bent with the frozen force of his dive, leg partially extended. The blade bit his back. The other man's ass had been flattened to the floor, but Mason could feel his upper body hadn't yet cracked against the ground, as he had half twisted and was held motionless against Mason's shoulder.

He heard Dill's feet running to his side well before they came into his line of sight.  
"Mason. Shit. Are you okay? Goddamn it, he sliced you."

*Oh, really? So that's what that stinging sensation is,* he thought dryly. He felt like an idiot, his ass in the air, his face distorted and plastered against some guy's hip, while Dill squatted beside him.

"If I touch you, you'll unfreeze, and I'll be stuck here until it wears off. I think. If I don't get you out of here, you'll all wake up to keep fighting where you left off."

Mason heard him sigh. He wanted to yell at Dill to hurry up and unfreeze him. It was like claustrophobia. Though he wasn't in a small, confined space itching to get free, Mason was frozen within his own body, betrayed by the skin and muscles he kept in shape for protecting himself. But it didn't help him here. Not now. Not when he was incapable of movement, and someone else held all the power to hurt him or help him, depending on whatever whim took Dill.

Trapped. Again. Dill, at his leisure, could do anything to him, and he'd have to allow it. But there was a measure of comfort that if Dill *did* touch him, he might switch places with Mason. He didn't think Dill would risk that happening.

"I've got an idea. You stay put," Dill said, amusement lacing his words.

*You've made sure I will.*

He heard the pop and rasp of button and zipper near the top of his head. Dill was undressing the stranger? *What the fuck?*

Then he understood as the body gave a little under Dill's coaxing. He'd been holding the guy too tightly for Dill to move him, but leaving the cloth and taking the man allowed for a break between the gripper and the grippee.

Dill had to fight to free the man's legs, even with the slight advantage. Inevitably, the stranger's feet dug into Mason's shins, his kneecaps, cracked him in the balls, ran roughshod over his ribcage, caught under his chin. Dill tugged, finally freeing the man with great gasps of effort, dragging him away as Mason's cheek and jaw rubbed across the dark material until his face felt numb and he tipped off balance, face-planting the floor.

Dill was going to suffer for this indignity.

Mason's smashed nose buried into the remnants of odor belonging to former tenants—cat urine, dirt, stale cigarette smoke, age. It assaulted his senses. You never fucking knew how bad your place needed new carpeting until you were nose deep in old poly fiber pile.

"Almost done here, buddy. Gotta tie them up before they come out of it. Then I'm taking you someplace safe," Dill murmured between exerted breaths.

*Let me guess. Your place?*

"I'm taking you to my family's place," Dill continued.

*Of course you are. So you can freeze my ass in the air again. Touch me. I dare you.*

*Payback's a bitch, asshole. Say it louder so they know where to find me next time.*

But he didn't touch Mason. He left him with his face in his carpet, instead.

He listened, trying to pick out sounds for an idea of what Dill was doing. Some of them came from his bedroom. Some from closer by, where the first attacker had been. After several minutes, Dill came to Mason's side.

"As soon as you unfreeze, we'll get out of here. Are you going to come nicely, or do I have to force the issue?" Dill asked.

*There are a lot of ways I want to come with you, but following you around like a puppy isn't one of them.* And yet, he doubted he looked the least bit threatening to Dill where he lay, arms holding empty pants, nose bent to the side, lips and cheek appearing as though the pressed against invisible glass, and his jean clad ass lifted for viewing, if Dill cared to check it out.

"It would be so much easier if you could hear me. Maybe you wouldn't fight my help so much."

*He doesn't know I can hear him? Can't everyone hear him?*



He heard Dill moving around him in a slow circle. Mason mentally cringed, wishing he could stand up and face the other man.

"Nice ass," Dill murmured, stopping behind him. "Too bad it's wearing clothes."

*For the view or for your rutting pleasure?*

"Maybe you'll show me that on your own, one day."

*Not likely. I might take yours, but fat chance I'll give you mine.* No one touched him. Not ever. Especially not some freak of nature whose blue eyes seemed to pierce his own defenses—when he was actually *looking* into his eyes and not staring down brown carpet. Could you get rug burn on your face without moving?

"I'm sorry I froze you again," Dill said, quietly.

*Fuck off.*

"I'm trying to keep you safe, but I really don't have any control over this ability."

*Yeah, you're fucking chatty when you think I can't hear you, huh? Captive audience to listen to your spilling soul? Then tell me why? Why are you here? Why are you following me? Who are you, and who are the two guys in here with us? And how the fuck do you explain freezing time?*

Sensation returned like a drunken man, tripping on wakefulness with dizzy head and clumsy hands. Mason's body relaxed, dropped to the floor, the frozen grunt in his throat from his original response attack limped forth, and nothing more substantial filled his arms than empty pants. Mason wobbled to his hands and knees. Muffled cussing and shouts of alarm heralded from his bed, where he saw Dill had tied the burglars.

"You got knocked out," Dill lied.

Mason shot him a look of disbelief. *He must really think I couldn't hear him. Lying sonofabitch.*

"C'mon. Let's get you out of here."

Dill dragged him to his unsteady feet and pulled him toward the door. Fire slashed across his back as the full onset of sensation returned to him with a burning reminder of the knife wound he'd taken.

"Burns like fire," Mason muttered as he kept pace with Dill on the rickety metal stairs.

"We'll treat it once you're safe."

Hitting the bottom, and freedom stretching out before him, he jerked away from Dill. "I can take care of my own shit."

Dill nodded upward. "Clearly."

He had to admit, Dill's little magic trick had saved his ass. And the man had a car. Getting away seemed a logical self-preservation maneuver. He caught up to Dill, keeping stride as they crossed the street. Slipping into the seat beside his hero, Mason kept himself on guard.

"You're bleeding in my car," Dill said.

"Sorry."

Dill took out his cell and started dialing. He wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear, started the car and drove off.

"Sage. We've got a problem. Tell mom I need her up at the lake." Dill paused, glanced at Mason. He reached for his phone, opting to drive with one hand. "Yeah, he's hurt. I need a guard on this one."

There was a pause. *Sage* must have said something Dill didn't want to hear, because he frowned. The downward tip of his lips made the bottom one push out slightly. Mason caught himself staring, dragged his gaze away, only to let it rest on the other man's crotch. He noticed with some interest that there was an impressive bulge pushing from inside of his jeans.

"No," Dill answered the garbled voice.

Pause. Dill shifted in his seat, ran a red light. His frown deepened and he pinned quick looks at Mason from the corner of his eye.

"It's the worst idea you've had," Dill told Sage. "Get Willow to do it. She has a thing for bald guys."

"Bald by choice," Mason felt compelled to say.

Dill barely spared him a glance. "Just have her meet me at the cabin. When you come up, bring clothes."

A dull flush colored Dill's cheeks.

Mason watched with renewed interest as the blush grew and darkened.

"Fuck you. Bring clothes and toiletries," Dill snapped at Sage.

He pulled the phone away from his ear. In the stillness of the car, without Dill's ear as a sound barrier to the conversation, Mason heard the guy on the other line say, "a box of condoms, coming up."

With a snap, Dill ended the call on whatever else Sage would have added.

*Condoms.*

Mason's gaze lingered on Dill's groin. Maybe a quick fuck would relieve some of the built up tension. Might take his mind of the stinging pain in his back. The car bounced over increasingly rough roads, causing his back to slide on the upholstery.

He'd spent worse ways passing the time. He didn't think that having his cock swallowed by Dill would be such a bad thing. That swollen bottom lip rubbing the underside of his dick, or that curious tongue of his running between his balls sounded like a fine way to distract himself.

A dull ache started in Mason's groin as he imagined making the verbally reserved Dill Harper beg for cock. Mason's cock.

## *Chapter Four*

*Thank God*, Dill thought, spotting the last gravel road turnoff to the lake cabin. If it had taken any longer, he'd have had to pull over and jack off. Preferably with Mason watching every frenzied stroke with that sexy half-smile he favored.

As it was, he'd still have to jack off, but at least it would be a little more private than the side of the road.

Mason had remained silent the entire one hundred and eighty three miles. At first, Dill had tried to start a conversation, only to be greeted with that knowing, black stare. The silence hadn't been much better. Occasional glances had told him that Mason had been alternating between closed-off and amused. Since the latter seemed to coincide with each and every time Dill had felt his eyes on his crotch, he could only guess that Mason found Dill's state of arousal humorous. Which fucked with Dill's head a little. A lot. Shit, he was doing it again.

*Gonna be a long damn time until Willow gets up here to watch him.* He might even hug her if she showed up before he embarrassed himself by reaching over to slide a hand up Mason's thigh.

Like he'd let him.

Like he wouldn't find *that* pathetically amusing, too.

It had been more than three hours and the tension in the car fairly crackled. Dill couldn't wait to get out of the car.

The cabin was dark as he drove up. Gravel made popping sounds as they pulled to a stop in front of the wide, covered front porch. It had been the place his parents had met, and his dad had bought the land to build the cabin so Dill's mom would feel close to her home. Every year, the seven Harpers came to the lake cabin for summer vacation. As kids, they'd spent weeks up there. As adults, time and commitments ate into the freedom of staying in the cabin.

Not to mention that weeks with his four siblings and his slightly off-center mother would drive Dill batty. All in all, it had been a great childhood though. Room to roam the woods. Encouragement to explore and talk about beings most humans didn't know existed, like nymphs and elementals, and, well, faeries.

*What was Mason's childhood like?*

"Nice place," Mason said, walking around the front of the car to look at the cabin.

Dill didn't remember turning off the car and getting out. He stood looking up at the wooden structure seeing his family as ghosts of memories past instead of walls, and steps, and windows.

"Yeah," he said, not knowing how to put the thoughts into words so that Mason saw the importance of this place to his family.

He wasn't sure he wanted Mason to know how grounding it was for all of them, because that meant letting him into a very private part of his life. The cabin represented the core of Dill's family. It was symbolic of his mortal father joining with his magical, earthy mother—successfully.

Mason snorted. "You think you could talk a little less? You're giving me a headache with your constant chatter."

Dill looked over at him, raising an eyebrow. He saw the way Mason rolled his shoulders and winced as he scanned the front of the cabin. Dill swore under his breath. Mason had to be in a lot of pain and here *he* was, reminiscing. The guy's life was on the line, and no one knew why.

"Let's get inside," Dill suggested.

He found the key he needed on his ring and took the steps to the front porch two at a time. Within seconds he'd turned on the inside lights and began looking for the first aid kit. Ironically, it wasn't something they used often enough for it to have a special place. One of the downsides of having a healer as a mother, he supposed.

"Go into the bedroom, and take off your shirt," Dill called. Wincing after the words were out, because he realized how bad that had to have sounded.

Mason must have thought so, too, because he came up behind him while Dill was on his knees looking through the under-sink cabinet. "I thought you said I had to buy you coffee first," he murmured in a low, sexy rumble.

Dill's insides took a flip. "Never mind. Have a seat." He motioned to the toilet stool. "I want to see the cut."

Any more looks like that and Dill was sure to shoot his wad. Nothing like being eyelevel with the very cock you wanted passing your lips and refusing to look at it. He gave himself props for willpower. Fortunately, Mason did as he was asked, straddling the closed stool backward, so his wound could easily be seen. Then, almost reluctantly, Mason tugged his shirt up and over his head, hissing through his teeth as the fabric brushed the sliced skin.

Dill took a couple of washcloths, a bag of cotton balls, and a container of alcohol. He wasn't sure how well this would work, but hopefully, it would hold off infection until his mom came to knit the skin back together.

Which begged the question: how much did Mason understand? He didn't question that Dill could freeze time. Did he know about the other Harpers? Why wasn't he skeptical of Dill's abilities? How would he *know* Dill froze time since no residual clues were left behind when time restarted? Even his family wasn't aware when time returned unless Dill either told them, or deliberately moved things out of place between seconds.

"How did you know?" Dill asked, putting the question out there.

"To sit on the toilet backward? You said you wanted to see the cut."

"Freezing time," Dill clarified.

Mason seemed to think about his answer for a few minutes while Dill moistened the washcloths and began cleaning the wounds. Two long slices crossed his back in a broken diagonal from lower right hip to upper left rib. They weren't superficial, but they weren't dangerously deep either. Still, a mortal would require stitches.

"I just do," Mason said finally.

"That clears it all up," Dill noted.

He gently wiped the area around the wounds, trying not to get lost in appreciation for the well-toned musculature and wide shoulders, the artistically sculpted valley bisecting his back from top to bottom. Even if the spinal column tattoo hadn't been there to highlight the beauty of his form, Dill still would have appreciated the uninterrupted view of flesh.

Mason's body had been perfectly molded, his skin naturally bronzed from genetics and sun. Dill longed to toss the cloth aside and run his hands over the man seated in front of him, but dutifully, he cleaned the wounds. He traced the tattoo with his eyes, thinking about pain and time, and desire to put something so beautiful, yet so menacing on his body to permanently keep people away. Scare them away, perhaps.

The little bit he knew about Mason from his research suggested it hadn't been done on a whim or out of rebellion. This tattoo meant something. Mason didn't have to brag about it, give a story about the reasoning behind having it, like a lot of guys did who had paid for elaborate art. No, this tattoo was a part of him—silent testimony against getting too close.

It was a shame to see the garish slash of red severing the drawn spine. Dill felt a sense of relief that the well-muscled back, which created the dip over Mason's spine, was developed enough that the blade had skipped from one high ridge to the other. It left only a shallow flesh wound beneath which Mason's nervous system continued to function.

"This is going to sting," Dill murmured, picking up the bottle of alcohol.

The cotton wouldn't work well enough. The cuts were too deep and he didn't want cotton fibers getting trapped in the raw flesh. Picking up the next washcloth, Dill poured the disinfectant straight into the cuts, catching the spill off with the cloth, wringing it out, and doing it again.

Mason didn't even flinch. Didn't show any sign of pain. That's when Dill noticed other things about the man he was meant to watch. He had faint scars in several places.

"What the hell happened?" Dill asked gruffly.

Mason glanced over his shoulder as though he could see what Dill was looking at. Dill liked the way his neck wrinkled and the tattooed claw on the back of his scalp seemed to control the turning of Mason's head.

"What?"

Dill traced a couple of the scars, flicked the tip of a finger over some that looked like cigarette burns.

Mason shrugged, faced away. "Life happened. If you're done..." he said, standing.

Dill put aside the alcohol and cloths. "For now."

"Good." He stepped around the stool, crowding Dill's space in the small bathroom. "Let's talk about what's going on here."

*Between us,* Dill wondered?

Mason wasn't that much taller than he, but he certainly overwhelmed a room. Especially a guest bathroom. Looking at him, nearly nose to nose, he silently pleaded for either his mother or Willow to hurry up and get there. He wasn't sure who needed a chaperone more—Dill or Mason. It could go either way considering that they'd been dancing around a flirtation for the last while and bone-jumping could easily be in order.

Dill held his silence. It was always wiser, he'd found, to let someone think you were more controlled than you actually were.

"You freeze shit. Your mom heals shit. How the fuck is that possible?" Mason asked.

"I wouldn't call you *shit*."

Mason snarled. It surprised Dill enough to take a step back where a towel rod crammed his back.

"Can we take this to the living room?" Dill asked. His phone chirped. Keeping a wary eye on Mason as he backed down and left the bathroom, Dill put the phone to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Did you call Jenson?" Sage asked.

"I left a message."

"Try calling again."

Dill snapped the phone closed.

Mason sat on the coffee table, fixing Dill with a patient stare. Dill took the couch across from him. Leaning back, he stretched his arm out, resting it on the back cushions and studied his mark with renewed interest. He couldn't help but think that Mason was just as beautiful below the belt, as above. He'd like to find out, kiss any more boo boos he discovered.

"Tell me about Diego," Dill said, hoping to get some details out of the secretive man.

Mason's expression clouded. "There's nothing to say."

"Bullshit."

"Tell me who hired you and what the fuck happened to my apartment. Then tell me why any of my goddamn personal business has anything to do with you. Or," he said, leaning in dangerously. "You can take your pants off, and we can fuck. Unless there's some other reason you brought me to the middle of nowhere?"

Dill's heart tripped a little. He couldn't help but smile even though he knew he had to be blushing judging from the heat in his neck. "Tempting."

Mason straightened, reached for his belt and began loosening it. "Come on, then. Let's kill the elephant in the room."

"Blunt much?"

Yeah, it wasn't exactly his style to charge in like a bull... Oh, wait, it was. He nearly smiled.



Dill would figure it out sooner or later. Mason was betting he would forget his nosy questions once there was some cock play. Even the most reserved motherfuckers succumbed to pillow talk. If Mason wore him out enough, chances were Dill would get romantic touchy-feely and spill some of his information. Those quiet boys were saps after sex. Mason counted on it.

He stood, opened his pants and let his belt hang. Then holding his hands out to the sides, palms up, Mason looked down at Dill's upturned face. The guy was handsome, Mason would give him that. The thought of those pouty lips going down on him sent more than a little electricity up the length of his cock. That and the image of him swallowing Mason's load.

Mason's cock filled eagerly. "Any time, boy-wonder. Unless you want to freeze this moment for posterity..."

Dill's gaze traveled downward, and Mason felt it like a feather-light stroke. It came to rest on his pants and he thought he saw more than a little interest in the quiet man's eyes.

"Straight to the point, aren't you?" Dill stated more than asked.

"Like I want you to be. My cock is straight. How about you start sucking my point?"

Dill's eyes flashed with annoyance when he shot a look upward. "Fuck you, asshole. I'm trying to save your hide, and you think gratitude is treating me like your whore?"

No, he didn't, but he wanted Dill to think so. The less personal connection, the better to cut ties and run when he left the sexy stud in his wake. Unfortunately, if Mason didn't play his cards more carefully, he not only wouldn't get the information, but he wouldn't get the guy either. He wanted the guy maybe as much as the information. It wasn't often he found someone whose height so closely matched his own that he could look straight into his eyes. It also wasn't often that a guy as well built as Dill wanted a piece of his ass.

"I'm not big on subtlety," Mason said, feeling a little bad for his phrasing.

"I gathered."

He usually got lustful looks from twink. And he took them, but they weren't his preferred meal of choice. No, that was reserved for stubborn, meaty, silent, brooding men that usually wrote him off the minute they saw tattoos. Those hadn't seemed to scare Dill. Mason had every intention of pushing the envelope to see just how much of his freak-fest Dill could handle.

He didn't like admitting it, but Mason pushed lovers away. It's what he did so they didn't get too close. He knew it, sometimes hated that about himself, but ultimately it was about survival. Wasn't it always? Protect your own ass first. Keep the ones that could hurt you at arm's length. If that meant loneliness, then so be it.

Yet if Dill was game, Mason wanted his mouth on his dick and clamoring to have his mouth fucked. He'd do it. Then he'd get his questions answered. Then he'd leave. To do that, he had to soothe the savage Dill.

Mason slid his fingers into Dill's hair, sifting it, then running through the strands again to lightly capture Dill's head. "You're cute. I get tongue-tied with cute, but I'm pretty sure you want me."

Dill's brows rose in question.

"Your cock is trying to get out," he said, answering the unspoken question.

God, what was Dill thinking about? Mason loved the silent sexy ones, but he never knew what they were thinking. Was Dill judging him? Did he think Mason was crazy, rude, stupid, egotistical? Fuck. He shouldn't care. He shouldn't be worrying about what Dill thought. That wasn't an issue here. What did it matter what Dill thought of him?

It mattered, damnit.

"Touché," Dill acknowledged.

"I'm not a patient guy, and I've been thinking about your mouth doing a lot of amazing things involving my dick." Mason shrugged, hoping he didn't sound as clumsy as he thought he did. "You gonna make me wait, or can we do this thing?"

"Fucking romantic," Dill muttered.

Mason's fingers fisted Dill's hair, and he tugged him closer to the opening in his pants. "Please?"

*There, that sounded good, Mason thought. Just a little head, hot stuff. That's all I need, and then I won't have to wonder any more. Won't have to jack off without a mental picture of you taking my rod, tonight.*

His balls tightened and Mason groaned, unable to stop himself from shuddering as the thought filled his mind.

Unexpectedly, Dill shot to his feet, so near their chests bumped, and Mason's hand fell away. He started to take a step back, but stopped himself. He didn't back down from anyone. Dill grabbed his hips and pulled him hard against his groin. Then closing the space, Dill kissed him, devoured his mouth with nipping teeth and soft lips. Chills of pleasure raced down Mason's spine and alarm bells went off in his head.

*This is bad. This is very bad. Make him stop. Walk away. Back the fuck off—damn, he tastes good.*

All protests sputtered to a halt as Mason sank into the welling sensations started by Dill's expert mouth and followed by his inquisitive fingers wrapping firmly around Mason's cock. The groan that escaped him was more telling than he'd have allowed, but Dill rewarded him with another hand and grabbing fingers tucking into the back of his pants for a handful of Mason's bare ass.

Demanding, insistent, intrusive, stubborn, selfish, tender, rough, Mason was lost to Dill's conquest. It was a mistake. A big one. It was the most incredible feeling of possession he'd ever experienced, and he fucking wanted more.

Dill broke away. "This is what you wanted, right?" His words scraped past his lips angrily.

Mason shoved him, knocking Dill to his ass on the couch. Mason rubbed his arm across his burning lips. Kissing Dill would make him do stupid things. Considering the ransacking of his pad, stupid wasn't Mason's best defense. Escape felt more promising.

He turned, closing up his pants and grabbing a windbreaker off the coat tree at the front door. "I'll find my own way back to town."

"It's long walk."

"Nothing I haven't done before." Mason reached for the door, pausing to enjoy the way Dill's tousled hair fell over his forehead and his breath rushed over his swollen lips. This sight would keep him warm on many lonely nights to come.

"Stay," Dill murmured. His expression hadn't changed. It was as unreadable as ever.

What did family guys like Dill think about when they saw him? Foster families had seen Mason as a lost cause. The rotating round of friends he had seemed to think of him as expendable. It was fair. He thought of them the same way.

Dill's kind, with stable families, probably saw him as a broken man in need of fixing. Kind of like a religious order trying to convert the lost. *Just do this, just think that and you'll be one of us. You'll never be alone again.* But that was a pipedream and he knew it for the lie it was. You could only depend on yourself. Eventually, everyone else let you down. Like he'd let down Diego.

Diego had thought of him as a hero. Some hero he'd turned out to be.

Mason's eyes felt hot, tight. Pressure built up in his forehead and behind his cheekbones, even his throat seemed to constrict. He'd do anything to bring that kid back.

Dropping his head, Mason stared at the worn wooden planks of the floor. Yeah, he'd do anything. Did that include sticking around Dill to get some answers? He sighed heavily, let go of the door, and swallowed his pride.

"I want answers," he told Dill after several moments.

"I have some."

As if he was breaking out of cement shoes, Mason reluctantly left his spot by the door to stand adjacent to the Dill's couch. "These cuts burn like fire."

It was the only admission of weakness he was willing to make, this indirect request for help. The words were bitter grit in his mouth. Mason didn't ask for help. He supposed every man had his limits and Diego's death had been his. Who'd have known the little brat would inspire such loyalty?

Dill got up, hesitantly. The front door to the cabin swung open with a tsunami of motion, chaos, and florals.

"Mom," Dill said in greeting.

"Mom?" he asked.

Mason turned, ready to face the next threat. Goddamn it, where was his knife when he needed it? A tiny blonde woman with a beaming face and long, slender arms waved toward the front of the house at someone outside. She erupted into the walk-in living room.

She saw him, squealed, and threw herself into Mason's arms. "Sweetheart! I'm so glad to finally meet you. Dill didn't mean to hurt you. Promise me you won't hold it against him. It's really not his fault."

Panic assailed him. "Oh shit. Get it off. Get it off!" he yelped, flailing backward with the pixie-sized ball of sunshine firmly clinging to him.

His back hit Dill's chest, stung like wildfire where the contact pressed his wounds. Steady arms wrapped around his waist.

"It's okay, Mason. It's just Mom," he soothed warmly against his ear.

## *Chapter Five*

Mason's eyes were huge with horror, shock, fear, and alarm. He felt stiff in Dill's arms and Dill tried very hard not to laugh, knowing exactly how overwhelming his mother could be. Mason would get used to it.

"Willow," his mom yelled into Mason's face. "Hurry up with the cooler. This boy needs a steak."

"Got it mom." Dill's petite sister, lean and long like her namesake, clumsily dragged in a cooler. "Dill, there are three more out in the minivan."

"I'll get them," he offered. She smiled gratefully, and Dill carefully extracted himself from Mason to help bring in the rest of the supplies.

"Take your coat off so I can touch you," his mom was saying to the horrified Mason.

"What is it with you Harpers trying to get me naked? Back off, lady."

"Mason," Dill said, sharply. "You need my help. That means you need hers. She'll heal you and you'll treat her with respect."

Mason nodded mutely.

Dill smiled and rushed to bring in two more coolers. He came back to find Mason gripping the side of the couch as his mother knelt behind him, her hands glowing as she murmured soothing sounds.

Dill was so distracted that he nearly bumped into a sapling in the middle of the kitchen bar entry. "Willow, now?"

The sapling shivered apologetically.

"He already thinks we're freaks," Dill complained.

"Oh, honey, relax. You know he has to see all this in order to marry you," his mother called.

"What the *fuck*?" Mason barked.

Mom swatted the back of his head.

"Sorry, Ms. Harper."

"You're forgiven," she said, dropping a kiss on the spot she slapped.

Mason's cheeks burned and he kept his eyes fixed on Willow's trunk.

"She doesn't like it when you stare," Dill said.

Mason's gaze climbed over to his. Dill recognized the signs of overwhelming confusion.

"Don't try to make sense of it. We'll explain later." Dill tipped his head toward his sister, who already began her reversion.

His mom got up from the couch. "All better. You'll be sore for a few days, honey. I'll make you some chamomile tea to calm your nerves."

"Thanks," Mason said in a gravelly whisper.

"I called a family gathering, Dilly-bear."

"What? Why? I'm trying to hide him," Dill protested.

"Dilly-bear?" Mason asked.

"Shut up." Dill gave his full attention to the packet of energy called Mom.

"Don't you want them to meet your husband?" she asked.

"He's not my—"

Willow snickered. "Why are you arguing with her?"

Mom folded her arms over her chest. "You will marry him. You should trust me. I always know these things, sometimes."

*Great. More paradoxical logic.*

"Now," his mom continued. "After you finish the tea, you should go have sex together."

"*Mom.*"

"It's a great relaxant," she defended. A pout touched her bottom lip. Then she shrugged. "If he does it right, it will be relaxing after, you know, he's done."

Horrificed laughter erupted from Mason.

"Oh, God, Mom," Dill said, shaking his head in disbelief. And really, he thought, he shouldn't be disbelieving because it was exactly the kind of thing his mother would say. Random and to the point all at once. Only a pureblooded faery could pull off that kind of crazy.

"You can use some of my toys," she offered brightly. "The cabin sex toys are in the trunk at the end of the master bed."

“Gross, Mom,” Willow protested on his behalf.

“Ew.” Fauna’s voice came out of nowhere near Mason.

Mason scrambled indelicately to the opposite armrest. Dill decided he liked it when Mason wasn’t so self-possessed. It was good for a man to get shaken up every once in a while. It gave him a new perspective on where he stood in the universe. Plus, it made Dill feel appropriately smug after the set-down Mason had given him.

“I disinfect them.” His mother sighed. “Really, you kids are such prudes.” She flicked her wrist toward the master bedroom. “There are some unopened ones in there, too. Batteries are in the cool storage by the bed.”

Judging from Mason’s bafflement, not every household kept an entire mini-fridge stocked with batteries by the bed. He’d suspected as much. Another quirk of his parents.

“I have this vibrating butt plug that—”

“Mom!” all three kids yelled.

Fauna returned to visibility. She glanced at Mason. Her eyes widened and *poof*, she disappeared.

“You make her nervous,” Dill explained.

“I’m just gonna go,” Mason said, easing toward the door. His face looked pale, and he moved with a delicately quiet tread.

“You can’t leave, sweetie. You’re half the guest of honor,” Mom explained.

*Uh oh.* “What do you mean by that?” Dill asked her.

She pouted. “The bachelor party. Flora, Ian, Sage, and Joe still need to get here. Your dad is coming later tonight. Then we can have the party.”

“You all are insane,” Mason muttered. His throat sounded dry.

Dill shut the front door, stood in front of it to keep Mason from walking out.

“But I hired strippers,” Mom whined.

“She hired strippers,” Dill repeated for him, starting to smile. What a circus they must look like to him.

“Exactly,” she said. “You two go to the backroom and make hot wild manlove until the others get here. We won’t bother you at all.” She laced her fingers together under her chin and blinked at them expectantly.

“Mom, layoff. You’re freaking both of us out,” Dill warned.

“I’m *being* supportive.”

"You're *being* weird," Willow joined in.

"And embarrassing. Please don't ever do this to me," Invisible Fauna pleaded.

"They're getting married," Mom insisted.

"Did the faery court tell you that?" Willow asked. "Because I have a few things to set straight with them, and I'm pretty sure Fauna feels the same way."

"I'm shaking my head in agreement," Fauna narrated.

"Even if they did tell you, don't you think you should let things develop naturally or risk screwing them up?" Willow dropped her hands on her hips. "The poor tattooed guy is freaking out."

Dill glanced at Mason. Yep, the poor tattooed guy *was* freaking out. His eyes were widened as though to take in the full spectrum of domestic confusion as his attention bounced from one speaker to the next.

"I'm with Willow on this one. Mason is sexy as hell, but I'm trying to save his life right now, not sleep with him," Dill said.

Two women and one invisible sister stared him down with incredulity. He could feel Fauna's skepticism.

Dill shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't say I would turn him down, I just said it wasn't my primary goal at the moment."

"I'm high, aren't I? You gave me something...a hallucinogenic or some shit," Mason said, more to himself than to the others.

Willow walked over to Mason and peered into his face. Mason leaned back, holding his ground but clearly not wanting her too close, either. "You'd like an easy explanation wouldn't you?" Her steady gaze turned to Dill. "God, don't you wonder what he's thinking right now? I wish Sage would hurry up and get here so we could ask him."

"Fuck. You have a mind reader?" Mason correctly deduced.

"Mm," she agreed, looking at Mason. "And a transporter. If you play your cards right, humor Mom, I betcha Flora will take you home when the party is over."

"That means what? Fucking your brother?" Mason bit out.

Willow raised her brows, not backing down from the venom in his words. Dill smiled supportively at her. Fauna shimmered into view again, looking on with fascination. Mom hummed from the kitchen having lost interest for the benefits of putting on tea and whipping out several sizes of candles and votives to decorate the doily covered bar top.



*God it feels great to come home to family,* Dill thought, his chest filling with love and pride. *Ridiculous, but great.*

"Only if you want to," Willow pushed back on Mason. "I'm guessing you do."

Even Dill could see the burn of a rare blush rise from Mason's bare shoulders, up his neck and heat his ears.

"I'll just bet—" Her words cut off as Willow became an armoire.

"Holy shit!" Mason swore. He stepped back, straight into Dill's arms. It wasn't like he could step forward. Willow blocked his immediate path.

Dill took his wrist and turned Mason around in the cramped space between cabin door and sisterly armoire. "She does that. We all do things without warning," he said gently. Feeling a little giddy for having Mason listen to him complacently, he added, "Just don't twist her knobs while she's in this form. She doesn't take kindly to uninvited advances."

"This is really messed up, man." Mason looked exhausted.

"C'mon. You said you wanted answers. Let's go get you some and leave these three out here to continue the bickering," Dill offered. He slid his hand down to link fingers with Mason. When Mason resisted the gentle tug, Dill met his gaze. "Talk. Without sex."

\* \* \* \*

Mason relaxed and let himself be led around the armoire and down the hall to the bedroom at the end, which had started this whole freak show. This is exactly why he didn't do relationships, Mason reasoned. Too much baggage. Some people did drugs and beat the shit out of each other. Some turned into furniture.

Behind him, Dill closed the bedroom door, and silence engulfed them like a blessed blanket of peace. Mason walked to the edge of the bed and sat down. Dill stayed where he'd left him.

"I'm confused," Mason confessed, dropping his head in his hands. "What the hell is going on, Dill?"

"I guess you would be confused."

Dill came over and sat down beside him, leaving a good foot of space. Mason appreciated it. After the bombardment of new experiences and realities, he needed the distance to look over the rubble of his defenses. Did he want them back up? Was it a question worth asking? Could he trust Dill not to take advantage of the insecurity he had to be seeing? Did he want him to take

advantage and lose himself in sex and the smell of another man who wanted him and wanted to take care of him?

But no, that wasn't what was really happening here, was it? Dill had been hired to—what? To protect him? To watch him? To keep him alive? To drive him insane? Mason felt shaken to the core. Nothing he'd believed about the way things were, *were*. It was like he'd been dropped into a fantastical storyline, and he didn't know how to maneuver his way through the resulting changes.

"Faeries, huh?" Mason broke the silence with the obvious question.

"Yeah."

Mason swung his head to the side, waiting for Dill to elaborate.

"Mom is a faery. Dad is a scientist. He came out here to do some research on plant healing properties and regeneration. What he found was my mom skinny-dipping. They got married and had five of us who are half-breeds. Since we're faery, the faery court granted us each an ability which never quite works right." He shrugged. "It's always been annoying, but none of us are alone, and we're pretty tight as families go."

"Break it down for me. You freeze time..."

"I freeze time. Willow transforms into anything wooden. Flora transports herself. Fauna disappears. Sage reads minds. Dad is just Dad and Mom heals. She's good with anything natural, like growing things, and the faeries tell her things. Sometimes, it's nothing but lies, and sometimes it's real. She'd say they're both right and wrong and I say, that's a faery's way of circular reasoning."

"She's healed me twice?" Mason asked.

"Yep."

"No offense, but I'm not marrying you."

"I didn't ask," Dill said.

"No, I guess you didn't." For some reason, that made Mason relax. Maybe it was because Dill wasn't forcing the issue and didn't fall into line with his mother's crazy prediction. Whatever it was, it gave him comfort.

"Back in my apartment you acted like you knew about the time freezing thing. You weren't surprised. What you said was, you freeze time. How did you know that?"

"It was hard to miss."

"No, actually it isn't. Time stops, everything stops, awareness stops. When it ends, things resume as they were with no one knowing unless I leave something out of place. So, how did *you* know?"

"Hey, I'm the guy with the questions you promised to answer, remember me?" Mason asked.

"I'll answer yours. You answer mine," Dill pressed.

Mason watched him through narrowing eyes of consideration. His lips pursed slightly and Dill found himself thinking about the way those lips felt on his.

Mason nodded, finally. "Deal. Me first."

Dill settled in, leaning back on his hands and stretching his feet out. He crossed them at the ankle and waited for the first volley. "Shoot."

"Why are you following me?"

"I was hired to," Dill answered.

"There's more to it than that. You have to give me something to go on."

Dill shrugged a shoulder. "I'll give you what I can. Some of it is confidential. Some of it I don't know. I was hired to obtain a sample of your DNA. That was the whole contract."

"Why?"

"I don't know. My directions were to take it to a particular lab for testing. Then the contract would be over, and Harper Security would be paid."

"Who paid you?" Mason asked, turning to bend and tuck one leg behind the knee of the other.

"That's confidential, and even if I could tell you, some of it is sketchy since the client has a contact hired to speak for his interests. Sage handles the negotiations, not me. I get called in when freezing things might get handy."

"You said you can't control it," Mason reminded him.

Dill thought about that for a minute. He was pretty sure he'd told Mason it didn't work right all the time, not that he couldn't control it. It was true that he couldn't, but inadequacy wasn't the kind of picture he wanted to paint for Mason.

"When it happens, I can take advantage of it on a case," he answered, skirting the issue.

“Since that was your contract and you had me bleeding in your apartment, it’s safe to say you got your sample, right?” Mason’s mouth looked tight, as though he wasn’t pleased with the thought.

Dill nodded. “I got it.”

“Then why did you keep following me?”

“The contract was extended after someone tried to end your life. The client didn’t seem to think it was a fluke,” Dill said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I sent in the sample. I reported the events. We were hired to continue watch until the results were discovered and we were called off.”

“Have you been called off?” Mason asked.

“No.” Dill sat up, mirroring Mason’s position so that they faced each other. “My turn.”

“I’m not done.”

“I know. But since you like to run, I want to know certain things before you try to ditch me again.”

Mason rubbed his palm over his scalp.

“Still bald,” Dill told him.

Mason smiled ruefully. “I need a razor.”

“I’ll get you one when we’re done talking,” Dill offered. “How did you know I froze time?”

“You and the rest of the world were frozen while I wasn’t,” he answered.

“Nice try, but I’m not buying it. You told me before the freeze that you knew me, and I was the one who froze time. How did you know that?” Dill asked with increasing interest.

“I remember it.”

“Remember what, exactly?” Dill asked.

“Not moving and you circling around me, staring at me.”

“That’s not possible. No one is aware when time freezes,” Dill protested.

“I was. Just like I’m aware that when you did it again at my flat, you checked out my ass.”

Dill swallowed hard. He’d heard everything? That would explain why Mason knew his gift wasn’t reliable. He’d apologized back at the apartment for not knowing when the freeze would happen. “Well, shit.”

“I don’t appreciate being frozen in place for anyone’s inspection.”

“Calm your ruffled feathers. It wasn’t on purpose, and in two cases, it saved your life,” Dill argued.

Mason’s eyes took on a wary squint, the outer corners crinkling slightly as he scanned Dill’s face. Then cautiously reaching up, he slid his fingers into Dill’s hair and pulled him in.

Not frantic or rushed, Dill had plenty of time to resist if he’d wanted to. He didn’t, though, enjoying the tentative bid for acceptance he felt certain Mason wasn’t aware of. It was like the dawning of some new experience Mason let him see. There wasn’t anything that would make Dill mess that up.

Their lips touched, skimmed across each other, held, dissolved, and parted.

“I think and feel when you freeze me,” Mason murmured. “If you freeze me in the middle of an orgasm, will it draw out the pleasure?”

*God, what a hot prospect that would be.* “Is this one of your burning questions?” Dill asked.

“It’s a question that makes me burn for an answer.”

“Then, I don’t know.”

“Do you want to kiss me?” Mason asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

“Only if you let me. Otherwise, waiting would suck,” Dill confessed.

“Don’t wait.”

“I thought you didn’t want to have sex with me.”

“Now we’re talking sex? I thought this was about a kiss,” Mason said, his black eyes dancing with mischief.

It was a good look for him. Sexy, dangerous, wicked, playful, and fucking tough. Yeah, he wanted a lot more than a kiss from the tattooed extremist.

“You’re a bad idea, Dill Harper. You make things seem possible that have no way of working out.”

“Later, I’m gonna ask you to explain that,” Dill promised. “Now, I’m taking whatever you’ll give me.”

Dill tipped his chin up, closing the scant distance between them. Mason tasted salty and vaguely sweet, like the faraway tang of metal. It made Dill think of cold autumn afternoons and rolling in a pile of leaves, of holding Mason tightly to the music of a distant creaking swing set.

It was strange and gripping. How a man who hadn't had much of a childhood could make Dill think of every fond memory and new ones he hoped to create, was beyond him. He wished he could give some of that back to him, let Mason feel what he could have if he gave Dill half a chance.

"I still have questions," Mason said, breathing heavily.

"Ask."

"Who's trying to kill me and why?"

Dill searched Mason's heavily lidded eyes. He was rebuilding the wall, trying to separate himself from caring about why his life would be at risk and why he should trust Dill in knowing the answers. It was as readable as a book and had a lot of the same hallmarks as Sage's look before he met Joe and knew that he would be safe with him.

Ironic that he'd see something so familiar in a man he knew so little about. Yet it was there.

"I don't have that answer yet, but I'll find out," Dill said thickly.

"Why? I'm just a contract for you."

"You're a lot more than that."

"Really?" Mason's question was loaded with skepticism and he leaned away from Dill to deliver it. "This I have to hear. What more am I than your contract, and if you say, my next lay, I'm over this faery mistake."

The words stung but Dill knew they were said in defense. He sighed, knowing too, that he'd have to make a confession of his own. Turning the power over to Mason went against every instinct of self-preservation he possessed. He'd do it anyway. He needed Mason's trust if he wanted to help him.

Dill sat up, preparing himself for Mason's harsh mockery. He'd enjoy this one, Dill was certain of it. "I have this... *God*." Dill paused, feeling stupid. "This *crush* on you." He shook his head and looked up at the ceiling. "I can't explain it, and you aren't even my usual type."

"What's your usual type?" Mason asked in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"Twinks. They're easy to love and leave." He laughed at himself, ruefully. "I know how that sounds, and it's exactly how it should sound. I'm not much of one for commitment. I knew the minute I saw you that I was in trouble."

"Why do I trouble you?"

“You ask a lot of questions,” Dill complained. Hadn’t he been stripped bare enough for one day?

“You told me you had the answers.”

Dill met his look. His answer seemed intensely interesting to Mason. Dill’s breath caught on a strange half-hiccup. That look made his cock tingle hopefully. Did Mason have any idea what his smallest expressions did to him? *Jesus*.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Dill asked.

“Maybe.”

“You’re trouble because you’re the kind of guy I can’t dismiss easily. Falling for you means I’m in for a lifetime of tumbling through the endless rabbit hole. If you aren’t there to catch me at the bottom, I don’t want to step over the edge in the first place.”

He’d been studying his jean leg as the silence ticked past.

“Speechless, are you?” Dill said, feeling the dread of rejection.

Looking up, he saw that Mason was frozen. His expression curious, yet amused. Great. Nothing like having another man’s amusement frozen for you to study at your leisure. Of course, he hadn’t heard any of that—or had he? He’d heard the other times, hadn’t he?

“Mason? Can you hear me?”

## *Chapter Six*

Yeah, Mason could hear him. Couldn't answer for shit, though. He hadn't heard Dill string that many words together before. Between that, the confession, and the funny way Mason's chest ached, he was at a loss for something important to say, anyway. Just as well. He'd probably fuck up the answer like he fucked up everything else. He'd say something stupid like, "Cool."

And that would be the best a guy like Mason could offer him.

So Dill dated twinkies because they weren't an emotional challenge. That's what he'd been saying, right? That's what all those fancy feeling words had meant? He wanted Mason and was afraid to take the chance? Mason kind of liked that. Kind of turned him on. Fuck, it turned him on a lot.

Couldn't do anything about it frozen.

"You're easy on the eyes," Dill said. He smiled a sexy little half-smile. His blue eyes seemed to darken. "Since you're frozen, I can say whatever I want and you have to listen. This could be handy."

*Just when I was starting to trust you.*

"Listen, when you unfreeze, if you think my feelings about you are funny, just don't say anything. If you think you'd like to start something with me, make a move." Dill leaned in like they'd been earlier, between kisses.

*He looks great up close. Far away. In a car stalking me. Under me on a bed.*

"I know this is a point of trust for you. You don't like being trapped. You like being in control. You made that pretty clear."

*I thought Sage was the mind reader.*

"So I'm going to give you *my* trust and we'll see what you do with it."

Dill stared into his eyes as though waiting for an answer.



"First, I'll answer your questions. I don't want there to be any reason you have to stick around here, unless you want to. We clear?"

*Crystal.*

"If you stay once you unfreeze, it's because you want to be here. With me."

Oh fuck, why did he have to make him hope?

"I don't know the client behind my contact, but you're important and because it's DNA, I figure the crux of the information is about whether or not you're family."

*Family? I have no family,* he thought bitterly.

"It's important enough that when we obtained the DNA, Harper Security was asked to keep an eye on you through any threats. I'd guess you have a benefactor out there trying to locate you. It could change everything if you let it, or it could be something you walk away from."

*Don't I have a choice in this matter?*

"It's not for me to judge. This is yours alone." Dill paused. "You have no idea how bad I want to kiss you right now."

*Ditto.*

"I'll find out what's happening. I'll find out who's after you and why, to the best of my ability. I'll drag in my brother and sisters if that's what needs to happen. I wouldn't do this for anyone else. Do you get that?" His gaze darted between Mason's. "No one but you."

*Kiss me.*

"Those are all the answers I have with a promise tacked on. So here's the other half of this confession. I want you."

*Fuck, yes.*

I want your hands and mouth all over me. No strings. I'm not asking you for anything you don't want to give. I want sex and rubbing body parts. Yours preferably."

Dill smiled, a wicked little thing that deepened the dimples on either side of his lips. For a man as rough hewn and masculine as Dill, Mason was a little surprised to see the gorgeous harmony of deep angles and whisker marked jaw turn him into the whisper of a pretty boy. There was nothing pretty about Dill Harper, and the incongruity of tough edges and soft words made Mason's body ache for everything Dill wanted.

"I want your cock, Mason. I want it any way I can get it. If that scares you off, then you should leave once the spell wears off." His voice lowered with promise. "If it interests you, then stick around and let me make it worth your while."

Dill's breath teased Mason's lips. Having said his peace, or perhaps sidetracked, Dill pressed his parted mouth over Mason's. Feeling crawled to life in Mason's body. Dill's lips, softly lining his, stilled.

Mason completed the kiss on his own, moving away to get a good look at Dill in mid-kiss. "You look damn good when you're kissing. You ought to see this."

Standing up, Mason slowly unbelted and popped the top button of his pants. The chain looped at his waist jangled invitingly, and making sure to stay inside Dill's line of sight, he pulled his pants off, then his boxer briefs. He stood, naked before Dill, hoping he could see and think in the frozen moments.

"So if I understand you correctly, you want this. I've never been one for long, drawn out confessions, but I think I'm a new believer in them. Everything you said was exactly right to get me in the sack." Mason chuckled then. "Of course, you could have said, c'mere, and that would have done the trick. You talk a lot when you think no one is listening."

Mason laced his fingers behind his own neck, relishing the open view he gave Dill, enjoying the feel of the muscles he worked hard on in the gym while dealing with his personal frustrations. Did Dill like what he saw? He figured the chances were pretty good considering his words.

He unlaced his fingers, dragged them over his shoulders, over his chest and playfully rubbed his torso. Canting his hips out to best display his happily erect cock, he then dragged his hands further down his body and gave a couple of slow, twisting pulls on his cock. "I want your mouth on this. I won't try it now since I'd come and then you'd choke on my shit when you wake up. Doesn't seem right," he told Dill.

"If I touch you, will you wake up?" He tried it, lifting Dill's hand and forming it into a fist around Mason's cock. Dill didn't move. "*This* is a fucking awesome talent to have," Mason exclaimed, thrusting once into Dill's hand.

Next, he carefully laid Dill out on the bed. "You gave me consent, so I'm going with it." Removing his clothes was more complicated than Mason had imagined, but he kept at it until Dill was as naked as Mason.

"Impressive, Harper. Nice stash you got there. I can appreciate the nod to rebellion with that barbell at the base of your cock." He held Dill's penis, examined it. "Thick, ugly bastard. I'd enjoy every one of those ridges on my tongue. Too bad you're too comatose to enjoy it."

Mason cuddled Dill's balls in his hand, bent to his pierced cock and took it in his mouth. Dill began to move sluggishly beneath his mouth. His cock filled, thickening in Mason's mouth. He moaned his approval.

Slipping off the tip of Dill's cock, he looked up the naked landscape of Dill's rugged body. "That's it Dilly-bear, wake up, and join the private party."

"More," Dill rasped, his vocal chords not yet limber.

It was all he needed to hear. Mason, settled on his belly between Dill's legs, pinning the other man's thighs under his arms and gripping his hips to hold him steady. Then with diligent interest, he tasted Dill's cockhead. He curled his tongue over each side of the head, flipping the rim, nipping it between his rolled lips.

Dill's fingers clumsily gripped Mason's shoulders.

"That's it, wake up," Mason coaxed.

Breath exploded from suddenly working lungs, wringing out a guttural choking sound from his throat.

Mason traced the tip of his tongue underneath the flared head, nudged it forcefully at the soft underside where the rim parted.

"Mason," Dill gasped.

Sliding his mouth over the now fully engorged head, Mason worked the most sensitive part of Dill over and back on his lips, sucking with hollowed cheeks and taking him deeper with each consecutive pull.

Dill's hips lifted against Mason's lips. His belly tightened, compacting Dill's well-developed abdominal muscles and drawing his ass cheeks into rock-hard swells. Dill in full cum was spectacular. Beads of sweat broke out on his brow, his eyes crinkled from squeezing, and unable to hide the depth of his pleasure, his lips had drawn back and every muscle in his neck and jaw strained with him.

Mason watched in awe, taking, sucking, enjoying his effect on the powerful man whose next breath depended on the treatment of his cock in Mason's mouth. Already Mason tasted the first salty signs that he was close.

Flexing his hips faster, holding Mason tighter, Dill ground his cock into Mason's mouth. But it wasn't until Mason pressed a knuckle into Dill's perineum while thumbing his balls, that the other man shouted and lost all control. He bucked, fully awake now, slamming his hips up as

his cock got sucked off. With a bellow, Dill came, shooting hot cum deep into Mason's mouth until he finally sagged with exhaustion.

Mason spat in his hand, spread the combined fluids of sex and spit on Dill's tightly clenched hole. "Let me in," he murmured encouragingly.

Dill's eyes opened, his breath labored past his lips, but arousal hadn't left the naked expression on his face. Mason liked that expression. He liked it a lot.

Working his finger into Dill's body, he gently stretched him while keeping his eyes glued to his face. He could stare into those blue eyes for eternity and not get tired of seeing the reflection of Dill's pleasure. Pleasure Mason had put there. Part of him wanted to linger with kisses and soft touches, curl up with him and make him cry out with need over and over again. It was a dream another man, who didn't know how the world worked, could get lost in.

Sometimes ignorance was bliss.

Dill lifted his leg. Mason helped tuck it to his ass, opening him wide, then climbing forward, Mason pressed the tip of his weeping cock to Dill's relaxed hole. Body heat lured him on and he didn't resist, pressing until his cock rim popped through the tight muscle ring.

Dill's eyes clouded.

"Talk to me," Mason murmured.

He shook his head. "I'll say something lame."

Mason chuckled, inching deeper into the enveloping furnace of Dill's body. "I doubt it."

"I like you. Stick around afterward."

Mason's brow furrowed. "You said no strings." His cock was fully embedded now. Not moving took everything he had, that there might now be strings attached and he'd have to withdraw seemed beyond his ability to manage.

"No strings. I meant it."

He pulled out, then thrust home. Both men shivered with the blissful friction of their bodies coming together.

"I'm not a strings guy," Mason said, apologetically. He dragged out, pushed in, grinding his hips into Dill's as they met. He loved the weight of Dill's balls trembling on the sensitive flesh above Mason's cock.

"I know. *I* am when I find someone string-worthy. If you ever want strings, bring them to me," Dill told him.

Drag, thrust, grind. God, Mason thought he might explode. Too soon. No one had ever wanted him. Why would Dill? He had a family and friends. He had respectability in a way tattooed bald dudes didn't.

Being wanted was one hell of an aphrodisiac.

Dill caressed Mason's chest with teasing strokes and sharp pinches to his nipples. Mason threw his head back. He felt so good. So good.

"Say it again," Mason demanded gently.

"I want strings," Dill complied.

Drag, thrust, grind.

"I want you," he added.

The words were a balm to Mason's neglected heart. His cock felt full and needy. Expressing his appreciation the only way he knew how, Mason rocked forward again and again. He fucked Mason with increasing force, watching his lover's face tighten with pain and pleasure, and still Dill bathed him in affirmations.

"I want your arms around me. I want your lips on mine. I want to taste your cum and feel it on my face. I want these pinpoint nipples on my tongue and between my teeth. I want you in my ass, inside my body. I want your head on my shoulder at night."

The words blurred together taking him higher. So high.

"Fuck me, Mason. Fuck me like you mean it," Dill challenged.

The words prickled through him, tightened his balls and tripped the cascade of nerves which burst from the base of his spine and raced up his back. With a grunt, he emptied himself into Dill. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," he yelled, broken yet sated.

Dill tried to pull him down on top. Mason fought him. They grappled halfheartedly, and Mason's cock slipped from Dill's body.

*No holding after sex. No strings. No holding. Fuck! No holding. Get away. Gotta get away.* It would be better for both of them. He never should have given in to the hunger. Dill had a lot to offer. He had family and home and fucking strings, damn him.

Mason shoved off of Dill and rolled off the side of the bed, swiping up his clothes and yanking them on as he went.

"Mason, don't go."

"Strings, you sonofabitch! You fucking said no strings."

"There aren't any. I'll take you however I can get you."

“With guys like you, there is nothing but strings. Goddamn webs of them,” Mason yelled. He tore out of the room, passing the three frozen members of the Harper family he’d already met and four others in mid-greeting outside.

Definitely time to go. He didn’t want to stick around for the part where this family asked him to go, too. This time, it would be *his* decision.

## *Chapter Seven*

Four days later, Dill was still trying to find a way to talk to him. Mason had looked through him at a coffee shop and in the parking lot of the same club where Mason had been hurt.

It seemed to Dill that his mark wanted to get killed. He made the rounds of each place there'd been an attack and boldly continued living in his apartment. The tattoo parlor owner had forcefully escorted him out for the third time that morning.

It was a matter of time before whoever was trying to get at Mason, got at Mason. As it was, Dill and the other Harpers were double timing to keep Mason's ass covered. Even Jenson seemed exasperated by Mason's bullshit.

In the meantime, Dill dug up as much information on Mason's childhood as he could. Whoever wanted the DNA had to be family, and that meant Dill had to start at the roots of the family tree.

It also meant he had to get into his own brother's security files. Not an easy feat when that brother could read minds and headed up a top-notch security firm. All he'd given Dill was the client's contact person when case details needed to be addressed, like when the DNA had been secured and notifying the contact that Mason could be in danger.

He'd learned a lot about Mason in the gap days between sex and now. Most obvious was that following Mason on a mission was like trying to catch a windblown feather. Nearly impossible to keep up with, and every swipe netted a fistful of almost.

Dill finally found him at the cemetery. Dill rapped a knuckle on the roof of Sage's car, relieving him, and took off on foot across the immaculately greened lawn.

"Hey," he called, taking the last few steps to join Mason.

"Hey."

The stone had the date of the stabbing below the words, “Diego Carteval, Brother.” After the research he’d done, Dill didn’t miss the significance of Mason not only paying for the headstone when no one else had come forward, but for the kinship that had formed between the two men while they drifted, unwanted by the system. They were two who’d fallen through the cracks.

The silence carried weight to it. Not wanting to interrupt it with the crass brutality of words, Dill quietly reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, a flyer from the political activist waving them in front of the tattoo parlor. Dill’s movements were somber, reverent as he handed it to Mason.

Mason took it, opened it, read it, then shoved it into his pocket. He sighed. “What’s this about?”

“Carla Leon, the lioness of human rights,” he said spitting out the propaganda.

“Yeah, I know who she is. The whole Goddamn city knows who she is. Why the fuck are you at my brother’s grave handing me a pink paper with her slogan on it?”

“She started her career eleven years ago. Six years before that, she was Carla Newcomb and eight years before that, she was Carla Levaro. And before that—”

“Before that she was Carla fucking Jane Doe,” Mason said gruffly.

“Nope. Before that she was Carla Haliday, a twenty year old who’d run away from home at the age of fifteen when she got pregnant,” Dill finished.

He let the words sink in, saw when they did, and Mason’s cocky chin in the air routine faltered. Then he stared at the ground, his eyes hazed as he stared at nothing and his hands curled into his t-shirt at his middle.

“She’s my mother?” Mason rasped.

There was no need to answer. They both knew the truth.

“Carla Leon is our client,” Dill added. “I’ve been communicating with her contact, Jenson Price.”

“Oh, God.” Mason’s hands shook. His knees gave and he sank on the damp ground at Diego’s headstone. “I never—I never thought I’d find her. I figure she’d gone to hell giving me up. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m gonna skin the bitch,” he swore violently.



Dill dropped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. The raw pain on Mason's face, the way he crumbled upon hearing the news made Dill ache for being the bearer. If only Mason would let him offer comfort, but his defenses had been raised. The visual sparring during the past few days had everything to do with having sex. Amazing sex, damnit.

"Who's my father?"

"Don't know," Dill said. "The DNA will solidify your parentage to Carla. It's merely a formality."

"Did you give her the results yet?"

"They're expected by special delivery tonight. She's pulled some favors to speed up the process, bump it to the top of the priority list."

"Did she say what she wanted once she got it?" Mason asked.

"She's campaigning for human rights. She could be trying to repair former mistakes by bringing you home again, preserving your rights as a part of her family."

"I'm not a mistake," Mason corrected.

"Her mistake in letting you go, Mase, not in having you." Dill knelt beside him. "You knew what I meant. You're picking this fight on purpose."

Mason moved his shoulder. It was a gesture meant to show his displeasure at having Dill's hand on him, so Dill let go. He hated this distance. Having been close to him already, intimate with him, the emotional barrier Mason had lifted felt like a physical barrier between them.

"Go away, Dilly-bear," he mocked. "I'm bad news. People disappear around me. Or they die, like Diego."

"It would be easier for you if I disappeared. You wouldn't have to look into the face of someone who actually gives a damn about you. I want you around. Can't fucking figure out why when you're an ass most of the time."

"I'm an ass all of the time. If you don't like it, get lost," Mason remarked tightly.

"I can't."

"Yeah, you can. Get up. Walk away. Don't look back. I know it can be done. It's been done my whole life. Except for this kid," he motioned toward the grave. "And look what happened to him."

Dill watched his profile. Mason was sinking in his misery. The deeper he drifted, the more he walled himself off.

*Make him laugh, Dill.*

"Naw. I can't leave. You give great head."

Mason jerked his head around, searching Dill's face with a look of confusion on his own. A smile tugged the corners of his lips up. "Only good?"

Dill pretended to consider it for a moment. "Yeah. I've had better."

"Fuck you," Mason said, laughing.

"You never did buy me that coffee. I think I gave you a freebie back at the cabin."

Mason's laughter subsided. He grabbed Dill behind the neck, a move he really liked because it meant Mason wanted to kiss him. This time Dill beat him to it, leaning in before Mason could drag him, and locked lips with the tattooed warrior.

*If I could just make him quit hurting, Dill thought. If I could just show him there's more good in people than he's seen.*

Mason pressed his forehead to Dill's, breathing as deeply as he did. "Freeze time for me, Dill. Give me a head start."

"I don't control this thing."

"I just want to talk to her alone when she unfreezes."

"I still can't control this thing. Not for you, not for me, not for anyone. It's part of the faery funhouse."

"That can't be true. You've saved my life twice, gave us our own pocket of time when we made love and the world around us ceased to exist. You froze it the first time we met. Those aren't coincidences," Mason reasoned.

He was right. There were differences in his abilities since he'd met Mason, and it reminded him of Sage and Flora and how their abilities had changed when they'd met their perfect partner. He didn't need an alteration of his abilities to know Mason was his perfect match. But what happened if his perfect match wouldn't have him?

Dill had grown up knowing that the faery realm played with human freewill, bending it and stretching it to complicate decisions they made. They couldn't alter its course unless the will to stay the course remained weak. Mason didn't want him enough to ask him to stay. He didn't want Dill enough to fight for their relationship. He already believed it was doomed, and he had ample reason, historical precedence, to back it up. All previous relationships for Mason had deteriorated into the rubble of not-good-enough.

Mason had no reason to believe Dill would be any different, and if he never gave them a chance, it wouldn't matter if they were a perfect match. Dill would have to watch him walk away and know there'd never be another man for him the way Mason would have been.

Which, to Dill, meant one thing. He'd have to fight hard enough for both of them without scaring away his perfect match. Maybe if he carried the load until Mason was strong enough, they'd still have that chance.

"They're not coincidences," Dill agreed. "Doesn't mean I have control over them."

"Try."

"Give me a reason," Dill said.

Mason sat back on his heels, looking over his shoulder at Diego's grave. "What kind of a reason are you looking for, Dill. We've had this discussion."

He'd try a different direction, get Mason thinking about how Dill fit into his life beyond his personal convenience. "Are you using me?"

Mason met his gaze steadily. "Yes."

*Well, that's not what I was hoping he'd say.* The admission stung. It also created a series of questions Dill needed answers to. All personal.

"How far are you willing to use me?"

"As far as I need to. That's just the kind of guy I am," Mason said coldly.

"Liar. You wouldn't tell me that if it were true."

"I'm honest."

"You're warning me," Dill countered.

"You're a decent guy. Don't get mixed up with me and my shit."

"It's my choice."

"It's also mine. Either help me, or go away," Mason said.

He looked away, and Dill heard the strain in his voice, the way his Adam's apple bobbed with unspoken emotion.

"Mason," Dill said quietly.

Mason didn't look at him.

"Mason," he said, trying again. This time the fathomless black-eyed stare lifted to his. "I'm gonna tell you something as many times as it takes and you're going to listen, do you know why?"

"Because you're a stubborn fucker?"

Dill grinned. "I'm going to tell you that I'm not going anywhere. That I want you. We're in a dank graveyard, on our knees in soaking grass, our cocks are tucked away, and I still want you in my life. You're valuable to me. And you're going to listen because you want my help, and I'm going to give it to you."

"Why am I valuable to you? Carla Leon paying you well?"

"Get your head out of my wallet. You fucking feel what I feel, and we both know it. I want *you*. I'd chuck your baggage to the curb, but don't worry, I'll provide all kinds of new coping shit you can deal with."

"Oh, I get it. You're a fixer. I should have known."

Mason got to his feet. He started walking away before Dill caught up with him, but when he did, he grabbed Mason's elbow to stop him. "Deny it. Go on. You can sling your punches, and they'll find a mark. They'll hurt. If that's what you want, do it. But if there's any part of you that thinks I might be worth the effort, this would be the time to start easing up on the emotional battery."

"Don't you get it? I don't fucking want to hurt you. Quit coming back for more," Mason snapped.

For the second time, Mason reached for him, pulling him tight against his chest and sinking his fingers into his hair to hold him still. His mouth covered Dill's in a demanding search for answers. Dill tasted fear, need, desperation, and more fear.

He wrapped his arms around Mason's waist keeping him snug against his body. He hoped he showed comfort and patience, yet the kiss was scrambling his better intentions, turning them hot and hungry for more of Mason's skilled seduction.

"When this is over," Mason murmured, nibbling Dill's lips as he spoke. "We'll make a go of it when this is over."

"If you don't trust me when things are tough, you'll never know that I would have stuck by you in every hardship."

"This isn't your fight," Mason said, his voice cracking as he rushed over the words.

Dill's hopes soared. It told him he was getting through, and Mason fought it. "You're right. It's our fight because it's your fight."

"You sound like your mom."

Dill found himself smiling. "Don't tell her. She'd never let me live it down."

"You've got an interesting family."

“There’s room for another member, Mason.”

Mason took him in another searing kiss. His tongue pressed through the barrier of Dill’s lips and rubbed wickedly with his. Slick, hot, plunging, their mouths did all the things their cocks were straining to do.

Dill felt his legs kick out from under him. Mason neatly took him to the ground, covering him with his body. He pinned Dill’s hands above his head, devastated his mouth, and tugged on his pants until he finally took hold of his cock.

“I want you too, Dill. All the time,” Mason admitted between deep, plunging kisses.

Mason left his mouth to nip his shoulder, then claim Dill’s nipple through his shirt. He tortured it deliciously between his teeth, simultaneously stroking Dill’s cock with a punishingly tight fist and rough thumbing of his slit on every up pull.

Pain and pleasure tumbled over themselves. There wasn’t a twink alive who’d taken over his body the way Mason did. There wasn’t another man in existence who could take over his heart the way Mason was.

His chest burned with the longing to possess Mason the same way, to be let in to Mason’s breaking heart and fill it for him. His body fractured its ability to focus between voracious teeth and insatiable fist.

Mason left Dill’s hands above his head and tracked down with scoring nails, lifted Dill’s shirt and bared him to Mason’s sucking lips across his pectoral to his ribs while his busy fingers twisted the unattended nipple.

Dill cried out as he felt the landslide of orgasm begin.

“Don’t fight it. Show me what you got.”

Mason’s hot breath puffed across his bare flesh. He moved lower, suckling Dill’s abdomen and pumping harder. His teeth caught the slim line of hair to his belt and tugged.

Dill’s cock jerked, spurted in a rush of pleasure so hard, flashes burst behind his closed eyelids, and his balls felt like they’d rolled up into his body. Mason let go of everything, sank lower, taking Dill’s pants down to take his cock into his mouth.

Pleasure filled him and he groaned at the sensation of Mason’s hard sucks along his entire length, swallowing the traces of Dill’s cum. Then he took Dill’s balls in his mouth, rolling them on his tongue and cleaning them. With small licks and kisses, Mason finished, then tucked him safely away.

“I always put my toys away when I’m done with them,” Mason teased.

Dill still gasped for breath. "I was hoping you shared your toys, too."

Mason climbed up Dill's body, but held himself over him. He smiled down. "You should see the look on your face when I surprise you. Hell, you should see the look on your face when you come. It's pretty as a picture."

Dill cocked an eyebrow. "I've never been accused of being *pretty*."

"You have a great mug."

"Sage has a great mug. I have an eyesore," Dill countered.

"I saw Sage. He's hot."

Dill threw a light punch to Mason's gut. "He's taken."

"So are you as long as you're helping me," Mason said, his tone turning serious.

"Why does that sound like an exchange of services?"

The wall went up behind Mason's eyes. "Because it is."

*Oh, God.* Dill closed his eyes on the pain. He couldn't school his features because of the depth of disappointment and hurt searing his chest. He'd been thinking Mason had finally figured it out. That Mason had finally decided it was okay to want him. But he'd only been securing Dill's services.

"Head in exchange for information," he said, forcing the words up his constricted throat.

"I might be getting the better deal. Your gnarly cock feels great in my mouth."

It was a conciliatory statement. He must have seen the hurt Dill couldn't hide. Dill looked back at him. He just hoped he survived Mason.

"Then I guess the information I gave you was pretty fucking awesome considering the payment you just delivered."

Mason's smile disappeared. "Yeah. Something like that."

"Good. Let's get to Carla's and see if I can work out the freezing thing. If nothing else, we'll be in good position when it does happen again." Dill pushed him with all the frustration he was feeling, and rolled to his feet. Dusting his ass off, he walked toward the car. "C'mon."

He didn't bother to look back to see if Mason followed him.

\* \* \* \*

Could he regret being an asshole and continue to be that asshole anyway? Mason wondered. He watched Dill's confident stride, liked the controlled authority in it. He was a massive combination of height and shoulders and power, presence that seemed summed up by his unconscious swagger. His sheer presence would suggest zero vulnerability, but he'd been

vulnerable for Mason. Openly so, and that was a characteristic that didn't seem to match the quiet, slightly distant façade Dill kept in place.

Could he believe that Dill would stick around no matter what he found out about Mason? What would gazing into his rugged face look like when Dill discovered that Mason had a juvenile record for breaking and entering, theft and once, possession of marijuana? He thought Dill would look stony. The way he did when he tried to close off his feelings after Mason had said something especially harsh.

Mason had joined a gang in his early twenties, too. He'd still be there if it hadn't been for tag-along Diego trying to get himself initiated with a jump-in. Only, his gang jumped-in with steel-toed boots and all the guys kicking or hitting at the same time. The thought of Diego taking on eight of them at once had chilled him to the bone. Leaving the gang had taken another two years of drive by shootings, muggings, tire slashing, and home invasions before they finally got the point that nothing would scare Mason back in.

He hadn't told Dill. Nor had he told him that the apartment at the end of the alley where he lived had made drive-bys impossible and sneak attacks unlikely. He no longer drove a car and he was used to the occasional drunken and bitter fistfights when one of the old guard decided to test his resolve.

He could have told Dill that gang beat downs weren't unfamiliar to him. That this could be more of the same, except he didn't recognize the crew. It also wouldn't have been the first time a gang was sent to rein him in, either. But telling Dill that might have ended the constant watch, and Mason hadn't seen anything to discourage that notion.

Dill watched him because he believed Mason was in danger. If he knew it was only more of the same old thing, he'd shrug it off and leave. Leaving was the last thing he wanted Dill to do. It was also the only thing he *could* do, or he'd end up sorry he'd ever met Mason. He didn't want that. He wanted Dill to want him and leave wanting him, to never know what a fuck up he was.

Dill reached his car and looked back. He looked guarded, watchful, kind of stiff. Mason winced knowing he'd done that. Then steeling himself for more of Dill's intoxicating presence, he trudged to the car.

He never should have touched Dill. Never should have kissed him or tasted him. Should have walked away and not let the promise in Dill's eyes grip him the way it had. He'd been unable to resist having Dill on the grass because of it.

*I'd like to say I'm the guy who'll catch you in that rabbit hole.* But he wasn't. Not his kind. His kind filled the void of population between the decent, worthy, important kind. The world changing kind that he'd never had a membership card for.

What Dill needed was to leap over the societal cesspit that Mason filled and find solid ground with a solid guy.

*Don't apologize. Let him think you don't care. It'll be easier for him to move on.* And maybe he could fuck the longing from his system in the meantime. He glanced at Dill again. *Yeah, like there's any chance of that happening.*

"Ready?" Dill asked.

Mason nodded abruptly.

They'd been sitting around the corner from Carla's office for going on twenty-four hours. There'd been no movement in or out, and the silence between them had not only grown pregnant but had delivered and become a grandparent. The car felt loaded with missed conversations and bruised egos.

Rain drummed the windshield faster, making their view from the front blurred. Out Mason's side window, they watched ill-prepared businessmen and women dart into buildings and dodge wheel spray.

"Fifty bucks that chick gets it," Mason said, nodding at the woman waiting at a bus stop across the street.

"She's standing on the curb. No bet." They'd been filling the awkward moments betting make-believe money on traffic spray victims. This victim stood the perfect distance from a huge puddle.

Mason snorted when she stepped to safety, seconds before getting a dousing. "Shoulda taken the bet."

"Did those strippers your mom ordered ever arrive?" Mason asked, after a moment.

"Yep. My sisters had a great time."

"Did you?"

"I didn't stick around after you left," he remarked.

"Where did you go?"

"Home."

"Alone?" Mason asked, looking out the window.



“Would it matter?” Dill willed him to say it did.

“No, I guess not.”

Dill swallowed the bitterness and tried for a light tone. “Good, because there was this little guy who’s been trying to get my attention for weeks. I decided to give him a fucking he wouldn’t forget.”

Mason jerked to look at him. “Serious?”

Dill frowned. “Show me your cock.”

“What the fuck for?”

“I want to see it when I’m not too frozen to enjoy the view,” Dill said. “Fuck it. Just strip down again and rub yourself like you did at the cabin.”

“You’re mocking me,” Mason muttered.

“A little.”

“Did you fuck the twink, or didn’t you?”

“Have you *seen* your naked self? How the fuck can I fuck some twink when fucking SuperFuck has just sucked my dick, fucked my ass, and fucking stomped my pride into the fucking mud?” Dill snapped.

Relief loosened Mason’s lips.

“Fuck,” Dill muttered. He sure as hell hadn’t intended that Mason feel good about what he’d done to Dill.

“Maybe you gave the twink a mad-fuck. The kind of fuck you’re mentally yelling fuck you about to some other guy. Or maybe you felt like being the player and fucked the twink’s hole while thinking of some other guy’s ass,” Mason offered.

“And whose ass might that be?”

“How the fuck should I know? He’s *your* twink.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re making me hard,” Mason teased.

“Fuck you, more,” Dill said, but the short chuckle in the words took the sting out of them.

“That’s it, Dilly-bear. Say it again.”

“Don’t fucking call me Dilly-bear.”

Mason unzipped his fly and pulled out his stiff, flushed cock. “That’s it, babe. Say it again.”

“Pedestrians,” Dill said, choking over the warning as he watched Mason lower the seatback and begin stroking himself.

“Say it,” he demanded. He rocked his head to the side, looking at Dill through slitted eyes.

“Indecent exposure?”

Mason let go of his cock and put his hands behind his head. “I want to get off, Dill. I want to get off, bad.” He inhaled sharply. “In fact. I want to get off so bad I think you should punish it. Slap it around for me.”

Mason had grown breathless. Dill felt the same surprising lack of oxygen.

“Show me,” Dill rasped.

Mason reached down with his right hand and slapped his cock, before gripping his thigh. Dill watched the hypnotic bob of the other man’s penis. The tip moistened with pre-cum.

“You made me hard with all your fuckity fuck fucking. You ought to finish it,” Mason challenged.

“Does an arrest mean anything to you?”

“No one’s looking. The rain has them dodging puddles and finding cover. What are you afraid of?” Mason mocked.

He let go of his pants and slapped his cock again, reached in the zipper slot and pulled out his balls to rest on the fabric. They were puckered and tight.

“Fu-uck,” Dill said, drawing out the word with true appreciation for the weeping dick.

Another slap and a droplet hit Mason’s thigh, instantly darkening the cargo pants he wore. Dill stretched across, stroking the length of his dick with his knuckles. The swiping a finger over the top, he brought it back to his lips for a taste.

Mason fisted himself. “Suck your fingers for me.”

“I’ll do one better.” Dill twisted, took Mason’s free hand and slipped two fingers into his mouth. Salty and calloused, he nonetheless imagined they were Mason’s cock and he sucked up and down their blunt length.

Mason swore, pumped into his fist while he fixated on Dill’s mouth with the fervor of a religious experience. Mason already looked like he was close, so when he hooked his fingers in Dill’s cheek to drag him over, Dill moved easily, leaning over the console to ready himself for Mason’s spray.

He flicked his tongue out, tasting Mason’s cockhead.

“Please,” Mason begged.

Dill did it again. "Fuck it, Mase. Fuck yourself." He cupped Mason's balls, rolling them gently. Wedging a finger and thumb into the zipper opening, Dill pinched the skin behind the orbs.

Mason shot. Dill pinched and twisted carefully. Cum hit Dill's tongue, lips, face, the back of his throat.

He licked his lips, swallowing what he'd been given. "Is that it?" Dill taunted, continuing to play the role Mason seemed to need from him. He went down on him, taking Mason's dick full into his mouth and sucking it like a straw. He popped off, wiped his cheeks on his coat sleeve.

Roughly cupping the now flaccid cock and balls in his hand, Dill gave them a squeeze and looked into Mason's eyes. "Next time I see this cock, it had better be a private showing, and you'd better say 'thank you, sir' when I finish spanking your rod until it's angry and red. Got it?"

Mason grabbed him, dragging him down for a desperate kiss.

"You've been a bad boy, Mason Haliday. I'm going to have to fucking teach you a lesson about how to treat your lovers."

Excitement spiraled through Dill. He'd never role-played a dominant before. Didn't know how it was done, but took his cues from Mason's reactions. It seemed new to him too, and fuck if they didn't both like it.

"Yeah. I'd like that," Mason breathed.

"I can see that. For now, you'll have to go the rest of the watch knowing that I'm hard as a rock for your ass and there's nothing I'm going to let you do about it."

"God," Mason murmured, his eyes hot and huge. "There's an alley over there. You can fuck me against the brick wall."

"No. You've given me a sour case of blue balls, which is going to make me pissier by the moment. I'm hard, swollen, and horny as hell. By the time I come, I'm going to be planted so far up your ass that you're gonna taste saltwater."

"Holy shit, Dill."

Mason's cock had already regained some life. Dill smiled knowingly. He rubbed and fondled him until he was completely erect and the glazed look had re-entered his eyes. Then Dill gave him a sharp slap to the cock and sat back.

Mason moaned his complaint.

"Sit up and cover up. Your shit belongs to me through the duration of my assignment and I don't share my shit."

He was pleased to see Mason struggling to put away his package with shaking hands. Even happier when Mason squirmed from the hard-on Dill had left him with.

Despite the raging erection he was sporting, Dill felt pretty self-satisfied as he stared through the rain washed windows.

## *Chapter Eight*

Dill leaned against the club wall, looking out over the parking lot. He sank into the shadows and let the rough brick wall snag his shirt. The weather had warmed since the last time he'd stood here. Like before, he waited for Mason's arrival.

After the failed stakeout, they'd decided Mason needed to pick up his old routine. If they thought he'd given up the search for his attackers, maybe they'd come out of the woodwork for another nasty round.

Mason had said that it meant Dill couldn't hang around him anymore. Dill had argued the point. He'd even tried the dominant track and gotten a fist in the jaw for it. But he'd seen the bulge in Mason's cargos.

He figured when Mason got tired of jacking off to the memory, he'd come back. In the meantime, not pressuring Mason or crowding him, seemed the best compromise because he sure as hell wasn't going to quit covering his ass if someone did make another attempt on his life.

Except it was midnight, and there'd been no sign of Mason. He glanced at his watch to be sure.

*Yep, only three minutes since the last time I looked.*

Dill pushed the keypad on his phone for Mason's number. The line rang through to voice mail, and he frowned as he thought of all the things that could have gone wrong. He didn't think Mason would avoid his call. It wasn't a privilege Dill abused. When another ten minutes passed without seeing him and without a callback, Mason pushed himself off the wall and headed for his car.

Next he dialed Sage. "It's me. Mason is a no-show. I've got a bad feeling."

"I'll meet you at his place."

Short and to the point. Dill hung up and concentrated on taking the roads without breaking the speed limit like he wanted to. When he got there, the alley was dark. Not even the halogen lamps high on either side of the passageway were in service. If they'd been attached to the same source, he might have reasoned through them both being off. Since they weren't, and Mason was a person of interest to two different parties, every nerve in Dill's body was on the alert.

Sage hadn't arrived yet. Dill got out and paced the far side of the street, keeping his eyes and ears trained on the black maw of alleyway.

*He could be bleeding to death. What if they are attacking him now? Calm down. You'd hear something. No way will Mason go down without a fight. Bleeding is silent, though.*

He'd crossed the road when Sage arrived, slammed the car into park, and jogged to walk with him. "Steady, Dill. Don't go in stupid."

Dill shoved him in annoyance, took a cautious skulk along one of the walls. Sage mirrored his movements on the opposite side. The alley gave them nothing.

Dill inched forward, keeping close to the wall, then skirting around a dumpster. Above, a faintly flickering blue light told him the TV was on at Mason's.

Glass crunched under his shoes just beneath the darkened halogen. *So it was busted on purpose, not blown out.* He sent the thought to Sage, hoping he got it. Apparently he did, because he looked at Dill, then up, nodded before motioning him to continue at a slower pace.

Fuck slower. Mason could be in trouble.

The sound of a door clacking open and closed gave him only a moment's pause before Dill surged forward, crossing the remaining distance to the metal staircase. Taking three steps at a time, he circled up, not stopping until he got to Mason's door. This high a slight breeze moved it in and out of the jam, creating the sound he'd heard. Beyond, the TV flickered silently and all other lights were off.

He wanted to spring into the apartment to find him. Sage's hand came down heavy on his shoulder.

"Don't," Sage warned in a winded whisper. "Might still be inside."

"I don't care."

"You will when they crack you over the head. Get a grip, or you'll be useless to him."

*That made sense.* Dill forced himself to calm down. Having taken a moment to collect his thoughts, form a plan of attack, he pushed the door open all the way with the toe of his shoe. It

creaked noisily. Dill winced. If there had been any way to sneak up on the intruders before, they'd lost all possibility of it now.

He crouched and stepped inside, quickly pressing his back to the wall and waited for his eyes to adjust. Something whizzed by his head. Dill ducked, barely in time. The wall behind him resounded with a loud crack and Dill leaped forward, tackling the man with the flailing object.

They stumbled backward, hitting the ground. He was big, hard, long underneath Dill, and entirely familiar.

"Mase?"

"Dill? What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Saving your ass. Again," Dill retorted. "I thought you'd been broken in on."

"I was. I have them tied up in my bedroom. I thought I had some stragglers sneaking in late to the party," Mason said.

The lights flared on. Sage stood over them with his hands on his hips. "You have them tied up in your bedroom? Kinky."

Mason's glance flicked to Sage, held for a second then came back to Dill. Dill cocked his eyebrow waiting for the usual reaction his brother got. Mason grinned, his eyes danced, seeming to know what Dill expected.

"The last time I said something about that you told me to fuck off, and you know where that got us," Mason murmured.

"Oh, fucking hell!"

Dill rolled off Mason to see what Sage was on about.

"Get a room. Promise me you won't do that in public again. And seriously, bro, if you're going to go all Dom, invest in some leather because you are the preppiest Dom I've ever seen," Sage complained, clutching his head. "I think I need to scrub my brain."

Mason laughed. "I'll buy him a leather and spiked ring for his equipment. Will that help?"

"Jesus." Dill's face felt hot and he took the next logical move, which was to leave. The bad guys were in Mason's room, so that's where he needed to go. "We have a job to do here perverts."

"Does it involve blowing?" Sage asked.

"Fuck you."

"You really want to start that up again? Here? Now? With Sage and a bunch of strangers watching?" Mason called to him.

The two laughed behind him. Dill got to the dividing curtain and whipped it aside. Hogtied and gagged, they looked uncomfortable and unconscious. "Do you know these guys?"

"No," Mason answered, coming up to nudge one of them with his shoe.

He laced his fingers over the top of his bald scalp. Two flesh and one inked joining at the same spot looked eerie.

Mason sighed. "There's something I should tell you."

"Let's hear it," Sage said.

"I did some things when I was a kid. One of them was join a gang. They made leaving difficult but Diego tried to get jumped-in and I pulled the plug on it. Sometimes they come around to harass me. They pull shit like beat downs and breaking in and shit. But these guys? I've never seen them before. They aren't from my old crew."

Dill squatted down. He pulled up sleeves to check their wrists, tugged back their collars to show their shoulders. "Do you know if they're gang stamped?"

"I checked. Figured my crew maybe got some brothers to mess me up. Nothin'."

"I don't suppose you asked for their identity?" Sage asked.

"Yeah. Path of least resistance, man. I got nothin'." Mason folded his arms across his wide chest. Dill passingly thought he looked like a sexy Mr. Clean who'd been through hell, decorated, and spat back out again.

"No leads back to your gang pals," Dill murmured. "What about the other attacks? Were they guys you knew?"

"I don't know about the ones you froze, but the dudes from the parking lot weren't any I'd met."

"Staged?" Dill asked Sage.

"Sounds like it," he agreed.

"You know what's going on?" Mason asked.

"Clara Leon is running for a senate seat. She wants to find you and confirm the genetic proof of your identity. What if someone doesn't want her to run? What if someone thinks killing you is the perfect way to scare her off?" Dill conjectured.

"Why not just kill *her*?" Mason wondered. "Seems like a lot of round about trouble to come after me when she's the one they want to stop."

"Because she's in the press, and you're..." Sage began.



"Nobody," Mason finished. "I'm nobody anybody would miss. Except someone who's looking for me."

"And me," Dill added quietly.

"Exactly," Sage agreed. "She's up against two others. Which one has more to lose?"

"What if it's not tied to the senate seat, but her platform? She's been actively pushing human rights in the media. Maybe she uncovered something that would fuck up a lot of people who don't want to get fucked up."

"Sounds promising, Dill." Sage took out his cell and dialed three numbers. "This is Sage Harper with Harper Security. I'm at a third floor residence with a friend who halted a robbery in his home." He paused, nodded his head. "That's right. I'll put him on the phone and he can give you the details. His name is Mason Haliday. Yeah, here ya go." He handed his phone to Mason.

Mason took it and wandered across the apartment for privacy.

"You got into my files," Sage said.

"Yeah."

"I can fire you for that. Clara was a confidential client."

"You won't," Dill predicted.

"No, I won't but don't do it again, or I will."

"This was different. Like Joe," Dill said, referencing Sage's husband.

"I know. That's why I'm not firing you now."

"Thanks."

"Yeah. Whatever."

"Did you know about Mason's history?" Dill asked.

Sage nodded. "It didn't apply to this case. Anything he chooses to tell you about himself, is between the two of you."

"This could have applied," Dill noted.

"But it didn't because I already knew Mason's history, and the guys he hung with are pretty small time thugs. The parking lot could have been them, but there were too many and they didn't use guns. It didn't match their profile."

"Would you have told me if it did?"

"Not unless it became necessary," Sage admitted.

Dill smiled. "Thanks."

"For keeping secrets from you?"

“For keeping *his* secrets for him.”

“Sure thing.” Sage bent over the three sprawled men. “He did quite a number on these guys. Maybe they’ll wake up by the time the police get here.”

Mason walked back, handing the cell to Sage. “They’ll be here in another few seconds. Dispatch said they were close.”

“Looks like we’re in for a long night of statements,” Sage said, sighing. “Excuse me a sec while I call Joe.”

Dill stood. “Are you hurt?” he whispered.

Mason closed the distance. “Nah, but I could pretend to be if you want to kiss things better.”

“Goddamn you’re losing gallons of blood by the second,” Dill teased.

“Pints,” Mason said, laughing.

“Most of its pouring from your cock.”

“God, yeah, my cock is killing me.”

“We should apply pressure,” Dill offered. He cupped Mason’s cock, enjoying the turgid length lining his palm. “This could be life threatening.”

“I’m feeling weaker by the second.”

“For fuck’s sake, get a room,” Sage complained.

Strobing lights bounced off the alley, circled through Mason’s studio and lapped the area again.

“Pick up where we leave off?” Mason asked.

“Count on it,” Dill murmured.

Mason dropped a quick kiss on his lips. It felt like nothing had distanced them. He hoped it wasn’t just the adrenaline rush affecting Mason. He really wanted it to be something more lasting and genuine than hormone run-off.

*One thing’s for sure. He keeps me on my toes.*

The sun was coming up as they left the police station. Mason’s eyes felt gritty and leaden, his body exhausted from the adrenaline rush and fight several hours earlier. Hell, he’d been on a high when he’d all but begged Dill to fuck him on the apartment floor. Looking back at it now, he didn’t think it was the smartest move he’d made. He’d just been relieved when Dill had shown

up, and too tired of fighting off the three intruders to fight his feelings for the man who'd come to his rescue.

He figured that was an effeminate trait or something. He'd never admit to it, or Dill would think he'd gained a foothold. After the effort Mason had expended in convincing Dill he was nothing more than a convenient fuck, it would hurt like raging hell when Dill knew better and left him anyway.

But he'd kinda fucked that up when the whole grope and fondle bit. He made Mason feel *light*. Like none of the problems he had were as big as they seemed. Like he could face them all with Dill beside him and that was a dangerous thing to believe. It was myth. It was fog. A puff of a hope that led a man to the shoals of devastation.

He knew all this and yet his aching body wanted nothing more than to curl up with Dill and fall asleep expecting to be safe and cared for. The myth was a drug and right now, he wanted to take a draw on it.

Beside him, Dill yawned.

"We should hit the sack," Mason said when he'd finished. He had no place to go that hadn't been breached a couple of times now. The cabin? Would he be invited back there?

Mason slouched against the stair balustrade. He tucked his chin against the early morning chill. If he had hair, his head wouldn't be so damn cold. He liked the look, but did Dill? Maybe he should think about growing it out again.

"You going to fight me on where we sack out?" Dill asked, turning his piercing blue gaze on him.

"Nope."

Dill hooked his thumb, gesturing toward the sidewalk. Mason followed.

"Got a place in mind?" Mason asked.

"Hotel."

"Cool."

He'd been expecting a motel with rickety doors, the kind you find in Mason's neighborhood, but Dill turned the corner, led him a few more blocks and walked up the front steps of a glittering, carpeted entry.

"Uh, Dill?"

"I'm tired. On the off chance they know I'm helping you and discover where I live, this is the safest place for a long sleep."

Mason shrugged. Made sense to him. The doorman wasn't amused and shot an encompassing glare over Mason's person. He, in turn, ignored the little man and hung back while Dill secured a room.

Back with a keycard, they went to the bank of elevators where Dill pushed the top floor. Mason looked at him askance. Dill hadn't said anything about the room, but then Dill often didn't say a lot unless he thought someone was frozen. The memory made him smile.

*He wants me*, Mason recalled. That light feeling tickled in his chest again. God, that was a great feeling. Maybe if he let the myth do its thing, Mason could just live in the moment for the night, before reality popped his light-filled bubble.

For one night. Yeah, for one night he could let himself love Dill and pretend that Dill might actually love him back. It would suck later. He still thought it sounded like a good trade.

The elevator doors opened and they moved down the hallway to a door with a brass plate on it, inscribed with the words *Presidential Suite*. He'd never been in one of those. Those had lots of bedrooms, right? Had Dill chosen a suite because it would be big enough to have two bedrooms?

Mason prepared to squash his disappointment. What he wanted was that picture of perfection where they curled together in sleep. What would Dill say if Mason asked to share his bed?

Inside, the spacious quarters had a kitchenette and a living room. His spirits lifted when he saw only one bed, visible through an opening beyond the social area.

"Hope you don't mind. I only got the suite with one room," Dill informed him casually.

"I can take the couch," Mason offered, wishing he could grab the words out of the air and shove them back down his throat.

Dill studied him. He shook his head slowly. "It's a king. I'll keep my hands off you."

*I hope not*. Mason gave an acknowledging nod and a tight smile, nerves having got the better of him.

"Oh," Dill added, leaving for the bedroom. "You'll have to strip off your clothes. I'll put a laundry bag on the bed for you. The hotel will pick them up for cleaning."

*Cuddling in a king sized bed, naked, with Dill? How the fuck am I supposed to stay platonic? How the fuck can he? Jesus, I'll never get any sleep.*

From his vantage point, he saw Dill's clothes fly through the air and land on the bed. The sound of running water indicated he'd turned on the shower. Mason groaned. His cock strained at the ready.

"He's trying to kill me," Mason muttered.

He'd quit playing the victim a long time ago. He wasn't going to renew that arrangement now. Nope. He wanted a night with Dill. Dill had offered no strings. Dill had also said Mason was his for the duration of the case. So, yeah, for one night, he'd be Dill's. If that was platonic—he bit off some impressive cuss words—then so be it.

"What the hell. Why not?" Mason stripped out of his clothes. Grabbing Dill's he stuffed them all into the plastic hotel laundry bag, tied the drawstrings and looped them over the outside doorknob. Then, because Dill was still cleaning up, and Mason wouldn't admit to being too chicken shit to join him, he dialed room service for the pickup.

Water still running, Dill stepped out and wound a towel around his waist. "I left it going for you."

"Cool. I took out the clothes."

"See you in bed."

*Fuck if that wasn't a loaded statement.*

"Yep. Every naked inch," Mason threw back as he stepped under the punishing spray.

The lights were off when he got out and walked back to the bedroom. The heavy, light-blocking curtains had been drawn. Dill's body lumped under the covers on the one side of the king. Mason dropped the towel and climbed in.

The temptation to reach across the short distance made his fingers twitch. Instead, he rolled to his side and blinked into the darkness as he waited for his eyes to adjust.

"You're looking at me," Dill mumbled.

"Can't see you, yet."

"Trust me. You're looking at me, and it's creepy," Dill informed him.

"Go to sleep."

"I would, but you're looking at me."

Mason sighed, scrambled closer and turned his back against Dill's warm, welcome chest. Grabbing Dill's arm, he draped it over his ribcage. "Now I'm not looking at you."

Dill scooted closer, aligning his body snugly to Mason's. "Nope. You fixed it."

His hot breath fanned over Mason's scalp, raising goose flesh as Dill's breaths came heavier and deeper. Dill's swollen cock pressed between Mason's ass cheeks. Equally as hard, he nevertheless resisted the urge to move Dill's hand south, choosing to link their fingers. He thought he'd never get to sleep.

He was wrong.

Warmth permeated his back, the light embrace of Dill's arm around him, the lullaby of Dill's breathing, the sexual satisfaction of knowing he *did it* for Dill, and the anonymity of sleeping together apart from the rest of the world drugged him with security and peace. The world fell away in the face of belonging, and the last thing he remembered before slipping into unconscious slumber was that he was smiling.

## *Chapter Nine*

Mason awoke to someone running fingers up and down his arm in a ticklish path. The fingers traced along his shoulder, up the back of his neck, and became a large, hot hand cupping his scalp where the claw tattoo was. Then they stroked their way down his spine to just between his shoulder blades.

The innocent examination had his cock throbbing and his nipples anxious for play. Mason stayed still for him, not letting on that he had awoken.

Soft lips pressed the center back of his skull. The inquisitive hand smoothed from shoulder blade to side to hip, and stopped. Dill's rock hard erection pushed against his cheeks, seeming to need pressure the way Mason wanted pressure on his cock.

"I wasn't going to touch you," Dill murmured by Mason's ear.

He didn't know if that meant Dill knew he was awake, or talking freely because he thought he wasn't. Mason kept still. He didn't want the stroking to stop. He couldn't remember the last time someone had touched him. There were men in and out of his bed over the past years, but they'd been nameless fucks and touched for the purpose of getting off as fast as possible.

This didn't have any purpose for sex, but turned him on more than any rough grope and pointed proposition ever had. This felt comforting, tender, and Mason could almost believe that Dill cared.

Mason closed his eyes, willing to let the dream continue, and ignoring the way his eyes got hot. *Just one night*, he reminded himself. *Pretend it's real for just one night.*

Dill released his hip to trace the whorl of Mason's ear. Dill's lips brushed his shoulder and Mason couldn't hide the way his breath caught. Dill's arms came around him and held him tightly. He hooked his chin over Mason's shoulder and rested his cheek on his.

"I like you touching me," Mason confessed, finally admitting he was awake.

Dill didn't react, and Mason suspected he'd known the minute Mason had woken up. He'd known and still he hadn't been afraid to tell Mason that he wanted him. That light, happy feeling Dill created in him seemed bigger this time. Dill made it so easy to believe.

He rubbed his palm over Mason's chest before tucking his arms around him again. "Good. I like touching."

Mason tentatively reached back with his one free arm. The natural catching point was Dill's buttocks and Dill murmured his approval into his ear before catching the lobe and gently suckling it.

Mason's breath hissed sharply. His stomach tumbled. "No one's ever done that. Feels incredible."

"Suckling your earlobe?" Dill asked, incredulously. At his nod, Dill did it again, his tongue tracing, tasting, driving Mason crazy as each pull mirrored the draw in his balls.

Unable to stand not reciprocating, he maneuvered onto his back and pulled Dill down for a lingering kiss. He tried to imitate the sensations Dill created in him, by lightly taking his fingers across Dill's cheekbone then down to his jaw. He felt nervous and scared, which was stupid because it was just a touch. So why did this touch feel a thousand times more intimate than fucking?

He liked it though. He liked the way Dill's skin felt when he barely skimmed his hand from jaw to throat to collarbone. The tips of his fingers seemed to come alive as though they'd never noticed something as simple as touch before.

Mason had a memory of sitting in a tub too long as a child and his fingers crinkling from the water. This felt like that. The same sensitivity and curiosity overcame him. He ran them over Dill's chest, bumping his tight nipples and earning himself a pleased groan from Dill's throat, which blossomed on their tongues inside the hidden confines of their mouths. He dragged them further, enjoying the rippling of Dill's muscles and the way they reflexively clenched when he found a ticklish spot or a spot that made Dill's breath shudder.

He moved them around Dill's body, flattened his hand on Dill's lower spine and pulled it up his back with increasing pressure. Dill caught Mason's lip in his teeth, when they broke for air.

Dill's eyes looked smoky-gray in the dark room. Like everything else, they were draped in shadows, yet Dill's heated gaze communicated so much promise.

*Believe.*



Dill released his lip, moved over him, and dipped for a soft plucking kiss only to retreat. He settled on top of Mason, took another softly melded kiss, and released.

"I found you," Dill said, quietly, wonderingly.

Mason didn't understand.

Dill's half smile seemed to recognize that while declining to explain.

Mason wanted him so bad his skin burned. He caught Dill behind the head, trying to bring him down for a kiss.

Dill shook his head free. "Don't rush. Stay with me."

Mason let go.

"Tell me what you want," Dill told him.

"Your cock in my ass."

Dill chuckled through a rewarded kiss. "That's direct."

"Dill, can we cut to the chase?"

"Is that what you want, or are you just getting gun-shy?"

"Does it matter?" he said, stealing Dill's phrase.

"It matters," Dill confirmed. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"I don't want to. Sex is simple. This feely shit isn't something I'm good at."

"You're great at it." Dill rocked his hips on Mason's. They both groaned.

"Okay, I'm a fucking genius at it. Can you screw me now?"

"Nope."

"Goddamn fucking please?" Mason hated that his voice cracked with telltale desperation.

Dill pushed up. "Roll over."

"It's about time."

Dill just laughed like he knew something Mason didn't. Well the joke was on Dill because Mason was finally going to get cocked. He rolled to his knees.

Dill knocked his knees out and pushed him to the bed. "Not yet."

"What?" he bellowed.

"I want to lick every inch of your ridiculously sexy body, so stay the fuck still," Dill commanded.

"Oh, God." Mason thought his cock was going to explode.

With wet, sucking nips and kisses, Dill mapped his spine. His hands stroked what his mouth didn't and by the time Dill reached his tailbone, Mason had buried his face in a pillow to muffle the whimpers of pleasure he couldn't hold back.

Then Dill took light, scraping bites on his ass cheeks, spread them apart and probed the unexplored crease with tickling, wet precision.

Mason moaned, lifted his hips, and was rewarded when Dill stroked the underside of Mason's balls.

"You clean up pretty," Dill said, wickedly. The tip of his tongue flickered across Mason's hole and Mason had to bite down on his wrist to keep from crying out and sobbing for more. He'd been reduced to a quivering mass of arousal, completely dependent on Dill to satisfy him. And he hoped he fucking hurried before he shot his wad on the bed.

"Dill," His strangled cry said it all.

Dill dropped below the desperate rosette and licked Mason's balls. This time there was no stopping the hungry cry. Sweat broke out along Mason's spine. Did he say only *one* night? What the fuck had he been thinking? A week. Yeah. A week with Dill. If he could pretend to love for a day, then a week wouldn't be too much different, right?

Pleasure swirled around his balls, and suddenly, hot and moist, they were tugged in sensuous sucking pleasure. Mason bellowed, scrambled to get his knees up higher, out of the way for whatever it took to keep him doing *that*. Dill chuckled, the vibrations working through the thin skin. Mason's balls pulled up tight and achy. Still the suction came and so did the burn of unreleased pleasure.

It felt like Dill dragged the flat of his tongue up, over Mason's hole. He rubbed it in, and now pulling Mason's ass further open, exposing the hidden flesh to cool air, Dill drilled the rosette with his tongue.

Mason's ass felt slick, and he welcomed the minute discomfort of Dill's finger probing inside, loosening the muscles. Just as suddenly, Dill stopped. He rose up behind Mason, hooked his arm around Mason's waist and hauled his ass into the air. Giving him a sharp, stinging slap, Dill positioned his cockhead at Mason's hole and shoved forward in one burning, agonizing, fantastic thrust.

Mason reached for his own cock, unable to stand not having it stimulated any longer.

Dill smacked his hand away. "That's mine. For later."

"Not gonna be able to stop from coming."

"Don't you dare," Dill warned. To back up his order, he squeezed the base of Mason's cock, then pulled out and plunged forward, making sure to hit every nerve he knew Mason had.

"Aw, goddamn it, Dill." His cock felt painfully full, his balls, hard knots of agony yet every thrust, every grinding possession seemed to demand he fall over the precipice of orgasm while Dill made sure he didn't.

It was harrowing, mind fogging, nerve searing, torturous bliss. All he could do was hold on, and even then his body shook with restricted need, and pinpoints of light exploded in his vision, Dill kept his cock in a vice. Mason felt everything. Every goddamn, blessed, excruciating detail of what it was like to be well-fucked with every sense alive and screaming.

Dill came, branding Mason on the inside, and Mason tried to hold onto his cock, squeeze every last bit out of Dill. He wanted all of it. All of *him*, even if he couldn't say the words.

Dill grunted, gasping as he emptied himself and withdrew reluctantly. Still holding Mason's cock, he nudged him to roll over then snuggled alongside him.

"Don't leave me like this," Mason pleaded.

"I won't."

"Please."

"I won't."

Mason tried to loosen his hold. Dill bit his shoulder.

"Patience. You'll come too fast if I let go right now," Dill murmured.

"That's okay with me."

"I want to enjoy you."

"My turn to enjoy," Mason muttered.

"You have the sexiest looking hole."

The words sent a spiral of bubbly pleasure straight to his middle. What did a sexy hole look like? Who the fuck knew, but Dill liked his and that's all the praise he needed.

"Tight. Hot. Sweet. I could tongue you all night."

Mason groaned. "You're not helping."

"Would you rather I slap your dick around? Maybe use my teeth on your cockhead?"

Mason tried to grab himself again. The urge to jack-off overwhelmed him with the sharp arousal and sexy, sleep coated words drifting huskily across his ear.

"If you jack yourself off, I guess you don't want what I'll do to you."

That stayed Mason's hand, fast.

Dill released his captive cock. Straddling Mason, he pinned his hands beside his head. "Did you like that?" he asked.

This close, there was no eye averting. Mason wasn't one to back down from a confrontation anyway, but this intimate space dialogue made building a defensive emotional wall between them nearly impossible.

*You're letting yourself love him, today.* Seemed he had to keep reminding himself that it was alright to relax, let Dill in. Just this once.

"Yeah," he admitted, when he'd calmed down.

"How much?"

"A helluva lot."

"How thorough and descriptive you are," Dill teased.

Mason steeled himself for rejection. If he was going to allow himself this freedom for one day, then he intended to experience it. "I want it back in there. Or in my mouth. I keep thinking of what you look like when you come, and it makes me hot as hell. Sometimes, I think I can't breathe when I look at you. I want what you want to give me, but I'm afraid that if I claim it, you'll snatch it away. It's happened too many times with people who say they care only to run off or send me away. I don't think I could handle it if you did."

Dill's eyes widened, dilated. His lips slackened and he looked like he would devour Mason with the hunger he saw etched on the man's face. He liked that look. That look said he'd made the right choice in coming clean.

"Whoa," Dill breathed, clearly impressed.

He lowered himself on Mason's body, thrilling him with light kisses. Their tongues touched, noses brushed. Dill rubbed his cheek with his own in a tender caress. The kisses began holding longer, still sweet, but equally mesmerizing in their full-lipped expression.

"You approve?" Mason asked between interruptions.

Dill nodded against his lips.

"Today, I love you," Mason murmured.

Dill retreated far enough to look into his eyes. "Only today?"

"It's all I have."

"I'll take today. Then I'm taking tomorrow. After that, I've got dibs on the next day," Dill remarked matter-of-factly.

"What if I can't give them to you?" Mason asked.

"They're already mine. I'm already yours."

"I wish I could believe that," Mason said, frowning.

"You will."

"It's one of those time things, isn't it?" Mason asked.

"Yeah. But I'll freeze it when it gets rough so you can catch your breath," Dill grinned.

"Dill?"

"Yeah?"

"Make me come," Mason whispered.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Dill pushed down Mason's body, taking time to fiddle with the pierced nipples he found along the way, until the soft pants and urging hands on his shoulders told him Mason needed more. Dill had made him wait long enough. What he hadn't told Mason was that his mouth watered for the chance to suck him off.

He couldn't wait to feel the texture of Mason's gorgeous cock sliding between his lips. The man's body was a work of art. Tight form, tattooed perfection and glowing with health, Dill applauded himself for his restraint so far.

Then Mason had said the words he didn't think he'd get to hear. Trying not to rush it after that seemed like a bigger obstacle than Dill was prepared to undertake. He felt like celebrating with shouts and laughter, yet sensed that Mason needed to take it slower. He was tentative and cautious. Skittish, pretty well summed it up. The last thing he wanted to do was scare him away.

Because the next step was finding out if Mason would allow a more permanent arrangement. Like one with wedding bands.

*I never should have doubted Mom.*

Now if he could just convince Mason what Dill already knew to be true. They belonged together.

Sinking lower, Dill nuzzled the trimmed hairs at the base of Mason's cock. They were dark brown and for the first time, he wondered what color Mason's hair had been before he shaved it all off. With sucking kisses first along one side and then the other, he looked up at Mason.

"What color is your hair?"

"Brown."

"Mm," Dill murmured as he slipped the tip of Mason's cock into his mouth.

Mason gasped. "You want me to grow it for you?"

"No."

"I would."

"No." Dill nipped the rim, then licked it in apology. "I like your head. Both of them."

"I like that you like my heads. Fuck, do that again."

Dill nipped and licked, then smoothed his tongue over the entire knob, dipping into the slit. Mason shivered. He held Dill's head on the cock, alternately, twisting his fingers into the strands until they pinched enough to water Dill's eyes, and stroking his hollowed cheeks when he began working it over.

Then, inspired by an idea, he pulled off and looked up the length of Mason's fully aroused body. "Tell me what I do to you. Tell me how you love me. Don't stop telling me unless you want me to stop this." He took a long draw on Mason's dick, hugging the tip with his lips as he withdrew.

"That's blackmail," Mason complained weakly.

"You love me, today. So today I want to hear it all."

"Safe with you." Mason gasped over the words as Dill resumed. "You don't give up on me."

Dill murmured in agreement.

"Christ that feels good," Mason said, squirming.

Dill stopped long enough to remind him, "Keep going."

"Okay, okay—uhm—I love the way you look at me. Blue eyes, sharp. Hungry smile. Quiet presence."

Dill resumed, pleasuring him with his mouth for every warm praise Mason bestowed on him.

"Strength. You're strong in your person. Uh..."

Mason seemed to be having trouble holding on to thoughts, or finding the words he wanted. Dill couldn't help but smile and increase the intensity of his movements on the delicious cock in his mouth.

"Confidence," Mason nearly shouted. His body had grown taut, drawn. He alternately grabbed Dill's hair and the sheets, twisting both in his effort to hang on to speech or sanity.

“Sexy confidence. Don’t back away from challenge. I’ve...fucking...challenged you. Aw, fuck,” Mason swore, gasping around the words. His breaths had grown labored.

“Tell me,” Dill insisted.

Mason grunted with frustration and scrambled to shove Dill back on his cock.

Dill laughed but allowed himself to be guided.

He liked the feel of Mason sliding between his lips and over his tongue. He liked the taste which was both salty and crisp. The fact that he got to have the sculpture-perfect piece all to himself made prolonging Mason’s pleasure all the more fun. But he’d waited long enough. Mason could barely hold himself still and he’d certainly allowed Dill to control him beyond the endurance a lesser man would.

“I do love you. God, I hate that you make me feel shit.”

Mason’s hips lifted to meet Dill’s decent on his penis. His balls had drawn up again and his words had a strange strangled quality to them. He was ready.

Dill slid his finger inside Mason’s hole, curling the tip and popping the ring as he came out. Mason howled and bucked, insane with pleasure he couldn’t hide from Dill’s studious gaze. He repeated the action, faster and faster until finally he tasted success.

Mason arched up, grinding his teeth as he pumped Dill’s mouth. Hot and sharp, he erupted, spraying Mason’s throat. Dill swallowed, sucked to take more, worshipped his length with hand and mouth, wringing every last luscious drop from the strong man who’d admitted his weakness—for him.

It wasn’t just for today. Not if the admissions he’d made were true. Dill had finally gotten through to him. Now he just needed Mason to realize that it wasn’t a bad thing to trust Dill with his heart, and to trust himself enough to know that loving wasn’t a weakness at all.

Dill climbed over him, leaned down to kiss Mason’s gasping lips. “I love you, too.”

Alarm tightened Mason’s gaze. “I didn’t say...”

Dill cocked a brow and waited for the denial.

Mason never formed the words. His face, still flushed from sex, pinked further. The slightest smile touched his lips. “I can’t lie to you, can I?”

“You could, but I’d know it after that display,” Dill noted.

His smile faded again, his eyes grew troubled. “It doesn’t mean I’ll do anything about it.”

“You just did.”

“Beyond today, I may never do anything about it.”

Dill could see the stubbornness rising to the forefront. Mason must be feeling trapped again. It wasn't a feeling he wanted Mason to have about him, so Dill climbed off to lie on his back beside him. "Strength is found in many ways, Mase."

"Is that Sensei Dill talking?"

He laughed. "Yeah." He turned his head, looking at Mason's profile. "But it doesn't make it any less true."

Mason rolled up on his side. He looked down at Dill and trailed his fingers from the base of Dill's throat to his belly button. "You're strong and you have strength, but you're not *my* strength, Dill. You're my weakness. I learned a long time ago that some people don't get a chance at regular feelings. If they try, the gods strip it away to rebalance life's order."

"The cosmos according to Mason Haliday, god of complete knowledge." He'd meant it as a joke, but Mason's answering expression was serious and Dill felt the humor drain away. Was there nothing he could do to prove himself?

"Something like that."

"It's gotta be lonely where you live." Dill stroked Mason's cheek, rubbed his thumb on his temple before letting his hand fall away again.

Mason shrugged a shoulder.

"What will it take to let me in?" Dill asked.

It was the wrong thing to say. Mason's expression shuttered instantly. "It is what it is, Dill. This is good. Really good. But it isn't permanent. Nothing is permanent. Not even families. Not even you."

"You haven't given me enough of a chance to know that. A week ago you'd never have admitted to loving me."

"I still haven't admitted to it," Mason said, some of the sparkle returning to his eyes.

It was a cautious start. Dill would take it. "Not with words. It's in the air. I see it, and you know it."

"God, you're stubborn." Mason's hand rested over Dill's heart. He leaned down, softly kissed him. "If I could hold this moment in time, I'd keep it forever to look back on when this is all over."

The air stilled.

"No. No, no, no, not now," Dill yelled. "Not when it was getting so good. I was so close. He was so close, you fucking faeries." He felt the blood drain out of his face. "Oh shit, you heard



all that, didn't you? I'm sorry Mason, but you do love me, and I love you and no matter what you seem to think about permanence or the cosmos, it's bullshit. We belong together."

"The only way I know to prove it, is to unfreeze you. Kiss me and we'll be in the moment together while the rest of the world stays unmoved. I'll give you your moment in time to look back on forever. I'm going to show you that it could be more than just one, or two, but a collection of moments meant only for us."

## *Chapter Ten*

Mason Haliday listened with no small sense of panic. If Dill could read through him so easily, there didn't exist any hope of getting over him. He'd said, just for today, but it hadn't even been a day. He'd slept in Dill's arms better than he'd slept in his lifetime. It was like his body and mind had known he'd come home, and that scared the shit out of him.

Home meant depending on someone and getting let down. It meant people said important things about love and caring, yet it was that moment, the one where they made all those promises, which began the downward slide into disappointment. Why? Because Mason knew. He *knew* what promises were filled with, and it stank bad enough to draw flies.

Oh, they all believed it at first. They thought they'd loved him. They thought they'd weather through with him and keep him, but they always let him go. They always found something they disapproved of, and then he was gone. They sent him away, and he'd be left wondering what he'd done this time that made them stop loving him.

He fucking couldn't take that from Dill. If Dill saw how much he mattered to Mason, if he knew that he put the lightness in Mason's chest and filled it with hope instead of fucking emptiness, he'd not only have all the power, he'd see how badly it hurt him when Dill grew tired of him.

For Dill that would include regret and guilt. Dill didn't love like the people Mason had grown up with. Dill wanted him to believe it, and he did. He knew Dill actually thought he meant it, but the moment Mason wasn't good enough for him, he'd *want* to send Mason away. Mason wouldn't be able to handle the fading affection, the disgust, and he sure as hell wouldn't be able to stomach seeing Dill suffer from guilt for knowing he hadn't been true to his word when he'd only loved Mason for a little while.

Dill reached for him and drew back.

Mason experienced the familiar sizzle along his nerve endings as they woke. He witnessed the gradual slowing in Dill until they had completely switched places. This is the part where he decided whether or not he'd trust Dill. At least, that's what Dill would see. What he wouldn't see is what Mason knew from experience: No one could love him forever. They tried and failed. As long as Dill believed Mason couldn't open up to accept a permanent thing, he'd be saved from the self-loathing and guilt of unintentionally lying to Mason.

Because Mason knew it was inevitable, and because he did love Dill and couldn't allow him to beat himself up over something he had no control over.

The break had to happen now. A temporal freeze would provide Mason the time he needed to take care of personal business and leave Dill. He'd be pissed when he unfroze. He'd be hurt. He'd be alive, and he'd move on, too. He'd remember Mason as that guy who'd never let himself open up to another human being, and Mason would remember that Dill had been the only person to break the barrier of his heart. Dill *was* his weakness. He'd always be, and because of that, he wouldn't condemn Dill to a future of self-reproach but a future of one that always seemed possible if only Mason had let him in.

As he watched Dill still completely, felt the sensation come back to his own limbs, he looked into Dill's eyes for what would be the last time. What did you say to someone whose whole existence began, dwelled, and ended with happiness and belonging when all you brought was misery and solitude? What did you say to break his heart without breaking the spirit you loved? What did you say to keep him from coming after you, to make him accept that the two of you would never work? That he'd accomplished the impossible by working his way into your heart forever and he'd never be forgotten?

"I love you, today," Mason whispered. "I told you it was only today, and that's all it's going to be. I'm sorry to do this to you, but it's the only way you'll leave me alone. Good-bye, Dill."

Without touching him and risking a defreeze, Mason moved away and got dressed. He did it silently, with his back to Dill and left. The shit in his apartment would stay the way they'd left it. He'd move to another town. It wouldn't be the first time he'd started over from scratch. He had his art, his ability to tattoo. There was always work to be found and a way to work off the equipment rental. Once he met Carla Leon, looked into the frozen face of his birth mother so that he knew what abandonment looked like in the flesh, he'd leave town and start over.

\* \* \* \*

*Mason, get your ass back here!*

Dill couldn't fucking believe he'd been left naked in a hotel room by the man of his dreams. What the fuck had he missed? They'd been doing fine. Some light banter, some great sex, some dominating sex, and a true heart to heart. He'd made it clear he loved Mason and that he knew Mason loved him back so he didn't actually have to form the words. The words seemed difficult for Mason, and Dill got that. He did. He understood why they'd be hard, and he was okay with it. They'd get by on feelings and just knowing until Mason felt safe enough to say them.

He'd used Dill's ability against him, for fuck's sake.

What the hell did he mean by, good-bye, Dill? Good-bye for a few minutes while I get some coffee, Dill? Good-bye while I work out how to get over myself and my dumbass pride, Dill? Good-bye, you're creeping me out and I'm running away now, Dill? What? *What?*

Not that anyone could hear him.

Thanks to Mason. Thanks to the fucking faeries.

Thanks to Dill's own gullibility. *Goddamit!*

Now he'd left, and somehow Dill needed to find him and fix the misunderstanding. He didn't like to admit it, but that good-bye had sounded sickeningly permanent.

*Think, Dill. Where would he go? The apartment?*

No. He wasn't safe there as proven twice. The door still hung on a hinge but offered no security.

*The tattoo shop is out of the question. He got kicked out. So is the café. Fat chance he'd be at the cabin or my place.*

He'd needed Dill's help to get answers about...

*Shit. He went to Carla. We staked her out. He knows where she lives and works. Why else would he wait until I can't stop him unless he wanted to do something I'd told him he couldn't do.*

No one could stop him, now. The whole world was frozen except for Mason.

*The one thing he wanted was answers. Who better to provide them than the woman who had created the questions in the first place?*

He willed himself to unfreeze. He felt used. He felt discarded, impotent. His cock flopped nakedly on his thigh. His mouth still tasted of Mason. His lips were still swollen from kissing and rubbing, and he'd do it again if Mason would just walk back through that door.

If he'd just come in casually with some coffee and say something sexually flip, like, "Hey, Dilly-bear, I thought you could use a pick me up. I need you awake because it's my turn to make you suffer."

Then he'd complain about Mason's choice of endearments, and Mason would make him gasp through the admonishment until he'd forgotten everything but Mason's body on his.

But he didn't come.

And non-seconds ticked by.

*He's going to Carla's to face her. Then what? Will he come back? He wouldn't actually skin her, would he?*

He didn't think so. The one thing that kept Dill calm was that as long as *he* was frozen, *she* was frozen. Hopefully, alive and frozen with all her skin.

So he'd go to her and what, wait? He'd have to know Dill would figure it out sooner or later. That he'd come after him and if not catch him with Carla, then find him at home.

Something didn't feel right. The way Mason had said good-bye lingered with him. It was as though he didn't expect to see Dill again, and the only way that was possible was if he couldn't be found.

*Don't you dare leave town, Mase. Don't you fucking dare leave me with my dick hanging out in the air and never let me see you again. Don't fucking dare. I'm worth more than this. We have something more than what you give us credit for. Don't you dare fucking leave.*

But he would. Dill felt certain that was exactly what Mason intended to do. All he could do now was wait for time to give up its hold. And think. And plan. And imagine holding Mason in his arms until he figured it out—Dill wasn't going to let him walk away this time.

\* \* \* \*

Mason circled Carla Leon. She looked harmless enough. She wasn't a big woman. Probably cleared five-four in bare feet. Today she was wearing black heels with a thin strap around her ankle. She was slim and in a dark navy power suit. The skirt fell in a straight line to the top of her knee. Her suit jacket took a deep vee and buttoned with three large navy buttons at her tiny waist. She had narrow, squared shoulders and shoulder-length black hair pushed off her forehead and falling in slight waves.

Her sculpted eyebrows winged in black perfection above clear gray eyes and her nose was smallish over full pink lips and pointed chin. Young. That's what she looked like. She looked young for forty-five. And harmless.

Not harmless though. She'd made a decision and ruined his life. He'd have been happy growing up with one parent, even if she'd been young and inexperienced. They could have

learned the ropes together. He'd have protected her, stood by her, worked to help support her when he got old enough.

Yet here was proof that even at birth, he hadn't been worth the effort. It was something he'd been fighting against his whole life. Rejecting it in some places where he could stand up for himself even if he didn't know when it was a lost cause. This woman had started it all.

"There's something I know about you that Dill doesn't, *Mom*," Sage said, finding it eerie to hear his voice out loud when all of time and sound had otherwise stopped.

There were things that needed saying, so he continued. "You had to know where I was. You had to know *who* I was all these years. Foster care never revoked your rights to see me or have me back. You might have fooled the Harpers, but you don't fool me."

He circled her again. "Sure, I disappeared off the court records at eighteen, but I disappeared from the foster home a lot sooner than that. Is that why you wanted to run the DNA tests? To make sure it was me? Why? Why when you had all my life to find me, does it matter now? Is it because of this?" he snarled, holding up one of her bright pink flyers.

"Is it because I do or *don't* fit the platform you're running on? Are you staging a long lost family reunion with me or hoping I'll disappear? I owe you nothing," he spat.

Seeing her, hurt. Seeing the ghost of a smile as she clutched her leather portfolio to her chest, in mid conversation with the young man who stood poised to enter her office, hurt. It hurt worse when he'd found pictures of himself in the top drawer of her desk. The ten or so pictures had spanned his entire life.

"I wanted you, Mom." His words broke. "You were supposed to want me, too."

"...reports as soon as—How did you get in here?" The young man from the door swept inside.

Carla spun around, shock written on her face as she held the portfolio tighter. Her gaze swept him, saw him standing over her desk with the photos in his hands. "What are you doing here?"

With a wry twist of his lips, he quoted the line from a torn nursery book he remembered. "Are you my mommy?"

"I'm calling security," the indignant man threatened.

Mason lifted his brows. "Do you really want him to do that?"

"No," Carla said, calmly. "Jenson, it's okay. I know this man." She smiled warmly at the sputtering sap. "Can you give us some privacy?"

"You have a press conference."

"Not for another hour, at least," she said.

He looked between Carla and Mason, shot Mason a warning glare. "I'll be right outside."

"Thank you, Jenson."

He waited until the door closed. "You didn't need a DNA test."

He held up the fistful of pictures and dropped them on her desk. He saw her glance nervously at the open drawer before meeting his eyes.

"I had to be sure."

"Are you?" he asked.

"You didn't have tattoos the last time I saw you."

"It just wasn't this one." He ran a hand over the claw. "When was the last time you saw me, because I don't remember *ever* seeing you."

She glanced away for a fraction of a second. It was enough to know she wasn't as calm and collected as she appeared.

"You were twelve. You got transferred out of the Dolman's house, and I signed a guardianship paper."

"Didn't bother to say, hi."

"Of course not. You didn't know who I was anyway," she shot back, defensively.

"Whose fault is that?"

"I suppose it's mine," she answered.

"You suppose it's—Jesus, you can't take responsibility for dropping your kid into the system even now, can you? I'd have done anything for you. Anything."

"Except disappear."

It stung like a slap. Bile rose up in his throat. "That's what you wanted," he said, quietly.

"It's what has to happen. I can't be a human rights advocate with something like this hanging over my head. You've gone your whole life not knowing me from anyone else. Is it really any different if you just disappear now? I can pay you. A lot. I'm doing really well for myself," she offered, hurriedly walking to her desk.

She put down her portfolio and motioned toward him. "If you let me get in there, I'll write you a check right now."

"You're unbelievable," he muttered.

His throat burned and a strange sense of surrealism fell like a veil over him. He'd imagined any number of possibilities for the moment he met her. There'd been tears and hugs, apologies and pleas that she'd wanted to come to him but something horrific had kept her away. There was none of that. She openly admitted to the choice, to casting him adrift to chance and strangers and legal systems that might work for some, but hadn't done a damn thing for him.

"I don't want your money," he bit out.

"Of course you do. Your equipment was destroyed and your home was ransacked. You don't have a car, and you've got no money to your name. It'll be a fresh start. Think of it like payback for all the years I should have been supporting you," she scoffed.

His fingers curled into a fist at his side. "I said, I don't want your money."

Exasperated, she put her hands on her hips and looked up at him. "Then what do you want? An invitation to holiday dinners?" she laughed at her joke. "Oh, I know, how about a lullaby and promises I'll never keep?"

"That would be a start."

"That would be ridiculous," she countered. "I gave you an education in the way the world works. Other people live fantasy lives filled with lies and superficial trinkets. It's a mockery of what's real, of what you learn when life gets down and dirty. It may not be pretty or give you happy thoughts, but I gave you personal strength and character. What I gave you has no price. What I gave you comes from a deep well of worth within yourself. What *I* gave you, Mason, was more honest than any other mother could have done for her child. I did that. *Me*."

"You are one selfish, twisted, fucked up bitch. God help anyone who thinks your brand of mothering is an improvement to human rights."

Carla cocked her hand back and slapped him across the face. His cheek burned like fire, but the veil was shattered.

"Thank you," he said, meaning it. "I needed that. You did teach me one thing. You suck as a mother and as a human being. I've met some people lately that band together as a unit, who are crazy and odd and goddamn it, they would never do what you've done to me." And he'd just walked out of Dill's life, giving it all up.

No fucking way.

Mason strode through her office. He was going back, and if he had to get on his knees and beg Dill to take him back, he'd do it. Because he knew now more than ever what true love was,



and it wasn't wishful thinking about a mother who'd never wanted him in the first place. It wasn't throwing your heart into the wind and watching it drift off, never to land.

No, it was frozen in time and space with the one who held it, whether or not the clock kept ticking and whether or not trials came up to challenge it. It stuck by you when you fought it, and it kept loving you when you stubbornly said no, because it couldn't help but love. Once it was kindled, it kept burning and it could burn in the depths of cooling coals, or it could blaze against the summer sky, insatiable when all the elements fed it.

Dill had been feeding it alone, using the twigs Mason had given him. Well, that was over now. Mason would chop the goddamn forest down and pile it on top of whatever remained of Dill's affection.

Mason didn't want anything to do with Carla Leon. She could rot in hell for all he cared. She'd hoped he'd disappear. Well, today was her lucky day. He wouldn't be like his mother, who looked the chance for family in the eye and walked away. He absolutely refused to inherit that trait.

All or nothing. He wanted Dill.

"Wait," she yelled.

"I think I've waited for you long enough. I have a man waiting on me, who loves me, and I'm not going to disappoint him like you disappoint me."

"My running mate knows about you. He dug through my personal history and found out about you. It will destroy me."

He paused at the door. "I'd say you made that grave yourself."

"I just need you to disappear. I had to be sure it was you before I sent you away."

That made no sense. "Why?"

"Because they said you were dead."

"Who said?"

"The Johnsons reported your death five years ago. The State gave them money to handle the burial arrangements."

He'd met Diego at the Johnsons. It has been the last home he'd known before he'd joined the gang and runaway. Diego had followed. Losing Diego still hurt. They'd hated the Johnsons. It didn't surprise Mason in the least that the Johnsons been part of a scam against the State.

"You're running mate dug this up and found out it was a lie, huh? Now he's using your bad parenting against you. I say, good for him."

"Tom just wants to ruin me. I've worked hard to get where I am. If you disappear I can bury the DNA and argue against it," she pleaded.

"Why get DNA in the first place?"

"To see if what he said was true."

"Then why have me followed after my life was put at risk?" he asked.

She looked away again. Her lips curved downward but it lasted a flash of a second. "I was worried."

"Bullshit," he said, taking Dill's favorite retort.

He paced back toward her, watching her body language, watching her gaze slip and return, watching the way she dropped a protective hand onto the desk surface above the drawer he'd opened.

He leaned on her desk, one hand brushing her phone recklessly as he stared her down.

"You fucking bitch," he proclaimed, suddenly understanding. "You wanted to know the minute I was killed. You had the DNA and knew who I was. You hired thugs to kill me and you wanted Harper Security to report back when your case had to close because I'd been murdered. It would all look legal. It would all look like a grieving mother who'd gone in search of her long lost son, only to find him too late."

She swallowed. "Of course not."

"You killed my brother. Diego is dead because of you."

"I didn't kill anyone," she protested.

"No, but the orders to hire someone or the record of payment is in that drawer. That's why you keep looking at it. You're afraid I'll find the link. Guess what, *mother*, I found it."

"You can't prove anything. Most of the documents have been shredded."

"How efficient of Jenson."

"He doesn't know," she defended.

He hung his head for a moment. "Tell you what. You can call off your dogs. I'll disappear on one condition." He met her gaze again with one of calm.

"I didn't want to hurt you. Not really."

"You won't have to. Your hands will be clean. Just tell me who my father is and I'll get out of your hair. You'll never hear from me again."

Carla's face fell. "I was fifteen, Mason, he was married." She scribbled a name and some information down on a piece of paper. "His name was Juan Alejandro Romero. He was my

guidance counselor through the neighborhood youth program. He and his family were killed in a drive by shooting last year in that same neighborhood.”

Mason felt a strange calm. He remembered the news story. He’d look up the details later, but it closed a book on the questions he might have had for the man.

*Juan. My dad's name was Juan.* Mason had always suspected his heritage had been Hispanic. He felt a sense of peace in confirming it.

“You’ll go away now?” she asked him, hopefully.

“Yeah, I’m gone. Don’t sweat it.” He lifted his hand off the desk, smiling to himself when Jenson came running in. Mason passed the pale man.

“Ms. Leon, the police are coming,” he announced.

“How?”

“The office. We heard everything on the intercom.”

After that, Mason walked a little faster. He had a boyfriend to fall all over. Some making up and making out to do, if Dill wasn’t too pissed to let him.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Dill got to Carla's office building as three police cars, lights flashing, screeched to a halt outside.

*He killed her. Oh, fuck, Mason skinned her after all.*

Mason walked out of the building as the police rushed by. He looked at them with mild disinterest then kept going, his glance taking in the street and settling on Dill. The breath squeezed out of Dill's lungs with the look of utter burning possession on Mason's face.

"Dill?"

"Mason. Did you kill her?" He grabbed the other man in a bear hug. "Tell me you didn't kill her."

Mason laughed, held him tightly. "I didn't kill her."

Dill sank in his unexpected embrace. "Thank God."

"How'd you know I'd be here?"

"It was the only place which made sense." Dill pulled away to study Mason's face. "You said good-bye."

"I said a lot of things I wish I could take back. I... I don't know where to start, but I gotta start somewhere. I love you. God, I love you. It's not too late is it?"

The hope, the fear, the uncertainty in his eyes melted Dill's heart into a thick, throbbing puddle. Or maybe it was the thick, throbbing cocks lining each other as their bodies pressed together on the sidewalk for all to witness, that had Dill confused. Either way, there was thick and throbbing going on, and Dill didn't want it to stop.

"Come home with me," Dill murmured.

"I'll follow you anywhere."

"I still have the hotel room," Dill offered, thinking of the closest place he could get to. At least, that one was within walking distance.

"Hotel sounds good."

Mason grabbed his hand and dragged him at a fast pace. Dill laughed, ignoring the strange looks they got as they raced for the hotel. The elevator closed and Mason attacked him with kisses.

"Slow down," Dill complained.

Mason's answer was to grab Dill's cock through his jeans and squeeze. Dill moaned against his lips. The doors dinged arrival and Dill shoved Mason off, pushing him backward out the car, then dodging under Mason's arm when he moved to hold him. Dill jogged to their door and got the key card in as Mason barreled into his back. They stumbled into the room together.

Mason kicked the door closed, stalking Dill to the veranda. "Out here?" Mason teased.

Dill shot him a look of challenge, he hoped. It must have worked because Mason pushed him up against the low wall, pinning their hips together as he nuzzled Dill's ear. Excited nerves thrilled to life. Goose flesh rose on Dill's neck and arms. His cock throbbed with anticipation, and as Mason's hot, moist mouth closed on the side of his neck, Dill couldn't stop the strangled groan that spilled from his open mouth.

"I don't know what's come over you, but I hope to God it never goes away," Dill confessed.

"It won't. I'll tell you about it later. Right now there's nothing that's going to keep me from giving you head." Mason sank to his knees, making quick work of Dill's jeans and underwear. "Hello, gorgeous," he murmured to Dill's cock.

He looked down the length of his body to see Mason take his first lick on Dill's balls. Dill gripped the veranda wall, letting the rim hold his hips forward for Mason's attentions. He heard a gasp and jerked his head over to see a pretty lady watching, flushed and fascinated. She walked to the side of her veranda closest to them and leaned to get a better look. Dill didn't care. He kind of liked it. And she sure as hell seemed to enjoy the view.

He lost all track of her when Mason's mouth closed on his tip and slowly sucked him deeper until Mason's nose nestled in the short hairs at the base of Dill's cock, and his throat lovingly hugged his length with a swallow.

"Oh, God, Mason. Don't ever stop."

Mason pushed a hand up Dill's body, moving his shirt out of the way and exposing his chest to cool air. Dill pulled off his shirt, both for his benefit and for the woman's. Then he leaned, bowing his back. Mason came off his penis to help him out of his pants and Dill spread his legs when his cock slid easily in and out of Mason's mouth.

He heard feminine panting and he looked over to see that the pretty blonde had slipped a hand inside her blouse and was furiously plucking her nipple while the other one, though out of sight behind the wall, rubbed in time with Mason's ministrations.

Dill found himself smiling. He didn't care what she was doing, but damn if it wasn't flattering. He grabbed Mason's head, no longer leaning back as his body spiraled in on itself. "Yeah, like that. Ungh—Mason, oh God, Mason. I feel it. Oh God, I'm coming."

Mason flicked his tongue sharply on the tender under-spot of Dill's head, let his teeth lightly graze the top on each withdraw. When the tip of his tongue pushed into Dill's slit, he lost it. Thrusting deep into Mason's mouth, Dill came with a shout, his cry sounding like triumph and joy in one long drawn out bellow of gratitude.

Dill pulled Mason to his feet, immediately kissing him. He loved the taste of himself on Mason, even though he'd swallowed.

"I don't think she came yet," Mason murmured, tipping his head to their hotel neighbor.

Looking over, he could see her furiously trying to pleasure herself with growing frustration. Dill decided to help her out a little. He grabbed Mason's t-shirt at the collar and ripped it off his body.

"Damn that's hot," Mason approved.

With quick jerks to Mason's pants, he had them off and he moved Mason so that his back was to Dill's front. Both faced the neighbor. She'd paused, watching in awe of the same beauty that always captured Dill. Then reaching around him, Dill stroked his hands over Mason's body. He tested the pliability of his chest muscles, scraped over his abdomen with bent fingers, shoved both hands to his pubic area, framing Mason's perfect cock with his hands. He reached Mason's inner thighs, grabbing the flesh.

She went back to work on herself, her eyes glazed over. A man came out with a curse on his lips then froze as he too watched the three of them. Dropping his pants, he came to help her.

They got lost in their own dance and Dill wrapped his fist around Mason's cock, "I want this to myself," he decided, leading Mason by the stiff appendage.

The wound their way to the bedroom. Mason took advantage of being behind him and slid a finger into Dill's crack, stroking and nudging the tight hole that waited for him.

With the bed in sight, Mason tripped Dill. He instantly let go of Mason's cock, not wanting to hurt him. They fell together and Dill felt Mason stretching his ass again. Pain and pleasure pinched him in the abused spot, but Mason got down and worked him with tongue and fingers using saliva to ease the adjustment until finally, Mason took him.

The sudden thrust caused Dill to grunt, but Mason held, letting him get accustomed to the penetration while he kissed the back of Dill's neck.

"I think that's my favorite spot," Dill gasped.

"Your ass? Yeah, it's my favorite spot, too."

"My neck."

"Here?" Mason asked, scraping his teeth on him and causing Dill to shiver.

Dill tried to rise to his knees. Mason pushed his leg under him instead, then reached to fondle the beneath Dill's balls. His eyes crossed with pleasure.

"To answer your earlier question, I couldn't follow in my mother's footsteps and toss you aside no matter how good for you I thought it would be. I love you, Dill. You and Diego were the only two people alive who never let me face life alone. I lost him. I never told him how much being brothers meant to me. I'm not going to lose you without you knowing how I feel about you."

He thrust deep inside Dill.

Warmth and joy seemed to expand the sensation. Emotion battled with physicality: neither winning but both writhing ecstatically with each other for the common goal of pleasure.

"I'm hoping I didn't mess things up with you. You were right. It's more than today or tomorrow. If you're still okay with that," Mason finished.

Dill twisted, dislodging Mason. Dill rested on his back with Mason looking into his eyes. Dill could read that uncertainty again.

"Mason, I'm not going anywhere, remember? Get back inside me and fuck my brains out. And when you do it, look at my face and tell me if this is the face of a man who doesn't think more than today is okay."

He opened his legs, hauling Mason between them.

"Well? You gonna take my ass or just look at me?" Dill asked.

Mason plunged inside. He grabbed Dill's hips, draping his legs over Mason's shoulders in the process. "I like your face. Especially when my cock is in your ass."

"I like your face when my cock is in that, too," Dill returned.

Mason nudged Dill's prostate.

Dill groaned.

"Just so there are no more distractions," Mason panted. "My mom hired the thugs. The police are arresting her because the whole campaign office heard her confession, and my father died a year ago."

He pulled almost all the way out and slammed, hard back in.

"Any questions?" Mason asked.

"Yeah, just one."

"Shoot."

"Can we fuck now, talk later?" Dill asked.

In answer, Mason slammed into him again, rocking the bed and pounding Dill's ass with a delicious burn. Mason's balls slapped him and Dill reached down to stroke his own cock, which had grown hard again.

"Yeah, Dilly-bear, do that for me. Let me see you shoot again. Fuck your fist just for me."

"Watch closely now," he panted.

"Watching. Not impressed. Fuck it harder, babe."

Mason's thumbs bit into his hips. Dill stared into Mason's heated gaze. His ass possessed and on fire, Dill's fist swept up and down his shaft. He sought and found pleasure as Mason clipped Dill's prostate repeatedly. Cum streaked up Dill's cock, spilling onto Mason's chest and abdomen. Mason threw his head back, straining against Dill's ass as he too, spurted deep inside Dill's body.

Dill lowered his legs and pulled Mason into his arms. "You know my family is yours, right?"

"I don't think that's how it works," Mason murmured against his chest.

"Trust me. This is the part of family life I know to be true. You haven't had that, but you're about to. Maybe even more than you want."

"What if they don't like me? Too many tattoos or wrong side of the tracks?" Mason asked.

"They like you. Hell, Mom wanted to throw you a bachelor's party, remember?"

"That was before I ran out on you."



"In my world, a family loves you even when you make a mistake. You're *in*," Dill assured him.

"For how long?"

Dill squeezed him closer, dropped a kiss on his claw. "I know this is new for you, but when it comes to my family, the only thing you need to think about is, do you want *us*? Because if it's up to the Harpers, you're a sure thing."

Mason lifted his chin, meeting Dill's gaze. "I want you. I want to have them, too. But I can be without family. I've been without family before, so as long as I have you, I'm still coming out a winner."

He looked at Mason, realizing he wouldn't be able to make him understand with words how families were supposed to work. Instead, he held the look for several moments until Mason recognized Dill meant his next words as seriously as they were delivered. "You already *have* me and I'm. Not. Going. Anywhere. I love you.

"Dill, it can't be that easy."

"Why not? You love me, right?"

"Yeah."

"Are you going to leave me?" Dill asked, feeling his heart beat wildly.

"Hell, no." Mason looked a little pissed and his arms painfully gripped Dill's ribcage. "Never."

"Then get used to the idea that I feel the same way."

A smile spread across Mason's lips. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. Because I'd tie you up and keep you hostage if I had to. This time, I'm all about strings. Big thick ones."

Dill grinned, too. "Promises, promises."

Two days later, they were back at the cabin. Ms. Harper had left the decorations up and Mason turned around in wonder, trying to take in the crazy arrangement of penis cut-out streamers crisscrossing the ceiling in bright red, cockrings looped around plastic champagne glasses in different colors, presumably to distinguish ownership of the cups, and decorative sex toys artistically stretched across the serving tables. There were brightly wrapped gifts and penis cookies covered in plastic wrap with little red licorice hairs popping out of the blue-iced balls.

"Have these been here the whole week?" Mason asked.

"No. I called Mom and told her to meet us with the family. Looks like she came up early and brought food."

"Penis food," Mason remarked.

"Hey, that's my mom for ya."

"She put butt plugs in the fridge," Mason said, baffled.

"Uh huh."

"Why?"

"Because," Ms. Harper said, skipping through the front door, "I put a different flavor on each one and you have to suck it off. The first one to guess the most flavors right, wins."

She beamed at him. Mason smiled nervously back.

"Don't worry. I picked things high in vitamins." She nodded sagely then squealed and jumped into Mason's arms. "Oh, honey bunny, I'm so glad you finally came to your senses. I told Dill that even though it was his fault you were in that position, he shouldn't feel guilty because it would have happened anyway."

"Yeah, I never got that part, Mom." Dill joined them.

Mason hugged the woman back but tried to pry her off. She slipped neatly to the ground.

She sighed. "You had to watch him and watching him meant that woman would try to kill him and trying to kill him would have happened without you anyway, so while it's your fault, it also isn't. See?"

Dr. Harper cleared his throat. "Basically, he'd have been in trouble anyway, but Harper Security provided the means Carla could confirm she'd killed Mason. It still would have happened, you were just the conduit."

"Ah." Dill nodded. "Clear as mud. Just like usual."

Dr. Harper shrugged. Crossing to Mason, he clapped him on the shoulder. "Welcome to the family, son."

Mason took Dr. Harper's hand and shook it. "Thank you, sir."

"Dad," Dr. Harper corrected.

Mason swallowed hard, looked to Dill for confirmation. Dill smiled widely with an I-told-you-so look. "Right. *Dad.*"

"Good boy."

"We're here!" A bevy of people stood in the doorway and spilled in with laughter and good-natured nudging.

"Mason, you know my brother Sage and this is his husband Joe. Flora and Ian are those two. Fauna is the one you never actually saw much of and Willow, you've met."

"Yep. The armoire. You look like you've lost a lot of weight since I last saw you," he teased.

Willow grinned. "Trimming off the Oak doors does that for a girl."

"Everyone," Dill said, his chest puffing with pride as his eyes met Mason's. "This is Mason Haliday. He belongs to us now. But more to the point," he continued, leaning toward Mason and placing a kiss on his lips. "He belongs to me."

Mason felt his cheeks heat. The sibling guard descended on him with hugs and kisses and *noise*. Damn those faeries were loud. Tears clogged his throat. He'd finally come home. Not just in the arms of his lover, but to a family who actually seemed happy to have him.

*Pinch me*, he thought.

Sage grabbed a wedge of forearm and twisted. Mason howled, looking at Sage for an answer only to have him wink. "Oh, shit, I forgot about the mind thing."

"The answer is yes. You're one of us now," Sage whispered for him to hear.

"Thanks."

"It's in your back pocket," Sage murmured next. He whistled for everyone to quiet down. Turning to Mason, Sage waited expectantly.

"Ha. Well, I guess with Sage around, nothing's a secret," Mason began, reaching for his back pocket.

They laughed in agreement. Joe hugged Sage in a sideways hold.

"I wanted to be sure what Dill said was true, that you'd be okay with me being here."

They nodded and murmured encouragement.

"Of course I also didn't expect to be this nervous." Mason turned to Dill. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mase."

His throat closed and moisture welled in his eyes. He had everything to lose at the moment, and it terrified him. He'd never had so much at risk before.

"Uh," Mason looked down at the ground as he pulled the slim band from his pocket. It was one he'd designed of interlocking male bodies. On one of the bodies, he'd engraved a tiny claw in the bald head. On the other, he'd inset two tiny sapphires. Fingers shaking, he held it out.

“Dill. I spent my life alone. Sometimes people who called themselves family entered it, but they always left, always passed me along to the next one. It’s been kind of an uphill battle trying to believe that I was worth the effort to love.” He swallowed past the lump.

Dill pulled him into his arms, smiled that sexy smile that always made Mason feel wanted. It gave him the strength to continue.

“That hang up gets in the way sometimes, and I’m glad you didn’t give up on me. I have a lot of scary-assed tattoos, and my appearance tends to put people off. I do that on purpose, I think, but you’ve never looked at me like I didn’t belong.

“Dill, I want you in my life. You make it better and you were right, love isn’t a weakness. Marry me.”

Dill kissed him. His brother and sisters whooped. Someone whistled. But Dill kept kissing him, kept him close as he tasted his mouth with tender thoroughness. Mason thought he might propose again tomorrow if it meant Dill would keep kissing him like this.

“Dill, just tell him yes and quit sending out the graphic sex thoughts,” Sage called.

Mason and Dill broke on a chuckle. Mason handed Dill the ring, and he took it with a great deal of awe.

“Yes,” he murmured, just for Mason. “Welcome home.”

## *About the Author*

Mia makes her home in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she divides her time between a job and spying on people. Mia enjoys long walks in Como Park, daisies, dancing in the snow...(Delete prior sentence, meant for personal ad)...

Mr. Perfect may apply in person for a thorough evaluation and trial. All others will be towed.

Mia loves to talk to her readers and can be found at [www.MiaWatts.com](http://www.MiaWatts.com).

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***She's Got Balls* by Mia Watts**

What do you do with a “wife” who is more than you can handle?

When the FBI and local law enforcement team up for a mutually beneficial crime-stopping partnership, Rookie Agent Chris Tarpington and Detective Vin Pilk team up to prototype the new alliance. How better to bust a ring of drug dealing suburban housewives than to go undercover—way undercover—as a married couple?

Though Chris reluctantly gets in touch with his feminine side, he quickly finds ways of making his sexy partner squirm. And Vin is definitely squirming, but will he run away from his faux wife, or right into “her” arms?

One thing is for sure: as the investigation heats up, ‘inter-agency cooperation’ will take on a whole new meaning..

***Tropical Hedonism* by Dakota Rebel**

After a boating accident, Sean Harris wakes up staring into the eyes of a handsome doctor. Even when he discovers that he is on an island within the Bermuda Triangle, and there is no way for him to get back to his old life, he can't be too disappointed if it means being stuck with the doctor.

Dr. Wesley Carpenter cannot believe that the younger Sean Harris would want anything to do with him. After half-heartedly turning down the advances of his patient, he realizes that resistance is futile.

The men find themselves falling for each other quickly, but ghosts from their pasts and outside influences try to get in the way of their happiness. Sean and Wesley may be on the island forever, but neither is sure if that guarantees they'll be able to continue their *Tropical Hedonism*.

***Saving Noah* by Carol Lynne and Cash Cole**

Dexter Krispin arrived in the small Kansas town of Schicksal with one thing on his mind: finishing his doctoral thesis. He hoped getting away from his hectic life in Pittsburgh would allow him to concentrate on the long overdue paper and to forget about his last lover.

Life-long Schicksal resident, Noah Stoffel, has managed to keep his sexuality a secret. Yet, after one look at the dark-haired newcomer, he knows his life in the sleepy town will never be the same.

But more than Noah's desire for privacy stands between him and Dexter. For years, the residents of Schicksal have been hiding a horrific secret, one that takes Dexter mere days to uncover and expose...a secret that could destroy—or heal—they all.

### ***In For a Penny* by Carol Lynne**

What's the old saying...you can never go home again? Raven Black resigned himself to never returning after being ordered from the only real home he'd ever known. Now, seven years later, Raven is back to face the man who sent him away.

Zane Conner is not only Raven's foster brother but the only man Raven ever loved. Despite his mixed feelings about the situation, Raven can't deny Zane when the older man asks for his help in saving the Lazy C Bar Ranch. A boy found dead on the ranch clinches Raven's decision.

Why did the young boy look so much like he had at that age—the same age he'd been when his own father had beaten him and left him for dead?

### ***Mind F\*cked* by Mia Watts**

Sage has the ability to read minds, but only in high passion moments when thoughts transmit at a higher frequency. But the gift is double-edged. Sage is inordinately handsome. Some might even say he's a walking orgasm. So what's a half-breed to do when every person he meets seems intent on seducing him, and how will he know if the man he chooses will love him for more than his looks?

Joe has never been the object of anyone's lust before. Now Sage, the hottest guy he's ever laid eyes on, has Joe starring in his sexual fantasies. It would be perfect if only Sage could shut up for one minute, and quit talking about his own hotness—or about how he can read minds.

Meanwhile, Joe and Sage must secure the last three Zodiac Stones and prevent their theft while they wait for exhibition. Can they put their sexual tension aside long enough to stop a clever thief? And even if they do, will Joe's heart be a casualty of their inevitable fling, or could Sage really be looking for more than a one-night stand?



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