



MEN OF SMITHFIELD

In and Out

L.B. GREGG

Aspen Mountain Press

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L.B. Gregg

Dedication

Special shout out to my new friends at EKP who always help me laugh through the tears, and to my old friends at noseinabook who deserve more credit than there are pages to write.

For Kim who tirelessly answered my LEO questions on every Smithfield book. This one's for you, kiddo.

Warning

This e-book contains material that may be considered objectionable by some including graphic sex and adult language. Please store your e-books carefully where they cannot be accessed by underage readers.

Chapter One

The new lawn boy was back. A bright, shiny Monday morning and I should at least act like a productive member of society. Instead, I lay sprawled on a rattan chaise lounge in the sun porch. I used a dying laptop to hide my erection as I tracked that glorious creature while he labored to tame the wilds of my back yard. A yard I had conveniently, purposefully, shamefully neglected for two full years.

I liked to think of the grounds as a sanctuary; an overgrown jungle for wildlife to find safe harbor. In truth, it was an eyesore. The roses, which had once bloomed under my meticulous mother's green thumb, were a tumble of sharp briars and deep thickets. I'd been so mired in disgrace when my mother died it had been easy to let her rose arbor rot.

Besides, I couldn't go outside to garden.

The boy bent—muscular thighs tensed as he gripped a bag of mulch and slung it over his strong shoulder—and I stared at a sleek hind end covered in filthy, work-worn Carhartt jeans. His waistband dipped, his shirt rode high and a sweet patch of winter white skin peeked above his plaid undershorts. I couldn't take my eyes off that strip of

flesh. I felt dirty enough to smack my lips, leering as I was from the relative privacy of the sun porch.

Two weeks ago my brother, Porter, had come to stay and demanded I do something about our mother's legacy. At first, I thought he referred to the pair of us— forty-ish and neither one of us functioning as well as one would expect given our heritage, wealth and education. But no, he meant the blasted roses.

Then Mr. Tindell sent this interesting new hire to help tidy the lawn. He'd pulled into the driveway in a rattletrap Ford pickup—and I was enchanted. I'd yet to speak with him. Last week the kid came to mow the broad expanse of lawn that reached nearly five acres from South Street down to Meadow and he stayed—coming to work a few times a week. Today he toiled with a wheelbarrow and a shovel. Sunlight warmed the cool spring air and he'd taken off his jacket.

I squirmed but I didn't look away. I couldn't. I kept this new guy in my sight and watched as he moved effortlessly with pounds of cedar bark balanced on his shoulder. His gait was loose, confident in his ability to lift that bale and tote that barge in the great wide out of doors.

The lucky bastard.

I should write some of this down. This kind of vitality was exactly what I'd missed in my work over the last six months, which was why I'd turned my sorry focus to a culinary memoir.

His shirt dropped into place and that pale flash of lean back disappeared from view.

My computer pinged a warning as the three hundredth unread email landed in my inbox. I wasn't interested because finally, my muse had arrived. If the porch were made of anything other than sheer, spotless glass, I might have touched myself— it had been a long time since I'd felt this interested in another man.

The thought would have depressed me if I weren't so all-together turned on.

From inside the house the whirl of my thousand-dollar vacuum cleaner crept nearer. I sat tall and crossed my legs, adjusting the crotch of my Levis and hoping to hell Mrs. Henderson wouldn't catch me in a moment of depravity again. As it stood, she spent each Tuesday morning at St. Joe's saying her rosary for me. I wouldn't want her to add Wednesday as well.

The lawn boy tossed the mulch into his wheelbarrow and headed down the hill toward the western edge of my property on Meadow Street. I owned the second largest lot in the borough and was the only person in Smithfield lucky enough to have two sidewalks to keep clear of snow each winter: one past the circular drive in front; and the other in the back beyond the tumbled stonewall. The library bordered my homestead to the south, the steady stream of foot traffic blocked by a wall of towering hemlocks and thick yellow-tipped forsythia. To the north, the old rectory listed sleepily. I was a block and a half from the lively center of town where West Street and 202 converged on South Street at the Green—but I may as well have been on the moon.

The new guy was whistling, the jaunty tune carrying on the breeze through the screens. Jesus, I wish I'd seen him arrive. I would have watched him from the safety of my balcony high on the third floor—where the wisteria was twisted thick. It was perfect to hide behind. In fact, the entire house was perfect for hiding—with the exception of the bell jar I was currently sitting under.

If Porter came home now, he'd remind me that I'd turned into a creepy, lurking, masturbatory agoraphobic.

The gardener disappeared around the back of my mother's potting shed, pitchfork in hand, and I attended to my work. I had a deadline, theoretically, and I had a conference call with my broker at noon. Time to get a jump on things. There was money to manage, an agent to contact, graphics to approve and email to answer or delete. That *Traveler's Palate* wasn't likely to put itself together, either.

I was a busy, busy bee. These days work was the only life I had, so I got down to it.

The sun hadn't climbed higher and I'd deleted exactly one email when someone tapped on the slider. I looked directly into the clear blue eyes of the lawn boy. He nodded politely; his hands digging into his pockets as he waited for me. I still had some lingering issues with my erection or I would have let him in, but my pants were too snug around my dick.

He continued to wait, his unblinking eyes as pure as the Pacific waters on the coast of Playita. It was a rare, startling blue offset by waves of russet hair. He drew his hand quickly from the depth of his pocket and knocked again. This time he pounded with more urgency.

"C'mon in." Hadn't he heard about me? He should know that I would never step too close to the door. There was so much air outside.

And sky. Let's not forget how heavy the sky was without the protection of thick glass walls.

I waved him in. With a frown, the young man slid the screened door open and stepped inside. His work boots were dark with water spots and covered in grass clippings; his hands were stained with earth; and he brought a hint of spring sunshine, fertile soil and the sweat of honest labor.

"Mr. Worthington? I'm Adam. Adam Morgan? Mr. Tindell sent me."

Adam's Morgan? Surely that was too much to hope for. His hand shot out but I didn't stand to shake it. I couldn't. He must think I was handicapped or insufferably rude. I was a little of both right now. And yet he was unerringly polite, though there was a hint of anxiety about him.

"Sure. C'mon in." I gestured to the rattan chair next to me like a frail, elderly uncle hoping for company, but he declined with a quick shake of his head, and it occurred to me he wasn't trying to grip my hand in greeting. He grabbed my sleeve, as if to haul me

from my chair.

"Mr. Worthington, there's something outside you need to see." He let loose my arm and moved to pace by the door, his boots raining clods of dirt and blades of grass on the tile. Mrs. Henderson would have something to say about that. Morgan's hair was a little long and unkempt. It flowed madly around his ears and forehead, and curled under his stubbled chin. I was mesmerized and staring like a lovesick swain, but every shade of warm earth seemed to shine in those brunette locks.

"See?" It was a clear shot from the glass walls of the sun porch straight down to Meadow Street. All was the same. Just the usual weeds and sticks and rocks. Lots of fresh mown grass. Flowers peeping through, ready to unfold. "I can see whatever it is from here; just point."

"No, you need to come outside and see this."

I tried not to look horrified at that pronouncement.

"Outside?" Had he not heard? How could he not know? Maybe no one knew or cared anymore and I was a legend in my own mind. "What? Are the forsythia damaged?"

"I'm sorry to intrude on your morning." His gaze landed squarely on the laptop in my...lap...and heat crawled up my neck. His expression wasn't disapproving; it was grim. Pale lines bracketed his mouth. His jaw was firm, his voice firmer. "I just found a body behind your shed."

"My mother's shed?" I asked as if that made a difference. "A body? Of what? Water? Or work? I might have burned a few manuscripts back there once upon a time —"

"Mr. Worthington. I called the State Police."

The boy was agitated and I was missing the relevant information. This wasn't a drill

—he was serious. I set my laptop on the table and stood. “A body? You’re sure?”

“He looks bad. I had to...”

My thoughts finally arranged themselves and I stared beyond the edge of my complex rose garden. My mother’s shed sat squat against the lower meadow. It had always seemed menacing, but now it looked downright sinister. “Human? Are you sure it’s not something else? A dog? Or a deer? I’ve seen skeletal remains of ibex —”

“No...he’s dressed. He’s just — well, he’s just not looking too good.”

I could imagine. The snow melted only last week, and at night the mercury hovered around the freezing mark. In contrast, the days were beautifully warm; the promise of spring below the surface of every living thing outside. Birds. Bees. Sprouts. *Worms*. A body would be terribly fecund this time of year lying in the compost pile.

“Do you know who it is?” I was too calm. I was stalling. “It’s not Porter is it?”

Porter’s last two wives would have gladly buried a cleaver in his back given the opportunity, but Porter and I had had coffee this morning. His slippers were in the bathroom along with his wet towel and his medicinal whiskey nip.

“No. He’s not someone I know.” Adam Morgan slid the door open for me and I had no choice, not a single option, but to follow him into the backyard. A dead body on the lawn trumped any personal afflictions. I had to be present and find out who the hell was in my compost.

“Mr. Worthington?”

“Yes. Coming.”

But I wasn’t coming. I stalled at the screen door, staring at a yard that was caught somewhere between lush new green and trodden winter brown. The snow had left bare patches on the lawn and to my eyes, everything outdoors became too sharp edged and vibrant.

I moved toward the oppressive yellow sunshine and the leaden weight of wide open sky and any interest I had in sexy lawn boys or dead bodies in the compost dried up like so much dust on the wind – leaving me in full blown distress.

I had to go outside. A breeze lifted the hair on my arms. Gooseflesh prickled and tightened my skin. My lungs thickened with dense fresh air. Panic snaked from my feet to my knees.

Anxiety attack.

Fuck.

I was getting worse if I was frozen in place at the threshold of the doorway. I wet my lips. "You say the police are on their way?"

Adam nodded as I clung to the doorframe with a slickened palm. Hot, cold, sick, my dick was as limp as my wrist.

He was oblivious to my distress. "I'm not sure how long he's been there. He's battered...and soggy. Like one of those bog people. I was turning the mulch –"

"Jesus."

Adam waited on the bluestone patio as if it was the easiest thing in the world to stand in an open space, and I supposed it was. It used to be for me as well.

Behind him, the lap pool was closed as it had been for seasons. My pulse swished inside my ears and my breath sawed crazily from my mouth: I was having a mother fucking heart attack. At forty – which was even more embarrassing, because that wasn't much of a stretch.

The piercing wail of multiple sirens broke the tranquility of the morning. The sound carried up the hill from the State Police Barracks on 202. The Smithfield Cavalry on its way and for an insane second I was sure the cops were coming for me.

The troopers would loop the Green and head appropriately south on South Street. Perhaps two minutes away? I prayed to God they didn't find me in a swoon on the back steps again. I knew those people.

"Mr. Worthington? Are you coming?"

I needed to move, to step outside. I needed to think. I needed to go.

I need to go back.

Backward, back pedaling, backsliding, back in the saddle, back in the groove, back into the sure security of my quiet, safe, sumptuous home and away from the knowing, prying, condemning eyes of Smithfield.

My feet were like anvils, but pride forced me to let go of the damn house and I stepped for the first time in two months into the wide-open world. It didn't feel any better than it had the last time. That was my final thought as a rude bell clanged, my knees gave way and I hit the blue stone patio.

* * * *

A few years ago—back when John and I had our first separation and I was still leaving the house for simple things like trips to the Panamanian rainforest to shoot *Worth's World* and down the block to the package store for my weekly supply of cocktail hour Tangueray—I'd gotten to know our Resident Trooper. We'd had dinner a few times, but his eye had always been on someone else—someone younger (weren't they all?)—and my eye had always been on the horizon. Back when I could see it from the driveway.

Tony and I weren't meant to be—he could never hope to keep me in the lifestyle to which I'd become accustomed—but we had formed a solid friendship. A friendship that

I now relied on. Tony was one of the few people in Smithfield who knew the extent of my condition.

Within moments of my safe return into the house, Tony Gervase arrived on the scene with his trooper hat and those thick butch boots. An ambulance and four other troopers followed him from the Barracks. It only took a half an hour to cordon off my backyard and then the law enforcement circus pitched their somber tent behind the carriage house.

I watched the proceedings from my expansive, immaculate kitchen. Mrs. Henderson eyed me from the hallway, in case I slimed the toaster with my greasy, tawdry, possibly murderous fingerprints. I smiled at her and grabbed a cup of coffee. I had a Band-Aid on my forehead, which she had put there with a scolding *you know better than that, Holden* and a broad scrape on my chin.

The lawn boy waited at the back door, sitting stiffly on the painted bench like some sort of shamed Irish indentured servant. He was questioned by an unassuming, middle-aged detective and then left to wait. For what? I invited Adam into the house, but he was as reluctant to step in as I was to step out.

We were star-crossed lovers from the start.

Troopers swarmed the edges of the property, keeping the riff raff at bay. The overgrown hedgerow, the disgraced arbor and the dead patches of grass were all photographed and catalogued. At least the police hadn't trod on the narcissi and the crocuses. The pussy willows and the azalea hadn't fared so well. Yellow tape cut through the muted colors of early spring, cordoning off my entire property.

Police Line – Do Not Cross.

The implication being I had visitors to keep out.

Cars and trucks passing on South Street slowed to watch. Neighbors lined the sidewalk on Meadow Street; some of the young mothers pushed strollers or walked

dogs. They gaped and chatted. I knew my mother was spinning in her grave; this was so unseemly.

I stared at the brown-haired young man waiting politely outside and I couldn't help it—I imagined him naked.

What the hell is wrong with me?

There were cops everywhere, a dead body in the grass, and I was behaving like a Goddamn pervert. I had to remember that he was in shock and that technically he was an employee. Worthingtons may look, but we never, ever tinker with the staff. I stared into my coffee cup and rubbed my forehead. Ow.

Maybe Mrs. Henderson had slipped Spanish Fly into the Mr. Coffee.

It was spring, maybe my sap was running.

Or maybe I was desperate for some distraction to keep my rising terror at bay. The flash of bulbs and the cold faces staring back from the edges of my land made me acutely self aware in an *'I'm going to flip the fuck out in front of the public'* way. That young man had gone from simply captivating to a necessary diversion because the police would ask me to leave the house—to identify that poor bastard behind the shed—and I would perform another spectacular face plant on the patio. This time for the press.

Tony Gervase knocked on the kitchen door at noon, and I let him and the detective in. Tony wiped his muddy boots on the braid rug and said with no preamble. “Holden, this is Detective Lewis.”

Detective Lewis was a medium man—medium build, medium brown hair and eyes, medium looks. He was the kind of guy I wouldn't remember—unless he was in my house, questioning me. I offered my hand, which he shook mediumly. I asked Tony, “Any word on who's back there?”

"We don't know yet. He's been beaten to shit, though."

"With what?"

"That's for the coroner to decide. What's Morgan doing here?"

"Morgan?"

"The gardener. The kid who called us. The one working for you. How hard did you hit your head?"

"Not hard enough." I looked between the two men. "What does he have to do with anything? He didn't drag some old corpse into my compost pile; he just stumbled on it."

I hoped.

Tony's dark eyes were deceptively mild. "Old? What makes you say old?"

I gave him an even look. "Adam said the body was *soggy*. Don't show me your cop face Tony. He said *swollen*. I took that to mean decomposed."

"But you didn't see it."

"Not for lack of trying."

His voice warmed with that legendary good humor. "How far did you get?"

"To the door and then...I decided to come back indoors. I didn't want to sunburn. Do I need to view this thing? Out there?"

Tony shook his head. "No."

The detective had silently followed our exchange. He interrupted with his forgettable voice. "So you have a condition, Mr. Worthington?"

"I'm agoraphobic. I have panic attacks when I leave the house." It was hardly a secret at this point.

"I understand you were an adventurer? A TV personality a few years ago?"

"I don't know if I was a personality, per se, but I made my living on television—*Worth's World*. The show was based on my adventure stories. I've since turned over a new leaf."

"And now you're unable to leave the house."

"It's a lovely home, why would I choose to leave?" The detective waited patiently for me to continue. "No. I can't leave the house. I become ill."

Tony leaned against my counter top, his brawny arms crossed. Anyone else would think good cop/bad cop was at play. I knew that Tony was keeping an eye on things. I'd answer the questions and, if need be, I'd call one of my attorneys.

"Tell me what happened to your face."

"Gravity. I hit the patio when I collapsed."

He jotted a note on his pad. "And who helped you in?"

"Morgan and my housekeeper."

"So the last time you ventured into the backyard was how long ago?"

"I have no idea. Maybe a year."

Lewis' medium brown eyes were impressed with neither my celebrity nor my anxiety disorder. I couldn't say that I blamed him. He didn't fidget or twitch; he was bland as pudding. "When did Mr. Morgan start working here?"

"I think two weeks ago was the first time I saw him. Tindell sent him to tidy the front lawn. He's here for spring clean-up."

"And your brother, Porter, he lives here as well. Where's he today?"

"He doesn't live here. He's on an extended visit." Porter. I needed to call him. "My

guess is that he's down at the Village having a Bloody Mary or he's with his attorney. He might be at the Village with his attorney having a Bloody Mary."

That seemed likely.

"Attorney?"

"The third divorce. So. Who is in my compost?"

The flat-eyed detective made another notation and I shut my trap. I was behaving flippantly when someone had died on my land. Like it or not, this was going to make me guilty by association. It would stir old stories. Geraldo Rivera all over again. Tales would be carried by the wagging tongues of the idle. Granted, that used to be me, but that was entirely beside the point.

Lewis handed me a single Polaroid. I steeled myself for the worst. Even so, the swollen face in high gloss detail was still distressing, but I didn't recognize him. I tried to hide my relief. Whoever he was, his death had been unpleasant. His skin was a ghastly color wheel of bruises and trauma. The black of decomposing earth surrounded him, his dark hair blended into shadow. Incongruously, tiny green shoots of life dotted the ground around his battered head.

"Do you recognize him?"

"No. Not at all. He's a stranger." I handed the photo back to Lewis. "He could be anyone. Who is he?"

Tony said, "We don't know. Coroner will have to tell us. No ID."

Detective Lewis said, "Is there anyone else who lives here, beside your visiting brother?"

"No. Just me, fifteen rooms, and all this space."

"It's a lot for one person, I imagine."

What did he imagine? "Yes. I manage. Detective, I'm not sure I can help you. I've been in my office working for two months. I see Mrs. Henderson, I see Porter. Sometimes Pete delivers food from the Village. The UPS man stops a couple times a week, but usually my housekeeper attends to that. I saw Tony when I fell the last time." *Fell* was my polite term for *fainted on the driveway when I smelled the fresh air*. "Occasionally, Father David stops by to spatter holy water on the lawn. That's about it. I keep to the house and I work."

Detective Lewis nailed me through the heart with his next calculated observation. "You lead a solitary life. That must get rather desperate."

"That's an odd choice of word, *desperate*. I think of my life as unusually productive. I simply don't choose to go out-of-doors these days."

"I see. Well, I need to speak with both your brother and with your housekeeper. Mrs. Henderson."

Tony took a look through the kitchen window, declining the coffee I offered with a shake of his head. He was eyeing my new muse, and not appreciatively. He sighed. "My mother's going to have something to say about all this. She and Mrs. H go way back."

"Scandal at the Worthington house. She could hardly be surprised," I said smoothly, but inside, I was embarrassed. Tony kept his cool eyes narrowed on Morgan and, it was so unlike him, I had to ask. "What's the story with Adam?"

Tony shrugged. "History."

Lewis flipped his notebook and tucked it away inside his breast pocket. "I'll be back to interview you as necessary."

"I'm not going anywhere. I've got nothing to hide." I sweated a little. "I can stay inside, right?"

The medium man nodded and handed me his card. It was unadorned—just the facts. "I'll be in touch. If you think of anything relevant to the case, give me a call."

Tony and Lewis left. I watched them speak with Adam again and then I locked myself in the office. The wall of familiar books, the worn leather chair, the Bose; they were the creature comforts of the housebound. I put Tom Waits on—and drowned the noise from the crowd of observers forming on the sidewalks. I tried not to think about the battered man or the threat of having to leave the house, or the brown-eyed detective and his pointed questions or the sexy, quiet young man waiting on the porch.

I put it all aside. I worked. Because that was what I did.

Chapter Two

By 5:00, the cops appeared to be finished for the day, the media vans had moved to find better satellite reception and my austere housekeeper had properly tossed the hack from the *Smithfield Gazette* off the premises.

Score one for Henderson.

I shuffled stiff legged from the office, and went in search of gin and tonic.

At the window, golden light washed the rooftops of Meadow Street. All was quiet. No curiosity seekers remained, which was a relief. Everyone must be at supper. My yard was trimmed in jaunty yellow tape and a forgotten paper cup lay on the walk. I wondered who was supposed to clean the litter strewn through my garden. I had a feeling it was going to be someone in my employ.

A lone man sat by my backdoor. Adam. He was still as a statue, staring silently at the dormant roses and the sun setting over the Smithfield Woods. His face was bathed in the amber hue of evening. Had he been there since noon? He must be cold. He wore a snug beanie on his head, the way younger men do, and his hands were stuffed in his

worn woolen jacket as he relaxed against the wooden bench. Adam seemed utterly comfortable in the outdoors, like a rough-hewn gamekeeper fulfilled from a day of honest labor. Like Lady Chatterley's earthy lover come to fuck his aristocratic darling in the raw, rich dirt of spring.

Maybe I was projecting. One thing was for sure: it was time for a damn drink.

I opened the back door from the security of the mudroom. "Adam? What are you doing here?"

Adam climbed carefully to his feet. He was tall, though not my height, and leanly muscled. His wool coat was an even brown, making the contrast in his coloring all the more striking. Against those deeper tones, his irises were nearly hyacinth blue. His eyes crinkled around the edges as he offered me an unsure smile. "I needed to speak with you. I knocked a few times. Trooper Gervase told me you were here."

"Of course I'm here. Where would I go? And how on earth would I get there? Come inside. It's cold."

"Cold? It's fifty-eight." Adam knocked his toe on the step and dried mud rained from his sneaker. "We can talk right here. I don't want to intrude on your evening."

"You're not intruding. Come in and have a cocktail; it's five o'clock."

"No, that's—"

"I insist. You certainly deserve a drink after today. I'm about to make supper." I went to the kitchen, hoping that he would follow if he wanted to. I was rather curious about the gamekeep—*gardener*.

Reluctantly, Adam entered the warmth of my home bringing the nip of cool air with him. "I don't want to track mud on your clean floor."

"It's just a floor. It's meant to be walked on." I glanced down—and he was right to be worried. I couldn't remember the last time I'd even noticed the state of the floor, but

the damn thing appeared sterile. As in, surgically clean. It fairly gleamed with fresh polish. No wonder he didn't want to step on it. "Take your shoes off if you like, but I'm not concerned. Nothing is so dirty it can't be made clean again and my housekeeper needs the challenge. She's grown soft."

He eyed the floor again and bent to untie his shoes. Shucking his battered sneakers, he revealed surprising fire-red socks; one pink toe peeped through. I caught myself leering at his exposed feet. What was I doing watching this kid take his shoes off? I wouldn't add 'foot fetish' to my ever-growing list of psychological disorders, so I busied myself locating cocktail glasses and set them on the counter. "What happened to your boots?"

"The crime scene people took them. I had these in the truck."

He said this blithely, as if it happened all the time. For all I knew, it did, but I wouldn't react negatively to something that was a police formality. He'd been in the compost with a corpse and probably had something foul stuck to his shoe. It was rather a good thing they'd taken his boots.

I made us both a G&T and rummaged through the cabinets, grabbing a tin of smoked oysters. I set those on the granite countertop along with apricots and snack crackers and a crystal toothpick holder. It had been a while since anyone had joined me for cocktails—not that he was joining me. I didn't suffer any illusions that he was a guest, but we had leapfrogged the normal formality between lawn guy and homeowner with that grisly discovery in my yard. We now shared a bond.

Adam stuffed his hat in his back pocket before checking the snacks. He looked at me like I was his Aunt Gertrude. I felt a little defensive, but I liked smoked oysters. "It's cocktail hour. This is what one does."

"Where? We're from the same place. I usually just have some chips and salsa."

"I'm sure. *Salud.*" I tapped the side of his glass and knocked back my first taste. Gin

bit my tongue. *Five o'clock*, my taste buds screamed, *yippee ki yay!* "So what did the Super Troopers have to say?"

"I was...going to ask you the same thing, Mr. Worthington, because I don't want you to get the wrong idea about me. Trooper Gervase doesn't like the Morgans —"

"Doesn't like you? Tony's a professional. You're not whining are you? That doesn't fly with me."

Those were tough words coming from the man who'd fainted over a whiff of fresh air. I changed my tone. "He did mention you had some trouble with the law and he glared a lot. That's what he does, but he's a good guy. He just enjoys being butch. It's part of his charm." I slugged some more gin and used a tiny red sword to skewer an oyster. It dripped onto my napkin.

Adam's lip curled. "What is that thing?"

"Smoked oyster. It's what we call 'WASP food'. It came in a gift basket from my legal counsel. You know how they are. They never miss an opportunity to show you how much of your money they waste."

Adam stared blankly back at me. It was strange, because I normally elicit some sort of response. A smile, a laugh, an eye roll. Something. My natural ability to socialize had paid for everything in our lives, but this audience was proving a tough one.

Or I was sadly out of practice.

I sighed. "What did the trooper say?"

"He told me you were the town pervert and that I should steer clear of the house, keep my nose clean, and not bother you when you're working."

I actually choked on my oyster. Tony. That funny son-of-a-bitch. I would laugh, but Adam didn't appear to be joking. In fact, he looked exceedingly earnest. It must be his age, which, eyeing his cocktail, I hoped to hell was over twenty-one.

“What did he mean? Because I need to know if working here is going to get me into any more trouble. I’m on probation.”

My muse was a jailbird? That was news. When Tony said *history*, he hadn’t mentioned an arrest. “Probation? What did you do? Was it a felony or a misdemeanor?”

“It was a misunderstanding.” Adam’s gaze held and he sipped his gin. I could tell he was weighing his words. With his beanie gone, thick hair curled around his ears. His cheeks were pink either from the first blush of alcohol, or cold skin in a warm room, or proximity to a handsome older man.

He was gay. I’d lay money on it. Not that I would ever touch him because to do so would further every bad opinion the community held of me. A relationship in Smithfield was completely out of the question. I’d have to keep my lustful inclinations in my head, where they damn well belonged.

But I was unquestionably drawn to him. His shoulders were wide and his waist was narrow. He was lean and strong...strong enough to lift and carry those bags of mulch. Maybe he did have something to do with the scene behind the shed. I had convinced myself the body was that of a transient...but a Smithfield transient? That was sort of a rare bird.

With an eye on my muse, my writer’s mind raced with dark possibilities. Adam could have easily deposited someone in my yard using that trusty wheelbarrow and a sharply pronged pitchfork. The garden lit by a swollen spring moon, the walkways masked under a blanket of dense, mood setting fog. He’d be dressed in black—a thick fisherman’s sweater and snug jeans like Robert Wagner in *It Takes a Thief*. Would he plant a lover or a foe in my overgrow hedgerow?

I stopped musing. Why the hell would anyone dump a body in my yard? The weeds were high enough for good cover, sure, but why here and not at the Point or the Smithfield Woods or on Father David’s hallowed ground? Those were all mere minutes away.

Which meant that this either wasn't random or a transient *had* died here.

"Excuse me. Mr. Worthington?"

I came back to the present, so unpracticed with entertaining a guest that I had drifted in company. He must think I was nuts. He and everyone else in this town. I pasted a smile on my face. "Sorry. Woolgathering. I do that—I drift sometimes. It's part of the creative process." I sipped my cocktail. "So, Adam. The probation. What happened?"

"I took my father's car without his consent and he had me arrested. He refused to drop the charges. The probation is a formality."

"Sounds like your old man and mine attended the same parenting class. Nice car?"

"No. A Ford Taurus. '96. Not a decent car at all."

"Well then, he's the one who ought to be arrested." Nothing. Not even the ghost of a smile. He blinked at me; blue eyes clear of amusement, and I knew I had said the wrong thing.

"Mr. Worthington—"

"Holden. Please. Mr. Worthington was my father." What the hell was wrong with me? *Sheesh*. I winced hard, wanting desperately to retract those words. They were creepy and I was solidifying my reputation as the town pervert. If Adam noticed, he didn't let on. "What did Detective Lewis say to you?"

"Not much. That he'd be in touch. Not to leave town. He said to expect him."

"He thinks you're involved?"

"I don't know. He's hard to read. I'm not concerned because I didn't do anything but turn the mulch and call the police."

"Lewis pretty much said the same thing to me—don't leave, expect him. It's

procedure.”

Adam cleared his throat in the kind of *ahem* one gives before a speech. He sipped his gin, almost for courage, and said formally, "Mr. Worthington. I stayed late to speak to you about something specific. It's your property. It's beautiful, but it's in bad shape. You need help with the grounds. More than the weekly mowing and trim work. The stone wall has to be repaired; the forsythias are blooming so it's time for the roses. They need pruning. Paint is peeling on the carriage house. The gutters weren't cleaned last fall and your pipe is all bent."

Jesus. That was the perfect set up. Did he know it? He didn't look it. He was so... *sincere*. I bit my lip. I was not uttering some pithy, inappropriate, insipid comment about the bend in my pipe, but the words spilled forth anyway. "Well then, I guess you'll just have to straighten my pipe."

"I think so." Adam said soberly as he sipped his drink, oblivious to the undercurrents. My words didn't penetrate his outward display of...what was it? Calm? Disinterest? "There's a lot to do. Did you know the fountain is clogged?"

Fountain? "I have a fountain?"

He finally smiled a fraction as if this time I had amused him. His mouth tipped crookedly and he was devastatingly boyish. Had I ever been as young and guileless? He startled me by saying, "I know today was terrible, and that your fall was surprising—it surprised me, that's for sure—but I'm wondering if you need a hand here? I could use the work. I understand you...don't get out much."

"Jeeze, kid, aren't you afraid I murdered someone and tossed them in the yard to rot?"

"Honestly? I was at first and then Trooper Gervase told me about your medical condition."

"I'm hale and hearty; I'm just allergic to the outdoors." I was going to have words

with that Trooper.

"I understand," he said with unnerving sincerity.

It was my turn to clear my throat. "So, this will fit your schedule? Are you cutting Tindell out of the loop?"

"No. That was a joke, right? You tell a lot of jokes." His smile wavered and he looked momentarily unsure. There was something strange going on here; something about this man I couldn't quite put my finger on. His stained hands swirled the gin and rocks knocked against the glass. "I'm sort of literal. I don't usually know when people are kidding or having me on. You should know that about me."

"Meaning I have to tell you to laugh at my jokes?"

His chuckle was barely discernable. "Yes. Actually you do. It helps. You'll have to pay Mr. Tindell, that's fair."

"What? Are you insane? No. You do the lawn for the old man once a week, because that's what he hired you to do. Then you come here and I pay you under the table for the rest. That's how polite people get work done. Honestly, Adam. No joke."

"I don't know...I don't want to get fired."

"For picking up an extra job? He won't prune the roses or rebuild the wall. He won't clean the gutters. He won't fire you for getting a second job." I stopped dead.

Why in the hell was I begging this stranger to work for me?

Loneliness reared its ugly head and I smacked it back into place with a firm hand. I didn't care how interesting or unusual this guy was, or how stopped with filth my gutters were, or how much I wanted his dirty hands on my bent pipe. I was Holden Xavier Worthington and I didn't have to persuade people to entertain me or keep me company. I lightened my mood with a slug of gin, and turned my back on the lawn boy. It was time to eat anyway and one thing Mrs. Henderson did not do was cook.

Fortunately, I did.

"You don't have to work here. Have it your way. I'm not paying Tindell twice the amount so he can give you half what you deserve. Take it or leave it."

"You're sure I won't get fired?"

"Of course." I nodded, rooting through the oversized fridge for fresh vegetables.

"Should I come tomorrow then?"

"If you like. Finish your drink, Morgan. Try an oyster."

He knocked the last of his gin back with a gulp and considered the oyster. "I'll pass, thank you. Uhm...may I use your restroom? It's been...a while."

Probably since this morning. He'd been here all day silently observing as the Troopers processed evidence. He was either far too curious, too polite, or he was casing the joint to continue his life of crime. He was a criminal, after all. He could have it. I didn't care—I could buy more. Money had a way of begetting money around me, not that we spoke of such things in company. "Sure."

While he sought the bathroom, I searched through my recipe files. What to make? What exotic place to visit tonight? I was systematically trying every recipe I'd collected over my five years traipsing the globe. I dug through the box and...*T* is for *Thailand*.

Five years ago this month, resting from a week of snorkeling off the coast of Ko Adang, a tiny, spry woman in the guest house hot tub snatched an innocent cicada from mid-air. Her hand shot out of the water like a snake and startled us all. She ripped the insect's wings off with a practiced snap and popped that sucker live into her wide-open mouth. John and I sat spellbound alongside her in the steamy water as she gnashed it down in a few bites. The crew caught it all on film and it had become an instant classic on *Worth's World*.

I wasn't about to eat a Smithfield cricket, but Pad Thai was imminently doable.

I chopped scallions and minced garlic, the smell overriding the fishy tang of oysters. I could make enough for Porter, just so I wouldn't have to eat alone again, but Porter would be indisposed when he arrived. That fucker. Talk about having a social life. I bet the detective had to track him down and question him in the Village, which would only add more fuel to the raging fire of townie gossip.

I'd eat my dinner, I'd have a glass of Pinot Grigio and then I'd go upstairs to the master suite and watch porn. Actually—I'd probably have an Aquafina, hit the treadmill and then watch a movie.

Adam came back and the moment he stepped through the doorway, he looked at me differently. His blue eyes shone. I sighed. He knew. He'd have to be blind not to. The entire front hall was lined with black and white prints of me and my famed travels on *Worth's World*.

"You're Holden Worth. You wrote the Worth series. You were on TV," he said almost accusingly. Gone was the quiet blue-collar man—in his place was a fan. He shook his head and his smile nearly knocked me over. "I thought you seemed familiar. I'm bad with faces—but the pictures in the hall, those I knew."

I nodded mutely and scraped everything into hot oil.

"Your books were great. My brothers and I read them when we were kids. I couldn't believe when they turned them into a TV show—and then the movie."

Backhanded? "Believe it. It bought my last house." Which I didn't live in. "And the Jag." Which I couldn't drive.

Adam reached to finger comb a lock of hair from his forehead. My vanity hoped he was trying to look more attractive—which wasn't possible. He was beautiful. His t-shirt hiked again and from the front he was every bit as lean and strong as he'd been from the back. Like me, only younger. His skin was smooth and creamy. A trail of fine dark hair traveled in a line, disappearing into the plaid boxers that peeped from his jeans.

His belt was worn and I finally saw it: his clothes were tattered. His good looks had blinded me to the fact that he was threadbare. More so than the average lawn guy.

Shit. He did need work.

"How old are you, Adam?"

He blinked and shook his empty cocktail at me. The ices cubes rattled. "Oh. Because of this? I'm twenty-four. Do I look younger?"

Thank you. All I need is an arrest for serving liquor to a minor.

"No. I was curious. I ask a lot of questions. It's my nature."

"Did you write all those books here?" He looked around my uninspiring kitchen. "You used to be an adventurer. I watched the show on the Discovery channel. They were great."

"Don't sound so disappointed. I used to be. I trekked the globe with my film crew. On my last trip, I crossed the Sahara with my friend, John." I eased that memory with gin and waited for Adam to ask me about Geraldo fucking Rivera.

"I think I missed that one. I was away. Could I...bring a book? For you to sign, I mean? If you don't mind."

Away? I assumed he meant jail. Maybe that was how this man didn't know that I wrote porn under the name Xavier Wroth—and that our neighbors, the good citizens of Smithfield, wanted to run me out of town on a rail. He should ask me to sign one of those books for him, which I would do with a song in my heart and a skip in my step.

Here's looking at you, kid--

"Mr. Worthington?"

"Sorry? You were saying?" I needed to quit thinking that way. *Off limits*. He should wear a t-shirt with those words emblazoned on both the front and the back. It could be his

uniform.

“A book to sign.”

“Right. Sure.” I nodded and went back to sautéing while my newest fan wriggled his sock-covered feet into shot Vans. It was too quiet in my house. The only noise came from stove and the occasional pop of my icemaker settling. The room smelled of overcooked scallions. How pathetic had I become that a young man briskly tying his shoes captivated me? He ran a rough finger around the side of his foot and adjusted his shoe while I eyed him like a degenerate. I imagined him nude, running through a deep forest green, his thighs strong and roped with muscle. Sweat and mud and a crown of spring leaves his only decoration.

A satyr. The living God of Spring come to renew me.

“So. I’ll stop by tomorrow?” He glanced at me and I could not look away. He suddenly seemed imploring—nearly on his knees like a suppliant, those big, beautiful eyes so blue and utterly hopeful. From deity to devotee in the single beat of my heart.

And that’s when I realized what made him so different. Adam was innocent.

I swallowed hard and scraped the pan before my vegetables burned. I looked at his worn shirt collar and I found myself saying, “Yes. Lots to do at Casa Worthington. You may set the gardens to order and repair the house. You can be my new handyman. I haven’t been keeping up with the Jones. I could use the help.”

Adam settled his knit cap on his head and gave me a short nod. He left without a word and I was alone in my stately nine thousand square foot prison.

* * * *

At about 8:00, Porter stumbled through the side door with his square-faced friend Kurt. The towheaded pair had attended Dalton as scrawny sophomores thirty years ago and now they were back in town getting divorced and actively hiding money from their poorly chosen, if beautiful, third wives. They looked exactly like what they were: a pair of aging preppie bankers. They'd always been little round pegs fitting neatly into their little round holes, but best friends to the end.

I was cooling down from lifting weights in the gym, slurping fresh tap water directly from the faucet when they came in. I was slick with sweat and about to hit the shower.

Porter's cheeks were glowing and if I had to guess, I'd wager that inner light was powered by whiskey. He arrived blanketed in the mouthwatering scent of garlic smashed potatoes, a local favorite from the Village Restaurant. Porter's collar was free of lipstick, but the night was young.

I never knew quite how to phrase *Are you drunk?* My mother usually asked, "*How's everyone in town?*" to my father, so I carried on the tradition.

"Porter. How's everyone in town?"

He knew what I was asking but Porter threw me a curve when he said solemnly, "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

He wanted to make sure I was what? The two of them were soused. They must have staggered the few blocks from the pub.

"Sure. I'm spectacular. Why didn't you come back earlier? I called and left a message."

"About John?"

I looked to square-faced Kurt who sat somberly at the table. It was then I noticed he was holding a tiny dog in the crook of his arm. I enunciated clearly, "John who? What

are you referring to?"

"The news. Everyone in town is talking. They said they'd positively identified the body. They've contacted the family. I thought you knew."

"Knew what? Spell it out. Pretend I don't know what you're talking about."

He and Kurt exchanged a look. "They found John Paige's body behind the shed."

"My shed?" I gripped the counter, the second time today my sweaty palm clutched to hang on for dear life. *John Paige?* "No. I hadn't heard that."

I didn't...I didn't even know he was...how the hell had he gotten there? I scrambled to put this information into perspective.

Porter came over and squeezed my shoulder. "Sorry Holden. I came as soon as I heard. I'm sorry."

He crowded me, standing close enough that I could see the broken capillaries on his nose and the marks alcohol abuse had stamped into his skin. My brother and I were similar in height and coloring. We were good-looking, blond, and green-eyed. Trim, firm men, but Porter was going slack around the jaw and his hair was thinning.

I pulled from under his hand. "You can't be serious. It's not John. You have confirmation from an actual, credible news source?"

"Dead serious. I think you need to be prepared for the media again. I wonder how the hell John found his way to our back forty."

Our? *My* back forty. I bought the house and all its trappings in a neat transaction that had saved my parents from bankruptcy years ago.

I had to sit down. I fell into a kitchen stool—but for the wrong reasons. Of all the people I could imagine dead behind the shed, and as a writer it was my job to imagine those things in living color, I never would have pictured my former lover, my partner in

work and travel and, most importantly, the reason for my infamy – rotting behind my mother’s wretched potting shed.

I wanted to put my head between my knees—or a fist through the wall. Instead, I concentrated on facts.

For the first time in two years, I was grateful for my crippling agoraphobia. It would be my only alibi because if John Paige had been found dead on my back lawn, I had to be suspect. Detective Lewis had been direct in his question about my disorder. Thank God Tony had corroborated it. Tony must know about John by this point. If so, then why hadn’t he called me? That was fishy. I shot my brother a look. “What exactly did the cops say?”

“Cops? Oh, I got this from Pete down at the Village. He’s got the scanner going.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? He’s not a credible source, Porter.” Relief weakened me. It was townie gossip—and gossip was usually half wrong. My brother was mentally deficient to take Pete’s word as fact. “Think. Why hasn’t anyone called me? I mean, would my *friend* Tony save this for a special visit? Is he making a cake with a file in it for me? He would have given me a call. It’s not John.”

“There was a big accident on 1-18 and the Trooper’s got busy—closed the road. That’s what happens in a small town. I miss the city.”

“Yes. Well, no one is keeping you here.” I regretted it as soon as I said it.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. And it wasn’t John. The police would be here and I’d be in shackles.” They’d have to roll me from the house on a gurney, because make no mistake, I’d keel over as soon as my foot hit the driveway.

Kurt observed us from his chair and I swept my ugly emotions under the carpet where they belonged. I didn’t need him tattling on me. “Hello, Kurt.”

“Holden. I’m...deeply sorry for your loss.”

"My loss? Shit. Does everyone in town think I murdered John and planted him in the yard? Kurt. I didn't lose anyone. *It wasn't John*. And frankly, it wouldn't be much of a loss." Okay, I should have kept that sentiment to myself. "But thank you."

The dog gave a miniature bark. "I need to take the dog out." My brother said, as if he owned a dog. "Holden, I got a dog."

"For whom?"

"For you. To help you with your troubles. You need a dog."

"No. I don't want a dog. I can't walk him. I appreciate the gesture, but Jesus, get a grip."

I'm not a mean person. I'm actually a fair-minded, funny guy, and I love my brother—no kidding—but when people act stupidly, it is physically impossible for me to keep my mouth shut. Geraldo Rivera notwithstanding.

Porter took the white ball of yapping fur from Kurt. He set the dog on the polished tile. Tiny doggie nails ticked toward the door.

"Don't take him into the backyard. It's a crime scene out there."

"Aren't they finished?" Porter asked. "It's usually very quick on CSI."

"I think so. If they're not, do you think your puppy should crap on their evidence? Take him across the street to St. Joe's." There was no love lost between the elderly Father David and myself.

Kurt snorted, then tried to cover. "Holden, I think you should prepare yourself. I heard from four separate sources at the bank, the tellers and the new VP, that the police were obtaining a warrant to search the property."

"They already searched the property. It's due process. They came. They saw. They took my gardener's shoes and they left."

I may have implicated my new employee by dropping that tidbit in impolite, loud-mouthed company because Porter and Kurt wore the same stupefied expression on their faces.

My brother asked incredulously, "Gardener? You have a gardener now? Jesus, Holden. It's a Goddamn recession. People are losing their jobs. No one is supposed to be making money and it's like you're immune to the economic downturn."

"I'm not immune to the downturn. I'm just good at what I do. I sell everything I write. I sold everything I made. I get residuals and my show is in syndication." Not to mention Xavier Wroth had made a small fortune on his porn after the big reveal on *Geraldo*. I shouldn't explain myself to anyone. This was my house.

"A gardener. Well, that could explain the compost." Kurt added thoughtfully, as if we were playing *Clue*.

"How does that explain anything?"

"I mean—that corpse could have been hidden in your yard for a long time before anyone discovered him. Who goes out there? You know? Because you don't...uh... garden. Because of your...condition."

Kurt was right. Until Adam had turned that soil, it had been untouched since my mother was alive. That soil would have been fallow for years.

The puppy hunched and pooped at Porter's feet. I thought I couldn't be more disgusted, but I was wrong.

Kurt wouldn't stop sleuthing. "So, who did you hire? Maybe he killed John. Maybe there are more bodies in the back." He bit his lip Bill Clinton style and choked, "I am so sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry for." Gossip was going to be hard to quell if I couldn't stop this kind of talk in my own kitchen. I needed to make some calls. "Read my lips.

He's not dead. It's not him. It's a vagrant. Someone could have climbed over the wall on Meadow Street and...." What? Died in my backyard? Hidden himself in my mulch? Any scenario was disturbing—but none more than me having killed John. How could anyone think that of me? I glared at my guests. Fucking Porter had probably substantiated the rumors without even meaning to. "Why would my gardener kill John? Think."

"I don't know—maybe it was old man Tindell. He could have dumped someone back there with his tractor. It's a good hiding place. If you think about it." Kurt was on a roll. "No. I can't see Mr. Tindell as a murderer. He's like everyone's grandfather. He does all the plowing and the grass for St. Joe's for free."

"Free? That priest has him in a spiritual chokehold. It's his tithe." I opened the kitchen window. Cool air cleansed the cloud of stuffiness my sweat, the dog's accident and the two drunken preppie bankers had created in the kitchen.

Porter said, "So who's the new guy? Does Mrs. H know?"

"Not yet. His name is Adam Morgan. He's from town."

"No fucking way," my brother said. The two bankers exchanged another unreadable look. "You've got to be joking. Adam Morgan?"

"Why? He seems acceptable enough for the position." I knew nothing about my new hire, really—other than his approximate waist size (thirty two), his shoe size (eleven and a half), his shampoo scent (coconut) and his choice of cocktail snacks (not oysters). He was threadbare and slim and he didn't like to walk in the house with muddy shoes. He was calm under pressure and extraordinarily polite. He was a straight shooter. His knuckles were raw, his teeth were white and he drove a battered Ford pickup.

He also had a criminal record.

I went to the fridge and grabbed the orange juice. My gin had long since evaporated

and I was glad I'd worked out instead of succumbing to temptation. "What's the big deal?"

"His father spent the last few years in jail. Don't you know this? They're from Farmville."

"Ah. Well that explains...absolutely nothing, Porter, except to reaffirm that the pair of you are snobs. Farmville is just another section of Smithfield."

"Barely." Porter scooped the dog into his hands. It looked like a white muff. "I'd hide the silver when he's here. That family is dysfunctional."

I almost laughed. The Worthingtons were poster children for dysfunctional families everywhere. "Sure. Will do. Take the dog back, Porter, unless you're going to take him to New York."

I grabbed my orange juice, and headed for the shower.

Chapter Three

I tossed and turned all night, dreaming of that moment on *Geraldo* when John Paige had blithely unmasked me—the beloved celebrity adventurer for young people and travel hungry armchair explorers everywhere—as the secret author of gay porn, Xavier Wroth. That moment when Rivera turned on me and I froze stiff was every bit as paralyzing in dreams as it had been in real life. They’d read excerpts from Xavier’s one and only book, *Goldicocks and the Three Bears*, while I died inside. My worst fear had been realized—outed by my own purulent prose.

Blindsided by a premeditated strike, I’d never been at a loss for words in my life, until in front of a camera—on *live* television—Geraldo proceeded to gleefully crucify me because I was not only famous and shameless, I’d made the lovable lackey John my boy in every sense of the word. John sold me down the river for filthy lucre. He’d been holier than thou and broke, and I’d been a rich man with something to hide.

These kinds of relationships never work, Geraldo had said at the end of our segment. *I see it all the time.*

I woke to warm sunshine and the knowledge that a call to John was in order.

I hit the gym, doing crunches until my stomach burned. I showered, threw on fresh clothes and took the narrow butler staircase to the kitchen. It was seven forty-five and Mrs. Henderson waited at the counter, her orthopedic shoes buffed and polished and her starched apron straight. Her hair was a hodgepodge of iron gray and snow-white locks. She was a handsome, tall woman who had worked for and been friends with my mother for more than thirty years.

I forgave her that, because she always made coffee.

"Good morning, Mrs. H."

"Holden," she said cheerlessly. "You have three messages on your desk. Coffee's made. I have your list. I'm going to Stop and Shop and I'm going to church. John Paige died in your mother's yard and..."

Mrs. Henderson gripped the counter and for a second, I was struck that we'd made the same gesture in weakness. I felt bad.

"...if your mother were alive..."

"Well. Good thing she's not."

She didn't bat an eye. "Don't be rude this morning. I want to offer my condolences."

"Thank you, but that wasn't John. I called his office and left a message. He should call me as soon as he gets into the city."

"I think you need to face this. I know it's difficult. He's dead."

"He's taking the train from Pelham Station to the city. Trust me. He's fine. I promise. I need you to go to Dunkin' Donuts and buy some munchkins."

She blinked. "Are you expecting guests?" She noticed the dried mud on the braided rug and her eyes narrowed. "Someone is coming here?"

"Yes. I'm sure the police will be by to interrogate me as soon as they obtain a warrant and the new handy man will need some instruction. Obviously, he won't be able to work in the yard until all the evidence is processed."

Mrs. Henderson grabbed the soiled rug and shook it with a snap out the back door. I took a small measure of comfort in seeing my rigid housekeeper regain her composure. "I don't understand you. Aren't you concerned?"

"Yes, but this is how I deal with things. I make jokes. I upset my friends. I'm an ass. Please. Just go buy some munchkins. I want the ones with jelly in them. Stop by the bakery and see if they have fresh pita. And get me a copy of that town rag—the *Gazette*. Oh and find out what they're saying at the gas station. Those guys are a flock of hens always scratching for dirt."

"Hens scratch for insects." She untied her apron, folded it twice, and placed it on the counter. "Very well. You're sure it's not John? Father David insists otherwise."

"He's obsessed with proving me guilty of something."

"He's a man of the cloth. You're being paranoid." She pursed her lips and headed for the door, grabbing her cardigan as she left. She buttoned the sweater to her neck and said crossly, "Stay out of trouble while I'm gone."

"Will do. I have a deadline to meet."

Minutes later, I rolled the teacart onto the sun porch for the first time in my adult life. It was loaded with my silver coffee urn and a few Wedgewood cups that clattered when I hit the threshold. I had a daffodil in a Waterford vase and a box of Lorna Doones. I was sure Tony and the Detective would stop by. I planned to sit on my porch and watch the proceedings until it was time to return to my writing cave.

Harsh as it sounds, this was great material and I was taking notes—and looking forward to questioning the detective on police procedure. I was constructing my next project, which would not be another installment to my Worth adventure novels—

because I'd left him with John in the dust. Nor would it be a companion to the *Traveling Palate Cookbook*. No, I was inspired to write my first mystery script. I would sell it to Lifetime.

I gazed into my backyard and four cameras stared back at me from the hedgerow. *What the fuck?* I went from zero to sixty—flew from the chaise, nearly knocking the teacart over in the process, and raced into the house.

They were back. Those Goddamn prying, condemning eyes were everywhere! I bolted down the front hall, skirting the towering floral arrangement in the foyer. I snatched the phone from the hall table and fled to the parlor, where I peered from behind the drapes. I couldn't believe it—it was like the aftermath to *Geraldo* all over again. Public humiliation: take two. A pair of news trucks—Channel Eight Eye Witness News and Fox 61—was parked on the opposite curb, directly in front of St. Joe's memorial garden. A trim blonde reporter in a dove gray suit stood on the lawn. Her microphone was tipped lewdly toward Father David. The old man gestured toward my home and shook his head; even from this distance his pencil neck swam inside his white collar.

That priest.

He was the biggest tattler. He was probably telling the world I was a sodomite.

As if that was news to anyone.

I dropped the sash and Gervase answered my call. I didn't wait for him to say hello. "There are photographers in your crime scene. I want them off my property. Right now. This is an infringement to my right of privacy and I'll press charges so help me—"

"I'll send someone right over."

"Tony, there are trucks parked in front. Someone needs to clear this situation. Where's Detective Lewis?"

"He's on the case, as far as I know. My job is done. Mark told me about the gossip. John dead in the compost." He made a derisive noise. "I can't say anything until a positive ID is made. Probably today or tomorrow. I can't compromise the case."

"It's not John."

"I know. Remember? I saw the body. But Paige isn't answering any calls—"

"Oh for pity's sake. He's on the train." I hadn't spoken to him, yet I was sure he was fine.

"I was yanking your chain. I don't know how the rumors started, but that's all they are. Rumors. I said I'd send someone over. There's not much I can do about the reporters on South Street or wagging tongues."

"Thank you."

I refused to spend the morning in the parlor with my eye to the blinds, so I went from room to room, pulling shades and drawing curtains. The house darkened, and with it, my mood. Back in the kitchen, I poured a bracing glass of tomato juice and put my mind toward work.

There was a knock on the back door. Reporters? They wouldn't be so above board. Then I remembered Adam was arriving for his new job. What could he do here? The entire place was off limits until Lewis said otherwise—and now we were under surveillance by the media. My knees felt weak at the thought and that was unacceptable. I was trapped in this fucking house, but I wasn't weak. I was Holden X. Worthington, wealthy world adventurer and celebrated pornographer.

I wiped my wet palms on my jeans and went to the mudroom.

Adam waited with a thermos tucked under one arm and a red cooler in his opposite hand. His knuckles were clean and raw. He was dressed for manual labor in Carhartts and flattering blue flannel. The black beanie was in place and his brilliant eyes beamed

at me. I scanned the yard for intruders and then opened the door with care. "Good morning."

He nodded, his manners perfectly intact. "Good morning, Mr. Worthington."

"You managed to get past the news trucks?"

He didn't seem fazed. "Not a problem."

"Adam. I'm not sure what you can do here today, until we get the go ahead from the police..."

What in the hell?

There was someone hiding behind the stone wall. His attempt to disappear into the forsythia bush was foiled by his orange ski jacket. The fool. I was this close to shaking my fist and yelling *Get out of my yard, you darn kids!* Instead, I moved from his direct line of vision.

"What's wrong?" Adam glanced over his shoulder—I assumed to see what had me staring and hiding—and his mouth tightened until it was white around the edges. His tone changed to one I'd not heard from him before—it was filled with exasperation and a little gruff. "Is he bothering you?"

I nodded. "The press. They follow me."

That had a tinge too much melodrama for a strapping man in his prime.

"I'll handle it." He muttered something else under his breath, set his cooler and thermos on the bench and stalked across the bluestone patio with fists clenched. I tore my gaze from the splendor of his ass in those snug work jeans just as the photographer popped from behind the bushes like a meerkat in the Kalahari. Unlike any meerkat I'd ever seen, with a snide smile he flipped Adam the bird.

How strange.

I shut the door and scampered to the kitchen in order to get a better view from the window. I was hoping to hear this exchange—possibly to use for dialogue later—but the pair was too far away. I opened the window anyway.

One thing was clear: Adam knew this remaining photographer. The two frowned at each another. I was surprised when Adam cupped his mouth and hollered across the rolling backyard. "If you're still there, Braden, you'd better show your face."

A man appeared from behind the wall along the sidewalk on Meadow Street. Grinning with youthful arrogance, he shimmied over and jogged up the hill. He wore a backward brown ball cap and a gray *Ski Sundown* sweatshirt and looked nineteen or twenty, tops. A local. I don't know why I was convinced Geraldo Rivera was back in my life, haunting me—perhaps it had been the nightmare—but even he'd know better than to hire these two.

My phone rang as the showdown began. Hello?"

"Holden? It's me. It's John."

John? I expected to feel something—a rush of longing or boiling rage. Maybe a hint of embarrassment? Or even relief that he had returned my call? But I was too busy observing the boys in the backyard. The youngster in orange shoved Adam and, as they argued, I found myself so riveted, I was unable to process any unresolved emotional baggage with John. *What the hell were they doing?*

"Holden? You there?"

"Uh. Hello. So you're not dead?"

"Rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated." He chuckled to himself.

"Thus far."

The boy in the cap bent and threw something at Adam, who knocked it away with a loud, "You need to leave."

Dirt clods. They were pelting my new employee with lumps of dirt.

"Hello? Holden?"

I said into the receiver. "Everyone thinks you're dead. I need you to come to Smithfield, sit in the Village for fifteen minutes, buy a drink and then leave. There's talk that I killed you."

"Killed me? Is this one of your lame jokes?"

Lame?

"No. Mrs. Henderson offered me her condolences this morning. It's all over town."

He said slowly, "Just wait it out. It'll blow over in a day."

"I would, but there are people in my trees with cameras. News trucks parked on the street." Just saying that made me ill. I wasn't a freak to be watched on *Eye Witness News* at 5:00 and 11:00. I wasn't newsworthy; I just wanted to be left alone.

"What's the big deal? You used to thrive on that. As I recall, you didn't have a bad side or weak angle. You loved being the center of attention."

"Not anymore. I want my privacy."

"Well, I'm in a bind," he said and then his voice changed subtly. "It's why I called."

"Really? You aren't returning my call?" Outside, Adam pointed meaningfully at the line of yellow tape.

"You phoned?"

John had to be lying.

"Quit the bullshit. Your terrified secretary gave you my message. She says you failed to show for work yesterday or this morning."

"I haven't spoken to her. I'm scheduled to be back in the city tomorrow. I heard on

the news this morning that they found a body in Smithfield. I had no idea it was at your place. They said *at the home of a reclusive former celebrity*. What did they mean?"

"That I'm a reclusive former celebrity, I imagine."

"Well, I hadn't heard that the body was me. I'm in Kent." He said this as if it meant something—almost as if he expected me to know he was there.

"Kent? Then it should be no problem for you to swing by. Why are you...?"

What in God's name were they doing? One of the photographers launched himself at Adam. The two went down swinging. They hit the grass and rolled, dirt flying. The boy in the hat retrieved his camera and began snapping pictures.

"I don't believe this."

My shy gardener had the other man in a headlock. He grappled his opponent easily, his face calm but intense. He seemed to be lecturing the boy. Adam's beanie was gone and tufts of grass clung to his glorious hair.

I opened the window as wide as it would go. "*Will you people knock it off?*"

The trio froze as if I'd hit them with a cold blast from the hose. Mrs. Henderson used to do that to Porter, our brother, Thayer, and me when we'd go at it. Those had been the days—and the Worthington boys had been little scrappers when they weren't squirming under the firm thumb of Mother and Dad.

"What are you doing?" John was decidedly short tempered. His voice was hoarse. "I have a lot going on right now. I'm not well. If you're unwilling to speak to me; I need to go. I have things to attend to."

"I understand, but I have photographers hanging in my trees trying to take pictures of me because *people think I killed my ex-lover*. I'm asking you for a quick favor. All you have to do is drive over here—it's only twenty minutes from Kent—and have one flipping Coke in the bar. That's it. I don't want anyone videotaping my Goddamn house

anymore. It makes me ill." Mentally ill. "I dealt with this once because of you, I'm not doing it again."

"All right. I'll come." A pause. "I don't have transportation. Can you drive over? I've had a minor setback."

"Setback?" Why did I think AIG? "Surely you jest."

"No. I'm stranded. Just jump in one of your cars and come get me. Maybe you could give me a lift to the train."

"I would if I could." John didn't know the extent of my agoraphobia and I wasn't about to enlighten him. "I have an appointment this morning. I'll send someone."

But who? Tony wasn't an option—he wasn't likely to chauffeur for me. Maybe Porter would go? No, he was with his attorney, seeing to the latest divorce. Besides, he'd kill John himself. There was no love lost there—Porter had been the one who'd come to pick up the pieces two years ago. My throat tightened with embarrassment.

I stared through the window where my lawn boy was dusting his stained britches and yanking vegetation from his hair. He'd driven the intruders away—maybe he could drive someone else.

"Are you there?"

"Hold on. I'm thinking."

Adam snagged his beanie from the path, smacked it against his thigh a couple of times, and then he flipped some unseen person a middle finger before cramming his hat on. He straightened, tucked his flannel shirt in and transformed into my carefully restrained, polite help. A façade? Or did he have a temper?

It didn't matter as long as he held a valid driver's license.

"Holden." John's words were strained. "I'd prefer it was you."

"Not possible. I have a driver. He'll be there by 10:30." I took down the address. "He can bring you to the train later."

"Fine."

I placed the phone on its cradle and went to the back porch. On the step, Adam collected himself by rolling his neck. I jerked the door wide. "Come in."

"I'd rather not Mr. Worth—"

"Holden or Worth. Pick one."

He blinked at my tone. "Holden. Right. I'd rather not—"

"Come. In. Side." This working relationship was doomed if he didn't lose his reluctance to enter my house. "We need to talk. I have a job for you."

As he had yesterday, when he entered the mudroom, he stood on the braid rug to unlace his shoes. Soil fell onto the floor. Today his socks were cobalt blue and free of holes. He stuffed his hat into his back pocket. His hair stuck in every direction—a blade of grass clung to his ear. I picked it off and Adam jerked at my touch.

"This is what you get for wrestling on the lawn."

Adam finger combed his hair roughly. "I'm sorry about that."

"C'mon." I led him into the kitchen and pointed to a stool. "Now sit down and tell me what that was all about."

Adam chose a stool and rested his forearms on the sparkling black granite of my kitchen island. There were smudges of earth on hands from the brawl. In this light, his eyelashes were the same russet color as his hair—brown and red and surprisingly thick. His sideburns were neat and he was enveloped in the scent of morning sun and sweet coconut shampoo. His nearness reminded me that I'd once lived in the wide, open spaces: climbing mountains, sailing oceans, roaming continents, swinging through

damn trees...

Longing hit me. Not for the boy, though surely that was tangled into it, but for my old life. For freedom. I wanted to go outside, but fear hemmed me.

He took his own sweet time answering. When he did I wasn't happy. "Those were my brothers. They were hoping to get pictures to sell to the *Gazette*. I had no clue they planned this. I apologize."

All thoughts of fine russet locks and wild outdoor places vanished. My voice was firm. "I don't want them here. You are to make that clear. This is a deal breaker if I find them within an inch of my land. If I see them again, you'll have to go. My privacy is paramount."

"Yes, sir. I respect that. Braden and Cole are difficult to control."

"Find a way. I won't live like that again."

"Again? This happened before?"

"Yes, and I don't want a repeat," I said humorlessly. I poured him a glass of juice—I don't know why—and set it on the counter. "Keep them away from here."

"Absolutely. I will." He nodded sharply, some lingering bit of anger with his brothers betrayed in his stiff posture. "You have my word."

"Good. We're on the same page." He was a straight shooter, so I believed him. He'd do his best. I found my keys in the basket by the phone and laboring to turn my tone friendly again, I said, "I have a job for you today that requires driving. You need to use my car."

I hoped to hell the Jag would start. It had been sitting idle for a couple weeks, since Porter had used it to impress his banker friends at a teambuilding venture.

"That's all right. I can take my truck."

"No. It's a Jaguar XF. You'll take it. You'll probably have to fill it." I searched the drawer for my gas card and handed it to him along with John's address. "You need to go to Kent." I considered making him change into something more presentable, but caught myself.

Adam stared at the keys on the granite. "Seriously? You want me to drive that car? The Jag? My truck runs fine. It's dependable."

"You work for me now—I need you to go retrieve my ex and I'm experiencing an unprecedented moment of pride and pretention. I need you to take the good car. Later, by all means, use the truck to deposit our visitor on the curb of the train station in Waterbury. Particularly if said truck is rusted and smoldering its exhaust directly into the passenger seat. No offense."

He chuckled for the first time in my company. It was a nice rich sound. His smile was easy. "None taken. She sounds terrible. What's she like?"

I gawked at him while he sucked juice down in four bold swallows. Where the hell had this man been hiding? Under a rock? And why wasn't his gaydar detecting?

"Adam. *He*. My ex is a man. Yes?"

Adam froze. And then he startled me by shooting off his stool like a rocket. The stool wobbled. Adam backed away as if gay was a catching disease and I might sneeze it all over him. His reaction was so intense I assumed he wasn't serious.

But, he was.

"Gay? I didn't realize."

"It's not news. I need you to retrieve John Paige. My former lackey from *Worth's World*? He traveled with me for years. This isn't a secret." Anymore. Adam flushed to his hairline and down to his clavicle. The dummy turned red as a beet. He was beginning to piss me off. "Do you have a problem working for a homosexual? Your

reaction is extreme, Adam. I wonder why that is."

Actually, I didn't wonder at all. Evidently someone hadn't come to terms with what was as plain as the nose on his face. I didn't figure him for latent.

Adam held his hands out, as if carefully warding my gay away. He was nearly panicked. How strange. "No. No problem...it's just...a surprise. I didn't put two and two—"

"That's impossible. It had to have crossed your mind. I flame."

"Flame? I wouldn't know about that. I told you, I can't tell. You're rich. You're cultured. You eat weird food. You faint. I didn't assume that meant you're a homosexual. Not that there's anything wrong with that. You took me by surprise is all." He smiled tightly—no, fearfully. "I'm not good at this kind of thing."

"Thing? What thing? I'm not hitting on you. I'm just stating a fact. I'm going to be crystal clear with you here, Adam, because that's my way. Ready? Listen up. By the way, I'm gay."

"Yes. You've said."

"So I need to know if this is a problem."

"No. No—it's just that...people sometimes tell me things that aren't true."

I must have looked as confused as I felt. "I don't follow."

"It's just that I'm not sure who I can trust." He clammed up, shutting off any hint of vulnerability. It was like a curtain had come down with a bang. His blue eyes met mine and I absolutely couldn't read him, except for the residual fear. His words were so tight, they barely passed his teeth. "I'm uncomfortable with this conversation."

"That's because I think you're gay as well," I blurted, masterfully.

That shook him all right. His eyes closed for a moment, russet lashes spiky against

his mud-stained cheek. He took his time and then opened his eyes and glared. "I...can't believe you just said that."

"I can't either, but there it is." I dug a deeper hole. "I'm not usually if ever wrong about these things, so you can imagine my confusion right now."

I was waiting for another big response. Maybe he'd hit me, or leave and never come back. Those things happen.

Adam was deep in thought. He turned to look through the back window where outside, the yellow tape fluttered in the morning breeze—they looked like party favors.

I said into the quiet room, "Was that out of line?"

He was so red it hurt to look at him. "Yes."

"Forgive me. I thought it was pretty clear—or I should say, to me it was clear. That doesn't mean anyone else suspects."

"I hope not."

"Adam. Surely this isn't news to you."

He shook his head again. "No. It's just not something I want advertised, but not for the reason you think. And...I haven't acted on it. Not completely. It's just...it's hard for me to trust anyone. Which is why I don't act on my feelings."

"Have you told anyone?"

"Not really."

"Well...now you've told me." I was oddly proud of him. He'd come out to a virtual stranger, which generally was the way these things went, although typically one man had just given the other an orgasm to speed the process along.

My handyman shoved his hands into his pockets. He stared into the wide backyard

deep in thought. His jaw line was sharp and smooth and it occurred to me that he'd shaved this morning. His neck was clean and that smell of coconut hit me.

He'd bathed before seeing me.

He'd showered before coming to dig in the dirt all day. *For me.*

In that moment, right there in my kitchen, I wanted him. Not from afar, as I had yesterday as my muse. No, this was the real deal. I desired *him*. Adam. I wanted to be the man—the lucky man who showed him what goes where. I got hard. It was terrible. It was wrong. I would be taking advantage of an anxious, untried young man who worked for me—and perversely, that just made me want him more. I imagined Adam, whimpering and grunting under me, and Christ, I found myself asking another stupidly impertinent, unbelievably forward question. "So you've never followed through."

He shook his head and I hung onto hope—desperate for his answer. "Not that it's any of your business, but no, not really."

Not really meant no, not ever.

Untamed, insane, unwilling lust literally filled my cock with blood in a split second. My hot dick pressed into my jeans searching for a way out and a way into that big, strapping, fit, sweet, tight-assed, red faced, fumbling virgin.

And that virgin stared silently back at me. A rim of orange juice glistened just over his lip and he licked it while, truly spellbound, I followed the swipe of his tender tongue along wind burned lips. I wanted to lick his mouth and taste sunshine. I wanted to smell the dirt on his clothes and the soil under his nails. Then I wanted to bend him over my kitchen table, my hands spreading him and dive so deeply inside his tight ass he'd feel my dick touch his tonsils. I'd come deep. I'd make him blow his messy load on my table while he pressed back into me. He'd be all eagerness and innocence. I could wrap my hands into that unruly russet mop of hair and hold him still. I'd bite the

tender skin of his shoulder...

Never, ever had I felt so depraved in my entire life — not once — and I had written an award winning, best selling dirty sex book.

Now I was the one flushed and fearful. I was hard, hot, angry, ready, and so fucking stupid. This was a bad idea.

But he wanted me.

His pupils were locked on mine and dilating, as if every one of my filthy, perverted thoughts were written on my face for him to read. Or maybe he could see my fat erection poking from my pants. I was close to gripping my own dick and jacking off right here.

He moved toward me, or maybe I imagined it. Maybe I wanted him to move, to cross the space and reach for me first. The moment stretched. I stared at his firm sweet mouth as his color rose and then the side door opened with a squeak. I sat so fast that this time I set the stool to wobbling.

Shit.

Mrs. Henderson walked into the house holding a dainty orange and pink cardboard box. "No jelly, Holden."

Tension snapped. Adam snagged the key from the countertop, the address from the table, and his shoes from the rug. "I'll be back in an hour, Mr. Worthington, with your friend."

* * * *

My phone rang while I waited.

"The coroner says it'll be at least another day. They're searching dental records. Male, Caucasian, mid-forties. I can't tell you much more. Fractured femur. Blunt force trauma to the head and face." Tony's deep voice rumbled over the telephone. "Not a vagrant."

"That does nothing to quell rumors. Thank you."

"Well, that's how it goes."

"I spoke with John. He's alive and well. Did you reach him?"

He snorted. "Nope. Just his secretary. Did Detective Lewis see you this morning?"

"Not yet."

"Expect him. It's procedure. Cause of death was a blow to the head. That's...off the record but no surprise."

"Who am I going to tell? I just want the press to move away from my street and get out of my hedges. It doesn't help my situation. Any idea how long he was there?"

"Probably a couple days at most."

"So over the weekend some unknown person dumped an unidentified, well-dressed, deceased, white male in my yard. Terrific. All the more reason to stay inside."

"Wrong. You need to get the hell out of that house, Holden. Mark says to come for dinner—he promises not to cook."

"Tell him thank you for not cooking. Maybe soon. I'm making strides," I lied.

"Opening the window doesn't count." He hung up.

An hour later, John Paige entered my home via the mudroom room. He sported expensive aviator glasses and a cheap NBC ball cap. His pale hair was almost hidden. I hadn't set eyes on him in two years, but other than the hat, he looked the same: broad,

bearded, blond and boyish. He had gray flannels, a navy blazer and a starched collared shirt in pale blue. Unimaginative and indistinguishable. He looked like every other banker in my life. "Holden. You look fit."

"John." He didn't offer his hand and I didn't offer mine. "What are you doing here? I thought you were going to the bar."

Adam refused to come any further than the threshold of the kitchen, which was par for the course. I waited for him to tug his forelock and bow, but he surprised me by meeting my eye steadily as he relinquished the car keys. "I need to get back to work." He shot a mysterious look between John and I that I was in no mood to interpret. "I'll check in with you later, Mister Worthington."

There was something new in the way he said my name; something that hadn't been there earlier. It was a small almost inappropriate hitch that had me turning to remind him. "*Holden.*"

"Right. Holden." He scribbled his cell number on the phone pad and then walked from the house through the mudroom door without a backward glance.

It occurred to me that John had more than likely hit on him in the car. I stared daggers at John's back while he moseyed through the kitchen. He dropped an overnight bag on the table. That wasn't a good sign.

"I asked you to go have lunch in town and then leave. Simple enough. You aren't supposed to be here." I should have said 'how are you?' but I didn't feel welcoming and now I wished I'd had the foresight to invite some friends for lunch, if only to serve as witnesses. I couldn't think of a single person who would come other than Mrs. H. and Tony. One of my attorneys, maybe.

"Your driver was good enough to bring me here." John removed his glasses and right away I knew he had an ulterior motive. He checked the hall shiftily. "Where's Mrs. Henderson?"

"She's at Mass. She should be here shortly."

"Well, I don't want her to see me. In fact, I'd like to keep things quiet this afternoon."

That was wholly unexpected and all together suspicious. "Quiet? What do you mean?"

"I'm not ready to go into town. I haven't been well." John noticed the teacart on the sun porch. "Visitors, Holden?"

"Why are you in my house?" And then, I knew. The sunglasses, the furtive glances, the hat, the circles under his eyes, the sweaty upper lip—story of my fucking life. "You're hiding."

"I'm unwell and practicing discretion."

"Bullshit. You think I don't what that means? If I wanted discretion I wouldn't have called you. I need the opposite of discretion and the sooner the better. The phone's been ringing, the news trucks are cruising the block and no word from the powers that be on who they found in my yard. People are taking photos through the windows. My picture is on the news again. It's distracting me and I have a deadline. Not to mention that *everyone in town thinks I killed you.*"

That hurt, actually. How could anyone think that of me? Maybe they knew John and thought he deserved it.

"Everyone? You exaggerate. You were always prone to such paranoia." He swayed and gripped the counter.

That was real enough for me to ask, "What's going on?"

"I just need to rest. I'm tired. No. Actually, I'm fucking unwell. I need to lie down. I don't want to get Mrs. H sick. That's all I meant." He swallowed tightly. "No one is watching you for crying out loud. Go see for yourself. It's stone quiet."

In the mudroom, I peered cautiously through the curtain of the side door, trying hard not to look like one of the pansies Mrs. H had set in a pot on the steps. I should throw the door open and toss John on to the street with balloons tied around his neck—*See! He's not dead!*—but out front, not a soul was on South Street. An hour ago, as per my request, the troopers cleared the media trucks from the street—fifteen minute parking restriction on South Street in order for the school buses to deliver Smithfield kindergarteners safely to their homes. There was no sign of Father David. He was at Mass. The photographers were gone. The crowd had dispersed.

The only witnesses to John's arrival were myself and Adam and a row of ominous black birds watching from the telephone wire. Another joined them. They lined the road and all I could think of was Tippy Hedron. I was never going out there.

I dropped the curtain. "You need to leave. Right now." I'd call Tony, or Porter. Someone. Anyone. Even that hack from the *Gazette*. Actually, that was a pretty good idea.

"Why do I need to leave?"

I don't like you wasn't valid. *I don't trust you* was a given. I just needed to trot him through town like a parade pony and prove he was alive and then all those people would disappear. No one in the bushes. No priest pointing at my door. No phone calls. No press. No one profiting from the details of my private life. John must think I was nuts—but I *was* being watched.

"Because you're not welcome here," I said flatly.

"I told you I'm having my own crisis. Did you not hear me earlier? I said I was about to phone you and that I was in Kent. Did none of this register? I'm fucking sick. I have a bug—"

"People think I killed you. I have my own set of circumstances—and they aren't helped by the fact that the police can't reach you, your secretary doesn't know where

you are, and you've been gone for days."

I eyed the satchel. It was holding together pretty damn well. It was the one I'd bought him in Nepal on a trek through the Himalayas. What a miserable time that had been. We'd both had altitude sickness. His color wasn't any better today. He looked spongy.

"I'm stranded. I need to vomit, sleep, take a shit and a shower and then catch the train to New York." John blotted his forehead with a wrinkled handkerchief. He was rapidly fading. He turned white as a sheet before my very distrustful eyes. His was puffy, and his mouth was chapped, as if he'd been vomiting. He better not have done that in the Jag.

"I'll tell you what, you go to the Village, right now, and I'll give you a hundred bucks. You can go have your lie down at the B&B."

"No." Even sick as a dog, with nothing going for him, he wouldn't give an inch. N "Since you need something from me—i.e. a public appearance—I will need something of equal value from you—i.e. a place to vomit and pass out that isn't the floor of some filthy train station restroom."

This was the thing we had most in common, the tit-for-tat, although I would never vocalize '*i.e.*'—the prig. I reached for the phone, but John stopped me with a hand to my wrist. I recoiled. "How sick are you? Contagious sick?"

"Honestly, I don't know." He gulped as his face turned from white to green.

I wrenched open the cupboard. "Do you want...something? Water? Aspirin? Tums?" That was all I had—hangover supplies for Porter. Other than the agoraphobia, I hadn't been sick in years.

"No thank you." He swallowed again. "I'm set."

"All right. Go lie down. However, I'm calling the reporter from the *Gazette*. He can

interview you later.”

“If you must.” He hefted his bag and stumbled to the butler stairs.

I was about to go find Adam when John stumbled back, lickety-split, his tone rife with displeasure. “Who else is here Holden? Other than Mrs. H and your blue-eyed Boy Friday.”

“Porter. He’s staying on the west end.”

“Porter’s here? God. Why?” He held up a hand. “Don’t tell me. A divorce. Fine, I’ll be in the suite on the east end. The one with the fireplace and the bath. Worth, let’s don’t tell Porter I’m here. He and I have unfinished business. He threatened me rather vociferously after the *Geraldo* affair. I would consider this a favor. Also, I will press charges against him if he so much as blinks near me.”

“You’re threatening me. Why am I unsurprised?”

John’s stomach sounded a foul warning. “Shit.” He dashed up the stairs, disappearing around the corner faster than a speeding bullet. I hoped he made it to the bowl.

I went into the study, cranked the volume to *Closing Time* and stared at the phone. I should call that reporter, but sitting in my worn leather chair, hand poised on the receiver, my heart skipped into overdrive at the mere thought of phoning the paper. Not weak? I was a fucking baby. I was physically unable to speak with a reporter without having an anxiety attack, let alone invite him into my home like some sort of media vampire—and that’s what they were. Blood suckers.

I couldn’t do it.

Tom Waits mocked me with gravel-voiced manliness. He was a cool customer and I was wetting my pants over a fucking phone call. Disgusted, I did the only thing I could think of.

L.B. Gregg

I dialed Tony.

Chapter Four

Another five o'clock rolled around. I went to the kitchen eager to mix my daily cocktail and ready to start on the next 'T' recipe: *Tibetan Lamb Curry*. I'd been marinating meat since this morning, after sending Mrs. Henderson to the bakery for fresh pita. My evening plan was to tuck into a tangy, hearty supper and then venture onto my private balcony for a medicinal cigar.

I needed a drink more than was healthy for the product of two tight alcoholics. I had to take the edge off—which was the first step down the slippery slope—but everyone in my house was crazy.

I flipped the radio on to fill the silence and plotted ousting my unwanted, unhealthy houseguest. John had sequestered himself in the blue suite. He wasn't answering the door and, other than myself, Adam was the only person aware that my lackey ex was on the premises, and Adam had conveniently disappeared. His sorry looking truck was still parked in the driveway, leaking oil into the expensive crushed stone no doubt, so he was either hiding from himself or he was dodging my lecherous looks.

Calling Tony about John was useless. He was a no show earlier—probably too busy

writing tickets to speeding Smithfielders. Mrs. Henderson returned from mass, her spirit not rejuvenated in the least. I sent her upstairs with a cocky, *now do you believe me?* But John, that sick bastard, had locked the door and was unresponsive. She raised a sturdy brow and went to vacuum the front parlor, still furious over Father David's wretched accusations. Loyal was our Mrs. H, even if she thought I was hallucinating. She wouldn't return the simpering priest's calls. He left four more messages on the answering machine this afternoon, which I erased with no qualm.

The only sane person in the house was Porter—and he was utterly lit by three o'clock. He'd carried the runty Maltese into my office earlier and announced, "His name is Kipling."

"Fine." Even his dog was pretentious. My mother would have adored the name. I had to admit that the puppy was cute, with those round black eyes and a wet button nose. He was growing on me and I found myself petting his fuzzy little head. He licked my fingers.

"Any word from the police?"

"None." I didn't dare mention John. Porter would tear the door from its hinges and...then all hell would break lose. My brother would get arrested and more media blitz would rain down on my head. I changed the subject easily. "So, when are you going back to New York?"

"I have to go to work next week. I have another seminar." My brother went to a lot of seminars and retreats, corporate team building events and strategic planning, working dinners—he and his alcoholic banker friends. Any excuse to flee his marriage. He pet Kipling and mumbled, "I'm supposed to meet with Mitzie again."

"Really? I thought you had decided."

"I have decided. *She* wants to talk—and she's persistent. She's everywhere I turn. I think she finally understands what prenuptial agreement means and she's filled with

remorse.”

“I think remorse depends on who did what to whom, don’t you?”

“Maybe, but I think that prenup was the smartest thing I’ve ever done. Thank you.”

“Me too. And you’re welcome.” Porter better not marry again. He needed to accept that he was a player—an aging preppie player—and his next cuckolded wife would snip his dick off. “How did it go today?”

“Good.” This time he changed the subject without diving into any detail, which was fine by me. “Anyway, you’ll miss me when I leave, Holden. That’s a fact.” That was the extent of our exchange. Kurt swung by as usual and they and their precious dog left to go spend the evening on a barstool.

I peeled the paper wrapper from a wheel of Camembert as Adam arrived on the back step. He knocked politely and I waved him in, but he didn’t wave back. He waited for me to open the door. I ground my teeth, tossing the cheese onto the counter. Why couldn’t he simply come into the house?

Why can't you go out, Holden?

I stalled in the doorway, snappish words dying on my tongue. The yard was infused with soft light as the sun sank over the hills in a gorgeous splash of astonishing pastel. Rivulets of pink clouds streaked the horizon. Down along the property line, the stone wall and thorny rose hedges were bathed in purple and orange light. Buds softened the vines. The birds of spring called to each other from the thicket. On the patio crocus lined the bluestone. The flowers a bit higher than they were this morning, and a bit more colorful; the light hit the grass making it nearly blue.

It all cheered me—the cool fresh air, the hint of lawn clippings and pungent mulch. It made me feel younger. “Come in.” I said it more nicely than I’d started to.

Adam trailed me into the house and attended to his shoes. The police hadn’t

returned his boots. His words were careful. "Where's your...*friend*. John?"

"He's indisposed." Honestly, I hadn't heard a peep from upstairs. "Actually, he's sick as a dog. He didn't vomit in the car, did he?"

Adam shook his head. "No. I cleaned it anyway – he was ripe."

"Thank you."

"I wanted to check in with you. See if he needs that ride down to Waterbury." He didn't meet my eyes, but I read disapproval in the tightness of his jaw and the stiff set of his shoulders. It made me smile.

Ever the host, I made him a Tangueray and tonic, and settled a plate of cheese, crackers, and grapes on the counter at his elbow. Surely, he could find nothing weird about Camembert.

"Thank you, Adam. Not yet. How was the ride this morning? You never said." I asked this casually.

Oh, who was I kidding? I asked it pointedly. John and I had been together for years and sick or not, he was a horny goat. Hell, I was too – and Adam was just trying to do his job.

"He was all right, I guess. He was quiet. He asked me if we were involved."

I laughed. How droll. "He would. Did he hit on you?" A more sophisticated response would have been a calm *You don't say*.

"I...don't know."

"Believe me; you'd know if John Paige was hitting on you." I pictured John's sure hand landing on Adam's lean thigh as they drove my fancy car through the twisting back roads of Northwestern Connecticut, the wind in their hair. It didn't matter that my car wasn't a convertible – I saw it clearly. I nursed my drink. I'd like to put my hand on

Adam. I'd grip his knees, spread those long muscular legs and run my thumbs along the ticklish white skin of his inner thighs until my hands met in his hot heavy crotch.

Adam interrupted my fantasy, which was for the best as I was in danger of turning into Xavier Wroth again. "I wouldn't know. I don't know when someone's interested. I told you I have a problem with jokes and reading people's faces, you remember?"

I nodded. He'd grown rigid again. It was a tell of epic proportion. He picked at the skin of a grape – but he didn't eat anything.

"Okay. What gives? Something is bothering you."

He nodded. "You should probably know this. I can't read most cues. I can't tell what people mean unless they say it plain. I can't differentiate between someone joking, or making a pass, or just fucking with me because they're dickheads. It's difficult. I would have no idea if your friend hit on me. And, say I thought he was, if I got it wrong, if I misread it, men don't take that well. Do you understand? They aren't insulted – they get violent. That's why I spend a lot of time gardening. Plants are easier to understand."

"Not for me. They're about as easy to understand as women."

He smiled and actually shook his head in reluctant amusement. Beautiful, beautiful thing. "That one I got."

"I see that." I smiled back, feeling like I'd won a prize.

"Anyway. I've been taken advantage of in the past and had some trouble. It's why I don't really act on my...inclinations. I can't because I'm never sure if I read people the right way and things don't generally end well."

"I bet they don't. So, you've made overtures and gotten your ass kicked?"

"Basically. Yeah. I hate to think of myself as passive, but I have to be. I have never thrown a punch first, and I never, ever hit on anyone."

"What do you do then?"

"Nothing. I just hope someone will be straight forward and honest with me."

Holy hell.

The poor guy. It all made sense. He seemed innocent because non-verbal language was foreign to him. It explained so much—the clipped way in which he spoke and his tentative manner when approaching others. His stillness. The underlying fragility that was so at odds with his physical appearance. The lack of guile. Not to mention the fact that he didn't find me funny or charming—well that might be a bit of a stretch—but I'd heard about this sort of thing. Heck, I probably knew people like this. All the little tricks of facial expression and voice intonation—the things I'd teethered on in this home of sarcasm and razor wit—he couldn't hear it or see it. He didn't know when others read him wrong. High school must have been prolonged hell.

He went on. "I reacted earlier because I was relieved and surprised and...definitely freaked out. I was afraid, because you could have been lying, you know? Now, I feel like I can let my guard down, and I don't have to make a wrong guess."

"These days, I can't imagine anyone not guessing."

Adam chuckled again and his face lit from within. He was all dimples and white teeth and eyes that crinkled at the edges. Someday he'd have true laugh lines—when he was my age. "Well, it's a relief. You're surprisingly easy to talk to—and I'm starting to understand your humor. I feel like, I don't know, like I can be honest with you because you've been honest with me."

Jesus. He was painfully naive if he believed that.

Adam said, "Most people play games and, not to sound like an idiot, but I don't understand the rules."

He was every bit as earnest and innocent as I feared and he was naked in this house

if Porter and John were here. Or Mrs. Henderson. Shit— the entire town. They'd hurt him. They already had. Adam chewed on a grape and as he sat there, wide open with trust. A surge of protectiveness threatened to unman me.

Oh, bloody hell.

"I didn't tell you this before, but the detective said the body had been moved here after death. They were discussing it while I waited on the bench yesterday."

"Moved? You mean someone did plant a corpse in my garden deliberately? He wasn't killed in my yard? Why is that information not any better?"

"Because someone wants to hurt you," he said with stunning clarity. He took a smooth drink from his cocktail glass and I watched his throat work. His Adam's apple dipped. I drank my gin. If I wanted to, I could lay my mouth on his. His lips would sting mine like tart lime and sweet Tangueray. Only he would satisfy so much more.

The need to shield this young man from pain morphed into a raging lust to taste forbidden fruit. Thankfully, his next words cooled me down.

"Planted is the right word. It was dug down, buried. I was turning the compost with a pitch fork," he said matter-of-factly, "and...well it was a surprise."

As disgusting as the image was to normal people, my mind clicked into overdrive and I knew I'd write about this tomorrow. "There must be evidence out there... footprints or something."

"The snowmelt and the rain on Saturday morning probably washed everything away."

"I can't imagine who would do this? Someone strong. It's hard work digging a hole that size."

He smiled a little. "I know. I went to see Mr. Tindell at the garage this morning, to tell him I was going to work for you part time —"

I set my drink down. "I told you not to —"

"...and everyone in town believes you did this thing. Someone mentioned the Route Eight Killer, but we're twenty miles from there."

"Me? They're crazy. I can't even go outside to get the mail; how would I bury someone? Besides, there hasn't been a body in ten years *and* I was away that entire time." Morons. "Those were female prostitutes. This is a white guy in his forties. Probably a WASP like myself."

Adam nodded. "He had on a Navy Brooks Brother blazer — the kind with the gold buttons like your friend John wears. And chinos."

That was news.

"Did they show you a picture? They had Polaroids."

"Yes, but I think I'm too ill to be considered a suspect since I can't leave the house."

There was a creak on the butler stairs. It wasn't difficult to imagine John eavesdropping, a soiled handkerchief to his fevered brow, his ear to a glass against the pine door. That's what butler's stairs were for — the silent and nosy help. I went to look, but Mrs. Henderson marched into the kitchen from the front hall. Her sensible shoes squeaked on the polished floor. She gave Adam a tight look. "Holden. I'm off. Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

She waited, squinting at me with displeasure. "Your manners are lacking."

One would think that after the death of my mother I'd be free of this kind of censure, but no. I sighed. "Adam Morgan, gardener, meet Mrs. Henderson, housekeeper."

Her mouth pinched so hard it disappeared. "You're Jack's son. I know your mother

from church."

"Yes ma'am." He was curiously subdued—more so than normal. He politely nibbled on cheese and crackers, his gaze steadfast on his drink.

"I changed the towels in the guest suite. Whoever was there is gone."

"What do you mean gone?"

"The room was empty. That's generally what one means by 'gone.' Vacant. Devoid of human occupancy. You're sure it was John?"

"Adam delivered him for me."

Mrs. H sent Adam a look that said '*you are not to be trusted*'.

I shrugged. "He's around here somewhere."

At least, I thought he was.

"We'll see." She dismissed me and asked Adam, "Is Jack out of jail?"

Adam said emotionlessly, "Yes. I came back from Vermont to help my mother."

Help his mother what? Why would he come after his father's release and not before?

She turned to me. "Did your new gardener tell you his father killed someone? Drunk driving. Hit and run."

Hit and run. Adam's silence was complete. I now understood that he was trying to gauge the situation. Was Mrs. H a threat or simply a terrible conversationalist? He was at a complete social disadvantage. Something I had never been for a single moment of my life. "Ah. The sins of the father and all that. Tad drove drunk most every night of his life. Let's not judge my new friend."

She didn't let that slide. "That was entirely different."

"No. It's the very same thing," I said curtly. "Goodnight."

She sent another meaningful look to Adam that was entirely lost on him, of course, then grabbed her cardigan and huffed through the door. It was fascinating, from a purely academic standpoint, how much had just transpired that Adam was unaware of.

Or maybe he understood more than I gave him credit for.

His chair scraped when he stood to carry his empty plate and glass to the sink. As he passed, his arm brushed mine. An accidental contact I thought, until his rough fingers touched my sleeve. A jolt of electricity rushed from my wrist straight to my heart. "Adam?"

"I just wanted to say thanks. My father is a problem for everyone." He was clumsy and tentative, yet far more relaxed than when Mrs. H had been present. The sincerity in his words was unmistakable.

"She's protective. She means well." His gaze met mine and my stomach dropped to my knees like a teenager's. Adam's pink tongue made another breathtaking appearance. White teeth bit into the flesh of his lower lip and...something about his innocent fumbling attempt to connect made me crazy sick with lust. My damn dick pulsed into life.

"I..." His finger slid, calluses caught on the smooth threads of my cotton button-down. The sweet smell of cut grass and gin; his bright guileless eyes— blood pulsed into my groin and need tightened my skin. I wanted him. I wanted him and it was far too soon to think about laying a finger on him. Not that I would now, because it was definitely a bad, bad idea to let this moment continue.

Which, naturally, didn't deter me one bit.

He tipped his chin, now peppered in late day whiskers—and Jesus, Mary and Joseph—I silenced every warning and instead slid a hand around his lean hips. Those rough-made work clothes scratched my palm. It had been such a long, long time since

I'd touched anyone – since anyone had touched me – that I lost all train of thought.

My dick rubbed against my fly even as I tried to convince myself that my motives were pure. *This is just a hug.*

I'd never considered following through on diddling the staff – John didn't count. *Don't fuck the help.* I could hear my father mumbling that to us drunk at Christmas dinner over the stuffed goose. The memory alone was a good reason to shove Adam out the door where he belonged, but my cock was doing my thinking tonight – the great big lonely bastard – so I leaned against the granite island and settled him against me. Adam's eyes were wide and clear and I had the inexplicable urge to kiss their lids. Instead, I reached into the depths of his back pocket to pull him closer, his sweet ass filling my palm.

Adam looked into my eyes, and his gaze moved to my mouth. His eyelids fluttered closed and he whispered thickly, "I work for you."

"Yes. You do work for me." So hot. So close. I tipped into him, my hand gripped his jaw, my mouth came down to feather his lips and –

The sound of clanking metal came from yard. Adam jumped away.

Shit.

I almost had him.

"Unless you're uncomfortable, you can stay right where you are for as long as you like. You don't have to run away from me." I had no prior boss chasing the secretary around the desk fantasy – but my words conjured a pleasing image. "This is my house."

"I'm uncomfortable."

Well I had to hand it to him – he was honest. I took a breath as another small clatter echoed – this one from just beyond the laundry room. "Mrs. Henderson?"

Adam quietly went to slip his shoes on.

"It's nothing. Mrs. H probably forgot her rosary." She might be spying on us. I wouldn't put that past her. I willed my erection away again. It was becoming more of a problem whenever Adam was present. "Could be a raccoon."

"I think someone's on the portico."

"It could be John. Did he leave anything in the car?" I went through the mudroom and into the small attached laundry. There were so many doors on this end of the house that Max, my security guy, called it an *epic nightmare* and then charged me for three extra keypads. He was a prince.

The light was on in the carriage house so I asked the obvious. "Did you leave the light on?"

"No. I parked the car and then went back to work. Do you want me to go check?" His breath hit my neck he was so close. It tickled my hair.

I should go look myself. Surely I could do that much. The portico was a private, narrow, covered walkway that led directly to the garage. Latticework and climbing vines made it nearly a tunnel. I gazed into the night. My erection now long gone—as were my balls. "I can walk this. It's protected—and I've had a nice dose of liquid courage."

That was an admission and a half, but I owed him. I gripped the knob and twisted, taking a deep breath.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I'm not complete basket case."

"I don't know...but you hit the patio pretty hard yesterday."

"Thank you for noticing. I can do this. I sit in the sun porch and I smoke a cigar on

the balcony sometimes. No one can see me here.”

Man, I was begging my gardener to let me go outside. I was fucked up as well as forty.

Adam leaned around me to flip the light switch and I stopped him with a hand to his knuckles. “If there are photographers hiding in the bushes, I’d rather not alert them.”

Fucked up and forty, as well as fiercely paranoid. All my most attractive qualities were on display this evening.

We stepped onto the path and the air—cool and damp and alive with the sound of insects and distant cars—embraced me. The sun was down, the final rays of daylight disappearing behind the trees. The deep purple of dusk melded into the dark blue of night. A few stars twinkled beyond the lattice. I took my first step on the cobblestone path that stretched some fifteen feet to the next building. This should be a breeze. If I felt weak, I could faint on one of the benches, or drape my asinine self on the gate to the driveway.

Adam walked boldly, but lightly. I followed with a cautious step. It was difficult, though not as impossible as standing in the broad light of the noon sun. I forced myself to walk, to breathe, and to stay vertical.

“Who goes in your garage?”

“I don’t know. You, obviously. Porter’s car is in there—he walks in town for the most part. Mr. Tindell borrows the tools. Mrs. Henderson.”

“Maybe it’s your brother.”

“Maybe it’s yours. Porter is at the bar with his friends Kipling and Kurt.” Adam was purposely distracting me. Good boy.

“So who drives your cars?”

"Porter, mostly. He prefers mine to his."

"When's the last time he used it?"

"I...have no idea. Couple weeks ago, maybe? I don't keep track. He's free to use which ever car he likes."

We made it to the door and it was a small victory for me. Still I couldn't wait to get inside. Adam called, "Hello?"

All three bays were filled. Two of the vehicles belonged to me. The Jag for show and the Lexus—also for show. Porter's hard topped Saab was down at the end. The back wall of the old building was decorated with tools and lawn furniture. Other than that, it was neat as a pin. Except the trunk to the Jag was raised, the keys still stuck in the lock.

"Did you leave that open?" I knew he hadn't.

"No. We never touched it. Your friend threw his bag in the back seat."

I nearly laughed at Adam's persistence. "He's not actually my friend."

"I figured as much. I just don't know what to call him."

"You don't have to call him anything because he's leaving." On the midnight train if I could possibly manage it. I checked my car.

The trunk was empty, except for my old car blanket folded inside. I closed the lid, pocketed the keys, and the garage lights snicked out. For a moment, I thought the one action led to the other. While I stood there, the back door creaked and shut. *What in the fuck was going on?* "Adam you still here?"

"Right here."

I hit the lock button on my key and the dome light winked on. I said as evenly as I could manage, "Flip the overhead for me, will you?" because panic had gripped me by

the throat. Not the wide out-of-doors fear. Nor was it the feeling of imminent danger. I could handle snakes falling from the jungle canopy onto my head, the frigid terror of ice climbing in the Black Hills, the elation of paddling class five rapids in South America – all child's play compared to the sense of being watched and its accompanying paralysis.

The thud in my chest smacked my ribs. Tachycardia. I should probably sit before I fell. Talk about being emasculated. Balls? Mine were M.I.A. It was shocking how low I'd sunk in the last ten minutes. From horny boss on the make, to knock-kneed girly man about to collapse in the garage. I was in no shape to deflower any virgins – *not that I was thinking about it.*

I climbed into my car, and closed the door with a soft click.

On the road to life...I'd become a fucking passenger.

Adam opened the driver door and bent with a hand high on the doorframe. He smiled knowingly. "You all right there, Holden?"

Well, we were making progress if he was calling me by my first name. "Yup. Peachy keen, thanks."

He did the strangest and most unexpected thing. He settled into the driver's seat, leather crackling, and said, "Give me your keys."

I did, automatically. Handing them over as naturally as if it was something we did every day. Adam started the Jag, the radio mercifully drowning the awful sound of my sawing breath. That lovely motor purred. I hadn't heard it from the interior of this car I loved so much in months. Adam pressed the garage door opener and, smiling artlessly, he said, "Buckle up. Let's take a ride."

"Are you out of your mother fucking mind? That's the opposite of a good idea." He couldn't be serious. "That's a bad idea. Close the Goddamn door."

"No. I don't think so. Listen. If we're in the car, and you're sitting in the passenger

seat, in the dark, you can close your eyes and I'll drive you around the block once. You can get used to it. It helped me, when things were bad at home. My sister used to drive me up the street and back. It can be calming."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but for the first time I questioned both his judgment and his intellect. My fingers tingled; my heart slammed my ribs. "Calming? What? You're a psychologist now?"

"No. I'm a gardener. You know that." Adam put the car in reverse, taking more initiative than he had in the past day and a half. "You'll be fine. Let's just try it."

Panic and embarrassment—the calling cards of a true anxiety attack—choked me and I wanted to lash out. He meant well, I knew that, so I swallowed every single angry word. "Okay. Try. I have to do something before this kills me. I have to get my life back."

That was more than I'd admitted to anyone. Adam simply waited for my go ahead.

"And if I pass out? Don't wake me and you can go to the mall or something."

"Joke?"

"Yes."

"I thought so." His chuckle only confirmed my suspicion that he was unhinged. Adam twisted to back the car from the carriage house, his firm jaw lit by the yellow light of the dashboard. I concentrated on the graceful movement of his leg as he pressed the clutch, his scraped hand on the gearshift, his ease with my beloved car— and his misplaced confidence that he was somehow helping me.

Tires crunched on gravel and I saw my home for the first time in months. Tiny spotlights lighted the front. Just in case anyone in town wasn't impressed enough during the daylight hours they could see my stately colonial at night. The white brick, the black shutters, the lacquered door and its polished brass knocker—it was imposing

and homey. A few lights were burning on the second floor, but my suite was dark. I closed my eyes as Adam k-turned, and looped the circular drive to South Street.

Adam turned the volume down. "I'm going to school. I won't come by on Thursday."

"School?"

"Sort of. I'm taking the test in June to become a Master Gardener—that's when it's offered. That's what I want to do. You know, you'd feel better if you opened your eyes."

"I might." He was trying to distract me again. He was strangely perceptive in that way. I might find that contrast amusing if I wasn't currently strangling on terror. I opened my eyes and he was correct. It was marginally better.

"Who do you think was in your garage?"

I shrugged. I didn't give a shit who had snapped the lights off—Porter or John or Father David or the angry spirit of my mother's dead roses—I was trying not to puke on the fine leather interior of my horribly expensive Jaguar as we rolled by St. Joe's. Red and blue pinpricks of light sparkled through the rose window and I swallowed hard. "That's great, by the way. The class."

"Yeah." We came to a stop at the intersection at the Green and Adam easily turned my high performance vehicle onto West Street.

I stared in alarm through the windshield. "What in fuck's name are you doing?"

"It's privacy glass. No one can see you. Relax. We're just going around the block."

I felt like we were on a parade route. He took me right through the very heart of Smithfield at an absolute crawl. We rolled by the news trucks, the canon, the bank, the Village, the package store and the shops. He chatted and I had no fucking clue what he said. Not one. My eyes were riveted on life outside my window. Life on the mean streets—of Smithfield. It all looked so innocuous.

Finally, he made another leisurely left onto Meadow Street where two little girls were dragging a fat basset hound down the sidewalk. “Are you angry with me?”

“Angry? No. I’m...surprised. I’m appreciative. I’m perspiring. My dick is about an inch long and half as thick right now.”

He reached over and patted my leg as if I was a child and I tried not to react like one. “I think you’re doing great.”

“Great.”

We drove Meadow Street in its entirety, passing the quaint family houses. A few residents were outside. We cruised by the lower end of my property where on the hill my house sat stoic and lonely. A few more streets down Meadow, Adam made another left heading away from the opaque shadows of Smithfield Woods and back toward South Street. We’d been gone all of seven minutes. It was peaceful. Some U2 song came on and Adam cranked the volume. I slid the seat back a bit, and tried to ease my shoulders. My pulse had settled. I was okay.

I was okay.

We made the last turn onto South Street, St. Joe’s just ahead on the right and in no time at all, we were back.

Adam delivered me to the door. He walked me through the portico with predictable reserve and his usual caution. Anyone else, I suspect, would have been self-congratulatory – he’d gotten me outside and, so far, I’d remained conscious.

He followed a half step behind me, quiet and agile and ready to defend me from curiosity seekers, the press, and...the uninspired mist that swirled the edges of the portico. A thin layer of white hovered above the grass. That was about all the threat the yard posed, yet I was breathing erratically by the time we arrived to the laundry room. I had to stop Adam from opening the door for me – a man has his limits.

He stuffed his hands in his front pockets. "I'll be back in the morning."

"I expect nothing less."

He didn't smile. How was it possible that Adam saw through me and no one else did? That alone fascinated me. He said, "You know, what you just did? That took guts. You did a great job."

"You mean by not throwing up, passing out or soiling myself? Yes. I did well."

He shook his head and a smile flirted just under the surface this time. "That's exactly what I meant. Good night, Holden."

He disappeared, fog biting his ankles. I closed the door on the sound of crickets and frogs and cars moving along South Street. Father David's TV set blared from the rectory. I went directly into the kitchen to find a ginger ale and then, I considered the white cloud crawling across my backyard. The shed lurched, still a brooding shape that seemed threatening.

If someone had entered the yard from Meadow Street—currently checkered with yellow porch light and the square-framed glow of flickering TV sets—it would be easy to remain unseen. The stone wall should deter my good neighbors from entering my yard, but it was tumbled and untidy. Easy to climb, or pass through in sections. With no one to see, perhaps late in the night, an intruder or vagrant—hell, Santa Claus himself—could enter my property and no one would be the wiser. It was pitch black behind that shed.

I needed to install a light.

The side door rattled and Kurt's voice wobbled from the mudroom. "Hello? Holden? You in?"

Was he kidding? "I'm here."

It was too early for them to be back—but my brother and his best bud started their

evening prior to cocktail hour. So much prior, they'd enjoyed a three martini lunch. Porter's stay in Smithfield, as well as his tenure as a married man, was coming to a close. He was marking it by staying drunk.

Kurt staggered into the kitchen under the weight of my brother—the two of them disheveled and unfocused.

I had to ask. "How's everyone in town?"

Kurt blinked in an alcoholic haze. "The Village? Same. People think John's dead."

"Yes. Well, these are the same people who think adding garlic to mashed potatoes is the highest form of culinary genius. Let's not encourage them."

Kurt wasn't following my side of the conversation. Porter was smacking his lips and trying to articulate. "I need to lie down."

"Just don't aspirate. You'll need to lay him on his stomach."

"Can you help me get him up the stairs?"

Kurt and Porter had managed quite well without me on any number of occasions, but I shrugged a shoulder into my big brother's armpit and together Kurt and I guided Porter to the second floor.

"You two need to cut back, don't you think? Give your livers time to regenerate."

Porter was alert enough to slur, "I'm 'n vacation. 'N I 'm having fun. You're such a fuck-ing stick 'n the mud. You didn't used to be."

"No. I didn't." I flipped the light at the top of the stairs.

Kurt was his normal quiet, repressed self—he was biting his back teeth. They clicked and his wide jaw flexed. Was he embarrassed for Porter? I certainly was. "So where did you lose Kipling?"

Kurt mumbled, "We didn't lose him. He's in the garage. I'll go get him in a minute. I know you can't."

There was a hint of reproach there, but I didn't care enough to defend myself against a mid-level small town banker. If that made me a snob, so be it.

We bumbled the impressive length of hallway, and deposited Porter into his bedroom. Kurt glanced around, his eyes catalogued the strewn clothing and unclosed drawers as if he hoped the cure to Porter's unpleasant problem were hidden among the socks and folded underwear. He said, "I'll just go get the dog."

"That's probably a good idea." I sighed and set myself to the task of denuding my brother.

Chapter Five

I woke to the insistent bonging of door chimes at seven a.m. I'd overslept and missed my six o'clock workout. It was too early for Mrs. Henderson to get the door, so I found a pair of silk pajama pants and a matching robe and padded through the silent house in my bare feet.

I should have stayed in bed. My almost third ex-sister-in-law greeted me on the front step with a cheerful smile. "Morning."

"Mitz. It's barely seven o'clock."

"Yes. I know." She flashed her dainty, diamond encrusted Tiffany watch at me. "I'm sorry, Holden. Did I wake you? You're usually up."

"I overslept. Do you want to come in?" It wasn't my ingrained sense of hospitality that made me offer. I wasn't about to linger in an open doorway. No news trucks or reporters yet—maybe some sort of announcement had been made and they were turning their sights elsewhere—but I wouldn't stand there like a media target. "Please. Come in."

"Thank you." She slid by me and as she did, the soft scent of something lady-like and expensive followed her. Her tight body was draped in cream-colored Coco Chanel — her hair was swept high and somehow the exact shade of her jacket and skirt. She had tiny pink diamonds in her ears and a lovely matching brooch. A Coach bag the size of a microwave was tucked under her arm, a white paper bakery bag was in her hand. She was practically shellacked in new money, more so than she'd been at Christmas. Was she going for tea at the White House?

No. She was coming to see her husband. Poor Mitz. She didn't have a prayer. Not yet thirty, and I knew she hadn't married my brother for what everyone assumed was more money than he had. If she wanted money, she'd have come after me. No, Mitz came with her own money. The truth was the dingbat loved him.

She kissed my cheek, saying, "I can't reach Porter. He was to meet me at 6:15—we have an appointment with a counselor today."

"Counselor? You mean legal counsel? Six this morning?"

"We were to have breakfast in town." She wiggled the bag. "I brought pastries. Maybe you could wake him? We're going to be late for the therapist."

"He hadn't said." Then again, he didn't tell me everything. He was going to be in rough shape this morning. Maybe. Like many Worthingtons, Porter had a robust constitution and generally speaking, spent his morning after fresh as a daisy.

"I was hoping we would hash some things out."

Hash? Only if he were smoking it would he have agreed to this. He didn't appear to have a shred of remorse for how he'd treated any of his wives. "That's..." I couldn't say what I really thought—which was something along the lines of *that's a waste of time and money*, so I smiled and settled for a vague, "...that's news. I'll see if I can wake him."

"I'd appreciate it. I drove all the way here from New Rochelle." She handed me the bakery bag. A peek revealed morning glory muffins covered in thick white icing. Mitzie

fondled the floral arrangement, plucking tulips and roses and setting them back to her satisfaction. "Porter's been such an asshole since January. Since...you know."

"Mitz. As far as I can recall, he's been an asshole since he turned fifteen and discovered what his dick is good for."

She giggled. "He's impossible, but...he's also irresistible and wonderful when he chooses to be."

I left Mitz at the counter, nibbling a muffin and drowning her denial in a cup of microwaved Earl Grey, and I climbed to the second floor via the butler staircase.

The blue suite was the first door on the left and this morning it was shut tight. I'd seen John standing in his doorway in a pair of disreputable looking shorts late last night. He looked like utter shit—like someone who'd spent the day on his knees in front of a toilet.

I knocked and John, in a different pair of cut off sweats and nothing more, peered white and wary from the threshold. His eyes were bloodshot. Evidently, he hadn't improved.

"Holden. I'm...I'll be down shortly." He ran a shaky hand over his face.

"I was checking to see if you're still alive."

"I am. Is there a dog in this house? I thought I heard barking."

"That's Kipling. Why don't you come down for coffee before you head out? I'll have Mrs. Henderson air the room." It was sour. "Shower and Adam can take you to the train." Sick or no, he had to go.

"Worth. I'm not sure I'm well enough."

"What's your ETA on well? Because you can't stay. How long do you think you can hide before Porter notices we have a guest? Oh. Porter's wife just arrived."

"Mitzie? Christ." He snapped the guestroom door shut like I'd said the Jehovah's Witnesses were here to discuss the latest issue of *The Tower*.

I moved down the hall, passing my childhood room, and then Thayer's room—which hadn't been used in years. Our eldest brother had drowned in a boating accident long ago and I couldn't bear to change a thing. I couldn't bear a lot of things when it came to remembering Thayer—he'd been my hero, he and Porter together, and that bright afternoon when Thay disappeared under the waves in the turbulent waters of Long Island Sound had changed my destiny. His death had turned me from a wayward kid brother who followed the lead of others, to an independent man determined to live life on his terms, by his own rules.

Until I fell apart.

I passed the spare bathroom, the linen closet, my parent's old master suite, arriving last at Porter's redecorated room at the southernmost end of the hall. The door swung inward on its hinges with the first touch of my knuckles and the spunky white puppy dashed over my feet, scaring the hell out of me. Kurt must have delivered Kipling after I retired last night. The little bugger leaped on my legs and then warmth seeped between my toes.

"No! Bad dog." *Damn it.* I pushed the door wide. "Porter? You awake? Mitzie's here."

Porter's room was more of a wreck; no surprise there. The floor was littered with clothing and papers—Kipling had put those papers to proper use. The bed looked as if my big brother had leapt from it in a hurry. Probably as soon as the door rang and he realized his ex wife was standing in the foyer. As family, I had to cover for him, but first I had to deal with the dog.

I scooped the puppy into my arms before he did further damage to the carpet and went to bang on the bathroom door. No answer. I turned the knob—empty. Obviously, Porter had flown the coop. Kipling energetically chomped the sleeve of my robe,

wriggling and wagging and making cute puppy grunts, and I stroked his ear. It was so soft, his fur silky and soothing. He was a happy little thing—clearly he had no worries. This could all be part of Porter's evil plan to get me to keep the dog. "C'mon Kip."

Downstairs, Mitzie gazed through the kitchen window at the foggy gardens. Everything was blanketed in an eerie white mist. She looked pensive and lovely, like a sad Grace Kelly. She turned as I entered, a hopeful smile pinned in place. "Porter?"

"Sorry. He's not here. Maybe you missed him?"

"Maybe. I just don't understand him, Holden. He said he'd meet me Friday, meet me Saturday, Sunday, and he just runs away. He always says that he will meet me, but he never shows. He's not answering his phone either."

I deposited the spastic puppy in her hands. "Well. Why don't you hold his dog ransom? That could work."

She snuggled Kipling into her bosom. "Is this Porter's dog? How cute!"

"Yes. His cute wears thin. He's not housebroken."

"Neither is your brother, but he grows on you."

"I would think that Porter had worn out his welcome with you."

"I know. I just think that maybe...he can change."

Not going to happen. This was my third time around. I loved my brother, but he couldn't keep his dick in his pants if his life depended on it. I didn't want to hear Mitzie's tale, so I changed the subject the only way I could. "Would you be kind enough to take Kipling outside for me? He needs to do his business."

The doorbell chimed again and both Mitzie and the dog glanced at me. "If you'll excuse me?"

I trotted to the front door still dressed like Hugh Heffner, wishing I'd had the

foresight to throw some jeans on. Detective Lewis waited blandly on the step in a tan jacket that did nothing to distinguish him, which I guessed was his goal.

I opened the door cautiously. "Good morning. It's early."

"It's never too early to find answers, Mr. Worthington."

Was he for real? Tony pulled into the driveway, the tires of his Explorer plowing through costly crushed stone and I was quite suddenly unnerved. He parked behind the detective's nondescript Buick.

Something serious was about to unfold and I wasn't going to like it.

Lewis said, "I only have a couple of questions for you, if you have a moment."

"Sure, no problem. Please come in."

"We can do this right here, if you prefer."

He knew that I didn't prefer. "No thank you, Detective. If you'd like to speak with me, we need to do this inside the house where I'm comfortable."

"The agoraphobia. Right."

I led him into the parlor, the most antiseptic and least revealing room in the house—which was in itself revealing of my character. It was a stiff, formal, exquisitely prepared room that I rarely entered. I wouldn't assume the detective was any less intelligent than I, so he knew I was keeping my distance while being hospitable. It was the Worthington way. "How may I help you, Detective?"

Lewis took the room in at an unimpressed glance—an action that would have outraged my mother. "I just have a few questions."

"You've said. I'd prefer to be dressed, but go ahead."

The detective retrieved his familiar notebook from his breast pocket. "You say you

are unable to leave the house, is that correct?"

"Yes. I have panic attacks."

"Are currently you under the care of a physician?"

"No." I said this curtly. "I manage."

"You must, because last night you were seen leaving with your new employee. I'm wondering if driving in the Jaguar constitutes not being able to leave the house."

I ignored his snide comment. "Seen by whom?"

He'd intentionally reaffirmed my worst fears. I *was* being watched. Sweat broke out against my lower back and my palms dampened. I wouldn't wipe them on my pants. Instead, I shoved them into the silky pockets of my robe. "I was in the car—it was an experiment. We heard a noise in the garage and I had a panic attack."

"So you left. Isn't that contrary to the nature of your phobia?"

I nodded again. I hadn't done anything improper and he was an asshole to imply otherwise. "I'm taking steps to get a handle on this thing. Last night was a milestone for me. It was the first time in months I've left the house. I'm deeply appreciative to Mr. Morgan for driving."

I was so appreciative; I'd had vivid dreams of performing curious feats of the oral persuasion on his willing young flesh.

I kept my expression neutral, but Lewis smirked as if he could read my lewd thoughts. "I'm sure you are."

"The journey of a thousand steps, Detective."

He made a note on his pad and I wanted to slap it from his hand. "Are you familiar with Jack Morgan?"

"I know the name. He's Adam's father."

"Seven years ago, he was incarcerated for vehicular manslaughter. His son was in the car with him when the incident occurred. Did Adam tell you that?"

He was in the car? That poor kid. "It hasn't come up in conversation, no. I've only known him a few days." It seemed much longer.

"He was sixteen. There was a question of whether the son was actually behind the wheel at the time."

"I can't imagine that." What was he getting at? "While this is all fascinating, I'm not sure where you're headed. What does Adam's father have to do with me or the fact that an unfortunate transient was found behind my shed?"

"The coroner concluded that the victim's cause of death was from blunt force trauma to the head."

"That's terrible."

"Yes. It is. We have reason to believe the victim was also hit by a car—on Friday night or early Saturday morning—and moved here."

My skin prickled. "Well, I don't drive, Detective."

"So I'm led to understand. Your brother, your housekeeper, your gardener—they all have access to your vehicles? Your Lexus and your Jag have both left the grounds recently."

That was news, but unsurprising. "My brother likes my cars. I can't say I blame him. Have you seen the Saab? Piece of crap. It doesn't mean he was involved—or that any of my vehicles were involved."

I could see the direction he was taking now—best to set this fucker straight. "The church parking lot is filled with cars on a regular basis. The library driveway is next

door—it too, filled with cars. Meadow Street is active. Vehicles traverse South Street daily. The Green is a block away—New Yorkers doing their level best to drive a straight line on West Street. Anyone could have put that corpse in my yard. Anyone could have hit and run. If you have something specific you'd like to address, I'm all ears. Otherwise, I need to get dressed." I was getting testy. "Has an ID been made?"

"That was my next question. Do you know Geoffrey Davis?"

I thought hard before answering because it was expected of me. "No. Not ringing any bells."

"Really? That's interesting. I have a feeling he might have known you."

"Maybe. A lot of people think they know me. I was on television for five years in a very successful series. I've been a bestselling author for fifteen. I am a somewhat notorious resident of Smithfield. I'm not unknown."

He let that go. "And your former lover, John Paige. Have you heard from him in the last few days?"

Now that gave me pause. The Detective's keen eye stayed on me, calculating my every gesture—every breath and tick and eye flicker. I had to keep myself from reacting. "Don't tell me you listen to bar gossip. That isn't John."

Not really an answer.

He said, "I understand that. I'm simple wondering if you've been in contact with Paige."

My pulse increased a notch. Something was going on here and this dick was leading me down a dangerous path. I probably needed legal counsel, but I answered anyway. "John? Yes. I've spoken with him. This morning as a matter of fact. I told Tony that Paige is here—he arrived yesterday and took ill," I said cautiously. "May I ask why?"

"He isn't answering our calls. That's interesting." He made a note. "He was last seen in the company of Geoffrey Davis—they had dinner Friday evening in Kent. Geoffrey Davis was the man recovered from your property."

I said nothing because I had nothing to say—and my mouth had gone bone dry. *John and Geoff*. It made my blood cold, but I would swear on the grave of my brother that if John were guilty of something, he wouldn't be sleeping in my house. He'd be in Key Largo or San Juan or Bangkok sipping rum punch with an unsuitable houseboy. He was a smart man. No. Something terrible had happened to him. Something had driven him to seek shelter with me.

The Detective waited for me to respond.

"I see." Actually, I saw nothing. I needed an attorney to guide me. "To memory, I've never met Geoffrey Davis. John and I parted ways two years ago. Not amicably. That's old news."

"Not amicably. Yet he's sleeping under your roof."

"He's been ill since his arrival. I could try to wake him, if you like."

He nodded. "That would be ideal. The sooner, the better. We'd like to take a look in your garage and we'd like to speak with Mr. Morgan again."

Morgan. Hit and run. *Jesus*. My gardener, John, myself...we were all suspect. "Absolutely. Be my guest."

"Do you play golf, Mr. Worthington?"

I raised my eyebrow at him.

"Of course. Your illness. I'll be outside; just give me a shout."

Lewis crossed the lawn, shit colored suit rising above the mist, his shoes leaving a trail of dark prints in the dewy grass. Everything was blanketed in thick fingers of

white fog. It was the perfect setting for the next disaster.

I wanted to consult with Tony, who leaned against his truck, arms crossed over his chest, his face impassive. His eyes met mine from across the murky yard and he shook his head so carefully I almost missed it. Not censure; a warning.

Mitzie's Mercedes blocked the driveway and behind the cop cars, Adam's old red Ford seemed to float in the grass. I could just make out the news trucks through the fog.

Laissez les bons temps rouler. Damn difficult to let the good times roll when it was another crime party scene at my place.

I left law enforcement to poke around my property; they were still acting within their rights. I padded to the kitchen and the dog announced my arrival with a bark that had all the strength of a squeeze toy. Mitzie was speaking to someone. At first I thought it was to Kipling or maybe John had finally ventured downstairs, but it was Adam's wary voice. "I'll wait for Mr. Worthington outside."

Mitzie said, "I'm waiting for my husband, the other Mr. Worthington. I'm Porter's wife. Are you a friend of Holden's?"

"I work for Mr. Worthington."

"Work? What do you do? You look...very fit." She was flirting innocently with my gardener. He likely didn't know it. I swept into the kitchen to find Adam waiting rigidly in the mudroom doorway, his shoes securely tied onto his feet. He wore dark washed jeans today and a faded green t-shirt with a white pine tree on the front. It said *Smugglers' Notch*. His eyes met mine, but he didn't smile. If anything, he stiffened more.

"Holden, you didn't tell me you'd hired a gardener. A very good looking gardener."

I nipped this right in the bud. "Why would I have?"

Her smile wobbled and I regretted hurting her feelings.

She said, "I'm going to put the dog in the yard for his business. Would you mind if I waited here for Porter? Maybe...maybe he forgot? Maybe he went for a run?"

A run? Yes. He was running all right—running away.

"Sure, Mitz. I'll have Mrs. Henderson serve coffee on the sun porch. I have to work this morning, so I won't be joining you." I was about to drag John down here by his ear and pitch him through the front door to the police. Then I'd call Porter and give him fair warning that he had an uninvited guest.

As soon as I fired up my laptop, I was going to google Geoffrey Davis.

"Perhaps your gardener would like coffee?" Mitz smiled sweetly at Adam—she was having him on. She was no more likely to have tea with a gardener than she was to clean up after the dog. Porter's wife was a great girl, but spoiled.

"No thank you," Adam said rigidly.

"Some other time then." She toddled to the door on her heels, the puppy in her arms instead of her oversized purse. I had notion she was trying on a new accessory. The dog certainly matched her suit.

Adam stared broodingly outside where mist swirled around the hedges. "Good morning."

"Good morning Adam."

He nodded, like he was agreeing that it was indeed a good morning. "I'd like to start on the roses today, if that's all right. It's past time. There's a lot to do."

"Good idea. I wanted to ask you to stay for supper this evening. I'm making a hearty Tuscan Bean Soup—it's for the culinary memoir I'm writing from recipes I gathered while traveling. It's simple food, from Tuscany obviously, with white beans and sausage. It makes a large portion and I thought I'd make some fresh bread..."

Good fucking Lord, I was rambling. Babbling, even. Inviting a man to supper for the first time in too many years, while my ex lover swooned upstairs – and his probable lover lay dead in the county morgue and we were every one of us suspects to a possible murder. My priorities were confused at best. My skin heated. I flushed hot enough that I had to be strawberry red. I wasn't sure if the appropriate brand of shame was responsible.

Adam, of course, read nothing into any of this, which I found incredibly attractive. "Sure. That sounds nice, thank you."

I sighed, knowing I had to bite the bullet. "Adam. I'm going to spell this out. I mean this invitation as one man asking another to dinner. Not as a social visit or a boss asking an employee to discuss business, but as a gesture of friendship. I'm thanking you for last night."

His grin came slowly. It lit him from the inside to the out, until those magical eyes twinkled. Now that Mitzie was gone, he relaxed and the Adam I knew in private was back. "I understand. I'm not a complete idiot." His shoulders shook and he laughed under his breath, "Oh my God. Bean soup."

If possible, I blushed harder, which was in itself a unique experience. "It's good soup."

He held up a hand. "I'm sure it is. Thank you." And he snorted once.

"The police need to speak with you."

His smile sank and I wanted to retract my words. "Yeah. What else is new?"

Mrs. Henderson came through the front porch door as Adam left via the back. She stared unhappily at his retreating figure as he disappeared into the fog.

She hung her cardigan on the hook, her purse on top, and came smartly into the kitchen to make my coffee. "This place is crawling with people."

"Believe me. I know. I need to get dressed. Mitzie is here, can you even believe that? Would you mind getting her set with coffee on the sun porch? Maybe find her a book or a newspaper as well? Or a crossword." Could she do one? "I'm not going to entertain her. She's here for Porter."

"Oh for the love of Pete."

I took the stairs to my bedroom, tossed jeans and moccasins on, and a plain white t-shirt. In the mirror, I was startled by how tousled I looked. Bedheaded and stubbled. That wouldn't do for a mug shot or a hot *not-a* date, so I attended to my basic needs. I shaved, brushed my teeth, tamed my hair with water and a comb, and the Goddamn doorbell rang a third time. My head swam with all the activity. I let Mrs. Henderson tend the door while I sought John for the police.

He had some explaining to do.

I knocked on the guest room door again, but I didn't wait for him to open it. I turned the handle—I *was* the king of this castle and I'd open a door if I wanted to.

The room was empty. I should have felt some surprise, but with Porter gone as well, I was witnessing a disturbing new trend. John's worn Nepali bag was missing; his smelly bed was unmade. He wasn't downstairs or wandering the moody garden with my strapping, lopper-wielding lawn boy. He wasn't in the gym or the library or the wine cellar—or any one of the too many rooms in my supersized house. I checked them. That bastard had disappeared. It was as if I had imagined his very existence under my roof.

Chapter Six

The local radio station named the body to the public: Geoffrey Davis, aged forty-four of New York City and Kent. A realtor. With Porter suspiciously absent, I had no direct line to the gossip in the Village, but I imagined word spread like wildfire that Geoff Davis, recently of my compost pile, was linked to John Paige. The good news—the fine people of Smithfield no longer believed I’d killed John. The bad news—I was connected to the untimely death of his lover, if only by proximity. Four news trucks now lined South Street—*four*—each and every one of their cameras focused on the house.

The police spent time in my garage and my shed bagging, tagging, poking and prodding my personal belongings. They questioned Adam with disturbing regularity, and then they left. My vehicles remained in the carriage house for now, so I assumed I was in the clear, but my anger grew. Whoever did this thing—Adam was correct—did it to hurt me and mine.

If there was anyone motivated to hurt me, it would have to be John Paige. But, honestly, hadn’t he done enough? It didn’t add up—why would he kill his lover with a

car, or anything else for that matter, and bury the man here? He had nothing to gain. I tried calling John all afternoon, but couldn't reach him. His phone went straight to voice mail.

I kept an eye on Adam as he toiled in the yard. He was indifferent to the curiosity seekers lining the sidewalk along Meadow Street. The fog had burned away and the day turned sunny and warm. Hauling debris and carrying stones, Adam sweated, shirtless, determined to right the wrongs done to my home over the past two years.

At four o'clock, I started supper. What the hell was so amusing about bean soup?

I had just set the soup on the stove when Tony stormed down the hall, Mrs. Henderson scurrying behind him. "When were you going to tell me that John Paige left?"

"I left you two messages. Are you off duty? I'm about to make cocktails." It was early, but this day called for free flowing gin.

"I'm on duty. Don't you dare offer me a drink. You tell me everything, Worth. This stinks of tampering in a police investigation—you understand? You're treading a fine line. Are you involved?"

"No. And fuck you for asking. You think I'm enjoying any of this? I don't understand what's at foot here and frankly, your anger with me is out of proportion. I spoke with Detective Lewis—answered every question. John was upstairs upchucking and then he just...disappeared."

Tony Gervase was not a violent man. I'd never seen him lose his cool, not even with his high-strung lover, Mark, and that was saying something because Mark was a nut. Tony was fast losing his patience with me. Gone was my friend; here was the law enforcement officer. A six foot four, burly Italian, take no shit, Connecticut State Trooper. "The lab is processing evidence removed from the scene. You are intimately connected to the deceased. Everywhere I go, people are speculating that you have a

motive—

"What would motivate me to run a man over with a car? That seems like a sloppy way to murder anyone except maybe a crossing guard. Besides, I've been trapped in the house for how long?"

"You left the house last night, Mr. Miracle Cure. Your affliction means nothing. Not to mention you have a questionable new employee with a police record manning your grounds, digging in your compost, running your errands. Driving your damn car. His father is a felon. He served time for vehicular manslaughter."

"That's irrelevant."

"No. It's not. That kid was under suspicion then. His own father fingered him as the driver."

I set my spoon down. "Are you kidding me?" Inconceivable. That poor kid. I'd made jokes about his father. *Shit*. "And I thought Tad set the bar for bad parenting. What a miserable excuse for a—"

"Worth, he started working for you two weeks ago—he's young, he's impressionable, he has a history of criminal activity—wake up. I'm not saying he's involved, but how the hell do you think this looks?"

"I know how it looks, but I have nothing to do with this and neither does Adam."

Tony's mouth went mulishly flat.

"I don't know how I know it, but I do." Naturally, I told Tony everything I could remember about John. I gave him the address in Kent and a description of what he was wearing when he arrived as well as this morning, and when I'd last seen him. "I can't imagine John dumping a body here and then asking me for sanctuary. That's unlikely."

"People do crazy things." Tony said. I had a feeling he was politely reminding me that I was insane. As if I could possibly forget.

At 4:30, I kicked Tony out. "I have a dinner guest tonight."

"Morgan? Have you completely lost your mind? He's inappropriate. Do you know how this looks? What the hell is the matter with you?"

"The matter with me? Nothing. It's dinner."

"Don't kid yourself. It's something."

I let that go and he left as pissed as when he arrived.

Despite all the calamities today had brought – and it had brought many – all I could think about, write about, all that I wanted, all that I aimed for all day (and more importantly, this evening) was to have a respectable supper with my new employee. I wasn't planning anything else.

In particular, I was not hoping to sink my dick as deep and as far as it could possibly reach into the sweet young man carefully setting his empty soup bowl into my kitchen sink. I grit my teeth against a surge of lust. As if *soup bowl* and *kitchen sink* were metaphors for something lewd.

"I saw my brothers on Meadow Street again." Adam had changed his shirt, but his pants were dirt stained. He'd scrubbed in the small powder room down the hall, coming to supper with his gorgeously rich hair slicked back from his forehead. I'd swallowed hard and made the necessary chit-chat, regaling him with wild tales from back when I was still well.

His shoes were gone, as usual and he smelled of my French-milled hand soap, sweat, roses and, oddly, a little like gasoline.

"What did you tell them?"

"That they should try and find your old *friend* John Paige." He smiled shyly, as if he were trying to make a joke. He stood at the sink and rinsed his dishes. "I told them Paige was the real story and that he had to be here in town because he didn't have a car.

They left.”

“Smart. They’ll probably find him – the police are looking for him.”

“Maybe...it was them in the garage.”

“I thought of that, but I think it was John.”

“Probably. You know, your brother’s car is still here.”

“I heard. Porter’s hiding because his wife arrived.”

“That’s her Mercedes?”

I nodded. “She offered to keep the dog so I’m letting her stay in my parents’ suite. That way Porter can deal with her. This house is filling.”

“I’m sure you still have plenty of space.” Adam slid his shoes on. “We should go for another drive.”

“A drive? Again?” My voice pitched uncomfortably high and I fought to remain calm. I didn’t want to be a crybaby, but I waffled. “Didn’t we just do that yesterday?”

His smile only deepened.

“Look, I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but I don’t know.”

“I do.” His tone was even, firm, and I found I liked it. I liked it a lot.

“You just like my car.”

“What’s not to like?” He grinned. “We could take the truck if you’d rather –”

“No. No. The Jag. No offense.”

A sprinkling rain greeted us on the portico. It was still quite warm and the fog had returned. It covered the ground as it had this morning. I bravely traversed the walkway with Adam following close; his hand resting on the small of my back and I swear he

was...protecting me. He was close enough to catch me if I fell. I sloughed that off as ridiculous. I was taller, broader and stronger. I was only weak on the inside.

In the garage, everything was neat. "They didn't make a mess this time?"

Adam shrugged. "I cleaned it. Those cops really are pigs."

We slid into the car, first Adam, then I. He started my beautiful car and waited for the garage door to rise. "Where should we go?"

"Take me to the point."

Where in the hell had that come from?

"Oh, really? Can you do it?"

I tried to keep my voice jocular. "It depends on the 'it' you refer to. Just drive, Morgan."

"Yes sir."

We left the driveway and Adam took the back way, racing past the news trucks and heading down Gallows Lane toward the Smithfield Woods. He drove easily, taking the wet corners fast with the practiced skill of a native. The lights disappeared in the rearview mirror as we took 202 toward the Lake. There was only one reason to go to the point at night and we both knew it. I was stiff with dread and something a bit earthier.

Lust.

What the hell did I think I was doing? I was brimming with anticipation, resolved to at last put my mouth on this gentle, steadfast young man. Panic, my constant companion, could fuck off. As could honor, because the word *virgin* had taken its place in my lexicon. It fairly drummed inside my veins. I focused on the shocking breadth of my impure thoughts while Ida Maria sang about liking someone so much better naked.

How appropriate.

He pulled onto the bumbling private drive. *Closed at dusk* the sign warned. But Adam had grown up here, as had I, and he took that sliver of roadway to the very end of the point without hesitation. The headlights gleamed on still dormant trees. The branches glittered as if adorned with a million sparkling diamonds. Further out, our lights disappeared into the ghostly fog over the inky expanse of Bantam Lake.

We came to a stop and Adam shut the car off, the radio too. "You good?"

"I'm hanging in there. I'm not leaving the car though."

"Me either. It's pretty damn dark." He laughed.

With the radio off, the night was filled with the noise of woodland frogs. Even with the windows closed, we could hear their peeping. Adam didn't seem to know where to put his hands. They went from the steering wheel to his thighs. Then he crossed his arms. He uncrossed his arms. I watched, wondering if it was good form to grab a virgin by the neck and have my way with him.

The inside of the car turned warm and nearly oppressive with silence. How should I do this? The seconds ticked by, each one longer and hotter. When had I become so out of practice? I wanted him. I knew he wanted me. He looked point blank at me, not saying a Goddamn word, and he fucking willed me to do something. We stared at each other and...older, wiser, more experienced, this thing was up to me. His gaze flickered to my mouth, back to my eyes, to my mouth again and desire moved me forward. "Are you nervous?"

A laugh puffed on a tiny breath and he nodded. "Maybe a little."

"Good."

He laughed again and I couldn't wait another moment. I was going to lay my hand on him and then, sweet Jesus, I was going to put my mouth on him.

In the dim light, his gaze was eager and bright but when I touched his neck, when that first spark of finger to flesh shocked us both, he flinched with the power of it. His mouth trembled and he closed his eyes. I threaded my fingers through the silken strands of his hair and he leaned into me, so eager, so ready, as if he were desperate to be touched in kindness. He leaned into me and I knew that this bold, strong, delicious boy had been as bereft of human contact as me.

Promises be damned. I met him halfway and nipped his lip. A tiny hitch of breath escaped him. Our first contact and I bit him. I was nothing if not smooth. I brushed my mouth gently, easing the sting of my teeth.

I whispered, "Thank you for taking me here, Adam."

My words were barely out before his mouth came hungrily, greedily to mine. The satin flesh of his lips, moist and flavored of gin, opened and I tongued him. I forged in and took his mouth, this first kiss deep like a perfect fuck. I filled him and he yielded into my arms with a willing moan. I cupped his bold jaw, tilting him into my embrace, topping him—and showed him the raw pleasure of one man's mouth on another. Adam's surrender took me from just *hanging in there* to *Goddamn you're so lovely, lovely, let me have you*.

He squeezed my shoulder roughly, twisting in the bucket seat trying to twine himself around me. So fucking impatient to be had, his knee met the steering column with a crack and I regretted my shortsightedness. Why did I buy a car with so little legroom and such a cumbersome console? It separated us. I was too big to climb over. That dumb divider served to slow me down—which was important in a way. I longed for a minivan or a flat bed truck or a damn camper. Something to lie down in. Something to lie him down on. I wanted to be between his thighs, rubbing him to screaming release in comfort, if not style.

I licked his neck, sucking rough skin and tasting soap. And then I bit, putting my stamp on his flesh. I threw caution out the fucking window and peeled his shirt over his

head, cooing and coaxing. Inane words, "Yes, there you go, you're so lovely," and I tossed that rag behind us into the cramped backseat of my pretentious car.

Why didn't I buy the Hummer? I mean other than it not fitting into the garage?

Adam wiggled as I searched his pecs, seeking his budded nipple. His breath hissed between his teeth as I pinched that little brown nub and then I sucked it, drawing it in, stretching it with my teeth. Some men didn't enjoy nipple play – but Adam was holding me against his chest, his pulse erratic, his fingers digging into my hair. I suckled and nipped while he gripped me and breathed. *"Oh yeah."*

I needed to slow down, but that was beyond me. He wanted it. Shit, he was panting hard enough to fog the windows. That might have been my heavy breathing as well, because I wanted it too. I moved to lick his stomach and buried my fingers into his pants. A wet tip eased my grip and his bold young cock slid neatly into my curled fist.

Carried away by the sex noises that filled the car, I whispered darkly, "Open your pants for me, Adam."

He nodded, jerking to unzip, and then he unbuttoned his stained work pants. He was raw and hard and crude and I wanted him buck naked, lubed and riding my cock.

"Pull them down. All the way." I held him firm while he lifted his hips, cock still jacked tight—smoothly fucking my hand—and he dragged his pants slowly to his knees. His pale thighs were revealed, his skin hot, fevered and flushed, and I wanted to suck that delicious spot where thigh met groin. Eyes shut and nervous, he waited for me, his dick straining in fist.

I'd never seen anything more perfect in my entire life.

The leather squeaked as he strained to create friction.

"What do you want? Do you want me to jerk you off?"

"Yeah. That would be nice."

I chuckled and instead of jerking him, I half climbed, half lay across the console and swallowed his salty, velvet flesh. It didn't take him long. He was beside himself, cramming with no finesse deep into my throat. I was experienced and he wasn't, so I let him do it and brought him with hand and mouth right to the edge. Until that telltale stiffening when his begging stopped, his breath arrested and everything in the entire universe hung on that single moment. I sucked and the first drop of semen hit my tongue. With a cry his orgasm tripped and he stuffed himself into my throat. He came hard and the welcome flavor of ocean and iodine filled my mouth. I gulped Adam's load gladly as he mumbled and his voice shook. "Oh shit, Holden. Shit. Shit. It's so good."

His heart beat with such power; I could feel it through his fingertips as they rested gently on my nape.

I let him settle; let him relax, as he petted my neck. I almost laughed but I was nearly fucking the gearshift. I popped his prick out, licking him one last time, and wrestled any lingering reservation into submission—because this was meant to be. That delicious boy surprised me by scrambling over the console. He forced me with rough hands into the seat, climbed on top of me, and kissed me deep and violent.

"You taste like cock."

I nearly came at his words.

He yanked my shirt from my pants, fierce and strong. What's a man to do? I put the seat back, laying that fucker down nearly flat as Adam ripped his jeans off, shoes going who the hell knew where. He pressed his long body into mine. "You need a bigger car. I told you we should have taken the truck."

I swear to God I fell for him, right there.

"This is cozier." He ground his crotch, naked, hairy, wet and wild into my trousers, greedy and appreciative. Exactly the kind of fresh new lover a horny reprobate like me

needed. I was so hard that grinding him would be more than enough to get me off. He licked my chin, tongue trailing, and then his tongue dove into my mouth.

And I? I humped him. I slid my hands around his thighs, so slim I gripped their backs easily, and I thrust into him. I wished I were inside him.

I was nearly there, the juice working its way from my balls. Need turned me into an animal. The smell of his hair and the fine scent of my own soap filled the steamy car. His hair tickled my nose. I sucked his neck, his shoulder, his chin. I gripped his bare ass with enough force to leave marks, moaning *Fuck yeah- baby-harder, yeah, that's the way*, — and I let go for the first time in years. I shot inside my jockeys like a cannon, coming hard against him.

Lights flashed across the window. For a second, I thought that was an amazing testament to the strength of my orgasm. But no. Adam leaped away, vaulting into the driver's seat. "Holy shit!"

The white glare shifted and blue and red lit the road. If that was Tony, I was going to strangle him with my bare hands, as soon as I found something to mop my dick with. Disoriented and soaking wet in my own sticky come, I put the seat upright and stared numbly as shadows danced across the interior of the car.

"Holden. My pants. Can you...?"

I handed him his jeans and he hustled to yank them on. Adam rubbed a hand across his forehead. His chest was hairless, muscles defined, and pale from the long winter. He laughed. "I can't believe this. That's the town cop. Where's my shirt?"

Good God. He sounded sixteen. I felt a million years old and utterly filthy. The headlights crept closer down the twisting road. "Is this in violation of your probation? Switch seats with me."

"I don't think so."

"Switch anyway."

We banged into each other, two full-grown men all knees and elbows in that dinky space as the other vehicle arrived. The windows were fogged enough that I'm sure no one could see in. Adam pulled his shirt on. It was both backward and inside out, but that was the least of our concerns. I rolled the window down, adjusted the driver's seat and waited in my sticky pants.

Outside, the trees felt closer, the rain heavier, the air chunkier. On the edge of my awareness, I felt the tachycardia kick in.

"You okay?"

"Nope. Not at all. If I passed out, we better pray no one looks at my crotch."

I breathed a sigh of relief that it was Tony Gervase clomping to the car, his flashlight shining purposefully into my eyes. "You're an idiot."

"Good evening, officer."

"This isn't a cruising area, Worth. You need to have your medical breakthrough somewhere else." He drew in a breath, "License and registration please."

"Fine—you want to play it that way. I'm not feeling too well just now, so let's make this quick." I dug for my wallet, but it must have slipped from my pants when I was dry humping my gardener. I smacked my pockets stupidly and then turned to look at Adam. Damn thing must be stuck in the seat. I turned back to Tony. "Maybe this isn't a good time to tell you my wallet is at the house?"

"No. This isn't a good time."

"Just kidding. Adam, could you check your seat? It must have...jumped over the console."

"You're not funny. Just promise me you're not driving. You'll faint. You know

better than this."

"Don't nag. You sound like Mrs. Henderson."

"You deserve it." Tony's light beam slashed across the car seeking Adam. He sat frozen in the passenger seat. Neither Tony nor Adam looked happy.

I said, "I'll have my friend drive."

Tony snorted. "Everything all right, Adam?"

Adam nodded, his face the color of his shirt. The worn tag waved high on his collarbone. Red flag. No question he'd just been naked. "I'm okay, officer." Adam dug under his ass for my wallet. He reached between the seat and the console, saying to me, "Are you sure you had it?"

"I think so." On further reflection...I realized I'd left my wallet at home. It's not like I used it much. I smiled at unsmiling Tony. "Actually, officer —"

Adam was still digging. "There's something...here..." and he wrenched something free. "Here it is."

A new sense of foreboding nearly arrested my racing heart. In his hand was a brown leather wallet. "That's not mine."

I gave it to Tony who, until this moment, had been stringing me along as friends do. "Shit. What the fuck is going on Holden? This is Davis' wallet."

"Hell if I know. I thought you guys checked the car?"

"They did. There wasn't a nick or a scratch. No dent. No blood. No missing tire jack. Nothing. They went over it with a magnifying glass, but they missed this. Goddamn it, unless you really did put that corpse in your yard, someone is setting you up."

"They're not doing a good job if they hid evidence after the police came." Adam

offered. I snapped around to look at him and he said, "What?"

"I was going to say that."

Tony sighed and shook his head. "He's right. Now I really do have to call this in."

Chapter Seven

They took my precious Jag. Tony, tight-lipped with disgust, drove us to the house while I sweated and battled vertigo in the back seat of his Explorer. "Smooth."

"Fuck off or I'll puke on your floor." I closed my eyes and lay against the headrest. All things considered, this trip was still progress, although my dick was stuck to my underwear.

Adam was sweating worse than I—and brooding. He was stiff in Tony's presence, quiet and subdued. After his astute comment regarding evidence, he didn't once look at Gervase again, just stared out the window. I realized he was like this with everyone except me—that was troublesome. The only thing he'd said on the four-mile drive back was, "This isn't a violation of my probation."

Which I guess was to make me feel better.

"You're fine." I swallowed bile.

We returned and with a wave Adam dashed to his Ford—he was late for something

with his brothers. This entire experience had pushed him beyond the limits of his extremely small comfort zone. And like so many people in my life today, he couldn't leave fast enough.

That was hours ago. I had since showered and now sat in my lonely home theatre watching *Blazing Saddles*.

Doo-dah.

Lily Von Shtupp sang while I tried to imagine who would plant Geoff's wallet in my Jag. I really didn't have anything better to do but match a suspect to the crime—it was late and I was alone again.

All roads should point to someone in this house—namely: John. It wasn't him. He'd scammed before the police ever searched the garage, and while I couldn't imagine John killing anyone, I could well imagine someone taking a shovel to the back of his head. He had that effect on people.

Porter had disappeared early—he hadn't been on the grounds all day. Adam...had been here for two days. He tidied the garage after the police left. He'd cleaned the car after John arrived. He'd come and gone. He'd had easy, full access to the carriage house, my car, the grounds...he could have put the wallet there....

I paused, glaring at Madeline Kahn's corseted bust as if it was her fault I was heading down the wrong track.

It was *not* Adam.

He had no prior knowledge of Davis, or Paige, or even me as anyone other than some rich guy on South Street until he'd seen that monument to my monumental ego lining the front hall. He just had a knack for finding hidden things.

The phone rang at ten forty-five. I turned down the TV and looked at the display—*Blocked Caller ID*. It was a gamble but I answered anyway because my irritation with

Porter was growing.

"Hello?"

"Holden." Tony grumbled into the phone.

"Now what? Do you ever stop working?"

"I'm off in fifteen minutes and I'm off tomorrow. I don't want to see you, hear from you, or know about you."

"Done, and likewise I'm sure."

"I have Adam again. We're at Bacchi's. He's not in trouble yet, but if he doesn't leave, I might have to take him in. Which is a real problem. When I asked for a name to call, naturally, he gave me yours."

"Naturally." *What in the hell?* I'd seen his taillights leaving the driveway at eight. I stopped thinking for a moment and let Tony's words sink in. *Adam had given my name.* Why? My first instinct was jaundiced – what did he need from me? I set that aside.

"Right. You...want me to..." What? What could I do for him? "I'd drive over, but you impounded my car."

"You have another one. Quit bitching. I'll bring him to your place, which I'm not supposed to do. He needs a cab."

"There's not a cab for fifty miles."

"He can spend the night in the E.R. or in a holding cell or on your couch. He doesn't have the money for a hotel, he doesn't want to upset his mother and I don't blame him. I don't want to bring him in. There's been a dispute."

"Dispute? Between whom? I don't think Adam fights." Did I know that for sure? He tangled with his brothers on my lawn only yesterday – although they had clearly provoked him.

"It wasn't him — it was those loose cannons he calls his brothers."

Ah. That explained it. "Bring him here. I run a home for wayward alcoholics."

"I'd laugh if you were joking."

"I know. Thanks for...calling me."

"No problem. You owe me."

I went downstairs to wait for my employee. Employee? We'd crossed that bridge when he came in my mouth. I now thought of him as my drunk, hot, able, virginal, twenty-four year old burgeoning homosexual gardener lover. My lover. Adam.

This week couldn't get any stranger. On top of everything else, I'd *finally* shared an orgasm with someone other than my own sorry hand and he was on his way here to have an illicit slumber party.

* * * *

Tony deposited my beer-slopped new boyfriend on the seat of the hall tree. Adam smiled roguishly. My heart beat painfully at the sight. At least his Lobster shirt was turned in the right direction. "Hey there, Mister Holden."

"Adam."

"I feel like I've just made a booty call special delivery," Tony grunted. "Man, you think people were talking about you before? This takes the cake. He's twenty."

"Twenty-four. I've got things under control."

Famous last words.

"Mmmhm. Don't let him out of your sight, Worth. Give him something to eat. And

hide the silver."

"Funny. Have you considered a career in stand-up?"

Tony gave Adam a hard stare. "Don't make me come back here."

Adam smiled and gave him a wobbly 'thumbs up'. "Thanks for the ride, Tony."

Tony softened slightly, shook his head ruefully, and left.

I slid an arm around my charge. It felt entirely too natural to do so. I had diddled my employee and if everything else in my life were normal, that would be unforgivably scandalous. Not for the fiftieth time this evening I wondered what the hell I'd been thinking.

Still, here he was. I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. His warm, willing flesh was in my hands again. This seemed providential. I could chide myself tomorrow; tonight, I felt like Hannibal Lector, I wanted to taste him that much.

He breathed on me and...maybe I'd get him washed up a bit first. "C'mon. Into the kitchen, then the shower, then bed."

The order for all good things.

I remembered Mitzie and my step faltered. I had a sure thing and damn it all, that woman had better be asleep.

Adam and I stumbled to the kitchen. "Cole and Braden had pictures of you and I broke Cole's camera." He made a slapping motion. "Right on the bar."

"That's impressively dramatic. I guess thanks are in order."

"Don't thank me yet. They're not likely to stop."

I settled Adam onto a stool. "Sit still or you'll fall off. You need to eat something."

"More bean soup?" He chuckled. What was his problem with my soup? "How

about something with a little meat in it?"

I flushed and bit my tongue, but somehow he recognized that for what it was—lucky guess?—and apparently he was delighted with me. His grin was downright toothy. "You *are* a pervert."

If only he knew. "I'll read you a bedtime story later, and then you'll thank me for being a pervert." I sniffed the leftover lamb in its Tupperware container and then stuck it in the microwave. "Now tell me what happened."

"I went down to the bar. I never go down there anymore, but it was Braden's birthday and we had a few beers. I think I was still feeling good from the point. That was...that was..." His eyes shone. "Great. Except for that last part. Jesus. That was crazy. I thought that was your wallet. They showed me the photos of you...through the windows. I'm so sorry my family is... Shit. My truck is at the bar. Holden...do you mind that I'm here? I couldn't go home. Are you going to fire me?"

Fire him? I had an entirely different 'f' word in mind.

"Adam. Start over. Begin at the beginning because I have no idea what the hell you just said." I set the lamb and a tall glass of peach tea in front of him. "Eat. Now tell me one thing at a time."

"Okay," he said around a mouthful of food. "Cole said you write porno. Is that true?"

Well, that was refreshingly direct.

"Once upon a time, I wrote a wicked book about some men who...get lost in the forest and are under the delusion that the only way out is through each other's asses. It made a lot of money. How do you not know this? This is ancient by townie news standards."

"Well, how did you not know about my father? It made CNN."

"Ah. Touché."

"I wasn't here when you were a pornographer. When my father went to jail, my sister Abby and I moved to Stowe to work. I've been a ski instructor the last few years. We came home in February because...my mother has a hard time managing everything since the divorce. What's the problem with you writing porno? People don't like what you write but don't care that you're gay?"

"They minded very much that I—"

"Unless...hey, did you act in it?" I scarcely felt he was speaking to me anymore. He was thinking out loud.

"You seem unusually hopeful, but no. I simply had the bad manners to publish it."

"Hey. You're doing it again. Making jokes because you're...oh. This is why you're afraid of people seeing you."

"I'm not afraid of—"

"Don't lie."

Adam winked and I choked. He was not only more vibrant and confident than I'd seen him—he had my fucking number. I felt uneasy. Either alcohol loosened him and all those barriers were down, or our trip to the point had strengthened this unlikely bond.

"You're afraid of anyone seeing you. That's too bad. You're hot."

"Hot? I'm forty. Forty year olds aren't hot."

"You are."

"Thank you." He was steering us off course. "So, you got into a fight. I thought you didn't throw the first punch."

"I didn't throw any punches. I don't get into fights. I end them. That's my job and always has been. My brothers were clowning around, showing pictures to anyone who wanted to see them and—I know how much it bothers you. I couldn't let them do that. They are such punks. I took the camera. End of story. I so rarely get mad that they got a little riled. I'm sorry but, you know what, they want to hit your house."

"What?" He swayed and his fork swayed with him. "Steady there. Go on."

He slurped tea and wiped his mouth neatly. "What was I saying?"

"Your brothers want to hit my house. I take it you don't mean with tomatoes or eggs."

"They want to break in. They're not really delinquents—they're young and they're idiots and they insist on living up to the family reputation. Don't worry. They're all talk."

"They want to break in to take my picture?"

"No. They think you're rich. It's the reason I wanted to come over."

"You came over because I am rich?" I had to laugh. "Here I thought you came for the pleasures of the flesh."

"Oh, I did."

He reached out, just like that. It was so unexpected and so at odds with everything I'd experienced in the past that I froze. His long callused fingers slid along my skin until he laced our hands together. The shock of it made me giddy. I stared mutely at our joined hands. His was stained and broad—a workman's hand. No amount of scrubbing seemed to get the last edges of grit from his nail bed. Interlaced with his rough fingers, mine were lily white but thick-knuckled.

Once, my skin had been every bit as brown and tough as Adam's. The contrast was breathtaking. Or possibly, the vision of our intertwined fingers literally took my breath

away and sped my heart. His skin was warm and the union of our flesh was perfect.

Straightforward as ever, he said, "I don't want to lose this job, sure, but I don't want anyone to damage you either."

"Damage me?" I dropped that man's hand like it was on fire. *Damage me.* "That's nice, Adam, but I'm not fucking infirm. I'm just crazy."

Damage.

"Well, this is just great." I cleared his dishes, dumping everything in the sink with a smash. "I promise you, I can defend my poor feeble self. Probably much better than either of your plebeian brothers."

"Plebeian? Oh, I see. You're upset. I know that you're fit—I meant that I don't want anyone to make your condition worse."

"I know exactly what you mean, I'm not dimwitted. My reasoning is intact." I was leaving this house if it killed me.

He wobbled on his stool and laughed. "Hey. You're whining."

"Fuck you."

He smiled. "Yeah. I definitely want to do that."

"You dumb ass. That's not what I meant."

"I know exactly what you meant, Holden. I'm not dimwitted."

He was making some kind of point, but I couldn't see it. My anger was unchecked because what on earth could be less attractive or masculine than damaged goods? "Fine. You want to fuck? Let's fuck, baby. That's the plan anyway, right?"

I all but shoved him up stairs. Both flights. He stumbled and snickered and blabbed and I was furious. I finally corralled him into the massive master bath where he

looked around, utterly unperturbed. "This is really nice."

"Strip." My voice cracked against the tile. He hadn't really called me damaged, but...he was constantly trying to protect me. Had I asked him to? Yes, technically I'd asked him to, but damaged?

I'd show him damaged.

His dirty jeans hit the floor as did the plaid boxers. He tore his lobster shirt over his head and revealed, at long last, was my naked lawn boy – Adam. His legs were long and trim; his stomach a washboard of muscled flesh. His nipples brown and flat. I wanted to lick them. I wanted to taste every inch of his creamy smooth skin, working down to that wiry bush where his young cock sprouted strong and thick.

I quit staring at his dick and I did the only thing I could do – I turned the water on, all five spigots blasting hot – and dropped my pants.

He was as riveted as I'd been. "Jesus, Holden, you're beautiful."

I should have said thank you; instead I found a condom in the medicine cabinet and tossed it into the shower. "Come on. I'm taking you up on your offer. I'm a man. This is what men do. And...you wouldn't be here if you didn't want me to fuck you. Drunk or not."

"You're right about that. I'm not complaining. Are you having second thoughts?"

How did he do that?

"Get in the shower." I pushed him under the spray. Steamy water hit us from every angle. The glass walls turned white with mist and Adam smiled his happy drunk smile. He shook his hair, rubbed his face, and then he surprised me by leaning in just enough to lap my lower lip. I let him for a few seconds. Let his whiskey flavored tongue press against the seam of my mouth and his hand stroked my jaw – rough skin meeting rough whiskers. I relaxed, my anger fading as he kissed and coaxed my tongue – he

drew me into his sweet mouth and I groaned as lust tightened my balls.

What the hell was happening here? I was...supposed to be in charge.

I slammed him against the wet tile and his shoulders connected with a slap. He didn't look surprised. If anything he looked immensely turned on. His dick bounced into mine and he groaned, rolling his hips into me. "Oh fuck, yeah."

I trapped him and took that intoxicating mouth. I swept in, sliding a palm down the smooth plane of his abdomen, trailing through the thatch of wet hair, until I wrapped a fist around his meat again. I gripped his cock like a handle. "You want to be fucked?"

He nodded, biting back at my mouth. His teeth nipped and I flinched with pleasure. His breath hit my lips; his words light with humor. "Why do you keep asking me? Are you worried, Holden? Don't you want to fuck me?"

"What? Of course I do. You know what I'm going to do?"

"That's what the Internet is for. Stop worrying. I just haven't done it."

I licked his neck, the water mixing with the tang of his skin and then I placed my lips against the shell of his ear. "Turn around."

He spun around, pressed his palms against the shower wall and water flowed down the neat ridge of his spine. I shoved his hair from his face, tangled my fingers into the thick wet strands until his hair filled my hand and I seized him the way I'd wanted to for days. I drew his head back.

Oh God. I had him.

Fear stabbed me in the heart—what was I doing? Was he right? Was I having second thoughts? I should be gentle with him. I should be kind. I shouldn't touch him, or at the very least, if I did touch him, I should love him slow and steady and teach him how to do this with tenderness—and probably wait until he was sober as well—but

some monster inside of me was still furious at being called damaged. I was twisted wrong and yet, he seemed to appreciate it. Possibly he didn't even notice it. "Spread your legs for me."

He did, shuffling his strong feet apart. The shower rained over his shoulder, his front, his sides, and water flowed down his body in a glorious river that ran off his nipples and over his cock and streamed hotly into my hand snuggled tight around his balls. "Lean back."

He leaned and I pressed his firm round ass into my groin. I laid my teeth on the corded tendon on his neck. He tried to lead my hand to his dick, but I slid my fingers back and rimmed his tense, taut little hole. "I'm going to go right in here. Stuff my entire dick so far inside you—I'm going to stretch you and you're going to like it."

"I know I will."

I grabbed the shower gel, slicked my fingers and then I tipped Adam's chin, needing him to see me. His hyacinth-colored eyes stared unflinchingly back. "Has anyone touched you at all?"

He shook his head and relief and joy and lust made me rough with him. "You can make as much noise as you like—it's going to hurt. And then it's going to feel like nothing else. Like heaven. I promise."

I kissed him, his mouth opened to me as his body opened. I slid a finger into his untried ass, soap making the entry of my fingertip easy. He was so tight. I lapped water from his shoulder and breached his rim while his breath caught. His channel tightened around me. "Relax. You can touch yourself while I feel you."

"I want to touch you."

"Oh, baby, you are going to touch me." I probed inside his body, knuckle deep

now, my finger seeking paradise. "You're so fucking tight." My cock throbbed to be in there.

I knew when I hit it, felt his pleasure spot even as his hand clutched my leg, clawing into my thigh. He jerked his dick hard and made that sound I love to hear. High and pleased and shocked. I slid another finger gently into his dark hole, so desperate to get inside I thought I might come on his nuts before I made my way in.

"Wait."

His tone gave me pause. "Does that hurt?"

He nodded and I slowed down, stopping to nuzzle his back and let him rest. We waited in the hot spray as gallon after gallon of water eased his stiff shoulders. I kissed his neck, tasted the soft lobe of his ear. Then I squirted gel on my hand, drizzling it over my curved fingers, and stroked the depth of his passage. I petted him from the inside until he tipped back and lifted his ass to me. "That's it. Oh yeah baby, that's it."

I was going to come before I got in there. I knew it.

And so was he. "I'm going to come."

"Don't. Not yet." I stopped him and wrestled his hand to my dick. His cheek pressed into the wall and he panted weakly, trying to sit on my hand, trying to fuck the tile, trying to lose himself into the fury. "Calm down." I kissed his jaw and withdrew my fingers.

I found the condom on the floor. "Will you put this on me?"

He fumbled, nearly dropping the slippery package on the shower floor, but his smile was bright and his eyes shone electric blue against his chestnut lashes. Adam bent, dropping to his knees, and licked the bulb of my cock. He opened and allowed me to slide deep. Water streamed around his hand and I thrust inside my young lover. I

was going to go straight to hell for this. I absolutely did not care. I felt not one iota of remorse because he loved me fucking his mouth as much as I did.

Adam got me ready, rolling the condom on. He didn't know what to do next, where to turn or how I wanted him. I snapped the water off and, taking him by his broad, callused hand, I led him into my bedroom. Soaking wet, I bent that gorgeous boy over the edge of my bed and did what I'd been dying to since I first laid eyes on him pushing a wheelbarrow through my neglected garden. I spread his sweet ass, lubed him and wedged my wide crown right into his virgin opening. I held him softly and pressed my cock in as slowly as I could while he thrashed and moaned into the duvet. "Yeah. I know. Just breathe, Adam. It'll pass. Breathe."

The bedding bunched into his fists and we waited. Sweat and water dripped down my forehead. I caressed the unblemished white flesh of his buttocks, soothing him.

"I'm okay."

"Oh, you're better than okay, sweet thing. I'd say you're absolutely exquisite." I slid into him then, lifted him to his knees so I could touch him deep. It wasn't going to last long, so I stroked him inside, outside, nipping his damp skin, while he grunted and whispered and finally he begged. He begged me roughly — *oh please please more more fuck me Holden Holden* and then that lovely, lovely boy — he mewled, shooting his come onto the covers.

I exploded inside him. Jesus. I let go and poured seed, poured it into the safety of a condom while his ass spasmed around my flesh. I swear to God, the pleasure was so sublime I lost sensation in my extremities. But not anywhere else because as I rolled him into my arms, our bodies entwined, his wet heated flesh sealed to mine, his breath on my neck, his hair in my nose, and as he fell asleep smiling — my locked heart finally opened. I clutched him, squeezing my eyes shut against the power and the pain of Adam in my arms. I didn't want to let him go. Not out of my bed. Not out of my house.

L.B. Gregg

Not out of my life.

I wanted him forever.

Chapter Eight

My brother, Thayer, woke me in the morning—same sun-bleached hair stuffed under that old, faded Red Sox cap, same twisted, sardonic smile. His peridot eyes were framed by sun-baked crow's feet—too much time on the water.

Too much time in the water.

He came into my room and smacked the headboard. Glancing at the man snoring beside me, he leaned over while I waited, joy and laughter and fear bubbling inside my chest. I'd finally crossed that line—I'd finally gone from merely eccentric to barking mad.

Thayer put a tanned hand to my ear like he was going to make one of his wonderful asides—I missed him too much. His voice was light and filled with the usual mischief. "Rise and shine, jackass. Porter's in trouble."

My lids popped open. I moved instantly from dead sleep to full consciousness, clutching my chest like an elderly woman. *Thayer*. He'd drowned off the coast of Nantucket in his late twenties—and that loss resonated through the years, hitting me as

if it were fresh. I had to close my eyes again and wait for my pulse to slow. Adam snuggled oblivious beside me. It took me a few moments but I pushed the sorrow from my mind, stomping that old heartache down where it belonged, and ignored the ringing of the doorbell two flights below.

Why did I dream that Porter was in trouble? That was crazy thinking. Maybe there was so much unfolding around me that the snail's pace of the past two years had made me soft in the head. Porter was out fucking some lonely Smithfield divorcee. He was carousing and drinking. That was all. He wasn't missing, he was hiding.

Adam moaned beside me. "God. Make it stop."

Whoever was ringing the damn doorbell was pretty insistent for 6:45.

Shit. I'd overslept. No workout. Two days behind on the cookbook. And now, with Adam beside me, his naked ass bruised in the shape of my hand print, I had a possible sexual harassment suit on my hands.

I waited for the guilt. Waited for the voice chiding me—what the hell was I doing with this man/boy? Don't fuck the help? I was so far gone—miles past what was considered merely diddling the staff. It wasn't him who would be *damaged* by this. I was going to get crushed by a one-two punch. First, the explosion of more gossip over the terrible thing I was doing with my hired hand. Second, the living, breathing shame I'd live with because I wasn't going to end this thing until he did, and no question, he would do so.

And I wouldn't let him go without a fight.

I stroked his hair away from his face. He looked twenty-four years young. Sixteen years my junior. *Shit*. I was every bit as depraved as Porter.

The bell kept ringing. Someone was feeling mighty persistent.

"Go away." Adam rolled and pulled the covers over his head and I smiled from the

inside.

"Sleep. I'll go get see who it is." I kissed his shoulder and he patted my cheek sleepily.

"M'kay."

Today I had the foresight to put pants on before heading to the door. I should never have left the comfort and company in my bed, because on my front step the good Father David hunched like a vulture against the morning sun.

Fuck.

I stared blearily at him. "Good morning."

My feet were naked. Why that bothered me in front of the priest, I couldn't say, but it felt illicit.

"Holden. May I come in? I need a moment."

"At 6:45? I guess you must." It wasn't good form to bar the clergy from my door. Mrs. Henderson would poison my coffee if I insulted the man, so I invited him in. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

The priest's head shook on his pencil neck. The man was as white as his collar. I should have some charity in my heart for this shepherd of the local flock, but it would only be a matter of time before he showed his true colors for my benefit.

He craned around the enormous flower arrangement dwarfing the hall table as if he were looking for someone. "No, thank you. I'd just like a word in private."

"Sure." This was unprecedented, particularly because he'd never been here without my housekeeper. He obviously wanted to have his private audience with me before she clocked in for her shift. If that didn't define *suspicious* I needed a new dictionary.

In the office my ecclesiastical neighbor gave the room a quick, but thorough, glance.

There was no evidence he'd entered the unholy sanctum where I scribbled my gay porn that I could see, so his mind should be at peace.

I offered him a seat, which he declined.

"I've come in case you need to speak to me," he said gravely. "Do you have something you need to say?"

"I'm sorry? I don't follow?"

He cleared his throat. "Confession. I've come to offer you confession."

Words escaped me. Confession? I wasn't even Catholic.

He stared patiently.

Oh sweet ever-loving hell.

I cleared my throat and managed to speak. "I appreciate your calling, Father, but I have nothing to confess." Except pissing in his geraniums three summers ago after a particularly energetic Memorial Day volleyball match with Porter. And sodomy, of course. "I hate to state the obvious, again, but I'm not Catholic."

"We all have sins." His voice dropped and, coming closer, the older man gripped my sleeve with a gnarled and spotted hand. Alarmed, I tried to yank free. He hissed, "Someone told me. Someone has pointed a finger at you."

Jesus. What was this? *Rosemary's Baby*? I nearly crossed myself. "They were mistaken or lying."

Father David's wide eyes bore into mine. "Confession is a sacrament." As if that explained everything. "You can come to the church and speak with me."

"Again I remind you that I'm not Catholic and I have no sin to confess. I appreciate your...offer...but I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The garden. Someone saw you."

"Who?" Who would go to the priest and not the police?

"I'm not at liberty to say."

I almost asked him about the seal of sacrament. "Well that's impossible. I haven't been outside—"

Father David raised a tangled, know-it-all brow at me.

My excuse was now flimsy. It was as substantial to him as his confessional was to me. Anyone watching the house—Father David immediately sprang to mind—would have seen me leave with Adam in the Jag, privacy glass or no, on two separate occasions. He would have easily spotted me through the windshield. Nosy neighbor—my own personal Gladys Kravitz. I needed hemlocks on the north side lawn to protect my privacy.

I'd speak with Adam. I cleared my throat. "What exactly did they see?"

"You with the shovel; your car parked below. Last Saturday before dawn."

"Are you insane?"

It was a legitimate question.

"No, Holden. I'm not the one who is insane." The priest smoothed his collar. "If you have need of me, I'm at the church all day. Think about it."

"Sure." He toddled across the lawn. I was still shocked at the man's gall. He'd called me a crazy murderer and still walked into my house to save my soul.

Gall? Hell, the man had balls.

Who had spoken to him? Who had they seen in my yard last weekend? Porter? Maybe it was John. He was blond. He was tall. In the dark, maybe the beard was hard

to see at night. He had the means, the opportunity, and the motive.

John. I just...couldn't accept that.

Blond. Not brunette. Not the dark haired man in my bed on the third floor.

While I stood lost in thought with the door wide open—another first—Mitzie jogged along South Street. She wore black running shorts and a lime green sports top and matching sneakers. Her shiny hair was in a ponytail—under a red ball cap. Thayer's ball cap. Even from this distance, I knew it was his. Loss hit me for a second time since dawn.

Mitzie jogged up the driveway as grief hazed my vision. She waved, slowing to a walk, and I...closed the door with a careful click. I climbed the two flights to the master suite, wishing Porter would take care of his wife. No. I wished he'd care *for* his wife. My brother was probably too busy lining up the next Mrs. Worthington.

Only fifteen minutes had passed since I left my bed and I was tired. I shucked off my pants and crawled back between the sheets into my spot beside Adam. I lay, arms behind my head, and stared at the spotless ceiling. "Don't you have school?"

Adam groaned and cradled a pillow over his ear.

I had to smile. He was hung over, well and good. "Your skin is clammy, and baby, I hate to be unromantic, but you smell. Do you want to take a shower?"

I had to be the worst morning after conversationalist in Connecticut. I had no idea what to say and wondered if it even mattered because Adam wasn't reading my discomfort.

"I need aspirin, Tums, water and sleep. I need thirty minutes. My ass is killing me—you could have warned me. My head is killing me. My stomach is...but I'm not whining, Mr. Holden. I know how you detest that."

He was a funny thing—or maybe I was the only one who understood him. "I do

detest a whiner. I'll kick your ass out of bed for crying."

"You could try. Actually, you probably could kick my ass, the way I'm feeling."

"Probably, but I won't. I like you here." I stumbled over that admission while I stroked the back of his hand. His fingers gripped mine and we lay peaceful and sure. That old grief for my long lost brother finally eased, and Adam's companionship lulled me into something careful and new.

He moved closer, pushing the pillow away, and wriggled his leg over my mine. His knee came to rest on my thigh and his hair tickled me. Adam tucked himself under my jaw...making himself right at home.

"How's your head?" I had to ask.

"Better now that the bell isn't ringing, but I feel like shit. I don't usually drink much."

"This will come as a surprise to you—but me either. I keep to my cocktail at night. Sometimes a scotch."

Adam breathed heavily and nodded into my neck. "Yeah. Too much history."

"Yeah. History. And the present."

"Because of your brother?"

I frowned. "Are you clairvoyant now?"

"No. Practiced. My father...wasn't easy."

"Mine either. Although, from what I hear, not like yours."

He nodded against me. "It's in the past—I'm all right, just careful."

I stared at our entwined hands where they rested on top of the pale bedding. His palm covered my hand, the back tan, but not rough or worn. It was tender—with bold

blue veins – and vulnerable.

Adam sighed sleepily. "I need five more minutes. Then I have to go."

"Let me see what I can do for you." I kissed his forehead and slid from our cushy bed to find a hangover cure – and some distance.

I was halfway down the butler stairs, when I crashed smack into John Paige, sneaking like a thief to the second floor. He held a cup of tea in one hand and a box of cookies in the other.

He stared round-eyed at me and I stared at the cookies. Those were *my* Lorna Doones. "What the fuck are you doing here? Who let you in?"

"I...never left. I slept in that guest room last night."

I came this close to smacking my forehead with my palm. "I looked for you. You left."

"I did. I needed to get some air. I came back."

"When? I was here all day."

"Last night. The door was open."

"Didn't you think to knock?"

"I did. No one was home. I didn't think you'd mind."

"I mind. Jesus Christ. I mind." *Holy hell.* He'd been in the house while I was deflowering Adam.

Adam. I had to get rid of John.

"It's a huge house, Holden."

I took a closer look at him. His eyes were even more red-rimmed and bloodshot than yesterday and the man was decidedly pale. His beard looked almost yellow his

skin was so chalky. "That's bullshit. The police are looking for you and you disappeared as soon as they arrived. You need to tell me what's going on."

John followed me into the kitchen and I went to make coffee. Mitzie wasn't anywhere to be seen and it was still too early for Mrs. H. We were alone for at least the next fifteen minutes.

"Sit down and explain. My patience is at an all time low. I thought you were still sick."

"I am." John nodded and chose a stool at the counter. He seemed smaller today, almost as if he'd shrunk in the last few days. His voice was tired. "Someone killed Geoff. I didn't know what to do. I had no idea he was dead. Not one."

"When did you hear?"

"Yesterday, when that cop arrived. I didn't know until the detective told you." John choked. He literally choked on his emotions, his words pinching his throat. His head went into his hands. "I had no idea."

His shoulders shook. He was...crying. In all this drama, I had nearly forgotten that John Paige had suffered a terrible loss—someone he'd cared for was gone. It was a harsh way to receive the worst possible news, even for him.

I said gently, "I'm sorry. Honest to God, I didn't know Geoffrey Davis existed until yesterday. I have no idea what's going on either."

"I know that." He still couldn't look at me as he swallowed and sniffed into his hand. I couldn't remember ever seeing him cry—except when his mother died.

"I'm so sorry." I gave him another minute to collect himself while I measured coffee into the filter and turned the machine on; then I kept it real. "I know this is difficult, but you need to go speak to the police because they're looking for you."

He dropped his hands from his face and stared at me. His face was damp; eyes red

rimmed. "Looking for me?"

"John. You're not stupid. Of course they are. Why are you surprised? You were with him on Friday night. You were a guest in his house—and now you're in my house. Worse, you're unavailable to the police. The man is dead and his body was in my fucking yard. I hate to be self-centered, but I'm pretty sure everyone thinks you did this to exact some sort of revenge on me—or they think I did it because I'm jealous. You have to speak with the police." I reached over and squeezed his thick shoulder. "Someone hid Davis' wallet in my car."

"What?"

"I know. Someone confessed to the priest next door that they saw me bury him in the yard and someone left Geoff here, on my land, on purpose."

"Well, it wasn't me."

"Call me crazy—and everyone does—but I believe you. Now, tell me what the hell is going on."

"Okay." John swallowed and wiped his nose with the heel of his hand. He shook his head as if to clear it. He pulled himself together and said, "Geoff and I left the city Thursday for a long weekend. He has a house in Kent. So, Friday night we went to the Crowne and Hammer in Cornwall to meet some friends. We had an argument at the restaurant about something inconsequential and I caught a ride home with the other couple. They brought me back to the house and Geoff...he never came home."

"He didn't call?"

"No—nothing. At first I thought he was in one of his moods. That maybe he went somewhere else—a hotel, or back to the city or something. He's temperamental. That's putting it mildly—he has a temper. Had. He *had* a temper." His voice tightened. "He would do that—get royally pissed and disappear for a couple of days."

I hated to think poorly of the dead, but Geoff sounded like an asshole.

"Who leaves without a word?" Porter did. *Where was he?* I poured John and me both a cup of coffee. "I'm sorry. Really."

"So, Sunday turned to Monday and I was sick—I had the stomach flu. I couldn't get out of bed and I was alone in the house with no ride. I was upset as well because he abandoned me in Connecticut—you're the only person I know in this God forsaken state—you and your family and that wasn't particularly helpful. I broke down and started calling his cell on Monday. I assumed he was angry over the weekend—but three days? Alone on the mountain? It was unprecedented. Anyone I could catch a ride with went back to the city Sunday night and I was stuck, waiting, heaving and fighting diarrhea, praying someone would give me a lift. I was about to call a car service. Did you know that it's four hundred dollars to drive to Manhattan? I was furious, and then you called Tuesday and...I couldn't believe it. Things just went from bad to worse, and then..."

It was time to address the hard stuff. "You haven't seen my brother, have you?"

"I saw him Friday night with that friend of his, Kurt. The man with the Dudley Do Right jaw. They were in Cornwall, at the bar—drunk."

I set my cup gently on the counter as my mind careened to a shrieking halt. "I didn't know that."

"I assumed you did. Isn't Porter here? He didn't tell you?"

Why hadn't Porter told me? I had to wonder if Detective Lewis knew—but he must. "You think my brother had something to do with your lover's death?"

John was silent.

"He's a lush, he's a womanizer, he's protective of me, but he's harmless."

"He threatened me."

"Of course he did. You tried to ruin me on live television, but he wouldn't kill someone to teach you a lesson. If he struck someone, he would call 9-1-1. He would resuscitate—he would help, and he sure as hell wouldn't plant a body in our own yard. Who does that serve?"

"I understand that...Geoff...was buried. I doubt anyone was supposed to find him."

"It wasn't Porter." I was repeating myself with disturbing regularity. I grabbed a bottle of aspirin and some Tums for Adam. "Why didn't you speak directly to the police yesterday?"

"I...needed to grieve. I still need to." His voice broke.

"I meant over the weekend."

"I was sick and Geoff would fly into these rages sometimes and take off. It wasn't out of character. He was that way."

"Every second you delay, you look more like you have something to hide. For crying out loud, call the fucking police right now. You're too smart to act this way. You can stay for breakfast while you wait for the police." He and Adam eating together? I'd have to retract my offer. John would probably make Adam fetch the paper.

He nodded. "You're right, of course. I will. I panicked. It makes me look like...I tried to do this to you. I just can't believe that he and I...that our last words were on such bad terms."

"You couldn't have predicted this." I handed John the phone. "Call Tony Gervase. His number is on the pad by the phone. I have someone waiting."

I climbed to the master suite with coffee and hangover supplies. I wasn't quite ready to tell Adam that my 'friend' was downstairs weeping on the granite countertop—and that's when I remembered Tony was off duty. Someone I didn't know, and

probably wouldn't like, would answer the office phone. It wasn't the best scenario but John would have to deal with it. He was a grown man, although he wasn't making decisions like one.

I bullied an unsmiling Adam into the shower and soaped his hair for him. It was my pleasure. Then I took the stairs three at a time back to the kitchen, but John was gone. This time, he wasn't anywhere in the house—and something told me he hadn't gone to the police.

* * * *

I was sorting through image files on my laptop when Mitzie tapped into the kitchen at eight, showered and shellacked and smelling sweetly of costly perfume. In some ways, Mitz reminded me of my mother—only Mother was made of much sterner stuff. The dog was noticeably absent. When he wasn't peeing on the carpet, he was sort of sweet. "Where's Kipling?"

"I brought him to Kurt today."

"You gave Porter's dog away?" I asked incredulously—maybe she was more like dear old mom than I suspected.

"Not away—he's sitting for me. I went to see Kurt and I think he's left me for good." For a second I thought she meant that Kurt had left her. She sniffled then took her tea to go stand by the window. "Where's your friend?"

"He's at school."

It was her turn to look incredulous. "Oh, Holden. Tell me that boy isn't in high school."

"No, he isn't. He's decidedly too old for you to poach on."

She laughed. "Well, I wouldn't anyway because he's batting for the other team."

"And we're pleased to have him." Despite the fact that she was soon to be ex-family...I rather liked Mitzie.

"So, no word about Porter?"

"No. If I don't hear anything by this evening, I'm going to report him as missing."

I knew Porter was probably catting around, but his absence reminded me too much of Geoff Davis' disappearance—no one had seemed alarmed because he sometimes disappeared and now the man was dead. Porter could be in trouble.

I stared across the yard at that menacing potting shed, feeling more and more like evil was on my very doorstep. That dream of Thayer, his warning, it was such flimsy circumstance to base any real concern, but I was unsettled. One shouldn't be led by portents of doom from the dead or by weak logic—nor should one faint on the patio over the threat of fresh air. I had finally arrived at that point in my life where I couldn't trust my own intuition. I couldn't trust my own thoughts and...it was frightening.

No. Porter was just laying low until Mitzie left. That's all. I was as paranoid as everyone said.

My sister-in-law sipped her Earl Grey and her mouth trembled. "I'm not sure if you can report him missing. I mean there are rules about that kind of thing. He's an adult and he's not in danger. He's hiding. I just wonder if it's from me or if he's found someone new."

Mrs. Henderson came in from the laundry room with a stack of linens, saving me from comment. She stepped briskly to the counter and deposited her load. Mitzie eyed her cautiously. "Good morning, Mrs. Henderson."

"Mitzie," she said bluntly. "Your car is in my parking space."

"Oh. I'm so *so* sorry." I noted she didn't offer to move the Benz.

Mrs. H lectured her. "I always park at the second bay, behind the Lexus, because Holden hates that car."

"I do. I should have bought the Hummer." I could still kick myself.

Mitzie gave me a worried look. "I had it in the driveway, but it didn't look right there."

"Mmm. Holden. I'm stripping all the beds. You have so many people coming and going these days, my head's spinning." She grabbed the stack of sheets and disappeared through the door to the butler stairs.

"That woman. She's so impertinent."

"I know. Delightful, isn't she? She came with the house. So, what's your plan, Mitz?" I knew full well that Mrs. H was on the stairs, right behind the door. She was listening.

I approved.

"Well, Porter didn't call me when he left me. I'll go look for him and then I'm going to go home to see my attorney."

"Your attorney? Not the police? Well, as long as your priorities are straight."

"He's not in danger; he's just hiding until tomorrow when the divorce is final. I wanted him to get some...help...and he ran away."

"Help? I thought you asked him to go for marriage counseling?"

"I did—and treatment. I need to meet with my attorney. I need to make sure I'm protected." She looked more sad than usual as she glided away to do whatever it was she usually did.

Mrs. Henderson peeked around the door.

"She's gone." I was never going to get any work done today. I closed my laptop. "Porter is a jerk."

"He's throwing away a good thing." Mrs. H came in and set the linens back on the counter and poured herself a cup of black coffee. She didn't sit. "Father David was here, that old busybody."

"Again? Or still?"

"Again. He was waiting for me on driveway. The nerve of that man. He said someone came to see him and said you'd hauled a body through the yard, of all the fool things. And...well, could it be that boy of yours?"

"Boy of mine?"

Boy. Oh God.

I refused to blush like a teenager, but I could feel my face and neck heat all the same.

"That Morgan fellow."

"Yes. I know who my *boy* is." I said it on purpose. I liked the sound of it. "And you're not making any sense. Father David should be defrocked as a Goddamn gossip—he's not supposed to screw with that damn sacrament. Even I know that. I should call the diocese."

"Your reputation isn't as sterling as Father David's. Don't look at me that way. I don't think it's a good idea for you to call." Mrs. Henderson sipped her coffee. "What happened with Porter?"

I hesitated. "He disappeared."

"He probably has a new girlfriend. He was always that way. Since he was fifteen."

Mrs. Henderson patted my hand. "I'll find out who is spreading tales about you. Is John Paige gone? I need to air the room."

"Did you know he was back?"

"Of course I knew. I know everything. I know you'd better hope that gardener of yours doesn't tell everyone in town you're tickling his fancy. I bet he walks away with your mother's good flatware."

Why does everyone keep saying that?

She winked and took her linens and disappeared to set the house to rights.

I called Kurt at First National. "Have you seen my brother?"

"Not since Tuesday. Why? He didn't call yesterday, but that's not unusual. I know he's preparing for a corporate venture next week—and the divorce is final tomorrow."

"Mitzie said. She also mentioned Porter agreed to mediation."

Kurt laughed. "Was he sober at the time?"

His comment caught me off guard. It was one thing for me to judge Porter—quite another for Kurt of all people to remark on anyone's sobriety. A bit of the pot calling the kettle black. Unfortunately, his words had merit.

"She didn't say. He's definitely gone though. I...am considering calling the police." I could have infused some confidence in that pronouncement.

"The police? Why? How long has he been missing?"

"Since Mitzie arrived yesterday."

There was a noticeable pause. "Look. Holden. I hate to state the obvious to someone as intelligent as you, but if I were Porter? I wouldn't go back to your place either. I'll call him."

"I called. His phone is off. Where would he go?"

"Really? You want me to answer that? If I were to guess, I'd say into some woman's bed. Relax. I'll call you back."

"I have another question."

"All right. Shoot."

"Did you and Porter run into John Paige at the Crowne and Hammer? He was with some friends?"

He didn't hesitate, which I took as a good sign. "Yeah. We were in the bar; we saw him, but we never spoke to John. Porter said that he didn't want to stir any trouble—because John treated you like shit. He said wouldn't piss on the man if he was on fire. He's a good brother."

"He is. Why didn't he tell me this?"

"He didn't want to upset you. He thinks you're getting worse and...you know, you could have gone after John—if you were angry enough, I guess."

"With a car? That's rather implausible." A murderer? I had become so...damaged...that my own family and friends thought me capable of murder. "I can't leave the house. Explain exactly how I would achieve this? And how the hell would I know where any of you were?"

"I don't know. But...you should know one more thing. We gave that Geoff guy a ride on Friday night. I was sick when I heard he was dead."

My mouth slackened, though my heart raced. "You gave a what to who?"

"We gave Geoffrey Davis a ride. We were all buzzed in the bar and we dropped him off in the center of Kent. He was on the sidewalk the last I saw him."

I swallowed past panic. "Who knows this?"

Kurt's voice tightened. "You think I'm keeping information from the police? I spoke with the detective in charge, Lewis—and you should also know that he asked some leading questions about you and your new employee."

"What did he ask?"

"He wanted to know about your disorder—and whether the two of you, Morgan and you, were involved. He asked if you were the jealous type." He hesitated for the first time. "He thinks you're wealthy enough to pay someone to do your dirty work—someone like that Morgan kid. You're not involved with him, are you? The cop implied as much."

"Did he?"

"Yes." Kurt's voice went lower and I knew someone at the bank was near. "There's talk about you both. I heard something. Here."

"That was impressively quick."

"So it's true? I heard you actually left the house." He whispered. "He took you out in the Jag."

The police scanner. Goddamn Pete at the Village. "I rather think I took him in the Jag. We went necking at the point. Just like old times."

Kurt barked a laugh. "Oh Jesus, Holden. I'm glad you didn't kill anyone, but this might be worse for you. Really. This is bad. It's slumming—he's from Farmville. And that kid's father...in and out of jail. Morgan? He's what? Twenty?"

"He's not a kid—he's nearly twenty-five." What a snob. But Kurt was correct on one count—compared to my forty, Adam *was* a kid. "It's not anyone's business. We're both consenting adults, and neither of us is involved in that situation with Davis—we're only connected by geography. And history." Which made us uncomfortably connected. "Call me back if you hear from Porter. I'm in the office working."

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"Will do, but he's fine."

Chapter Nine

Adam arrived at ten after four. He didn't come to the house to say hello as I expected or if I really thought about it—as I hoped. No, he went straight down the hill to the stone wall with a shovel over his broad shoulder. He loped along the garden path in his same old jeans and t-shirt—this one dove gray. It said *Radiohead*. He had his old boots back on.

I stood at the granite counter, absolutely riveted by the sight of him. The forsythia was blooming, the day warm, bees buzzed, and Adam was back.

What was the protocol for the day after? Had anyone been rude to him in town? In a single afternoon, every citizen of Smithfield believed him to be my paid boy toy and possibly my accomplice. Did he know? Would he even recognize if some townie was snide? I was queasy thinking about Adam answering direct questions with a direct answer.

I considered speaking with him for about one minute then I decided it would be best if he focused on his job—and I focused on mine. I could change nothing about this circumstance, and I had a deadline looming and work to do.

I sifted through a stack of *T* recipes, but I didn't feel much like preparing *Turkish Swordfish Kebobs and Stuffed Cabbage Leaves*, nor did I have the stomach to fry any *Tunisian Offal*—or eat them for that matter. Although I'd enjoy serving them to Adam just to make him laugh.

I was making decisions based on his reaction. We were only four days in and he had become foremost in my thoughts. There's an unpleasant name for that.

Obsession.

Stuffing the recipes back into the file box, I phoned the perennial gossip, Pete, down at the Village. I kept my eye on my lawn boy. I craved ketchup and pickles and dripping grease and raw onions. Lettuce. Tomato. French fries. I ordered American Cheeseburgers times two and asked him to deliver them at five. I'd add a red, white, and blue section to the *Traveler's Palate*. Smithfield could be represented in my world travels. It was certainly an adventure for those of us living here. Sometimes navigating the rigid social structure of our town was every bit as exotically dangerous as a mountain gorilla safari in Uganda—and the food was so much easier to prepare.

Adam worked alone as the sun made its way west. I got comfortable on the rattan chaise in the porch with my laptop and a diet ginger ale and I threw in the towel. I wasn't going to write. Instead I sat in the amber rays of afternoon sun and tried to make sense of Davis and Paige. The two had fought bitterly before parting. Over what? It was too much of a coincidence that Porter and Kurt had been at the bar with Davis. I pondered and mulled, as my muse toiled in the garden, exactly as he had Monday morning.

Where was Porter? We weren't exactly the best of friends, but we looked after one another—particularly after Thayer's life had been cut frighteningly short. We were the last of the Worthingtons. After that nightmare on *Geraldo*, it was Porter who brought me home to Connecticut. Porter packed my house, and handled my affairs. He booted John from my property. He took care of me those first few months—answering calls,

handling attorneys, telling the press to back the fuck off.

He was a...good brother.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat thinking of all the things he'd done for me –not because I was wealthy or because he needed something from me, but because he always had done them my entire life. He had walked me down West Street to kindergarten when our mother, the stiff and demanding Tanner Mitchell Worthington, had been too busy with the Women's Junior League to bother. He read *My Side of The Mountain* to me when I was in the second grade and sharing that book had sealed my fate as both an outdoorsman and a writer. He taught me how to camp and to tie a decent knot and to sail, he and Thayer both.

The three of us on Bantam Lake sailing in tiny white-sailed sunfishes with no adults to inhibit us. Sleeping under the stars.

Porter was the one that came for Christmas, and birthdays, and long weekends because I could not physically go to him—because he didn't want me to be alone. Christ. And what had I done in return, other than seal that last prenup because he needed family to protect his assets?

Not much, except enable him. But I loved him. He was my brother, and it was my turn to save him.

Where was he?

On the western edge of my yard, Adam used the shovel as leverage to pry large stones from the ground. He piled the boulders, getting everything prepared to rebuild. He was careful not to set a stone on the fragile newly bloomed daffodils that grew in haphazard bunches along the wall's perimeter. He was precise, making slow, steady progress, putting things to right.

I gazed down at my new lover and a sense of well being settled my fear.

Eventually, Adam peeled his t-shirt over his head and I was lost to lean muscles at play in dappled sunlight. Lifting, hefting, stretching, straining. He was easily the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life—and I'd seen so much. I'd been enchanted by him since day one. I sat on the sun porch, taking notes and thinking about those rare people who come into our lives and create order from chaos, when Detective Lewis' plain car parked along the sidewalk on Meadow Street. Adam wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. He didn't lean on the shovel or bend to retrieve his shirt. He didn't fidget. He waited stiffly for the detective to come to him.

From this distance he looked like a deer in the headlights.

Detective Lewis climbed from the car in the same shit-colored suit, and it only took about four minutes before he got frustrated with Adam's response—or lack thereof. I couldn't see Adam's face, but he was unbending—unflinching. As rigid as the shovel in his hand. Lewis' posture quickly changed from laid back to aggressive. He stabbed a pointed finger at Adam's feet, his stance threatening. I could imagine Adam answering him in his flat, detached way.

We had sex in his car. I drove him. The wallet was stuffed under the seat. I don't know how it got there. Yes the sky is blue. What do you mean rent boy?

The detective moved and suddenly I wanted that dick off my land. He should go find John. He should find Porter, or his own ass with both hands, a compass and a copy of Rand McNally. He should do something useful and leave Adam and me the fuck alone.

Because something terrible was about to unfold.

I had the insane belief that Adam was about to be hauled away, hand cuffed, searched, demoralized—the stain of his family name and his illicit contact with gay porn king Xavier Wroth making him the prime suspect for this crazy situation where absolutely nothing made sense.

He wasn't even blond.

I don't know when it happened—what final straw broke me— but I was opening the slider, through the door and on the step before I realized the height of my folly. I was angry and emotional and protective and...out of my mother fucking mind. I should trust Adam to take care of himself—*but he couldn't*. By his own admission he didn't understand the rules of engagement. So I acted without hesitation, racing to the aid of my socially awkward young lover.

My mother would have chided me for making a scene, particularly on the patio where the neighbors could see. I would have been impressed by this new development in my usually calm, sarcastic, newly indoor nature, except I had another problem to deal with as the sky robbed me of oxygen.

I was standing on the patio, trapped beneath the gaping maw of electrifying blue sky. My feet stuck to the bluestone. The blazing sun, the viscous air, my predictably racing heart and shortness of breath—*Goddamn, what in the blasted hell was I doing out here?*

At least this time I had the presence of mind to put a hand to the ground as I collapsed. I let myself down gently, folding my muscular body until I fell back on my dumb ass. I should have put my head between my knees, but my eyes were riveted on Adam's sleek, bare back.

Noticing my unexpected arrival on the patio, Detective Lewis leaned to get a better view. His lips moved and Adam dropped the shovel. Dirt-covered, half-naked, Adam bolted from the lower meadow, leaped the hedges like a gazelle. He ran without a word, athletic and strong. My hero, apparently. He only wanted for that crown of leaves. His eyes were locked on mine and I couldn't look away because I didn't want to acknowledge my surroundings. He was safety. I trusted him. I didn't have the sense to be embarrassed, because I was desperately trying not to hyperventilate. At least I was still conscious.

Two men stepped from the hemlock border by the library. I knew it was Cole and Braden Morgan. They wore mud colored jackets today, the canny little bastards. Their newsworthy photo op was finally at hand, but they didn't do anything, much to my relief. Fearfully, they watched their brother.

Adam arrived; he wasn't even winded—which was good because I was gasping enough for the both of us. "It's nearly 5:00. Shouldn't you be opening another can of oysters or fish eggs or something?"

"Funny," I wheezed. "I have sardines. You can have them on a rye cracker with some Roquefort."

He slid a hand around my bicep and hauled me to my feet with a jerk. He didn't appear concerned for my welfare—if I had to guess, I'd say he was furious. I struggled to get my knees under me as he chided me. "My brothers are here. If they take a shot of you, it's your own fault."

"Agreed. Just...stop bitching and get me into the house." Detective Lewis was strolling along the path. No sense of urgency there—he probably thought I was doing this for his benefit. The Morgan brothers scurried back into the trees like a pair of scared squirrels.

Adam dragged me to the tiny porch off the kitchen. "You dumb ass. What were you thinking? You're supposed to do this thing slowly—small steps."

"I don't know. I was...I thought you...I thought he...." Blood flowed away from my face and spots formed in my vision. "I need to sit."

"You think?" He opened the door to the mudroom, slamming it into the wall, and hauled me inside while I made my feet and legs work. He didn't wipe his feet. He shoved me into a kitchen stool. He wasn't gentle or accommodating. I would have laughed, but I was distressingly weak.

"I'm fine." I said through clenched teeth.

"You're not fine. You're actually green." He went to the sink and wet some paper towels. "Here. Put this on your neck."

"What?"

He slapped a handful of cold, wet paper towels against the back of my neck and they dripped into my shirt collar. Amazingly, the nausea passed. I swallowed and closed my eyes. Bliss. "Thank you."

"What were you doing? I had everything under control. I was talking to Detective Lewis."

"Talking? He was interrogating you. Everyone thinks you killed that man for me."

"No, they do not. Listen to me. We were just talking."

"Were you? I don't think you can differentiate." I threw the wet towels on the granite. "He was threatening you."

"He was showing me where someone parked. How the tire tracks are still visible. They took an impression. He was explaining how the police think Davis was put in the yard.' He ran the water, reaching into the cupboard for a glass. "He said the weather made it nearly impossible for them to find tracks by the shed – except for mine."

"That's what I'm talking about. They think it's you."

"Then why did they return my shoes?"

He made a good point. "Whoever it was, he came from Meadow Street – probably in the middle of the night – and went right through that break in the damn wall. Good fences make good neighbors and all that shit. You need to fix that wall."

"I am fixing it."

"Adam. The police think you did this thing. He wants an admission."

"You're still pissed from last night. That's what this is really about."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You're mad that I protected you from my asinine brothers, so you turn around and treat me like I'm impaired. I know how to handle myself with the police—it's a skill we Morgans learn early."

"Well, none of you are particularly skilled, practiced though you may be."

"That joke isn't funny. You need to get a hold of yourself," he stated matter-of-factly. "He asked questions and I answered them."

"If you believe that then you are impaired." I snapped as he set the water on the counter top in front of me.

"Hey. I'm not the one who crumpled on the patio, Holden. That was all you. Drink this. You look terrible."

Detective Lewis knocked on the mudroom door. "Hello? Can I come in?"

"Sure." I wasn't about to leave my stool to let him in. I glared at Adam, who still didn't have his shirt on...and I had to crush another uncharacteristic flash of concern that smacked of something far worse. Adam stood in my well-ordered kitchen, half naked, rippling with cut muscles. Strong and dirty, he radiated youth and vitality. I frowned at the tender brown mole near his belly button. He should put his damn shirt back on, shouldn't he? Why didn't he? I yanked on my too tight shirt collar, feeling overheated and overwrought. What in the hell was the matter with me?

Detective Lewis came into the kitchen. "Do you need an ambulance?"

No, I needed a fucking sedative. "I need you to find Porter. My brother's missing."

"Morgan was telling me."

"He was?"

Lewis nodded and...I snuck a look at Adam. He leaned against the refrigerator with his hands stuffed in his pockets of his jeans. The waistband dipped and his boxers, faded teal today, showed. His hair peeked above the edges and his Goddamn crotch bulged in a round fist sized lump of denim. Jesus, he needed a shirt on.

I forced myself to stop glaring at Adam. I said pointedly to Lewis, "You seemed like you were getting a little intense out there. Is there a problem?"

Adam said, "You're imagining things. We were discussing Porter and your friend, John."

"He's not my friend."

"He's friend enough that he was here this morning and I didn't know about it." Adam said with no hint of emotion.

That iron curtain came back down with a slam. We were in the presence of someone Adam couldn't read and once again, he'd retreated. He was a master of concealing himself when he needed to. He'd had twenty-four years to practice not giving anything away—just in case he got his ass kicked or hauled to jail—or his father pinned him with vehicular manslaughter. He was afraid and unsure and I needed to cut him some slack.

Still, my eyes traveled the length of his torso and I found myself saying stupidly, "Why don't you go get your shirt?"

"I'm good, thank you."

Detective Lewis asked, "Any word from Paige?"

"No. Nothing. If he's hiding in this house, I'll arrest him myself."

Lewis raised an eyebrow. "Did he mention an argument with Davis?"

"Yes, actually, he did. He said it was inconsequential—and their last interaction was heated. He was regretful and staggered by the loss of his partner. He wept all over

my countertop.”

“Did he mention that he’d recently taken funds from Davis’ accounts?”

John. That asshole.

“It didn’t come up in conversation, no.”

“Mr. Worthington, when things seem connected in police work, particularly in a case like this, they usually are. I don’t believe in coincidences. You and Paige, your dispute goes back two years. He devastated you professionally and financially –”

“Surely, your sources are incorrect. He didn’t touch me financially.”

“All right. Emotionally, then. I understand your brother threatened Paige on multiple occasions.”

Where had he heard that? I said nothing because it wasn’t a question.

“Why was John Paige here? Really?”

Adam said stiffly, “Holden didn’t do anything.”

Lewis nodded. “Because of his condition.”

Adam was about to speak, but I cut him off and said to Lewis, “As entertaining as I find this, unless my attorney is present, I’m going to put a halt to our conversation right now. I never met Geoffrey Davis, never saw him, never heard of him. Until Tuesday I hadn’t had contact with John Paige in two years. I didn’t meet Adam until he found Davis in my yard and I’m not interested in anything but finding my brother, getting the media to clear off my sidewalk, and publishing my culinary memoir. If you’re here to speak with me about Porter’s whereabouts, I’m all ears. Otherwise, there’s the door.”

The detective nodded. “You may be answering some questions in a more formal setting soon enough. If you hear from Paige, or Porter, tell them to call me.”

He left through the back door, walking the garden path where new leaves were thickening the rose bushes.

"Holden. What was he saying?" Mitzie startled me from the doorway. She held two brown paper sacks that I recognized as my dinner. It must have just arrived. Mitz was draped in something flattering and stylish again. Where were all these designer clothes coming from? Smithfield? JC Penney in Waterbury? What woman has that many outfits tucked in her car? Unless she'd come with a suitcase of clothing.

Which meant that she had intended to stay from the onset — she'd truly believed she and Porter would reconcile.

She slapped the bags on the counter, her face pale with worry. "Tell me the truth. Do they think my husband is involved?"

"Possibly."

"He didn't like John, but he would never hurt anyone — why would he do this to you? He loves you."

"I know that."

"Why would he kill anyone? Let alone a complete stranger?"

"He wouldn't." I thought of Thayer's terrible accident — of that turbulent day on the Sound and the fear that had gripped us all. "Not intentionally."

Adam asked, "If you were in jail, Holden, who has control of your assets?"

I blinked at him. That was a very good question, actually.

"You're both crazy. I have more money than Holden and Porter combined. He doesn't need money from you! If he was going after money, he'd stay married to me." She choked on tears, slapped the bags on the counter, and stormed from the room in a cloud of Chanel Number Five.

"She makes a good point."

"The cops didn't take anything from the garage, you know? Not even a shovel. So whoever did it, as far as we know, they didn't use your tools." Adam continued to pose like an Abercrombie and Fitch model against the fridge. He didn't speak like one though. "I don't like him, but what does your friend Paige gain by killing Davis and leaving him here?"

"Money and revenge are usually the deciding factor. John could have left his dead lover here—he had no idea I was housebound. Maybe he hoped I'd be blamed." I was faced with a worse folly than my trip outside or taking my only living relative for granted or screwing the help. I allowed someone crazy, someone I didn't trust, someone unbalanced into my home. I sheltered him. Offered him my fresh ground Costa Rican coffee and my six hundred thread count sheets.

But the look on John's face this morning? That wasn't acting.

"He was devastated. I swear he had no idea the man was dead. And let's not forget—John doesn't have a car."

Adam shrugged. "So he says." He drummed his fingers on his thigh, lost in thought. "He can't be next of kin, or...I don't know, the beneficiary of an estate. They were just dating. That's like if you croaked and I tried to collect."

He was right again.

"Was that out of line?"

"No. It was damned insightful. Actually—you are insightful in general. I think you underestimate yourself."

He smiled and I had a hard time looking him in the eye. I felt a combination of sheepishness for my mishap in the yard and annoyance for his nudity in polite company.

"I'm just thinking out loud."

"We're going to have to wait and see." A good man knew when to apologize for acting like a fool. "I'm sorry I tried to interfere with your conversation."

"You should be," he said with no ugliness.

I guess I should be sorry then. He would know. I actually snorted with laughter—my emotional rollercoaster was a breathtaking ride this afternoon. It was time for a cocktail, but I pushed Adam out of the way and got us each a cold diet ginger ale instead. "Well, I am truly sorry. I acted like an idiot."

"You did, but I forgive you. I'm careful. I can handle myself, Holden. You, however, need to take it slow."

"Sure thing, Dr. Morgan." I cupped his jaw and bushed my lips across his—I couldn't help myself. His skin tasted of spring air and manly sweat and...cinnamon Tic Tacs. I licked and felt him smile against my mouth. "That's for me being an ass."

"It's all right. This is a mess and...you're anxious. I understand."

I ran my finger down his chest—he'd tempted me for the last hour—and watched as his skin reacted to my touch. His nipples tightened into hard nubs and I bent to kiss the raw edge of his collar before sticking the cold soda against his stomach.

He yelped and grappled the ginger ale from me. "Very funny."

The smell of burgers permeated my senses and my stomach rumbled. Adam poked the nearest bag with a blunt finger, blue eyes curious. "What's this? Not lamb? Or beans? Or something snooty the lawyers sent, right? It smells like food."

"Was that a joke? You need to tell me when you're joking."

His smile put the sun to shame and this time, I didn't look away.

"Go put your shirt on, boy-o, and I'll buy you a hamburger."

* * * *

Kurt arrived when we finished dinner. He rang the bell, but he wouldn't come in, so I was forced to stand in the foyer with the front door open. Light was fading fast on South Street. Near the rectory, a lone media truck was parked, but there was no sign of life from that quarter. They were probably having dinner. I angled myself out of sight anyway.

Kurt looked tired. He had Kipling on a leash, and he handed me the dog and a bag of supplies. "Porter's not answering the phone. I'm relinquishing Kipling into your hands."

"Mitzie said you were sitting." I petted the exhausted puppy and his wet tongue lapped at my wrist. "She said you spoke this morning."

"She's a crazy bitch—no wonder Porter's hiding." His sudden misogyny caught me off guard. I liked Mitzie.

"I don't think she's crazy or a bitch; Porter wronged her and she's hurt. He said he'd meet with her. Of course she's worried."

"What did she say?"

"Not much."

The porch light made Kurt's pale hair gleam and suspicion slithered across my consciousness. Porter, John and I weren't the only blond men with access to my house. Although what Kurt would gain from hurting Geoff—or me for that matter—I couldn't figure. "Are you worried that Mitzie said something?"

"About? I wouldn't believe a word that woman says. Seriously. I'm wondering why

she's still here? If you toss her out the door, I guarantee Porter will come home. You can see that, right?"

"Yes. I can. However, I'm not going to be unkind to that girl. Technically, she's family until tomorrow."

"Fine. But hear me. I can't sit the dog, Holden, I have to work. The bank frowns on animals in the workplace. People get fired for less than this, and it's not a good time to be unemployed. Porter's not coming back until Mitzie leaves. End of story."

"We'll...I'll take care of the dog." Which was probably Porter's secret plan all along. I was going to kill him when I saw him. Kipling licked my knuckles tiredly. "If you see Porter, tell him to call me."

"Sure. I'm going to the Village," Kurt announced as if that were an important news bulletin. He marched down driveway in his chinos and loafers—off for another evening on the barstool. He must be lonely without his drinking buddy. The two of them had cut a wide swath throughout the county over the last few weeks—drinking and carousing. My parents would be so proud.

I watched him disappear, heading to the Green. "C'mon Kip. Let's find you supper."

Chapter Ten

I locked the doors, tucked the slumbering puppy against my chest, and led the way to the backstairs. The door squeaked when I opened it. "C'mon."

Adam's mouth hitched and he flipped the light switches. The kitchen darkened. The green glow of the clock stove flashed above the stove—7:00. The house was quiet, the dishes were done, and I wanted a smoke. Adam followed me. "Are you taking me upstairs for pleasures of the flesh again or is this something else?"

"We'll see, maybe if you're very nice...but actually, right now I want an Ashton. I want a scotch. I want to think."

"I could go—"

"You could, but where would be the fun in that? You smoke?"

I felt Adam's eyes on me as we took the back stairs to my suite. "Nope, but I'll watch you."

He couldn't know how sexual that was, could he? Maybe he did. Maybe our fantasies were in line and Adam could sit at my feet while I stroked his wonderful thick

hair and forgot everything. He could suck my cock as I relaxed into the leather recliner with a fine smoke and good drink and a beautiful boy.

While I battled lust, found my cigar and poured us both a drink, Adam opened the French doors to the balcony. A cool breeze fluttered the sheers and freshened my room. I left the exhausted puppy on the mat in my bathroom, and then stalled in the doorway to the porch, not because I was hesitant—but because I was enjoying Adam as he took in the backyard from this brand new perspective. He was more alive unencumbered by walls, comfortable in his skin. Not hemmed in. The difference between us was striking—although I was at one time in my life very much at peace under these same stars.

“I saw this from the yard. It’s so private.” He fingered the rough vines the same way my mother used to, the same way every gardener I’d ever met did—rubbing them gently, rolling its stems between his thumb and fingers. “These must be so lovely when they bloom.”

“They are.” I could sit beneath the bower with a stogie and two fingers of scotch and watch the evening sun set over Smithfield Woods while in the peak of summer the bats swooped over the pool. In the distance, I could just make out the boardwalk and its bridges from the porch swing. It was a private nook, with a trellis that met the patio two stories below. My favorite place but even it couldn’t compare to the sight of Adam fingering my vine. I cleared my throat. “When I was a kid, I used to sneak here at night and climb down to trouble. My brothers and I. My old room is below this one.”

I handed Adam his glass, which he sniffed warily. “What’s this?”

“Seltzer.”

“Thank God.” He leaned on the frame of the glider, tucked deep under the dormant wisteria and the dried twigs left from last summer’s clematis, and gazed into the night. Only a hint of moonlight shone wearily through the opaque clouds. Everyone seemed to be at home on Meadow Street—lights blazed. Next door, at the rectory, more light shone from whichever room faced mine from the second floor. I didn’t see Father

David's face at the window, but that didn't mean he wasn't watching.

Adam set his drink down on the railing with care. He came soundlessly back on his sock-covered feet and surprised me by slipping his hand into mine—he'd done it so often, I knew that this was something he liked. Maybe it was something he needed—that simple connection with another human being. He held my hand as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Other than Adam, I hadn't held anyone's hand since I was a child. I didn't think I could ever tire of the feel of his callused hand in mine.

I let him draw me to the glider where he took my shoulders and pushed me into the seat. "I want to have you."

Just like that.

"Baby, you can have me any way you want me...what would you like?" I stroked the back of his hand with my thumb and stared into his handsome face.

He moved, sliding to his knees, settled between my legs and laid his cheek on my chest. I put my arms around his slender back, holding him to my heart as above us the clouds drifted and pale stars twinkled. I stroked his hair and my heart beat firm and strong against him.

The glider moved, so I braced my legs on the decking of the porch and let Adam kiss his way from my chest to my fluttering stomach. His mouth sipped and pleasure skated under my skin as fingers deftly opened my pants. My cock pumped itself to full staff while he peeled my jockeys down. He whispered, "Can I suck your cock, Mister Holden?" like some naughty backstairs housemaid and I just wanted to kiss his wicked mouth forever.

"As long as you do a good job. I wouldn't want to dock your pay." I had to wink—*God what if he didn't know I was joking?*

"I'll do my best."

He grinned, and then my eyes rolled back into my head as he enveloped my flesh. Velvet on velvet. His lush mouth was still shockingly cold from his drink. The contrast of chilled wet tongue on my hot stiff flesh made my balls ache. Lust gripped me by the dick and I dropped my hands to my sides so he could service me. He made the sweetest noises, his head bobbing in the moonlight, and I found an easy rhythm, sinking into the blessed haven of his welcome mouth.

Adam moved to take me deeper and I fucked his open throat—and crazy, crazy thinking—he made me feel more than hot and horny and ready. He made me feel whole. Alive. Healed. My legs trembled and he soothed them with his sure hands, thumbs gliding boldly to stroke the inside of my thighs. His fingers met at the base of my cock, exactly as I had imagined doing to him. He sucked hard, moaning because he liked it, and with his name on my lips and this unprecedented swelling of my heart, I came. I came on his loving wet tongue with those beautiful eyes fixed on mine in the wide, wild open air. The rich smell of vines and dew soaked grass and musky sex—all of it rejuvenating me. As if spring were on my horizon. As if he'd planted the seed of something wonderful inside my heart.

Adam climbed next to me, setting the glider to motion while I slumped, sated like the master of the house ought to be. I put my arm around him and he laid his head on my broad shoulder. I wanted to light my fat cigar and taste the fruity bite of tobacco, but I held him first. We rocked in quiet companionship, my fingers sifting the locks of his hair, until all at once, Adam put a finger to my lips. "Someone's outside."

I strained to hear over the night noises, but there weren't any. Once upon a time, I'd have noticed that shift. I'd have been aware that all had gone still. That no cars moved on South Street. No frogs peeped from woods. Adam pointed. "There."

Against my Mother's gloomy shed, a form detached itself from the purple shadows. How had Adam known? I never would have seen it—of course I was dreamy and stupid from coming in his delectable mouth.

"Who do you think that is?"

"Maybe...Porter?" I said hopefully. "I can't tell. We should put in a light."

"He seems wrong—but I don't know."

I started to call out, but Adam silenced me with a hand squeeze. "Wait. Maybe we can see who it is before they disappear."

Whoever it was, he lurked on the garden path by the rose hedges. He headed leisurely toward the patio, but the sound of crunching gravel stopped us all.

The man slid further into shadows. Adam and I froze under the wisteria vines as firm footfalls from a second intruder landed on the bluestone. This one entered from the portico. A moment later, the mudroom door rattled.

A break in? Or my brother?

Adam whispered, "That can't be either of my brothers—and I don't think it's yours."

There came the sickening smack of two surfaces connecting and then something struck the stone with a wet slap—a repeat of the noise I'd made when I hit the patio on Monday.

Adam squeezed my hand again and pushed me into the safety of my dressing room like some kind of knight in shining armor protecting his infirm Lady Guinevere. He bolted over the side of the balcony with the practiced grace of a long-term felon.

A felon wearing orange woolies on his big feet.

I waited one interminable minute for my panic to rise—but it never came. This wasn't the press, this wasn't gossip, this wasn't fear: this was danger in my fucking house, on my fucking land. I should, by God, be safe in my own home. I wasn't frozen now. I was furious and ready to damage whoever would threaten what was mine.

I was equally livid with Adam for treating me like I was frail and then acting irrationally. What was he thinking, leaping over the balcony?

On the other end of the house, the sun porch was black as pitch. Nothing moved between the portico, the driveway and the rectory on my right. All was still on the patio below me.

Adam. Where the hell was he? As each second lengthened with no sign of him, I regretted letting go of my cell service. How difficult would it have been for him to dial 9-1-1?

I was ready to hop the railing myself—ready to catch whatever bastard was down there—when Adam flipped over the side like an acrobat.

“Wha—”

His hand slapped over my mouth and he whispered, “Porter.”

Porter? Porter what? Had he been hurt? Had he hurt someone?

I leaned in, my lips brushing his ear. “What do you think?”

A light split the night from the rectory—the back door opened and Father David’s cross voice carried on the breeze. “Yes, yes, Martha. I know. The heat pump needs to be replaced in the building; it’s been thirty years.”

He was on the phone. Standing on the step in a checkered bathrobe, his frail legs poked from its hem. The old man craned to see into the yard. It was clear that he’d heard something and had come to investigate. He cut the light on. “*Who’s out there?*”

A figure tore across the far meadow, only to disappear into the hemlocks.

Adam’s hand gripped my shoulder. “That was your brother.”

* * * *

I waited on the bench under the portico, not panicked in the least. It was dark, it was cozy, and I was never happier not to see Tony Gervase. He'd have kicked my ass. Trooper Clark arrived—I didn't know her. She was short and wore her hair in a ponytail; her pants were cinched and uncomfortably high-waisted and a weapon was strapped to her hip on a very masculine looking utility belt. She seemed efficient enough, but with my car impounded, the crime scene tape still draped on the shrubs, my new jailbird lover standing quiet and uneasy on the driveway and my ex-lover out cold on the side of the carriage house, she wisely called for assistance.

I watched two middle-aged EMTs load an unresponsive John into the ambulance. As the back door latched and they took him and his Nepali bag away, red lights flashing, I hoped there was someone in his life that cared about him. I found that the saddest part of all.

I'd call his secretary in the morning.

The state police searched the yard, their useless flashlight beams streaking across budding bushes and trees. I was officially planning to put a security light on the shed—and I'd have Adam plant that row of hemlocks to the north.

Predictably, the news trucks arrived. Reporters and their cameras kept me hidden behind the lattice work.

They found a shovel on the path. I could imagine whose fingerprints were on the handle, in case they were looking. What a mess. To anyone, it appeared as if my new lover had clobbered my ex, which was an exciting new variation on the former theme of my new lover killing my ex-lover's lover and planting him in the back forty. That same ex had lurked like a thief—trying to slip back inside to crash on my couch, I bet. John never used to be so unimaginative. Five years ago, he'd have climbed the roof and

repelled down to a window like a hearty, healthy boy adventurer. Anything but this lame rattling around for an unlocked door.

Mitzie wandered by to see what the fuss was about and went tight-lipped when the officers began to question her whereabouts this evening. "I was in the gym, working with my yoga ball. I did Pilates." Tonight she wore black yoga pants and a matching top. Her hair was under Thayer's hat. I was too exhausted to protest. "Has anyone heard from my husband?"

"Not yet. He'll turn up." I felt bone weary and old. I was starting to get an idea what the hell was going on in my house and the one person I needed to speak with, Detective Lewis, was off duty.

When the officers had gone, taking my bloody shovel with them, and long after Adam's taillights disappeared down South Street, I locked the house and reset the alarm. I left a message for Lewis and made my way upstairs. A strip of light shone from under my parents' door, but I kept going, deep in thought, to my hideaway on the third floor.

I found what I was looking for. Porter greeted me from my club chair. He had Kipling burrowed into his chest. The French doors were open, and the curtains moved in the wind. My brother seemed shaken, but hale and unkempt in jeans and a peach polo shirt. He'd made free with my Lagavulin.

I was so relieved that I acted badly. "I thought you were missing, but you were here the whole time."

"Missing? This house is nine thousand square feet, Hol; it's not difficult to keep out of sight, although Mrs. H is hard to fool."

"There's a murder investigation at foot, and you're behaving like an ass."

"I spoke with the police already. I didn't think you'd ask Mitzie to stay. As soon as I heard her in the foyer the other morning, I left. Her car has been parked in the driveway

for two days.”

“She’s your wife and she’s worried.” Disgusted, I snapped, “You are such a fucking coward. The old man would knock you in the head for not standing tall.”

“Don’t talk to me about cowardice. You’ve been hiding from your own shadow for two years. I take care of you. I have always taken care of you. You could extend me one damn week. And Dad would be passed out in the study right about now if he were alive.”

“Apple. Tree. Porter.”

“I’m on vacation and I don’t want to see Mitzie until it’s over.”

“That’s unfortunate, because she wants to see you.” I finally broke. “Porter. Honestly. I can’t stand this shit anymore. You need to think before you bring home another one of these girls. What the hell is wrong with Mitzie? She’s nice. She’s pretty. She’s loaded. She loves you. And for reasons that defy comprehension, she wants to bear the next generation of Worthingtons. What in God’s name is your problem? You’re breaking that poor girl’s heart—she’s utterly wasted herself on you.”

“Don’t you think I know that? But I can’t give her what she wants.”

“All she wants is for you to stop drinking and stop fucking around. How hard can that be?”

He sipped my sixteen year old scotch and refused to meet my eye. “I’m sorry.”

“Fine. But from now on—no more wives. You’re forty-five years old. You’ve met your quota.”

“I…”

I didn’t want to hear it. Poor Mitzie. She’d been the pick of the litter and I was going to miss her. “Why in the hell did you attack John tonight?”

Porter gave me an exasperated look. "Are you kidding? I came back from town and he was breaking into the house. What did you think? I had dinner with Kurt and he said that you were going to call the police because I was a no show, so I came home. Your turn: why is Mitz still here?"

"She offered to take care of your dog. I didn't think you'd vanish for two days. You could have left a note."

"I didn't vanish. I was right here."

I raised my eyebrow at him.

"You're right. I should have said something. It's been a tough week." Porter finished his drink, and I took a seat in the opposite chair as he continued. "I took the path, cut through the yard, and John Paige was at the back door. I just, I don't know; it was such a shocker. To see him again after Friday night. Here at our house. I hate that bastard. I thought I was looking out for you."

"I can look after myself."

"Since when?"

"Since...I guess...okay, you make a good point— but if you'd been paying any attention, you'd know he's been here since Tuesday. You didn't see him?"

He looked genuinely horrified. "*Here?* Why the hell...I knew someone was here. I thought it was your gardener." At this, Porter turned scarlet. Even his scalp was red under his thinning blond hair. "I tried to come see you last night, but...uh...you were busy."

Loud sex noises must have echoed down the hallway. We hadn't exactly restrained ourselves. I refused to blush. "We're adults. This is my home. I was having sex. You're acting like an idiot, and you're sneaking around as if you have something to hide. I'm starting to believe maybe you do." I held up a hand, not to stop him, but to stop myself

before he denied it and I went on a real tear. That would come soon enough. "Don't lie to me. From the beginning. Tell me your story."

"My story? I saw Paige on Friday night. On Monday, when everyone was sure that he was dead in the yard...I...just thought if you did it, I'd be there for you."

"You thought I could kill someone?"

"No. But...if *you* killed *him*, I would understand."

"Well, I don't know if I could extend the same courtesy for you. Jesus Christ. I'm pissed, sure, but I can't even turn the man away from my door when he's sick. We were together for years. *Years*. That meant something to me. He meant something to me. I don't like him. Yes, I underestimated him and he hurt me, he betrayed me, he fucking exposed me, but I wouldn't kill the man. I could barely fight him over fucking syndication rights." Although I had. Which explained why a four hundred dollar car ride to Manhattan, even when John was desperate and had no other recourse, was beyond his realm.

"Hurt you? He ruined you."

"I'm hardly ruined. Most people look at my life and call me blessed."

"Kurt said the body was John. He heard at work, from Pete, Father David, shit even Mrs. H—everyone thought the worst because—"

"Because I'm crazy. Great. Fuck you very much. Tell me what happened at the Crowne and Hammer."

"Kurt and I went after I met with Mitz last Friday. That's when she asked me to go to mediation and...some other things..."

"Treatment? You can say that."

"—and we...had sex."

"You and Kurt?"

"Very funny. My wife and I."

"Porter. You have to stop stringing her along."

"I can't help it. She has this hold over me—"

"It's called 'she loves you.' You can say that, too."

"I know she does. That's why... I agreed to the mediation..."

Mitzie *was* supposed to meet Porter on Wednesday. What did square faced Kurt think of that? "You agreed? You told her you'd do it? You have no idea how much I want to believe you."

Porter's thick fingers sifted through Kipling's fur. He nodded. "I know you can't understand this, but I do love her. Always have loved her. She's...special."

"Why do you assume I don't understand? When did you become this much of an asshole, Porter?"

"I'm not an asshole; I'm human. We all make mistakes. I just...make a lot of them."

"Because you drink too much." Porter blinked—but this couldn't be news to him if he'd agreed with Mitzie to go for treatment. "So, what happened Friday night?"

"I...honestly don't know."

I gave him a curious look. "Did you black out?"

"Maybe. I...guess so. I saw Mitzie early, and then I told her I'd come here to pack. But I promised Kurt I'd meet with him first and then we went out."

"Now there's a surprise." I regretted it as soon as I said it. My attitude wasn't helping Porter. "I'm sorry. That was out of line."

He shook his head as if to say *now who's being the asshole?* "I've known him since we

were fifteen. He's been my best man three times, Hol. I haven't said anything, but he's having his own troubles."

"I know that his wife left him."

Porter nodded. "Times are lean and getting leaner at work. Kurt's under a lot of strain."

"I got that impression earlier when he abandoned Kipling here. Go on."

"We walked into the Crowne and Hammer at about nine, I guess, and John Goddamn Paige was sitting right there. Unreal. I wanted to leave, but Kurt knew the bartender and he talked me into staying. Paige was fighting with Davis like it was some kind of roughneck bar in the Bronx. It was uncomfortable and just...not at all appropriate." He sounded so much like our parents I would have laughed if any part of this were remotely amusing. "Davis was pissed, and he wouldn't calm down until Paige left. He was a diva. A little tiny, pissy diva. Swishy. You'd have hated him."

Swishy? Probably. "John's lover was effeminate? I had this...impression he was rugged." Like me, I wanted to add, but that was unnecessary.

"You have no idea. He was a whiny bitch."

"Really? He must have had money." I should feel badly for thinking that of John, but facts were facts.

Porter shook his head. "Maybe at one point, but not anymore. Since the market tanked he said."

"So. John. He left with his friends?"

"Just after we arrived. I didn't speak with him. Davis came into the bar and got shit-faced. We were all pretty lit. I think Kurt and I left at one or two, after the bar closed, and...Davis was too drunk to drive back to his place. He asked us for a ride."

A cold gust of wind blew into the room, or perhaps, I'd chilled listening to Porter.
"Go on."

"We gave full disclosure to the detective. The police know this."

"I know. Go on."

"So—I don't remember much. We left him on the sidewalk on Route 7—he wanted us to drop him in front of the coffee shop so he could walk off his anger. He was adamant and an adult, so we left him. Kurt and I came back to Smithfield. End of story."

It was the same turn of phrase Kurt used. *End of story*. Porter wiped sweat from his lip and refused to meet my eye.

It wasn't the end of the story.

"You were the last people to see him alive?"

"No. Whoever killed him was. It was Paige. It had to be. He probably ran Davis over; hell, he crushed you without a thought."

Outside the vines rustled in the breeze. "How drunk were you on Friday night? Scale of one to ten."

Porter stared at his glass and I took it from his hand, remembering Kurt and I hauling my inebriated brother to his room only a few days ago.

I should dump it all, every single drop—even my good scotch—but that would change nothing. If Mitzie couldn't get him to treatment, I doubted that I could.

Porter said, "I don't know. Eight maybe?"

"Eight. Jesus. Porter, don't you see this is getting to be a problem? Who was driving? *Shit*. You assholes took my car, didn't you?"

"I...we..."

"The police did miss the wallet." Or someone who hadn't been under my roof planted that wallet later on—and that person could only be Kurt. He'd been in and out of my house as much as Adam or Mrs. H or Mitz or John.

"You said it was okay to take the car." Porter's face was ruddy. "I...I think...I think Kurt was driving."

"*You think?* How can you remember what Davis said or where you left him, if you can't even remember who was driving the damn car?"

Agitated, my brother's words grew desperate. "I don't...We dropped Davis off. In Kent. Someone did this to you and it was John Paige."

"No."

My throat closed as I reached for my brother's thick hand. He was shocked enough to jerk and wrench free but I refused to let go. I wouldn't ever let go. I'd learned something from my time this week with Adam, and that was sometimes you had to take a person by the hand. In fear, Porter's eyes filled with unshed tears. He choked and swallowed. I asked him with all the gentleness in my heart, "Porter. What really happened? You can tell me. I want to help you. Did Kurt tell you to lie?"

He finally broke. He shut his eyes, as if to block whatever he did know from his sight. "Yeah."

"I can't help you until you tell me the truth."

"I don't remember much. Davis was alive and in the car. He was ranting about something—his leg and something about litigation. I know that Kurt and I were on the stairs here at some point. That's it."

"So you don't know if you were driving?"

"I...think I might have been driving." He swallowed hard, his eyes still closed. Kipling slept in the crook of his arm. "I think...I backed up...and I hit something. But I swear to you, Davis was in the car, alive with us."

"That's why you've been hiding, not because of Mitzie but because you're trying to remember—and you're afraid. You left when Mitzie arrived here the other day; but you really disappeared when you heard Geoffrey Davis was the body in our yard."

"I panicked. I...I couldn't have done this to you, Hol. I would never ever do anything to harm you—"

"I know that." Tears blurred my vision. "Even accidentally. You'd never hurt me."

"But I don't know for sure." He opened his eyes, pale green against bloodshot sclera, and he whispered, "What if I did hit him? I couldn't have done the rest of it."

"I know. You can barely walk when you're drunk; you didn't dig that hole."

"That means Kurt did. Jesus. Holden, he's been my best friend for thirty years."

"Tomorrow morning we'll speak with Tony. All we know for sure is that Kurt lied and that this entire event feels like *Weekend at Bernie's*—and that has Kurt's name written all over it. For fuck's sake, you stay away from him."

"I want to believe that Paige did this because it's easier."

"It's certainly convenient, but he didn't do this." I set the empty tumbler on the nightstand. "Go to bed. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Can you speak to Mitzie?"

All these years and Porter had never asked for anything. "Of course I'll speak with her."

Porter nodded and went to the door, moving carefully. Every day he looked more and more like our father, Tad Worthington—white collar, old money, country club

alcoholic, ready for rehab.

We were going to be more than that.

"Porter. Where are you sleeping?"

"In the media room. The leather couch is more comfortable than my bed."

I shook my head, suddenly so tired I wanted to lie down. "Just clean your dishes. I'll call Detective Lewis first thing. He tells me it's never too early to find answers."

Porter left to spend another night on the couch, and I sat in the leather chair with my long awaited cigar. I clipped the end with the ease of long practice and lit it, inhaling its rich, bitter taste. Smoke curled around me in a cancerous cloud of white. I tried to relax, but that was impossible.

"You can come in now."

Footsteps on the porch and Adam appeared in the doorway. He hadn't gone far when he left. He was wearing the same clothes—jeans and sneakers, the *Radiohead* t-shirt. His blue eyes were shuttered as he considered his shoes with a frown.

Even now, after that scene with Porter, Adam made me smile. "You can leave them on."

He toed them off anyway. "I don't want to track mud in." His hair was tucked under the beanie and auburn whiskers made him as rough-looking as a New England longshoreman or, perhaps, a Smithfield felon. "I'm sorry. I should have waited until tomorrow."

"You were eavesdropping. You are officially a Worthington employee."

His smile flattened. "I know you're joking because you're upset, so I won't take offense. I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I followed Porter for you and...I didn't want to ruin your chance to speak to your brother. But I still don't understand why John came

back here tonight.”

“He’s broke. He was looking for a place to sleep, I imagine. He has one now.” My cigar smoldered. Tomorrow Mrs. H would lecture me for daring to smoke in my own home. “You came back to do what? If John’s not here? If you can’t trust me —”

His eyes narrowed. “What do you mean? I trust you.”

“You didn’t earlier on the balcony; you doubted my ability to protect myself.”

His brow wrinkled in confusion. “What? You could probably kick my ass holding that cigar in one hand.”

“No doubt.”

“I don’t understand why you’re angry.”

“Don’t you?”

Adam reminded me softly, “No, Holden, I don’t understand. You’re going to have to spell this out for me. Remember?”

I finally took the time to read him, and what I saw there was genuine confusion and his usual honesty.

He’d warned me often enough. The irony about his lack of communication skills was that we were forced to say exactly what we meant—his disability encouraged a real connection, but it took courage. “I’m sorry. You’re right. You leaped into the dark and treated me as if I’m infirm. It makes me feel...broken.”

“You are broken. Explain how wanting to keep you from having an attack on the patio makes you angry. I watched you fall twice before. You don’t like to be outside, so I kept you from having to go. Give and take. That’s what people do when they care about each other. When one person is weak, the other is supposed to be strong.”

I couldn’t respond because...he was right. Adam had acted thoughtfully—as a

lover should – and I'd become so defensive about my illness, I'd turned into a dickhead.

And a whiner.

"Why do you always get to be right?"

"I don't know. Just lucky, I guess. You know what I think? I think you're angry over the threat to your family – and you're lashing out."

I smiled again and crushed my cigar in the ashtray while Adam took a seat in the other chair. He waited awkwardly for the next move. He said, "My inclination is to protect you, not because I don't trust you, but because I care about you."

"I know." I was officially talked out. I got up and tugged Adam into me, his chest warming mine, and cupped his cheek. "I care about you, too."

His arms slid around me. "I figured Porter looped the library parking lot and climbed the trellis, like you did when you were kids. I can't always read body language or even figure what people mean half the time, but I'm not stupid."

"Hey. I know that."

He touched his lips to my forehead, and placed a soft kiss there. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out. I'll see you tomorrow."

I allowed Adam a single step, and then I turned uncharacteristically needy. I hauled him back into my arms. "Don't go. Stay the night."

"I'd like that."

* * * *

Adam spooned me, his thigh between mine, our feet tangled in the lost sheets. His

hand gripped my hip. He was probably cold. I was freezing, but he nuzzled my neck and cuddled my behind and I didn't want to move. We'd left the French doors open earlier and that bracing spring wind blew across our naked skin. Adam was breathing new life into me as surely as that fresh breeze was trading the stale odor of tobacco and heartbreak for dew, damp wisteria vines, and coconut shampoo.

I swallowed and stared at the purple shapes of my furnishings crouching in the darkness. The armoire loomed in the far corner. The insistent peep of frogs and the call of owls filled the night—and my clock light glowed yellow. 2:36 a.m.

And Adam was turning me on with his wiggling.

I stroked his knuckles and he laced his fingers through mine. His voice was sleepy. "Are you awake?"

I nodded. My hair must be in his nose, but he didn't back away. Not him. He wriggled even closer. It was such a strange shift to be sheltered in the comfort of his arms that I rolled to settle my chest against his. I meant to keep going, to tuck him under me and have my wicked way with him, but Adam leaned over and licked the seam of my mouth. In a curiously bold move, he pressed my shoulders into the pillows. His eager tongue flicked mine, and then he circled my mouth with a coaxing glide until I moaned and let him move to loom over me. Budded nipples rubbed into my chest, and he pinned me with a firm hand to my shoulder. Adam brushed the hair from my eyes. I could hear his smile when he nuzzled my nose and whispered, "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." His prick touched mine. "I see you're up."

"You too." His eyes glimmered, filled with desire and mischief. Our next kiss was edged with urgency. He gripped my chin; the scratchy pad of his thumb stroked my mouth and I held him by the scruff of his neck and the gentle curve of his ass. Held him and let him plunge his hot tongue inside me until sparks shot behind my eyes and under my skin and in my crotch. I clenched his hair roughly, not sure who had control of the situation. Not really caring, because for us it didn't matter.

His fingers teased my shoulder and the hair on my chest; they twirled across my stomach, until finally he touched me where I most needed a helping hand. He cupped my cock and balls and *oh sweet ever loving hell* did so while nipping my mouth and chin. I ground into his tight hand, my dick pulsing, and Adam's voice was rough in my ear. "I want you so much."

"That's funny...because I was thinking the very same thing."

"No. I want you. Roll over." Adam urged me onto my stomach. "Let me."

What's a man to do?

I let him. He straddled my waist and his balls brushed my back. Starting at the smooth patch of my nape, he trailed soft kisses all the way to the narrow dip above my ass. The deep line of my spine, the curve into the cleft of my backside—he worshipped it all. His mouth was warm, and his teeth were sharp as he pierced my skin in tiny loving bites. Those workman hands eased into my shoulder blades, rubbing and kneading. His knee spread my thighs and I writhed into the sheets, fucking my cock into the bed. I breathed into the pillow, where the lingering scent of fancy soap and shampoo, clean linens and my fresh lover played havoc with my mind. His essence mingled with mine and I just couldn't get enough of him.

I thought he'd be a bit more tentative—but Adam explored the deep valley of my ass like a well-practiced, gay Lothario. His tongue ran the furrow, hands separating my muscled flesh, making my skin burn. His need forced me onto my knees, and at last, his hot tongue slipped inside. The shock of it stole my breath.

I panted, "Adam...you don't have to—"

God. Damn. It had been such a long, long time for me. Years since anyone had touched me—had wanted to touch me.

"I want to. I want to make love to you. Just relax. Let me love you." He was wooing me, as if he was now the voice of experience and I was the fumbling virgin. "Unless you

don't...like that?"

"I love it."

Hell, yes.

Adam slid a callused palm along my inner thigh and then he gripped my cock—his hands and mouth together worshipping me. I rocked into him—rough skin scraped my erection. I shoved myself into his hand and onto his mouth. Grinding. Deeper. Further. Harder. More. Until he licked inside my body and I stiffed.

"Oh, sweet Jesus. Baby, don't stop."

He didn't. I scrubbed my face into the pillow, lost in the scent and sensation of him, biting the ticking to shut the fuck up, but groaning his name anyway. *"Adam."*

A wet, blunt finger slid inside me and I tasted cotton. Teeth on the cheek of my ass and Adam delicately pierced me, slickening me with saliva. He reached and nailed that magic button inside like a pro. I guess the Internet had taught him a thing or two.

Two fingers and he was fumbling with the night stand, trying to bring me off and slick me up.

And his other hand milked me and...I flinched and bit and sweated.

"So good. Fuck."

I loved it, my dick stiffening harder as he spread my ass—and then the broad tip of his willing young cock found its way inside my channel. Through the discomfort, or maybe because of it, my orgasm tripped in his fist and spasmed around his flesh.

"You're coming, Holden." He all but sang with wonder. *"I can feel you."*

He sealed his chest to my back and a rush of joy ripped the lid off my emotions. Exalted. Exalting. I came, ejaculating in a long messy burst on his fingers and into the sheets, my ass hugging his fat dick, my balls small and tight and emptying...and wet hit

my cheeks.

Adam exploded easily, like a younger man does. He groaned and shook until his biting eased into kisses. He kissed me and....

Exhausted, we collapsed. He slid to nest me, belly to back, hands gripping mine. A sharp tremor ran across his shoulder, followed by a catch of breath, and I stilled. "Are you okay?"

A slow roll of his head against the pillow. "I'm perfect. You're perfect, Holden."

"You better Goddamn believe it."

He laughed, giggling into my hair, shaking and snorting. He squirmed with happiness like a puppy. Everything in me mellowed and I joined him. We lay giggling and snorting together like love struck teenagers.

At last we calmed, and Adam's breathing changed to snoring. I stared sleepily through the open doors of the balcony, the wind gently moving the curtains, my heart light for the first time in months. Years. There was so much to think about, with Porter and Kurt and the police...but my heart was eased and my eyes grew heavy and finally...I slept.

Chapter Eleven

I woke at 6:00 buried under a stack of blankets. Adam was long gone and Thayer sat on the bed again looking nearly as young as Adam. "You are such an idiot sometimes, Hol."

"I must be to keep dreaming of you. You told me that Porter was missing and he was hiding in the den the entire time."

He shrugged. "You said he was missing, jackass. I said he was in trouble. You're on watch. And I'm not real. You need to wake up."

I did, opening my eyes to the bright light of a fresh morning. I got out of bed, took a leak and went straight to the gym, punishing myself for a solid hour before going to hose off in the shower. The day felt better already. I needed to get back on track—breakfast and then eight solid hours of work. I finished the *T* recipes and their accompanying stories and now it was time to consider the end of the alphabet. *W* is for Wales. I had a plan for dinner tonight—and that plan included Adam and a loaf of good rye bread.

Before I could do anything else—I needed to gently remove my emotionally fragile sister-in-law from the house. I’d hug her and tell her to call me. Porter insisted I owed him this, but I felt terrible for that girl. From this point forward, a *No Girls Allowed* rule would prevail under my roof.

Mrs. Henderson’s company excluded.

The forecast ensured Smithfield a sixty-five degrees and sunny guarantee, so I put on shorts and stared balefully at my too-white legs. I’d work on the sun porch today and try to get a little color. I was going to fry, I knew it, but vanity must be served. I currently looked like the underbelly of a dead fish.

I knocked on the door to my parents’ suite, but the room was vacant. Mitzie’s bags were gone and when I looked, her car wasn’t in the drive.

My front door had turned into a revolving one, with people coming and going willy-nilly. Everyone seemed capable of using the damn thing, except me.

Downstairs, Mrs. H puttered around the kitchen making coffee. I walked in and she stared at my naked legs. She raised her brow, but wisely kept her mouth shut. She handed me a cup of coffee and the Smithfield Gazette.

My photo was splashed across the front page. A nice above the fold quarter page shot of yours truly sprawled on the patio with Adam’s strong steady arm ready to haul me to safety. How apt.

Local Celebrity Collapses from Strain.

Adam was half-naked and fit. His mole there for all of Smithfield to lust over. I looked pasty—but brawny as ever. My hair could use a trim, but otherwise I looked like Holden X. Worthington, failed explorer.

That was nice.

“The Morgan brothers took this photo. I wonder how much they made?”

Mrs. H nodded. "I warned you. Are you going to fire him?"

"Who?"

"Don't sass me. Adam."

"No. I'm not going to fire him for taking care of me. Then I'd have to fire you, too." I handed her the paper. "This is not a bad thing." I ignored her bulging eyes and slackened mouth. This exposure wasn't the disaster I thought it would be. "This is part of my twelve step program to freedom."

"Mm hmm. I hope one of those steps includes a therapist." Mrs. H slapped a toasted, buttered bagel in front of me and a jar of currant jelly.

"We'll see. Did you hear anything at St. Joe's?"

"No. No one has any idea. I think it was someone outside the parish. Or it was Father David."

I stopped mid jelly smearing. "You didn't come right out and ask people in church, did you?" I could hear her badgering the Altar Guild—*Was it you, Lettie? Or you, Winnie? How about you, Sarah?*

She gave me a stiff look that made me feel unappreciative and left to vacuum the unused dining room. Leave it to Mrs. H to identify that our neighborhood Peeping Tom—none other than the good Father David himself—was more than a confessor; he was an eyewitness.

I took my bagel and my laptop to the sun porch to wait for the phone to ring. It was only a matter of time before Tony returned my calls and I had a slew of questions for my legal team. I had a call in to Detective Lewis for Porter. My editor would contact me today to bitch at me about deadlines and contracts and I had yet to check in with John's secretary.

I could use one of those. An assistant to help with the phone calls and the email.

But not today.

In the back yard, the morning was every bit as stunning as promised. Blue skies and smooth sailing. Spring had officially sprung. I opened the windows to let the breeze in. Birds warbled in the trees, bees buzzed, black flies colonized the screens. Robins hopped the stone path, gathering nesting material and yanked unsuspecting worms from the mulch. The grounds were alive with chattering squirrels and worried chipmunks. The forsythia had bloomed overnight—a riot of vivid yellow lined the south. Daffodils waved their swollen heads in the grass, trumpeting the end of winter.

I was...happy. Except for John lying in the hospital and the question of whether my brother was guilty of a terrible crime, the day was bright. I felt unusually optimistic. I was getting closer to finishing my book.

And I'd had sex four times in two days.

Adam arrived sporting an old bottle green and white Celtics t-shirt. He had his thermos and cooler but today—no beanie. He waved tentatively, his expression as inscrutable as ever to the untrained eye. I smiled because the good mood was mutual. He slowly smiled back, his expression revealing itself in stages. *He was glad to be here. He was ready to work. He was a regular Casanova and had made me come easily.* He laughed and disappeared into the garage only to reappear in a few moments holding a pair of long handled garden clippers. He loaded tools into the old red wheelbarrow and went bouncing along the path to revive my mother's unloved roses.

Sun glinted off his hair and I wondered how long I would have to wait before he took his shirt off again.

I left another message for Tony—call me immediately—and then I worked, systematically going through my email. Eventually, Porter and the puppy ventured outside to enjoy the sunshine. My watch, Thayer said. Well, here he was looking as good as ever—tall and handsome. Kipling was a white blur tumbling through the grass without fear. The two played in a small patch of lawn near the portico. Porter rolled a

ball that was nearly as large as Kipling's head and the dog chased it merrily, tripping over himself in joy. His tiny bark carried across the patio. Porter, that bastard, had made me like the dog.

I could get a dog someday. Today it seemed possible.

From the front of my house, the doorbell rang. A few minutes later, Mitzie, in spiky sandals, teetered across the patio to join Porter. He smiled warmly –

Shit. They'd fucked last night. I mean, *reconciled*. They'd *reconciled* last night.

It was obvious by her smile and the way she touched my brother's sleeve that they were together again. She was decked in billowy white linen pants—like a genie—and a tangerine scoop necked t-shirt. Ignoring the possibility of both dog crap and grass stains, she sank beside Porter on the lawn. If that wasn't love, what was, really? She held a bakery bag in her hand and she and her soon to be ex-husband—one o'clock this afternoon for crying out loud—took turns playing with the dog and eating muffins. They'd cut it unbelievably close.

Occasionally, one of them would laugh. I stopped gawking when Mitz placed her head on Porter's shoulder.

I chose to be optimistic about this turn. Maybe as a united front, between Mitzie and myself, we could get Porter some help.

At about 9:30, a grim Mrs. Henderson entered the porch. Tony and Detective Lewis followed on her heels. Tony was in uniform; Lewis looked ready to sell used cars. "They're here for Porter."

"Porter?" I stood and shook Lewis' medium hand. Tony nodded and, for some reason—probably our long-standing friendship—when I shook his hand, he squeezed my palm. I looked in his dark, trustworthy eyes and what I saw there...was a warning. I took note of his gun. He held his trooper hat in one hand. He'd had his hair trimmed yesterday. He said evenly, "Morning Holden. This will only take a few minutes."

"Sure thing. How can I help you?"

"We need to gather a few things from your property —"

At that moment, before I could articulate the words 'shovel' or 'wheelbarrow' or 'just let me phone my attorney' Kurt burst through the portico gate. It hit the lattice with a bang and we all jumped. He charged across the blue stone in a Madras plaid sport coat, buff colored trousers and a pair of suede Bucks.

I was startled.

Not because he looked like a five-year-old on Easter Sunday, but because he held a nine iron in his hand. Golf. Lewis had asked me about golf. Kurt must have killed Geoff Davis with a nine iron he'd gotten from home.

Which meant he'd probably killed him there and brought Davis back here to bury him.

Mrs. Henderson whispered, "*Mary Mother of God.*"

My heart stopped cold as Kurt turned on Porter and I realized the depth of crazy in our old buddy Kurt.

I was out of the chair, knocking Tony from my way. My first thought was—Goddamn *preppie* and then it was *Porter doesn't deserve this*.

Tony cursed and roared, "Holden! Goddamn it. Wait!"

But I didn't wait because Kurt swung overhand with no hesitation and no expression, aiming for Mitzie. Porter threw himself in her path and Kurt clobbered his best friend broadside across his head. It happened freakishly fast, although my brother's body collapsed slowly.

I moved through the door, my hands outstretched as if I could somehow catch his fall from this great distance. He'd always tried to catch mine, however awkwardly, but

he slumped face first in the grass.

The dog jumped on Porter's back to play. Mitzie scrambled in her heels trying to get to safety as Kipling dashed crazily between everyone's feet.

Halfway there, Kurt saw me coming. He said something – but God, who could hear above my own shouting? He raised his golf club again, this time his sights set on me – and Adam came from nowhere to take the brunt of the swing into his broad shoulder. He was hit so hard, the club bent. Adam fell, tripping over the eager, happy Kipling.

Kurt swung again, but I took that cold bastard down with an old school flying tackle, and his head hit the stone path. Tony joined the fray, wrestling the club from Kurt's meaty fist. Kurt flipped until he was on all fours, trying to shake me from his back. We probably looked like we were fucking on the lawn.

Tony shouted – shit, everyone shouted, but it was the voice of the law that rose above the madness.

And then a blast of cold water knocked me in the face and we collapsed into the mud. Tony hauled me by my shirt collar to my feet. "Holden, I was on it. I had it. What the fuck are you doing? This is my Goddamn job. I could arrest you for this." He tossed me into Adam's arms.

"He was going to kill my brother."

"I wouldn't let him do that." Tony forced Kurt to his feet and restrained him, reading him his rights, but that dumb fuck banker didn't take his arrest well. He kicked and fought, aiming to nail Tony in the balls. Finally Tony quit taking crap and slung that bastard into the side of the carriage house. "You need to calm down, asshole. You understand? This is called resisting arrest."

"Fuck you, Gervase."

"Have it your way."

Porter struggled to sit up and Detective Lewis, cell phone in hand, checked my brother's pupils. "You all right, Mr. Worthington?"

"I...I don't think so," Porter said but he didn't stand. That worried me. A Worthington stood on his own two feet—unless he could not. Porter gagged and held the side of his head. His skin took on a green cast—and still he managed to say to Kurt. "You did this? Why? Why would you try to hurt Mitz?"

"She's bringing you down."

Mitzie hovered near my ashen-faced brother. "You're an asshole. A devious, back stabbing, psychotic, prick alcoholic murderer."

"You're a jealous, needy, lying bitch."

"Please." I said as if I were settling an unruly kindergarten class.

We'd all finally snapped and who the hell could blame any of us? Adam held onto me, but my eyes were on my brother. "You need an ambulance, Porter."

He swallowed. "I think so. There are two of you. Which is too many to deal with." Detective Lewis had Porter's wrist in his grasp, taking his vitals.

Adam peeled his shirt over his head and mopped my arms. "You're soaked."

"And you're naked again." I snatched the shirt from his hand and dried my face and neck. The water was cold but the sun was scorching. My own pulse had kicked into overdrive with Kurt's horrific entrance and now my heart slammed against my ribs with enough force my shirt shook with each painful beat. I refused to faint now—fortunately my impending heart attack would let me die first.

Adam touched my shoulder. "What about you? Are you okay? Maybe we should go into the house."

He was right. The sky was suddenly very bright. Very blue. Heavy. Thick. I said, "I

just need to get out of the sun. How's your shoulder? He hit you hard."

"I'm fine. Do you want to go inside?" He took my hand.

"He does. Take him in the house." Tony ordered, but I shook my head. "Then sit down, Worth, before you fall."

"You're doing great, Holden." Adam said, "Let's sit on the bench."

I was about to move, but it was Father David's turn to burst through the fucking gate.

"We should put a lock on that," I said to Adam.

"Done."

Obviously, my neighbor witnessed this new drama from his spectator seat at the kitchen window. That priest had nothing better to do than watch me—which wasn't such a bad thing after all. He pointed his gnarled hand at me. His face wasn't a mask of terror; it was one of confusion. "What in God's name is going on here?"

"I told you it wasn't Holden. He's a good man." Mrs. Henderson scooped Kipling into her arms. "You need glasses." To Kurt she asked, "Why would you do this?"

Sirens came from the center of town and as a repeat customer, I wondered if I'd get a free cup of coffee after ten visits. Which was a strange thing to think—I needed to sit. I was light headed. A new thought occurred and I looked toward the driveway. Sure enough, cameras lined the sidewalk. They were getting some great footage.

Adam tugged me to the bench, the same painted one where he so often liked to sit. I managed a mumbled, "Thank you," before I fell into the seat.

Kurt spoke, saying to Tony, "You need to get me out of here."

"I need to take everyone's statement." Tony nodded to Lewis.

In all the confusion, Porter still sat dumbfounded on the grass, Mitzie at his side. "I wasn't driving," he said and Kurt nodded. "Kurt. Goddamn it, look at me. Why did you do this?"

Kurt finally faced his friend and his eyes were blazing. "I was protecting all of us. You tried to drive. You backed the Jag up and Davis was stumbling around the parking lot behind the car. You only tapped him in the leg but he was a little guy. He went down. You hit him."

Porter said, "But he was in the car with us. He was talking. I remember."

"He was fine. His leg buckled a few times, but he got in the car and went insane—crying and carrying on. He said he'd have us arrested for DUI and kidnapping and vehicular assault and just about anything litigious he could remember. I took his cell phone because he was trying to call the police. He just wouldn't stop. Davis threatened us, our livelihoods, our families. Everything was on the line and, by the time I got back from dropping you off, I snapped. He just wouldn't shut the fuck up."

Porter gagged. "You killed that man? Jesus." He choked, and this time my brother vomited onto the lawn.

Adam squeezed my shoulder again. Tires crunched through gravel in the driveway and the sirens cut in mid-squeal.

Kurt's bold jaw was impossibly hard. "He was going to ruin all of us. He remembered everything—names, the license plate, everything and he wouldn't stop screaming about getting what was rightfully John's. He said that Holden could afford it." Kurt turned his evil eye on me. "I came back here and I put him behind the shed. I didn't think anyone would find him. I told you the other night—who would look? It was more likely someone would find him anywhere except forty feet from your door because you can't leave the house."

"You left with him. Everyone in the restaurant saw you. So you planted the wallet

and tried to make it look like what? Like Porter did it? Or that I hired someone to do it? That's the stupidest—"

Kurt snapped, "If you went to jail, what the fuck difference does it make, Holden? You should be locked up anyway."

I recoiled and Adam gripped my arm before I could respond. His voice was calming. "He's crazy. Just let it go."

He was right. I snarled at Tony, "Get him off my land."

"Let's go." Tony hauled Kurt the square-faced psycho through the gate, and led him slowly through my front yard where the media was poised and gunning for blood.

They'd finally gotten what they came for.

Epilogue

Adam finished the lower wall by day's end. He set every stone into its place, ordering them to make the length of wall more presentable and far stronger than it had been in a decade. He shrugged into his t-shirt. Even from this distance, his boxer shorts showed above his dipping jeans. I imagined the shadow of hip bone and the way he would taste at that hollow. His sunburned back disappeared under bottle green cotton and he stood still for a few moments. I gathered he was admiring his handiwork.

In the west, the sun shone red and gold and illuminated his russet hair. Eventually, he slung the shovel over one shoulder and, grabbing his cooler in the other hand he made his way to the garden. I watched from the kitchen window. The flowers bloomed riotously everywhere. Yellow, lilac, deep purple, wild salmon-orange and delicate petal-pink. New green leaves sprang from every stem and branch and shoot, eager and joyful. Birds called and the chilled evening air blew into my window, bringing the sweet scent of adventure into my dull world.

Five days and I couldn't imagine ever being the same again. Adam was quiet and proud and smart—and he seemed to know me better than I knew myself. Therefore, in

gratitude for his unlikely entrée into my small dominion, I had prepared a very special supper for the two of us. My first *W* recipe for the *Traveler's Palate* and an old Worthington family classic, Welsh Rarebit.

Surely, there was nothing odd about rye toast and cheese.

The phone rang. It was Tony offering me a brief rundown. John was hale and hearty and not pressing charges against Porter. He left for New York to organize a funeral and return to work. Kurt was in jail where he belonged, angry and insane and probably suffering from DTs. Geoffrey Davis' body had been released to his next of kin and Porter, whom I felt was the most egregiously wronged, was conferring with my attorneys and his doctors, Mitzie by his side.

That was a good thing.

Gervase's voice changed back into that of my laid back friend. "All right, Worth, tell me what the deal is with you and that Morgan kid."

"He's hardly a kid. And the deal is I...think...I'm in love with him."

Tony chuckled into the phone. "Do you have some kind of chicken hawk fantasy you haven't shared with your favorite fan? How old is he? Eighteen?"

"Mmmm. Something like that."

"I still think he's too young and he's going to rip your heart out, but hey, if this means you'll come for supper, fine. I approve. You wait. He'll start bitching about meeting your friends and wanting to go out. Trust me."

"That would be Mark. It sounds like he wants something in particular." A ring, more than likely.

"You're talking to the thing he wants in particular. He just can't get enough."

"You really should think about that career in stand-up."

“Hey, I’m funny. So about dinner...”

“Yeah. Maybe next week. Small steps, I’m told. Just don’t let Mark cook.”

“Roger that.”

Adam stopped to check the state of a bird’s nest on the side of the shed before coming leisurely to the porch. The sound of his boot knocking against the step made me warm, and then the door opened and he called, “Holden?”

“Here.” I went into the mudroom. I guess I looked calm and collected, but inside I was churning with need at the mere sight of him removing those damn boots. His socks were a fine shade of emerald green today.

“Hey. What smells so good –”

I spun into his open arms and thrust him straight into the mudroom wall, nudging the door shut with my toe and taking Adam’s mouth with all the pent-up longing of the last two years. Lip to lip, he opened for me, the wet slide of his tongue met mine, and at last I had him again. I tasted sunshine and inhaled the scent of tropical islands in his hair and the sweat of today’s labor on his skin. I wrapped him in my arms, his strong body moving reed-like against me. His hair brushed my cheek and the heat in his faded denims scorched my crotch.

He broke away, giving me a half smile. Those blue eyes focused on my mouth, his fingers clutched my hair and then trailed down my neck. And then...Adam said it and I groaned and even before he finished whispering, *“I love you, Holden – ”*

I took his words with my tongue and my fingers. I felt our kiss. He laughed into me, delightful thing. I didn’t tear at his clothes the way I needed to, but it was damn close. “Jesus, you’re so beautiful. I watched you all day from the window.”

“That’s because you’re a pervert.”

I laughed and cupped his ass, lifting him flush against me. Dry humping him into the fucking coat rack. I didn’t care. He didn’t care. His hand slid into my pants, stroking sure.

Adam's mouth moved on my neck, sucking and kissing, while he fumbled to free his cock and grind it against my own. The evening sunlight made orange patches on the wall, the light blinding and welcome and stinging my eyes—but I didn't look away.

I had to see him—his heavenly body glowing like amber in my arms.

"I need you. I want to feel you."

"Yeah. Me, too."

He had them together, both our dicks in his callused palm. Just like that. He held our cocks while I thrust hard against his rough grip, velvet-skinned flesh sliding on mine, his body so fucking hot and lean, his cock rigid and ready to blow all over me. I mouthed his neck, licking, the taste of salt and sun and freedom from his skin. He was the out to my in and the rough to my smooth. He balanced me, he comforted me, he unleashed the mean and the man in me.

Biting gently, I closed my eyes and my climax hit with unexpected intensity. I jerked, crying out. I shuddered, my ass clenching from outside to in as I came. He came too, panting, murmuring my name again just as he had last time. "*Holden Holden Holden*—" a litany of pleasure that only made my orgasm more intense.

I'm here. I have you. I love you.

A warm rush of wet pumped against my stomach, pulsing onto his Celtics shirt, and he let out a breathy, sexy sigh that was endearing—and mine.

Only mine.

Between the small nips of his mouth against my shoulder and sliding him back onto his feet, I started to laugh. It was the liberating joy of release. It was the joy of Adam. "I had no idea I could go that fast."

"You have sunburn." He kissed the bridge of my nose. "And freckles. I like them."

"I should have worn sunscreen."

"Probably." His mouth hovered, and then Adam sweetly nipped the skin of my neck just under my jaw again. "We should take this upstairs, have a shower – because I think Father David is probably watching us from the rectory."

"Probably."

I let him go as he shrugged free of his shirt. He wiped his hands, our stomachs, and then he tossed the shirt into the mudroom.

"Mrs. Henderson is going to love that." The weak part of me surfaced and I had to ask him. "Did you mean what you said?"

He took my hand in his. "I did. I wouldn't lie about loving you. I know it's fast –"

I squeezed his hand. "It wasn't fast. I've been waiting years for you."

"Well. Here I am."

Adam and I went into the kitchen. True to form he was half naked and I'd come in my pants, but this was right. I felt reborn. Renewed. I felt free with him – as if the future was at hand and I could at long last step into the light of day. All the pain and the fear of two years had somehow brought him to me...and he was worth everything.

We hope you enjoyed this installment of L. B. Gregg's fabulous *Men of Smithfield* series. If you did, then be sure to check out more of L. B.'s gay erotic romances like *Gobsmacked*, *Happy Ending*, and *Cover Me* at www.aspenmountainpress.com.

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