

Jude in
Chains

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Chapter One

The name on his birth certificate is worthy of a nineteenth-century industrialist: C. Everett Hammer III. Family and friends are allowed to diminish its Saturnian splendor by calling him Clarence or Ev. Once upon a time, the forty-eight-year-old was also known as Clary or Ham, but only in certain circles.

When C. Everett Hammer decided he no longer wanted to move in those circles, he shed the nicknames as if they were a shirt and pants that had suddenly caught fire. They'd been part of his homoerotic self, and his homoerotic self was about to be excised.

Thirty-six at the time, Hammer was ready to abandon many things in addition to his male lovers ~~tolerance,~~ ~~understanding,~~ ~~and,~~ ~~it appears,~~ ~~more than a few IQ points.~~

YOU can't write that. You haven't even met the guy yet.

"What're you typing?"

The Baron's Bull bar again took shape around me. Gary

stood over my booth, smiling, smelling of citrus. His white shirt gleamed in the soft blue light.

My gaze wandered up his exposed forearms. He always worked with his sleeves rolled up. “Just sketching out an introduction for my new article. It’s going to be a feature story, actually.”

After saving the start of the rough draft, I eased down the lid of the Compaq, set it on the bench beside me, and crossed my arms on the table. The bar, I finally noticed, had emptied. My eyes rose to Gary’s face. His mouth moved around a wad of gum as he continued to wear that familiar smile. It was his closing-time smile, his ready-to-fuck-time smile.

I had decidedly mixed feelings about that. My reaction didn’t surprise me. I’d been fooling around with him for about three weeks longer than I usually fooled around with anybody.

“This will be my first extended, on-site assignment,” I said, as if he actually gave a shit. “Means I’ll be leaving town for a while.”

“Yeah? How long?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

I *was*, actually, but didn’t want to tell him. My upcoming trip to the Stronger Wings Camp and Conference Center was a golden opportunity to get out of the Gary rut. If he knew how long I’d be gone, he’d be waiting for me to show up here once I got back. And if I didn’t, he might just make an appearance at my apartment. He’d already done that a few times on what must’ve been his “dry” nights.

He slid into the booth across from me and slapped two packets on the table. “How’m I gonna unwind after a night of

drink slinging if my favorite customer is gone?”

I glanced at the handy-dandy packets. Gary probably had an entire shelf in his closet lined with boxes of chewing gum, condoms, and pocket-portable lube. “I’m sure you’ll manage,” I said.

Meeting his smile, I sipped some of my watered down, room temperature mojito and glanced at his arms again. Mimicking my position, they were folded on the table. It was like looking into a funhouse mirror, seeing my own limbs distorted into shanks of beef. Gary was the Anti-twink, the perfect gym jock. Even now, with only his jaw working, beads of sweat glistened in his buzz-cut blond hair.

A lowering zipper rasped beneath the table. Lifting his bulk off the bench seat, Gary wriggled then sank back down. His jaw slowed. His smile shrank. His pale green eyes glazed.

Gary’s hands remained beneath the table.

Can’t even chew gum and stroke at the same time. Trying not to snicker, I looked at my lap. This gig was getting so fucking predictable.

“Before you take it out—”

Gary silenced me by unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it down his shoulders.

“Take your shirt off,” I murmured, which was *not* what I was going to say.

Lifted by the leg of my jeans, my foot jumped up. Gary’s concealed hands removed my shoe. Another yank, and my heel connected with the surface of the opposite bench, my sole with something spongy. I exerted careful pressure. The spongy something began to petrify.

A hardening dick beneath my foot. A pair of

mountainous pecs before my eyes.

Surrender.

I slid off the bench and stepped to Gary's side of the booth. He extended a hand to my crotch and felt around. My cock, thank God, had spared me the humiliation of being as disinterested as my mind was. Sneering in approval—Gary always sneered when he provoked a sexual response in one of his marks—he grabbed my waistband and pulled me forward. The tops of my shins knocked against the edge of the bench, and I dropped awkwardly into a one-legged kneel.

“I hope you locked up,” I said. It didn't hurt to mention that. Gary wasn't the brightest bartender I'd ever known. Or had.

He made an indecipherable grunt as he shifted position. Back resting against the wall, he angled toward me. His pants and underwear were down past his ass, and one ruddy hand gripped one ruddy hard-on.

At about this stage, I would normally dive at him and start kneading his upper arms and chest and biting his nipples while we pumped each other's erection. We rarely kissed. When we did, Gary put little into it except a growth of stubble. His whiskers were still too short after eight hours for a satisfying friction. All they did was poke at my pores. So kissing wasn't part of our foreplay.

Instead, he liked it when I got wild. He had just the right body to get wild on. Then he would “tame” me by shoving me around and finally fucking me. Another bar regular, a bona fide twink everybody called Jiminy, referred to this as “getting an assgasm.”

Gary delivered prostate orgasms that were usually a solid five on the pleasure scale, and sometimes as high as a

seven, but that wasn't enough to muffle my top needs for very long. Only consistent eight- to ten-rated assgasms could keep me content; either that, or being with a switcher I really, really liked. Gary, however, wouldn't bottom if his mother's life depended on it. And I was far from being infatuated with him.

I'd been idly rubbing the ridge in my jeans while I watched him, but something wasn't clicking. The gear of desire wasn't meshing with the gear of need. Maybe I was preoccupied with the article and my upcoming stay at New Wings. Maybe I was sleepy. Maybe the novelty of scoring quick shots with egotistical bartenders and trainers and other in-the-spotlight types had worn thin. In any case, I wasn't surrendering anymore. My dick began to relax.

"What're you waiting for?" Gary asked with a frown.

I got off the bench and dipped beneath the table to find my shoe. Once I got it on, I retrieved my notebook from the other side of the booth.

"I'm sorry, Gare. I have to go."

"What?"

"I forgot about a date I had tonight. Shit, and I didn't bring my phone." I fervently hoped my cell wouldn't ring before I got out the door. "Is the rear exit still open?"

"Yeah, but...."

For a fleeting moment, I felt bad. He looked so pitiable, yet so ridiculous. "I'm sorry, man. Really."

I leaned toward him and gave his prick a few gentle pats. "Catch you later." Even as I chided myself for being so devious, I hustled toward the backdoor.

"What the fuck? Mick!"

“My name is actually Misha,” I said over my shoulder. Funny, I never told any of my lovers that. Not since Robbie, anyway.

Hammer’s biographical details are sketchy. He seems to try to keep it that way. Speculation has taken over where fact has left off.

The son of a wealthy, conservative judge, Ev reputedly has a past that cost Hammer, Sr. a seat on the [Missouri? Arkansas? Oklahoma?] Supreme Court and nearly cost Junior his inheritance. Youthful homo hijinks were to blame. Never content to be discreetly gay, Ev flamed.

After being convicted on various charges related to his lifestyle [try to get specifics], Ev took up residence behind bars for the better part of a year. The circumstances surrounding his misfortune are murky, but rumor has it the elder Hammer initiated the busts.

The cloud of incarceration came with a silver lining. Ev found salvation. According to his own account, a “caring” jailhouse intervention staged by his family was followed up by the relentless preachments of a visiting clergyman. Thanks to both, Ev saw the

error of his manloving ways. He left [name county] lockup a happy hetero with a mission – to help other sexually misguided men find their way from c**k to c**t.

Thus was born the Stronger Wings Ministry, specifically designed to flip gays into ex-gays via “reparative” therapy. The Stronger Wings Camp and Conference Center is the heart of the operation. Dad’s generous financial backing made it all possible, although SWM is now fully funded by donations, registration fees, and product sales.

Dissatisfied, I shoved the computer aside and downed the last of my breakfast. Damn, I still had a lot of research to do, and I wasn’t even sure it would yield much of anything. Powerful people with money knew how to alter history, even make it disappear. Unless I could actually interview Hammer once I got to Stronger Wings, I’d have to abbreviate the sections relating to his background and instead center the article on interviews, if I could score any, and my own experiences and impressions.

When the phone rang, I immediately checked the incoming number to see if it was one of Gary’s. He’d called twice last night and left messages. Nope, I was safe; my former fuck-buddy was likely still asleep.

The managing editor of *Options* magazine was calling.

“Get your registration packet yet?” No pleasantries or chitchat from Bree, even though she was a sweetheart

beneath her professional crust.

“Yup.” Before I dropped onto the sofa, I lifted the manila envelope off the end table where I’d tossed it yesterday. “Haven’t dug into it, though.”

“You sure you want to commit so much time and money to this? I’m really sorry the magazine can’t foot the bill for your expenses, but with our budget constraints—”

“I know. And yes, I’m sure.”

I reflexively glanced at the opposite end table before remembering I’d taken down Robbie’s photo a while ago. Still, I thought of him, missionarying Christ-knew-where. With his new wife. Of the female persuasion. I sometimes fantasized about him butt-fucking her while he fantasized about me, like Ennis and Alma in *Brokeback Mountain*.

I was probably flattering myself.

“Misha?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I was drifting.”

“Don’t hit on anybody there, okay?”

I chuckled. “Jesus, Bree, I’m not some hormone-driven cretin.”

“And don’t try to *unconvert* one of the converts.”

“I’m not a deprogrammer, either.”

“Are you going to tell Hammer you’re a writer before or after you get there?”

I tapped the envelope against my lap as I thought that over. “I don’t know yet. Maybe I’ll decide once I read the introductory material.”

“Try not to piss him off. I love you to death, mister, but you have a tendency to overstep.”

“Overstep how?” I only had a vague idea. Bree might’ve

had a clearer one, and it was her standards by which I had to abide.

“Just watch your mouth.”

I began to smile.

“And I don’t mean where you put it,” she said, anticipating my reaction. “I mean what comes out of it. Extremist wackos can get pretty litigious. If we can’t afford your trip, we sure as hell can’t afford a lawsuit.”

“The Constitution protects freedom of speech, B.” I’d begun tearing open the envelope. It filled me with the same combination of dread and curiosity I used to feel when opening gifts from my Great Aunt Betsy. Maybe there was a bowtie inside with clown eyes on the loops and a red nose in the middle, right over the knot.

“Neither the Constitution *nor* the Ten Commandments can stop assholes from bearing false witness,” Bree reminded me. “Don’t put it past those people to make shit up just to fuck with their adversaries.”

“I’ll be good. I’ll just try to blend in.”

Bree sounded a skeptical *hmpf*. “Oh, one more thing, Misha.”

“What’s that?” I held open the envelope, peered inside, and separated papers with my fingertips.

“Don’t come back straight,” said Bree, the proud lesbian.

I laughed, but my suddenly squirmy stomach didn’t share my amusement.

Chapter Two

I WAS bushed. The Chicago-to-Little Rock flight had been fairly short, but it was the pre- and post-flight crap, as usual, that wore me out. Securing a rental car, figuring out where I was going, and then getting there was the biggest cluster-fuck. The Stronger Wings Camp and Conference Center happened to be near Nowhere-in-Particular, Arkansas.

The landscape was pretty but unremarkable. Colorful flowers dotted lush August greenery. At least I didn't have to drive through mountains—the state's two modest ranges were to the west and northwest—or across a desert. At least Gary the Brawny Bartender was four days and seven hundred miles behind me.

The entrance to the two-hundred-acre Stronger Wings grounds was rough-cut masculine. From atop iron gates anchored by two fieldstone pillars, a mighty pair of wrought-iron wings swept heavenward. I cruised through the open gates and followed a long, tree-lined drive to a sizable parking area. Before I left the car, I studied the grounds map that had come with my registration materials.

At the heart of the camp were two log buildings situated back to back, called North Lodge and South Lodge. Two wings splayed out from the center of each, so the structures were shaped somewhat like sawhorses laid on their sides.

On a knoll overlooking both lodges sat a pair of sprawling, two-story residences, which apparently housed Hammer and his staff.

Time to enter this alien world. Dragging my wheeled luggage behind me, I passed beneath the portico of South Lodge and, with some trepidation, headed for the Reception Room and Lounge.

It was set up like the rustically grandiose lobby of a mountain resort: animal-head trophies on the walls, antler chandeliers, leather and twig furniture, sprawling rugs bearing Native American patterns. And, natch, a massive fieldstone fireplace.

Immediately, I grasped the underlying concept. Accentuate the masculine; eliminate the feminine.

I strolled up to what was obviously the “checkpoint”—three sturdy wood tables. Two hetero couples sat behind each one. Only men stood in front of them. Luggage in tow and papers in hand, like a nouveau Ellis Island immigrant, I took my place in one of the shorter lines.

The purpose of this retreat finally fully hit me as I surreptitiously scoped out the other registrants. Dear God, here stood men ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, all desperate to correct what they saw as aberrant behavior: their homosexuality. Small wonder they looked sheepish.

A few of the men, smiling self-consciously, nodded at me. Not that it meant anything. Even though I was surrounded by queers, I didn't have a snowball's chance in heaven of scoring a single inch of dick.

I felt so queasy, I could've chugged a whole bottle of

Pepto-Bismol.

Just to keep my eyes off these guys and my imagination from writing their stories, I leafed through the Stronger Wings “Welcome!” booklet. It was chock full of photos, but not the kind I usually favored. Shots of the buildings and grounds were interspersed with pictures of modestly dressed gents who were laughing, smiling, and doing manly things. Problem was, they weren’t doing very interesting manly things.

I hadn’t yet gone through the booklet. When I’d first pulled it out of that manila envelope, I’d only gotten as far as the Stronger Wings Mission Statement on the inside front cover. As soon as I read it, I flung the booklet across my living room.

Let the natural man in you take flight with Stronger Wings!
Our nondenominational purpose is simple and righteous:
To give you a new lease on life
through behavior modification and thought realignment
consistent with the way
Nature meant you to be.

If I read any further, I figured I’d either avoid the camp like the plague or arrive with weapons.

Now, standing in the registration queue, I found a page I probably needed to memorize. It began:

In the interest of nurturing healthy fellowship, you’ll be expected to abide by the Dress and Conduct Code detailed below.

- No tight, skimpy, or otherwise revealing clothing, either above or below the waist. Loose Bermuda shorts and sandals are allowed. Swimwear should not draw attention and should be worn with an undergarment.
- No touching of other students and mentors except for brief handshakes and fraternal pats on the shoulder or back.
- No sexually suggestive jokes or comments.
- No prolonged looks except when appropriate (e.g., while listening to someone speak or watching a sports competition).
- No reading material that hasn't been approved at check-in.
- No cell phones. (The Camp provides telephones and desktop computers for limited use.)

Good thing I'd left my offensive electronics in the trunk of the car.

Closing the booklet, I stepped up to the table. I felt as if I were gazing into an egg carton. The six greeters and their wives had an absolute, pristine homogeneity that made them a near-perfect palindrome—they looked virtually the same from left to right as they did from right to left. Fortyish, neat hair, rosy cheeks, clean, trimmed fingernails. The men wore short-sleeved grandpa shirts with button-down collars and blue outlines of little wings all over the white permanent-press fabric. Not a chest hair showed, and white undershirts effectively obliterated any hint of nipples.

Rarely did I pay close attention to women, except the ones involved in my life, and this situation was no exception. All I noticed was a Stepford Wives sameness.

And that C. Everett Hammer III wasn't there.

“How do you pronounce your name?” my intake person brightly asked after he’d greeted me.

I spoke it for him. Misha with a long E. Tzerko with a “ts” sound. “It’s Russian-Polish,” I told him before he had a chance to ask. “Sort of the affectionate form of Michael. I use Mick as a nickname.”

The man nodded politely. I doubted he understood or cared about my ethnic-name explanation, but at least he was courteous in his indifference. He proceeded to pore over my registration form. “You’ve chosen the one-week program?”

“Yes.” I could have opted for a two- or three-week stay, but I figured a week was enough time to net what I was after. Besides, this retreat wasn’t exactly bargain-priced.

A plastic tag on the man’s grandpa shirt told me his name was Darren and he was a Mentor, capitalized. I suspected what qualified him to be a mentor was the fact he’d already been turned inside out and upside down and had all the queer germs sanitized right the fuck out of him. Same for the other five dudes.

What a shame. Darren, who appeared to be in his late thirties, had thinning hair but a nice physique. I vaguely wondered if any of these guys were seducible. None of them really tweaked my libido, but corrupting one would be fun.

In a perverse way, they reminded me of the playtime I’d be missing out on this week.

The woman seated on Darren’s right was Darlene, his wife. The mentors’ wives, Darren explained, took care of the “hostess duties,” whatever the hell *those* were, but the camp had cooks and housemaids to do the drudge work. Of

course, he didn't call it that. I had a sneaking suspicion the wives served other, more important purposes. Like maybe keeping their men in line while demonstrating to us infidels that het marriage was the True Road to Happiness and Fulfillment.

It appeared we'd be learning by example as well as through instruction.

Darren gave me a sheet of paper with a day-by-day, hour-by-hour list of the week's activities: mealtimes; classes, which were detailed on the reverse side; regularly scheduled group- and personal-counseling sessions; a whole shitload of outdoorsy, sporty stuff, including "casual campfire chats," and even—I could hardly believe my eyes—wood splitting. *Wood splitting!* Yikes, shades of Paul Bunyan. In some cases, attendance was optional; in others, mandatory. Since all the attendees were single, the schedule's *coup de grâce* was a mixer dance.

I wasn't thrilled to get a nametag, but I was relieved to get the key card to my room. There was going to be an orientation dinner in a few hours, before which all thirty-six registrants would meet their assigned mentors, and I really needed to freshen up and take a nap. I also needed to decide if I should try to set up a personal meeting with Hammer and tell him why I was *really* there. It was already obvious I couldn't tell him I was blissfully gay. Any queer not committed to reformation would certainly be banished from the kingdom. I didn't need a booklet or a mentor to tell me *that*.

I shuffled on past the sign-in tables and plopped into an overstuffed chair so I could get my bearings before proceeding. There was an auditorium behind the lobby area.

Two corridors ran alongside it and terminated in exits, which opened onto paths that led to North Lodge. It housed all the guest rooms, two common areas, a small chapel, and a large dining room and kitchen.

The only rooms that accommodated two people were the ones reserved for couples... and *not* same-sex couples. Stronger Wings also sponsored retreats for husbands and wives whose marriages were foundering in homosexual waters. The rest of the rooms were singles. Of course. And had private baths. Of course. I was willing to bet my secret stash of lube and condoms that each contained a twin bed, not a double or queen.

Tomorrow morning after breakfast and “counseling intake,” we’d attend our introductory class. Then we’d have lunch. Then we’d get a grand tour of the facility. Thinking about it only deepened my weariness.

Until I saw him.

My breath hit a shoal. Breaking one of the camp’s cardinal rules, I stared. I had to make sure. Although his head was tilted down as he stood before one of the check-in tables, he was smiling. And there was no mistaking that smile.

I waited, heart thumping, until he walked away from the palindrome and struck out through the lobby toward one of the exit corridors. He held the schedule sheet, at which he glanced occasionally when he wasn’t readjusting the shoulder strap of his carry-on bag.

Oh, yeah. Same lithe body and long, easy stride. Same incomparable ass, looking really fine in those khaki Dockers. I even caught another registrant copping an eyeful.

Getting up from the chair, I grabbed my suitcase and followed him. It wouldn't look good if I hustled up behind *any* guy too quickly, so I tried to maintain a brisk but unhurried pace.

Another man—one of the mentors, I thought—jogged past me just as I entered the hallway.

“Hey there!” he called out, but not to me. The mentor sailed right past me and up to my target, who paused in front of the exit. “You left your key card on the table.”

“Oh, sorry to inconvenience you.”

Damn, his voice was made for the bedroom—low and molten, measured, never abrasive. My body was little more than an aqueduct for adrenaline as I approached the two men, who stood with their backs to me.

“I'd better get to my post,” said the mentor with bland geniality. “You shouldn't have any trouble finding your room. Just go down the northwest wing and follow the numbers.”

“Thank you.”

The mentor jogged back in the other direction as I strolled up to the exit. “Hello,” I said in my sexiest voice.

He pulled up short, turned, and gave me a startled look.

I smiled. “Long time, no see.”

“Misha?”

“I'm flattered you didn't forget me *or* my name.”

“Shit,” he whispered.

Sneakered footsteps squeaked behind us.

Blinking nervously, he didn't seem to know where to look or what to do. His gaze skittered around for a second or two before he came to his senses and pushed open the door.

Had Robbie turned up at the Stronger Wings Camp and Conference Center, I wouldn't have been surprised. Well, maybe a little. But I wouldn't have been stunned.

Only I wasn't looking at Robbie.

I was looking at Jude Stone.

My stress level for the upcoming week had just been amplified tenfold.

Chapter Three

Two Years and Eleven Months Earlier

I MADE a beeline for the bar. Plenty of the other guests and attendants did too. Who liked sitting through a church wedding and then donning an ill-fitting face to make small talk with other people's relatives? Nobody, judging by the way the drinks were flowing.

I nursed a Long Island iced tea, even though it was September, and kept getting the distinct feeling someone was watching me. I wasn't wrong. Every now and then, as I chatted with whomever happened to sit beside me, I glanced across the arc of the bar... just as the man averted his gaze.

Yup, a man. He seemed like an ordinary guy—average height, build, face; good-looking but not breathtaking—yet there was a component in the unremarkable mix that made him seem worthy of attention.

Or maybe I was just horny.

The reception ramped up at my back. Babble increased as people ferried plates of food from the sizable buffet to tables set around the dance floor. Some stood or ate at the bar. There was no music yet—this was the dinner hour, meant for socializing and for filling bellies—but soon a local band would start churning out its versions of “Proud Mary” and the “Beer Barrel Polka,” and the empty floor space would

be filled with all manner of dancers, from stiff to spastic to skilled.

I would not, I vowed, let myself be cajoled into doing the “Chicken Dance.”

Two older guys stood behind me as they stuffed their faces and awaited their beers, wondering aloud why a pretty girl like Melissa would marry a black man named Mont. I grabbed the beers when they hit the bar, swiveled my stool, handed over the plastic cups, and said, “They’re in love, that’s why.”

When I turned back, the guy who’d been sliding me those glances was engaged in conversation with a man and woman. He himself didn’t seem to have a date. I didn’t either. It finally occurred to me I might not be the only gay person there.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye.

Something made him smile. Grin, actually. His cheeks rumped, his white, even teeth showed, and a crescent-shaped flush cradled each of his eyes. I looked more boldly and thought I saw dimples lurking within the creases.

His mouth opened wider. He tilted his head back, and a shaving of laughter drifted toward me on somebody else’s cigarette smoke.

Maybe his smile didn’t light up the room, but it certainly lit up the tunnel of air between his face and mine.

I was beguiled.

“Hi.” A woman in a bridesmaid dress—and they were some vampy dresses for bridesmaids—jammed herself between my stool and the one on my left.

“Hi.” Not wanting my chin to end up buried in her

cleavage, I tried to make more room.

“I’m Madison.” She stuck her drink straw in her mouth, which bore alarmingly red lipstick. “One’s of Missy’s sisters. Who’re you?”

“One of Mont’s coworkers.”

Suddenly, my male admirer exclaimed, “Whoa!” Putting up his arms, he drew away from a skittering group of ice cubes. His arms quickly lowered as he apparently cupped his hands over his lap and caught some rogues that had bounced over the bar rail. He dumped them where the bartender’s swirling towel could sweep them away, then shook the moisture off his hands. He had long fingers.

“Who’s he?” I asked Madison. Another woman had come giggling up behind her.

“Trying to cool off that crotch, Jude?” the second one shouted.

He made a cute, good-natured grimace. Our eyes met for the length of a heartbeat.

“Quit flirting with him,” Madison muttered to her friend.

“Why? He’s single, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, but he’s shy.”

“Time he got over it,” said the seductress. “How old is he, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Around twenty-five, I guess.” Madison slid her empty cup on the bar and motioned for a refill. Then she addressed her friend. “Just leave him alone. I don’t need you trying to smear cake frosting on a relative’s junk after you get shit-faced.” Madison half turned toward me. “He’s one of our cousins,” she said offhandedly.

“Oh.” The info caught me off guard, since I’d assumed she’d forgotten about me and my question.

The persistent friend stood on her tiptoes and waved a hand back and forth. “Remember you owe me a dance, Jude!”

He smiled politely and saluted.

“Lay off, Trin.” Madison grabbed the girl’s arm and pulled it down.

Trin, who already seemed well on her way to Funkytown, wriggled free and, alas, noticed me. “You here alone?” she asked brightly.

“No.” I ordered another drink.

THE band was far better than I’d anticipated. I should’ve known Mont was too discriminating to have the usual rusty amateur musicians play at his wedding. To keep myself entertained and add to my stash of fantasies, I watched Cousin Jude move his beautiful ass whenever some matron or teenager hauled him onto the dance floor.

He was really, really good. No matter how much he had to alter his style to accommodate the music or the age of his partner, he was an incredibly fucking good dancer.

A few women asked me to dance, but I declined. I wanted to dance with Jude. Since that didn’t seem doable, I had to content myself with catching a minor buzz and dancing with him in my imagination. When I couldn’t feast my eyes on Jude, I talked a little with other people from the office.

As I came back from one of my trips to the men's room, I saw him seated alone at a table. He pulled a frilly garter off his arm and tossed it aside.

I adjusted my beer balls. It was time.

"Excuse me."

His gaze shot up to my face. Those pink swatches surfaced on his cheekbones.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Uh... no." He seemed flustered by my approach.

I pulled out a chair and sat. I wanted to know him better, although I couldn't have explained why. Maybe because of that smile I found so captivating. Or those stop-and-linger-awhile lips. Or that ass, with its invisible "Grab Me" sign. Or those sparkling eyes, so dark a brown I could barely tell the pupils from the irises.

His hair, its cut charmingly ragged, was the color of wet sand, although his brows and lashes were darker. The loosened tie and two undone shirt buttons gave me a glimpse of damp chest.

I casually sat back in my chair. "Might we know each other from somewhere?" I asked with mild curiosity.

"I don't think so." Jude took a quick drink from the champagne flute in front of him. "Why do you ask?"

"I thought I saw you looking at me like you recognized me."

He'd been busted... and he knew it.

Trying to put him at ease, I threw myself into Mr. Congeniality mode. "I'm Misha Tzerko, by the way." Out went my glad hand. "I work with Mont."

“Jude Stone.” His grasp was firm but proper, as was mine. Our fathers had taught us well. “Melissa’s cousin.”

“Ah.”

Oh Christ, my gaydar needed to go in for repairs. I couldn’t seem to draw a bead on the guy. Maybe he simply *was* one of those soft-spoken, bashful types. Or maybe he was deep in the closet, fretting over his discomfiting curiosity about man-on-man action. All I could tell from his voice was that I liked it. A lot. It made me think of torchlight and chocolate mousse and French horns.

“So,” he said, “if you work with Mont, you must live in or near Green Bay.”

I nodded. “Yup.”

By small degrees, Jude’s expression began to modulate. He no longer seemed cautious and reserved. In fact, his gaze skated around my face with no timidity whatsoever. The scrutiny set up a quiver between my breastbone and diaphragm. He drained his champagne glass and got up from the table. I thought I saw a twitch at the left corner of his inviting mouth.

“Maybe,” he said, “we *have* seen each other before.”

I watched him walk away and liked what I saw.

The son of a bitch intrigued me like no one had in years.

MONT and Melissa’s wedding was in the northern part of Door County, where Melissa managed an upscale resort-and-condo complex. Since few of their guests lived or could even afford to live in the artsy and tourist-trappy “Cape Cod of the

Midwest,” Melissa, her parents, and her employers generously put a slew of us up for the night. Green Bay wasn’t that far to the southwest—an easy drive, under most circumstances—but I sure as hell didn’t feel like schlepping down the peninsula at one or two o’clock in the morning. Why dodge deer and cops?

The only drawback was that those of us who’d been given lodging had to double up in our rooms. That obviously wasn’t a problem for friends, couples, or family members, but I got stuck with a sixty-something widower named Milt Perlman who also worked at the same small publishing company where Mont and I were employed. I figured I’d just keep myself occupied until I was ready to drop; that way I wouldn’t have to argue with Milt over what to watch on TV or listen to him kvetch about the thousand-and-one things that were sending the world to hell in a handcart.

Jude disappeared from the reception without my noticing. I had no idea if he’d left alone. I had no idea if he’d be driving home, wherever that was, or staying at the resort. I still didn’t know for sure if he was gay, although the odds seemed in favor of it. His final, cryptic statement at the table had been a tip-off, albeit too vague to be fully enlightening.

My regret over Jude’s departure bugged me. My tenacious interest in him bugged me even more. Both bespoke a vulnerability I wasn’t used to. I resented that he’d kept looking at me, had snagged my attention with his looking, and then hadn’t followed through. If he’d just kept his eyes to himself, I probably wouldn’t have even noticed him. On the other hand, if he’d expressed a desire to see me again, I’d be content right now instead of all itchy under the skin and ready to carve Perlman a new set of sinuses if he

gurbled out a single snore.

Fuck. I'd lived twenty-eight years without fretting over someone's lack of attention. There'd always been plenty of other attention from plenty of other someones to make up for it. But there wasn't one here now.

I went up to my room, popped a couple of ibuprofen, brushed my teeth, shed my party garb, and slipped into my tiny piece of swimwear. The junk-hugging briefs made me even squirmier. I considered beating off just to relax myself, but Perlman might come stumbling in at any minute.

Before I put on my terrycloth robe, I paused in front of the bathroom mirror. Why hadn't I gotten a come-on from Jude? There wasn't a damned thing wrong with me. I was tall enough, good-looking enough, had decent musculature, a big enough dick, a round enough ass.

"You are one sorry diva," I said to my reflection... then reminded myself that in another day or two, Jude Stone would be nothing more than a fading wisp of a memory.

I made my way to the indoor pool, which was on the other side of the hotel from the rental hall. The reception was still going on, its sounds of revelry and the lingering aroma of baked ham drifting now and then past the front desk... just as I was doing. Nobody was in the lobby. It was nearly eleven.

The smell of warm, chlorinated water greeted me before I pulled open one of the double doors to the pool area. The sound of a swimmer displacing that water was audible as soon as I stepped inside. Evenly spaced lights illuminated the pool from within. Muted lights fanned over the surrounding tile floor. I dropped my robe onto a lounge chair and stood at water's edge.

The swimmer, a man, stopped and stood near the shallow end, then ran both hands over his hair. He faced the bank of windows and sliding glass doors that revealed, in daylight, a large patio. Just beyond the patio lay the outdoor pool. Umbrella tables were visible in the ethereal glow cast by strings of white fairy lights.

Hope welled within me. I remained still but expectant. The man turned and did a slight double-take. I could feel his shadowed gaze move down and up my body. It made me glad.

“Barbarosa’s,” Jude said. “Last November, the Saturday after Thanksgiving.”

I smiled. Barbarosa’s was a gay bar.

No wonder Jude had grabbed my attention today. He’d grabbed it before. Seeing him must have struck a dim spark of recollection.

“You going to come in, Misha, or just stand there and make me admire you?” Jude’s right hand fell below the waterline. I imagined him fondling a growing erection.

I dove in.

It seemed a shame to surface right away, so I remained underwater and immediately swam up to Jude. He hadn’t moved; he was waiting for me. Down to the bottom I went—the water was about five feet deep at this point—and slowly ran my hands up the backs of Jude’s legs. He spread them farther apart, encouraging and directing my touch. I cupped the tight, pronounced curvature of his ass, gave it a squeeze, then brought my hands forward without lifting them from his hips. My fingers bracketed the bulge in his swim shorts. First my thumbs and then my mouth tested the mound.

Jude's cock was dense, more resistant than resilient. Mine responded to the feel of it.

If only I'd been a merman....

Instead, I had to break the surface and gulp some air. I gained my footing. Excited as hell, I gripped the sides of Jude's face and stared into his dark eyes. Beads of water weighted his long lashes like seed pearls.

"You came out of the men's room," he said in a low, rushed voice. "I was just standing there, making small talk with some Indian guy. And you grabbed me and said, 'I really need to kiss you.' And you kissed me."

"Like this?"

Our lips were slack and water-slick, but they managed to come together. Damn, he had a beautiful mouth. Mine instantly opened to it. We kissed deeply in a kind of frenzy, lips pressing and tongues thrusting, as if neither of us had gotten laid in six months. Jude wrapped his arms around my head. I lifted a leg and curled it around his ass, trying simultaneously to feel it and urge his dick against mine.

We were both hard. My desire careened toward delirium.

"I want to fuck you so bad," I said into Jude's mouth.

He groaned feebly in response and kept kissing me. Our hands fumbled toward each other's crotch.

"Pretty superficial, aren't we?" Jude said.

"Mm." I massaged his promising package. "And how fortunate for us."

Laughter echoed from a nearby hallway, as if my comment had been overheard.

Breathing heavily, Jude and I bounced apart like

magnets repelling.

“We can’t do anything here,” he said. “Too public.”

“It isn’t public beneath the surface.” God *damn*, I wanted him.

“That’s not an option.”

I knew what he meant, of course. Fucking in water wasn’t wise, and since neither of us had gills, even a blowjob wasn’t feasible.

Shit.

Jude approached me, his arms moving in ovals over the water. I tilted forward. Our lips gently met. The kiss was soft and sweet, almost tentative. I could’ve kissed him for hours, but once again, we had to draw apart. Those voices in the hallway had neither receded nor advanced. Jude clearly didn’t know what to do any more than I did.

“I suppose you’ve got a roommate too,” I said.

Jude sighed. “Yeah. One of my nephews.”

“Fuck.”

“I wish,” he murmured.

The male and female voices got closer. Jude dropped beneath the surface and headed for the pool’s edge. I launched into a breaststroke that took me in the opposite direction. The doors opened on restrained laughter and a jumble of conversation. I glimpsed what appeared to be two middle-aged couples as I continued my inoffensive stroking.

“That you, Jude?” a woman called out.

He’d climbed out of the pool and was buffing himself dry. I kept swimming and pretended to be oblivious. I finally stopped at the corner farthest from where he stood and

angled a glance at the four people who'd just come in. One of the men, a lean, straight-backed dude with salt and pepper at his temples, appeared to be watching me.

Without acknowledging the newcomers' presence, I inched my way along the tiled edge until I was directly across from my discarded robe. I felt self-conscious as I boosted myself out of the pool. My swimwear barely covered my ass and my hard-on hadn't entirely gone south, but that wasn't all I was acutely aware of. These couples, who obviously knew Jude, had walked in on two twenty-something guys in tiny briefs going for a midnight swim together. If *that* didn't look a little peculiar....

As I donned my robe, I tried hard not to glance in Jude's direction. He was circling around the pool to join the four people. Suddenly and surely, I knew one pair were his parents. Their laughter had ceased. Suspicion laden with disapproval curdled the air.

Jesus. Twenty-five. The guy was twenty-five, and he had to worry about Mommy and Daddy seeing him alone in a room with another man.

There wasn't much I could do but leave.

Chapter Four

I NEVER saw Jude again after that night. I ended up going to my room, where I masturbated in the shower as I thought of us doing all the things we hadn't been able to do. Afterward, I fell into an unsettled sleep as Perlman farted out lullabies. By the time I got up the next morning, Jude was gone.

Although I considered asking Melissa how I could get in touch with him, I soon realized my interest could very well out him to his whole family. Not only *didn't* Jude seem outed to his family, he seemed to have a good reason for his reticence. His parents might have suspected his orientation, but I'd gotten the distinct impression they found it odious.

I also realized I could've been jumping to all kinds of erroneous conclusions... but I still couldn't risk exposing him.

Jude had made a strong impression on me, though, no doubt about it. The memory of that night remained tenaciously in my mind. It surfaced whenever I felt disillusioned with the dating scene. It surfaced with maddening regularity while Robbie and I psychologically battered each other on the road to Splitsville. As much as I'd tried to repress the feeling, I'd always regretted not having pursued Jude Stone, that shy, funny, passionate man who'd so effortlessly enchanted me.

Now, as we both strode through the central parlor of

North Lodge, his presence at Stronger Wings began to make disturbing sense.

He anxiously glanced over his shoulder at me. I couldn't *not* follow him, because my room was in the northwest wing, just as his was. As soon as I spotted my room number, I hastily opened the door and threw my stuff inside while I kept an eye on Jude's progress. He stopped a few doors down. I made sure nobody was around to see me before I dashed to the farther room and let myself in.

Jude whirled around and gave me a deer-in-the-headlights look. "Are you crazy?" he asked in a strained whisper. "Get out of here, Misha!"

"No, not yet."

He turned away from me and put his hands over his head.

"Why are you here?" I asked. My voice sounded strange. It reflected my concern, my dismay. I hadn't expected that.

Jude turned away from the curtained window he'd been facing and sank to the floor in front of the bed. Yup, it was a single bed. The room was small and Spartan, its color scheme solidly set in blues and beiges. Only the bedspread, which bore another of those Native American lookalike patterns, had touches of other colors—brown bars, orange rings. I was surprised not to see a cross on one of the walls, until I remembered this "ministry" professed to be nondenominational; they were equal-opportunity homophobes. Instead, a photo of the Ozark Mountains provided inspiration. The only other pieces of furniture were a bedside reading chair, a small nightstand, and a simple Thoreauvian desk with an equally simple desk chair. Drawers beneath the bed took the place of a dresser.

I, too, lowered myself to the floor. Jude and I sat cross-legged, facing each other, but I made sure my knees didn't touch his. Christ, what had happened to him?

"Tell me," I said.

Jude raised his head from his hands. "You should know. You're here too."

I could've adopted the ruse then and there. I could've pretended to be like the other registrants—a man despairing of his attraction to other men and desperate to obliterate that attraction. My experience with Robbie had even provided me with the perfect motivation. I could've fed Jude some blarney about how my former boyfriend had set an example for me and I wanted to follow in his footsteps.

It would've been the perfect way to get Jude's guard down. Then, once he'd started feeling at ease with me, I could've sneakily chipped away at his resistance.

It was damned tempting. But even *I* would've choked on so big and foul a lie. Not only did I despise what Robbie had done, I couldn't bring myself to manipulate Jude, especially through deception. The Stronger Wings Ministry would likely do enough of that.

"I'm not here for the same reason everybody else is," I said.

A crease formed between his eyebrows. He looked the same as I remembered, except for that hint of distress in his face. Jude was twenty-eight now; I was thirty-one.

"I'm here doing research for a magazine article," I said. "But please don't...." Damn. How could I phrase it?

"Don't blow your cover?" Jude said wryly.

He'd made me sound like some hostile infiltrator.

“That’s pretty melodramatic. I’m just a minor-league journalist. In fact, I’m planning on telling Hammer why I’m here. I just can’t tell him—”

“You’re still gay and content to be so.”

“Yes.” I gave Jude an imploring look, begging him to understand. “I *have* to tell Hammer I’m straight, maybe separated or divorced. He’ll kick me out otherwise.” I leaned forward. “Jude, this is my job. This is what I do for a living. I *can’t* get the boot.”

Scraping his teeth over his lower lip, he nodded and looked down. I recalled with a flash of longing how it had felt to kiss him—how eager and eloquent and plush his lips had been, how agile his tongue.

“You still shouldn’t be here, Misha. Not unless you want to change.”

Want to change. The phrase stabbed at my heart, a sudden, strong reaction made all the more potent by its unfamiliarity. I hadn’t been too moved by much of anything since Robbie’s departure. “Please tell me what made you take this step.” When I spoke, I impulsively touched Jude’s thigh.

His gaze jerked up as he flinched away. “Don’t do that.”

I put up my hands. “Okay. Sorry. I won’t.”

The look Jude gave me verged on apologetic. It was certainly indecisive. I wondered what he would do if I just leapt at him and pulled him against me, caressed his back.

“I’d appreciate some insights for my article,” I said. It was my first fib. The article had nothing to do with my interest in him.

Jude idly scratched at his pants legs. “Nothing’s right,” he murmured. “*I’m* not right.”

My mouth formed a question—*What?*—but no sound came out.

Jude's eyes turned up. Etiquette dictated he should look at me while he spoke to me, and Jude believed in courtesy. That's just the way he was.

"I've never really felt good about myself," he said. "My parents think I'm disgusting. They're ashamed of me. They can't bring themselves to talk about it, but I know that's how they feel. More and more, *I think I'm disgusting.*"

It made no sense to me. None. He was a lovely man. "Jude, why?"

The furrows in his forehead had increased and deepened, and when his eyes again met mine, I fancied I could read his embattled history there.

"I'm sick of the whole shallow scene, Misha. The bars and Internet sites, the party boys and flaunters and users and cheaters. That 'anything goes' or 'if it feels good, do it' attitude. I hate what it brings out in me. Maybe what I am *is* an abomination. Something that's completely right and natural shouldn't be depressing."

I stared at him in despair and felt a too familiar, jagged ball of ice form in my stomach. I'd heard this spiel before, albeit a more religious version, and getting over it had taken months off my lifetime allotment of good cheer.

"What happened to make you feel this way?" I asked, convinced there must've been some catalyst. The potential lover I'd met three years ago didn't just wake up one morning and decide being gay was a curse.

Jude shook his head and shrugged. "It's been an accumulation of things. The way my parents look at me, feel

about me. And the nature of my job. And the hook-ups I've made, the way they've gone...."

"Was there one in particular that went bad?"

Jude looked away from me. He was tightening, sealing himself up. I'd hit on *something*, but he obviously wasn't going to talk about it.

"I'm just sick of self-serving people whose lives center on their damned genitals," he mumbled.

I leaned back, as if his feelings were a physical repellant like insect spray. Directed at *me*. "Do you think *I'm* like that?"

What does it matter? I asked myself. Still, I wanted to know.

Again, Jude shrugged. It was obvious he didn't like talking about this stuff to someone who didn't "want to change."

"Please don't get dodgy," I said. "Just tell me."

He gave me a glance shaded equally with embarrassment and suspicion. "I only know what I've heard."

"Where?"

"At Barbarosa's."

"Were you asking about me?"

Immediately, Jude blushed. "I could've been. I can't remember."

"Bullshit."

Scowling, he shushed me. "Okay, maybe I was."

"And?"

"I was told you were...." Again, he had trouble looking at

me.

“What?”

“There’s no point in repeating it.”

“To me there is.”

His eyebrows rose, then fell. “A player. A cock whore. Fickle and self-absorbed and—”

“Okay, that’s good enough.” Frowning, I got up and sat in the chair beside the bed. I was angry; I was hurt. I wanted to rage indignantly. I wanted to pity myself. More than anything, though, I was mortified. I didn’t want anybody to think of me in those terms.

“You still live in Green Bay?” Jude asked, as if he were indeed taking pity on me. He’d kindly changed the subject. Even his voice was milder, and his eyes matched his tone. They looked like warm molasses.

“Yeah, but I often stay with my sister in Chicago. That’s where the magazine’s offices are. I don’t work with Mont anymore.”

“What magazine?”

“*Options*.”

Jude brightened a little. “Wow. I’ve heard of it. Don’t they publish online too?”

I was ridiculously pleased that he seemed impressed. “A month after an issue comes out in print. How about you? Where’re you living now?”

“Still in Archerville.”

We were practically neighbors. I’d never known that. Our old conversation had never gotten that far. “Aren’t you a pastry chef or something?” That reference he’d made to his

job—maybe it had something to do with how “faggy” it was perceived to be.

The question drew a baffled frown. “Music teacher and band director. High school.”

“Oh.” How could I get the two mixed up? “You sure you don’t do anything with pastry?” I vaguely recalled a reference to frosting.

After a pause, Jude muttered, “Not anymore.”

I snorted out a laugh. Each of us snuck at glance at the other, and he kind of smiled too.

“Jude, could we talk more?”

Article or no article, I couldn’t just let this go. He was full to bursting with anxiety and shame and bitterness. And he seemed achingly confused. His relationship with his parents must’ve been a nearly lifelong agony. The fact he was a teacher was also telling. And I had a strong feeling he’d once had a partner who’d somehow made him suffer.

“Not now but soon,” I added, because I knew I should get out of his room. “I’d really appreciate it.”

“That might not be such a good idea.”

I rolled up my eyes. “I’m not trying to get in your pants.” Fib Number Two, but the fibs were getting rickety. I was starting to mean what I said.

My choice of words clearly made Jude uncomfortable. He rose from the floor, opened his bag, and distractedly began picking through its contents. I admired the backs of his hands, their distinctly masculine bas-relief of veins and tendons, and again noticed he had enticing fingers.

“You know,” I said, “what you heard about me isn’t entirely true. I actually had a steady boyfriend for a while

after you and I met. And I never cheated on him. I'm not a total schmuck. I do have *some* scruples."

That snared Jude's interest. His hands stilled as he cocked his head in my direction. "You still with him?"

"No. He... found something else to do and someone else to do it with." Forearms resting on my thighs, I toyed with my fingers while a ghost of recollection blew through me. When it had passed, I looked up. "But I still don't want to get in your pants. Especially under *these* circumstances."

I couldn't quite read Jude's expression—he'd started poking around in his luggage again—but another withheld smile seemed to tease his mouth. He could've been amused by my obvious distaste for this place or my claim to purity of intent. Or both.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"Thank you." I rose from the chair.

"A lot is going to depend on Hammer's reaction, you know."

"I know."

Suddenly, getting laid got shoved onto a back burner, alongside that cooling pot of Robbie regrets. I didn't want to see this unassuming man get flushed into a cesspool of self-loathing. I didn't want to see him scale over with repression. He was too fine. I knew that with absolute certainty.

I'd already lost someone to this accursed movement. That was why I was here. And even though I couldn't "lose" Jude, since I'd never actually had him, I was determined to save him.

I had no fucking idea where this Superman complex had come from, but I clung to it. Nobody was going to drain the

vibrant sexuality out of my favorite dancer. Nobody.

Jude hustled up to the door before I opened it. “Let me make sure the coast is clear before you leave.”

His shoulder inadvertently brushed mine as he leaned past me, and I smelled the cleanness of him. The arc of his neck drew my gaze; with it, the kind of innocent yearning a harried man feels when he looks at a hammock in the shade. Jude’s lithe body had simple, clean lines, a graceful geometry. I wanted to fit myself to it. That was all. Just settle in and, after a while, arise feeling reborn.

He motioned to me then briefly cupped my arm. “Okay,” he whispered. “It’s safe.”

No, I thought. No, it isn’t. But I’m going to try my damndest to make sure *you’re* safe.

Chapter Five

THERE he was, Ex-gay Extraordinaire: C. Everett Hammer III. Tall and tanned, fair and fit. The picture of accomplishment. And the picture of smugness. With his primped blonde wife on his arm, he made an appropriately belated entrance into the dining room. We thirty-six registrants were already seated. Six men and their assigned mentor ringed each of six large, round tables. Smiling affably, Ev and the missus, whose name was Catherine, went from one cluster to another and shook each registrant's hand.

He was a handsome man in a fussily stitched-up way, as if he'd been taken apart and meticulously put back together, and wore his casual clothing like a tuxedo. His gray eyes were riveting. Their color seemed adjustable; it could've been bright and clear or mellow and deep—or nearly colorless and devoid of nuance.

I'd seen only two pictures of Hammer in his youth. In them, he appeared willowy and seemed to have a flair for dramatic, pouty poses. A surfable wave of gold-streaked walnut hair fell over one eye. I could tell he was trying to look pretty and seductive. *Tres* gay. In spite of his seeming vanity, or maybe because of it, I got the impression he was happy with his life.

He was sturdier now—rather angular and imperious, in fact—and neatened up to match the idealized image of a middle-aged CEO. As we shook hands, I sensed that he took more notice of me than he did of the other men at the table. That creeped me out a bit. His eyes seemed to repel the room’s light rather than catch and shatter it into glitter, the way Jude’s eyes did.

I was relieved when he moved on.

As luck and the alphabet would have it, Jude and I were in the same group. We conscientiously refrained from exchanging even a single glance. It was like that wedding reception all over again—the two of us silently, stingingly aware of each other’s presence—except this time, there were no alcoholic beverages to alleviate our discomfort.

I tried to enjoy the savory and plentiful food while I listened carefully to the dinner conversation. Directed by Thom Swain, our mentor, we’d started out by introducing ourselves and saying where we were from. The men seemed self-conscious. As dinner progressed, some of them dropped hints as to why they’d come to Stronger Wings. Swain listened as carefully as I did, but certainly for a different reason.

Conservative religious backgrounds seemed to figure heavily in those dropped hints, as did peer-group ridicule or disapproval. Two of the five guys were divorced and clearly felt guilty about it. One alluded to alienation from his children. All of them had obviously had piss-poor luck on the dating front.

Jude, however, didn’t talk about himself. He was pretty tight-lipped. He only participated in the conversation when he didn’t have to say anything revealing. I wondered how

willingly he'd spill during his first counseling session, which would be the following morning, and wished like hell I could be there.

The men all strove for optimism, and their hope was cleverly fed by the jovial, oh-so-caring Thom, who for some reason made me think of Tom Sawyer. It was his name, probably, combined with his red hair and freckles and mild Southern accent. Then I remembered I'd once pinned down a guy named Tom, no H, and teasingly tried to lick the freckles off his face and chest—before, that is, I got farther down his body and became serious.

“You know,” Swain said when dessert arrived, “as I look around this table, I see six guys with so much to offer, so much to give. Your lives are kind of like powerful engines that have stalled out because of bad maintenance. Our purpose here is to clean away the gunk and give y'all a tune-up, get you rolling along toward a genuinely good life. When an engine is running normal, it's running smooth.”

Everybody murmured in assent except me. I couldn't tell if Jude did or not. At that moment, he was earnestly digging into his cherry cobbler.

I was digging into the corner of my mind where wickedness was stored.

Maybe you should get us on that road by dropping your pants and bending over the table. That was my response to Thom's pep talk. It was more the imp of the perverse than genuine desire that spawned the thought. Yeah, Swain was moderately fuckable. So were eight or ten of the other guys in the dining room. But I didn't want them. More to the point, I didn't want to be the kind of ho-doggy homo Jude

had excoriated, and that's probably what had quashed all my natural instincts.

After dinner but before Thom set up his half-hour counseling intake meetings, I excused myself and hurried over to see Hammer before he left the dining room. He'd been sitting at a separate table with his wife, and I managed to get to him just as they rose from their seats.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hammer."

He seemed a bit startled when he saw me, as if he wasn't accustomed to registrants approaching him. His arched eyebrows and low-lidded gaze bespoke an arrogance I knew I'd have trouble accommodating.

"I'm Mick Tzerko," I said. "I need to speak with you for a moment."

"Who's your mentor again?"

"Thom Swain."

Hammer's cool gaze shifted to my table.

"The thing is," I said, anticipating his response, "I don't need a mentor."

He frowned at me. "What do you mean?"

"That's what I have to talk to you about. I'm here as a journalist, not as a..."—I did a mental scramble to come up with an acceptable phrase—"not as a gay man seeking help."

Hammer laid a hand on his wife's back. "Go ahead, dear. This might take a while."

With a demure smile, she walked away. Hammer sank back into his chair. "Have a seat," he said to me, then called out, "Just proceed, Thom."

I didn't look in the mentor's direction, but he must've been hesitating, wondering what was going on.

"So," Hammer said, crossing his legs and folding his hands on his lap, "what's this about being a journalist?"

I explained. Hammer stared at his interlinked hands and occasionally nodded.

"This *Options* magazine isn't a gay advocate publication?" he asked at one point.

"No, not at all. You can look it up online if you'd like. In fact, you can call one of my superiors." I pulled a business card from my wallet and handed it to him.

Hammer briefly studied it and then slipped it into his breast pocket. "What's your marital status, Mick?"

I summoned my inner actor. "Divorced," I said ruefully, "but I'm still hoping Jill and I can eventually work things out."

"Please excuse me for asking, but might your difficulties have something to do with your sexual preference?"

I chuckled, seemingly at the question's absurdity. "Goodness, no."

"You're heterosexual?"

"Absolutely," I said. "One hundred percent."

"From birth on?"

"Yes."

No lightning bolt came through the ceiling.

"So what is it you intend to do while you're here?"

"Listen, observe. Maybe interview some of your guests, if you'll allow it. The magazine's mission is to present

oppositional viewpoints on current issues—social, political, religious, cultural.”

A female kitchen worker appeared and bussed the table with quiet efficiency. She left Hammer’s coffee cup, and he asked her to send a server over with a full carafe and a cup for me. When the coffee arrived, I gratefully drank, for my throat had gone dry.

“As you see it,” Hammer said, picking up where I’d left off, “Stronger Wings stands in opposition to what, exactly?”

“The Gay Pride movement, I suppose.”

Fuck, I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to use the term *gay lifestyle*, because there wasn’t any such thing. We lived like everybody else in our respective age groups, income brackets, and places of residence. Even our bedroom activities were often the same as other couples’.

“Do you believe, Mick, that same-sex attraction and homosexual activity pervert the natural order of life as designed by our Creator? That they undermine personal spiritual fulfillment as well as social and family values?”

I compressed my lips; behind them, my teeth began to clench. My jaw had already tightened when he’d said “sexual preference.”

Don’t get angry; at least, don’t let it show. I forced an air of indifference, as if I had no investment whatsoever in these issues.

“This isn’t about what I believe. My job is to record and report... as objectively as possible.”

Ev uttered an abrupt *hm* that had a mocking quality. He likely didn’t have too much respect for the media in general, except the most avowedly conservative outlets.

“So,” I said, “may I have your permission to attend some of the classes and activities?”

“The counseling sessions are private, you know.”

His response and its curtness immediately made me suspicious. I hadn’t even asked about attending any counseling sessions. Now I was curious about what went on in them.

“I’ll try not to be intrusive,” I said. “And I respect the confidentiality of one-on-one meetings. In fact, I won’t use anybody’s real name. Except yours, of course.”

His cool-as-ashes gaze flipped up to my face. “I hope you realize I don’t grant interviews.”

Fuck, I’d been hoping he’d damn himself with his own words. “That’s a shame,” I said. “I was counting on—”

“I’m sorry, Mick, but I’ve been burned enough by reporters.”

You’ve been burned by yourself, asshole; by your own lies and your sick notion of normalcy and the fact you’ve been profiting from other people’s misery.

I sipped coffee so I wouldn’t say something I’d regret.

Ev fingered the handle of his teaspoon as he considered my initial request. “Well, I suppose you didn’t *have* to divulge your reason for being here, and the fact you’ve been forthright speaks well of your ethics.”

“Thank you.”

He pondered for another twenty seconds or so. “Yes, all right. Our mission is an important one, so I don’t mind using your magazine to help spread the word.” He smiled at the notion. “I’ll apprise Thom of the situation.”

“Good. And feel free to let me know if I’m ever overstepping my bounds.”

“You’d only be overstepping your bounds, Mick, if you took liberties with our employees or guests.”

“That’s not likely to happen,” I said, “since I’m still in love with my wife.” *Oh, God.* I smiled away that egregious lie and tried to make a joke. “Maybe I should ask for *your* reassurance that my stay here won’t turn me gay.”

That didn’t exactly tickle Ham’s funny bone. His expression couldn’t have been colder if it were a death mask. “I’m afraid I can’t share your humor. We at Stronger Wings take our mission very seriously.”

I heard Bree saying *Watch your mouth.* I tried to sound penitent. “Yes, I’m sure you do. Please forgive me. I guess I’m a little nervous about being in this environment.”

“Don’t be,” said Ev with smooth reassurance. “This isn’t a cruising bar. These men are here because they’re committed to their own salvation.” He rose from the table. “Perhaps you can even help set an example for them.”

As I, too, got up, the true import of that statement hit me.

Chapter Six

“SORRY to barge in.”

“No you’re not.” Jude was sitting on the bed, his knees drawn up, writing in a notebook that rested on his thighs.

He wasn’t surprised to see me this time. Why should he be? He’d again left his door open, a tacit invitation.

“Okay, I’m not. But Hammer gave me the go-ahead, so I’m going ahead. I’m allowed to talk to you.”

“Me in particular?”

“Any of the attendees. As long as they agree to it.” I stepped up to the bed. “Please don’t turn me away.”

Sighing, Jude slapped the notebook closed. I caught a glimpse of printed musical staves dotted with handwritten notes. Leaning against the headboard, he crossed his arms over his chest. “I wish you’d try to get your ‘insights’ from somebody else.”

“I will, but I want to start with you.”

“Why?”

“Because we know each other. I feel comfortable with you. Why are you being so damned difficult?”

“Because *I* don’t feel comfortable with *you*.” He tossed the notebook toward the foot of the bed.

“I already told you I won’t try—”

“Just ask me what you want to ask me,” he said

abruptly.

I sat in the bedside chair. Jude's pinstriped shirt was draped over the back, and I could smell it—the fading deodorant, the hint of fabric softener, the more primal scent of Jude himself. I liked this odd blend, this rare perfume. It suited the man who sat beside me in a sleeveless undershirt, the kind Stronger Wings insisted men wear. Only now, without another piece of clothing over it, the undershirt displayed the very assets it was meant to conceal—the peaked shadows of Jude's nipples, the smooth skin and curving lines of his bare arms. A raised vein, delicate and almost imperceptibly blue, ran over the hump of each of his biceps.

"This is all confidential," I told him. "I won't use your real name." I switched on my recorder and laid it on the edge of the bed. "Tell me what prompted you to enroll in this program."

Jude lifted and dropped his folded arms. "I don't need any of the crap I've been dealing with. Not any of it. I just want to live a normal life."

"Define that."

"A life I can be open about, even proud of. Maybe one that includes a loving, stable relationship. And certainly joy." He slid me a self-conscious glance. "I just want to be at peace with myself."

Shit, this was going to be tough. I already felt out of sorts. "Why can't you have those things the way you are? There's nothing *wrong* with you, Jude."

"Tell my parents that." He stretched out his legs and dropped his hands to his lap.

Fuck your parents! I wanted to yell, but that would hardly have advanced my cause. “Their attitude toward you is *their* problem. Can’t you see that? It’s a result of their own fear and ignorance. *All* bigotry stems from fear and ignorance. You’re certainly not to blame.”

“Their religion shaped how they feel,” Jude said.

I couldn’t tell if he was defending them or not. “Do you share their convictions?”

Jude tapped his pencil on his thigh. “Only... on a basic level, I guess. You know, belief in a higher power and living by the Golden Rule. I haven’t been much of a church-goer since I got into my mid-teens.” The pencil-tapping slowed as he fell into thought. “Still, I can’t help but wonder why so many religions view homosexuality as—”

“Don’t even go there,” I snapped. “You know as well as I do that organized religion can’t exactly be lauded for its reasonable, compassionate treatment of human beings. Or its consistency, for that matter. Hell, there’s even squabbling *within* denominations. So don’t try to tell me there’s something wrong with us when we’re not hurting anybody and, especially, when there’s love involved in our relationships.”

“You obviously haven’t read the Bible,” Jude said drolly. He tossed the pencil toward his notebook and folded his hands on his flat belly.

“Actually, I have. But who wrote that book and why they said what they said is another issue entirely. And a very complicated one.”

Jude stared down at his interlinked hands. He kept pressing his thumbs together and pulling them apart. “You

can't discount the procreation issue."

Scoffing, I blew air through my lips. "Of course I can. *Homo sapiens* sure as hell isn't facing extinction due to a lack of breeding pairs and viable offspring. Just the opposite, in fact. So don't go *there*, either."

Now Jude's thumb-wrestling was accompanied by lip-nibbling. It went on for a good ten seconds. "Misha, I spend five or six days a week around teenage boys. I have to help them hone their performance technique. That could mean improving posture and breathing. Or working on proper hand placement on the body of an instrument, proper finger placement on strings or valves or keys, proper embouchure on a mouthpiece. It can literally be a touchy job sometimes." He shot me a warning glare. "And *don't* make any smarmy comments."

"I wasn't going to. But how is that different from a straight teacher working with teenage girls?"

Instantly, Jude was stymied. "I suppose it isn't," he said grudgingly.

"Of course it isn't. Jesus, Jude, sexual conduct doesn't have a goddamned thing to do with orientation. You know that. It has to do with an individual's moral compass and overall character."

"Some parents and administrators don't see it that way."

Uh-oh. "Did something happen?"

Jude pulled his lips between his teeth, as if determined to keep his silence.

"Please tell me."

He lifted and dropped in arms in resignation. "I was dating this guy, Chad, for a while. Somebody associated with

the high school—a parent or teacher or flippin’ janitor, for all I know—saw us out together one night. Could’ve been one of us had his arm around the other or we were holding hands or maybe kissed briefly. But something obviously gave me away. A few days later, the chairman of the school board told me in no uncertain terms not to be demonstrative in public. Now I feel like some potentially lethal virus that’s being watched under a microscope.”

“God, Jude, I’m really sorry.”

I wanted to give him a soothing touch, hold his hand, hold *him*. But the camp’s damned injunction against physical contact was something Jude took seriously. Besides, he was wary of my motives, and I didn’t want to spook him and lose his trust.

“I’d *never* step out of line with my kids,” he said fervently, his color rising.

An ache went from my heart to my stomach. “I believe you.”

Jude tried to give me an appreciative smile but couldn’t quite manage it. “What makes that whole incident such a bitter pill is that Chad turned out to be....” He looked away again, his embarrassment almost palpable.

“What?”

“This is really personal stuff, Misha.”

“I have plenty of personal stuff myself,” I said. “So don’t think you’re alone.”

Jude’s fingers locked together more tightly. “He was abusive.”

Outrage and sorrow simultaneously filled me. “What did he do to you?”

“Shoved me around. Slapped me a few times. Threatened to break my hands, my jaw.” He looked out the window. From where he sat, there was nothing to see but a rectangle of dimming sky.

“I really want to hold you,” I said. My voice was shaky and barely audible, but I had to tell him.

My seemingly boundless stash of cynicism must’ve finally run out.

He swallowed hard, making his Adam’s apple bob. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Why? What’s wrong with wanting to hold someone?”

“You know it’s....” Jude stopped himself. He probably assumed I’d blow up at any reference to the camp’s rules. “Here and now,” he went on more gingerly, “under these circumstances, it would be... counterproductive.”

“Counterproductive of *what*, for God’s sake?” I almost got on the bed with him. Control prevailed, and I merely turned toward it. “Jude, those things you want—you can have them, all of them. Exactly the way you are. I fucking *promise* you that. None of this shit that’s made you miserable has any bearing whatsoever on your quality as a human being or your potential for happiness. You need to live your own life—for *you*, according to your perfectly sound standards; not for other people according to their capricious, hateful standards.”

“I haven’t done a very good job of that, Misha.”

“You haven’t even *tried*. Not really.” I muted the stridency in my voice. “You’ve felt defeated from the start because of your parents. That’s probably why your choice of partners has been crap. You’ve been living a self-fulfilling

prophecy: ‘I’m shit; therefore, I deserve shit.’”

My mouth just kept running. Although I knew the message I wanted to get across, I wasn’t sure I was putting it together well enough to make sense. That, however, didn’t stop me. “Don’t, *please* don’t let this so-called ministry twist you out of shape and then bind you into that shape. Don’t try to deny your true nature and become something and somebody you aren’t meant to be. That’s going to eat you up from the inside out for the rest of your life.”

I wished I could’ve said to him, *Come away with me. I’ll help you rediscover joy.* But I sure as hell couldn’t do that for someone so utterly convinced joy was beyond his reach. I wasn’t sure I could do it at all, for anybody. Besides, Jude thought I represented gayness at its worst.

Maybe I did.

Maybe I needed him a lot more than he needed me.

The thought jangled my nerves. I’d never expected to start believing *I* should change.

“Damn it,” I whispered. I grabbed my recorder and got up from the chair.

“Where’re you going?” Jude didn’t exactly sound frantic, but he sounded anxious enough to get my attention.

I didn’t turn to face the bed. I stood with my hands on my hips and looked at the floor. “I should just leave you alone. I hadn’t intended....” Finally, I was at a loss for words.

The bed creaked behind me and made my heartbeat accelerate. I didn’t think for a second Jude would grab me, pull me back there, and engage me in a passionate tangle. And he didn’t.

His hands slid up my back, raising goosebumps on my

arms, and then closed over my shoulders. “Thank you, Misha,” he said quietly. His chin moved against the top of my spine; his breath caressed my nape. “You’re welcome to come back.”

As I pivoted toward him, my arms were already rising, preparing for an embrace I’d craved for three years... even if I hadn’t realized I’d craved it. Jude gave me a wistful smile, the kind I imagined a spirit giving a loved one as he departed for the final time. My arms sank back down to my sides.

I left the room. I didn’t know what to expect anymore, from myself or anybody else. I just knew I couldn’t let Jude go.

Maybe he was *my* source of salvation.

Chapter Seven

HAMMER was keeping an eye on me. Even as I sat in the first class of the week, “From Despair to Hope,” I felt the burn of his scrutiny, although his eyes weren’t even turned in my direction. He might’ve been more than willing to “use” my magazine to spread his word, but I was nevertheless a loose cannon in his very regimented camp.

I sat in the back of the room, paper notebook and recorder at hand, and tried to be inconspicuous. But I wasn’t. Everybody’s awareness of my presence made me stand out like a monster woody in a porn video.

The registrants all knew by now why I was there. Each mentor had clued in his students yesterday evening. Some of the men had an obvious aversion to me; others seemed intrigued.

I realized I’d have to seek out other interview subjects and not concentrate solely on Jude. That would arouse suspicion. He might even be blamed for monopolizing my attention. It was certainly conceivable, since the camp leaders all believed I was straight and knew Jude wasn’t.

Oh, the irony. Jude was the one who quailed from queerness; I was the one who celebrated it.

Beneath my sheep’s clothing, I was the true wolf among the lambs.

Before the class officially got started, I idly scanned the room. What, I wondered, had these men said in their earlier counseling sessions? I didn't doubt some of them had broken down, and the thought of their pain made me ache with anger-studded sympathy. How had the mentors responded? With some preprogrammed nonsense, probably, but not a single hug, not a single glimmer of genuine understanding or compassion.

It *really* nettled me to think of Jude baring his soul to Thom fucking Swain. It nettled even more to think of Swain eyeing him up. The mentor had a way of doing that: looking at us as if he were being attentive to what we were saying, yet slyly giving each speaker the once-over.

Jude sat several seats ahead of me in the row to my right. What parts of him I could see—his choppy, directionless hair, his nicely tapered back, one suntanned forearm, and especially the pink dish of his ear—made me want to smile. I couldn't figure out why his ear affected me that way, until I remembered our encounter in the swimming pool. He'd nuzzled against my face as I'd kissed and lightly tongued the whorls and drawn the lobe between my teeth.

Goddamn, I wanted to do that again. And so much more. Jude had been eager and responsive, and his kisses alone had made me realize I wasn't making out with some insensitive douche bag who just wanted to lighten his load. Kisses are extremely revealing.

Hammer checked his watch and then moved to the lectern. He'd been having a hushed confab with the mentors. The arm ornament, Catherine, sat in a chair to her husband's right. The mentors took seats at the back of the

room, although none, thank goodness, sat near me. I turned on my recorder and lifted my pen.

The teacher graced his students with a smile. It was a welcoming smile, apparently meant to convey a sunny disposition and charitable spirit, but it lacked the warmth and delightful spontaneity of Jude's smiles. Hammer beamed like artificial light. Turn it on; switch it off.

"So, guys, how do you like it here so far? The ladies sure know how to clean up after us and put good food in front of us, wouldn't you say?"

The men chuckled and murmured in agreement. Score two propaganda points for the ladies. I had a feeling that as the week progressed, more flattering references would be made to the fair sex. A lot more.

Hammer blabbed about women for a couple more minutes, extolling the myriad virtues of sharing our planet and our lives with them. I couldn't argue. I liked or loved plenty of women. I just didn't want to get cozy with them, even though Hammer claimed males and females were meant to pair up for all sorts of glorious reasons.

"So you must be wondering," he said, easing into a segue, "why your own preferences have been skewed away from this beautiful, natural bond, this coupling for which we were tailor made, body and mind, heart and soul."

I smothered a yawn. To me, the answer was self-evident: some people were born gay or bi. Period, end of class.

Whoops, not so. Many of the men nodded, confirming Ev's assumption about the confused seas that were their minds. Egged on, he puffed himself up and assumed a polished air of authority.

“My friends, turning to men for sex is a misguided substitute for the father-son closeness you never had. It’s an act of desperation. Perhaps you were raised in a single-parent home. Perhaps your dad was emotionally cold and distant, or away much of the time. Perhaps he was psychologically or physically abusive. He might’ve even been a drunk or a philanderer or a pedophile. It’s also possible that another relative or family friend molested you. Regardless of the scenario, the result was the same: a boy who never enjoyed his father’s loving guidance, moral support, and protection from harm.”

Many of the attendees nodded at one point or another in the course of Ev’s pronouncements. These troubled men were going to be convinced they’d come from shitty homes or suffered sexual abuse even if they hadn’t. I knew *I* sure as hell hadn’t, and I knew plenty of straight men who had. But the Stronger Wings program seemed designed to reinforce every self-doubt or feeling of dysfunction a gay man had ever had, then assign a specious reason to it, then—*poof!*—set all to rights.

“What we’ll help you do,” Ev continued, “is rechannel your need for male bonding. It’s a perfectly natural need, but it sometimes manifests in unnatural ways. Once you can start thinking of men as friends, and spending time with them doing things that enrich your masculinity rather than pervert and diminish it, you’ll find a whole new source of satisfaction in that connection. And once your psyche is freed from the slavery that is homosexuality”—at this point, Ev extended an arm toward his wife, who stepped into his loose embrace—“you may just find a whole new appreciation for *true* femininity.” The couple exchanged fond smiles and a

brief, passionless kiss.

A student raised his hand.

Ev nodded and pointed at him. “What’s your question, Carlton?”

Carlton Druger stood and cleared his throat. “How do we... maintain once we’re away from here?”

“Your mentors will help you develop those skills,” Ev assured him. “In a nutshell, you’ll find you can strengthen your new perspective through regular prayer and meditation. You’ll find you can reinforce your new patterns of behavior by *living* them on a daily basis. In addition, Stronger Wings has a twenty-four-hour support line and, if you’d like, we can pair you up with a ‘brother’ you can turn to in times of weakness.”

Ev began a slow, contemplative stroll back and forth at the head of the class. “I’m not promising this renewal will be easy. You can’t be repaired overnight. Dependence on destructive thoughts and actions can be as hard to overcome as dependence on any drug. Like a recovering addict, you may always be a work in progress. But with relentless cultivation of physical and mental discipline—and someday, God be willing, the unflagging support of a loving wife—you’ll find the personal fulfillment that’s eluded you. And that’s a promise from me, a living example of what you seek to achieve.”

There were a few more questions, a few more facile replies.

By this time, I was seething. Some of these guys, especially the ones whose religious beliefs clashed with their sexuality, were in a fragile state... and a wrenching

quandary. They obviously needed some compassionate, practical solutions that ran far deeper than Stronger Wings' polluted river of judgmentalism.

My arm shot up like the mechanical arm of Inspector Kemp in the movie *Young Frankenstein*. Looking displeased, Hammer hesitated but finally acknowledged me.

I stood as I addressed him. My voice carried a neutrality I didn't feel. "Mr. Hammer, how do you counter the American Psychological Association's repudiation of reparative therapy? And its assertion that same-sex attraction can't simply be 'forced' or 'trained' to go away? That, in fact, efforts made toward this end can be very psychologically damaging?"

Ev immediately reddened but kept his superficial cool. "If your research had been thorough," he said snottily, "you would've found that many prominent figures in the field don't endorse that so-called repudiation. You would've found that change is *entirely* possible. A significant percentage of men and women have successfully transitioned *out* of homosexuality."

"What's your definition of 'successfully'?" I asked, and knew damned well I was seriously pushing my luck.

I got a haughty smile. "I would say that finding inner peace by shedding an onerous identity constitutes success. I would say that finding a life partner of the opposite sex constitutes success." He cocked an eyebrow. "Wouldn't you?"

An electronic bell dinged somewhere in the room, startling me. And, possibly, saving my ass. I hoped I didn't seem jumpy to Hammer. He'd surely take that as a sign of weakness. The guy had a huge capacity for bullying people, which he managed very cleverly to hide. Most of the time.

“Ah, lunch!” he exclaimed, gleefully clapping and rubbing his hands together. He swept an arm through the air, as if scooping up every man in the room. “Come on, fellas, let’s go see what culinary delights the ladies have cooked up for us today!”

The mentors, all wearing matching smiles, waited for their small flocks to gather around them.

Hammer, however, extended a hand in my direction. “Mick, my inquiring friend,” he said with expansive good humor, “come join me for a moment.”

I picked up my things and walked between the rows of adult-size desks. Ev waited until the room had emptied and then closed the door. When he turned to me, he wasn’t the same affable Goodtime Charlie he’d been just moments before.

Impassively, I met his frigid gaze.

“What was *that* all about?” he asked in a low monotone.

“You mean my questions? That’s part of my job,” I said cavalierly. I was maybe a half-inch taller than he. It gave me an absurd sense of power.

“You need to consider your questions more carefully, Mick.”

“I’m not sure I get your point. Those questions were relevant to—”

His face moved closer to mine. I smelled the mint on his breath, saw the large pores and roseate blotches on the skin of his nose. “You told me to let you know when you’d overstepped your bounds. So I’m letting you know. Don’t try to taint my program with your liberal horseshit, Mr. Tzerko.”

“It wasn’t liberal horseshit, Mr. Hammer. I was simply

asking about your reactions to the APA's findings."

His nostrils flared. Simultaneously, his eyes narrowed. "Let me put this more bluntly. Don't fuck with me by asking questions or making comments that undermine this program's goals. If you do, you'll lose. *Big* time. Unless you watch your step, starting now, you won't just be off this property and out of a story, you'll be out of a job. Or worse." He wheeled away, took two steps, wheeled back, and pointed at me. "And don't even *think* of trying to influence any of my guests."

"Why would I do that?" I asked ingenuously.

Hammer had no reply.

ANOTHER weird mealtime. Two of the men were loquacious. Three were withdrawn. Jude fell into the latter group. I answered, with pleasant civility, whatever questions I was asked. Nobody brought up the issue I'd raised in class. Nobody would've dared.

Funny, but I was developing the ability to read the men's faces—their eyes, especially. I could tell which guys seemed to resent my presence, and I could tell that dislike extended beyond my immediate group.

I couldn't fault them for it. These thirty-five men had come here because they desperately wanted to believe in the bizarre miracle promised by Stronger Wings. I'd implied the miracle was a sham, even a dangerous sham. Their attitude toward me may have been a case of blaming the messenger, but I understood.

As we headed back to South Lodge following our post-

lunch break, a guy named Ashton Perry posed a question. I'd never had occasion to talk with him; he was in a different mentor group. An adorable, blond young man no older than twenty-one or -two, Ashton was slender, about five-ten, and a teensy bit effeminate. But the pure perfection of his ass couldn't be concealed by even the cheapest, Chinese-made cargo pants.

Whereas Jude had a great man-ass, Ashton had the quintessential twink-ass. I greatly enjoyed looking at both.

"What are we supposed to do if we can't stop wanting men?" he asked no one in particular.

"I guess you're supposed to ignore the desire," I answered a little too wryly.

Of course I couldn't say what I wanted to say: *You'll never be able to stop wanting men. You were born gay. The Stronger Wings philosophy is moronic in the extreme, so just fucking ignore it and put that pretty rear of yours to good use.*

"Don't ever act on it," threw in a middle-aged, tattooed guy named Bret or Bart. I couldn't remember which it was and didn't want to peer at his nametag. "Then maybe the wanting will go away."

"Focus on godliness, cultivating your godliness," offered Franklin Faylon. He was one of the guys who didn't seem to like me, maybe because I was part of the secular media. "That's what I've been doing. I hope it will give me the willpower I need to resist temptation."

"I'm not sure I know what godliness is," said Ashton, endearingly befuddled.

Ed Imhof, another hater of me, leaned into the conversation from the outskirts of the loosely streaming

pack. “Try to start dating a good-looking, good-hearted woman too.” He was serious.

“I’ve *never* been attracted to a female,” Ashton confessed miserably. “Not for a second. I wouldn’t know how to make love to a woman. I’m not even sure I could stomach it.”

His last sentence made me cough out laughter before I could squelch my amusement. Four or five guys looked at me. “Maybe your mentor will clue you in,” I said, trying on a more sober face. “In fact, isn’t there a Joys of Hetero Sex seminar scheduled?”

“Not until next week. I won’t be here next week.” Staring at his feet, Ashton shuffled along for maybe ten more yards before addressing me again. “You’re straight. You’re not an ex-gay who’s in recovery or whatever. Could *you* help us get a handle on, you know, what to do and how to do it?”

I nearly tripped. Incredulous, I poked five fingertips at my chest. “Me?”

“Yeah,” said Ashton, as if it were the most sensible thing in the world.

“I, uh... no, I don’t think so. Besides, it’s not my place. I’m not here as a participant. I’m certainly not here as any kind of mentor.”

Jude, about two bodies to my right, had been sliding surreptitious glances at Ashton and me every time we spoke. Our interaction seemed to make him uneasy. Or *something* seemed to.

I didn’t know what he’d been thinking lately, since I’d gone straight to my room after lunch and left him alone. I still had a ton of notes to jot down, information to organize. But I’d sure make a point of dropping in on him later.

Chapter Eight

THE tour. Well, well. I could feel my muscles expanding as I traipsed with the male herd through the southwest wing of South Lodge, where we got to view a bowling alley and a variety of courts. Basketball, squash, racquetball, handball, volleyball—dicked if I knew. Administrative offices and the Grand Hall, where our mixer dance would be, were in the southeast wing.

Then off we went into the wild green-and-blue yonder, where we viewed the outdoor attractions. The Grand Hall's exits opened onto a couple of paths that converged about midway down a gently sloping hill. The single promenade led to a gazebo. Not far to the east of the structure was Freedom Lake. As I stood on the manmade beach of the manmade body of water, I thought how apt they were for a camp that turned out manmade men.

Three small shuttle buses then ferried us past a driving range, tennis courts, horseshoe pits, softball diamond, rock wall for climbing, and two multipurpose playing fields.

Hot dang. After all that, I was ready to don a nut cup and grab my own crotch.

What I didn't see on the facilities tour was just as telling as what I did see. There was no spa or sauna or massage parlor, no exercise room, locker room, or communal shower. Of course not. Such places could invite gawking, unclean

thoughts, and quite possibly the dreaded spontaneous boner.

At one point, as we all surveyed the baseball diamond, Ashton murmured at my back, “Crap, I can’t do any of this stuff.”

No bulletin there. The whole setup was obviously designed to stimulate a clean flow of testosterone and encourage the blossoming of masculinity. Ashton Perry had his pageant-walk down, but I couldn’t see him hoisting a bowling ball or swinging a bat.

I felt bad for him and tried to cheer him up. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I don’t think anybody expects you to master these sports. They’re basically just games. So play. The fun is in the trying.”

Ash gave me a grateful smile.

“I can help you with some of them,” said a voice I knew and loved.

Jude had walked up behind us. He darted a glance at me.

For the rest of the tour, he studiously refrained from turning his eyes in my direction. His behavior had begun to scare me a little. I found myself praying, actually praying, however ineptly, that this morning’s counseling session and Hammer-headed class hadn’t started pulling him out of my reach.

We returned to North Lodge for a break before supper. After showering, I again scrambled to pull the raw material for my article into some workable shape. But I couldn’t concentrate. My thoughts were with Jude.

When I finally got around to checking the time, it was too late to pay him a visit.

Within minutes, we were all flowing toward the dining room. I'd made a vow to keep my trap shut and merely listen. The thought of getting ejected from Stronger Wings and leaving Jude behind was enough to make me behave.

Once my group was seated, David Reiker asked Swain if there'd be any discussions of celibacy as an option. David and Franklin Faylon, the champion of "godliness," seemed to know each other. Maybe they belonged to the same congregation.

The Knuckleheaded Confessor pooh-poohed this path. "Mr. Hammer believes that's avoiding the issue, not addressing it," he said. "Besides, it's unnatural, just like homosexuality is. Swearing off sex deprives a guy of intimacy and fatherhood, which are both part of your ultimate goal."

Oh fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. I wanted to grab the basket of rolls off the table and smash the whole thing into Swain's stupid face. Embracing chastity *was* an alternative for devoutly religious gays. It meant they wouldn't have to be straitjacketed into a lifelong lie, wouldn't have to pretend they were something other than what they were. They could accept being gay, and having been *created* gay, yet refuse to be sexually active. Furthermore, there were gay-friendly churches all over the country.

Alternatives also existed for men who wanted to remain sexually active. Intimacy was entirely possible without violating religious injunctions against sodomy and fellatio. So there sure as shit *were* solutions other than pretending to be Ward bloody Cleaver.

Gaze fixed on my dinner plate, I kept stabbing at my food and thinking, Damn you, Jude. Damn you.

I'd never before kept my lips sealed for any guy—except, of course, the really ugly or smelly ones.

WEARING the most humble version of my interviewer's hat, I called on David Reiker that evening, despite the possibility he thought I was evil incarnate. He was wary at first but didn't shoo me away, and our conversation turned out to be enlightening for both of us.

I realized something about religion and sexuality, and the Stronger Wings ministry, as I talked with David. It was the so-called Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that were condemnatory of non-heterosexuals. Eastern religions didn't specifically target us for censure, and pagans surely didn't give a shit. So the Stronger Wings organization was solidly anchored in monotheism, despite its nonsectarian claims.

Rather than tell David about alternatives to the Stronger Wings way, which could've been construed as blatant propagandizing, I slipped in delicate, respectful questions that contained the information: "Had you ever considered...?" "Are you aware of...?" I hoped Reiker would in turn mention these options to Franklin and other like-minded registrants.

I also hoped he wouldn't yammer about this stuff in front of the wrong people. If Hammer caught wind of my "interference," he'd catapult my ass right out of here.

I felt wrung out when I got back to my room. Just as I grabbed up the schedule to see what further joys were in store for us, a quiet knock sounded at my door. My nerves went taut. I thought of Jude; I thought of Ev.

It was Ashton who stood there, looking good enough to eat—or at least rim. Curious, I invited him in.

“I thought you might want to interview me,” he said with charming candor.

As it turned out, he just needed someone to talk to, someone who wasn’t trying to manipulate him.

This beautiful boy didn’t belong at Stronger Wings. It was parental pressure that had driven him into the program, but he was more discombobulated by it than committed to it. I thought he should get the hell out while the getting was good, and I told him so. The tension drained out of him as soon as I voiced my opinion.

“I might stay to the end,” he said, “just to keep my folks off my back. It’ll be a lot easier for me now. I guess I just needed someone to tell me I shouldn’t pay attention to this crap.”

“Don’t pay attention to it,” I reiterated, certain he wouldn’t finger me as an instigator.

Beaming, Ash sighed. “I feel better. Now I can spend more time with Samuel and pretend the talking heads”—he waved an arm in front of his face and snapped his fingers—“don’t exist.”

“Samuel Patterson?” I asked, just as Ash put his hand on the doorknob.

“The one and only,” he said brightly.

Samuel Patterson was the only black guy in this bleached place. Maybe ten or twelve years older than Ash, he was a taciturn man with a kind of smoldering yet dignified presence. They were in the same group under the same mentor.

“Are the two of you getting to know each other?” I asked. Ashton’s grin melted into a coy smile. “Oh yeah.”

I smiled back. Son of a bitch, some attendees *did* get their gay on in this place. I wanted to applaud.

As the young man swung out the door, someone else sidled past him to enter.

“Hi,” said Jude. “Mind if I came in for a minute?”

“You know I don’t mind.” My voice had gone silky as kitten hair. I rarely sounded like that, but the tone came on naturally as soon as Jude stepped over the threshold.

He hesitated before quietly easing the door closed at his back. “You, um... you’ve been making yourself scarce lately.”

I simply let my eyes take him in. At that moment, I would’ve sworn he was getting more handsome by the day. “Well, you know, they don’t give us a lot of free time. And I *do* have an article to write.”

I hadn’t popped in at Jude’s room for a while, and I felt insanely flattered, maybe even encouraged, that my absence seemed to bother him.

Jude quickly looked over his shoulder, although there was nothing to see but the plane of the door. “Why was Ash in here?”

“He wondered if I’d be interviewing him. So I interviewed him.” I lifted my recorder. It wasn’t until then I realized I was sitting on the bed, my back against the headboard, the button of my jeans undone. Guess that *did* look a little fishy. “Actually,” I added, “I think he just wanted to vent. He seems to feel out of place here.”

Jude nodded. Or twitched. I couldn't tell which. His gaze jumped from my waistline to my outstretched legs and fell to the floor.

"I didn't take advantage of him," I said, "if that's what you're wondering."

A blush flared over Jude's cheekbones. "Did he want you to?"

"I don't know. But he did compliment me."

I swung my legs off the bed and stood. Lowering my zipper just enough to show a bit of trail, I tucked in my shirt and resecured the closures. I caught Jude watching me.

He cleared his throat and tried hard to be nonchalant. "Oh yeah? What'd he say?"

"He thinks I'm the yummiest man here and if I were gay I'd get plenty of action."

Jude uttered a clipped "hm," scoffing at the observation, and crossed his arms over his chest. "He actually said 'yummiest'?"

"That's what he said." Once I was all buttoned up, I sat on the edge of the bed, my legs spread wide. "What do *you* think?" I asked with a taunting smirk. "Do you think I'm yummy?"

"What I think is that I've never used that word in my life."

"Nice sidestep."

Jude held in a smile. "Did you give him advice on how to make love to a woman?"

Cheeky bugger. "What could I possibly tell a diehard bottom?"

"To find a brick house with a strap-on."

After a second of not believing what I'd just heard, I exploded into laughter. Falling sideways onto the bed, I grabbed a pillow and held it over my face to muffle my tittering, which was spiraling into the upper register. My eyes were watering when I finally sat up again, but I could see Jude grinning.

What a lovely sight.

"Good one," I choked out.

"You laugh like a frat boy, Misha."

"Is that another strike against me?"

Jude looked down. His grin shrank.

"Why don't you have a seat?"

He walked over to the desk, pulled out the wooden chair, and turned it to face the bed.

"How was your first counseling session?" I asked.

The question further sobered him. He shrugged and shook his head. I couldn't tell what that meant. I also couldn't tell if Jude looked glum or pissed off or just pensive. His expression had a kind of generic cloudiness that could've sprung from any number of sources.

Maybe, I thought, I should cast a wider net and see if *that* hauled in an answer. "Something on your mind?"

Jude's features pinched together. "Misha, for God's sake, don't get yourself kicked out of here."

I hadn't expected to hear *that* come out of his mouth, and I didn't know what to make of it. "For *God's* sake?" I asked, because I wanted to hear him say, *No, for my sake*. But like so many of the scenes that played out in my fantasies, it didn't translate into reality.

"Just don't," he said. "Okay?" He flipped me a furtive

glance. “FYI, if you don’t start keeping your eyes to yourself, you’ll blow your *own* cover. No matter how careful you are about what you say.”

My forehead crimped. *Now* what was he talking about? “I beg your pardon?”

He mumbled something.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“Ashton’s ass.” The words came out as sharply as if Jude had just crunched through a bone. “If you keep staring at it—” He frowned at me. “What are you grinning about?”

“Are you jealous?”

Sighing, Jude rolled his head back. “Oh, come on, Misha. Can’t you put your ego aside for even a minute?”

My amusement faded. I kept watching him, thinking without words how purely unpretentious he was and how much I liked him. Yeah, I could be a very satisfied switcher with Jude. “I put my ego aside,” I said quietly, “the first time I saw you smile.”

Immediately, as if my words hung visibly in the air, Jude closed his eyes. The skin around them puckered slightly.

“Why don’t you want me to get kicked out of here?” I angled toward him. “Tell me, Jude.”

“I wish I knew,” he murmured, then abruptly rose and left the room.

Chapter Nine

ONE day slid into the next, each day informed by a pre-established routine. Breakfast, counseling session, class; lunch, some sports activity, break; supper, group sessions, free time, and sleep.

Of course, I couldn't attend the counseling sessions, which bugged me no end, and I bypassed some of the sports and classes. That gave me time to do my work, enjoy an occasional swim, and go to my car to make phone calls and check and send e-mails. I'd gotten a number of messages from different guys I'd dated, but none of them particularly interested me. I'd kept my responses short and breezy.

I wedged in interviews when I could, with whom I could. Although each man had his own story, a common thread ran through them all: disaffection with the very core of their beings, which had led to chronic self-reproach.

I quickly realized I couldn't change the thinking of these guys, certainly not in *this* environment, and it would've been presumptuous and foolhardy of me to try. They were adults, after all. I also realized I had no right to invalidate what some ex-gays felt was their successful adoption of heterosexuality. Kelly, one of the mentors, fully believed in both the wisdom and efficacy of his change. He claimed, quite convincingly, to find his new life supremely satisfying. Who was I to dispute his feelings?

The whole thorny business got me thinking about the nature of human sexuality, how it was sometimes fixed and sometimes fluid. People who managed to switch off their homosexual desires were probably bi—or pan or omni, or whatever the most accurate prefix—from the get go. The more I interacted with the “students” at Stronger Wings, the easier I found it to distinguish strict homos from their more flexible brothers.

I could also tell which attendees were in the greatest danger of being harmed by this experience. They were the guys whose self-esteem had already been seriously eroded by outside forces. If those men failed at purging themselves of same-sex attraction, they’d suffer. They’d suffer so severely, I could barely stand the thought of it.

This whole reeking movement was so senseless. That was my ultimate conclusion. Like water seeking its own level, all the people who’d been sucked into these programs and specious therapies would likely have found their own way, or much more affirming kinds of help, if programs like Stronger Wings didn’t exist. Being hounded by religious dogma or personal prejudice was the last thing they needed.

Why the *fuck* did so many people despise other people who weren’t exactly like themselves? I’d never understood it. After my stint at Stronger Wings, I understood it even less.

Jude and I continued to spend at least half our free time together. I got the impression he carefully refrained from asking himself why. Grateful for his company, I tried not to proselytize and pressure him. So we just talked about ordinary things—our jobs, our likes and dislikes—and shared anecdotes from our lives.

I found it hard to tell him how accepting my family had always been. My parents and three sisters were easygoing, broadminded people who were willing to give almost anybody the benefit of the doubt. When I mentioned how painless my coming-out had been, I felt as if I were sponging Jude's psychic lash marks with salt and vinegar. I got off the subject as quickly as possible.

Often, during these talks, we played cards or checkers. Occasionally, we accused each other of cheating. During one match, Jude pitched a checker at me and almost got it in my mouth. Seeing and hearing him laugh again was well worth my narrow escape from a choking incident.

Some of the program's organized activities were fun, too—a few of the sports, the short hikes around the Camp—and they were especially fun if Jude and I were near each other. I came to like and respect a number of the other guys as well, but my feelings for them came nowhere near, in nature *or* degree, my feelings for Jude Stone.

I treasured our time together, whether it was filled with quiet conversation or earnest competition or hilarity. I treasured that time because, I realized, I treasured *him*. The realization filled me with apprehension.

On Tuesday evening in Jude's room, after I grumbled a little about Hammer constantly giving me the fish eye, I let slip something about Robbie. It was one of those stream-of-consciousness missteps I wasn't even aware of... until Jude picked up on it.

“Did your ex-boyfriend enroll in one of these programs?” he asked, perceptively watching me.

The question took me by surprise and put squealing bats in my stomach. I felt the flare of their red-eyed heat in

my face.

“He, uh... yeah, he did.”

“While you were seeing each other?” Jude, who was on the bed, rolled onto his side to face me. I was again sitting in the bedside chair.

“Mm-hm.” I hoisted my ankle up to the opposite knee and picked at the hem of my pants. It was a real fucking downer, having Robbie intrude on one of these pleasant interludes.

“What brought it on?” Jude asked. “Did you see it coming?”

I sighed. No way could I tell him, *I really don't feel like talking about it*. I'd done plenty of poking and prying into Jude's life, so I didn't want to add the label *hypocrite* to those delightful epithets Barbarosa's customers had already hung on me.

“Robbie had always been one of those spiritually restless types,” I explained, to myself as well as to Jude. “It began with him deciding to start going to church. He tried out a bunch until he found one he stuck with. Then he got more and more distant and our sex life went to hell. Then he informed me he'd met a woman and couldn't see me anymore. Then... well, then it was over.”

A *Reader's Digest* condensed version was the best I could do. I really couldn't bear parading out all the details of each phase. First, Robbie's soul-searching withdrawal. Then, his sudden, frightening animation, as if he couldn't talk enough, couldn't mute the flash and clamor of whatever spirit had possessed him. Finally, his eerie disconnection, like a movie astronaut who floats off into space when his

lifeline breaks.

I'd never forget how Robbie's eyes changed as he got deeper and deeper into the remaking of himself. At the end, they had the kind of preternatural sheen Renfield's eyes had in the 1930s *Dracula*. Hell, I'd even begun to see him in shades of black and white—a half-toned wraith without color or dimension.

It was during the second phase that we had all our hideous, go-nowhere conversations, as if we were members of two drastically different cultures or even species. Neither one of us understood, much less accepted, a word the other said. My voice bounced off Robbie's glow; his voice bounced off my glower. We'd become utterly alien to one another. And utterly odious.

I silently sank into myself as these memories slithered past my mind's eye. Jude patiently, indulgently let me remember without pressing me to cough up every last piece of dirt. I finally turned my eyes to him. I have no idea how I looked, but it seemed to affect him.

"How did you react?" he asked gently.

"Oh, I just armored myself with pride," I said. "I told Robbie to get the fuck out of my life and go do what he had to do, even if it meant hanging himself with a beard. And that's precisely what he did."

Jude's eyebrows were still drawn together. I had a feeling he wasn't buying my insouciance. "You didn't try to talk him out of it?"

"Not after a point. I figured that would've been akin to groveling, and I refused to lower myself. I knew there were more fish in the sea. So I went about finding them. In fact, I

started the evening of the day he ended it.”

Great. I’d just confirmed the rumors of my promiscuity. My bravado had come across as pretty pathetic, actually.

I got off the chair, stuffed my hands in my pockets, and began a slow, directionless ramble around the small room. Goddamn, how did this turn into a dissection of *my* life?

“You were hurting,” Jude said quietly. “By the time you got that armor in place, he’d already wounded you.”

“Yeah, well. I got over it.”

“Did you?”

I stopped and gave him a direct look. “Yes, Jude, I did.” When he didn’t acknowledge my affirmation, I repeated it. “Honest, I did. Eventually. For the most part.”

He gave me a wan half smile. “Any lingering feelings?”

“No sentimental ones. Sour ones, maybe.”

“So this article you’re writing... is it like payback?”

I had to give that possibility some thought. “Could be, in a way. But I think it’s become more an attempt to understand. Sometimes that’s what closure is all about.”

Jude vacantly traced the pattern on his Indian-print bedspread. I risked sitting on the edge of the mattress. He didn’t chide me. He didn’t even flinch or bend his legs to pull them away from me, just slid them back to give my butt more room.

“I hope I’m not your instrument of revenge, Misha.”

I frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You know. They took someone away from you, so you’re trying to take someone away from them.” Jude flipped a glance at me. “An eye for an eye.”

They. Them. The people involved in the ex-gay movement. Okay, I got that part. But did Jude really think—

“No,” I said firmly. “That’s not the way it is. I swear on my honor.” I moved back to the chair so I’d be closer to his face. “Or what little honor I have.”

“I think you have a lot more than you give yourself credit for.”

An unsettling current crackled between us. There’d been other moments like this, when we knew damned well we were forging an awkward bond neither one of us could fully accept or define.

Jude broke our brittle silence by asking, “Did you love him?”

“I don’t know.” Damn, I just wanted to fall into his eyes. Dark and warm and guileless, they invited immersion. I had to look away. “Everything that happened sort of... muddied the waters of recollection for me. It’s hard even to conjure an image of Robbie the way he used to be.”

Jude curled a hand over my arm. It wasn’t a dramatic gesture, and certainly not a suggestive one, but it made my breath catch. His warmth seeped into me. My first impulse was to put my hand over his.

“I’m really sorry for your loss, Misha. It must’ve torn you apart.”

Words I might’ve expected to hear at the death of a loved one. But, then, the Robbie I’d known *had* died. “Don’t be,” I said. “I’m ready to fight back now.”

“Isn’t it too late?”

I stared at Jude’s hand as he withdrew it. “It’s never too late.”

Chapter Ten

EACH evening, one of the six groups ambled off to a place called the Hollow and sat around a burn pit for a campfire chat. Wednesday was my group's turn. Led by Thom Swain, all six of us gathered up kindling and, in true Boy Scout fashion, helped construct the perfect framework for a fire. Cut wood was heaped beneath a lean-to at the edge of the groomed space, and we were to take turns fetching a length or two whenever the flames dwindled. Tomorrow, during the designated physical activity time, we'd have to split wood for the Thursday group. These were apparently more exercises in wholesome fellowship and selfless cooperation.

I didn't mind. I cared about these guys and liked the outdoors. And, although the August evening was too sultry for a blaze, I looked forward to watching the firelight play over Jude's features.

Just as we all got settled around our crackling masterpiece, an eighth person joined the circle. Hammer emerged from the darkness of the woodsy path like a murderous stalker. In spite of his convivial greeting, my spirits sank. Good things did *not* happen when Ev and I were thrown together. Moreover, I could get away with watching Jude when only the deaf, dumb, and blind Thom Swain was around; I couldn't when his eagle-eyed boss hovered nearby.

"Now's a good time," Thom announced, "to share your

life experiences before you came to Stronger Wings—like, what put you at the point of seeking help—and talk about how your stay here has affected you.”

“Feel free to ask questions too,” Hammer added. “We all need advice as we try to claim our true identities.”

I sat on the ground just outside the log circle, so I would look like the unobtrusive observer I was supposed to be. There were other advantages to distance. I was away from the fire’s unpleasant heat. And I was mostly in shadow, which meant my face was harder to see.

The men began a kind of scattershot exchange. Swain sometimes threw in his worthless two cents’ worth. Hammer listened but mostly refrained from getting involved in the conversation... unless, of course, the mentor fumbled the ball.

David again raised the possibility of celibacy. This time, Hammer did step in. “The whole point of repair,” he said, “is to reshape one’s internal sexual paradigm and redirect one’s thoughts, not just suppress urges. Intimacy should be courted, not rejected. It’s essential to a normal life.”

As I groaned and growled inside, David lapsed into silence and the conversation veered in another direction. Jude didn’t say much, except to verify that domestic violence did exist in the gay community. The men continued berating their old liaisons and the “lifestyle” in general.

And then Danny Quinn lost it. He’d been talking about the HIV-positive man who’d coaxed him out of the closet, become his lover, and soon thereafter contracted pneumonia and died. The story made several of us misty-eyed. Jude, who was sitting beside Danny, put an arm around his shoulders. Murmuring soothing words, he drew the

distraught man close to him. Danny wilted against his chest.

“Jude!” Hammer barked. “Get your hands off of him!”

Everybody jumped, as if one of us had thrown a firecracker into the flames.

Jude took his time letting go of Danny. “Can’t you see the difference between—”

Hammer wouldn’t let him finish. “Regardless of motivation, that is *not* the proper form of interaction for two vulnerable men who are still in transition.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, springing to my feet. “Jude’s only trying to comfort Danny! There’s nothing wrong with holding somebody when he’s grieving!”

My objection hung chillingly in the air. Only the fire didn’t freeze.

Hammer glared up at me. “With all due respect, sir,” he said levelly, “you know far too little about what these men are going through to judge what behavior is acceptable and what isn’t. The rules of this camp exist for a reason. They are part of a very thoughtfully planned program intended to help troubled people out of an untenable existence.”

“Maybe,” I said, “this *is* a case of deficient understanding.”

Hammer likely knew what I meant, knew I was impugning *his* understanding and not my own, but he had no way of being sure. So he donned the persona of a kindly but put-upon uncle, slathered his voice with all the forbearance he could muster, and said, “Mick, I can see why my objection would be incomprehensible to you. Why don’t you meet me in my office later, and I’ll try to explain.”

“All right.”

I caught a glimpse of Jude looking down and shaking his head.

There wasn't much I could do now but prepare for Round Two.

HAMMER'S large, frontier-chic office was like an extension of the South Lodge lobby. His desk could've come straight from the Ponderosa ranch. Two cows must have given their lives to upholster the Holstein-hided chair that loomed behind it.

Seating himself, Ev took up a ballpoint pen and slipped the button end between his pursed lips. Little did he know it, but he had his gay face on. There were just some things a wife couldn't change.

I already knew he hadn't summoned me here to clue me in about the No Touch rule.

"According to scuttlebutt," he said after regarding me a moment, "you and Jude Stone spend a lot of your free time together."

Laconically, I shrugged. "He's a nice guy—bright, well read, well mannered. I enjoy his company. I don't feel threatened by him."

"The question is, might *he* feel threatened by *you*."

"For what reason?"

"How old are you, Mick?"

"Thirty-one. It's on my registration form."

Nodding, Hammer tossed the pen onto his desk. "You're a good-looking man. Don't you think it might stress Jude out to be around you so much?"

“Why should it stress him out any more than it stresses *you* out?”

Ever so slightly, Ham fidgeted. “I have a wife to turn to. He doesn’t have anybody. Surely you realize how difficult it must be for these men to fight against their... inclinations.”

I could’ve sworn he was about to say “natural inclinations.” It made me smile inside.

“So isn’t it better,” I said, “for any one of them to hang out with a straight guy than with another gay guy?”

Hammer chewed on something that wasn’t there. “That depends on how the straight guy looks. You probably don’t realize this, but gay men can be very superficial, carnal creatures. They’re drawn to attractive males, regardless of preference.”

“Really.” My voice had gone flat.

“Yes, really.”

Although I immediately thought of myself, I also thought of the millions of queer men who didn’t deserve to be painted with the same brush. And the many more millions of hetero men who did. “In any case,” I said, “It’s up to Jude to decide if he wants me as a buddy or not. He’s an adult. And he’s anything but superficial.”

After scratching and rubbing the underside of his neck, Hammer let out a sigh. “Swain doesn’t know what to make of Jude. I don’t either. He’s very reserved.”

“Sometimes.” Hammer was angling for information, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to oblige.

“It’s especially hard to help men like that, the ones who keep to themselves. They don’t give us any openings.”

“I see.” Revealing word, *openings*. And disquieting. The

people who ran this camp were akin to psychic invaders, and they were always sniffing out entry points, weak spots.

Hammer turned his gaze from the desktop to my face. “Can you enlighten us?”

How predictable. “I’m afraid not. Confidentiality and all that. You don’t want me sitting in on your counseling sessions; I don’t want to share the content of my interviews. You can read some of what I was told when the article is published, but all the men will have pseudonyms.”

Ev was in no position to dispute my logic, and he knew it. “So Jude hasn’t done or said anything...untoward with you?”

“Not a thing.”

“Can you at least tell me if he seems to be making progress?”

I stared into my lap and contained a smile. “Yes, I believe he is.”

SAME routine the next day, Thursday, but I barely noticed. In fact, I didn’t get out of bed until breakfast was over.

I wandered to one of the common areas and got an apple and a granola bar from the vending machines. Jude and the other registrants were tied up with their class and their counseling sessions. North Lodge felt deserted.

After I showered, I did more writing and revising. I was grateful when lunchtime rolled around.

“We missed you at breakfast, Mick,” Thom said. “I poked my head in your room just to make sure you were okay.”

You poked your head in my room hoping to cop a glimpse of naked man. I hoped he had. I hoped I'd thrown the covers aside while I slept, and Thom "Sly Glances" Swain had gotten an eyeful of bare ass or thickened cock.

"Yeah, I overslept," I said.

My gaze briefly met Jude's.

After lunch, we all had to return to the Hollow to split wood for the Thursday evening campfire. At least the area was shaded from the scalding sun. Thom and a guy named Roy Schroeder seemed to know their way around axes and mauls, but the rest of us were lucky we didn't amputate something. By the end of the ordeal, I had a fairly good rhythm going, and I was glad I'd kept myself in shape.

Jude kept sliding glances at me. I was sweating and felt pretty grungy, so I couldn't figure out at first why he'd want to look at me. Then I realized it was *because* I was sweaty and grungy—and, furthermore, my upper body was pumped—that he kept checking me out.

The assumption was one hell of a turn-on, even if it was incorrect.

I jerked off during my break-time shower as I thought of Jude being aroused by the look of me. Christ, it made me feel like Gary to think that way... but it worked. And I'd really needed the release.

I hustled over to Jude's room once I was clean and fragrant. He'd showered, too, and was sitting on his bed, staring out the window. He gave me a distracted smile when I walked in but he didn't say anything.

I made the bold and completely unacceptable move of getting on the bed with him, fully, not just balancing my butt

on the edge of the mattress. I didn't do anything except sit there, but it was still a major no-no.

"Does any of the shit you've been fed here make any sense so far?" I asked without preface.

Jude shoved a hand into his thicket of hair and scratched at his scalp. "I don't know. I need more time to process it."

I craned my neck in his direction and lifted my eyebrows. I knew he knew better, and he knew I knew. He glanced up and gave me a weary, lopsided smile. Even Jude's halfhearted smiles were better than a jubilant grin from anybody else.

"Not too much," he finally admitted. "I'm starting to get the feeling that if I can't turn myself around, I'll have to *pretend* I've turned myself around. And if I can't pretend, I'll have to be celibate for the rest of my life and keep myself distracted with lofty thoughts."

I started sniggering. Jude's shoulders jiggled. He, too, was chuckling, but the sound came out as little expulsions of breath. At least mirth had graced our stay at Stronger Wings.

Jude sighed. "Problem is, I can't seem to conjure a single lofty thought."

"Why's that?" I half expected him to blame my presence. I hoped he would.

"I've never been that kind of person," he said instead. "I love music, dancing, good food and conversation and books. I guess I'm too much a...." He scrunched his face. "What did Swain call it?"

"Hedonist?"

“No,” Jude said, “that’s you.”

I ignored the minor barb. “Secular humanist?”

Jude pointed at me. “Yeah, that’s the phrase.” He braced his elbows on his upraised knees and held his head. “Damn it, Misha, this sucks. I can’t stop trying. I can’t fail at this too.”

Oh God, no. “What do you mean, ‘too’? You haven’t failed at anything else. It’s other people who’ve failed *you*.” Jude’s declaration jolted me. I’d let myself believe he was about to give up this insane endeavor, and I refused to surrender that belief.

I leaned forward. “I hope to God you *do* fail at this. But I’ll be there for you when it happens.”

Stupefied, he slowly lowered his hands and gaped at me. “You think I need your help? *Your* help? Like, what, you’re going to ‘rescue’ me?”

I spoke without thinking. “Maybe I’m hoping *you’ll* rescue *me*.”

“Save the damned innuendo, Misha.”

“*What* innuendo?”

“You know what I mean.”

“What do you think I’m saying? Huh? Do you think ‘rescue me’ is some euphemism for ‘get me off’? Do you really think that’s all I care about?”

“Just drop it.”

I was good and riled now. I wasn’t about to drop any damned thing.

“No,” I said stubbornly. “No, we’re going to get this shit out of the way. Okay, I’d love it if you sucked my dick. I’d

love to suck *your* dick. And taste your cum and lick your nipples and squeeze your ass cheeks and fuck you senseless and feel you sweat against me before you fall asleep in my arms. Yeah, I want all those things and more. Going both ways. There, it's out in the open. But that wasn't what I meant."

Christ, Jude's cheeks were red. "You need to go now," he said tightly.

I got off the bed. "Let me ask you something first. Have you jacked off since you've been here?"

His wide-eyed gaze shot up to my face. "That's none of your business!"

"Just tell me. Have you looked at Samuel's chest or Bill Gerard's crotch or Ashton's ass and mentally undressed them and fantasized about—"

"No!" Very slightly, Jude's chin quivered. He swiveled on the bed and put his feet on the floor, just to the left of mine. "Just you, Misha, goddamn you. Just your damned blue eyes and your hair and your... everything else. Just you."

Nothing had ever filled me with more hope than that strained confession.

I dropped to my knees in front of Jude and bracketed his thighs with my hands. But I didn't touch him; I only stared up at him. "I want you more than I can say, for reasons I don't know how to express. And I care about you. Do you honestly believe there's something wrong with that? Do you think the universe would skid to a halt if we made love? Or fell in love?"

"Please stop it. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Why? *Why?*" Oh, man, this was making me crazy. I felt

like some machine gone haywire—welds splitting, rivets popping,

“You know why,” he mumbled.

“No, I don’t.” I hazarded a touch, lightly flattening my hands against his thighs. “Give me a chance, Jude. Give *yourself* a chance. I don’t understand the problem here. I shit you not. I mean, I can step back and kind of see what’s going on with the other guys, *kind of*, but with you—”

Helplessly, I lifted and dropped my hands. All the groveling I hadn’t done with Robbie I was doing now, but it didn’t seem demeaning. Futile, possibly, but not demeaning. I wouldn’t give up on him until I had no other choice.

“The problem,” Jude murmured, gripping the edge of the mattress, “is that we got too close. That’s why you can’t see what’s going on with me.”

I slowly shook my head in denial. “I got news for you, buddy. *Nobody* can see what’s going on with you. *Except* me.”

Jude fell silent for a moment. I read his inner conflict in his face. He had one hell of an expressive face.

“I enjoy your company, Misha.” He struggled with the words. “I might even... have certain thoughts about you. But that doesn’t mean I want to be the way I was.”

I exploded, pitching toward him, throwing up my arms in frustration. “The way you *are*, damn it! And it isn’t a deliberate choice, a whim, a disease, a sin, a crime against humanity, an insult to families, a psycho-emotional aberration, or a case of rotten judgment. Being gay is just... part of who you are. Like being a great dancer who’s left-handed and likes pistachio ice cream. Like being a brown-

eyed music teacher who doesn't know shit about hairstyle but everything about kissing." All I could do was look up at him, beseechingly. "Damn it, Jude, I just wish you loved who you are as much as I do."

I'd gotten to him. Without even trying. The sentiment had just welled from my heart and borrowed my voice and made itself known. Looking pained, Jude reached for my face, twice, but pulled his hand back both times.

My throat knotted. *That* sure as hell was an unpleasant surprise. "You were right," I muttered. "I should go." I pushed myself up from the floor.

Jude didn't follow me this time.

What the fuck had I gotten myself into?

Chapter Eleven

DECKED out in our Friday-night best and reeking of fifty different colognes, deodorants, and hair products, we men of Stronger Wings made our way to the Grand Hall. The tin chandeliers hanging from the beamed ceiling weren't ablaze with light. Instead, they cast a romantic glow. Against one wall sat a table, its expanse of white linen broken by punch bowls, hors d'oeuvres trays, and flared stacks of napkins. Tables for two, similarly draped but topped by fairy lamps and bud vases sprouting red roses, were scattered in a semicircle around a space for dancing. A DJ had set up on the hall's stage.

"Why the fuck am I here?" murmured Ashton Perry on my left.

To meet a brick house with a strap-on. "To eat, drink, and be merry while you dance your ass off. I heard the punch is spiked. That should make it easier."

Ash poured himself a cup and drank. "You're right; it is." The liquor chased his blues away.

"I think it's supposed to dissolve our inhibitions, like varnish remover," I said. "Help us get jiggy wit' da ho's."

Giggling, Ash said, "I think you're gay, Mick."

I smiled.

Samuel sidled up next to Ash, deliberately making contact with him. “Who’s gay?” He dipped into the punch.

“We are, sweetness.”

“Hallelujah for that.”

Little by little, chatter carried on female voices ballooned at our backs. I turned to look. Our dance partners and potential girlfriends had begun to arrive.

Swain had told us the camp advertised its dances in surrounding towns, and single women of all ages, shapes, sizes, and colors usually flooded the main office with calls and emails. Stronger Wings tried to screen them—weed out the married ones, the floozies, the alcoholics and crackheads and ex-cons. No trailer trash allowed. The women all had to send in photos and fill out questionnaires. If a falsehood was uncovered, they were forever banned from the dances; if they passed muster, they could repeatedly return. Neat, pretty women with “solid values” were given priority. Just like at the Miss America pageant.

It must have begun to rain, since most of the arrivals made a great show of brushing at their dresses and hair and shaking their bare arms. Storms *had* been forecast for this evening.

The mentors and their wives hurried over to greet the ladies, who were treated like minor royalty. I supposed it made sense. How generous of these gals to slog through a downpour just to help unqueer a motley assortment of awkward men. Hell, they weren’t even guaranteed any kind of payoff.

I suspected we were like forbidden fruit to them. Their feminine egos probably thrilled at the prospect of turning gay

men straight through their irresistible charms. Why else would they be here?

Holy wishful-thinking shit.

I caught a glimpse of Jude talking with Tim Terjenta across the hall. Tim was part of our group, and not bad looking. A wholly unexpected and unwelcome pang of jealousy made me turn back to the food trough. I still felt all wrenched out of shape by my feelings for Jude; even more, by his willingness to become enchained like Prometheus and let the Stronger Wings bird of prey peck his goddamned heart out.

As I popped a stuffed mushroom in my mouth, Hammer appeared beside me. He even laid a hand on my back.

“You know, Mick,” he said, “you’re legally a free man now. You *can* let your hair down tonight.”

I had slightly curling hair that crept over my collar, and I felt Ev’s fingers graze the ends of it. I truly believed I could fuck him in a heartbeat if I applied myself to storming his personal fortress.

“I might just do that,” I said after I dabbed at my mouth. “There’s no harm in a little dancing and conversation.”

“Good man.” He patted my back and finally withdrew his hand. “Show the rest of these guys what fun it can be.”

At that moment, I almost repented of my deceitfulness and felt sorry for him. Almost.

Gradually, the genders began to mingle. I assumed some of the men just wanted to do the right thing and give straightness a try. Some might’ve been lonely. A smattering could’ve been with women before.

The hostesses kept refilling the punch bowls. Their efforts were certainly appreciated.

Moderately upbeat music encouraged people to dance, and a few couples did. I could tell this would be an evening full of lulling oldies. No driving rock or metal, no esoteric jazz, no rap or hiphop. Certainly no scurrilous lyrics. Like the wallflower I was, I sat in one of the chairs lined up on either side of the food table and sucked down bourbon-laced punch. Four women kept casting me glances, but I couldn't even pretend to return their interest.

I was getting morose.

Not good.

Jude had started dancing with some raven-haired temptress who looked like a local beauty queen. This time, I couldn't bear to watch him. They sat out some dances at one of the cozy, candlelit, rose-adorned tables. I considered retreating to my room, but that would've been worse. That would've invited a marathon of brooding.

Fuck. I wanted to cry. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried. Well, yeah, I could, but I didn't want to think about it. Those had been angry tears. I wasn't incensed now; I was very nearly in mourning.

Why was Jude buying into this nonsense? Had our mutual attraction spooked him? I couldn't discount the possibility. It seemed that as our closeness had grown, so had his resistance to it. Shit. If my interest had indeed pushed Jude closer to donning the broken wings this program offered, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

I couldn't let him ignore me, *wouldn't* let him ignore me. I got up and slid my empty punch cup onto the table, then

approached a young woman with auburn hair and prominent breasts. She'd been eyeing me, so I figured she was an ace in the hole. Not *my* hole, of course, but whatever hole aces went into.

"Care to dance?" I asked in a perky way, and immediately wondered who'd just hijacked my voice.

My invitation clearly pleased as well as flustered her. The two women with whom she'd been talking teetered on the brink of giddy.

"I'm surprised you asked me," she said as I led her to the dance floor. Her name was Paulette. "You're the best-looking guy here. You have such pretty eyes."

"Thank you."

The song was some slow country-western tearjerker, which was okay by me. I didn't want to feel forced into busting moves I didn't really have at my disposal. Paulette and I made small talk, although I was distracted by the oddly aggressive feel of her breasts against my chest, a discomfiting sensation. I was used to feeling the harder, lower mounds of pectoral muscles. It seemed as if someone had lobbed a couple of water balloons at me, and they'd stuck to my shirtfront, and then I'd been shoved against a wall that smelled of Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds. I wanted to shake myself free and blow my nose.

We sat at one of the tables, talked some more, then danced some more. Paulette was smitten, especially after I fed her my divorcé story. *Whoopdeedoo!* She'd scored the only bona fide straight guy in the whole place! I felt kind of bad that I couldn't conjure some wood to nudge against her little black dress.

Never in my life had my dick been so soft. The bugger was probably stiffer when I'd slopped out of the womb.

After an hour of this charade, I started getting restless. My gaze began to wander around the hall. The mentors talked with each other and danced with their wives. The other men drifted between punch bowl and tables, tables and dance floor. Ashton and Samuel murmured together in a corner. Jude moved his ass just for me.

That's how I felt when I looked at him—all La La Land dreamy and wistful. Maybe Paulette's perfume had merged with the bourbon to make me intoxicated.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jude cross the hall and disappear through the southeast exit. He was moving at a pretty good clip. Worried he might be sick, I excused myself and followed.

Heavy drops pelted me as soon as I stepped outside. Blinking against them, I peered down the path. Jude was little more than a dark smudge in the rain-drenched night, but I was pretty sure I saw him enter the gazebo.

I ran down the path, heedless of the slippery stones beneath my feet, heedless of the downpour that plastered my clothes against my body and added an extra five pounds to my weight. It was a warm, sensuous rain, and it perfectly suited my mood.

Jude spun around as I galloped up the gazebo steps.

Breathing hard, I slicked the wet curls back from my face. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just... I just needed to get out of there for a while. It started to feel suffocating."

He turned away from me and again faced the black expanse of lake. Its textured odor, richly organic, crept through the deluge.

“What happened to your lady friend?” Jude asked, speaking to the darkness.

I walked up beside him. “Paulette? She’s waiting for the line-dancing lesson.”

The side of Jude’s mouth that I could see curled into a smile. “I’m not surprised.”

“Why?”

“Big hair.”

I snorted. “It didn’t move much, did it.”

“Good place to be during a tornado.”

I laughed harder. Jude smiled wider.

“Wouldn’t you know,” I said, “I forget to wear my cowboy boots.”

Jude’s smile shrank, and he lowered his head.

I gently grabbed his arm and turned him toward me. “Dance with me, Jude.”

He didn’t throw any of the camp’s rules at me. He didn’t object. But he did seem uncertain. Faint strains of music drifted from the hall’s open windows—“The Time of My Life” from *Dirty Dancing*.

“Please,” I said. “I’m not as good as you are, but I’ve waited three years.”

Our hands slid up each other’s forearms, and we began to move. I didn’t even have to concentrate. As if they were charmed, my feet followed Jude’s steps.

“Great voices,” he said.

We turned, pulled closer, eased apart. “Whose?”

“Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes. They have strong, expressive voices. I loved the Righteous Brothers, too.”

“It’s a shame Bobby Hatfield died,” I said.

Jude’s eyebrows rose. “You’ve heard of him?”

“Beats the fuck out of Clay Aiken,” I said.

Jude laughed. “Amen.”

Christ, I was happy.

We drifted closer. Soon, my hands were on Jude’s tight waist. His hands curled over my shoulders. We still held to the song’s beat, but we held to each other more than to the music. Our movements slowed, became more subtle and sinuous. We set our own rhythm.

The dance was effortless. We’d joined as naturally as we had at Barbarosa’s and in that swimming pool... and so much more naturally than we swung axes or sat in classrooms inviting our own destruction.

Jude’s cheek scratched softly against mine. Our bodies pressed together from chests to hips. Thighs fit between thighs.

“Misha....” His breath feathered against my ear.

“Hush, Jude.” I pulled my head back so I could face him, then I dipped forward. “Hush,” I whispered against his soft, soft lips.

His hands rose and balled in my hair.

Chapter Twelve

THE kiss had a tender ferocity. It was a cluster of kisses, actually—to our mouths, our faces, our necks. Quick and coarse, our breath was louder than the rain.

“You’re so beautiful, Misha.”

Jude’s hands held my head as his tongue explored my mouth and mine explored his. He wasn’t going to let me go. I wasn’t going to let *him* go. Our hips butted. Cock met cock, both unyielding. I fumbled with the buttons of his shirt. When enough were open, I palmed his chest, pulled my thumbs over his nipples.

He gasped. “Harder.”

I pinched and pulled. He uttered a soft, broken cry, and my cock swelled at the sound. Our mouths kept crushing and sliding together. Jude pulled my shirt over my head, began fondling and lapping at my chest, tugging the hair with his teeth. We undid each other’s jeans and sank to our haunches.

I shoved both layers of pants past my ass. Jude did the same with his. The sight of his gorgeous, rigid cock so crazed me for a moment, I couldn’t decide where to start. I wanted to fuck him and suck him and stroke him and kiss him all at once.

“Do something,” he said with a foggy smile. “Fast.”

I gently pushed him onto his back and straddled him.

“You’re not going to give this up,” I whispered, looking into his heavy-lidded eyes. “I won’t let you.”

His silence indicated his assent. He kept caressing my face and shoulders, arms and chest. His hand slipped between our bodies, and he trailed his fingers along and around my dick. The deft, longing touch made it twitch, a puppet without strings.

“Jesus,” I breathed out.

Slowly, I swayed my hips above his. There was just enough friction between our rain-dampened cocks to send splintery shivers down my legs. Braced on my arms, I lowered myself so I could trace Jude’s lips with the tip of my tongue. He moaned beneath me. His strong fingers wrapped around both our rigid cocks, squeezing them together, and began pumping them in concert. Every now and then, his thumb and forefinger played around the two plump heads, or his little finger teased my balls.

I hadn’t done this in a long time —not since Robbie decided we could no longer penetrate each other’s body during sex.

“You prefer this?” I asked breathlessly.

“Right now, yeah.”

“Do you like the rest too?” Hazy as my mind was, I couldn’t help wondering if his parents’ religious beliefs had restricted Jude to cock-on-cock action. Was everything else out of the question with him?

“I love it all,” he said. “All of it. I’d especially love it with you.”

His words, as well as his nimble fingers, sent my excitement into overdrive. I shivered against him. My hips made quavering, reflexive thrusts, pushing my cock into his grip, pushing my dense, damp heat against his. I skimmed my fingers over Jude's fingers, helped nudge our crowns together. The feeling was exquisite. That thick, torturous tension in my groin began to break, and a sharp tingle made my eyelids flutter. I couldn't hold out.

Jude whimpered with each breath. The sound was my tipping point. Grunting between his feeble exclamations, I turned my head down and tried to peer into the dark, narrow space between our bodies. I saw shapes, movement. That was enough. My imagination could take care of the rest.

Chins nearly touching our chests, we watched ourselves come, spilling onto each other, pulsing against each other. The climax felt like it was tugging me to pieces and melting the parts. On it went, a gripping, rolling pleasure, until the last, low waves shimmied through me.

My arms began to give out. I wilted to the left and fell onto my back.

As we lay there, Jude and I held hands.

Perfection.

We tilted onto our sides to face each other. Still no words, still more touches. It was our first true exploration. I hoped it would lead to discovery.

"Do you realize how much you mean to me?" I asked, petting Jude's hair with affectionate amusement. I couldn't get it to lie down.

"No," he said. Then, "Maybe."

"Do you really think I'm beautiful?"

“Yes.”

I studied his face and decided he was beautiful too. I’d probably decided that a long time ago.

“Don’t you remember kissing me at Barbarosa’s?” he asked, as if the question had been nagging at him.

“No. I’m not sure why.”

“You tasted of rum,” he said. “That might explain it.”

“Oh God....” Fucking rum had obliterated what could have been one of the best memories of my life. Then again, maybe it hadn’t. “What did I do afterward?”

“Some guy pulled you away,” Jude said, “and you went off and danced with him. But you did look over your shoulder at me.”

“Like I wanted to come back.”

“I thought you didn’t remember.”

“Maybe, subconsciously, I do. Anyway, it just makes sense. Now it does.” I petted the line of his right eyebrow and trailed my fingers down the side of his face. “You make me better, Jude.”

Rocking forward, I kissed him. He held my head in place. They were leisurely, sensual kisses now, slow and savoring. I reveled in his skill. Most guys I’d known had been too tongue-centric; they didn’t know how to use their lips. Jude knew how to use his. Damn, did he ever. I would’ve given anything to see them cinching my cock.

We hiked up our pants and then wrapped ourselves together, hugging with arms and legs, our faces and bare chests melded. Jude’s fingertips made patterns on my back. I massaged his neck with one hand, slipped my other hand

inside his open jeans and enjoyed the tight, silky hemispheres of his ass.

“Let’s sleep here like this,” he murmured. “Just for a while.”

I wasn’t about to protest. My eyes closed as his breath fanned my skin.

WHEN we awoke, the palest hint of light silvered the treetops across Freedom Lake. Jude stretched like a cat within my arms. Our bodies were warm from each other. We’d constructed our own sauna.

“Looks like a while turned into all night,” I mumbled.

Jude stirred, then cursed softly.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m stuck to my underwear.”

I chuckled, even though I shared his pain. “It was worth it.” I kissed his warm throat.

Jude made a purring sound. “We’d better get back to our rooms.”

“There’s time.” I trailed a hand down Jude’s back as he shifted and sat up.

“Don’t tempt me, Misha.” He ran his musician’s fingers over my chest, his blunt nails sliding through the hair.

He’d told me he played a number of different instruments but favored keyboards. It showed.

I tugged at the waistband of his jeans. “Payback. You’ve been tormenting me all week.”

He smiled down at me. “Ditto.” After a thoughtful pause, he said, “I’ll bet you’re gorgeous even now.”

It was still too dark for him to tell. “You haven’t seen my hair yet.”

Snickering softly, Jude stood, stretched, and fixed his clothes. “You coming?”

“If you help me.”

“Now *that*,” he said, “was a true one-night-stand line.”

I sat up, wondering vaguely where my shirt was. “That wasn’t a one-night stand, though. Not for me. Not if you don’t want it to be.”

The crickets began to quiet.

“I have to go,” Jude murmured, and skimmed a hand over my hair. “Yeah, it *is* kind of a mess.”

I grabbed his hand and kissed it. I felt like a moonstruck teenager. “See you later. Don’t let your meat loaf.”

“Oh God,” he groaned, and scampered down the gazebo’s stairs.

I grinned at his retreating form. All was right in my world.

To celebrate, and because I suddenly felt invincible, I decided to go skinny-dipping before the sun rose. Besides, I did need to clean myself off. Last night’s rain had fled, leaving behind grass and leaves that glistened in the light of a waxing moon. Nature seemed to have divorced itself from Stronger Wings and reclaimed all its fey beauty.

I pulled off my shoes and socks, peeled off my jeans. Wincing, I managed to unglue my boxer briefs from my

crotch. Even my discomfort brought me joy. I found my properly opaque shirt in a moist heap on the gazebo floor. Rather than throw all my clothes onto the beach and encrust them with sand, I spread them out of one of the benches.

The weighted bounce and sway of my cock and balls actually aroused me a little as I walked to the beach. Thinking of Jude's adroit fondling aroused me further. I lazily played with myself before wading into the lake. The romantic feelings would hit me later—hell, they'd already begun to creep up on me and sing sappy ballads at my back—so I wanted to enjoy the purely physical rush of this attraction while I could.

I dove into the water as I envisioned my hard dick sliding into Jude's ass.

Dawn had broken by the time I finished my swim, got dressed, and started trekking back to North Lodge. Rather than circle South Lodge, I decided to take the shorter route and cut through it. As I crossed the empty lobby, someone pronounced my name as if it were an invective.

Glowering, Hammer strode toward me from the corridor that led to the offices.

"Come with me," he said brusquely.

I immediately feared Jude and I had been busted, until I realized it didn't matter. I had plenty of material for my article, and I'd managed to bring Jude to his senses. Or, at least, I thought I had. I was supposed to leave tomorrow anyway.

Hammer steered me to his office. Once he'd closed the door, he didn't head for his Holstein chair or invite me to

have a seat. Instead, he stood a few feet away from me, imitating a thundercloud.

“Where were you?” he asked.

“At the beach. I went for a swim.”

“You disappeared from the dance last night.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I began to feel uncomfortable, so I left.”

“And where did you go?”

I figured he was trying to trip me up, so I didn’t lie and say I’d gone back to my room. “Outside. I like walking in the rain. Then I went to my car and checked my e-mail, made some calls. Then I fell asleep. When I woke up, I went back to the lake. What’s the big deal?”

Ev stood with his hands on his hips and studied my face. Something I’d said must have fouled up his accusations, because he sure as shit had intended to accuse me of an impropriety.

“The big deal is this,” he said. “Jude Stone disappeared from the dance too. Thom went to his room looking for him, but he wasn’t there.”

Impassively, I met his gaze. “Yeah, so?”

“Two people were spotted in the gazebo. They appeared to be men, and they appeared to be embracing.”

I shrugged and lifted my hands.

“Where was Jude?” Hammer’s lowered voice carried a hint of threat.

I feigned irritation. “Why are you asking *me*? Why don’t you ask *him*?”

Oh, Ev didn't like that. His implied threat became a promise. "Believe me, we will."

"Well," I said, "if you're through making mountains out of molehills—"

He obviously wasn't. He grabbed my arm as I turned toward the door. "Have you been advising men to leave this program?"

I sighed. "Not precisely 'advising'."

That did it. Ev blew. His volume dial spun to the right. "Then what would *you* call it, Mr. Objective Journalist? Word's been trickling through the grapevine that you've been puking up your goddamned opinions all week." He'd started gesticulating, pacing. "I don't even *need* verification, since I've seen enough evidence of your meddling myself."

I crossed my arms and waited.

Ev suddenly stopped in front of me and became ominously still. His eyes moved down and up my body. "You're gay, aren't you." It wasn't a question. He knew.

"Yes," I said. "As God made me. Just like every man here. Including you."

There was a tiny crimp at one corner of his mouth. I couldn't tell if it was a withheld smile or sneer or a nervous tic.

"The con is over. Hit the road, Mr. Tzerko. Now."

"Don't I get to have breakfast first?"

Ev went red. The suddenness of the flush was startling. "*Now!*" he shouted, pointing at the door.

"Thanks for the memories." I turned away.

“By the way,” he said to my back, “don’t expect to take any of your prey with you.”

There was a snide tone of triumph in his voice that made me pause before I left. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” I said. “I never treated this tragic place as a hunting ground.” I turned as my ire rose. “That’s what *you* do.”

We had a brief stare-down. It conveyed every one of our differences.

In the thin atmosphere of his eyes, I saw the smeared mirrors and rust-stained sinks of wayside restrooms and the bare-bulb glare of Stronger Wings storerooms. I saw the seamed lips of his father’s flinty approbation and his wife’s more tenuous resignation.

I perused his bank statements with him and eavesdropped on his thoughts, directed at his father: *I’ll show you, you starchy old bastard. I’ll show you.* And like a chorus in the background, the walls released the grunts of men well paid for their discretion or merely compensated by their misguided awe.

“I’m sorry your life turned out this way,” I said quietly, with more feeling than I’d ever thought I could summon for this man. “I’ll bet you used to love your life. I’ve seen old pictures of you. You were proud of who you were.”

“Go fuck yourself,” he growled like a dying bear.

“I don’t need to,” I answered. “I’ll never need to.” I wondered whom he’d been doing *this* week.

His face had hardened. Even with cosmetic surgery, the lines etched there would never be gone. They ran too deep.

“In case you’re not aware of it,” Ev said with cavalier viciousness, “Mr. Stone signed up for the two-week course. He’ll be staying on.” Now his lips did curl, and his smile sent a cool wave of nausea through me. “We have a great deal left to teach him. He’s always expressed a sincere desire to win this battle with his debased urges. Jude might be a man of few words, but he’s determined. I don’t think he’ll let some gutter-variety man-slut get in his way.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t trust my voice.

You lay a hand on him, I thought, and I’ll shove a broom handle clear up your ass and make you sing “I’m Every Woman” while I’m doing it.

“Oh, and by the way,” Ev tossed out, “you needn’t bother going to Mr. Stone’s room. He’s elsewhere, having a talk with Thom Swain.”

Before my face gave me away, I calmly left the office and headed for North Lodge.

I cleaned myself up and put on some fresh clothes. Packing didn’t take long at all. My mind was as blank as I could make it, but beneath that *tabula rasa* a dozen frantic plans half formed and then fell apart. I was a superficially controlled mess.

The sound of footsteps and muted voices came from outside my room, which meant the men were on their way to breakfast. I wanted to find Jude, but I knew damned well I’d be intercepted and, probably, escorted from the building if I approached any of the registrants.

I kept telling myself to have faith in Jude, in his irrepressible passion and integrity and common sense. And whatever germinal feelings he might have for me. If I’d let

myself see Jude as vulnerable, a victim of his own blind desperation, I would've gone berserk. The thought of these soul stealers having him in their clutches for another week would've pushed me over the edge.

Still, I couldn't slink away like a thief in the night. There was no particular nobility in that course. Even if I couldn't talk to Jude alone, I had to make *some* final statement.

After depositing my things in the car, I returned to North Lodge.

Chapter Thirteen

I SET my bundle of clothes on an empty chair and ambled through the dining room. Women gasped. All of them, as well as maybe a quarter of the men, got up and left. The guys who stayed stared at their plates. Some kept sliding glances at me. Jude watched openly. He appeared bemused. Beyond that, I couldn't interpret his expression.

I didn't single him out, though, because I didn't want to embarrass him. After my first glance, I didn't look at him again.

"I've been asked to leave," I announced. "But I wanted to thank you for your acceptance and cooperation and, most of all, your honesty. I respect all of you. And I'm deeply concerned for all of you."

Hammer wasn't around. The mentors, however, were, and they exchanged shocked, uncertain looks. So which confident ex-gay was going to hazard tackling a crazy, naked guy with a damned nice body?

"I'm deeply sorry for having deceived you," I went on, "but I hope you understand why it was necessary."

"Why is *this* necessary?" called out a man named Jeff.

"Because I wanted to get your attention. Because I want you all to reconsider what you're doing. None of you needs fixing. A little adjustment of perspective, maybe, but not a complete, forced overhaul. *That's* what would be unnatural:

trying to reject the way you were created and are meant to be.”

“Mick!” The mentor Darren dove for me, but I skipped out of his reach.

My sane, civilized self kept harping at the exhibitionist, *What the fuck is wrong with you?* But my body, now in motion, was at the mercy of Newtonian physics. Feeling more and more like Norma Rae with a dick, I held my arms out. “Do you really want to give this up? Can you honestly say you’d be happy giving this up?”

“Hell no,” said someone behind me on the left.

Ashton. He smiled up at me and said, “You are fucking *hot*, Mick. If I hadn’t met Samuel, I’d so let you do me.”

I leaned over, cradled Ashton’s face in my hands, and kissed him. He tasted of maple syrup. It was a fond kiss of encouragement, not one born of a desire to fuck him or influence him. One of Ash’s smooth hands petted my cock, although it was hopelessly flaccid.

Samuel’s rougher hand stroked the curve of my ass. I turned and kissed him too. If I’d had the luxury of time, I would’ve kissed every man in the room.

“Get out of here!” somebody shouted. “You’re revolting! You’re making us all look bad!”

“I love you regardless,” I said, although I couldn’t tell who’d just spoken. My gaze swept around the dining room. “Yes, I *am* revolting. And I wish the rest of you would revolt too. Please, all of you, don’t buy into this. Strive for self-love. You are so worth it. Don’t, *don’t* lock yourselves in a prison of delusion teetering on some feeble foundation of denial. You’ll be living in a house of cards.”

Thom Swain managed to sneak up behind me and snap an arm around my waist. I nudged my ass against his crotch. Reflexively, his hips pushed back, if only a little. He sucked in a breath. I considered it a minor victory, and one that came close to turning me on.

The appearance of Clary Hammer flanked by three members of the local constabulary was enough to keep my dick staring at my toes.

“OH FUCK, Misha! *Fuck!*”

“Sorry, Bree.”

“You were running around the place buck naked?”

“Just the dining room.”

“Were people eating?”

I frowned into the phone. What difference did *that* make? “Not after I walked in.”

“Oh *fuck*, Misha! What possessed you?”

I glanced at the deputy standing next to me. He was chewing gum and reminded me vaguely of Gary, except he was more flabby than firm. “I can’t get into it now,” I said.

“So how and when can you get out of there?”

“Five hundred bucks will buy my freedom.”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know yet.”

A heavy sigh gusted into my ear. “I assume you don’t have the money,” Bree said wearily, “or I wouldn’t have even heard about this.”

“Well, the thing is, I nearly maxed out my credit card for this trip, and I don’t have enough cash on me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, anticipating another round of *oh fuck, Misha*.

“Oh shit, Misha!”

The deputy made a rolling motion with his hand and then tapped his watch.

“I’ve got to wrap this up,” I said. “Can you help me? I don’t know if I can make any more calls. At least not until... tomorrow. Or next week. Or the end of eternity.”

This time, a groan. “Damn it, it’s Saturday. Let me figure out what’s happening on my end, and I’ll call back there and talk to somebody about how to get funds—” The line abruptly went dead.

How long, I wondered dismally, before they fitted me for a blaze-orange or striped jumpsuit? And how long before I got some food in my belly? I shouldn’t have gone on my nude gambol until I’d at least pulled something from a vending machine and shoved it into my face. I was starving.

Back I went to the holding cell. I’d earlier glimpsed the cellblock itself. It wasn’t like San Quentin or anything—just a large room where recessed fluorescent ceiling lights cast their harsh glow on a gleaming floor, unibody steel tables with attached seats, and cinderblock walls. Numbered steel doors with narrow windows lined three walls. A television flickered from a high shelf in one corner. Everything was painted either beige or baby-poop green, and much of the paint was chipped all to hell.

The holding cell was its own little universe. A steel toilet against one wall, a long bench against another. That was it. Thank God I was the only person there.

I wasn't given anything, since The Powers That Be obviously expected me to be released shortly. But they'd still made me empty my pockets. They'd also filled out plenty of paperwork—I'd been tempted to sign my name as Heywood Jablomie, but I figured I'd fucked up enough for one day—and they'd run a check on me for pending warrants, snapped my mug shot, taken my fingerprints. At least they'd bypassed the strip search. I assumed that was because the responding officers didn't have to pat me down at Stronger Wings. It was obvious I wasn't concealing anything.

I sat on the edge of the bench with my face in my hands. I wasn't even sure what I'd been charged with. Indecent exposure, probably, or disorderly conduct. I didn't know; I couldn't think clearly and hadn't listened to much of anything I'd been told. A bone-deep exhaustion and dull headache had set in, and those, combined with my hunger, made me want to curl into the fetal position and fall asleep. But there was no place to do that, save for the pitted floor.

Besides, I had to stay awake. This ordeal was far from over. Once released, whenever *that* happened, I somehow had to get back to the camp and retrieve my rental car. Then I had to find somewhere to spend the night. Then I had to drive back to Little Rock, catch my flight....

Although the ache in my head intensified, I couldn't help worrying about Jude. When I got back to the camp, should I try to see him, speak with him? I had an idea I wanted to share before those jackasses at Stronger Wings totally warped him out of shape. Maybe I could wait until

nightfall and creep around to his bedroom window. If I could remain concealed until then. If I could figure out exactly which window was his.

Oh, fuck.

I lifted my head. The cell smelled of disinfectant and, more faintly, urine and rotten fruit. It wasn't Mayberry, but it could've been worse. A lot worse.

The thought brought me little consolation.

I peed, did some pushups against the wall, paced, sat down for a while, and paced again. I had no clue what time it was or how long I'd been stuck behind bars.

Then magic happened. An older, jowly officer came and got me. He told me I was free to go. First, though, he explained the conditions of my release.

"FYI," he said on the QT, "I suggest you don't return to this county, Mister...."

"Tzerko," I said, filling in the blank. "Let me guess why."

"Don't bother. If you don't guess, then I don't have to say nothin'. Just trust me on this. Stay away. For good. Mr. Hammer didn't like troublemakers. We don't like perverts. So between him and this department, you'd be in some deep-ass shit if you came back."

"Don't want to be *there*," I said.

"Not if you're smart."

I was smart enough. I'd probably be arrested for bail jumping and then sit for Christ knows how long in that ugly cellblock before I had my day in court. I'd have to defend myself against Christ knows how many charges. Local folks would see me as a pervert, so I'd be found guilty and shipped off to some state prison, where there'd be no big-chested

bartenders or round-assed dancers, except of the felonious variety. They'd assume, because I was a convicted pervert, they could have their way with me. I'd come out a broke and broken man.

Green Bay had never looked so good.

Checking out of the county motel didn't take nearly as long as checking in. As soon as my pocket possessions were returned, I unwrapped a battered piece of gum and began chewing, just to get a small burst of sugar energy.

I was free! Revitalized, I walked through the foyer and into the afternoon sunlight... and saw Jude.

He stood up from the wall against which he'd been leaning and approached me with a smile. I couldn't move. I stared at him, my mouth open, the gum a damp wad on one side of my tongue. It was like seeing a vision of a saint.

"Ready to go home?" he asked in that velveteen voice.

I think that's when I began, weakly, to meet his smile.

We drifted up to each other, drifted without hesitation into the best hug I've ever given or received in my life. Our faces nestled in the crook of each other's neck. Tears leaked from my eyes.

"They didn't get to you," I whispered.

"No. You did."

I held him tighter, stealthily kissed his neck. He cupped the back of my head with one hand.

"You sprung me?" I asked when we drew apart. It just occurred to me that he must have.

Jude chuckled. “Sprung? Wow, aren’t *you* hardboiled. In addition to being crazy. Yeah, I sprung you. I can always use a dance partner—so long as he keeps his clothes on.”

I laughed. “I promise I’ll pay you back within the week.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Damn, I felt all mushy inside. “Didn’t I say you might be able to rescue me?”

Jude seemed touched by the reminder. “I didn’t think this was what you had in mind.”

“It wasn’t. But it’s a good portent.”

His gaze moved over my face—a reevaluation. “Maybe it is.”

My demure smile felt strange to me. “How’d you get here?”

“Ash and Samuel. They’re in a café down the street. They’ll get us back to the camp and your car.”

“They left early too?”

“Got kicked out, actually. It was the perfect way for me to get here, since Samuel drove to the camp in his own car.”

“So you just—”

“Split. Yeah. I went back to my room and packed right after you got hauled away. I figured Ash and Samuel wouldn’t mind giving me a lift into town.”

I was moved beyond words. My eyes didn’t want to release him.

“Oh, and before I ask *you* for a ride,” Jude said, “I’d like to know if you make a habit of impulsively kissing guys. I’ve seen you do it three times now.”

I took the question at face value and shook my head. “Not when I’m committed to someone.”

Smiling tenderly, Jude nodded in approval, then swiped his thumbs over the moisture on my cheeks. “I didn’t think you were the emotional type, Misha.”

“I didn’t either.”

We looked at each other for a few beats longer—maybe wondering, or hoping; maybe exchanging a promise—then began walking down the street.

“You hungry?” Jude asked.

“Famished.”

“Then we’ll grab some eats before we head back.”

“I’m buying,” I said.

“Damned right you are.”

I wanted to put my arm around him but refrained. Two men might be able to get away with hugging on a small-town sidewalk, but that was likely the contact limit.

“I thought of something you might consider doing when you get back home,” I told Jude.

“Introduce you to my parents?”

Although that got a laugh out of me, I did have to say, “Actually, they might like me. I can be one charming son of a bitch.”

“Yeah, I already know that. So what’s your idea?”

“I don’t really know how school districts are set up and run,” I said, “but I do know a lot of them have programs for gay and lesbian kids and their families. Support groups and counseling and such.”

Jude nodded thoughtfully as he watched his feet move down the pavement.

“We could do some research, draft a proposal, maybe enlist the help of a local mental-health professional. Then you could present the proposal to your school board. Or it’s possible there’s a school district in the area that already has something set up, and you could get involved in it.”

Jude looked at me. “I’ve actually thought about that. But after the warning I got....”

“That’s a whole different thing,” I said. “You get discouraged too easily.”

He paused before saying, “You’re right.”

“So piss on your parents and Chad and whatever administrator scolded you—”

“And focus on helping those kids,” Jude said.

“Yes, exactly. It’s support they need, not condemnation. That’s what *you* needed at that age. So... should we tackle this project when we get back?”

We stopped in front of the café. Through its large window, I saw Ash and Samuel laughing together over coffee. The sight made me feel almost as good as having Jude at my side.

“You keep saying ‘we’,” Jude noted.

“Yeah. As in ‘you and I’. Together. Something wrong with that?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and toed a crack in the sidewalk. “Misha, maybe I’m jumping the gun here, but I... I really don’t want to get involved with somebody who sleeps around.”

“You wouldn’t be. Look at me, Jude.”

When he did, I knew for sure.

“You wouldn’t be.”

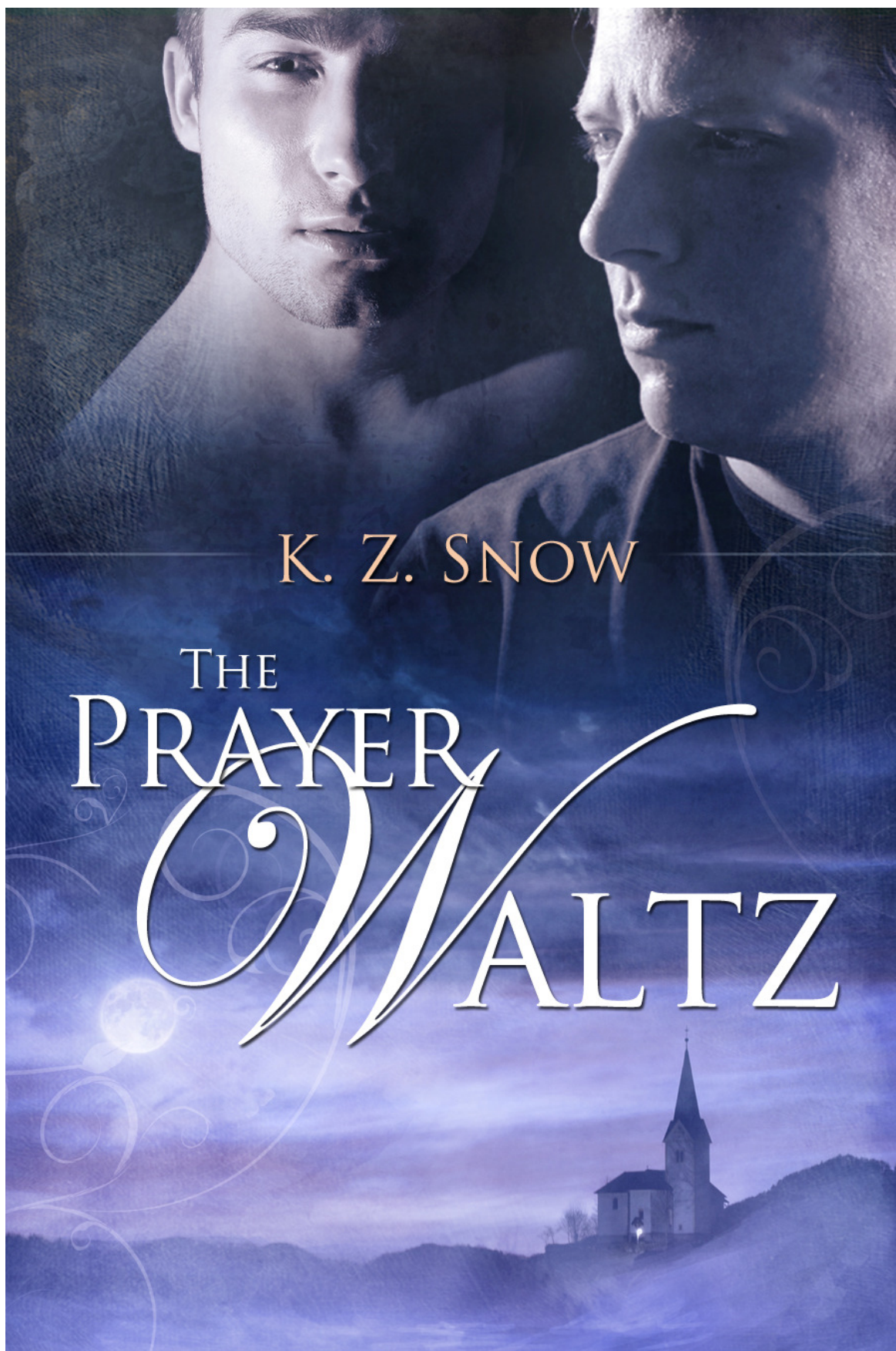
Maybe his smile couldn’t light up the already sun-drenched town, but it certainly lit up that diminishing space between his heart and mine.

If there's one thing K.Z. SNOW loves more than indulging her wayward imagination, it's the natural world and, especially, animals. She's been a companion to most domesticated creatures and a good number of the feral ones commonly known as men. After too many turbulent years, her life in the upper Midwest is finally boring as hell—an achievement as well as a blessing.

She's overeducated, underskilled, and has written a lot of stuff. Her only awards are two medals she received, obviously out of sympathy, for playing the bassoon and making it sound like a malfunctioning chainsaw.

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