

# LOVE ME DEAD

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a tombstone. The tombstone is dark and has a heart-shaped carving in the center. It is surrounded by autumn leaves in shades of orange, red, and yellow. Several lit candles are placed around the tombstone, creating a warm, glowing effect. The title 'LOVE ME DEAD' is written in large, white, serif capital letters at the top. The authors' names are listed in bold, dark blue, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom.

**WILLIAM MALTESE  
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Love Me Dead  
*by AM Riley*

**MLR Press, LLC**

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Love Me Dead  
*by AM Riley*

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Love

Me Dead

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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*Ghost Hunters—Long Beach by AM Riley*

*Rousing Caine by Lex Valentine*

*The Day They Closed The Iguana by AM Riley*

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Love Me Dead  
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## **Ghost Hunters**

*Long Beach*

\* \* \* \*

AM Riley

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"Ri-i-i-i-ta! Ri-i-i-i-ta!"

The voice echoed, disembodied, in the dark room. My hand tightened on the theater armrest, and something icy cold and damp touched me.

"Ah!"

"You want another beer?" whispered Rick, leaning toward me and touching the back of my hand again with the bottle.

"Sure." My palm closed around a chilled beer bottle, still damp from the ice chest. Millers with the twist-off caps were a staple of our ghost hunting evenings. Rick carried them in a portable chest fitted with a shoulder harness. Currently the ice chest rested at his feet, and I heard the crunch of ice as Rick leaned over and got himself another bottle as well.

We were seated in the theater of the Queen Mary Hotel. It was after 11:00 p.m., the theater was closed, and the lights were shut off. The only illumination came through a ventilation grate in the far left wall. A shaft of light angling down to the dusty parquet floor, particles of who-knew-what twisting in its glow.

"Ri-i-i-i-ta." I could see the source of the voice, Beth Ann Tomlinson, seated several rows below me, her hair a fuzzy mass in the dim light. Her husband Daniel sat beside her. I knew him by the outline of the knit cap he always wore.

Two rows down and over to the left I could discern the hunching shapes of the three Musketeers, George, Bob, and Ginger. Bob had some kind of recording device running that needed technical maintenance; I could hear it squeaking from several seats away. Ginger's small digital camera made a

sound every few minutes. She'd look through the pictures later for the translucent spherical dots that ghost hunters call 'orbs'. A few seats beyond them were Amy and Dick, whose heads had been pressed together since the lights had gone out. Dick was known amongst the 'die-hards' as 'Screaming Dick', because of that one unfortunate night in the main engine room when a box had tumbled onto the floor behind him. He'd shrieked and run, banging his head on the portal door and, still running and screaming with the blood running down his face, had shattered the nerves of a group of people on a ghost tour of the HMS Queen Mary.

Ghost hunters don't scream or run. REAL ghost hunters. Die-hards like us.

I let my gaze rest on the two-headed monster of Amy and Dick for just a little longer; thinking that though Dick was branded a coward, he had more courage than I did. He'd had the courage to reach across the dark abyss and take the hand of the one he wanted.

Something I hadn't yet had the balls to do.

Rick's elbow shoved into mine, and he leaned over so he could whisper against my ear, "It's almost midnight. Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

The HMS Queen Mary sailed back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean over 1,000 times between 1936 and 1967. When she retired, she was permanently docked in Long Beach, California. During her maritime career, over 39 deaths were reported onboard, not to mention the wartime accident

with another ship in which 300 men lost their lives. So, when the ghost sightings started pouring in, there was ample material from which to draw the considerable stories.

She was a luxury cruise ship in her day. When they'd converted her into a hotel, they'd preserved the first-class staterooms and deck for tourists, so when Rick and I, with expertise born of years of practice, maneuvered ourselves and our considerable ghost hunting equipment out the back doors of the theater, we emerged into a well-lit galley way with rich ochre carpeting and glowing teakwood doors on both sides.

"Hold on a minute," whispered Rick, blinking. Rick has terrible night vision. Helluva handicap for a ghost hunter if you ask me. But he always had to wait for his eyes to adjust after emerging from a dark room.

I took advantage of his temporary blindness to ogle him a bit.

When Rick and I had first met back in the 6th grade, he'd been one of those undersized kids with big ears and a bad haircut whom I always felt compelled to protect. He'd caught a growth spurt in the tenth grade and was now two inches taller than I. Considerable years of hauling heavy equipment up and down and around abandoned buildings had helped him fill out a bit and given him a flat belly and a tight little ass. He would have been a stud if he weren't such a geek. He still cut his own hair, uneven bangs falling in his eyes. And he did nothing to showcase his considerable physical assets. Tonight he was dressed in his typical ghost-hunting gear: Oversized jeans, worn sneakers, and a torn Jose Cervo t-shirt with a

baggy flannel shirt draped over it and a striped wool scarf hanging around his neck. With about fifty pounds of electronics slung over his shoulders, he still looked like an AV geek.

I was the one who usually attracted attention. A tow head like my beach bum father, I had the classic California surfer-boy look. Blue eyes, sharks tooth on a thong around my neck and everything. If I didn't spend so much of my time in dark, haunted places, I'd probably be nut brown by now. As it was, I still caught the bulk of flirtation wherever we went.

Rick didn't seem to care. And I? Had eyes only for Rick.

His vision adjusted, Rick rubbed one big wrist across his eyes and squinted at me. "Do you have the recorder?"

Rick's eyes were hazel, but changed to dark brown when the lights went out. Because of his faulty night vision, when we sat in a dark room, he'd stare straight at me, probably not aware that I could see him. Now that the lights were on, though, I was pretty sure I wasn't imagining the way he avoided letting his eyes meet mine.

"Yeah, I do."

Another one of those looks, gaze hopping away from mine like it burned him to look at me. "Are you sure?"

Like Rick, I had a quantity of electronic equipment hanging from my shoulders. I produced the box that held the small audio recorder. "It's right here."

"Don't forget to check the batteries."

"I won't forget."

"Right, you say that now. But that one time..."

"Rick, it was only the once! Look, I have an extra set of batteries here just in case."

We sounded like an old married couple, arguing in hushed voices.

"Okay." Rick checked the equipment he carried one more time and then, with a gesture that he probably didn't realize was both dramatic and romantic, he threw one tail of his scarf over his shoulder and took off down the hallway. "C'mon then."

Our feet were soundless on the lush carpet, about twenty yards towards port, we rounded the corner into a circular vestibule. On one side were the main doors to the theater we had just come from. These were securely fastened, a thick bolted chain laced through the vertical handles on either side of the double doors. Only ghost hunters knew the way to get into the theater, through a maintenance door. On the other side of the vestibule was the top of an elegant staircase. Brass railings showed brilliantly above recessed lights that shot stars of illumination up the surrounding walls. Rick padded to the top of these stairs and paused, holding up a shushing hand, cocking his head to listen.

Ghost hunters become adept at sneaking around in places they aren't supposed to be. This part of the ship was officially 'closed' after dark. Anyone staying in the hotel should have been in the lounge at the bow getting stoned off their keisters and dancing to the live jazz music.

Rick and I had been sneaking up and down the Queen Mary for years. I could probably draw a blueprint of the 'Grey

Ghost', as she'd been known during World War II, from memory.

Down two flights, across the matching lower deck vestibule, then astern another twenty yards, climbing down a metal staircase, on deck, under a railing, and then across the teak deck of the lower lounge, dark and quiet and lit only by the moon and stars and harbor lights outside.

We slid under a safety chain with a red 'no entry' sign hanging off it and into a room illuminated from the spots mounted below the water. They cast globules of wavering blue and greenish illumination on the white metal walls above and behind us.

"There it is," Rick whispered.

The walkway on which we stood encircled an opening in the deck, where we could see, deep beneath layers of murky green water, the dim white form of the last remaining propeller of HMS Queen Mary.

The 'propeller box' was meant to be an attraction for tourists, part of the planned maritime museum that the Queen Mary had housed since its permanent docking in 1967.

"Ja-a-a-a-ack? Are you here? This is Rick," Rick called into the void.

Rick believed that the ghost that purportedly haunted this section of the Queen Mary, Jack Feinstein, *date of death* May 8, 1943, knew and responded particularly to him.

I knew if I were a ghost I'd respond to Rick.

About twenty feet beneath the water, the propeller was huge and white, somnolent with latent power, like a sleeping

monster. With the ship in permanent lock these days the propellers were eternally still. This was the place where Jack Feinstein had supposedly fallen. Those propellers and the impenetrable dark sea beneath them, the last thing he had seen.

It was one of the spookiest parts of the Queen Mary tour. Probably why it was supposed to be haunted by ghosts.

"Okay, let's set up," whispered Rick. The lights from below reflected off the whites of his eyes as he moved a little further toward the center of the 'u' and began disencumbering himself of all the equipment. Call me overly sensitive, but you spend a quantity of time sitting next to somebody in the dark, you become adept at reading nuances of emotion. Rick was definitely tense.

"Sure," I said. What else could I say? I'd been trying to get him to talk about it all day, but he just kept avoiding the subject.

We'd set up so many times in so many ill-lit rooms that we could do it quickly and efficiently. The chairs side by side, the ice chest at our feet. The EMF machine on a box, next to a microphone. Another recording device that I would hold in my hand. A digital camera. Rick was the primary carrier of the infrared. Both of us had jackets and polartek blankets, which we'd brought from our room. Ghost hunting was usually a chilly business.

"Jack? Where's Felix?" Rick queried the spirit again.

Felix McCray, midshipman first class, a crew member on the Queen Mary in 1956, was supposedly the reason that Jack Feinstein haunted the boat. Jack and Felix were our own

special ghosts. We'd first heard their story from the aged night steward, Freddie, who claimed to have known both men.

Freddie had caught us in the first class pool, years ago, hunting the ghost of the little girl who had drowned there. Coming out of the women's dressing room and scaring the pants off both Rick and I.

Some of Queen Mary's night crew were sticklers for the rules. And some were as enthused with ghost hunting as were we. Freddie was definitely an enthusiast.

*"You boys want a real ghost story?" he'd said. "Listen to this..."*

The story was a classic, really. Boy meets handsome young midshipmen. Boy's wealthy and powerful family finds out. Young midshipman mysteriously vanishes and Boy overcome, so they say, with desperate grief and a little alcohol, falls beneath the churning propellers of the ship. Or leaps. Suicide being, apparently, a sure avenue to an eternity of ghostly wandering.

Of course, as was often the case, very little of the story was born out by actual evidence. There may have been a crew member named Felix during the time in question. And there was no doubt that the family Feinstein had a son who had died while still in his early twenties. But the rest of the tale was an amalgam of purported odd occurrences, supposed sightings, and the fecund imagination of ghost hunters.

Especially Rick's fecund imagination. He'd been hunting ghosts since our freshman year in high school.



Everyone has a ghost story. A first encounter. A reason to believe. Rick's was his mother. Killed suddenly in a car accident when he was twelve, in the middle of the day while he was at school. He'd come home to police cars and his father crying on the front porch.

Rick claimed he'd seen her in the weeks following the accident, and who was I to tell him he was wrong?

I remembered our first ghost hunting trip. Two boys, a blanket, and a flashlight. We were thirteen and supposed to be in Rick's bedroom, but instead we lay sprawled on our bellies in a sleeping bag in the old parlor of an abandoned house in our neighborhood; flashlight's beams slicing through the dust and shafts of light that came through the broken roof of the old house.

*"Did you hear that?" whispered Rick. He wriggled, moving his hips and pressing into me under the blanket. "I felt a cold spot on my back, too."*

*"I didn't hear anything," I whispered back. I felt something but it would be weeks before I'd get what it was. And months before I could put a name to the feeling. Rick next to me, his body pressed against mine, arm around my shoulders, his laughter warm on my cheek.*

*"Old man Smythe hanged himself in this room." His mouth near my ear. And then that feeling again. A rush of tingles that felt good and tight in my belly. And then I realized that my penis was hard.*

I wondered if I were warped for life, sometimes. The realization of my sexual gender preference entwined with Rick's ghost hunting obsession had resulted in a strangely

erotic response on my part to dark, dank old buildings. The smell of mold. The scrape of careful feet on dirty flooring, the sweep of flashlights. All nighters in more abandoned buildings and rundown hotels than I could count. Sitting in dark rooms, whispering ghost stories back and forth. I associated the whole thing with being achingly hard for hours at a time, jerking off in the shower at dawn.

Is there a word for that? Hauntophilia?

"Jack?" Rick had out his EMF detector sweeping the thing around the space in which we sat. An EMF, for those of you not in the know, is an *electromagnetic field detector*. It is used to measure the charge emitted by electromagnetic devices. Microwaves, big screen TVs, and sometimes badly grounded circuits or old electrical outlets, will emit high EMF ratings. Human beings can feel these fields and it gives us the creeps. Seriously. That creepy corner in your mother's laundry room that even the cat avoids? It's probably NOT haunted by your mother's crazy uncle Lawrence. More than likely, there's a badly overloaded outlet back there leaking EMFs all over the place.

Of course, if there's no reasonable cause for a spike in the EMF readings in the room, we ghost hunters look for an unreasonable cause. Like the ghost of Jack Feinstein searching for his lost lover. As if! See, the hell of it is, there are two people in the propeller box of the Queen Mary tonight, and only one of them believes in ghosts.

"Over there." Rick leant on the railing, chin jutting forward as he squinted across the water. His face lit with the greenish bluish light from below. From a skinny, too-tall boy all elbows

and knees and too-big ears, to a strapping specimen of a man when the hollows in that big frame had finally filled out. Rick was sufficient reason to sit in dark rooms for hours at a time talking to nobody. Now, his head turned, those dark eyes flashed at me. And he grinned. His smile was crooked, and he had lips that had looked girly and stupid when he was a boy, but now they just looked sexy. And perfect teeth. Rick had spent four years in braces. The excuse he'd given in high school for not dating much. *"Who wants to kiss a tinsel-toothed geek?"*

*I'd* wanted to kiss a tinsel-toothed geek. More than anything.

"What was that?" said Rick.

I cocked my head, listening. A voice, muffled and reverberating a little. Then the thunk-thunk of feet on stairs. "Probably the ghost tour." I looked at my watch, the letters glowing green in the dark. "It's 12:15. Sarah is probably leading them to port."

The Queen Mary had a bona fide ghost expert on board. She led a tour at midnight every night. We die-hards despised the tourists and complained that they scared away the ghosts. Rick was muttering something to that effect when the port door opened and Sarah's well-coifed head preceded a high beam flashlight. She shined it in each of our faces, blinding us, and said, "Didn't you see the sign?"

"Sign?" Rick and I chorused. The general rule when caught trespassing was to feign ignorance. "What kind of sign?" I asked.

Sarah tiskied. As the official Queen Mary paranormal investigator, she considered the ghosts and their environs her personal domain and resented anyone who thought otherwise. She had about ten people in tow, and they made the loop around the propeller box, chatting and taking pictures, their cameras flashing as they went.

I rose as they passed, but Rick remained sitting in his chair, a look of steely resentment on his face, the polartek blanket thrown across his knees, big feet sticking out underneath, overlong hair and knit scarf around his neck. I saw a couple of the women roll their eyes sideways to look at him with trepidation.

And after awhile Sarah led the group out again.

"You shouldn't be here," she reminded us as she left.

"Probably scared him off," Rick muttered when the group had cleared the area.

I managed to keep my response inaudible.

Of course, a man who hears ghosts could hear my mutter. "What?" he said.

"Nothing."

Another one of those almost palpable silences. Now or never, I thought.

"Rick, we should talk about it," I said.

"Talk about what?" His voice was overly casual.

"The other night. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"What are you talking about?" He moved his shoulders as if he felt confined. "I'm not uncomfortable."

*Thung... Thung...* it sounded like Sarah had thrown one of the tourists down the stairs. Both Rick and I sat up straight.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Don't know."

*THUNG*

"That came from outside," said Rick, rising from his chair.

It sure had sounded close by. Despite myself, goose bumps went up my back, and I caught myself looking around and behind me in that way you do when you feel like you're being watched.

Both Rick and I had learned to be silent over the years. I couldn't even hear myself breathe. But then I did hear something. Like a mouse whispering.

Rick's hand went up, palm out, towards me. The whites of his eyes reflected blue as he rolled them sideways.

And then I almost jumped out of my topsiders when there was a loud, metallic *THUNG*. Like a ghostly fist had hit the locked door.

"Shhhh!" we both told each other.

*THUNG*

"Oh my God." That was Rick. I was frozen, silent, and unable to move, staring as the port door opened and a shadowing figure filled the doorway.

"What are you boys doing in here?" said a deep, easy voice, and the lights went on. We were blinded for a second.

"Freddie!" Rick's voice was two octaves higher than usual, but at least he could talk. I was still trying to swallow my heart, which was lodged in my throat.

The night steward, Fred Williamson, stepped onto the walkway and cocked his head to the side, shaking it slowly.

"Didn't you boys see the sign?" he said.

I cleared my throat. "Sign?"

"What kind of sign?" said Rick, grinning.

Freddie lowered his chin and leveled a serious gaze on us.

"Those signs are there for a reason."

"C'mon, Freddie," said Rick. "It's Jack's day."

"That's right, it is, isn't it?" Freddie looked us both up and down. He'd been chasing us out of private and crew-only areas of the ship since our sophomore year of high school. Rick and I figured he had to be eighty years old at least. One of those guys who kept working, less for the money than because the job was his home. He still dressed in the traditional steward's uniform. With a brass-buttoned vest and watch fob hanging from the pocket. The cap covering a head of tight gray curls. "You better be quiet, then," he said.

"Somebody hears you it'll be *my* ass."

"You bet, Freddie," said Rick.

"Alrighty then." Freddie walked the entire length of the area around the propellers and pulled the door that we had snuck through closed. "I'm going to lock this one. You'll have to leave by the other."

"We will."

When Freddie passed Rick, he paused and looked him square in the eye. "I'm counting on you," he said.

"You got it."

After Freddie had left, I noticed the sweat in my armpits. The familiar post-adrenalin giddiness. That rush in my belly.

Hauntophilia. Rick grinning at me, eyes dark. "Can't believe we let ol' Freddie scare the shit out of us, bro."

"Yeah. Shit."

The scare had broken the tension between us, at least. We set up again. Had another beer. Eight years we'd been doing this and mostly we sat in the dark, drinking beer and telling stories. Now I heard the scrape of the aluminum chair legs on the teak planking as Rick's shadow moved a little closer, setting his chair next to mine.

"Wow, eight years," said Rick. "Can you believe it?"

Deep in the bowels of the ship a dim thung and the water over the propeller shifted just barely. Freddie must still be making his rounds. "No, I can't."

Rick's hand, holding his beer bottle, bumped mine. Knuckles brushing knuckles.

"It's crazy," I said. It was. Eight years is a long time to carry a torch.

"Yeah," the word was more a sigh. I saw the shape of Rick's hand rise and fall, the bottle barely silhouetted in the dim. "Eight years, and here we are."

We were like fishing buddies, weren't we? Can you think of anything more platonic than fishing buddies?

"Rick, I really think we need to talk..."

Rick tipped his bottle back. "Talk about what?"

"About... the other night. You know... that I'm gay."

A pause. "Uh huh, and so?"

"Did you know before I told you?"

Rick's eyes rolled toward me and away.

"Okay, well then, you knew. Of course you knew." I opened my mouth, taking a deep breath, preparing myself for the next plunge.

"Did you hear that?" asked Rick, suddenly sitting up straight.

There'd been no sound whatsoever. I was pretty sure he was trying to change the subject. "No."

He shifted in his chair, leaning forward. "That?"

"There's nothing there, for Christ's sake," I said. And snapped my lips closed. I couldn't believe I'd said it.

Rick's shadow moved, I could see his cowlick highlighted by a reflection off the water. "What did you say?"

"Jesus, Rick. There's nothing there. Jack Feinstein, if he even WAS a suicide and if he even WAS in love with a midshipman is not haunting this boat. He's dead. And whatever could have been between himself and Midshipman first class Felix is dead too."

I could hear the steady *slap slap* of the water below.

"You just don't want to hear what I have to say," I stated.

Rick's head turned toward me. It was dark enough that I could barely see him, and he probably couldn't see me at all. Dark eyes wide and staring straight into mine. "What do want to say, James?"

Of course, then, I couldn't say anything.

Rick sat back in his chair. He was silent and I was kicking myself.

The metal hull groaned again, but Rick didn't comment.

"Listen, why do you think I've been tagging along all these years, Rick?"



"Tagging along?"

"You know I don't believe in this stuff."

"Really?" said Rick, voice sharp. "REALLY, James? How do you explain everything we've seen?"

"What have we seen, Rick? A few dust motes reflecting light? A cold spot in a room? You're supposed recordings?"

"Supposed? *Supposed?*" He sat up and jabbed a finger at me. "That recording of Rita scared the shit out of you when you heard it. There wasn't anything *supposed* about that."

"I was just saying that to make you happy."

"Make me happy?" he spluttered. "This is you making me *happy?*" Rick stared up at me, then he slumped back into the chair, arms crossed, a shadowy lump of anger.

This wasn't going at all like I'd hoped. "I should go back to the room," I said. I stood and bent to fold my chair back up, but this time the groan of the metal hull was louder and followed by a rather distinctive *sploosh* of water from below. Like a fish had jumped. Or a body had fallen into the water.

"What was that?" I said.

Rick continued to sulk.

*THUNNNNNNGGGG* The boat's innards moaned, and something hit the side of the boat. "What was that?" I asked again.

Now Rick was standing too. "I don't know."

And then I heard something I had been sure I'd never hear, ever, in my life.

"Felix?" said a voice from across the walkway.

I looked at Rick. He was staring.

"Fe-e-e-e-e-lix..." moaned the voice.

"Who is that?" demanded Rick. His voice squeaked a bit. Me? I couldn't talk at all.

Rick switched on his flashlight and shone it over the area where it seemed the voice had emanated. There was nothing there. "WHO ARE YOU?" Rick demanded.

A long pause. The water *slapped slapped*. "Jack," said the voice. "Who are you?"

The adrenalin had mounted a steady drum beat in my temples, I was breathing in long shaky inhales and exhales. Rick was amazing, though. He thought to turn the infrared camera toward the dark empty space across the water. I looked down with him into the monitor and saw the definite outline of a man, bright red and orange.

My heart increased its pace; I couldn't seem to get enough oxygen into my lungs. I felt Rick's hand, firm and steady in the middle of my back. "It's okay," he whispered.

"Jack? This is Rick," he addressed the shape across the water. On the monitor I saw that the red 'record' light had switched on. So he was capturing this. Good. Because nobody, including me, was going to believe this later.

"Turn on the EMF," Rick hissed at my ear. I fumbled to do so, my hands sweaty and my fingers all thumbs. The EMF detector warmed, buzzed, and then the needle hit the red zone.

"Jack? Can you hear me?" said Rick.

"Yes," said the formless voice. "Where is Felix?"

Rick's face, illuminated by the working lights of the camera, was somber. "Felix is dead, Jack."

The image shimmered, shifted, shrank. "No-o-o-o-o-o..." moaned the voice. "No-o-o-o-o-o..."

Poor guy. Ghost. Whatever.

"I loved him," moaned Jack. "I loved him and I never to-o-o-o-old him."

"I'm sure he knew," said Rick. That's my buddy Rick, counselor to the lovelorn dead.

"No-o-o-o-o-o," moaned Jack, the outline of his head moving back and forth miserably. "I should have to-o-o-o-old him."

Okay, I'm a doofus, but even I was starting to get that there was something weird going on.

"Freddie, is that you?" I called.

"Don't!" said Rick, low and soft. "You'll scare him off."

"Fe-e-e-e-lix," moaned the apparition.

"Freddie, this isn't funny," I said. And digging up courage from some hitherto unknown corner of myself, I picked up the flashlight and advanced on the area from which the voice emanated.

"Be careful," Rick said from behind me.

Of course I couldn't see anything as I got closer, but then I noticed the rags pushed up against the Plexiglas shield below the railing. They kept this part of the boat immaculate, so that didn't make sense. I kicked the rags.

"No-o-o-o-o-o-o," the ghost said.

I bent over and there it was. A tiny little microphone. I stood up and looked at Rick across the water. His face was bluish and indistinct, so I shined my flashlight into it.

The minute I saw his eyes, I knew that he'd set it up. Set ME up.

"What the HELL, Rick?"

He compressed his lips and thrust out his chin. His eyes flinching against the glare of the flashlight.

"Fuck this," I said. I tossed the mike and it landed in the water with a tiny splash. Then I walked through the door.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

The Queen Mary only kept the first class cabins when they converted the boat to a hotel, and so we had a very nice, very large cabin with a portal window that was open. The full moon battling with harbor lights illuminated the corner of the cabin where Rick sat, his body sliced diagonally by the white light. I couldn't see his face, but I could see his fist tighten. I sat on the other twin bed. The last beer dangling from my fingers. He'd followed me back to the room, and we'd been sitting here for over an hour. For the most part silent except for Rick's periodic apologies.

"I thought you'd think it was funny."

"Har-dee-har," I said. "Eight fucking years of my life, Rick. Very funny."

"What are you talking about?"

I took a long swallow of beer. "You know."

Rick had the sense not to deny it. Because, how could he not *know*?

I finished the beer. "Shit." I tossed the bottle and it hit the trashcan and knocked it over. "Shit. What the fuck am I doing here?"

Rick didn't answer.

At the foot of his bed, a briefcase that held sophisticated electronic equipment. Over the years Rick had recorded and collected thousands of minutes of EVP's. Electronic Voice Phenomena. We'd sit in the dark for hours while Rick asked questions. Then he'd spend his nights going through all those hours of audio recordings listening for voices. It was a little creepy the stuff he'd captured.

"Just tell me why?" I said.

"You needed something to keep you going," he said. "I could tell it wasn't enough anymore..."

"What do you care?" I asked him. "There's plenty of people who'd do this with you." Hell, ghost hunting was becoming more popular than bar hopping these days.

"Wouldn't be the same," he said. His face was still masked by the darkness. His voice sounded odd.

"It's not fair, Rick," I told him. He knew what I meant, I didn't have to explain. I rolled off the bed and righted the trashcan. Grabbed my jacket and headed to the door. "I have to take a walk."

The Queen Mary is a big ship. But when you've walked the length, breadth, and depth of her for hours and hours over a period of eight years, she seems small. I didn't want to chance running into any of our fellow ghost hunters or, worse, the loud and inebriated tour group, so I headed toward the stern and down a flight of stairs, where a lock on the door was easy to open. I slipped in and sat at the back of the empty room.

This had been the second class pool, according to the old blue prints. Legend had it that a young girl who had drowned

here still haunted the room. Rick had what he claimed were EVP's of her in here, though to me they just sounded like scratchings on tape. Generally, though, the room was less popular for ghost hunters. Maybe the extensive refurbishings had driven away the spirits.

I'd hoped for privacy, so I was a little annoyed when I heard someone working a lock and a door at the end opened a crack. A flashlight beam flashed through. But then I was relieved to recognize the silhouette of probably the only person I could bear being around at the moment. "Hey Freddie," I called and raised an arm so he could see me.

The steward entered and closed the door. "I thought you and Mr. Rick were in the propeller box room."

"We got tired of that. Rick's in the cabin. I needed air."

I was surprised that Freddie still stood there and even more surprised when he made his way across the tiled floor and sat a few rows away from me, flicking off his flashlight. "You two have an argument?"

"Something like that."

He was silent there in the dark; and then he said, "How long you boys been coming 'round here?"

"Eight years."

"You ever see a ghost?"

I laughed. "No."

There was light leaking in somewhere. The air near the ceiling filled with blue haze, and I could see the considerable dust, kicked up when Freddie had come into the room, tumbling slowly in the light. The whole place smelled moldy and humid. Came of being below the water line. The pressure

was what some people misinterpreted as a 'creepy feeling' or a 'feeling of something present'. It was making my ears pop and the skin on the back of my neck crawl.

"I understand Mr. Rick," said Freddie. "But why do YOU do it?"

"I do it for him," I admitted. I wondered if he even imagined what I meant.

"Ah," said Freddie.

"Lot of these people are crazy," I said.

"These people?"

"You know. That come around here looking for the drowned girl in the pool, or the ghost of the man who died in the engine room."

"Crazy is a funny word," said Freddy.

"Rick's not crazy. Rick's great. He's just got this one thing he needs to believe in."

"And you need to believe in him," said Freddie.

My eyes were adjusting and I could vaguely make out his outline in the dark. I could see that he was turned so he could look at me. "Yes," I said.

"Let me tell you a story," said Freddie.

"No offense, Freddie, but I'm really not in the mood for a ghost story tonight."

"Not a ghost story. A true story. The story I told you boys about Jack and Felix wasn't entirely true."

I sighed. "I know, Freddie. It's okay, we appreciated you indulging us."

"No, I mean, there was never a Felix. That was a fiction I invented. His real name was Frederick Williamson. I was the midshipman who loved the rich boy."

I'd always thought Freddie had a bit of a soft spot for me and Rick. Now I knew why. "So what happened?"

"Nothing," said Freddie. "Jack Feinstein went back to his parents home and I stayed here. I never told him. He never told me. We KNEW but we never said. And then, in the summer of '43, his appendix burst and he died."

The dust tumbled slowly in the shafts of light. I thought about what Freddie had said. About how most ghost stories are sad, but real life is sadder.

"I'm sorry, Freddie."

"Not a day goes by I don't think about what might have been," said Freddie. "And then the other night, Rick and I had a talk and he told me about you and him."

"About me and him? Like, what did he tell you?"

"He wanted me to help him. I'm sorry if it didn't work out."

"How was *tricking* me supposed to 'work out'?"

Freddie took off his cap and scratched his head thoughtfully, then fitted the cap back on. "I suppose he wouldn't mind if I told you."

When I let myself back into the cabin, I could see Rick's form under the covers, the harbor lights illuminating his long limbs under the sheets. I could tell by the way he was breathing that he was only pretending to be asleep.

So I sat down next to him and I guess that startled him a little, because he rolled over, looking up at me, eyes wide and dark.



"Hey buddy," I said.

"Wha...?"

I put a finger over his mouth and the touch silenced him. He stared at me.

"I'm a coward," I said.

"No you aren't," whispered Rick, his lips barely moving under my finger. I lifted them and let the pads trail across his cheeks as he watched my face. He seemed to be holding himself still; he didn't even move when I dared to touch his hair, letting my fingers lace through the strands. Silky black and softer than a child's.

"I talked to Freddie," I said.

"Oh," whispered Rick. "I'm sorry, man, really, it was stupid idea..." His words faded when I touched his lips again.

"He told me what you told him," I said.

"What I told ..." but he couldn't finish the sentence, since my mouth was pressed against his.

I don't know what I'd expected. God knows I'd fantasized about this enough. Holding Rick's face between my hands, tasting his mouth, his lips moving against mine.

Whatever I'd dreamed was nothing like the real thing, though. Rick surged up against me, both his arms wrapping around me and we rolled and almost fell off the bed.

"Watch out there," he whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" I whispered back. His eyes were wide and dark and vulnerable. "Can you see me?" I asked.

He nodded, and the shadows on his throat slid up and down when he swallowed. Then his hand rose and he touched

my lips, let his fingers trail down my throat to my shirt. "Take this off?" he asked, his voice breaking a little on the words.

I sat up and pulled off my t-shirt and he stared at me.

"Now what?" Rick whispered.

"You've never done this?"

"No. Have you?"

"Last summer, I ... when you went back East to visit your aunt."

He nodded, his hand drifted to my chest, five rivulets of shivering pleasure followed the path of his fingers. "I thought you were different when I got back."

His hand rested lightly on my belly. I could barely breathe. "I guess it's your lead, then," he whispered.

'I think my head might explode," I admitted.

He smiled. That big white grin of his. "We'd better hurry up then."

We climbed off the bed and undressed, working quickly and in tandem as we always did. I could feel Rick's eyes on me while I unbuckled my belt and unsnapped my jeans. I looked over at him and saw him gazing at my swelling cock. He licked his lips, and I had to concentrate so that I could get my pants all the way off.

When we were both down to our boxers, we climbed back on the bed. I straddled his legs and leaned over so that our cocks bumped and rubbed through the fabric of our boxers. When he gasped and pushed up against me, I had to close my eyes and count to ten. Then I bent down and tasted the skin of his belly with long swathes of my tongue. Moving downward.

"James..." My name exhaled, his hand in my hair, and his damp boxers against my cheek.

"Can I?"

"God, James, do it, man..."

I slid the elastic down and took him gently in my hand. Rick inhaled sharply, his hips twisting. I grinned up at him. "You're leaking like a son of a bitch," I whispered.

"Been hard forever." He wriggled his hips on the sheets.

"Yeah? Me too."

"We're idiots," he said.

"We are..."

He wriggled again, urgently. "God James, *do* something..."

"Patience..." With my thumb, I rubbed the slick pre-come down his shaft, leaning over to lick at his balls. He gasped and stiffened, his head snapping back, and I took pity and sucked him down hard.

"James..." his hand in my hair, hips fighting me, cock swelling in my mouth. "I'm going to come..."

I pulled off. He was thick and swollen, writhing and bucking and groaning, as I jacked him off, come spurting across his belly, coating my hand. Then he lie there, chest rising and falling. He stared at the ceiling.

"Christ," he panted. "I'm sorry."

"Are you kidding? We're just getting started. You want to roll over, Rick?"

We spent ages rolling on the sheets, grinding against each other. I kissed every bit of him I could reach. His ears, the back of his neck, his spine. He arched his head back and we kissed while I lay on top of him, my cock nestled between his

cheeks, sliding in the warmth until I got a rhythm going and came against him.

After my heart slowed, I kissed the back of his head again. "I could do this all night."

He chuckled. "Look in the drawer."

The son of a bitch had brought a new tube of lube and some condoms. My size.

"You sneaky bastard," I said into his ear. "How was this supposed to happen?"

He laughed, moving under me, and our fingers clasped together. "I had some idea that Jack would tell you," he whispered. "God, what are you doing...?"

"Hold still." I was only guessing at technique, but the lube just slid into him, and my fingers followed, he groaned and pushed back onto my fingers. I found a spot inside him I'd only read about and he made a noise that was 10 percent surprise and 90 percent need.

"You sure you've never been done this before?" I asked, my lips against his ear again.

He was panting. "Christ, of course not. I've been waiting for you. Oh, James..."

*Oh, James...* The words that had filled all of my adolescent fantasies. My balls were filling again. Eight years with a helluva lot of fantasizing to make up for in one evening, but I sure as heck was going to give it a go.

In the cold light of day the Queen Mary was busy with hotel personnel. Maids pushed carts of towels down the long passageways, stewards briskly wished us a 'good morning', and at the restaurant, a waitress greeted us with a sunny

smile and long glossy menus, and led us to seats at windows that looked out over the bay.

I was ravenous and ate all of my scrambled eggs and half of Rick's, barely taking time to breathe. Rick just sat across from me with an expression inches from loopy. We hadn't gotten a lot of sleep last night, after all.

"You want the rest of that?" I indicated a tomato still on his plate, with the tines of my fork.

"Go ahead." Rick was working his way through a pot of coffee. The beard burn on his skin was a bright rosy flush, and one corner of his mouth tipped higher than the other when he smiled.

I looked him over. "You okay?"

"Never better." A sheepish laugh, color rising from his neck and spreading into his face. Man. Maybe we'd have to rent the room for another night.

Sarah was manning the front desk when I walked up with a bouquet of flowers I'd purchased at the gift store.

"Why, thank you, James," she said. "Is this an apology for last night?"

"No, these are for Freddie," I said. "Can you make sure he gets them?"

A peculiar look. "Freddie?"

"The night steward. He did us a favor. What?" Because her look had gone from quizzical to annoyed.

"Very funny, James," she said. "Har de har."

Rick leaned on the counter. "What's the problem?"

"I suppose you think it's clever. But really, why do you want to waste your money?"

"Are flowers incorrect?" I asked. "Should we give him a bottle of wine or something instead?"

Now she was really irritated. "I think the flowers are enough."

"No, seriously. I don't want to embarrass Freddie."

"You are concerned about embarrassing a ghost," she snorted. "Of course you are."

She must have misinterpreted our twin stares.

"Grow up, boys. Addressing flowers to him won't make that tired old story any more plausible." She slammed a drawer shut and said, "Now, if you're done wasting my time, I have a legitimate ghost hunt to run."

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Love Me Dead  
*by AM Riley*

## **Rousing Caine**

\* \* \* \*

Lex Valentine

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## Chapter One

The sound of water splashing in the bathroom sink pulled Jason from a deep sleep. Rolling over, he hugged his pillow and tried to ignore the sound. Chris would come back to bed soon and the annoying sound would stop. He sank into the pillow, willing deep sleep to return, but something nagged at the edges of his consciousness. Why the hell was the water running? Why didn't Chris get his ass back to bed?

Shock flicked Jason's eyes open as reality slammed into him. His heart raced and adrenaline shot through his body. Chris had dumped him a week ago, making off with his prize painting and several thousand dollars from the wall safe. That morning, Jason had come to his family's rustic cliff house on 17 Mile Drive in Pebble Beach. Alone. No Chris. No anyone. Yet, he distinctly heard water running in the sink of the master bath.

He lay perfectly still, almost afraid to breathe, thinking there must be a burglar in the house. Although, he couldn't fathom why a burglar would wash his hands for ten minutes in the master bathroom. Didn't they just rob the place and leave? Jason shut his eyes tightly and buried his face in the pillow.

*One one thousand. Two one thousand. Three one thousand*

What the fuck? Why didn't the guy just take what he'd come for and leave? Jason thought as panic rose within him. He didn't know how much longer he could lie still and pretend to sleep.



The bathroom door creaked slightly as it opened. The covers lifted. Jason stopped breathing. The far side of the bed dipped. The sound of a pillow being plumped echoed loudly in the dark bedroom. The solid weight of a body settled in next to him and it was all Jason could do not to jump up and scramble out the other side of the bed. A contented sigh rent the silence.

*Four one thousand. Five one thousand. Six one thousand.*

Jason wondered how long he would have to lie there beside the burglar. He didn't want to be attacked and left dead or dying, which left him no choice but to play possum. A hand touched his naked thigh and he froze, a scream caught in his throat.

"I'm not going to hurt you, so just relax."

The warm hand stroked his thigh from knee to hip. The fingers caressed his skin with an expertise Jason had rarely experienced. He swallowed hard as the warmth of those talented fingers brushed his cock. It twitched and Jason cursed it silently. The traitorous organ was aroused by a total stranger! A fucking burglar!

"I'm not a burglar and I'm not going to hurt you. I want to help you."

In the dark, the disembodied voice sounded like the dulcet tones of a jazz singer. Rich, deep, and sexy as hell. A fine trembling took hold of Jason. He couldn't stop it. He knew the burglar had to feel the tremors; he lay pressed to the man's side after all!

The heavy body on the other side of the bed shifted and hard arms came around Jason. Warm lips trailed over the

point of his shoulder and along his collar bone. Held tight to a wide, rock-hard chest, Jason could only shake in reaction, dumbfounded by his arousal. A stranger held him, caressed his back, squeezed his buttocks, and his fucking dick became hard as a stone! Jason wasn't sure what shocked him most, the fact that a stranger had aroused him or the fact that he let him.

"Help me?" Jason winced at the sound of his own voice. High-pitched. Squeaky. Fear-laced. Whiny. Geez. He sounded like a damned pussy.

A deep chuckle rumbled up from the hard chest that pressed against him. "You're not a pussy, Jason. Your fear is natural. But don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you. That isn't why I'm here."

Jason didn't understand why, but his fear began to dissipate. "Then why are you here?" he demanded, trying to show some balls. "And who are you? And why are you in my bed making my cock hard?"

The chuckle rumbled again, but louder this time. "I'm making your cock hard because I want you and you like how I touch you. That pleases me, you know." The voice paused for a moment, then said, "I'm Caine Carruthers."

Warning bells sounded in Jason's head. The name was familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. It sat on the edge of his consciousness, niggling him, but delivering no answers to his questions. "Cain? Like Cain and Abel?" he asked, stalling as he tried to figure out how he knew the man's name.

"No. Not like Cain and Abel. With an E," the stranger replied in an overly patient manner that told Jason others had voiced that question.

"An E? An E where?" Confused, Jason tried to ease back from the hard heat of Caine's big body.

Caine sighed heavily, the sound long-suffering. "My first name has an E at the end of it. I'm not C-A-I-N like the Biblical Cain. I'm C-A-I-N-E," he explained.

The man's identity exploded into Jason's mind. With a jerk, he yanked himself from the man's arms and stumbled off the bed, twisting the sheet around his hips as he snapped on a light. Bright blue eyes set in a celebrity handsome face stared up at him from the black and white bedding.

"You—you're—you..." he stuttered, trying to find the words to articulate the confusion in his brain.

Caine sat up and the black comforter fell to his lean hips. Jason stared at the wide expanse of bronze skin stretched tight over lean muscles that flexed and bulged when Caine moved. That chest had been photographed thousands of times. Jason knew exactly where he'd seen it before—on the cover of Sports Illustrated... with the title "RIP Caine" emblazoned across the middle.

"Yes, I'm the guy who owns the surf shop across the highway from your restaurant," Caine said with a little smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. In fact, Jason could swear he saw a twinge of fear cross the man's face.

"Not that!" He inched backward, away from the bed, hoping Caine didn't notice. The man's sharp blue eyes gleamed and Jason stopped. So much for not being noticed.

"Ahhh." Caine leaned back against the white pillows. "Then you must mean the 'dead' part."

"Yes!" Jason burst out. Confusion didn't begin to cover how he felt. "You're a dead celebrity!" The fact that Caine Carruthers had been a famous surfer made Jason feel like he was being Punk'd. But how had they faked the man's death? And why were they doing this to him, a virtual nobody? He didn't even know Caine Carruthers!

"Oh, now, I wouldn't exactly say you're a nobody," Caine muttered in a low voice. "How many times has your restaurant been featured on the Food Network? *Cooking* magazine? *Epicure*? And this house. It's been on *Better Homes and Gardens*. *Architectural Digest*. *Sunset*. Your beach house in Malibu's been on HGTV."

Jason snorted. "People don't know my face. They know my restaurant. Rockport is famous, not me. Besides, how do you know all that about me?"

Caine shrugged, the muscles in his arms rippling. "Being dead has its advantages."

A shiver went down Jason's spine. He backed toward the door and saw Caine's eyes narrow. "Why are you here?" he asked hoarsely, his fear returning as he repeated his earlier question.

Caine sighed and shook back the shaggy blond hair that fell over his brow. "It's a complicated story, Jason. Are you sure you don't want to come back to bed? I'm not here to hurt you," he insisted for what had to be the fourth or fifth time.

Jason shook his head. "I'm going to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. If you know what's good for you, you'll get the hell out of my bed and join me."

Unsure if he had just made a huge mistake with his show of bravado, Jason turned and opened the bedroom door. He tucked the sheet around himself toga style and headed down the tiled hallway to the huge open kitchen. Refusing to speculate on Caine, he busied himself making a pot of Italian Roast coffee. While it dripped into the pot, he leaned against the wide granite counter and stared out the glass walls at the darkness of the Pacific Ocean.

Circumstances had brought him home to Cypress House. Whenever something went wrong in his life, he ran north to the house his family owned in Pebble Beach. It was the only place he ever thought of as home. The huge timber and stone house perched on a cliff overlooking Monterey Bay, surrounded by cypress trees, built in a vee shape with two wings and a pool in the courtyard between. Four bedrooms, five bathrooms, an office and a mini media room comprised the wings. A sauna and Jacuzzi were set into the side of the cliff, below the central courtyard. A huge open kitchen and a formal "great room" that combined a dining room and living room opened off the entry at the bottom of the vee.

Jason didn't like to think how much the damned house was worth. He couldn't touch it anyway. His father had set it up in a trust when Jason and his brother were kids. The trust owned the house. Jason and Evan just used it. One day, Evan's kids would use it since Jason had a feeling he wouldn't ever have kids of his own.

The thought of children brought Jason's thoughts back to the circumstances that had driven him to Cypress House. His life was a mess. His emotions were a mess. After being an eternal optimist his entire life, at the age of thirty-eight, Jason Rockham no longer trusted.

He should have known better than to play the games he'd been drawn into. They sucked him dry in a matter of weeks. Not unlike the gorgeous player who'd drug him into the games. Chris Matthews was young, hung, and totally bad news. Jason hadn't been able to resist him. For ten whole weeks, Chris had consumed him, mentally, emotionally, and physically. The guy could suck cock like nobody's business.

Chris had played him and Jason had known that all along, which made the whole situation rather sad. On the rebound from his marriage, pissed at all the alimony he had to pay out, Jason had been ready to resume the sexually free lifestyle he'd had before his marriage. Chris wasn't someone to get serious about and Jason knew it. Still, he'd let the little liar closer than he should have, leaving him several thousand dollars and one priceless painting short because of it.

The loss of the money and painting didn't bother him so much. His stupidity did. He knew better, knew Chris to be an opportunistic liar who waited for a chance to fleece him. He knew the guy used him, but he'd been helpless to stop himself from indulging in the mindless, hot, sweaty mansex. He'd gone ten years without touching a man and the moment his matrimonial bonds disappeared, he went nuts for hard bodies and harder cocks.

Life had been simple in his young, single days. Nothing but one hedonistic rush after another. No ties. Nothing to interfere with his pleasures. Then he'd met Lainey and had wanted her more than he'd wanted his pleasure-filled lifestyle. Love caught him with his pants down and in the end spanked his ass red.

He and Lainey had tried to have children, but eight years into their marriage, Jason knew it wouldn't happen. The doctors couldn't explain it either. Lainey blamed Jason. The last two years of his marriage had been filled with Lainey's growing hatred and resentment. During the divorce, she'd been furious to discover that he didn't own Cypress House and she couldn't take it from him. Her vitriol not only stung, it soured him on women, at least for the time being. Before he'd met her, he'd always been more attracted to men than women. But he'd been more than willing to give up being with men to be with Lainey. He'd fallen so hard for her that he would have done anything to have her. Now, he had nothing but painful memories and a restless sense of distrust.

Once free of Lainey and her bitter drive to rob him of his business, Jason had tried to return to his former lifestyle. He picked up men. He picked up women. He had threesomes and encounters in clubs. Then he'd met Chris. At first, his earnest, open demeanor had Jason fooled into thinking he was honest. Within a week, Jason had realized his mistake. Chris was a hustler. He had a hard-on for Jason as long as he kept his wallet open and the fun coming.

Jason hadn't been in love with Chris, although he had totally worshipped the man's cock. He'd expected Chris to

move on when a richer man came along. When that day arrived, what he hadn't expected was an empty safe and a missing priceless painting. Wracked with anger at himself for not realizing the depths of Chris's dishonesty, Jason lost what little trust he'd had left in humanity. Between Chris and Lainey and all the other opportunistic little sluts of both sexes who had tried to latch onto him at clubs and parties, Jason had a tough time trusting people now. In fact, he had a tough time trusting his own instincts too.

Coming home had been the perfect solution. Lord knew he'd been driving his staff at Rockport insane with his micro-managing. He had a lot of garbage piled up inside him and he needed to take out all his mental trash. He couldn't trust people again, at least not yet, but the solitude of Cypress House would help him regain himself. Standing in the huge open kitchen, the tinted windows giving an unobstructed view of the bay even though he couldn't see the water in the dark, he felt freer than he had in many years. No one would demand anything of him here. Deep, peaceful silence enfolded the house and soothed Jason's nerves.

"It is very peaceful here."

Jason jumped, banging his hip on the granite counter. He glared at Caine, who also wore a sheet toga style, except his sheet had palm trees and little surfers on it. Jason frowned at it.

"Where did you get that?" he asked gruffly.

"Linen closet. It was yours as a child, wasn't it?"



"Yes, but how did you know that? And why are you here?" Jason's desire to understand Caine's presence returned with renewed force.

"I'm dead, Jason. It's not hard to know most things when you're freed of your mortal constraints." Caine opened a cupboard and pulled out a coffee mug, the mug Jason always used when he came to Cypress House. He filled it with coffee and pushed it across the counter.

Jason reached automatically for the mug, not asking how Caine knew how he took his coffee. "So you really are Caine Carruthers, the pro surfer who died a few months ago." He stared at the sun-bronzed skin of the man—ghost—in front of him.

Caine nodded. "Yeah. I died." His face tightened and pain flashed in his bright blue eyes. "I was pretty unhappy, so I guess it's no real loss."

Sipping his coffee, Jason realized that he believed Caine. He'd never before pondered the existence of ghosts, but found that he didn't have any difficulty believing in their existence. He knew Caine Carruthers was dead. He'd seen the evidence on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. The fact that the man stood in front of him, seemingly corporeal, didn't really shock him, but it did pique his curiosity.

"How did you die?" he found himself blurting out. When one of Caine's brows rose, Jason flushed guiltily. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," he said hastily, hoping the ghost didn't take offense.

Caine's lips quirked into a grin. "I'm not offended, Jason. I suppose it's a natural question for you to ask since you didn't buy the magazine with the sordid story inside."

Having Caine be privy to his thoughts unnerved him more than accepting that the man was a ghost. "I'm not much into sports," he muttered, turning away from that intense blue gaze.

"I know," Caine chuckled. "It's okay. I don't mind telling you how I died."

Jason looked up, meeting Caine's eyes again. The ghost smiled at him. A strange sensation took hold of him as he stared at Caine's handsome face. The instant attraction he'd felt when the ghost had held him returned.

"My wife shot me."

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## Chapter Two

Shock rippled through Jason. Whatever he might have fleetingly thought had caused Caine's demise, he'd never expected the man to have died a violent death. Violence was just so... violent. He suppressed a shudder. How Caine could speak of such a thing so calmly freaked him out a little.

"Why?"

Jason found it difficult to speak any more than the single-word question. Probably because during his divorce, he'd wondered daily if he would come home to find Lainey pointing a gun at his chest. She certainly hated him enough to kill him. And if he'd died before the divorce was final, she would have gotten everything he owned. For a moment, he wondered if he'd died too... if this weird surreal scene with Caine acted as an explanation for his death, telling him he wouldn't ever go back to the house in Malibu or his restaurant on Pacific Coast Highway.

Caine's deep chuckle jarred him from his thoughts. "You're not dead, Jason. Although you're correct in thinking that your ex-wife wishes you were. She just never had the balls to do it herself."

Eyes narrowed, Jason stared at Caine. "But yours did. Why?" he repeated.

Caine grimaced. "I didn't want her anymore. I wanted someone else and she wasn't happy or comfortable with my choices."

"You cheated on her?" Jason didn't like cheaters. If Caine turned out to be that type of person, Jason didn't think he could be with him. Then, like a thunderbolt, he realized that he had unconsciously considered being with the ghost sexually, even though he didn't know if ghosts could have sex. Something about Caine drew him. Not his obvious physical beauty, but something more, something Jason couldn't put his finger on.

"No, I never cheated on any of my lovers." Caine shook his blond head. "Well, if you don't categorize masturbating and fantasizing as cheating."

"If you didn't act on your thoughts, you didn't cheat." Jason was clear on the definition of cheating. His attorney had drummed it into him for months during the divorce.

"Still, she caught me red-handed, jerking off because of someone else. When I told her I didn't really want to be with her anymore, she shot me."

Jason shook his head. Caine's wife sure as hell defined the word bitch. "Did she get caught? Go to jail?" he asked, hoping she hadn't gotten away with it.

"She was caught... in a manner of speaking." Caine rubbed a hand around the back of his neck. "She took my car for her getaway. She wasn't used to the power or the stick. She was distracted too. She tried to make a left turn onto PCH, ground the gears, stalled the engine, and got t-boned by a big delivery truck. She died instantly."

And they said the wheels of justice turned slowly, Jason thought with evil satisfaction.

A wry smile quirked Caine's lips. "I thought the same thing. Unfortunately, my poor Maserati was totaled. That made me sad."

"Obviously, her death didn't." It wouldn't have made Jason sad if it had been him and Lainey in that position.

"Oh, it did. Sort of." Caine heaved a sigh, turning his head away from Jason. "I blame myself. I never should have married her in the first place. I'd always known she couldn't handle who I really was. My first wife was just like me, so I never had to deal with issues of sexuality and morality with her. If she hadn't fallen in love with someone else, I would still be married to her."

"And alive." Jason finished his coffee and went to the sink. He rinsed the mug and left it in the sink. He turned to find Caine sitting on the counter beside him.

"Yeah. If I had stayed married to Melanie, I would still be alive," he acknowledged. "She knows it too. I thought she'd feel a little guilty, but she doesn't. Mel is very Zen. All things have a place in the universe and everything happens for a reason."

Jason eyed the ghost thoughtfully. "So you've appeared to her too?"

Caine nodded. "Her, my daughter, and my best friend. And now, you."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Jason stared at Caine. "Why me?" He wanted to know why the hot-as-fuck ghost was in his house, in his bed, touching him.

"Why not you?" Caine replied smoothly. "You obviously don't have any problem accepting the fact that I'm a ghost."

Why wouldn't I choose to be with someone who has that sort of open mind?"

Jason's brows rose in astonishment. "You're here because you knew I wouldn't kick up a fuss over the fact that you're dead? C'mon, Caine. You don't expect me to buy that, do you?"

Caine reached out and stroked a finger over Jason's bicep. Fire shot through Jason's veins and he shuddered, lust taking hold of him in a relentless grip. He suddenly didn't give a shit about his own question. His balls ached and his cock began to rise. Having sex with Caine became the only thing he cared about at the moment.

"I just want you to like me, Jason," Caine whispered. "The reasons aren't that important, are they?"

Desire made his mouth dry. Jason swallowed hard. "How do you know who I am?" he asked hoarsely. "Just tell me that much."

Caine smiled, his white teeth flashing in the bronze of his sun-gilded face. "I'd eat lunch at your restaurant a couple of times a week. I'd see you working and think how fucking hot you were. But you were married. I was married. I'd sit there and eat and contemplate the ocean and wonder what you looked like naked."

Jason laughed. He couldn't help himself. The image of the centerfold-perfect Caine wondering what he looked like naked amused him. "You're shitting me, aren't you?"

"No." Caine shook his head.

"I can't believe you came into my restaurant and I never noticed you." Actually, though, Jason could believe it. At

work, especially during the lunch rush, he rarely had time to greet and speak to customers. He knew they had regulars, but he never got the opportunity to know who they were. Dinner was a different story. Lewis, the main chef, handled dinner, and Jason got the chance to mingle with the guests and schmooze.

"You know it's true. I've been watching you from afar," Caine said in a teasing voice.

Jason grinned. The idea that this hot man had noticed him was a boost for his shattered ego. Even though trust remained a major issue for him at the moment, he figured a ghost had nothing to gain by lying to him. The man was dead after all.

Caine's hand slipped beneath the sheet to stroke Jason's chest. He twisted one flat male nipple. The lust that rose within Jason soared higher. He wanted Caine badly and the urge to find out if ghosts could have sex drove him to slide one hand along Caine's hard thigh.

A loud moan broke the silence in the kitchen. Jason didn't know if it was his or Caine's. Not that it mattered, but knowing their lust was mutual helped with new-lover jitters.

"It is. I want you and yes, ghosts can have sex. At least, I can have sex while in this form," Caine replied, pressing his thighs apart so that the sheet fell open.

Jason could see the round fullness of the ghost's balls and the arc of his rising cock. The sheet still partially covered his groin, but Jason knew it was only a matter of time before they were both naked. He might have trust issues, but they didn't extend to people who weren't alive anymore. There

wasn't anything Caine could do to hurt him. He couldn't take his restaurant from him. He couldn't take his money or his art collection or his homes. He couldn't take his story to the press. He couldn't ruin Jason's relationships.

"I just want to show you that not everyone in this world or any other dimension is out to get you. There are some people you can trust, Jason. I would never hurt you," Caine whispered hoarsely. "Not intentionally. I came here to show you that mistrusting others and mistrusting yourself, your own judgment, is wrong. Everyone makes mistakes. It happens. But cutting yourself off from life and never trusting again is not the answer."

Jason's fingers caressed the smooth skin that covered the hard muscle of Caine's thigh. "You're here to prove this to me? So I don't ruin my life? Is that what this is all about?"

His eyes searched Caine's for any sign that the ghost lied. He found none. The bright blue irises gazed back at him calmly, with just a hint of fire burning in their depths. Caine wanted him. It showed in every word he spoke, every movement of his body right down to the thick cock that poked its head out from beneath the palm-tree-patterned sheet. Jason didn't know why or how the ghost's desire had happened, and he truly didn't care, because all he could think about was how good that cock would feel sliding down his throat.

Caine groaned loudly. "Jason, your thoughts are killing me. You're projecting them outward so that it's very easy for me to hear them. I want to take you to bed. Unless you'd rather



all the fucking and sucking happens here in the pretty kitchen."

Jason shook himself free of the sexual stupor he'd fallen into as he'd contemplated being with Caine. He needed to stop thinking about it and just do it. Lord knew his cock wanted it. The damn thing was so hard his whole body hurt.

"I can fix that for you, Jason. I've wanted you for months," Caine groaned, his hands reaching inside the sheet Jason had wrapped around his body.

Hot, hard, callused palms stroked Jason's flanks. Long fingers curved around the firm flesh of his buttocks, pulling him closer to where Caine sat on the counter. Jason had never been touched by such masculine hands. Most of the men he'd been with had soft hands. They were professional men or office workers, artists, college students. Even in his youth, Jason had never had an older lover with the kind of physical presence Caine had. This man had been an athlete for years, at the top of his game for more than half his professional career if the stories were true.

"Bed now, Jason. We can talk about my career after we've both come," Caine rasped, hopping down from the counter.

The palm-tree-covered sheet fell to the granite floor and Jason felt his jaw drop in astonishment. Caine Carruthers had the most beautiful body he had ever seen on a man. Not a single hair marred the perfection of his legs, arms, and torso. The tufts under his arms and at his groin were neatly trimmed. By contrast, his hair hung in shaggy tufts over his forehead and eyes and dipped below where a shirt collar

would have been if Caine had been wearing clothes. The man looked like a golden god, every inch of his skin sun-kissed.

"You're going to inflate my ego way too much, Jason," Caine muttered, but his eyes filled with amusement.

"Shut up and suck me, Caine." Jason's growl surprised even him. He'd never been the assertive type sexually. His partners were usually the aggressive ones, but something about Caine made him want to take charge. He wanted to prove his worth to Caine, that he could stand up and take control, be a man...

Caine tugged the sheet from Jason's body and knelt before him, his movements graceful. "You are a man, Jason. Don't ever let anyone tell you differently."

Calloused hands stroked up Jason's thighs, making him tremble. One palm cupped his balls, and an unbearable ache grew inside him. He didn't know if it had anything to do with Caine being a ghost or not, but he'd never felt such an attraction to another person before. Not even Lainey, and he'd wanted her enough to marry her. He couldn't imagine what he would do to have Caine.

Another calloused hand encircled his cock. Jason felt it throb in Caine's grasp. The big hand slid down his hot flesh, stroking with a teasing motion that made Jason's balls tighten even more. Just suck it, he thought, pushing his hips toward Caine.

A dark, velvety chuckle rang out in the granite-floored kitchen and made Jason shiver with lust. He gasped out loud as Caine's hot, wet mouth enveloped his cock, lips sliding along the engorged flesh.

"Holy shit," Jason hissed as heat seared him. "That feels fantastic."

Caine didn't reply. Instead, his head bobbed as he sucked Jason's cock with an expertise and enthusiasm the younger man marveled over. His cock had been sucked more times than he could remember, but no one had ever made him feel as if the damn appendage was on fire. The tightest pussy or ass had nothing on Caine's mouth. Hotter, wetter, with better suction... the ghost's mouth drove him insane. Pleasure spiraled up Jason's spine and he knew he wouldn't last very long. The pleasure was too intense, the sensations beyond his ability to control.

He sank his hands into the silky strands of Caine's hair, marveling at the texture. He couldn't believe the sensations buffeting his body. Couldn't believe they'd been caused by a ghost. Hell, he couldn't believe how intense the whole act was. No one had ever sucked him so well.

Caine's tongue slithered around Jason's cock, licking and teasing. At the same time, the ghost's mouth engulfed every inch of the swollen organ. That mouth sucked hard, then more slowly and softly, teasingly... When Caine's fingers traced the crease of his ass, Jason's knees went weak. He widened his stance and Caine's fingers slipped between his buttocks, grazing his anus. Jason let go of Caine's head with one hand and gripped the edge of the granite counter for balance. Still holding Caine's head with the other hand, he thrust with his hips, feeling his cock glide easily in the molten mouth that encased it.

"Argh!" he groaned. "I'm gonna come!"

With his mouth full, Caine's only reply came from his fingers rubbing over Jason's anus, his thumb teasing the taut skin over the perineum. Jason's knees grew weaker. He shook with the force of trying to hold back his orgasm. Actually, he didn't want to hold it back anymore. He wanted to come, wanted to ram his cock down Caine's throat and make him swallow his cum. He wanted the man to reek of his seed and sweat. He wanted to...

Caine's finger slid into Jason's tight hole. A half-scream of pleasure escaped Jason's mouth as, with one more thrust of his hips, his cock began to spurt into Caine's mouth. He shook with the force of his orgasm, unsure how he remained on his feet. His ass clutched at Caine's finger as his cock remained stuffed down Caine's throat. As his tremors subsided, Jason had to give Caine credit. He hadn't exactly been gentle with the man. Yet, Caine had taken every inch of his cock, had sucked it better than anyone else ever had, and had swallowed every drop of cum that spurted from it. Jason should have been more than satisfied, but he wasn't. He ached to fuck the man's beautiful body, despite having just come.

Caine's tongue swirled its way from the base of Jason's cock to the head. When he sat back on his haunches, his mouth popped free of Jason's cock at the same moment that his finger eased from Jason's ass. He smiled up at Jason, the satisfied smile of a man who had just pleased his lover.

"Bed now?" he said huskily as he rose to his feet.

"If I can walk," Jason replied with a little laugh.

"I can carry you," Caine offered.

Jason bent and retrieved the white sheet. "Oh, I'm sure you can, but I'd just as soon walk." He turned off the coffee pot and crossed the kitchen, stopping in the doorway. "Are you coming?" he asked when Caine didn't move.

The ghost's bright blue eyes twinkled. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Jason turned and headed down the hall, saying, "If I have anything to say about it, you will be, Caine. Oh, you will be."

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## **Chapter Three**

The master suite took up the end of the north wing, comprising about half of the entire wing. The other half was the office and media room. Caine had peeked into all the rooms earlier upon his arrival. Not that he'd needed to. He seemed to just know things now that he was dead.

He wished he'd known how unhappy Jason had been. Maybe he would have made a push to get to know him. Of course, they'd both been married for most of the time Caine had been aware of Jason's existence. In the last six months since Jason's divorce, Caine had stupidly let his own marriage continue when he should have moved out and filed for divorce. His stupidity had led to his death. And the death of his dreams.

Caine remembered the exact moment he'd fallen in love with Jason Rockham. He'd just finished lunch with his accountant slash best friend. Phil had left and Caine sat sipping his ginger ale, studying the reports he'd been given. Then laughter caught his attention. Well, one laugh really. The sound had been pure delight, dished up and served on a silver plate with lashings of chocolate syrup and whipped cream. Caine's mouth had literally watered at the sound.

His eyes tracked the laughter to a booth, two over from where he sat. A tall man with a disheveled mop of dark curls leaned against the end of the booth. His long legs, encased in ordinary khakis, drew Caine's gaze. Runner's legs, he'd thought, trying to place the man's sport. Then he noticed the

broad shoulders and the bulge of the man's biceps in the forest green polo shirt. Tennis, he'd decided.

The man laughed again and leaned over to ruffle the sandy head of one the children in the booth. He exchanged a few words with the parents and turned away from the table as a waiter came up to him with a folder. For a moment, Caine had seen the sheer happiness on the man's handsome face. It shone from his dark green eyes and radiated out from the smile on his mobile lips.

Before Caine could think to stand up and introduce himself, the man left, striding away across the restaurant with the waiter at his heels. Caine had been dazzled by him, his laughter, his lean body, his infectious smile. He'd asked his waitress for the man's name since it was obvious he worked there. He'd even tipped her an extra five bucks since she'd been so forthcoming. Jason Bedford Rockham the Third, owner of Rockport Restaurant, Malibu, California. He didn't play tennis. His sport was sailing.

After that, Caine became obsessed with Jason. He dug up everything he could about him on the Internet. He ate lunch at Rockport three times a week. He knew what Jason drove—a classic Mustang convertible—and knew where he lived. Oddly, Jason lived less than a half mile from Caine. But Jason's house was on the beach and Caine's on the cliff. He'd found that with a telescope, he could see Jason's deck. The telescope had been his downfall. If he hadn't bought the telescope, Tiffany wouldn't have shot him.

Pulling himself back to the present, Caine leaned against the open doorway of the master suite, watching a naked

Jason remake the bed with the sheet that had been wrapped around him. He knew that most people would think he'd been stalking Jason, but he hadn't been. He'd just wanted to know more about the man who'd captured his heart. He'd never followed Jason or dug in his trash or anything like that. Google alerts, lunch at Rockport, and the telescope were the extent of his stalking. Mostly, he just waited for Jason to notice him, but that hadn't happened.

Jason turned from the bed and cocked up an eyebrow. "So what are you waiting for? An engraved invitation?" he said with a chuckle.

Caine stepped into the room, letting the sound of Jason's laughter fill him with joy. He hadn't thought it possible to fall in love at first sight with a stranger he'd never even spoken to, yet it had happened. He still couldn't believe it. He rubbed the center of his chest absently, his thoughts filled with *if onlys*.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked softly. His dark green eyes watched the hand that rubbed Caine's chest.

He let it drop. "Nothing. Just remembering something that hurt." He moved closer to Jason, breathing in the man's scent. He smelled so fresh and clean, minty with a hint of something exotic.

"She shot you in the chest."

Caine blinked. "Yeah, but that didn't hurt. Okay, it hurt, but not for long. I think I died almost instantly." He shrugged. Talking about his death didn't bother him; it just seemed like a crazy topic when he was so hot to have the man in front of him. "What I remembered wasn't that. Not a physical pain. A



mental one. That feeling you get when you love someone but they don't know you exist."

Jason's eyes widened and Caine could have kicked himself. Open mouth, insert foot. That had been the story of his life. He didn't dissemble well and forever ended up saying something he shouldn't.

"I'm sorry."

Jason's softly spoken words told Caine the man had figured out exactly what he meant. A sigh escaped him. He didn't really care if Jason knew he'd been in love with him for months. It had been bound to come out anyway. However, he didn't want Jason to feel sorry for him or obligated. He just wanted a chance to be with Jason for a little while, to experience what he had lost the opportunity to have in his life. Now, in death, he sought a taste of heaven before he moved on to whatever lay beyond the limbo in which he currently resided.

Caine stroked a finger down Jason's bare chest, reveling in the warmth of his skin. "Don't be. It's not your fault. I made the wrong choices in my life. Had I chosen differently, maybe you and I would be together like this anyway..."

"Just not having ghost sex?" One of Jason's brows quirked up and his lips curved in a smile.

The softly wry humor on his lover's face melted Caine's already aching heart. He'd chosen well when he'd fallen for Jason. He'd just fucked up everything after that.

"Yeah, well, sometimes things just don't work out the way you want," he said gruffly, ducking away from Jason's keen

gaze. He felt raw and exposed, a rather weird feeling considering the fact that he wasn't alive.

Hard hands cupped his face, long fingers speared through his hair and caressed his scalp. Jason's touch warmed him right down to his soul. He looked up, his gaze colliding with Jason's. A wealth of compassion—and passion—lay within the dark green depths of the man's irises. Caine wanted to lose himself in those eyes, hold the moment forever in time, and never have to leave Jason. The ache in his chest grew.

"I don't know how this happened or why. I just know I feel incredibly drawn to you, Caine. I trust you and I want you, two things I didn't ever think I'd feel for someone again," Jason said, his voice low and fierce. "You're dead, and yet you're not. You're a stranger to me, and yet you're not. I should fear you, yet I don't. I should not believe in your existence, yet I do. I shouldn't have a fucking erection after the orgasm you just gave me, yet the evidence of it is poking you in the thigh. I want you and I don't give a good goddamn what you are, where you came from, or why you're here... except that I want you to want me as much I want you. Does that make sense?"

Caine smiled and leaned into Jason's body, feeling the man's hands drop from his face to encircle his body. An incredible sense of belonging flooded him. The moment felt the same as when he'd first heard Jason's carefree laugh. Inside, he began to tremble. It seemed odd to be filled with so many emotions when he no longer lived. Happiness warred with despair within him, rocking his psyche until he had to shut off everything but his growing awareness of Jason.

Slightly rough hands stroked down his back to squeeze his buttocks. Jason's hips pressed against him with a rhythmic motion that had his hard cock gliding against Caine's thigh, leaving a wet trail from the pre-cum. Caine shuddered as lust filled him with heat. The rawness of his emotions added to the sensations racing through his body. Being with Jason was a dream come true even tinged with the bittersweet fact of his loss of mortality. He knew, although Jason did not, that he had limited time with the man. He would give anything to have Jason forever, but that chance had been lost at the hands of a vengeful woman who couldn't accept the fact that her husband loved a man more than he loved her.

Pushing away thoughts of his wife Tiffany and his own death, Caine bent and licked Jason's shoulder. "I understand, Jason. The only thing that matters to me is you," he said simply. "I am here because of you. Your emotions pulled at me, roused me from where I went when I died."

Jason laughed, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement, the lust in them banked for a moment. "I roused Caine? How funny." He sobered then. "Funny weird, not funny ha ha. I wasn't making fun of your death."

Caine smiled, loving that Jason cared about his feelings. He was a ghost, not alive anymore, yet Jason worried about upsetting him. God, how he wished he'd been braver when he lived. Jason suited him as no other person ever had. How fantastic would life have been had they gotten together? Emotion rose within him, tightening his throat and choking him.

"It's okay. I know what you meant," he whispered, unable to speak at a higher register.

He stroked his hands up Jason's arms, loving the feel of his skin, his muscles, and his bone. The man might not be as hard-bodied as Caine, but he was in great shape, his muscles long and sleek and hard. Just to be able to touch Jason sent shivers through Caine. He reveled in the sensations that bombarded him. He might be dead, but Jason made him feel alive again.

Caine looked into Jason's eyes and leaned forward until their lips brushed. A moan escaped him as Jason took his mouth, kissing him deeply. The kiss they'd shared in the kitchen had been hot, but this kiss had a depth to it the other hadn't. Caine pressed himself to Jason's body, his hands stroking every inch.

Hard, hungry kisses followed. Desperate, rough, and lust-driven. They cranked up the heat inside Caine until he shook with the need to come. When Jason's hand closed around his thick erection, Caine thought he'd pass out from pleasure. Stroking with a twisting motion, his fingers wet with pre-cum, Jason worked Caine's cock expertly. The intense pleasure that rippled through him nearly drove Caine to his knees.

Jason had to know how his touch affected his lover. He backed Caine toward the bed and pushed him down on it. Staring up into dark green eyes filled with the fire of passion, Caine spread his thighs in invitation. Jason didn't waste any time sprawling on Caine's body and sucking his straining cock into his mouth. Caine hissed in a breath as the talented mouth of his lover engulfed every inch of him.

"Oh, God. Suck me, Jason. I want you so much," he panted, his words tumbling over each other, spilling eagerly from his mouth.

Sucking Jason had been a dream come true. Having Jason suck *him* surpassed every sexual fantasy Caine had ever had. Heat spiraled through his body as every cell came alive. Jason's mouth sucked and his tongue licked. The suction, heat, and friction of that talented mouth had Caine in a frenzy in only a few minutes. He clutched the sheets frantically as his hips thrust upward. He grabbed at Jason's head, stroking the short, silky midnight curls. He had the sensation of drowning, not being able to breathe, unable to make it back to the surface.

Jason's fingers squeezed and pulled Caine's balls, then teased his perineum before moving lower to graze the wrinkled skin of his anus. Electricity arced from Jason's fingers into Caine's body. He jerked, his back bowing as he thrust his cock down Jason's throat. A firestorm of lust consumed him. Jason slipped his finger past the tight ring of muscles that made up Caine's anus. More electricity rocked Caine. He shook uncontrollably as Jason fucked him with first one finger, then two.

"S-stop!" he cried out, his voice weak and stuttering. "I want you to f-fuck me!"

Jason sucked and licked his way to the head of Caine's cock. He backed off and smiled. "I can do that," he teased, grinning.

Caine watched his lover walk into the bathroom and return with a tube of lube. He scooted over in the bed as Jason sat beside him, stroking his long fingers over Caine's thigh.

"From behind or facing you?" Jason murmured, opening the lube.

A shiver went through Caine. He could hardly breathe. Excitement had him in its clutches and wouldn't let go. "Facing you. I want to see your face and eyes when you push your cock into me," he whispered, his breathing completely out of control.

Jason's eyes darkened. He squirted the lube onto his fingers and knelt between Caine's spread thighs. Tilting his hips up, Caine grabbed the backs of his knees, opening himself to Jason.

"Geez, Caine. I can't even find the words to tell you how much I want you." Jason's words were followed by an inarticulate growl as he bent and pressed his tongue to Caine's dark hole.

A loud keening cry filled the bedroom. It took Caine a few seconds to realize that the sound came from him. Jason rimmed him, licking and sucking and fucking him with his tongue. No one had ever done that to him before, and Caine thought he would lose it and come apart at the seams, spraying his cum everywhere long before Jason put his cock inside him.

"Oh, my God. Your tongue feels like lightning. Hot and wet and setting my nerve endings on fire," he moaned as he clutched his knees.

Jason chuckled, a self-satisfied sound that made Caine's heart turn over in his chest and made his balls tighten painfully with arousal. "You like that, do you? Well, I can't believe some man hasn't eaten you before this, Caine. You're beautiful. I could lick and suck your cock, balls, and ass all night," he husked. "I know I want to."

A heavy shudder shook Caine's frame, and Jason laughed softly. Cool wetness stroked over the hot flesh of Caine's asshole. His fingers dug into the backs of his knees, pulling him open wider.

"Tell me I don't need a condom, Caine. Tell me I can bareback you. Cause... I want to. I wanna feel your hot ass grabbing me with every stroke. I wanna feel you taking every bit of my cum inside you," Jason hissed, through gritted teeth.

Caine looked down in time to see Jason rub his cockhead against the slippery wetness of his lubed ass. "Yes. It's okay. I'm not diseased, just dead! Fuck me! Fuck me *now*!" Caine couldn't help how frantic he sounded. His need to have Jason inside him overruled anything and everything else. He didn't think there would be a problem with fucking and being fucked without protection. After all, he was dead.

The steady press of Jason's cock against his anus had his breath catching in his throat. He pushed back against the invading organ and felt the thick head pop into him. Moaning, he pulled his legs higher, and Jason's cock pushed in farther. The feeling of fullness, the pleasure-pain of a cock plowing his tight channel and hitting that bundle of nerves known as his

prostate, sent Caine's arousal through the roof. He'd never been this aroused. Never felt so much pleasure before.

Looking up into Jason's handsome face, Caine's heart tumbled in his chest. Sweat trickled along his lover's hairline. Jason didn't notice Caine staring at him. His eyes watched his cock disappear into Caine's tight hole.

The lust and pleasure riding Jason's expression thrilled Caine. His ass burned where Jason's thick cock speared it, filling him more tightly than anyone ever had. With Jason fully seated inside him, he clenched his muscles, squeezing the cock that sent waves of delirious sensation through him. Jason looked up and their eyes met. Heat flared between them, passion flying out of control as pleasure sizzled through both of them.

Jason hissed in a breath, leaning over Caine to snatch a hot kiss, tongues tangling quickly with frantic lust. Balancing on one arm, Jason reached down and wrapped his hand around Caine's cock, stroking it boldly.

"I want you to come with me," he panted roughly. "We come together, Caine. Okay?"

Caine nodded, his eyes filled with the wonder of Jason Rockham. This is what he'd been born for and died for... loving Jason. There was no rhyme or reason to his feelings. They just were.

Jason's cock eased back, then pressed in again. Caine moaned. Jason set up a rocking motion that turned Caine's ass into more of an erogenous zone than he had ever thought it could be. And the feel of Jason's hand stroking his cock, his lubed fingers gliding along the length and up over the head,



teasing the slit and the ridge of the head... had Caine in ecstasy. Sensations buffeted his body, feelings and pleasures more intense, more fierce than any he'd ever experienced. Caine thought he would die again, but this time from the overwhelming emotions that rose within him and spilled over, fueling his arousal. Nothing in life or death compared to being with Jason. If he'd had to die to experience this level of pleasure and emotion, then he accepted it. It was worth it.

Caine's ass clutched at the burning bliss of Jason's cock. He felt his balls tightening as Jason's hand stroked him more swiftly. They kissed again, bodies pressed tightly together as Jason's hips pumped with short, hard strokes.

Tasting Jason's tongue, Jason's essence, filled Caine with joy. Jason's fingers teased the ridge of his cockhead and Caine lost control. He jerked, his eyes opening wide as his ass clamped down on Jason's cock.

"Oh, God. Jason, I'm coming." Even to his own ears, his voice sounded breathless and filled with emotion.

Jason nuzzled his throat, licking and kissing him, then took his mouth in another quick kiss. "Come on, baby. Give me your cum cause I'm gonna fill your ass with mine the instant I feel your hot mess," he rasped, his expression fierce.

Jason's words felt a little dirty to Caine. Nasty, sweaty, man-sex dirty. Caine loved it. He could listen to Jason's cultured tones talking dirty for hours. The sound of them combined with Jason's hand on his cock and Jason's cock in his ass pushed him right over the edge. He blinked his eyes shut for a second as his orgasm hit him. Sparks showered the

darkness behind his eyelids and he opened his eyes quickly, not wanting to miss Jason's orgasm.

Caine's cum gushed from the end of his cock, splattering Jason's hand and both their bellies with hot seed. The moment his wetness spurted from the end of his cock, he felt a huge growl rise from the depths of Jason's chest. His lover's cock expanded, pushing tightly at Caine's narrow passage. Then Caine felt the first spurt of hot cum inside him.

Jason came with a muffled roar, his mouth seeking Caine's, slashing down on it violently. Teeth mashing lips, tongues pushing roughly. The kiss was so fierce Caine could taste the urgency that drove it. He released his knees and grabbed Jason's buttocks, pulling him closer as he wrapped his legs around his lover. Jason thrust one last time into Caine, forcing every inch of his cock into the heated welcome of Caine's ass.

Whimpering slightly at the force of the emotions that battered him more roughly than Jason's body, Caine held onto him tightly, wanting the moment to last forever. Suddenly, the heat of his lover's body in him and around him became more than he could handle. For a moment, he felt his body lose its form before he controlled it, pulling himself back, willing himself to stay with Jason.

"Oh, God. I love you," he moaned against Jason's mouth, fighting to keep himself in human form.

The body above his stilled. Two beats of absolute silence and stillness ensued. Then Jason backed away, pulling himself free of Caine's ass and arms despite the fact that Caine could feel his lover's cock still pulsing as it pumped out cum.

Love Me Dead  
*by AM Riley*

"How can you love me? You don't know me."

A tinge of fear colored Jason's confused whisper. Caine's emotions took a nosedive. He stared up into the dark green gaze of the man he loved and knew he'd screwed up.

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## Chapter Four

Sex with a ghost? Jason hadn't thought it would be any big deal. At least, he hadn't thought that when Caine had sucked his cock dry in the kitchen. Now, after having had the roughest, most arousing and emotional sex he'd ever had with a man... Caine's whispered words scared the shit out of him. He knew Caine hadn't meant to say them aloud. But there they were, hanging between them as if they were visible, filling the space between their bodies with an icy cold draft of reality-based awareness.

He understood that Caine had seen him from afar and gotten a little crush on him. He'd figured it for a mostly physical crush. After all, he'd had those sorts of moments himself. He'd see a hot guy—or woman—and would fantasize about them, about fucking them. Sometimes the crush filled only the moments he gazed at the person. Other times it lasted a week or two, usually because the person was a repeat customer at the restaurant. But he'd never had a crush on someone that transcended life itself... or made him think he loved the person.

So how could Caine love him? The man didn't know him! Jason hadn't ever believed in love at first sight. He thought you needed to know someone to love them. Blind emotion—the kind that generated love at first sight—had no place in his universe. Staring now at Caine's handsome but crestfallen face, knowing that the man was dead, he realized that his new lover was not of his universe either.

Turning away from the bed, ignoring Caine's gasp of shock and pain, he went into the bathroom and shut the door. He needed a few minutes to himself to understand what he had just done. With a jerk, he opened the shower door and stepped in, blindly turning on the water. A blast of cold water hit him and he sucked in a harsh breath, shivering as he turned up the water temperature.

He stood in the center of the shower, water from all six shower heads pouring onto him, washing away the feel of Caine's hands and body. The knowledge made him feel a little bereft. Caine's intensity called to him on a level he'd never experienced before. Besides, he really liked the guy. He'd never been so attracted to a man before.

A sick feeling took over his gut as he recalled vividly that Caine wasn't a man anymore. For a few moments, a split second, he'd seen and felt Caine's body dissolve in his arms. He'd been about to panic when the strange sensation stopped. He'd looked down to see Caine in the throes of his orgasm, his face filled with an emotion that called to Jason strongly, making his heart skip a beat and his breath catch in his throat. And then those words. The words that had stopped him cold.

Love had been the bearer of all bad things in Jason's life. Now, he had a ghost speaking words of love to him. Caine's lack of mortality, lack of physical substance, had just been hammered home to him and despite how ecstatic their shared orgasms had been, his head couldn't process emotions as strong as love. All of which left him beyond confused. What the hell was he supposed to do or think or feel?

"Nothing."

Jason jerked his head up, staring through the glass shower door at Caine, who stood, fully clothed in jeans and a t-shirt just inside the bathroom door. A solemn, sad expression turned the ghost's handsome face into a cool mask. A trickle of fear iced Jason's heart.

"You don't have to think or feel anything, Jason." Caine took a couple of steps forward and Jason saw that he was barefoot. "I'm leaving. I shouldn't have come here in the first place. I'm not sure why I did. I guess something in your emotions roused me, called to me. I had to come to you. But I can see now that I shouldn't have. I'm sorry, Jason."

Caine's blue eyes glinted with emotion as he turned to leave, his form shimmering as it dissolved. Jason blinked as he realized he could see through Caine's body. The force of his own emotions slammed into Jason in that instant. The trickle of fear that wrapped itself around his heart grew exponentially in the few seconds it took for Caine to reach for the doorknob with a hand that was rapidly fading.

"Wait!"

Jason couldn't stop himself. His heart pounded in his chest as if he'd run a marathon. His throat felt as dry as the Sahara. With jerky movements, he shut off the water and opened the shower door, striding toward Caine, whose form continued to shimmer but stopped fading. He grabbed one muscular bicep in his wet hand, thankful that the ghost was still solid enough to touch. He spun Caine around.

"Why? Just tell me why you love me," he asked, desperate for some kind of answer, but he didn't know what.

Caine's blue eyes softened. "Because I heard you laugh and I couldn't help myself. I looked up and saw you laughing with a child, the son of a customer, and... and... I just knew I loved you." Raw, ragged emotion filled the ghost's voice and he spoke as if he had no control over it. "I don't know why. I just *knew*."

Agony filled the blue eyes that met his. Jason knew Caine spoke the truth. It just seemed so bizarre. He supposed if he had met Caine when he was alive it would have been different. Oh, the sex would have burned just as hot. He had no doubts about that. But would they have risked everything for it?

Jason had been in the process of divorcing Lainey for almost a year before Caine's death. Had he met Caine properly, based on the way he felt about him now, he would have found a way to be with him despite the discretion forced on him by his attorney during his separation from his wife. The attraction between them flared so strongly, he had no doubt that had they met at any time during Caine's lifetime, they would have ended up in bed together almost immediately. An attraction as full-blown as theirs didn't have outs.

"I suppose that is part of why I came here," Caine said quietly. "I knew what it would be like between us. I knew there was a reason I'd fallen in love with you so quickly. But I fucked everything up. I should have left Tiffany when I knew I'd fallen for you. I should have taken the risk, left her, and introduced myself to you. Instead, I sat on my ass and gave

her a reason to shoot me. I didn't fight for what I wanted, so I lost it all."

He shrugged, his face twisted into lines of pain, the likes of which Jason hoped he never felt. He wanted to comfort Caine, but didn't know how. What did you say to a ghost with regrets?

"Nothing."

Caine spoke the word again, this time with a sardonic twist to his mouth that looked totally out of place. Jason might use sarcasm regularly, but Caine didn't look like the kind of guy who did. It seemed out of place on a guy with an open, positive personality.

Caine's form wavered and something crumbled inside Jason. Every shimmer of the ghost's body struck fear in Jason's heart. Whatever reservations he'd had, whatever fears had held him back, they just didn't mean anything in the face of Caine's patent unhappiness and pain and the shimmering that indicated the loss of his corporeal form. However freakish it might be, in the space of a few hours, the ghost had come to mean something to Jason. With his bright, sunny personality, he embodied every hope Jason had ever had for the future. Caine had no room for negativity and doubts which made him the perfect foil for Jason's cautious, darker demeanor.

In that moment, Jason knew they had been meant to be together. He had no other explanation for Caine falling instantly in love with him or for the attraction that burned so bright and hot between them despite Caine being dead. The fact that he could see Caine and be with him meant



something too. Maybe it was Jason's own need that kept Caine from leaving this world for the next.

He drew a shuddering breath and let go of Caine's bicep. He reached up and cupped Caine's face in his wet hands, leaning in to kiss him softly. He drew back, staring deeply into the ghost's troubled blue eyes. "I'm sorry I freaked out. Can we go back to bed now?" he asked quietly, his eyes searching Caine's.

Emotions flickered across the ghost's face, but the overriding one was relief, and Jason knew he had won. Caine wasn't leaving him tonight.

Turning away to grab a towel, a hand on his arm stopped him. He looked back at Caine. "I can't hide how I feel, Jason. It's too hard for me and it means too much," the ghost said in a voice so soft Jason barely heard it.

He smiled and tucked the towel around his hips. "It's okay. You just be you. That's all I need. For however long the powers that be let me have you."

A joy so pure it nearly took Jason's breath away blazed from Caine's eyes. A sense of rightness with his world settled around Jason in that moment. He pulled open the bathroom door. "You're wearing way too many clothes, ghost," he teased.

Walking to the bed, he whipped off his towel and rubbed it over his damp body. He glanced up at Caine and found him naked again. The ghost grinned at him.

"I can see getting you out of your clothes will be the least of our worries, eh?" Jason said on a laugh.

"I've never been one to wear very many clothes. I used to love to swim naked. Still do, but not in the Pacific. Too cold. Too dirty," Caine replied.

"Ah, a surfer right down to your soul." Jason tossed the towel onto a chair. "I never watched professional surfing. I imagine it was a tough sport to stay at the top of."

Caine grimaced. "Surfing is all I know. And surfboards. Why do you think I invested all my money in the creation of my own line of boards? I knew all along that one day either a wave or a shark would take me out for good. I saved as much of my winnings as I could to start my own board company. The bigger I got, the bigger the company got. I started the surf shop and it led to a chain. The flagship store is the one across PCH from your restaurant."

Jason shook his head. They'd both taken a dream and turned it into a success story. But where Jason's success had been laced with personal betrayals, Caine's apparently had not. At least, not until the ultimate betrayal when his wife shot him.

Caine sighed. "My fault again. I should never have married her. Too flighty. Too demanding. Too... everything. I knew it was wrong six months in, but I didn't do anything about it. I was a fool."

Pulling at the bedding, Jason slid into the bed and plumped up his pillows. "I wasn't much better. I let my marriage drag on two years after I knew it was over." He sighed. "We all make mistakes. Hopefully, though, we learn from them."

He gazed pointedly at the empty side of the bed where Caine had first lain. "You coming?"

A slow smile spread across Caine's face. "Already did. But if that's an invitation to sleep with you, I won't turn it down." He slipped into the bed beside Jason.

Hard, warm arms pulled Jason against a wide chest. A sigh escaped Caine, and Jason smiled. "Do ghosts sleep?"

Caine snorted. "This one does. I don't know how to be a ghost. I just know how to be Caine Carruthers."

Jason closed his eyes, sleep tugging at him already. "It's a good thing you're Caine Carruthers. I'd have hated explaining to the cops why I fucked a burglar."

The last thing Jason knew that night was the rumble of Caine's chuckle vibrating the chest on which his cheek lay pillowed.

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## Chapter Five

He awoke alone. Bright sunlight spilled through the glass wall of the master bedroom. The door to the terrace stood open, the sheer curtain billowing in the breeze. Jason blinked at it sleepily, unable to remember if he'd left it open the night before. Someone getting into the house from the terrace side was a physical impossibility. The terrace and the ends of the house's two wings were on a sheer cliff. Below were jagged rocks and Monterey Bay, which fed into the Pacific Ocean.

Taking a deep breath, Jason wondered if the previous night had been some kind of fantastic dream. He stretched and felt his groin pull slightly. Turning his head, he saw the indent of a head on the pillows beside him. No dream.

Sitting up, he wondered where Caine was. Could ghosts appear in the sunlight? he wondered, scratching his stubbled chin thoughtfully.

"Yes."

Jason looked up to find Caine, wearing only a towel, striding from the terrace through the closed glass sliding door into the bedroom. The ghost grinned, white teeth flashing in a sun-bronzed face. Damp blond hair slicked back from his forehead, and he smelled faintly of chlorine.

"I'm not a vampire. Sunlight doesn't affect me." He walked farther into the room and came to stand beside the bed. "I went swimming. No ocean to swim in, but the pool felt great. Not too warm."

"I don't like it too warm," Jason murmured, his eyes on the hard planes of Caine's body. His morning wood responded to his lover's nearness, arcing up with aching rigidity.

"Oh, Jason. I'd love to accommodate that, but I have a feeling breakfast is ready." Despite Caine's apologetic tone, his eyes danced with laughter.

"Breakfast?" Jason tossed back the sheet and stood up, stretching again. He knew Caine's eyes were on him, and he deliberately reached down and stroked his cock leisurely.

"Fresh baked muffins and coffee. Can't you smell it?" Caine muttered, seemingly mesmerized by the movement of Jason's hand on his erection.

Jason sniffed the air. Something smelled like cake. Peach muffins? The sharp scent of strong, fresh coffee wafted toward him. His mouth watered and his erection flagged in the face of his suddenly growling stomach.

Caine chuckled. "I need to pull the muffins out of the oven."

He disappeared down the hall while Jason headed for the bathroom. After rushing through his morning ablutions, Jason yanked on a pair of black shorts and a grey t-shirt. Padding barefoot into the kitchen, he found Caine sitting on the terrace with a tray on the table before him. The ghost appeared cleaned up from his swim and now wore a sage green t-shirt with the Caine Surf Shop logo and khaki shorts. His hands held the newspaper at arm's length as he read.

Jason sat down across from him and reached for a muffin, breathing deeply of the fragrance of the warm bread. Setting it on his plate, he reached for the coffee pot and filled his cup.

As he ate the muffin, he watched Caine read the paper. Finally, his curiosity got the better of him.

"Why are you holding the paper out like that?"

With a loud rustle, Caine folded the paper and laid it on the table, reaching for his coffee. "My eyesight isn't what it used to be. If I don't hold it at arm's length, the letters are blurry," he replied simply.

Jason gaped at him. "But... but you're dead! Didn't that fix the problem of old-age eyes?" he said, struggling not to laugh. "And how old are you anyway?"

"Forty-three." Caine frowned down at the newspaper. "Maybe I can see the letters now. I didn't even try. I've been holding the paper like that for a couple of years now. I didn't realize it was a by-product of getting older. It's just a habit now."

Jason reached for another muffin, breaking open the golden cake. "As we get older, our eyes age too. Our near vision starts to weaken. It's a common condition called presbyopia."

Caine's brows rose. "Fancy word for old eyes," he said with a chuckle.

"I have it too." Jason grinned at his lover, thinking he hadn't felt so comfortable with someone in years. "I wear glasses for reading."

Caine's mouth opened as if he was going to say something, but then he closed it and smiled. "You're not old."

Jason shrugged and finished his muffin, leaning back in his chair with his coffee mug. "Thirty-eight isn't that young. I wanted kids, but it's too late for that now."

"You can still have children, Jason. So you're not married anymore. Hire a surrogate. It's not like you can't afford it."

Caine's quiet words froze Jason in mid-sip. He'd thought about a surrogate often, but he didn't even know if his "boys" were up to impregnating a woman. The fertility specialists he and Lainey had gone to had never determined that the problem was his, so he just didn't know if he could father children.

"I don't think you have a thing to worry about, Jason. Just start the process. It will all work out," Caine told him.

Jason stared in amazement at the ghost. "Me? Be a single parent? I don't know if I could do it, Caine." He shook his head. "When I was married, things were different."

Caine cocked up one eyebrow in a sardonic expression. "Not really. Did you really think that Lainey would nurse a baby and ruin those perfect breasts you bought her? Did you think she'd pace the nursery at night holding and rocking a colicky infant? Change diapers? Deal with midnight feedings?"

Caine shook his head vehemently. "Jason, you know that was never gonna happen, and for all that she turned into a bitch because the two of you couldn't have kids. She would have hired a nanny. Her getting pregnant was all about your money. It was never about her wanting children the way you want them."

Jason sighed dejectedly. He'd always had the sense that Lainey had lied about wanting kids. He knew for a fact that she wanted his money, though. Her drive to take it all from him in the divorce proved that. Luckily, his father had made both his sons put their assets in trust long before either was

married. The old guy had been whip smart and Jason had never appreciated that fact more than during the ugliness of his divorce.

"What's it like, Caine?" he asked softly.

The golden head rose, blue eyes filled with more emotion than Jason had ever seen in someone's gaze.

"Having a child?" Caine let out his breath on a long sigh. "It's amazing. I remember feeling shell-shocked. I couldn't believe I had created her, that she was part of me. All the things you think you'd never do—the diapers and puke and driving around all night in the car so they can sleep in the car seat when they're fussy—are just automatic. You don't even think of not doing them. Your child needs you so of course you just do what's necessary for their existence. I would die for her..." He snorted then. "Well, if I wasn't already dead, that is."

Jason's heart turned over. The love in Caine's voice touched him. All the things he said, Jason wanted to experience, but likely never would. His chances had grown very slim.

"Just call the surrogate program, Jason. Trust me. You can do this. Make your dream happen. Don't sit on your ass. Look what sitting on my ass got me." Caine gestured to himself and his form shimmered like a mirage for a few moments. "Dead. You don't wanna be dead. You just need to jack off in the test tube and let the expensive doctor inject your sperm into some waiting college student who needs money. Next thing you know, you'll be chasing a little Jason around the terrace."



Caine made it all sound so simple. Until Caine had brought it up, Jason had thought he'd successfully gotten over his burning need to have a child. Yet now, the ghost got him all fired up to try the surrogate program. Could he do it? Was he really not too old?

"You're not old, damn it! And you can do it. Just believe in yourself and your dreams, Jason."

Caine's eyes met his, and Jason saw the stark determination in the blue irises. "You can do whatever you set your mind to. Having a child is not as hard as you think. That laugh I heard, the laugh I fell in love with, it came because you were happy and part of it had to do with the child you were speaking to. You were meant to have children, Jason. Don't deny yourself. Promise me you will call the surrogate program."

Jason wondered how they gotten onto such a serious subject for a morning after a night like they had had. Having children seemed like an odd discussion to have with your new lover after a night of hot sex. Yet, he felt comfortable having the discussion with Caine. Maybe because Caine had a daughter. Or maybe it had to do with how well they fit together both sexually and in their personalities.

He stared at the ghost who had opened the paper again. He couldn't remember ever wanting someone as much as he wanted Caine. He couldn't remember ever having such spectacular sex. He was pretty sure it had nothing to do with the supernatural and everything to do with who he and Caine were. Their spirits meshed perfectly, and if life had been different, he could see them growing old together...

A warm hand clasped his where it lay on the granite table top. "I wish things were different, Jason," Caine's voice whispered, emotion deep and raw in the quiet tones. "But they aren't, so before I go, I need to know that you'll be okay, that you'll be happy. Please call the surrogate program."

Jason's throat tightened until he felt as if he couldn't breathe. "Okay," he croaked unsteadily. "I will. I promise."

Caine's hand tightened on his. "Thank you."

They spent the rest of the day lazing in the sun, swimming, and using the sauna and hot tub that were set into the side of the cliff just below the terrace. They grilled steaks and corn on the cob for dinner and watched the sun set. They hadn't had sex again, but the sexual tension between them rose to an almost unbearable level, and as soon as it grew dark, Jason decided he'd had enough of teetering on the edge of a hard-on for hours on end.

They sat in the media room, an old Alfred Hitchcock movie on, and Jason only knew what was happening onscreen because he'd seen the movie so often that he knew the dialog. His hand traced the swell of Caine's thigh muscle, marveling at the texture of his smooth skin. With his fingers, he teased the hem of Caine's shorts, brushing his fingers along the sensitive flesh of his inner thigh.

A hiss sounded and Jason smiled. Obviously, the movie no longer held Caine's attention. Through narrowed eyes, Jason saw Caine's cock swell beneath the khaki of his shorts.

"You aren't watching the movie," he murmured with a chuckle.

"Am t-too," Caine stuttered as Jason's fingers brushed his erection.

With a wide grin, Jason leaned over and licked the side of Caine's jaw. "Are not."

Caine went rigid in his chair. Jason grinned openly. The ghost's cock now strained against the front of his shorts. Getting to his feet, Jason pushed Caine's feet off the ottoman in front of him and sat on it, between Caine's thighs. He leaned forward and unbuttoned his lover's shorts.

"Still say you're watching *Rear Window*?" he teased, knowing that Caine's eyes were riveted on him and not the movie.

"Jason." The name emerged from Caine's mouth on a groan that made his lover chuckle.

"I thought not."

Jason's mouth enveloped Caine's stiff cock. He licked and sucked the length, letting the salty taste roll over his tongue and fire his own arousal. He loved sucking Caine. The man made such loud, appreciative noises that it drove Jason into a frenzy of lust.

He lifted his head and stared into Caine's dazed eyes. "Here or the bedroom?" he asked abruptly. Personally, Jason didn't think he could make it two feet, let alone all the way to the bedroom without just knocking Caine to the floor and taking him.

Caine frowned as he tried to concentrate on the question. "I... I..."

"Aww, fuckit," Jason muttered and grabbed Caine by the hands, yanking him to the floor. He sprawled atop the ghost,

his mouth a hair's breadth from Caine's. "Here," he decided. "Later, the bedroom."

His mouth caught Caine's in a deep kiss. The big body beneath his trembled with desire, and their kisses grew more passionate. Jason gave in to it and let it sweep away all his rational thought. Already he felt an attachment to the ghost, but he couldn't think about it. Not when the passion between them burned so hot and urgent. Questions about the future loomed in the back of his mind, but he pushed away the logical man inside him and let the hedonist take over as Caine's fingers sank into his hair with a guttural sigh of pleasure.

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## Chapter Six

"So you can't travel with me, but wherever I go, you can just appear?" Jason's brow wrinkled thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I'm not sure who made the rules, and they seemed kinda weird, but it is what it is." Caine shrugged. "I can't go for a drive with you."

After a week of living with Caine, Jason couldn't imagine being without him. Now, he needed to go to the market, but Caine couldn't go. The stumbling block tweaked him and at the same time it forcibly reminded him that Caine was not alive.

"It's no big deal. I was just going to the market," he said off-handedly, trying not to seem disappointed as he checked the shelves of the refrigerator and made his list.

"I can hear your thoughts, remember. I know it bothers you. Bothers me too, but we can't change it." Caine's deep voice was carefully neutral, but Jason still heard the note of sadness in it.

"So while I'm gone, can you still hear my thoughts?" Jason wondered out loud.

Caine sighed, but a little smile quirked up the corners of his mouth. "Not really. Apparently, I have to be with you to have a connection with you. When you went for that walk in the rain the other day, I couldn't hear a single thought of yours."

"How odd." Jason thought the whole condition of being a ghost seemed pretty freaky, but he cared about Caine and

loved being with him, so he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth and maybe lose it. Memories of their first night together—the scene in the bathroom when Caine had been about to leave—flooded Jason's thoughts, and an ache began in the center of his chest.

Caine coughed softly and Jason looked up. The ghost's expression was solemn. "I won't be here forever, Jason. I'll have to go soon," he admitted quietly. "I don't want to. I want to be with you, but deep inside I can sense that my time here is limited."

Fear iced Jason's veins. "I don't understand. Why would you be allowed to come here and be with me, if they were just going to make you leave?" The fierce question expressed Jason's fears and his desire to know why Caine had been allowed to be with him in the first place.

"I don't know. I don't understand all of these ghost conditions, Jason. I just know that I couldn't go where I was supposed to go. I couldn't leave you behind, disillusioned with life, love, and people." Caine's expression grew pleading. "I needed to make you see that you have value and worth, that your judgment is sound, that all the things that went wrong in your life are just a drop in the bucket and are now done. You have a lot of years before you and you shouldn't waste them. You can believe in love, in people, and in yourself."

Jason stared at Caine. The urgency in his voice as he spoke told Jason that he believed this wholeheartedly. All his life, Jason had believed people were users. Using each other to get what they wanted. Sometimes it was uncaring and

sometimes it was bartering, but to him, life was still just about people using each other.

"No, Jason. Life is about love. Without that emotion we are all just robots going through the motions." The solemn expression in Caine's blue eyes pinned his lover.

"Everyone pays lip service to those words. No one means them anymore." Jason turned away. He couldn't bear to see the reproach he knew would show up in Caine's eyes. And he knew the emotion would be there. Caine believed in love. Jason had proof of that with every moment he spent with him. The man just exuded love.

"You go on to the market. I'm going to go for a swim, a soak in the hot tub, and then the sauna."

Caine walked off without looking back, and Jason watched his stiff back cross the courtyard to the bedroom slider. He walked through the glass and disappeared into the bedroom. It took Jason a moment to realize that Caine hadn't opened the door but had gone through it, his form briefly fading as he stepped through. The reminder that Caine wasn't alive struck him anew. Coupled with their conversation about Caine's time there being limited, Jason felt a stab of loss. Mostly, he didn't think about Caine being dead because the notion that he would just disappear one day filled Jason with dread.

Staring at the glass slider, he took a step toward it, intending to follow Caine. Then he stopped. Running after Caine and coaxing him into bed wouldn't fix anything or get the groceries. With a sigh, Jason picked up his list and headed out to his car.

As he drove, he pondered Caine's words. At one time, Jason expected that someday, someone would speak words of love to him and truly mean them without wanting something from him. When each person that passed through his life was revealed as an opportunist, Jason lost faith. In the space of a week with Caine, Jason had begun to question why he insisted on clinging to his cynical views when just the fact of being with Caine negated them. Clearly, Caine's very presence in his life meant something. Fear swirled within Jason as he wondered if Caine would be taken from him before that meaning was revealed.

That night after dinner, they swam in the moonlit pool. Jason loved the silky feel of the water on his skin and the way his limbs kept brushing against Caine's. They were both strong swimmers but Jason knew that Caine could out-swim him. After all, the man had been a professional surfer. That reminded him of Caine's insistence that he learn to surf. As a child he'd had the sheets with the palm trees and surfers and his dream had been to learn to surf. Caine had encouraged him to take lessons.

Jason had protested that he was too old to learn to surf but Caine kept insisting he wasn't. He explained about the classes he taught at the surf shop and how older men and women came in all the time to learn. Jason kept thinking that if Caine had still been alive, he wouldn't mind going to the surfing class. He would have loved having Caine teach him. Since Caine's death, however, a young man Caine had taught—a friend of his daughter Erin—had taken over.



Despite Caine's assurances that Ben was a good teacher, to Jason it just didn't seem like a doable thing.

"Promise you'll go, Jason. You promised me you'd look into the surrogate program and I want you to promise me you'll sign up for the surfing class." Caine's voice held a stern note and Jason looked up at him in surprise.

"Why is this so important to you?" he asked, swimming over to Caine.

Brilliant blue eyes held his in the dim light of the pool. "Because I don't want to see you fall back into your old way of thinking. I need to know that you'll be happy."

"Caine, just because I don't learn to surf or impregnate a surrogate doesn't mean I won't be happy," Jason said quietly, hating how the subject of Caine leaving kept coming up.

The ghost's jaw clenched. "If you keep thinking the way you were when you arrived here, you won't be happy," he insisted.

Jason shook his head, droplets of water flying from the wet strands of his hair. "I rather think that being with you has impacted my future, Caine. There are some things I will never look at the same way again," he said with a lift of his brows. "Don't you believe me?"

Caine swam over to him. "I do. But how much do you believe, Jason? In people, in love, in your judgment? How much do you trust?"

With a sigh, Jason reached out and pulled Caine against him, their legs tangling in the water. "I don't know, Caine," he admitted.

Instead of pressing the issue, Caine kissed him. Jason felt the wet rasp of his tongue and opened his mouth. Their tongues tangled and heat burned its way through Jason's veins. The brush of Caine's thick arousal against his thigh told him his lover was ready to go. As ready as Jason. He ached for Caine. Usually their nights were a repeat of the first one, and as much as Jason enjoyed Caine sucking him, and as much as he got off on fucking Caine... he wanted more now.

"Time to go inside. I have plans for you," he said against Caine's lips.

They showered together, soaping each other's bodies. Jason loved the feel of Caine's hard muscles beneath his fingertips. The man had a body to die for even at the age of forty-three. And despite the fact that he was dead. Always at the point of Caine's orgasm, he lost some of his corporeal form. Jason had grown used to that momentary sense that the flesh he touched dissolved into nothing. Yet whenever he thought about it, and thought about Caine being dead, he had to touch the man. That's when he reveled in the sensation of Caine's warm skin beneath his fingers, his hard body pressed tight to Jason's own. Fear lingered like a shadow at the outer edges of his peripheral vision. The more he tried to ignore it, the more its presence irritated him.

They dried off and stretched out on the king-sized bed, kissing and touching. Their caresses were softer and sweeter than on previous nights and Jason felt Caine's love pouring from him. Setting aside his fears, Jason concentrated on his lover.

Caine seemed eager to lick Jason from one end of his body to the other, but it didn't quite fit in with Jason's plans. He pushed Caine back onto the pillows and took his cock into his mouth. Caine's hands fisted in Jason's hair. Using the flat of his tongue, Jason pressed all along the underside of Caine's cock. Then he swirled the pointed tip all around and down the hard flesh.

Beneath Jason's hands, Caine writhed uncontrollably. Jason bit back a grin and kept up the teasing strokes of his tongue on Caine's cock. He stopped periodically to deep throat him, letting the muscles of his throat massage the head as his tongue swirled and his mouth applied suction. Caine's moans grew louder, and when Jason knew his lover wouldn't last much longer, he stopped.

Sitting up, he smiled down at Caine. Dazed blue eyes stared up at him, slightly unfocused and a little confused. Jason brushed back the shaggy golden hair.

"Caine, I want you to fuck me."

The ghost's eyes widened. Thus far, Jason had been the one doing all the fucking and Caine had apparently loved it. Now, Jason wanted something more from his lover. He wanted Caine to know that he cared about him, that he trusted him.

Jason got up and opened the nightstand drawer. He returned with the lube. Holding it out to Caine, he said, "How do you want me?"

Caine swallowed hard and took the bottle, sitting up. "Facing me, so I can hold you in my arms, so it can be the

same as when you fuck me," he whispered, seemingly awed by Jason's request.

Catching Caine's chin in his hand, Jason drew his face close and kissed him, rubbing his tongue alongside his lover's. A shudder went through Caine. He opened his eyes as Jason pulled away. With a smile, Jason flopped back on the bed.

"C'mere," he murmured, holding out a hand to Caine.

In a flash, Caine was in his arms, rubbing himself on Jason, kissing him urgently, nipping his throat. Jason reveled in the sensations rushing through his body. Caine worshipped every inch of him with hands and lips and tongue. Finally, Caine opened the lube and coated his cock thickly with it, making sure that his fingers were smeared with the slippery stuff.

Jason planted his feet on the mattress and spread his thighs. Caine's eyes glittered darkly as he stroked his wet fingers along Jason's crease. The brush of Caine's fingers against Jason's puckered anus sent electricity shooting through his body. He shook with lust, already almost to the point of begging to have Caine finger fuck him.

When the ghost sank a finger into him, Jason's hips bucked. Intense pleasure ripped through him and Jason didn't think he could stand it. Instantly, he yearned to have Caine inside him.

"Now. Just fuck me, Caine. I want you to. I need you," he begged hoarsely, waiting for that first burning press of hard flesh.

Caine's body covered him, the hard muscles and planes pressed up against him. Jason's focus narrowed to the

relentless press of Caine's cock, first past the tightness of his sphincter muscles, and then filling him with all of his heated length. Jason's ass burned, in part because Caine had to be the biggest man he'd ever been with, and also because the feel of Caine inside him totally set his nerve endings alight.

Shock glazed Caine's blue eyes as he stared down at Jason. "Oh, god. I'm inside you."

His amazed whisper brought a smile to Jason's lips. "Oh, you are, baby. You really are."

"I've done this before, b-but it's never felt this good," Caine groaned as his hips began to ease back. He thrust in again and closed his eyes, an expression of bliss settling on his handsome face.

Caine's utter enjoyment at being inside the younger man had Jason's heart soaring. His skin seemed ultra sensitive to Caine's every touch. The hard body pinning him to the bed sent waves of lust roaring through him. Caine's scent and the sexy little sounds he made as he worked his cock in Jason's ass excited him beyond anything he could remember feeling before. Each friction-filled glide of that thick erection inside him hit every erogenous zone Jason had. Caine's hard abs rubbed Jason's cock with every thrust, and the rhythmic motion pushed his arousal over the top.

He existed in a world that contained nothing more than Caine. The heat and fullness of Caine's cock in his ass, every weighted thrust milking his prostate and making his eyes roll back in pleasure. When Caine kissed him, his tongue thrusting in the same rhythm as his hips, Jason wanted to scream in delight. Never had he been fucked so well. The

eroticism of the moment from the urgent movement of Caine's hips, to the damp lingering kisses they shared, to the slap of hard flesh, and the incredible scent of sex that permeated the room—all combined to make their union transcend anything that had gone before.

Caine stared deep into Jason's eyes, his hand slipping between their bodies to stroke Jason's cock. "Together. I want us to come together," he whispered.

Jason just nodded. Already, he struggled to hold back his orgasm. Every pass of Caine's cock against his prostate had more pre-cum leaking from the end of his penis until it covered Caine's hand and puddled on his belly. He wanted to come. He wanted Caine to make him come. Shivering, he put his arms around Caine and nuzzled his ear. "You're so fucking hot with your big cock in my ass," he whispered, loving the crude words and the affect they had on Caine.

With a cry, the ghost shuddered, his fingers clamping down on Jason's cock with an urgent twisting motion. Jason felt the first of Caine's spasms in his ass as his lover came. Just the thought of all that creamy cum being jetted into his ass set him off. Fiercely, he kissed Caine as his cock jerked and began squirting hot splashes of cum on them both.

"Oh, Jason! I love you!" Caine cried out as he broke the kiss and buried his face in the crook of Jason's neck.

Jason held him lovingly, stroking his body, loving the golden skin and hard athlete's physique. "I swear you were made for me, Caine," he whispered, feeling incredibly high despite how hard he'd just come.

"I was, Jason. Just for you. Only for you."

Jason caressed his lover and silently pondered Caine's words. If he was honest with himself, he'd admit that he felt the same. But at that moment, he didn't really care about anything except how comfortable and right it felt to hold Caine in his arms.

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## Chapter Seven

Jason glanced at the calendar and realized nearly two weeks had passed since he'd come home to Cypress House. He'd spent a dozen days relaxing in the sun, swimming, eating healthy, and having a lot of sex with Caine. Sex in the sauna, the hot tub, the pool, the shower... and on the couch, the carpet, the counter, the bed, and the ground. They couldn't keep their hands off of each other.

Caine made him relax. Not by doing anything specific, but just by being Caine. The man got things done, but didn't have a driven attitude like Jason. He seemed to have gotten some of the Zen-ness of his ex-wife.

"How can you run such a big company with that lackadaisical attitude?" Jason asked one afternoon as they sat watching the storm clouds roll in from the ocean.

Caine shrugged and sipped his wine. "I let Phil do the hard work. And Erin's working on her MBA. She and her Uncle Phil are the hardnosed ones in the company. I just smile and show up to sign the checks," he joked.

"Somehow I don't believe that." Jason rubbed a hand down Caine's bare thigh below his shorts. "So who's Phil?"

With a grin, Caine caught Jason's wandering hand and threaded their fingers together. "My best friend, accountant, and Erin's unofficial godfather. Back when I opened the surf shop, Phil was in the first surf class I ever taught. He sucked. Still does. But show him a balance sheet and woow weeee!"



Caine shook his head in a disbelieving manner. "I'm not sure how it happened but we started hanging out together. When I took him home, Erin totally latched onto him. Her whole life, Erin's wanted to be like Phil. I left everything to them. Even if Tiffany hadn't died, she would have gotten nothing. I signed it all over to Phil in trust for Erin on her eighteenth birthday."

"They don't let felons benefit from their crimes anyway, Caine." Jason grinned and tickled Caine's palm with his fingers. Today, he felt very much alive to Jason. He hadn't walked through any doors or walls in days.

Caine sighed. "It's probably better this way for everyone. She woulda gotten off if she hadn't run. She woulda batted her long lashes and boo-hooed to the jury about how everything was my fault." Caine finished his wine and set the glass on the coffee table. He relaxed against the back of the couch, his head practically on Jason's shoulder. "She woulda made a big case for how my actions caused her mental anguish. She woulda told them I fucked with her head and her self-esteem. Can you imagine what woulda happened in the courtroom when she dropped the bombshell that she shot me because of Jason Rockham?"

"What did you say?" An ice-cold hand seemed to grip Jason by the heart.

Caine went very still. When he looked up, his eyes were clouded, and he appeared as if he wanted to squirm or look anywhere but directly at Jason. His discomfort was palpable, yet he held Jason's gaze steadily.

"I said my wife shot me because of you," he repeated slowly, almost reluctantly.

"What the hell did I have to do with it?" Obviously, Caine hadn't told him everything about his death. Despite the fact that Caine was dead and nothing could change that, Jason wanted—needed—to know how he figured into Caine's murder.

"I bought a telescope. From my house I could see yours. Portions of a couple of rooms and all of your deck," Caine whispered, his face pinkening a little across the tops of his cheekbones.

"My deck?"

For a moment, confusion clouded Jason's brain. How the hell did seeing his deck through a telescope matter? Then realization dawned. He hadn't always been very circumspect on his deck. He often walked around out there naked, and once he and Chris had... Jason sucked in a sharp breath.

Caine's expression turned tentative, his eyes filled with uncertainty. "I saw you with someone on your deck," he admitted softly. "I was home alone. I imagined it was me with you. I...I became aroused." Caine's gaze dropped from Jason's. "I was masturbating. Tiffany walked in on me and wanted to know what was going on."

Stiffly, Caine rose and crossed the room to the big plate-glass window. He leaned his forehead on the glass, his posture slumped and defeated. "I told her I was in love with you. She really didn't take it very well that I'd rather be with a man who didn't know I existed rather than with her. She left the room, and I pulled up my pants and was headed for

the bathroom when she came back into the bedroom with my handgun."

Raising his head, Caine's eyes sought Jason's. "She never said a word, and I didn't have a chance to. She just pulled the trigger."

At first, shock held Jason immobile, his brain completely on hold. Then outrage rushed in. Caine had spied on him. He'd stalked him! Watching his every move from a telescope! Finally, his sense of outrage turned to an all-encompassing fury. Not only had Caine stalked him, he'd been getting off on seeing Jason naked, seeing him with his sexual partner. What he'd done was creepy. Freaky. More than a little stalkerish and definitely an invasion of privacy.

"I can't believe you. Did you ever stop to think that what you were doing was just a little bit illegal, Caine? That it was the act of a stalker?" he said in a low growl, his anger bursting free. "What were you thinking?"

Jason turned away from Caine, pacing across the room and running his hands through his hair as he tried to process everything he'd been told. He spun around, striding over to Caine's side. His lover raised his head, eyes dark with pain.

A disgusted sound escaped Jason. "Those were not the actions of a man in love with me, Caine. Those were the actions of an obsessed man. You used me to get off because your wife didn't do it for you anymore! That's it, isn't it?" Jason practically yelled in Caine's face.

The ghost flinched and his form wavered, shimmering like a mirage. "I'm sorry, Jason," he rasped painfully, his voice hoarse.

It didn't occur to Jason that there was something very profound about the fact that Caine didn't make any excuses for his behavior. His expression held a mixture of shame, embarrassment, pain, and fear.

"That's all you have to say for yourself? You're sorry?" Jason's legs carried him back to the doorway. "I don't know how to deal with this. I'm going out. Don't be here when I get back. I need to think," he said grimly.

Glancing back at Caine, he caught a glimpse of stark terror in the ghost's eyes. Then his form shimmered again, almost completely dissolving before returning to form. "Please don't send me away, Jason. Please. I love you," he whispered, his tone agonized.

Jason shook his head and glared at his lover. "Don't say those words to me. You don't know the meaning of them. You're obsessed is what you are and everything you've said to me in the past week has been fucking lip service," he snarled, more angry and betrayed than he'd ever been over Lainey. The thought of Caine spying on him, watching him walk around naked, watching him with Chris, getting off on it... Jason's stomach turned.

"Get out of here and don't come back! You're not what I thought you were and I don't ever want to see you again!"

With a sound of disgust, Jason spun away and left the room, grabbing his car keys from the table near the front door. He drove for hours. Down to Big Sur and back. From Carmel Mission all along the beach into Pacific Grove. He drove the length of 17 Mile Drive twice. His mind tried to process what Caine had told him. He tried to understand the

man's motivation. He just couldn't. Finally, as the clock ticked over to midnight, it began to rain and Jason drove slowly toward home.

The wipers swished, the rhythm hypnotic. In his head, Jason heard Caine's voice telling him how much he loved him. His heart turned over in his chest. The emotion he'd felt had not been a lie. Caine did love him. Jason's anger drained away and he pressed the gas pedal, in a hurry to get home to Caine, to tell him he was wrong.

Bursting into the house, Jason yelled for his lover. "Caine!" When he didn't get a reply, he ran from room to room looking for him, but the house was empty. In the master suite, on Jason's pillow, lay a note.

With shaking hands, Jason picked it up.

*Jason,*

*Apologizing yet again for my inexcusable behavior would be just as wrong as watching you was. There are no words to make up for what I've done. I suppose dying should cover the debt though. Since you do not want to see me again, I've gone where I should have gone before. Where I belong now*

*I don't belong in this world any longer and I was wrong to try to stay. I just could not pass up the opportunity to know you and be with you. You are everything I imagined you to be. Intelligent and caring, funny, and so incredibly beautiful inside and out. Never let anyone tell you differently. You have more value than you know. You just need to believe, Jason. Believe in yourself, believe in fate, and believe in love. It's there all around you and within you.*

*You can do anything you set your heart on, whether it's raising a child on your own or learning to surf. You believed in me even though I didn't deserve it. Thank you for making my days here worthwhile and for giving me a taste of heaven. I won't tell you to have a great life because I know you will.*

*Yours always,*

*Caine*

The paper fell from Jason's numb fingers as pain spread throughout his body. At first he didn't hear his phone ringing because his mind had gone blank with sheer agony. Caine was gone. Really gone. Caine had asked him how much he trusted. Jason had turned right around and proved that he didn't trust at all. Jason hadn't trusted or believed in Caine. He'd sent him away...

Sinking down on the side of the bed, Jason dropped his head in his hands. He'd been a monumental fool. His temper had gotten the best of him and he'd said things he shouldn't have. His stomach heaved. Caine was gone. God, what had he done?

The shrill, insistent ringing of his cell phone finally got his attention and he answered it absently. His mind tried to focus so he could figure out a way to get Caine back.

"Hello?"

"Is this Jason Rockham? Of Malibu?" A crisp, female voice crackled in his ear and he winced.

"This is Jason Rockham," he mumbled.

"Mr. Rockham, this is Cheryl King. I'm a social worker at Malibu Community Hospital. A man was brought here tonight severely injured in what the police feel was a gay bashing. He

has no ID on him, but the police found a painting lying on the ground near him and your business card in the frame."

Jason blinked. They'd found his painting? Could the man who was injured be Chris? "Is the man blond? About six feet tall, 175 pounds? Twenty-eight years old?" he asked, his heart pounding.

"That does sound like him, Mr. Rockham," the social worker said. "He's in very bad shape, and we wondered if perhaps you knew his name or his family?"

"Chris Matthews," Jason replied automatically. He ran a hand through his hair. He didn't need this right now when he was reeling from Caine's departure. "I think it might be Chris. I'd have to see him, I guess, to be sure."

"I understand. Do you think you could come down to the hospital, Mr. Rockham?"

The social worker sounded detached but insistent. Jason figured they probably wanted to know who to bill.

"I'm up in Pebble Beach right now. I can be there some time tomorrow. Tell me who I need to ask for," he told her, his brain seeming to work on auto-pilot.

"Just ask for me. I'll take you to see him."

Jason drew a shaky breath. "How bad is he?"

The social worker let out a little sigh. "Not good. He's been badly beaten. There are broken bones and internal injuries. A punctured lung and spleen. He's lost a lot of blood and the head injury... well, that doesn't look good either. He's on a respirator."

Shock reverberated through Jason. "Will he make it until I get there?" he asked.

For a moment the social worker didn't speak. Then she said quietly, "I don't know."

The drive back to Malibu took all night. Jason hadn't wanted to leave Cypress House because he thought for sure if he called Caine back, he would come. Yet, he'd stood on the cliff path below the house, in front of the sauna, and screamed Caine's name to the elements and nothing had happened. All Jason had left of his lover was the note and a few peach muffins in a ziplock bag on the counter.

He'd bundled the note and his sheet with the palm trees and surfers into his suitcase, grabbed the muffins, and headed south. All the way back to Malibu he thought of his days with Caine. Every moment, every glance and touch were recalled with a vivid clarity that made Jason want to cry out in pain.

Arriving at his beach house seemed anti-climatic. He could find no pleasure in the house he'd once adored. After a brief, restless nap, he headed up to the hospital where Cheryl King ushered him into an intensive care unit room. Lying on the bed, swathed in bandages, covered in bruises, hooked up to every machine imaginable, lay Chris. Jason swallowed hard. He might not like the guy but he sure as hell hadn't wished this on him.

"I gather you do recognize him," the social worker said. Jason nodded and she handed him his painting. "This must be yours then."

Taking the painting absently, he stared at Chris, wondering if the guy would die right in front of him. He seemed that fragile.



"Do you think you could tell me as much as you know about him so I can have the police locate some family?" she asked quietly.

Jason nodded again and told her what little he knew. He had a feeling what Chris had told him wasn't the truth, so he doubted the police would find any family. As the social worker turned to leave, Jason stopped her.

"Do you think I could just sit here and watch him? I mean, he doesn't have any family here and... and..." He broke off, unable to even explain to himself why he needed to sit with Chris.

She nodded. "That's fine. I'll let the nurses know. Thank you for your help, Mr. Rockham."

After she left, Jason sat down on the hard, bedside chair. He stayed there all afternoon in a daze. Night fell, but Jason ignored the numbness of his ass. He'd never been good at waiting, and hospitals creeped him out. Yet there he sat at Chris's bedside, his painting propped against the wall. Machines beeped, hummed, and whooshed, all working hard to keep the little bastard alive. He could have walked out of there with his painting and never thought of his ex-lover again, but something held him back.

He sat staring at Chris's near lifeless body, his mind consumed with how he'd left things between himself and Caine. He'd felt betrayed, and his anger had sprung from that, but he knew he'd been more than irrational about Caine's confession. After all, what did it matter if Caine had been watching him from his telescope like a moonstruck calf?

Alive or dead, Caine had never done anything to hurt him. All he'd wanted was to love Jason.

Shifting uncomfortably in the chair as his thoughts turned painful, Jason recalled how Caine had tried to bolster his confidence and enrich his life by encouraging him to do things he was afraid to do. Learn to surf? Have a baby with a surrogate? No way would Jason have ever contemplated doing either of those things if it hadn't been for Caine.

Pain squeezed his chest like a giant invisible hand. He'd sent Caine away. Sent away the only person with whom he had ever truly felt comfortable. Caine wasn't alive, but he was worth more to Jason than all the breathing people in his life. He'd been everything Jason had ever wanted in a lover and a friend. In a short span of days, Caine had shown Jason what it was like to have a real partner, one who loved you and put your needs first.

Shame replaced Jason's pain. He'd acted like an ass. Behaved unforgivably. Now, he sat in a hospital waiting for the death of a man who'd stolen money, a painting, and self-esteem from him when he should be home telling Caine how much he loved him. Except that Caine was gone.

Jason acknowledged to himself that what he felt for Caine was love. In fact, now that he was being honest with himself, what he felt for Caine far surpassed what he'd felt for every lover in his past combined, including his ex-wife. Caine completed him. And Jason had sent him away.

Despite all the emotions that had been raging within him for hours, each seeking top billing, fear eclipsed them all. If

you banished a ghost, did it stay gone? The thought that he would never see Caine again churned inside him.

Resting his head against the wall, Jason closed his burning eyes. Tears stung behind the lids. He'd had a chance, an opportunity, and wasted it. Not lost it. Wasted it. He knew damned well he'd pissed away the first good, true, real thing in his life. Now, he was left with nothing.

"Damn it, Caine. I know it's wrong of me, so incredibly bad. Worse than what I said to you, did to you, but I would rather have you alive than him," he muttered, feeling horrible for even thinking such a thing.

But it was true. Chris had never done anything but take from others. Caine had only ever given. One was dead and the other wasn't, although his life hung by a thread. One deserved to be dead and the other didn't, not when he had so much left to give.

The raw injustices of life excoriated Jason. Even though he didn't deserve Caine, he prayed with all his might for his lover's return. And as awful as it was of him to do so, he could not shake off the sense that it was Chris who should have died rather than Caine. Inside, Jason wept for all that Caine had lost, and by extension what he'd lost.

"I'm sorry, Caine. I'm so sorry. I promise you I will do everything you told me to do," he whispered as a pair of tears crept out from beneath his lids and tracked down his cheeks. "I'll learn to surf. I believe you. I'm not too old. A- and I'll go to the s-surrogate agency. I'll do whatever it takes to have a child. The child that should have been ours."

As the long minutes dragged past, turning into hours, Jason sat in the chair and prayed to God and Fate and whoever else had a higher power that would listen. Just before dawn an alarm went off in the room. Jason's eyes flew open. The monitor above Chris' bed showed no heartbeat. Shocked, he ran to the side of the bed and grabbed his ex-lover's cold, limp hand.

"Wake up! Wake up! You can't die!" he yelled. Despite his earlier thoughts about how Chris should be dead and Caine alive, he didn't want another person to die.

The doctors and nurses rushed in with the crash cart, shoving him back. "You have to save him! You have to!" Jason cried out frantically.

One of the nurses pushed him toward a chair. "You have to stay back, Mr. Rockham. Please. Let us work."

Jason sank into the chair, a feeling of helplessness enveloping him. Caine was gone. He knew it. Now, Chris would die too. He stared at the flat line and tears sprang to his eyes once more.

*Caine, Caine, he thought. Where are you? Don't leave me. Please, just don't leave me. I'll do anything*

Something brushed his cheek like the stroke of fingertips over his skin from temple to jaw. The sensation filled Jason with an agony of yearning for his lost love. On the bed, the medical team attached paddles to Chris's chest. Someone yelled, "Clear!" A sound like a gunshot blast caused Jason to jump, frightened and panicked. He couldn't breathe, couldn't swallow. His eyes watched the monitor, unable to look away,

his lips trembled but still he whispered, "Please, please, please..."

"Again!" One of the doctors yelled.

"Clear!"

Another loud bang sounded, gunshot loud in Jason's ears. He looked around to see if anyone else had heard the sound but all he saw were nurses and doctors busy working on Chris and apparently oblivious to the deafening report. He watched the monitor. No blip. The team began to put away their things, and Jason realized they had given up.

"No! No, you can't give up! No!" he cried out, jumping up from his chair.

He didn't know what drove him to feel so frantic over Chris's death. He almost hated the guy. Yet, he couldn't bear for him to die. With the loss of Caine so fresh within him, Jason's pain overwhelmed him. It might have been Caine who died right before him, not Chris.

A nurse grasped his arms, trying to ease him toward the door. "Mr. Rockham, you need to calm yourself. There is nothing more to do. You need to let him go," she said soothingly.

Tears poured down Jason's face. "No! No, I can't let him go. You don't understand. Caine! Oh, God, no. Caine!" he moaned.

The nurse stared at him, puzzled by the unfamiliar name, but then they both started as the heart monitor let out a loud "Bleep!"

"Jesus God!" she muttered and rushed back to the bed.

Love Me Dead  
by AM Riley

Jason stared, wide eyed, tears streaking his face as the monitor began to record the steady beats of Chris's heart. Fumbling to his chair, he sank into it, clutching the arms, unable to look away from the monitor.

Inside, his heart broke. *Oh, Caine. I love you.*

A fresh wave of tears overtook him as he watched the monitor and sobbed.

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## Chapter Eight

Twenty-four hours later, after going home for a shower and a nap, Jason returned to the hospital. Holding his cup of fresh-brewed Italian Roast and a packet of papers, he eased into the chair at Chris's bedside. The nurses had told him Chris was still unconscious, but much improved and breathing on his own. They anticipated him waking at any time.

Jason didn't know what to say to the guy. They'd parted on obviously bad terms, but after everything he'd been through, Jason just didn't have it in him to wish Chris any harm. Mourning Caine took up all his emotional energy.

He had nearly finished his coffee and was perusing the paperwork he'd brought from the surrogate agency when a movement caught his eye. Setting aside his paper and drink, he got up and went to the side of the bed, gazing down at Chris. His former lover's eye sockets were sunk deep in his head, and he looked much older than his 28 years. Jason frowned as he studied the man's face. In fact, he looked a lot like Caine. Funny, he'd never realized that Chris looked very much like Caine had some fifteen years before.

Chris's eyes opened and Jason's breath caught in his throat. Blue eyes stared back at him. Frantically, Jason searched his memory. He could swear that Chris had brown eyes. He'd even made the remark once, teasingly, that Chris was so full of shit his eyes had turned brown.

A hand grasped his, the grip sure and warm. "Jason."

He blinked. Chris's voice was deeper than he remembered. Deep, like the smooth, dark tone of a jazz singer. Swallowing hard, his body beginning to tremble with fear and a strange tingle of hope, Jason squeezed the hand that held his.

Chris smiled and Jason stopped breathing. There in his eyes... those incredible, beautiful, brilliant blue eyes... was love.

"Did you call the surrogate agency?"

The words were raspy, the voice slightly rough as if it hadn't been used in a long time, but Jason knew that voice. He knew the eyes. He knew the hand that gripped his as if it would never let go. Tears spilled over. Someone, something, had heard his prayer.

"I did. I have the papers right here," he whispered, his throat thick with tears. His heart ached as he tried to come to grips with what had happened. Taking the plunge, he spoke the name that hovered on his lips. "Caine..."

The man in the bed smiled again, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "I love you, Jason."

Bringing their clasped hands to his mouth, Jason kissed Caine's knuckles. "I love you too, Caine. You can't even believe how much I love you."

"Oh, I believe. That love called me back. I couldn't leave you. When Chris..." Caine glanced up at the heart monitor. "They gave me a chance, Jason. Because you loved me. Because I made a difference. And here I am."

Jason clung to Caine's hand. "You did make a difference. To others, but even more to me. I had given up. I didn't have



faith or trust or belief in love. You gave those all back to me, Caine. You gave me back my life."

"And now that I have a life once more, all I want is to be with you, Jason. I will make sure you never regret believing in love or giving your trust to someone," Caine vowed.

"I don't regret it. Even if you'd died, left me forever, I would have believed. I would never have loved anyone the way I love you, but I would have believed in the existence of the emotion because of you." Jason shook his head in wonder, tears filling his eyes. "You give of yourself, Caine. You give to others and never take, never ask for anything for yourself. If I follow your example, I will be a better person, someone who is more worthy of your love."

Caine's eyes blazed with emotion. "You are worthy now, Jason. In your heart you've always been. You're a good person. I could never love someone who wasn't."

A weight fell from Jason. Caine was right. His depression and disillusionment had dragged him into a dark, bleak world where nothing good ever happened and everyone had ulterior motives. He'd lived there a long time, not even remembering his own achievements and things that had previously given him joy, like playing with children or driving with his top down. It had taken Caine's arrival in his life to make him see what was in his own heart.

"Caine, I love you. You need to get better so you can come home and we can start our life together," he said hoarsely, love spilling from every word.

Caine grimaced. "Yeah, this body has taken a real beating. It's been so long since I had a broken bone, I'd forgotten how much they hurt," he replied, his lips curving into a grin.

Jason squeezed his hand tightly. "They need to knit properly; otherwise you'll get arthritis and not be able to chase after our kids."

A rusty laugh escaped Caine. "Our kids? You mean you want me to do this surrogate thing too?"

Jason nodded. "Both of us. If you want me to do it, you have to do it too." The thought of them having children, plural, sent happiness spiraling through him. He had resigned himself to no kids, and now he was committing to two.

A cloud passed over Caine's face. "I don't suppose you'd consider getting rid of the beach house, would you?"

The place he'd been with Chris. The place Caine had been spying on when Tiffany had killed him. Jason didn't have any objections to selling it, but he didn't want to move inland. He needed to be near the ocean.

"On one condition," he said. "I'll buy a yacht to replace it. We'll moor it nearby and live on it. Does that work for you?"

Caine sighed, a happy, joyous sound to Jason's ears. "It more than works."

"Good, because I'm not letting you go. And that means filing domestic partnership papers, adding you to my will and insurance, everything." His eyes met Caine's. "I'm not going to lose you again. I'm in it for the long haul, Caine. It's you and me and the happily ever after."

"Good. It woulda been a bad thing getting this hot new body only to have no one to fuck it," Caine teased.

Jason leaned over the bed, his lips hovering over Caine's. "I liked your forty-three-year-old body just fine. It was damned beautiful. This body will work though. Just you wait. You'll be healed soon, and when that happens..."

"You'll fuck the burglar?" Caine's blue eyes twinkled with laughter and happiness.

"No," Jason whispered. "I'll make love to the person who means more to me than anything living or dead in this universe and beyond." He lowered his lips to Caine's. "You gave me back my life, so it's only fitting that you get yours back as well. I will never let a day go by without showing you how much I love you. Death couldn't stop your love, and nothing will stop mine either."

The kiss began softly, reverently, filled with gratitude for second chances. As their love spilled over, the kiss grew in strength, swelling with emotion until tears fell from their eyes. And finally the heat came, promising erotic pleasures and lives filled with endless passion.

When Jason broke the kiss, Caine smiled up at him, radiating happiness. "I promise never to buy a telescope."

Jason brushed back his lover's golden hair. "I promise never to buy a gun."

"And no Maseratis," they said in unison and broke into laughter.

Staring at Caine's happy face, Jason pondered the mysteries of the universe for a moment. He remembered Caine telling him that his ex-wife Melanie was very Zen, that she believed everything happened for a reason. Jason had never *not* believed in ghosts and fate, but he'd never really

given them any thought either. Now, he wondered if perhaps there wasn't something to Mel's way of thinking. Certainly, some power had sent Caine to him as a ghost and given them both this second chance at love.

Jason held Caine's hand tightly as he fell asleep. He stared at the heart monitor where Caine's heartbeats were recorded. No one would believe what had really happened. Not that Jason cared. He grinned widely to himself. He had Caine and a future now. How it all had come about would be a story for their grandchildren. A ghost story.

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## Epilogue

### *4 Years Later*

The boat rocked gently beneath Jason's feet. Out on the water, Caine rode slowly past on a Sea-Doo, one arm wrapped tightly around a life-jacketed three-year-old boy, whose green eyes sparkled with excitement and joy.

"I'm glad my dad fell in love with you."

Jason turned to find Erin standing behind him, a fair-haired little girl asleep in her arms. Elizabeth Carruthers Rockham, known to her family as Lisa, had turned two that very day. Her brother Joshua Carruthers Rockham was the dark-haired little boy on the Sea-Doo with Caine. Since Caine inherited Chris Matthews's identity—at least in the legal sense—he'd changed his name to Christopher Caine Matthews. No one thought anything of the fact that Jason called him Caine. When it came time to name the children, they'd been in complete accord and anyone remarking on the Carruthers name was told that Jason and Caine had been fans and friends of Erin's late father.

Holding out his arms, Jason took Lisa from Caine's older daughter. Cuddling the baby to his chest, he breathed in her sweet scent of shampoo and birthday cake. "I am too," he said with a smile.

In the past four years, Jason had learned the true meaning of family. Caine had explained to Erin and Mel what had happened, and they took his revelation in stride. Jason wondered if their strong belief in spirits and the metaphysical

were part of what helped bring about Caine's rebirth. He sure as hell had a healthy respect for the power of belief now.

"Everything happens for a reason," Erin replied as if to Jason's thoughts.

Her smile reflected her father's, from the way her blue eyes crinkled at the corners to the way her lips turned up. Their daughter Lisa was just the same. Josh had turned out to be Jason's mini-me. Same dark, tumbled curls, same forest green eyes. Anyone looking at the family had no trouble discerning who had fathered any of the children.

Strangely, the slight resemblance Chris Matthews had had to a younger Caine Carruthers had shifted over the past few years until Jason could barely see anything of Chris in the body that Caine had taken over. Not that he cared. The physical representation of Caine didn't mean nearly as much to him as Caine's emotional presence. Jason relied on Caine every moment of every day. He was the boat and Caine was the rudder. Together, they could do anything, and had.

They had helped Erin run the surfboard business and surf shops. They had expanded Rockport into a series of restaurants all along the coast. Jason's brother Evan and his sons had gotten involved as well. Finally, a year ago they had merged all the businesses under a single umbrella, did a small IPO and raised enough money to actually open a small resort on Catalina Island that utilized every one of the businesses. Rockport Spa had quickly become a hit and was consistently booked six months in advance. Offering a spa setting, the luxury of Rockport cuisine, and the sports angle

from Caine Surfboards and Surf Shops, the hotel offered people of all ages a fun, relaxing stay.

Jason nuzzled the sleeping Lisa, but handed her over when her older sister reached for her. Erin walked to the rear of the yacht to meet Caine and Josh. Caine bent to kiss her cheek and that of the sleeping baby. Then she went below decks, Josh trailing behind her chattering away about the Sea-Doo.

Caine joined him at the rail, windblown, sun-bronzed, and grinning from ear to ear. Jason thought his partner had never looked so happy or so handsome. He brushed a lock of golden hair back from Caine's dancing blue eyes.

"That kid is gonna be the master of the seas," Caine said with a chuckle. "If it has to do with water, he wants to do it."

"Olympic gold medalist in 15 years, right?" Jason joked, stroking his hand down Caine's strong back.

"Mmmn." Caine caught Jason's mouth in a quick kiss. "I don't care what he wants to do. As long as he's happy, that's all that matters."

"Six years ago I would have said you were crazy to think that. Today, I know the true value of being happy." Jason hugged Caine, pulling him close. "You gave all of this to me, Caine. Without you, I would still be unhappy. Childless, driven, unable to believe in love. You saved me."

Caine kissed him softly, his lips curved in a smile even as their mouths touched. "It's all because you roused me. The beauty of your laugh made me fall in love with you. When I died, your emotions were so strong they called to me, roused me from my grave even though you didn't know me. I'd felt so close to you. Loved you so much even then," he

whispered, his hands stroking over Jason's arms. "I would do anything for you, Jason. I love you."

A deep sigh of satisfaction escaped Jason as they held each other tightly. "I love you too, Caine. Always."

The beat of Caine's heart against his was a miracle to Jason. One he savored and cherished every day from the moment the silent heart monitor in the hospital had let out it's loud "bleep!" telling everyone that the man on the bed was not dead. However it had happened, whatever it had taken, Jason thanked the universe daily for the man with whom he shared his life. Even on the darkest days, when storms blotted out the sun, making everyone around him cranky and depressed, all Jason needed to do to bring a ray of sunshine, warmth, and love to his heart... was rouse Caine.

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Love Me Dead  
*by AM Riley*

## **The Day They Closed The Iguana**

\* \* \* \*

AM Riley

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28 GWM N/S N/D LIKES THE GYM AND THE CLUBS, SEEKS  
SIMILARLY MINDED GWM TO HANG OUT OR WHATEVER BOX  
236

I drew the thick black edge of the bic pen around the ad. Read it again, then carefully deleted the encircling line with little x's. I could just imagine the perfect buff gym bunny taking one look at me, his face falling briefly in disappointment, then the game grin. *What-the-hell, good for a coupla laughs, right?*

Nope. You're wrong there, fella, I thought grimly. I'm not even good for that.

GWM, 48 YEARS YOUNG SEEKS TRAVELING COMPANION...

I didn't even finish the ad. I'd definitely aged beyond the companion stage.

32 GBM N/S N/D WATERSPORTS. SEEKS SIMILARLY  
MINDED GM.

I tapped my pen thoughtfully against the thin newsprint of the *LA Weekly*.

"You can't be serious." The disembodied voice rang through the empty theater, laden with amusement. I looked over. Seth was sitting on the stage, perched on one of those tall wooden stools frequently used in soliloquies or auditions. Arms folded. One lean leg bent to rest on a rung, the other solidly planted on the wooden floor of the stage. Work boots, faded tight jeans, his black silk shirt untucked. He tossed his hair. Seth was the only guy I ever knew who could toss his hair and still appear masculine. The strawberry colored curls shook dust motes out into the bright spotlight.

"I'm trying to open my mind," I said, tapping the pen half-heartedly.

Seth's lips curved just barely into a smile. He rested his arms against his chest, gazing at me across the room, and I could feel a world of thought in those dark blue eyes. Around him the dust motes settled, the spot seeming to jog just right of center as it cascaded over the lines of his body. That's the quality that Seth carried with him, of course. He displaced light. Like water or some other heavy element.

They call it charisma in the theater. Camera presence, our agent would have said. It gave moment to every motion he made, every expression. He could underplay drama and comedy and the audience just lapped it up.

"Stick to the basics, Bill," he advised now. "Don't try anything fancy."

"Easy for you to say." Seth could get any guy he wanted. Just snap his fingers, as the expression goes. Now, me, I was okay, but nothing you'd put on the front page of *People Magazine*, you know? And not getting any younger.

I pushed the *LA Weekly* personals aside and reached for my coffee. The sleeved paper cup was sticking to the envelope I had set it on. I peeled the envelope off and carefully placed it on the corner of the counter. It had been sitting there for so long, it had reached coaster status. And still I hadn't opened it. Didn't have to; I knew what was in it. Every storeowner in the surrounding three city blocks had received the same letter.

I saw Seth register the letter and his eyes flick away. He looked offstage, shifting position on the stool, unconsciously

creating a more dramatic pose. "Throw it away, Bill," he suggested.

I tossed my empty coffee cup toward the mound of trash in the bin and left the letter where it lay. "Need more coffee," I announced, standing.

He shrugged, looked offstage as if some hand was back there trying to get his attention.

When I came back from the shop, he was gone.

'Merle's Coffee Shoppe' was just two doors down from the entrance to the Iguana Theater. I frequented it partially because it was the unspoken policy of every shop owner in the area that we habituate each other's establishments. Like family.

But I actually preferred the place to the ubiquitous 'Starbucks' caddy-corner across the road. Merle's had that unintentionally mismatched shabbiness that earmarked the old coffee shops before chain marketing made it a 'look'. Tables of assorted heights and shapes shoved against each other to create larger groups where friends could spend hours over a few lattes. Dissing the latest releases. Bemoaning their own rotten luck and lack of appreciation. Drooling over the hot young bodies walking through the shop doors.

Merle was actually an older lady who moved out here in the sixties to get into the film business. She got into the coffee business instead. That's how it worked out for most of us. And now the city wanted to put some kind of tourist-trapping mall up here. Tear down all the little shops, including my theater. The offer price wasn't bad, though. And Mrs. Merle had told me she was sorely tempted to take it.

"Non-fat large latte with a cinnamon stick?" asked the pert, fresh-skinned boy behind the counter. His name was Tim; he'd been here less than a month and he'd memorized my drink. I looked him up and down with a professional eye.

"How are things, Tim?"

"Great, Mr. Miller!" He bounced and grins with teeth that should make his orthodontist proud. "I had an audition yesterday for a new Fox pilot. I think they really liked me."

"Huh," I said. "Did you get a callback?"

A little wince at the edge of those sky-blue eyes. In a few years those little wincings would add up into one big cynical grimace. "Nope, but it was close."

"I'm sure it was," I said, working hard to keep the sarcasm out of my tone.

"I just need exposure," said Tim. Oh oh. He had that look. Like a puppy sniffing out some treat. "I heard you're casting for a new play."

"Maybe," I shrugged. "It's all still talk. Nothing definite."

"Do you think there'd be something in it for me?"

*No!* I thought. Tim was a beauty, no doubt about it. That straw-colored hair and the expressive matching eyebrows. Skin as golden and delicious as a Twinkie fresh from the wrapper. Wet behind the ears and that counted for something out here. But he didn't have *it*. Not even an ounce of *it*. One of my few natural abilities was that I could just tell. Still, in a town devoted to the Film Industry, one didn't always have a lot of casting options for theater.

"Maybe," I said, sipping my coffee and avoiding his eyes.

He was cooing and simpering and I was about to gag on the saccharin when I noticed that guy over there again. The one that had been there every day this week. With the straw cowboy hat. Sitting over in that same spot by the window, morning light picking out his sharp profile as he studied the sports section of the newspaper, absently sipping at his coffee.

I'd caught him looking me over the first day. Hey, it still happens sometimes! But, of course, being me, I ran for the door instead of approaching him. But he was still there. And occasionally I caught his gaze drifting over to check me out.

"Who is that?" I asked Tim.

He shrugged. "Not industry. Don't think he's from around here. And what's with that hat...?"

I didn't hear the rest of it because I was wandering towards the table. Like my feet were heading there of their own volition. And let me tell you, that does not happen very often. Usually, I see a good-looking guy and my feet are running the other way.

Explains my lack of a sex life.

Now, you give me a script and put me in front of an audience, or even a little handheld beta cam, and I'm good. I know what to do and I'm confident I can do it. Maybe not as well as the next guy down the row, but I had got the moves pat and I could count on my body. My voice, my feet.

Put me in my own life and I was a little worried that I'd trip over nothing and pitch across the table. Spit when I spoke and babble nonsense. This time, I managed, miraculously, to

make it to the wall near Cowboy's table. Where I was able to lean, somewhat casually, pretending to look out the window.

He ruffled the paper and looked straight up at me. The look was very direct, not at all coy. But not aggressive or defensive either. *What do you want?* The look said in a friendly way.

I wracked my brain for conversation. "Er, how about those, uh..." I gestured like a geek at the sports pages in his hand. I couldn't for the life of me remember the name of any Los Angeles sports team. Fuck. I looked away and sipped my coffee in utter humiliation.

He set the paper down and laughed, loudly and un-self-consciously. "Don't blame you," he said. "Your LA teams are just a bunch of overpaid stars."

"Everybody's a star, here," I said by rote.

"Are you a star?"

How many times had I been asked that by breathless eager wannabes? Scanning my forgettable face, searching their memories for where they might have seen me. And of course the standard reaction was denial, then casually trotting out my appearances. The few odd high profile commercials. Supporting roles in several episodes of prime time TV series. Playing it down. Which automatically implied bigger things just percolating away out there on the horizon.

But Cowboy didn't look much interested in my resume. Though his eyes were cataloguing my modest 'assets.' Okay, so we were on the same page there.

"Sure," I said. "I'm just hanging out at Mel's incognito."  
That made him laugh.

"Are *you* a star?" I asked, only half joking. He had that look about him.

He grinned and shook his head. The tan crinkled around his eyes. "Only to my mamma."

I smiled. "You could be," I said. And I meant it. He had that indefinable something. I was fascinated by every move he made. The way he creased the newspaper with the flat side of his thumb. The way those green eyes flashed just slightly when he looked out the window and back at me. The thoughtful pauses between his words.

"That so?" He said, studying me.

"You're not an actor?"

"Nah, just here on business. Staying at the Holiday Inn down the street," he said in a drawl that brought to mind a five-room, one-story motel off the side of a highway. Not the twenty-story edifice of effete, moneyed snobbery standing in the center of the Sunset Strip.

"How is it there?" I asked, happy that this conversation seemed to be writing itself. A little dull, maybe, but...

"Lonely." And he looked directly into my eyes. "Damned. Lonely." And he extracted a card from his front shirt pocket, pressing it into my suddenly benumbed hand. Straightened his hat in an unhurried way. Stood. "Y'all should call me," he said, and with a nod he sauntered out of the shop. A perfect exit.

"I can't believe you're doing this," Seth was following me around the little apartment I kept above the theater offices. He really had to move to keep up with me, as I was slightly crazed.



I'd called the number on Cowboy's card. *Frank Connor* it said. He picked it up on the first ring. Asked my name. Invited me to dinner. It was so fast and easy. Like he'd just looped one of those ropes over my head with a quick flick of hands and wrist. I said yes.

"Not that shirt," Seth said, as I held the semi-sheer, white-fitted shirt up and posed in the mirror. I tossed the shirt to the side and gazed hopelessly at my wardrobe.

"It's a Diesel shirt," I said. "You told me to buy it."

"It makes you look too eager," he explained, and I gritted my teeth and snatched the shirt up again. "I am eager, Seth," I said. "I'm absolutely desperate."

"Fuck all," he said as I donned the too-tight cotton/poly garment.

"No, just me. Fuck. Me."

"I can't Billy," he said quietly. "You know that."

I stopped in the middle of buttoning the shirt. "I waited a long time for you, Seth."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

I nodded and occupied myself with the nice slacks I kept pressed and hanging in the closet for interviews and auditions.

"Billy," and he was serious now. "Think about this. What do you know about this guy?"

"He's hot," I said. "He seems to maybe like me. What else do I need to know?"

"I just think you should consider before you do anything rash."

"No, Seth." I shed my jeans and begin jerking on the slacks. "No more considering. The time has come for rash action." I purposely turned my back on him and checked my hair in the mirror.

And he was gone just like that. Not even a wisp of smoke to indicate that he'd left.

"I was real glad to hear from you," said Frank. "Didn't fancy eating dinner alone."

We were in some restaurant I was sure I'd never noticed before. The kind of place that just flies in under the *LA Times* food critic's radar. A steak-and-potato-type place buried in the old downtown business district. Tall, wide leatherette booths. Low light. There were no stars' portraits by Hirschfield or signed headshots on the walls. No star-sighting tourists gaping from the other tables. Just the quiet clink of glasses and utensils.

Our waiter, who had been smitten with Frank since he walked through the door, tipped his hat and called him 'darlin', approached the table for the hundredth time. "Is everything to your liking?"

"Everything's just perfect," said Frank, giving him a wide, easy smile.

I swear the waiter almost curtsied. "Just call if you need anything else, sir," he simpered. I rolled my eyes.

"You don't like him," said Frank, after the waiter was out of earshot. He sounded amused.

I shrugged.

"Okay, I'll stiff him," he said.

"No, don't do that on my account," I said quickly. "There's an old saying in theater. If you don't tip well, you'll come back in the next life as a waiter."

He laughed, as if he's never heard that one. "Where I come from it's not nice to flirt with another man's date."

"Date?"

Frank looked surprised. "Well, sure." He rolled his wine glass by the stem, thoughtfully. "Your steak okay?"

I eyed the hunk of flesh oozing pink onto my plate. "It's perfect."

"You've barely touched it," he observed.

"It's... beef," I said, finally. "I don't eat much beef."

"Ah," he said. "I can see that."

"What?" I asked, prickling.

"You need to eat a little more, I'm thinking," Frank observed. "Get some more flesh on your bones."

"I'm an actor," I said. *He thinks I'm too skinny? Nobody is too skinny!* "I'm supposed to be thin."

"Nice looking man like you could do with a few pounds is all I'm saying," and he grinned charmingly.

"Oh," I said.

He was still smiling at me. His arm reached across the space between us and two fingers just touched my wrist. "Don't mean to insult you or anything, Bill," he said. "I think you're a fine looking man."

And his eyes traveled from my hairline down over the revealing shirt, wandering slowly, obviously appreciative, from one pectoral to the other. He met my gaze again and the look in those eyes was sheer heat.

I blushed. My face felt as full of blood as a balloon was of helium. It was ridiculous, really. In this town, everybody is always telling each other that they look good. "Thanks," I said.

He removed his fingers and there was a cold spot on my wrist where they had been resting. "So, if you're done poking your fork into that porterhouse, you got any plans for the rest of the evening?"

"No. No plans at all."

He smiled and did that little tilt of his chin that I was starting to find really charming. "Anything in particular you'd like to do?"

And this was where I would have trotted out any number of touristy bars. Interesting hot spots. You know, to show the guy around the town. That was the script and I'm not the type to ad lib my lines. Call me predictable. So I was just as surprised as Frank probably at what came out of my mouth.

"Why don't you show me your hotel room?"

The room was very nice. Sumptuous, really. And I found myself wondering how Frank could afford it. "What do you do?" I called to him as he washed his hands in the bathroom sink.

"I owned a small ranch in Montana," he said. "We've branched out a bit these days, ostrich and buffalo in addition to your standards. That's what this trips about, mostly. Standards and practices. That kind of boring stuff." He came back out of the bathroom; he'd lost his tie and had unbuttoned his shirt. He was unbuckling his belt as he walked.

"Uh," I stammered. "Um ... Frank..."

He stopped and eyed me speculatively. "You don't want to," he stated. And he made a graceful acquiescing gesture. "Well that's alright, then, Billy, don't want to pressure you. We can just talk."

"No," I said, stumbling for words. I mean, how often did this sort of opportunity come to me? "No, I want to." I had to stop and catch my breath. I'd become very aware of the tightness of the shirt I was wearing. "I've just ... not much...experience with..." I waved a hand pathetically.

"Really?" Ah, and here would be the time for the mocking, I thought. I focused on some piece of art on the wall, trying to look casual but feeling my face hot with shame.

But no mocking followed. No laughter. I dared to glance at him and he'd just sort of tilted his head, his eyes tender. He came towards me very slowly, watching me and holding out his hands, and I lifted my own feebly into his warm grasp.

"May I kiss you?" he asked, all gentlemanly and soft. "Just a kiss, mind you?"

I nodded. And he came up against me. Just slid into my personal space like he was made to fit there. And his mouth closed over mine, warm and a little red wine-ish, and soft.

It wasn't a perfect kiss. We fumbled a little. I wasn't used to men who bigger than me and I was sort of gasping for breath and I was awkward. We banged our mouths a little too hard a few times. Our teeth clicked together and he laughed against my mouth. That wide grin speaking against my lips. "Out of practice," he said, and his voice was husky. "I haven't done this in a while."

It was such a gracious thing to say.

"Me neither," I whispered. Partly to be as gracious as he. But mostly because it was true. He paused in the kiss, keeping his arms around me. Comfortably nestled up against me so I could feel him pressing into my thigh and I was sure he could feel me. He scanned my face, that soft light in his eyes again.

"You gonna be okay?"

I nodded, but he broke away. Took my hand. "Let's sit," he said, leading me across the room. Not to the bed, but to a big love seat that looked out over Sunset.

He leaned back against the arm, but his other arm pulled me in so that I was snuggled against his chest. It was a sort of weak, girly position, I supposed, but I liked it and so I went with it. I could feel his fingers now softly stroking the top of my head.

"It's sorta pretty up here," he said after awhile, looking through the French doors at the lights of the strip.

"Sure," I said, barely thinking about what I said, I was so mesmerized by the feel of his fingers in my hair, the rise and fall of the warm chest beneath my cheek. His shirt was still undone, and my fingers rested lightly on the nice dusting of hair over his sternum. "If you don't know what's going on down there, it's pretty enough."

"What's going on?"

"Listen carefully and you'll hear the sound of a thousand hearts breaking."

His laugh was deep and rumbling and I liked the way he let it out of that wide mouth.

His hand stroked my hair. I felt his breath warm against my forehead. "So why do you stay?"

I shrugged. My hand was slowly moving now over his chest, the fingertips working their way beneath the lapel of his shirt. I felt him arch slightly into my touch. "I'm doing alright," I said. "The theater keeps me busy. I get the occasional job. It's not bad."

"Ah," he said. His hand stops moving on my head, and when I look up that happy mouth is frowning a little. He looked thoughtful.

I got some courage and slid my hand beneath his shirt. Found a hard nipple there and brushed it softly, ran a finger over it. He made a small sound and I saw those eyes suddenly intent. Then his hand came down to the back of my neck and I was pulled up into another kiss.

This kiss was more demanding than the first one. His tongue more aggressive, and more sure around the plains and valleys of my mouth. I leaned into it, letting him take my mouth, feeling his skin hot under my palms, the slight stubble of his face, his thigh as he rolled towards me, his other hand coming down to pull me against him.

I was hard in seconds. Embarrassing sounds coming out of my throat. Humping against his leg and whimpering. He pulled back just barely and looked down at me with eyes that were a little dazed.

"Move this to the bed, Billy?" he asked.

I could only nod.

I'd done some of this before, of course. I wasn't a total virgin, for Chrissakes! I'd been naked in front of men. Sucked

a few cocks. A few hand jobs. But crawling up onto a king-sized bed stark naked with an equally stark naked and very well-endowed man was something I'd never done. I was waiting for Seth. And then, well, and then I just never seemed to get around to it.

I was starting to worry that I'd passed my expiration date.

I felt suddenly all elbows and knees and was hyper aware of the bits of me that were poking out. But Frank lay back on the bed and just waited for me to stumble about and get myself situated. Adjusting my legs and arms and finally coming to rest sort of lying next to him on my side. He looked down and I almost covered myself. My cock looked red and eager and not at all ashamed of itself. Like a retarded dog. He smiled into my eyes and slid his hand down to clasp me in a loose grip. I closed my eyes and shuddered involuntarily.

"Wait," I gasped, afraid I'd totally embarrass myself if he didn't let go.

He released me and instead moved closer on the mattress, snuggling up to me so that we pressed together. Our cocks bumping and sliding until they were resting side by side between our bellies.

His hands softly stroke up and down my arms, fingers trailing to my neck, across the backs of my shoulders. He leaned forward and toucheed my lips with his mouth.

"This is nice," I managed to say, teeth chattering.

His eyes were mellow and happy. "You're nervous."

"N...no I'm not," I said, shivering.



"What do you want, Billy?" he drawled in a whisper. His lips touched mine again. A soft chaste kiss. "We can do anything you want."

"I want..." I couldn't say it. I had to say it. "I want you to fuck me," I said. "But..."

He kissed me again, but this time his mouth lingered. I opened my lips and he kissed deeper. His hands moved in circles against my arm; he rocked against me and his hand started traveling downward. "But, what?" he murmured.

His eyes were half closed, but he was watching my face. "I've never ... I've ..." I stammered. I waited for him to pull away.

But he just kept stroking, kissing, rocking. "I'm honored," he finally said, all courtly and soft. His mouth touched my chin. Moved up my jaw. "We'll take it slow, okay, Billy?"

I nodded, a lump in my throat, my balls like hot lead pulled up against me.

"But first we'll take the edge off, darlin'," he said, and slithered down my body before I could stop him.

I've had blowjobs before. Of course I have. Outside bars, quick hurried things in the dark against a wall or in the noise of an alley. Even at the Iguana. A couple of times when I let my body override my reason and some hopeful boy tried to prove his talent to me via my dick.

But Frank made love to my cock. He licked it, swaddled it with his tongue. Drooled over it, his hands softly kneading and rolling my balls. He buried his face in my pubes and gripped my thigh and moaned.

"So good."

I touched the top of his head carefully. Let my fingers trace his ears, trail over his cheekbones. I could feel his cheeks hollow as the wetness and heat gave way to an intense suction, and then all I could think about was not thrusting. Not... I grabbed the sides of his head, made some gargled noise and tried not to push as he seemed about to suck me down into his belly. His tongue pulling and wrapping around me. A fluttering, impossibly erotic motion happening all around my dick. And then he was pushing against the slit.

"Frank..." I flailed and grabbed the sheets. His hands were pressed into my hips, so I figured I must have been thrusting upwards after all. Heat curled at the base of my feet.

Streamers unfurling up my legs, across my torso.

His throat closed around me and I screamed as the white wave devoured me.

"Did I lose you, Billy?" I blinked and gazed up at him. He was watching me with soft eyes. His hand stroking my jaw.

"No way." I could feel him pressed against me. Hard and big. Did I say big? I'm sure I mentioned that.

His hand stroked my face, slid down over my neck, across my chest, fondling a nipple with a playful little flip and rub, like flicking a switch. He kissed me and I could taste funkiness and salt on his lips.

I folded both my arms around him and kissed him back with enthusiasm.

I was overcooked pasta now. Wet and mushy and sticking to the covers. He hugged me to him and rocked with me, his hands petting again, rubbing.

"That was so grand, darlin'," he whispered against my ear, and the sound that came out of me was embarrassingly close to a giggle. "I love the way you taste, Billy. The way you feel," he stated, his hands gripping me tighter, his rocking a little more urgent.

I watched him, his face becoming flushed. His eyes like brilliant emeralds, his mouth opened and reddened from sucking me. He was panting, he rolled on top of me, and I could feel all of him in my belly as he thrust.

"Are you going to fuck me now?" I asked, my voice shaking.

He moaned and his eyes rolled back a bit. "Oh Lord, you're going to kill me."

"Yeah?" I grinned, feeling saucy and sexy and confident for once.

He lunged down and took my mouth fiercely, teeth mashing against me, his hands now holding my face. A rumbling growl rolled between our mouths, and when he pulled back, he was looking a little wild.

"Hold on," he said roughly. And pushed himself up, sort of fell off the bed and went to his suitcase. I was pleased to see that he was having a little trouble walking straight.

He came back quickly. The foil crinkled in his hand and he raised his hips to slide on the condom, watching my face the whole time. "You sure?" he asked, looking scared and horny and just as crazy as I felt.

I nodded. Found I was having that trouble with words again, so I just rolled my legs back instead, spreading them. Frank made a helpless noise and fell on me.

I probably should have panicked. I mean, here I was over thirty and still a virgin. With some guy whose name I had only learned this morning from a business card. But he didn't let me panic. He overloaded my brain with so much sensory information that there were no brain cells left for panic.

His breath and tongue were at my ear, words, sounds, nonsense a lot of it. And my name. "Sweet" and "pretty" and "precious" whispered wet and breathy against my ear. His tongue following the words, lapping them up like sugar. His thigh was massive and muscular, and it rubbed up against my balls, one of his hands creating a renewed interest down there. His hand and my cock were developing a fine relationship. Becoming good friends, and then his fingers slid beneath my balls and brushed against my entrance.

"Ohhh," I arched up instinctively and he chuckled low against my ear.

"You're hungry for it, Billy, you are," he chanted. I heard a drawer open and close, felt cool wet slick against my hole, and then his finger sliding in.

It was weird but sort of great just because somebody was finally there. I pushed and he pushed and it was okay. Weird, but okay. Then he drew his finger out. His teeth nibbled at my earlobe, his thumb rubbed the side of my cock, and then more fingers.

This pinched and I gasped. His mouth came over mine. Quick hot kisses interspersed with words. "Relax, that's my boy. Relax. Oh you feel good, Billy, you do." I relaxed under the soft words, the soft touch. Felt the thickness moving around in there.

"God," I said, sort of randomly to any deity that would have me. "Oh. God."

"Pretty," said Frank. "Are you alright, Billy?" His fingers plunged, massaged, rubbing around. "Are you alright?"

I nodded. "More," I said. "I'm ready for more."

He withdrew his fingers and now I wanted them back. This was getting stranger than I had imagined. He drew his body up higher and moved around a bit. I guessed he was getting into position and I just tensed up. Who would not?

"Relax, Billy." He kissed me again. "Don't want to hurt you."

I laughed. Sort of. "I've seen what you've got there, Frank. Don't think you can *not* hurt me."

He stilled at that. Both his hands came up, holding my face steady and looking deep into my eyes. And there was something warm there. Not just lust. Something human.

"I'm never going to do this if it hurts you, Billy," he swore solemnly. "So you have to promise me you'll tell me to stop if it's too much. Okay?"

I nodded wonderingly.

He moved forward again, sort of arching his chest up, his eyes never leaving my face. I felt more lube applied and then something blunt and big and hard pressing just there.

"Oh," I said, and I looked up into his eyes.

"Just a little," he said, and I felt his body tense and push.

It hurt, dammnit. Burned. I tried to relax. I did. I wanted this so much. Just to do it, really. To have finally had it done. But I also wanted Frank, now. Wanted to feel him inside me.

He was watching me so I managed a little smile.

He pushed a little further and I breathed and tried to relax. Okay, not so bad. Not so bad.

He pushed and paused. Pushed and paused. It took forever, but I was starting to get into the heat and the pressure, starting to work through it like you work through the burn in a marathon. And Frank hanging over me, his eyes squeezing shut, face all tensed and those hot little moans and cries coming out of him. That kind of made up for the pain.

"Yeah, Frank," and I felt myself arching up into him.

His eyes popped open, and he made a deep noise in his chest; the muscles there bunched up, and there was an intense burning sensation in my ass and I felt soft hair brushing against my ass cheeks. He was in.

I concentrated with everything I had and pushed down. Hey! I've read a few books. Frank's eyes squeezed shut and he gasped and shuddered. "Ohmygod. Ohmygod," he chanted. I guess I felt kind of good.

"Frank," I whispered, the feeling pushing up my spine, and amazingly my cock was getting hard again. The burn and pressure turning to something intense that invaded my balls, coiled tight and hot in my belly. "Frank, oh god, good. Oh."

"Yeah," he said through gritted teeth. And rocked very slightly.

A bright spark burst in my ass and flared in my brain. "Again," I demanded.

He did it again.

"Oh... oh my god, Frank, do that again." I rocked up against him. So far beyond the pain, trying inexpertly to roll my hips up against him, pull him all that much deeper inside

me. I was going to hurt in the morning, no doubt about that, but it was going to be so worth it.

He was chanting nonsense now, rocking and grinding and mewling. Every now and then he'd kiss me. Quick hard needy pecks. But I was good, I was better than good. I felt like a surfer pushed ahead of an ocean swell. Cresting, cresting. So much pressure, the roar of the water in my ears.

"Oh god, Frank, I'm ... I'm..."

He yelled when he came, heaving against me. His hand closed around my cock, and I just jerked helplessly like a puppet at the end of his dick, and gave it up all over my chest.

"Wow," I said for about the hundredth time.

He chuckled. "Yeah. That was good, Billy."

"Really?" I rolled my head to look up at him. He had me cuddled against his chest, doing that thing with his fingers in my hair again. I turned back to stare at the ceiling. "Wow," I said.

We lay that way for a long time. I wanted to sleep there, but I wasn't sure about something that... intimate so soon. Seems crazy, but sleeping in the same bed seemed even more of a step than letting him stick his dick up my ass. Call me old fashioned. So eventually I pulled it together and sat up, rolling my legs off the side of the bed.

My ass felt like ... like it had had something really big shoved inside it. I grinned. "Boy, do I feel fucked."

His hand stroked my back softly. It's funny how after such a short time I could already feel emotions in his touches. His touch felt apologetic now. Worried.

I turned back and let my hand rest on his chest. "I'm fine."

"You sure?" He kept petting me.

"Never been better. Thank you."

He nodded. Managed a feeble smile. There was something vulnerable in his face. Some ... softness that gave me a tremendous feeling of power. Of worth.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said simply. His eyes had that question in them. I'd seen it before, god knew. Auditioning kids. Writers. But he wasn't auditioning for a role, or trying to sell me a script.

"What?" I asked. Leaning back onto the bed. Caressing his cheek with my hand.

He shook his head. Kept reading me for a while until finally he sighed. "Do you need a ride home?"

"That would be nice," I said.

Seth was sulking.

We had auditions starting that week, and usually he was pretty helpful. But today he just slouched around, slumping in corners, watching me fuss and bother with the sides and the paperwork. Occasionally emitting a non-committal grunt.

"Christ!" I scanned the agent's list of names. "I wish she'd stop sending this kid."

I looked at Seth and he raised an eyebrow, looking severely disinterested. His tight leather boots were propped up on one of the tables, showing off the long, lean legs encased in pants so pegged and tight I expected him to suddenly start singing Clash songs. His arms were crossed over the worn Bob Marley shirt he favored.

"I should just tell her, huh?"



Seth grunted.

"Okay." I set down the pen. "What's bugging you, Seth?"

"That guy called again."

"Which guy?"

"Christ, you know which guy. The one you ... you know..."

I grinned. "I can't believe you can't say the words, Seth."

He sulked some more. I went back to my paperwork. After awhile I heard his boots hit the floor and he stalked out. I thought for a minute about going after him, but then the phone rang and I knew just from the ring who it was.

"Hi, Billy." Frank's warm, happy voice.

"Hey."

We basked for a few minutes in the immediacy of each other's presence.

"You busy?" he asked lightly.

"Sort of," I said, gazing with dismay at the stack of folders containing headshots, resumes, endless video tapes...

"Too bad," he sighed. "They've shut down for the afternoon. Some of the boys are heading over to that rodeo at the Equestrian Center."

"Fun," I said unenthusiastically.

He chuckled. "It ain't bad, actually, Billy, but I was thinkin' maybe we could go do something more private."

"Such as..." that stack of folders was looking uglier and uglier.

"There's a hot tub resort up in the hills, I heard. Private rooms. Masseurs." He pronounced the word the old-fashioned way.

I tossed the pen directly at the pile of folders and smiled as they leaned and then slid off onto the floor in a long line of paper and mess. "When?"

"Christ, Billy," said Frank in a squeezed voice. "I've been thinkin' about you in one of those hot tubs for half an hour, so I'd say half an hour ago woulda been good."

"I'll be there half an hour ago," I said, jumping up and grabbing my car keys. "Hold those thoughts."

"Yeah, I'm holding them," Frank growled. "Gonna be shootin' 'em inside my pants if you don't get your ass over here pronto."

I almost dropped the phone as I tried to get it back into the handset. I could hear him laughing as I hung up.

It had been less than a week. Five days to be precise. And Frank and I had managed to find time for each other every day. It was the most fantastic sex I had ever had. Hell, it was the *most* sex I had ever had, and I just seemed to be ravenous for more.

Frank was so easy to be with, too. He seemed to enjoy just about anything I wanted to do. Sitting back and just watching me with those steady green eyes. A little grin sort of permanently pasted to his mouth.

That's how he looked when I sank into the hot water, groaning and bitching every inch of the way until finally I was entirely encased in heat. I felt every muscle in my body just give up the ghost all at once, tipped my head back against the padded sides, and looked at him through slitted lids.

"I'm going to be so relaxed, Frank."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Maybe TOO relaxed."

He chuckled, those eyes going warm. "Don't matter to me, Billy. Just want to see you feeling good."

He had that expression on his face again. The one I had seen the first night. It came back fleetingly from moment to moment.

"Hey," I said. "You alright?"

"Sure," he said, looking down. Then he seemed to make a decision. He looked up at me again with that wide-eyed look he could get that suddenly made him appear 14 instead of 44. "No, I'm not alright, Billy."

A little prick of fear found its way into my limp torso. "What's wrong?"

His mouth worked. He looked away from me, then back, his sun-whitened eyebrows determined. "I don't want to leave you, Billy."

Oh. Yeah. Well, I didn't think about that. Because, well, it was too depressing. So I just didn't. I wasn't too good at the leaving thing.

"Right," I said. The prick of fear had now turned into a low ache somewhere in my chest.

The steam rose in great exhales from the tub, the water making a continuous draining and running sound. The distant freeway like ocean surf. The candles that had been lit at the periphery of the room guttered and then flared again.

"Come with me?" He whispered it sort of, down into the bubbling water.

"What?" I said, thinking perhaps I'd misheard him over the sound of the jets.

He looked up. His eyes were amazingly green. "Come back to Montana with me, Billy."

I was feeling dizzy. Maybe it was the hot tub, maybe not. "For a visit. Sure, Frank..."

"No," he interrupted harshly. Obviously intent on getting this out now. "Come back with me permanent, Billy. Come live with me."

I gaped. I'm sure it wasn't a good look, but there you are. Most romantic thing that ever happened to me and I'm a limp piece of overcooked flesh, gaping like a fish. "Why?"

"'Cuz I love you," said Frank in a surly growl. "Obviously."

I had definitely had too much of the hot tub. The room was throbbing and sort of sinking into my chest. "Out, please," I gasped. "Now."

He clambered over and helped me out. Not really looking at me. His face was a deep red. I decided he'd had too much of the heat, too, and left it at that. We wrapped ourselves in the huge bath sheets and lay back on the reed mats. I was still trying to catch my breath when the masseurs came in and rescued us from conversation.

"Guess I sort of popped that on you unexpectedly." Frank's voice was slow and soft over the low mood music. We were still lying on the tables. Both covered with oil, and I knew that if I turn to look at him, I'd become one long erection. So I didn't.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm surprised."

"I've got a confession," said Frank, and I heard him adjusting his weight on the table. "I... saw you before you came up to me in the coffee shop."

"Saw me?"

"Yeah..." And I turned my head despite myself. In the dim candlelight, his hair ruffled into spikes by the massage, his face and torso oiled, his head bowed, he was beautiful. "One of my buddies and I caught you in a performance," he was saying. "At your place."

"You came to one of the shows?" For one insane moment I actually thought he was going to offer me a job. The 'Lana Turner at the soda shop' fantasy, you know? I fumbled for words. "Uh, did you like it?"

"No," he shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, not my thing, I guess. But you... I ..." he looked across the room. Frowned at something there.

"Frank," I said playfully. "Were you stalking me?"

"No! Christ. No. Just came around again. Don't know what I was going to do. And saw you in there havin' coffee with some fella." He shook his head again, ruefully. "Figured if I just came up to you, you'd bolt like a shy colt. So..."

I was grinning and my body was tingling. Maybe with the massage. I don't know. "You horsewhispered me you damned cowboy you."

"Okay," he said, looking at me like I'm crazy but he loves me anyway. "Whatever that means."

I knew that movie was a crock.

Tim set my coffee down at the bar, the expression on his face more serious than any I had ever seen there before. "So," he said. "I heard you decided to take the city's offer after all?"

"Yeah," I said. "Time to move on."

"You gonna set up shop somewhere else?"

"Maybe. Someday." I grinned unaccountably. I'd caught myself doing that a lot these days. Call me crazy. "Maybe I'll set up a summer stock theater in Montana," I said.

"MONTANA?" Tim repeated, as if I'd said 'Venus' or 'Hell'. "Damn," he said, scrubbing at the counter with a bit of rag. "What a shame."

I hadn't seen Seth for days, but I expected him to show up before I closed the doors for good. Still, here it was, the last day. All the boxes packed. Ten years. Picked through and sorted and labeled. Shipped off or disposed of properly. And still no sign of Seth. I stood in the doorway of the theater, looking over the empty, swept arena of all my hopes and dreams.

"You should take a picture." Seth's boots rang a hollow thunkety-thunk on the boards as he strolled from stage left. He was wearing the blue satin shirt. His hair caught back in a ponytail. "To weep over in your bitter dotage."

"I thought you might have left already," I said.

"Where am I going to go?" He wouldn't look at me.

It hadn't occurred to me until just that moment that he might not be able to leave. That he was tied here somehow. "Seth?" I said, stunned. "When they tear the place down...?"

He snorted and shook his head, lifting his face into the spots. He was as white as the light, his edges fuzzy. He looked back down at me and came all at once into sharp focus. I saw him as I had the first day we met. Charismatic. Beautiful as a young god and full of life.

"There's no such thing as ghosts, Billy," he said.

"Yeah, I know that," I said doubtfully.

"I could come with you..." He let the suggestion dangle. But then he shook his head; one boot heel kicked at the boards.

"But you won't," I said. "You belong here."

He acknowledged this statement, as was his fashion. With a silent nod that carried a world of meaning. "I could have done something here," he said.

"Yeah," my chest felt tight, "you had it, Seth. You were gonna be a star."

"Damned drunk drivers," he said, lightheartedly.

"I tried to do it for you, Seth," I reminded him. "Ten years..."

"You're a good friend, Billy," he said.

"I loved you, Seth," I whispered to him.

That nod again. We knew that.

"I'll miss you," I said.

And his head came up. Those eyes blue-black as the L.A. night sky. Stars in them. "Don't," he said. "You've done enough of that."

And then there wasn't anything left to say.

Frank was waiting outside in the cab. He took my hand in his as I slid into the seat and gave it a little squeeze.

"Say all your goodbyes?"

I gazed through the window at the face of the theater. It looked shabby and abandoned already. "It's just an empty building," I said. "Nothing really to say goodbye to..."

"No ghosts, then?"

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*by AM Riley*

I squeezed his hand and turned to him. His eyes were warm and bright and happy.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," I said.

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Love Me Dead  
*by AM Riley*

## **Black Candle Reader**

\* \* \* \*

William Maltese

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## Chapter One

Jeremy Taig is an exhibitionist who likes to suck his cock. I'm a voyeur who likes to watch him suck it. Aside from that, our relationship is complicated. Not that the relationship of any two people isn't complicated, but ours, I do think, is even more so than most. We're not officially lovers, although we do love each other; we're not officially roomies, although we do live together. His apartment is next door to mine, and the inside door that connects them is almost always open, but we sleep in my bed and entertain customers in his.

I met Jeremy at the Horse-Head Tavern before either of us signed with the Penningdale Escort Agency. I was "into" skinny white blond boys at the time, and still am; Jeremy was, and still is, a skinny white blond boy. We came back to my place—he lived farther afield at the time—with the explicit understanding that all that would initially happen would be that he would suck his dick and I would watch him do it. Jeremy wasn't into anything other than that and made that perfectly clear from the get-go. If I had any inclinations for anything else, there was little point in his accompanying me to my place, because nothing else was going to happen. Nor was he prepared to go into any details explaining the why; it was just the way it was, and that was that. Take it or leave it.

Once we got to my place, we both stripped down. He sat in the chair adjacent my bed, and I spread out on my bed. That he has a normal-size dick, only seven inches when erect, and I have just the kind of large, long, and over-sized ten-inch

dong everyone stereotypically expects a black man to have, doesn't mean that he still didn't make me seem a rank amateur, then—and still does—as far as eating one's own meat is concerned. His lithe flexibility allows him just to bend on over, easy as he pleases, to gobble up his dick, all of the way to his pink balls. I'm lucky if I can get the tip of my tongue to touch my purple cockhead after a good hour of stretching and flexing into all sorts of pretzel positions. I'm so inept at self-fellatio, it never seeming to get any easier for me, that I've pretty much left off even trying it, finding it more pleasurable, especially when playing voyeur, simply to beat off my meat with my fist.

After he'd served himself up an eight-course (-squirt?) meal of his hot and heavy cum, and I'd deposited so much semen in the palm of my left hand that it overflowed before I could get it sopped up with tissues from the box of tissues I always keep close by, he agreed to share a bubble bath in my bathroom's large, lion-claw bathtub, again emphasizing that it would be purely for hygiene, not for hijinks.

I filled the tub with hot water and frothy soap suds, the latter which, smelling as they so much did of lavender, I hoped he wouldn't find too prissy (he didn't say anything other than, "Smells really good!"). Then, I did something I very seldom do and would have been unable to do until that very morning after an impulse buy in a local department store; I lit a large green candle and set it on the edge of the sink. Though I've always enjoyed candles and candlelight, my mother had an inexplicable phobia as regards both; it had only been with her passing nearly a year before that saw me

finally succumb to the temptation that had always been there but had seldom been acted upon.

"Lavender and pine," Jeremy said and looked so particularly thoughtful that I thought, for a moment, there was something about the combination of scents, bubble-bath and candle, that he didn't like.

"I can snuff the candle?" I suggested.

"Not necessary," he said. "It just reminds me of something in my past that I had to come to deal with."

"Oh?" I was curious; but he made no effort to provide additional enlightenment.

We stepped into the tub at the same time, facing each other across its length. We squatted into the water and bubbles, and maneuvered our legs so that their overlap was comfortable and convenient.

Then I mysteriously blacked out and don't remember a damned thing until I woke up the next morning in my bed, sheets all awry and wet with cum. Jeremy was laid out belly-down beside me, his asshole oozing what I could only assume was my spent spunk.

Considering the emphasis he had put on not having sex, I was genuinely distraught in apparently having forced it on him. I'd always known, comparing our physiques, that mine was definitely the superior. At any time, I could have forced him into letting me fuck him, but I truly believed I wasn't mentally wired to attempt screwing anyone without first getting his permission.

While I was feeling like a genuine shit-head for not having lived up to my side of our bargain, he stirred and rolled to

face me. I expected the worst, even so far as to prepare myself for his physical assault.

Certainly, I didn't expect his wide smile, or his outstretched arms that invited me in closer.

"What?" he asked, as if he didn't have a clue why I wasn't fast to act on his invitation.

"I fucked you," I said, and it wasn't a question. There were enough clues to convince any judge and jury.

"Didn't you, though," he said, and his was no more a question than mine had been. "I'm just hoping you have enough strength left over, this morning, to fuck me again."

"But, I thought...?"

"You do way too much thinking," he said, pulled me down on top of him, opened his legs wide so that his thighs parenthesized my waist, and personally grabbed my dick to put it to his asshole.

I fucked him a couple of times that morning, and twice that night. I fucked him regularly for the next week, after which he moved into the apartment next door that had become vacant sometime during the course of our fucking.

It took me more than a while to find out what happened that night of candle light and bubble bath, pine and lavender, because Jeremy simply didn't believe that I couldn't remember any of it.

"You were so confident of what you were doing that it was almost as if you were there when Maurice and I did it."

"There" was a forest meadow, smelling of lavender and pine, during one summer at camp. "Maurice" was the camp counselor who had seduced Jeremy into offering up young

virgin ass for its very first fucking. All of which had left Jeremy feeling horribly guilty on three counts: one, that he'd actually let a man fuck him in the butt; two, that the fuck had been far more pleasurable than Jeremy figured so "unnatural" an act should have been; three, that Maurice had soon ended up dead. Jeremy had, thereafter, decided to put gay sex off limits forever and ever, amen. Since he wasn't really "into" girls, it ended up that he put all sex, except self-sex, off limits.

It seems I coaxed, and pleaded, and cajoled, and insisted that I had the word straight from the dead Maurice that Jeremy was only cutting off his nose to spite his face in his continued ridiculousness in denying himself the pleasure of a butt-fuck just because of his juvenile misguided notion that his first fuck had somehow caused Maurice to die. I'd pounded home my points *-and Maurice's point?-* by nailing Jeremy to the bed with my hard pecker and fucking him until he'd begged nonstop that I give him even more and more of the same.

None of which I remembered, or have yet to remember, but which Jeremy insists is true; for which he will, or so he says, thank me for the rest of his life. Certainly, without my having fucked him into giving up his "silly sexual hang-up," he would never have become one of the boys in the Penningdale Escort Agency who are required regularly to offer up their cute asses for money and make each and every fucker think he's getting the ride of his life. While there are plenty of johns who still pay to see Jeremy suck his own cock, the kid's increased sexual repertoire, compliments of his

session of sexual reawakening beneath the pounding of yours-truly's cum-spewing dick, provides him more cash for his bank account, which in our line of work doesn't have all that many good years to grow and multiply.

"Don't you think you should be saving that mouthful of cum you're about to suck from your own dick for a paying customer?" I say, watching the way his intense slurping of his meat concaves his cheeks and makes his thin face even thinner.

His dick comes free with a wet *pop*. "Cal has given me the afternoon and the night off so I can just relax and do what I please," he informs me.

"Well, I've an appointment this afternoon with Talon Winland," I say, "and Cal's going to call me, later, about some other special-request appointment for this evening—neither John, I think, will understand my balls bone dry, even if I explain they got that way because I was just too damned turned on by watching you eat your own dick to keep my hands from beating my prick to climax."

"When have those nuts of yours been completely drained by one measly come?" Jeremy says, and goes right on back to his fine-salami dining; I can't believe he eats the whole thing! I wonder if Talon Winland and the special-request guy will really mind if I have a little less cum than usual to share with them. Sometimes, Talon doesn't really require that I even provide him with even one drop of spunk, but I never know. Sometimes, he's hard core into fucking and sucking. Sometimes, he's just into getting his ass whipped and my telling him what a bad-bad boy he is. It would be

unprofessional of me, though, to take the chance that either upcoming session will be one wherein the customer doesn't require my nuts filled to the brim with cream. Talon is a long-standing customer. He's never a problem. He's always a good tipper. I'd hate, in any way, shape, or form, to disappoint him.

"I think I'll leave off watching you in favor of a glass of wine," I say and head in the direction of the kitchen, leaving Jeremy's face making more wet sucking sounds over his crotch.

I hear another *pop* behind me, and he says, "Talon Winland and this other guy aren't going to appreciate you any more drunk than cumless."

Jeremy's point well taken, I opt for a bottle of Advanced Hydration Technology water. I truly believe its extra oxygen molecules keep me healthy and provide more energy than water from the tap. I accompany my drink with a square of Xocai XoBiotic dark chocolate which I truly believe, what with its combination with acai and blueberries, provides antitoxic benefits that I can't get from regular candy. It's the difficult individual packaging of the latter that occupies enough of my attention to keep me from getting any more turned on by Jeremy's sexual sounds. I'm unwrapping a second piece of the chocolate when he comes in, licking his cummy fingers as if he's the one who has been eating chocolate.

"You want to be super healthy, you should eat more of my cum and less candy squares," he says. Then he snatches the piece of unwrapped chocolate from my hand and pops it into his mouth with a wide smile.



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## Chapter Two

Kenneth Black hasn't slept well this last week. The nap he just attempted was no exception. An author by choice, his recent inability to sleep could likely be attributed more to his having become a candle reader via forces quite beyond his control. He's experienced similar bouts of sleep-deprivation, usually just prior to psychic breakthroughs in major criminal cases, although he doesn't yet have a clue as to which case this might refer. He just knows that someone or something is "out there", restless in "the void," and trying to contact him without him—yet—able to make the connection.

He gets up from the couch and spots his image thrown back by the reflecting surface of the full-length mirror on the wall across the way. He's pleased by what he sees. When he's no longer pleased, when his body starts to show signs of aging and sagging and drooping and sloughing, he'll cover all the mirrors or take them all down. Presently, however, his body is well-toned from regular gym work-outs. It's bumpy and lumpy in all the *right* places.

He's tempted to go directly to the storage cabinet in one corner, but he detours to the bathroom. He has to pee, and there's nothing more aggravating than becoming involved in a candle reading only to have to piss like a race horse before it's over. It helps, too, when he refreshes himself with some splashes of cold water to his face.

His minimal body maintenance taken care of, he goes back into the other room, heads to the cabinet, and opens its two

front doors to reveal the large selection of candles neatly aligned upon its inner six shelves.

He separates two yellow candles from the total, well-recognizing which of the isolated duo is his (the more amateurish), and which is the one by craftswoman and wax-artisan Jfay. Convinced that it's a lemon-scented candle that will provide him the insight he needs for connecting with whatever is presently calling out to him, he commissioned the Jfay candle when his own hadn't seemed up to the task at hand. He knows from experience that a superior candle can, more often than not, provide a superior reading.

He hefts the Jfay masterpiece and carries it to the small table at the window. He places the base of the candle in the yellow porcelain plate he'd previously put dead-center the tabletop.

Since the drapes are already drawn, he doesn't bother with them before sitting in the chair most immediately facing table and candle. He reaches for the box of matches adjoining the plate, opens the box, strikes a match from the box, and puts the resulting flame to the candle wick. He blows out the match's flame, and balances the length of the still smoking stick gently on one leading edge of the yellow plate.

He folds his arms on the table, his impressive biceps bulging, and his pectorals squeezing into higher definition. He leans for a closer look at the flickering candle flame. He concentrates on the hypnotic weave of the burn and waits ... and waits ... and waits ...

The room fills with the thoroughly pleasant aroma of lemons.

Kenneth feels the moment particularly "right" and "ripe" for something to happen, for some revelation to be made known, but nothing happens.

"Shit!" he says. He's frustrated because he's been here before and, as a result, knows that any disconcertion, no matter how intense, and no matter how sincere, probably won't be immediately rewarded. Whatever the information that's on its way, it will come when the spirits are ready for it to come—usually when Kenneth least expects it—and he'll have very little say in the matter.

He's better able to cope with that frustrating reality these days than he was in the beginning when he knew virtually nothing about candle reading. It has taken him a lot of digging in a lot of arcane files to bring the subject sufficiently to light, it having so faded from view and been for so long supplanted by other visionary formats, like crystal-ball reading and fortune telling and tarot reading, the tossing of sticks and bones, even the observance of steamy animal entrails, or the flight paths of airborne fowl. He is still surprised by just how far back in time the practice goes:

*And Lilith, the first woman, did see the vision within the flickering of a candle flame that did show her Yahweh's displeasure and how He would supplant her in Adam's favor with Eve. And Lilith became Demon.*—ancient Jewish text.

Kenneth still isn't sure, or even particularly pleased, about the inexplicable why and how of his having become a human vessel for routing information from the spirit world via candle reading. It was unexpectedly thrust upon him seemingly out of the blue; from the get-go, even after helping so many

people, it remains largely unappreciated by him. He still remembers how it initially compelled him to go to the police with information he'd felt—and which had been—genuinely pertinent to the mysterious disappearance of the little Jacob Lenton boy. God, the looks the cops gave him, and the snickering behind his back! If it hadn't been for Janet Maylord calling Kenneth with words of reassurance that he wasn't all alone—she, too, having one day suddenly been bestowed with the magic to read candle flames—Kenneth would have told the obviously dubious-at-the-time police to go fuck themselves; Jacob's molested and mutilated body would probably never have been found.

Between Janet on the east coast and Kenneth on the west coast, they have chocked up the locations of six missing persons and two murder victims, plus the apprehensions and arrests of two serial killers. Their successes are so well documented by the authorities and the media that most of the snickers and doubts have long since stopped. The well-publicized duo has made candle reading so mainstream that it's "the" major power had by "the" major protagonist in *FLICKER: TEEN-WARRIOR SAGA*, a popular teen-angst vampire, werewolf, chimera, dragon, demon, devil, witch, warlock, soothsayer, diviner, tree-sprit, and shadow-people novel being made into a movie by Steven Spielberg.

Despite Janet and their finally acquired trappings of respectability, Kenneth still finds the uninvited intrusion of ghosts into his life at times as unwanted as relatives stopping by for unannounced visits. Most of the time, the ghosts are even more aggravating than the relatives.

As for the interference of all the attending publicity with his privacy, that's another bone of contention. The mass-circulation of information regarding his candle reading successes, via the internet and cable television, brings all sorts of people—some genuinely needy—to his door at all times of the night and day—to the point where he's hired several people to run interference; which puts a definite damper on his life in general—and on his sex life in particular. No longer can he cruise for cock and ass whenever and wherever the fancy strikes him.

Tonight, though, is one of his rare nights out on the town, pre-planned with careful attention to detail that'll get him clandestinely out of his apartment and covertly checked into a hotel room, hopefully without being interrupted by someone laying in wait and jumping out to enlist his assistance in finding some lost relative, or in conversing with some long-dead friend, acquaintance, adversary, or loved one.

He can hardly wait for the evening to come—so he can come cum.

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## Chapter Three

Talon Winland's physique is one that naturally manages to stay in great shape, with little effort, where others just kind of fall apart in middle age. I'm not really sure how old he is—he's mentioned that his father is somewhere in his eighties—but I'd guess Talon is somewhere in his late forties. He has blond hair so platinum that I don't think I could sort out the white he might well have. His eyes are so startlingly light blue that I originally mistook them for colored contact lenses. His face and jaw are square. His cheekbones are high. His lips are full without being too full. His body has square pectorals, ridged abdominals, bulged biceps and triceps, and well-muscled legs; all of which has seen firmer, tonier days but is still mighty impressive when the man strips down. His cock, like the rest of him, is just about right. It's neither too big nor too small. It doesn't gag me when I suck it, and it doesn't make me scream bloody murder when it's pounded up my butt; although, in both instances I *do* know I have cock inside me.

As soon as he's naked, as soon as I'm naked, he tells me to go to the satchel he always brings with him; he gets down on the floor on his hands and knees.

"I've been a bad boy again," he says.

"How have you been a bad boy again?" I always ask the same question. The answer, though, is never well-defined; he may very well know what it is, but he's never inclined to share it.

"I burned the documents, didn't I?" This surprises the hell out of me; certainly, it's more specific information than he usually provides.

"What documents?" It comes out automatically.

"I thought they'd never find out if I burned them, but it seems they've found documents of their own. They'll blame me, of course, for covering it all up, since they can't blame my father. Did I tell you he died?"

"Your father?"

"Of lung cancer. Not a pleasant way to go. There will be those who'll be happy to hear how painful his last days were. I'm his son, though, aren't I? He always did well by me, didn't he?"

"So, why was it wrong for you to burn the documents?" I ask. "Why does that make you a bad boy again?"

"It makes me a bad boy in their eyes," he says.

"Who are *they*, though? Why do they matter?"

"Those in power always matter; they're the only ones who do."

"Do you want me to pretend to be one of them?"

"I want you to be who you are: a big-dicked black man soon to take a riding crop to my lily-white ass. As a black man, you have your own reasons to think I'm a bad boy."

This is my cue to find the riding crop that's in his satchel with a length of rubber hose, a cat-o'-nine tails, a paddle with three holes, a hair brush with very stiff bristles, and a leather strap.



"What are my reasons for thinking you a bad boy this time?" If I sound like an actor trying to get some insight into a character I'm playing, that's not all that far from the truth.

"You know why," he says.

"I know, all right." Of course, I really haven't a clue, but I always go whatever way I have to go to bring this to the conclusion he's after. "I know that you're a damned bad boy again, who has wronged me in more ways than I can ever say."

"Wronged you *and* yours," he expands.

He's said that before. It always has me wonder if he might have once been a White Supremacist, or if one or more of his ancestors had lynched one or more of mine. If either is the case, he really *does* deserve to get his ass whipped, just as hard as I lay it on, then and there. Except, he so always seems to enjoy my black cock way too much for me to think he's ever felt it inferior to his.

*WHACK!* the sound of black leather riding crop connecting with his lily-white ass and leaving a red stripe tattooed on the curved surface of his violated buttocks.

"Personally, I've never had anything against black men," he confirms, "but sons are always destined to suffer the sins of their fathers, yes?"

"Your father was Ku Klux Klan, was he?" If I don't have his bigot father to whip, then Talon is the best alternative.

*WHACK!* the sound of leather riding crop again connecting with his buttocks.

"My father Ku Klux Klan?" he asks, as if no one in his family was ever White Supremacist or Klansman. People like

Talon sometimes just get off on pure fantasy. Some, often as blond and blue-eyed, such as he is, simply get turned on by being whipped and/or fucked by a black man, such as I am. Mine is not to reason why; mine is just to give Talon his money's worth.

"Bad boy!" I say and hit him again.

"Again!" he insists.

I do as he asks, leaving his ass with a red-slash tic-tac-toe design; all it needs are the x's and o's to make it complete.

"Why does that feel so good when it should feel so...?" he begins, but I interrupt his train of thought with another really forceful slap of his ass by the riding crop. Although I've never in the past beat him to the point where his butt bleeds, I'm suddenly fearful that my last wallop does just that. There's such a thing, I do know, as giving a client too much of a good thing. He might be turned on by the appearance of his blood here and now, but might well regret it by the time he's back, seated uncomfortably sore-assed, in his car and headed home.

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## Chapter four

Sammy Grant gets critically up close and personal with the bathroom mirror. He's genuinely afraid of losing his good looks at a time in his life when he needs them to put food on his table, beer in his frig, and a roof over his head.

*So far, so good, though.* Saved from a bad complexion, even when his balls dropped and he literally cum-blasted into puberty, his skin remains pretty much peaches-and-cream flawless. There's a small scar on his upper right cheek, the result of his falling from a park bench when he was four, but that adds character and keeps him from being too pretty. His hair is straw blond. His eyes are attractively pea-green. His nose is pert. His mouth is cupid's-bow. His cheeks are dimpled. His chin has its own small cleft.

He has a really nice body that completes a really nice physical package. He's mainly hairless, except for on the top of his head, under his arms, and at the vee of his crotch. He has good muscle tone that well defines his square pectorals and his scalloped belly. His arms are nicely shaped by just enough bar-bell lifting to make them impressive but not body-builder freakish.

He can wish for a bigger dick, but he really doesn't have too much to complain about in that department, either. Coming in at seven-and-a-half hard inches, his cock is more than enough to have had more than one trick comment that anything more would just be a waste of good meat. Seven-and-a-half inches make a nice mouthful and a nice butt-full.

Seven-and-a-half inches make a nice handful for anyone paying for the privilege of taking hold and whipping this hustler dick to creaming.

His young ass is solid. One customer, who pays regularly to fuck it, calls it his "very own hard-leather saddle."

"Certainly, Jeremy doesn't have anything over on you," Sammy tells his reflection. He refers to Jeremy Taig who started cruising city streets at the same time Sammy arrived in town from down-on-the farm Idaho. Sammy has heard through the grapevine that Jeremy has signed with the Penningdale Escort Agency. If true, Sammy finds it surprising, in that Jeremy, when Sammy knew him, didn't do much of anything but himself. While there's always a certain clientele willing to pay to watch self-fellatio, it isn't the majority. Sammy always assumed the studs in the Penningdale stable are more versatile than most, accounting for their being in constant demand. Whether Jeremy has seen the light and expanded his repertoire, or whether Cal Penningdale has taken the kid on as a novelty act, Sammy has taken it as his cue to schedule his own appointment for an agency interview. Even if he should probably stay in tonight in order to be fresh as a daisy for his look-over by Cal tomorrow afternoon, he wants and needs the reassurance and confidence boost he'll get, and see carried over into tomorrow, by his scoring big time on his own this evening.

He slips on a pair of bikini underpants. He opens a bottle of Honolulu Kina-Lime Cologne, tips citrus-smelling liquid into the palm of his left hand, and paints his neck, chest, and belly with it. He uses more cologne on his face which stings from

the alcohol; he shaved just before he showered—not that any razor ever comes away from anywhere on him with anything but peach fuzz.

He puts on a flannel shirt that's a color of blue that makes his green eyes look greener. He squeezes into a pair of tight-fitting jeans that require some firm packing of his package to get the fly buttoned. He dons Tony Lamas shit-kicking boots and a genuine Stetson cowboy hat. What completes his down-on-the-farm picture to perfection is the bit of real straw he puts in his mouth. He's had a whole manila envelope of straw bits shipped to him by his horny little hayseed cousin left behind in boondocks Boise.

When he leaves his apartment, he doesn't have to go far to score. He's chosen where he lives because of location ... location ... location. The hustlers' bar, The Night Rail, is just down the street. The official nighttime meat rack, where Sammy, among others, regularly displays his wares for the viewing pleasure of potential drive-by customers, is only a short walk away. Only a bit farther in that same direction is Boyland Park where he can always go for a busman's holiday when money for sex isn't as important as simply getting off his rocks. He isn't in the park all that often, though, because he doesn't want it to get around that he gives "it" away.

It's not so early that buyers and sellers aren't out in full force. The nice weather helps, as does the encircling tall buildings that always keep the streets pretty much in shadow except at high noon.

Sammy nods to a couple of fellow hustlers he knows, one of whom is getting into a Lexus with a driver barely

distinguishable through the car's deeply tinted front side window.

Sammy has his regular spot, and he's glad no one has usurped it. Of course, he looks good when posed against any available wall space, but familiarity with, and long use of, this one particular spot makes it easier and quicker for him to assume his pose of innocent, young, and fresh farm boy with meat to sell. His expression, practiced for hours on end in front of many a mirror, is designed to relay the impression that he's where he is, doing what he's doing out of necessity and not because he actually enjoys letting queers suck his dick and/or cock-poke his asshole.

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## Chapter Five

Surreptitiously, Kenneth pulls back the edge of his apartment curtain enough to see what's happening, or not happening, on the dark street outside. These days he has a sixth sense that pretty much tells him whenever there's someone out there, waiting for him to come out. His gut feeling tells him that there's no one there tonight, but that doesn't mean he's going to proceed any less carefully than planned. He'll still use all of the cunning, precautionary measures that will allow him to escape, undetected, from his living quarters which have, for not the first time, become downright claustrophobic with him holed up in them so much lately, candle reading and writing his latest novel.

Part of tonight's ruse requires a disguise, although not much of one. It consists primarily of a Los Angeles Angels baseball cap which his cooperative and in-collusion-with-him neighbor, Jason Court, has been wearing on and off for the last month. When Kenneth puts the cap on and pulls its brim down low over his forehead, he can't imagine anyone suspecting he, not Jason, will be at the wheel of Jason's car when it pulls out of the garage in a few minutes and heads off into the night.

He takes one last look at his reflection in the hall mirror, satisfied with what he sees. He makes sure he has the car keys and his money. He leaves without turning off the lights, but he does lock the door behind him. Since he never goes to

bed early, lights off now might well tip off anyone watching from the outside that Kenneth is on his way out.

Ten minutes later, taking one more look into the car's rearview mirror and satisfied he's not being followed, Kenneth breathes an audible sigh of relief. He's really looking forward to this evening and is glad there's no genuinely needy person out to spoil it for him. He's tired of devoting so much of his time and energy to other people; he's determined to start providing more time for himself. It hasn't been easy for him to adapt his long-time solitary writer's life to include so many complete strangers—alive and dead. He still wishes, more often than not, that he could go back to it being just him and his computer, with the occasional let-down-his-hair evening to fuck and suck until the cows (and he) come home.

Even now, having successfully escaped his apartment for a bit of fun, it's not the same as when he made it a point to cruise three or four bars during the course of any given evening, before possibly settling on the one perfect trick or the one trick who was made to "seem" perfect by too much lead-in booze. He's tried a return to that routine a couple of times since his candle reading received so much press; he's been determined that he isn't going to let his blossoming psychic abilities interfere with his sex life. But ... Mrs. Paulson and her husband had tracked him down in the Gay Cowboy Bar, complete with Mrs. Paulson's breakdown wailing and tears and raving on about their kidnapped son. Then and there, Kenneth decided that, whether he likes it or not, he had to adjust to fit his unappreciated new life-style.



Jason has made a reservation for Kenneth, under Jason's name, at the Dillingball Hotel. Thank the Lord that Jason came into Kenneth's life when he did, ready with the solution to Kenneth's on-the-verge-of-going-stir-crazy existence. Jason has recently broken with a long-time lover, his heart on the mend; he's more than willing to volunteer his wardrobe and his car to someone more obviously wanting a return to the "outside world" than he is.

Kenneth steers Jason's car onto Tanyln Boulevard ,which provides the most direct and convenient access to the hotel garage. After which, it'll only be a short elevator ride to the hotel lobby, check in, another short elevator ride to his room, a call made to Cal Penningdale for the pre-arranged black boys from the Penningdale Escort Agency's stable, and Kenneth can forget writing his new novel (which isn't going all that well anyway), and forget his sudden penchant for all things smelling of lemons (his contacting spirits not going all that well, either). If he's destined to spend another sleepless night, it will at least include the welcome distraction of some hot and heated lead-in down-and-dirty sex.

He brakes the car for a red light and can't help but scope out the little dramas being enacted all around him. It doesn't take any stretch of anyone's imagination to know why this area is called "The Meat Rack." Both sides of its streets have all sorts of meat, more often than not ill-wrapped by bulged trouser-crotches, all lined up for inspection by potential buyers who constantly drive by.

There's something about even the idea of picking up rough trade directly off this street, or off any street, that Kenneth

finds tremendously exciting, even if it's something he'd never do, even if his life hadn't become what it has become. If he finds himself paying for sex these days, where he's never paid for it before, and still wouldn't pay for it if he wasn't seeing "things" in candle flames, the escorts he's paying for come (pun intended) well recommended and backed by Cal Penningdale's sterling reputation for providing companionship that can be trusted not to conk you over your head and rob you blind when all you want are a few minutes of hard cock or tight asshole. Catch-as-catch-can here at The Meat Rack is something Kenneth leaves to far braver souls than he is. That doesn't, however, keep him from looking. In fact...

He can't believe he steers the car over to the curb.

The blond stud in blue-flannel shirt, tight-tight jeans, boots, and cowboy hat, originally posed against the wall, is already at the car window that Kenneth definitely doesn't remember rolling down.

The kid's bend from the waist brings his decidedly handsome face up close, personal, and attractively bracketed by the window frame. "What's up?" he says. "Besides, of course, what you have in the crotch of your pants."

He chews on ... yes, an actual ... piece of straw.

His teeth are white-white. His smile is thoroughly attractive and come-and-get-me seductive.

He smells disturbingly of freshly squeezed lemons.

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## Chapter Six

Fuck! Fuck! Shit! Piss! Whore!

*He's* missed out on getting him by the length of one fucking bejezus car! What fucking luck, or lack thereof! Damn!

There the kid is, all blond hair, green eyes, cowboy hat, tight jeans, shit-kicking boots, blue-flannel shirt, and that bit of straw he's always chewing (hopefully not the same overused piece, night after night!) only needing to walk up to the parked car ... which he does ... except it's not *his* car.

Still cussing up a storm, *he* drives slowly by, trying to make out the lucky sonofabitch who has screwed up *his* plans for the evening. If *he* had a shot gun, *he* would blast the interfering driver and the interfering car to Kingdom-Come, but all *he* has is *his* knife.

It's not as if the kid likely will be gone for the whole evening. The name of the hustling game at The Meat Rack—where the "meat" isn't as costly as what's available through call-boy agencies, like the one run by Cal Penningdale—is fast turnover. A lot of the johns here are wham-bam-thank-you-man kind of guys who get their rocks off and then they're gone. Where, in the callboy service, a customer might well book a specific client for the whole night.

Still, *he* doesn't want to wait however short the time it will take whomever the lucky stiff, with the lucky stiff, in the car still parked at the curve. In *his* car's rearview mirror, *he* sees the way the blond is leaned up against the driver's side of the

stopped auto, tight jeans-sheathed ass thrust invitingly backward; the kid tucks a bit of unruly hay-colored hair back beneath the brim of his cowboy hat.

Fuck! Fuck! Shit! Piss! Whore!

There is no way on God's green earth that *he's* going to have at anyone else but that blond cowboy. *He's* been planning this evening for a long while. *His* heart is set on this particular male prostitute, and on no other until he gets this one. *He's* thought about him and dreamed about him 24/7, since his last pick up from The Meat Rack. If the frustration of not having "it" happen as quickly as *he'd* like it to happen is, in fact, an additional turn-on, by way of prolonged Anticipation (with a capital "A"), it's an additional turn-on, *he* would prefer doing without.

Not that all of *his* evenings always go as planned, but *he* likes them best when they do coincide as nearly as possible with the format *he's* previously mapped out. *He* doesn't like surprises. Surprises can interfere. They can screw *him* up, trip *him* up, and eventually maybe even see *him* up the river without a paddle or a pot to piss in.

*He* pays no attention to all of the other merchandise on display. *He's* focused on the kid behind him, still seen in the rearview mirror. The kid is still leaned up against the parked car. What in the hell are the two doing, spending so much time talking? The kid should be in the car by now ... should be off to some deserted parking area, like the one at Boyland Park ... should be collecting his fee for doing what he does ... should be doing what he does ... should be headed on back to give someone else, like *him*, a fucking turn.

The Meat Rack takes up four square blocks. A potential client drives two blocks, turns; drive another two, turns; drives another two, turns; and ... is back where he's started, at least as far as The Meat Rack is concerned.

*He* won't feel self-conscious making the circuit all damned night if *he* has to. *He* won't be the only one, either, who'll go round and round, some never pulling over to the curb; not because they don't find anything of interest, but because they're subjected to so much of a voyeuristic good thing; they're satisfied to keep one hand on the wheel, the other hand busy stroking, stroking, stroking their hard dicks to ejaculations. After which, some go home, and some stick around to repeat the procedure a second ... third ... fourth ... or however many times their cocks can stand the abuse, and there's still cum to squirt without its owners having to pay for anything besides gas.

*He* just hopes that when the kid returns he won't be grabbed up again before *he* can get to him. Even professional street kids only have a certain amount of spunk to put out during the course of any given evening, and when it's shot, they have a tendency to go home or check in with their pimps, or go spend their earnings on booze in some bar like The Horse-Head Tavern. *He* has no intentions of going to The Horse-Head Tavern where there are simply too many damned people, each with two eyes, to see what *he* wouldn't want them to see—except of course for one-eyed Willie, who was in the war and now wears a black eye-piece like Barnacle Bill the Sailor (or is it Bluebeard the Pirate?).

Wait a minute! Wait a fucking minute!

*He* can't believe his eyes. *He* can't believe the car that was there is gone, but the kid hasn't gone with it. The kid leans against the wall. One foot is up, its sole aligned with the bricks. His cowboy hat is pushed back to show more of his blond hair. Still coveted by his sexy mouth is the bit of straw shifted here and there by his full lips.

So, what the hell happened? Was the guy in the parked car into something too kinky? Was he not about to pay whatever the asking price? (No price for the cowboy, as far as *he's* concerned on this particular evening, is too much to pay.) Did the guy not like the kid up close? Or was it the driver of the car who looked too dangerous? There is, after all, a serial killer of gay hustlers on the loose. *He* smiles.

"Move that piece of junk!" *he* mutters to the driver of the slow-moving vehicle immediately ahead of *him* ... to the slow-moving car ahead of that one ... to the one ahead of that one—any one of which can pull over to the curb, beckon to the kid, have the kid get in, drive away with the kid, before *he* gets him.

*He'd* honk his horn, but that would draw attention. *He* doesn't want attention. *He* just wants the kid in *his* car as quickly as possible. *He* wants him driven to that carefully chosen alley as quickly as possible. *He* wants his tight jeans dropped, his underpants (does he wear any?) dropped. *He* wants the big cowboy dick out and stiff and gobbled down. *He* wants to hear the cry of pleasure and the pain in direct result of what *he's* prepared to deliver for and to him. Oh, *he* will get his money's worth, if *his* luck holds out; hell, *he'll* get even more than *his* money's worth, no matter what the studly

little bastard charges that may have already sent one potential customer on his disappointed way.

Jesus, fucking, YES!"

*He* has *his* car so fast to the curb that *he* almost back-ends the car in front of *him* that hasn't quite cleared the spot by the sidewalk when *he* hastily moves to claim it. *He* tells *himself* to be calm, be cool, be collected. It'll do *him* no good to fuck up now and do anything, like have a fender-bender that'll have everyone recall that *he* was where *he* was, doing what *he* was doing. No way will *he* be able to continue all *he* wants to do this evening if there's an incident, and the police are called.

Cowboy sees *his* parked car (can't miss it!), but doesn't move toward it. Has he noticed how quickly *his* vehicle claimed the spot; a sure indication of a ready, willing, and able john behind the wheel; someone so taken by cowboy's exceptional good looks and body that *he* might put out a little extra cash to have at it, if just made to wait a bit longer?

*He* rolls down the driver's-side window and waits. *He's* determined not to appear as anxious as *he* is. *He's* been here before, done this before (if not with this particular cowboy) ... has the t-shirt, has burned it, has tossed the ashes. *He* knows that *his* rolled-down car window is enough incentive to bring the kid on over eventually. And sure enough ...

Here he comes, with his cute little butt-wiggling swagger and all. Looking all shy and just in town from the farm, when *he* knows he may be from the farm but it's been a while since his arrival. *He* spotted him from the get-go and put him on *his* waiting list.

He stops. He squats rather than leans his full studly body against the car. The move successfully puts his face at the window. "What's up?" he says. He has a surprisingly low voice, which is probably a helluva lot higher when he screams in passion ... or in pain.

"I'll give you three guesses what's up," *he* says. "And I'm not talking the moon over Miami."

He smiles. He has a nice smile that parts his full and sensuous lips over startlingly white and even teeth that provide proof positive that not all boondocks are without qualified dentists and excellent dental care.

"I would have guessed you were a cop," he says, "you're so good looking, but I've seen you around before."

*He's* supposed to be flattered. In a way, *he* is, despite *himself*, even if *he* recognizes the old tried-and-true hustler spiel that *he's* heard before. Most of these guys don't give a damn what anyone looks like and will fuck a knothole if Mother Nature only leaves enough cash in the crotch of the tree to pay for the molestation.

"You out for a little fun?" he asks when his compliment doesn't get any response but the slight roll of *his* eyes. "I know I am."

"Well, if your idea of fun is the same as my idea of fun, namely my face swinging on your hard dick in an alleyway I know that's all private and just up the way a bit, then I'd say we might well manage some shared party time. What do you think?"

He tells *him* his asking price. It certainly can't have been the cost of his dick for cocksucking that sent the other guy



packing. *He* expected the cost of *his* evening to be a helluva lot more. God knows, *he* has paid more for far less attractive packages with far less impressive packages; not that *he'll* say so. *He* takes money out of his pocket, peels off the appropriate bills and, with extra obviously added by way of good-will incentive, hands over the total and, only then says, "Get in the car."

*He* has no doubt the kid will comply. If *he* isn't the most handsome man on the block—certainly not on this block—*he* certainly has never had to bag *his* head. *He* looks ordinary. *He* looks safe. *He's* always amazed by how people, even those who should know better, like cowboy here and all the other hustlers in danger and lined up along these streets like sitting ducks in a shooting gallery, still judge a book by its cover.

"It's not far," *he* says once the kid is in and sits with his muscular legs teasingly open so that *he* has a good look at his length of ropy cock aligned along the inside of his left thigh. "I know the alley well, because it's out back of my cousin's restaurant, which is closed for remodeling; there's virtually no foot traffic after nightfall, so I can suck your dick and make you squeal loud enough to raise the dead without anyone coming to investigate." *Raising* the dead is the last thing on *his* agenda.

"You good at cock-sucking, are you?" *he* says, maybe trying to insinuate that *he* shouldn't be too disappointed if *he's* not climbing the walls when the suck occurs, because *he's* been sucked off by some pretty skillful cock-gobblers in his short time on the streets.

"I think you'll be quite surprised by my particular expertise," *he* boasts. *His* statement is rife with double-entendre, above and beyond the soon-to-be-verified fact that there are truly few cocksuckers who rival *his* talent in swinging on hard dick. *He* senses the kid doesn't have a clue. Cowboy, like the others, is probably thinking no farther than how long all of this is going to take before he can get back to his spot on The Meat Rack to reel in another paying customer.

*He* drives to the alley and parks the car in its darkness. *He* turns off the motor. Complete silence!

"Your cousin is Joe?" Cowboy asks. That's what the faded black block-lettering spells out on the back of the building, along with BAR-B-Q AND GRILL. *He* told Cowboy they were headed for a spot behind *his* cousin's restaurant, but *he* lied. *He* doesn't have a Cousin Joe, and JOE'S BAR-B-Q AND GRILL hasn't been up and running for at least a couple of years.

"When the place reopens, be sure to stop by," *he* says. "Tell Joe his cousin sent you, and he'll give you star treatment. In the meantime, I'd like to eat your dick with you backed up against the restaurant wall, if that's okay with you."

"Why not?" Cowboy says.

They get out. No one is in sight. All the businesses once housed within the surrounding buildings have been shut down by the recent recession—or depression (depending on whom you talk to).

"Any spot in particular?" Cowboy asks.

"Anywhere is fine," *he* says. *He's* previously cleared one stretch of the alley of its junk that once blocked access to the

wall. "Just lean on back, as if you're waiting for me to drive by in a car, spot you, and call you on over. Only, pull out your big dick by way of additional enticement."

Cowboy does exactly as instructed: finds a portion of the wall ... leans against it ... widens his stance .... unbuttons his pants fly ... fishes out his mighty fine dick not yet so used and abused by evening usage that it's anything but steely stiff and hard.

"Now, you don't have to do anything else but spew cum when the time arrives," *he* says. Actually, there's one final requirement, but *he's* not about to spoil *his* fun. *He* pulls over a pre-planted piece of cardboard for kneeling on and drops to put Cowboy's impressive cock at eye-level. The kid and his dick smell pleasantly of lemons. "Except, if you would please, can you tumble out your nuts, too, so they'll provide a lumpy pillow for my chin once I've eaten your prick all the way down to its base?"

Cowboy's right hand momentarily disappears into the breach beneath his dick and soon returns with his two genuinely sizable testicles encased in their blond-hair scrotal sac that's released to waterfall in unrestrained freedom.

*He* takes Cowboy's boner in one hand; *he* fondles the kid's nuts with *his* other hand. *His* tongue licks cockhead as if it licks lemon lollypop or a scoop of lemon sherbet. *He* pays particular attention to the sensitive spot *he* knows exists on most any dick where cock corona flares from supporting cock belly.

"Oh, yeah, baby, lick my meat," Cowboy says. Whether his accompanying sigh is of sheer pleasure, or is merely good

play-acting by someone so often paid to have his cock sucked that it's no longer the novelty it once was, it's hard to say. To *him*, it makes no fucking difference whatsoever. Pleasure faked by Cowboy now won't be faked once *he* has the kid's cum blasting like sixty from blond, cum-filled nuts.

*He* doesn't waste time getting down to serious cock-sucking, in that *he* doesn't get all that much pleasure out of eating dick. Mouth-riding a boner is something at which *he* excels only as a means to an end. The end is all that's important as far as *he's* concerned.

"Jesus, fuck, you do know how to give head!" Cowboy compliments on the fourth slide of *his* head down the total length of the kid's dick. "Maybe you should start charging."

Oh, there'll be a price to pay, all right! The sooner *he* gets *his* recompense the better. Cowboy obviously hasn't had all that many really expert cock-suckers go down on his pecker, or it might have taken him a little while longer to realize what a prize he has bouncing on his prick at the moment.

*He* continues sucking up a storm. *He* keeps hold of the dick with *his* right hand, moving *his* fingers out of the way whenever *his* lips move down the whole of the cockshaft. *His* left hand now rests on *his* left knee, paying no attention to Cowboy's nuts, which are elevating within their scrotum and contracting in direct response to the pleasure hastily building inside the kid's body.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, yes!" Cowboy says. His hips take up a reflexive fucking motion that pushes his dick forward, whenever *he's* on a sucking downslide, and pulls back, squashing the kid's ass against the back-wall of JOE'S BAR-B-

Q AND GRILL every time *he* slides *his* face up to where only flared corona is contained by *his* hot mouth and pursed lips.

It won't be long now, if just because no hustler— and Cowboy is no exception—ever uses techniques, mental or yoga, to prolong any paid-for session or its resulting pleasure. The shorter the time spent with someone, no matter how well that someone does what he does, the quicker a hustler's meat can get back on the rack for recycling into some other paying john's mouth or asshole ... the quicker the hustler's mouth and ass can start getting paid for additional servicing.

"Eat it ... eat it ... eat it!" Cowboy chants.

*He* does exactly as instructed, *his* left hand locating the side pocket on *his* left pants leg and skillfully unfastening its button; *he* used to use Velcro but it made too much noise when coming undone.

*He's* done this enough times that *he* usually knows more about the time line of a sucked cock's explosion than the guy who owns the priming erection ever does. Cowboy's cock is on the verge. It's only going to take a couple more bounces of *his* hot mouth and squeezing throat, before ...

"Fucking take my jizz!" Cowboy says. His hands tightly grip *his* scalp and push *his* head all the way down to keep *his* tightly pursed lips anchored around the very base of the kid's primed penis.

Almost simultaneous with the first squirt of pearly Cowboy cream from the kid's completely sucked prick, *his* knife cuts the Cowboy's thigh all of the way to and through his femoral artery. The action is over and done so quickly, so expertly ... the knife blade so surgery sharp ... the kid's senses so

consumed by the ecstasy of orgasm ... that Cowboy doesn't even know he's bleeding out ... actually thinks its pleasure that buckles his knees and lands them painfully against the concrete of the alley's paved surface. His cock having slid free of *his* containing mouth, it squirts the last of its cum into the space between the two now-kneeling men.

"How was that, kid?" *he* asks and smiles, *his* pants filled with the cum *his* cock has squirted without *him* even having touched *his* dick. "Was it as good for you as it was for me?"

Cowboy's face is pale, as if all of its blood has already left to join the crimson lake forming between his legs. His mouth moves but doesn't say anything, which is just the way *he* likes it. *He's* always worries that one of his little playthings might actually find the capacity to make some kind—any kind—of death-rattle sound. God knows, *he* picks *his* killing grounds carefully to avoid any such sounds being heard, even if made, but the unexpected can always be expected to happen unexpectedly.

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## Chapter Seven

Kenneth awakes with a start.

He's disoriented and can't figure out where he is. He's had a nightmare and not a pleasant one. He was being berated by the hustler he'd encountered earlier, up close and personal, at The Meat Rack—"Why did you just drive away and leave me to die?!" Anyway, he thinks he earlier encountered the real thing, in cowboy hat, boots, and jeans, on the street. It's all very hard for him, mentally, to nail down. He thinks he steered Jason's car to the curb. He thinks the kid said something. He thinks he said something to the kid in return. He thinks the kid went back (disappointed?) to resume his stance against the wall. He thinks he drove away to ...

There's a follow-up knock to the one that just jolted him from dreamland.

"A minute, please!" he requests loudly.

He's in a hotel room. He doesn't remember checking in. He doesn't remember falling asleep. He only remembers the horrible dream, the disappointment in the kid's pale-pale face.

There's an attractive black kid in the hallway outside, seen through the peephole that centers the upper part of the hotel-room door.

"Yes?" Kenneth asks.

"Cal Penningdale sent me," I say. I'm not surprised that he's paranoid. A lot of johns are ... afraid someone is going to catch them in the act.

Finally, he opens the door. Not too bad to look at, if a tad disheveled ... you can never tell what waits on the other side of any closed door, in my business. Actually, he looks familiar, although I can't place his face. I'm sure I'd know if we've tricked before.

"You okay?" I ask. There's just something about him that...

"You smell of pine," he says; anyway, that's what it sounds like he says.

"Beg your pardon?"

Has he been drinking? A lot of guys drink before sucking and fucking. A little booze is okay, in that it helps them relax and lose inhibitions. A lot of booze, though, is bad in that it makes it hard for even a pro like me to get them hard.

"Nothing," he says. "Come in." He steps back and lets me on through. "I've been having smelling problems, lately. Doctors think it's to do with my screwed-up sinuses, having, thank God, dispelled my initial fears that it was a brain tumor."

Do I comment upon my own my recent smell problems, especially since I've never given any thought to blaming them on something so serious as a tumor on my brain?

"You say your doctors say sinuses?" Suddenly, I want reassurance.

"Even gave me the CAT scan to prove my sinus cavities look like those of a smoker, when I haven't smoked a day in my life."

Does he drink, though?



"I'm sorry," he says, finally closing the door behind us.  
"Did you tell me your name?"

I tell him my name. I can tell it doesn't ring any bells, although I'm sure Cal must have told him.

"I nodded off while I was waiting for you to get here," he says. "I'm still groggy. Maybe a drink will help." Yep, he drinks! "You want one?"

"Better not," I say. "My boss doesn't like me to drink on the job."

"I'm sure he won't mind if I have one," he says, and heads for the small refrigerator. I look for any indication of other drinks he may have consumed before I arrived, but there are no empty glasses or empty liquor bottles in sight.

He opens the frig and squats before it. He retrieves a cold glass and fills it with ice. He stands with glass, ice, and a small bottle of vodka. He kick-shuts the refrigerator door.

"Sit down," he says and nods me into a chair. He sits across from me on one end of the sofa, unscrews the top of the bottle, pours the contents into the glass and over the ice, and carefully places the empty bottle on a side table. He takes a long drink, as if it's his first in a very long time.

"Refresh my memory, if you would, please, as to how much this session is going to cost me."

I tell him, although I'm sure Cal covered this same ground.

Kenneth remembers having had a conversation with Cal Penningdale the day before. There had been talk of Kenneth's planned night on the town. There had been a discussion on the possibility of Kenneth sampling the talents of one very versatile black man in Cal's stable. Kenneth was supposed to

call the agency's night number from the hotel when he was settled in. He doesn't remember making that call. Hell, he doesn't even remember arriving at the hotel.

"I'll be fine in just a moment," he says and takes another swallow of his drink.

I'm still trying to place his face ... last seen as regards to business (not likely), or pleasure (lately, my business and pleasure have been one and the same). Do I just see him regularly, somewhere on the street? Have I spotted him, more than once, in one of the gay bars? (Although most people who hire callboys are usually too ugly or too paranoid to window shop elsewhere.)

"There!" he says, having finished the last of his liquor. He puts the empty-but-for-ice glass next to the empty bottle on the side table. "Sorry about the schizoid beginning, but I'm much better now." He still doesn't remember what he'd like to remember, but he's more quickly able to adjust to such voids these days, although the black man likely can't tell that by the way Kenneth has been acting. "Actually, I've rather been looking forward to this evening, what with more than a little stress on the job lately."

Is that my opening to ask him what he does for a living? Nope! The general rule of thumb is that an escort asks no questions, even if the escort—like me—thinks that asking might help place a face. On the other hand, if the customer wants to volunteer information, that's okay. I wait and hope he'll feel free.

"I'd like you to fuck me into complete exhaustion," Kenneth says. Something tells him this black stud is just the

one who can do it, too. "I have all intentions of sleeping soundly, for hours and hours, after you leave me tonight, so let me go get your money, and let's get started."

He stands. Again, he's disoriented until he spots his jacket thrown haphazardly over the back of a nearby chair; an accompanying Los Angeles Angels cap is on the arm of the same chair. He doesn't even like baseball.

He pays me. We go to the bedroom. We take off our clothes and get on the bed.

I fuck him hard and fast, as requested. He has a nice tight asshole, and I'm still breathing hard from having serviced it so well when he asks for repeats.

He expands upon his request. "Think you can manage this one slow and easy?"

"Your wish is my command." I'm sure as hell glad I didn't jack off while Jeremy was eating his dick earlier in the day. I'm sure as hell glad Talon Winland didn't require any of my cum this afternoon. Not that I wouldn't have been able to manage two comes in a row, here and now, but it makes it a lot easier that I haven't emptied my nuts once or twice before taking on Mr. Fuck-Me-Into-Sleep-Induced-Oblivion.

No changing of our positions. He stays on his belly. His legs stay bent and flayed on the bed; I stay down and in between them. My cock, up his ass, is still hard; I commence some slow and easy pumping to keep my dick as solid as it is. If his asshole is a little less tight since I filled it with lubricating cum, it's still plenty tight enough to keep my dick from going soft. I'm confident I'm going to manage this consecutive screw just fine. In fact, if he needs yet a third

fuck, before sleepiness sets in—considering he's already had one nap by his own admission—I just might be able to provide him with that, too.

"How's that?" I ask. I was wrong in saying that a hustler can't ask *any* question, because that is one we should and can ask, more than once during the course of an evening, to make sure a customer is getting his money's worth.

"Mmmmmmmmm!" he hums, which I take as a yes.

And then, suddenly, I'm smelling pine. This has me wondering if he hasn't lit a candle somewhere, like the one I had burning in the bathroom when Jeremy insisted I told him about how I knew he'd been fucked by Maurice at that long-ago summer's camp. Seeing no lit candle, though, I opt for the possibility that somewhere there's one of those cheap air fresheners usually seen hanging from rearview mirrors in cars.

The piney smell dissipates as quickly as it arrived.

I'd like to leave off fucking and have a long discussion with Kenneth as regards our mutually shared weird bouts of smelling ... and about his tumor-versus-sinus prognosis.

"Oh, do that again, please," he says.

Unfortunately, my mind has been wandering, and I haven't a clue as to what "that", in my very extensive fucking repertoire, refers. By way of compensation, I provide a roll of my hips on a fuck-thrust that I know will torque my entering meaty inches against his prostate in a way—hopefully—that's destined to please.

"Oh, yes," he says appreciatively. Having lucked out with that maneuver, I have to pay way more attention. I've not

been hired to sit around and chat with him about our possibly shared olfactory condition, unless he wants to delve into that subject a bit farther. I'm here to fuck his ass this second time and, should he ask, a third. Pine smells out of the blue ... whether heralding visits by ghosts with more insights regarding clandestine summer-camp sex ... or hotel rooms with ghosts insinuating something else ... or merely plugged sinuses ... even the possibility for a brain tumor ... are all incidental.

"Ugh ... ugh ... ugh," he grunts. It's not the sounds, though, of someone in pain, who wants me to stop. It's the staccato song sung by someone enjoying and who wants more of the same.

My black dick fucks his tight, pink, white-man's asshole for the second time, and I concentrate on making it feel even better for him than the more hurried first time. I vary the angles of my insertions so each ensuing jab enters from a different direction; I vary my withdrawals, too. Every so often I make a concentrated effort to fuck my dick particularly hard and fast against his prostate, sure those times are complete successes when his grunts become louder.

I'm good at what I'm doing. Not only have I put in a lot of practice perfecting my craft, but I've had more than a few people lucky enough to be on the receiving end of my dick, or plugged to their balls up my tight asshole, say that mine are the very best fucks they've ever had.

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## Chapter Eight

Talon Winland is going to miss the whip, riding crop, leather strap, and rubber hose wielded by his favorite black hustler to impart dark-pink impact striations across Talon's firm and pliant pale blond ass. He is going to miss the big black hustler dick rammed to purple Negro balls up his white man's tight and gripping asshole. He's going to miss all the B&D game playing that has put him in the roles of master ridden by Mandingo slave on some old-south plantation, or the Ku Klux Klansman captured and fucked by a disgruntled black, or the abducted White Supremacist who gets his due from a black stud long maligned by him as having less than monkey-brain intelligence. He'll even miss being the son of the Nazi SS officer who ruthlessly exterminated thousands of Jews, gypsies, and malcontents, and then hid out in America after World War II, until dead of lung cancer.

Of course, he has the option of continuing, simply needing to convince himself that the sins of any father really have nothing whatsoever to carry-over to the son, despite the popularity of the old saying to the contrary.

It's not as if he doesn't have friends in high places. Without them, he wouldn't have had a clue how close to coming to light the truth was before his father died, and how close it *still* is to breaking out of confinement. Of course, now his father is safe enough. There will be no deportation of Deiter Winland back to Germany to stand trial. Certainly, there will be no deportation of Talon, either, who was born

and bred in the good old U.S. of A. He is a U.S. citizen in good-standing. He has nothing to do with what his father was and did in a world war long over and done.

"When the shit hits the fan," one of his old friends in government told him, "just sit tight, stay low key, and keep out of sight until it all blows over. Most people don't remember World War II and couldn't really give a rat's ass, except by way of mouthing kowtow platitudes to the few Israeli who genuinely do care and, as a result, will garner fifteen more minutes in the spotlight before fading back into black."

Actually, that was the course of action Talon, until just recently, had all intentions of following. What changed his mind were communiques out of South America that those rabid members of the Jewish community, still intent upon righting the wrongs supposedly committed during World War II, somehow had caught wind of Talon's participation in his father's nefarious affairs after the war. They were sniffing out conclusions that wouldn't let Talon live out the rest of his life as he would have liked to live it.

The truth—unable to be changed, even if Talon had any regrets, which he doesn't—is that Talon isn't one of those sons destined for surprise when it's revealed why his father has for so many years been in hiding.

At a very early age, Talon not only knew of his father's Nazi connection, including the participation of Deiter Winland (nee Vinlander) in the Final Solution, but had agreed, when his father's mental acuity began to fail, to continue the money laundering that still routed funds to the families of Nazi

dignitaries long sequestered in various parts of the world. If he was—as he can boast with some degree of pride — exceedingly careful and cunning in routing funds through dummy corporations and off-shore accounts, there's still the paper trail that leads roundabout to him and is about to be discovered.

Better to just end it all now and avoid the likely consequences, folderol, publicity, and inconvenience.

He pulls his father's German Luger P08 model pistol from the holster he wears as part of his father's black *SS-Untersturmfuhrer* uniform, in which Talon would always play dress up in the attic, with his father's oversight and blessing.

He puts the gun barrel to his right temple; the gun metal is cold.

He pulls the trigger; the blast is tremendously hot.

He dies in a splatter of lukewarm blood, bullet-damaged skin, impact-shattered bone, and messily-scattered brain.

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## Chapter Nine

I've had the day off and spent most of it lying around in Boyland Park, half naked, and being admired from afar. When I get back to my apartment, Jeremy is reading the newspaper.

"Better hope your face doesn't freeze with that expression on it, or you'll never get another trick, including me," I warn.

"They found another male prostitute dead," he says.  
"Sammy Grant. I knew him."

That makes three of the serial killer's victims he's known; thank God, I haven't known any. Jeremy may even have known a fourth in passing; he's not sure. They've found seven bodies in all, but who the hell knows how many are out there, uncounted except by the killer? Surely the police don't have a fucking clue!

"What say I cheer you up by taking you to that new gay restaurant?" I say. I'm still feeling flush from Talon Winland's and Kenneth's exceptionally generous tips.

However, I've grossly miscalculated the restaurant-in-question's initial popularity, because it's purely by luck that we get waved to the head of a very long line by Jeff Dillin, an old fuck-buddy of mine, who the management has hired to watch the door.

"I thought all you ate was my cock," he says, ushering Jeremy and me on through.

"Don't you wish?" I say in passing; he slaps my ass.

The waiter finishes lighting the candle on our table—a pretty red thing, smelling faintly of strawberries—soon covered by a glass globe that seemingly should snuff it but doesn't. The waiter heads off for our rum and colas. The cute femme lesbian and her butch companion finish at the adjoining table and get up to go. I stop her on her way by to ask if her scarf—black silk with silver, barbed-wire-design edging—is a *Draqual*.

For some reason, I don't catch her answer as she continues on out the front door.

"How did you know that?" Jeremy asks. He sounds like he's asking from another room, but then his voice turns up in volume. "You kind of freaked her and her 'husband' out."

"I just saw that scarf in the latest issue of *reFRESH*," I say, "although there it was worn by a genuinely handsome blond Brit twink."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" he says.

"The scarf she was wearing. What in the hell are *you* talking about?"

"Whatever the 'little something' her dead mother left her 'in the bottom right-hand door of the kitchen cabinet, beneath the strawberry-pie recipe.'"

"Beg your pardon?"

"That's exactly what she said."

"Who?"

"The gal with the scarf. She asked you to repeat what you'd said, and you did."

"I asked her if her scarf was a *Draqual*."

"Like hell you did. You told her that her dead mother had left her something back at her house. Dear Mum was going to tell her where it was but died first."

"Don't shit with me, Jeremy!"

"Cross my heart, buddy." He goes through the motions. "That's exactly what you said ... leaving me, the gal, and her husband believing that you just may genuinely be psychic."

"I know what I said."

"You *do* remember telling me that my camp counselor, Maurice-who-so-loved-my-ass, died from a blow to the head when all of us at camp were told at the time that he drowned?"

"I only remember you telling me that I told you that he died of a blow to the head. I only remember you telling me that you were told that he had drowned. Truth be told, I figure you're likely right about his drowning, you having been closer to the event than I ever was."

"Nope. I looked it up, and he died from a blow to the head. They thought he must have slipped on the embankment and slid into the pond. No water in his lungs."

"You looked it up?" That really didn't seem likely.

"In the library. It's surprising what all you can find there if you smile nicely at the buck-toothed lady behind the front desk."

"You looked up the death of your camp counselor and found out he died of a cracked skull?"

"Just like you said he did."

"Except, I still don't remember saying it."

"And you don't remember telling the gal with the scarf to go look in the cabinet drawer in her kitchen for a little surprise? Damn, would I like to be a fly on the wall when she pulls out that drawer and finds whatever she finds."

"Probably she finds nothing, which will bring her and her husband back here to beat the shit out of me, and believe me, the husband looks like she's more than capable of doing the job."

"Why don't you get in contact with the ghost of Sammy Grant and ask who offed him?"

"Sammy who?"

"Grant. My hustler friend who was the last victim of the serial killer."

"Right."

"Really, I'm serious."

"You should *get* serious! Whatever you think is happening by way of my insight isn't happening. All that *is* happening is some kind of fluke."

"Go on, give a try at contacting Sammy's spirit. I'll bet the police would love to know there's someone else conveniently around conversing with spirits instead of just that guy they're always using."

I'm thankful for the return of our waiter with our drinks. While he's here, I tell him we're ready to order. This obviously isn't true from the way Jeremy suddenly hems and haws after I've put in my speedy request for the surf and turf, baked potato with extra dollops of real butter and sour cream, hold the bacon bits, please. In the end, Jeremy asks for the same.

"I actually think I want prime rib," he then says, pouting after the fact.

"Shall we call back the waiter and change your order?"

"Lobster and steak is fine," he says but doesn't sound as if he means it.

"No more spirit do-do-do-do-do-do bullshit, please!" I warn him.

"Fine," he says. "Be one of those clairvoyants afraid of his newly discovered talent."

"You watch way too much television."

"You think?"

"I know."

"Since you're paying, I think I'll have another drink," he says and signals the cute gay bartender for seconds.

When we get back to our apartments, both in a good mood, he turns on my television.

"Didn't I tell you that you watch way too much of that," I say on my way to my bathroom for a piss.

"Fuck you!" he says and flops down on my couch before my sputtering screen.

I've my dick over the toilet bowl, letting go my steady stream of piss that results from all the rum-and-colas I'd drunk that evening, when Jeremy shouts from the other room, "Get the fucking hell in here!"

Not knowing what in the hell to expect, my dick is still out of my pants and dribbling piss down my pants leg when I make it back into the living room.

"What?"

"I think they just showed a picture of Talon Winland, although they said his name is Vinlander."

The picture now on the screen, though, is of a transport train arriving at some World War II concentration camp. There are Germans in uniform, prisoners in civilian dress, dogs barking and straining against leashes, guns drawn ...

"Seems your Mr. Vinlander has blown out his brains," Jeremy says. "Something to do with his father and World War II."

"Jesus," I say, stuffing my cock in my pants and sitting down on the couch to watch.

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## Chapter Ten

"Here, catch!" Jeremy says from the doorway. He tosses me a piece of material that I reflexively catch. "Take a look and tell me what you think."

"I'm thinking a pair of bikini underpants," I say. I bring the material up close to my nose. "I'm thinking that despite their faint overlying smell of lemons, they're more than a little ripe and probably have needed a good wash for quite some time. I'm thinking that you've just taken them off so my cock can more easily access your asshole."

"You really think they're mine? I'm disappointed."

"If they're not yours, then whose are they?" They sure as hell aren't mine.

"They belonged to Sammy Grant. I stole them the last time he and I had sex."

"Sammy Grant, as in the dead hustler, you mean? Jesus, Jeremy!" I drape the shorts over the arm of the couch, as if he's told me they harbor the plague. "You're not serious!"

"You really didn't know they weren't his?"

"How in the hell could I know that?"

"The same way you knew my camp counselor didn't drown. The same way you knew that lesbian in the restaurant had a gift awaiting her in the bottom drawer of a kitchen cabinet."

"I still haven't a clue how I luckily guessed about Maurice. As for the gal in the restaurant, we don't even know she actually found anything in that drawer, do we?"

"I thought for sure those undies would give you some kind of vibe, maybe even a clue as to Sammy's killer," Jeremy says.

"Come on, Jeremy, do get real! I'm not psychic, buddy. Believe me! Now, what say you take Sammy's dirty shorts and drop them in the trash? It's all kind of macabre that you still have them around."

"Actually, I have underpants from all my tricks, you included."

"You have a trophy collection of underwear that includes a pair of mine?" I *tsk-tsk* and shake my head.

"I swiped the black pair you wore the night you re-convinced me how much I really did enjoy cock fucked up my asshole."

"*You* have my long-lost favorite *Draqual* briefs, you mean?"

"When you're not around, I still sometimes smell them and jack-off."

"That has me hoping you can't say the same about those." I nod toward Sammy's shorts on the arm of the chair.

I'm expecting a quick denial, but he says, "Maybe you're just not trying hard enough." He walks over, sits on my lap. His hard-pressed ass gives me a miniature lap dance while he retrieves Sammy's soiled underpants and pretty much puts them in my face.

"Christ, Jeremy!"

He relents but looks so crestfallen that I'm almost sorry I can't provide him a soothsayer's insight into what exactly happened to his dead friend.

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## Chapter Eleven

"I'm genuinely sorry, John, but I really don't think I'm going to be able to help you," Kenneth says. "I keep sensing something or someone there, just out of my reach on the astral plain, trying to get through, but it just isn't happening. I'd feel it unfair to take any more of your money or hold out any additional hope."

"You did once say that if I had something of his...?"

"Of your grandfather's?"

"Of Deiter Vinlander," John Weinstein says. "You do know his son Talon is now dead, too—a suicide—likely making you even more my only hope of ever finding out what happened to my grandparents? I've been in contact with the son's heir who isn't German, isn't anti-Israeli and, as far as I can tell, doesn't have an ax to grind. Seeing as how you've led me to believe that it's only some insignificant item that's needed, like a scrap of old clothing, I'm thinking the heir might be persuaded to give us something of Vinlander's that'll work."

"There are no guarantees, even with a candle made incorporating any such item," Kenneth says. He's reluctant to let this go any farther. He's pretty sure that if there was anything to be had, he'd have it by now.

"It is one more way to try, though, yes?" John persists.

"I suppose it is *if* something of Deiter Vinlander can be had."

"Can I persuade you to come along with me when I ask? Somehow, I feel my request will come across more

legitimate, with you on hand, what with your proven track record with the police in this sort of thing."

"There are still a whole lot people who don't believe in me, or in what I do, John," Kenneth reminds. "Sometimes, *I* even wonder if I possess the power to converse with spirits, or if it's all just some kind of coincidental quirk."

"I made a death-bed promise to my father that I would try everything I could to find out what happened to his parents," John said. "I have to keep trying until I've exhausted even the most implausible of possibilities; this possibility is less implausible than most, considering your past successes, wouldn't you agree?"

"Well," Kenneth says, "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to give it a try ... if the son's heir can be persuaded. See if you can set up a meeting, and I'll go along to provide back up."

John takes Kenneth's hand and kisses it. Kenneth, embarrassed, blushes blood red.

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## Chapter Twelve

I'm going through another box that turns out to contain very little but old electric bills destined for the big dumpster I've specially ordered from waste management and had dropped off just outside the front door.

I look up. "Jesus!" I say, genuinely disturbed by the apparition Jeremy presents in Nazi black with swastika-emblazoned arm band. "I thought I told the medical examiner to throw that away when I took in the regular suit for Talon to be buried in."

"This isn't that uniform worn when Talon blew out his brains, buddy," Jeremy says. "It turns out that the corner wardrobe we spotted in the attic is full of them."

"And you just couldn't help trying one on?" The macabre outfit is too big for his skinny body and makes him look less scary than and more like a little boy in dress up.

"What's the harm?" He clicks the heels of highly polished jackboots and tries to win me over with a smile. "I'm just pretending it's Halloween."

"Didn't one of the English princes do that, too, and get dumped on by the press?"

"Don't I wish I were a prince, or that the media even gave a damn what I do or don't wear," he says, sounding very much neglected.

"Do take it off, please," I say. "It's creeping me out."

"Do you think it was some kind of search for retribution, for his old man's sins, that had Talon coming to you to get his

ass whipped and fucked?" He makes no move to remove the black SS uniform, and I decide not to make a big deal out of it. World War II is long over and done. Talon Winland is the only man I ever knew who knew an honest-to-good-Nazi.

"From what I'm reading in the newspapers," I say, "Talon had a few sins of his own that warranted more than a few whacks from me and a poking or two from my big black cock. The authorities still haven't figured out all of the convoluted trails of cash he routed through multinational banks to end up in the accounts of families of disposed Nazis still living high on the hog in parts of South America."

"Except for the attic, this doesn't look like the home of a die-hard Nazi fanatic, even of an ex-Nazi fanatic, though, does it?" Jeremy says. "It's all ... so ... well ... so very all-American, wouldn't you agree? Complete with its white picket fence."

"I suspect this place was planned to look less conspicuously a Nazi hideout than something in cement and steel with a sign proclaiming *REICHTAG BUNKER* might have done," I say. Though Jeremy is right. Except for the attic, which contains a miniature Nazi world all of its own, now obviously complete with Nazi wardrobe, the rest of the house is middle-America suburbia where any normal family could be expected to be found—husband, wife, two-and-a-half kids and a dog. If I didn't know what was upstairs—a Nazi-memorabilia collector's wet-dream—I'd be tempted to check in here permanently with Jeremy and give a try at living the stereotypical great American dream that bypassed both our parents and us.

"I'll bet that when you finally sell everything here, including the house, you won't have to fuck anyone for money ever again," Jeremy says. "Color me jealous. You going to charge John Weinstein for whatever it is he's coming for today, by way of a souvenir?"

"John Weinstein has been bit vague, to be sure, but I did get the definite impression he isn't exactly a Jew out to start a *Heil Hitler* collection. Although how he hopes to find any closure as regards his grandparents, apparently victims of atrocities possibly done by Talon's dad in Germany many years ago, is a complete mystery to me. Still, I'm a sucker for a guy in tears, even over the telephone."

"Is that why you like to fuck me until I cry?"

"I like to fuck you until you cry because you like me to fuck you until you cry. Now, I think you might want to shed that uniform before John Weinstein arrives on the doorstep, and you come across as an unfeeling and impolitic little pissant turd."

He checks his wristwatch, which doesn't go with his period outfit.

"There's plenty of time before he gets here," he says.

If nothing else, I'm immediately made suspicious by the tone of his voice.

"Plenty of time for what?" I want to know.

"I've been a naughty Nazi, my black friend," he says. "So much so that I'm convinced I need my ass whooped, maybe even fucked by a big black cock by way of punishment."

"I don't think so," I say and mean it. My cock, on the other hand, obviously has a mind all its own, and it immediately begins to stiffen in my trousers.

"I suppose I could wait for John Weinstein," he says, "who might be more disposed to take out his frustrations on this poor repentant Nazi, but I've always been partial to your whacking of my butt, and your fucking of my asshole."

He begins unbuttoning the uniform blouse. That completed, he undoes the front flap of the uniform trousers and unfastens the fly.

"This may actually be too damned kinky even for me," I say.

"Nonsense," he disagrees. "You've already fucked the son of a Nazi. I'm just an all-American kid dressed up in an old Nazi uniform."

"Smelling of pine," I say. Not having recognized that fact until just that very moment.

"You think so?" he says and sniffs a uniform sleeve. "I do believe you have the smell of moth balls confused with that of pine, but that's neither here nor there."

Since any mention to him that my cockeyed smelling as of late might be indicative of a brain tumor would likely put a real damper on his ardor, I refrain from being a killjoy. I keep hoping Cal will arrange another session for me with Kenneth, who may well have the same nose problem and might fully clue me in as regards all the available facts. I do remember having given him a good time, verified by his big tip, and I'm frankly surprised there haven't yet been any repeats.

"So, drop your pants and let's have at that all-American Nazi ass of yours," I say. Obviously, I'm too quickly convinced to participate and likely unforgivably politically incorrect in so doing, but I'm just too turned on by the idea of whacking Jeremy's ass and then fucking it to turn down his invitation, a Nazi uniform somewhere in the mix or not. I can only hope that John Weinstein doesn't turn up for his appointment early.

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## Chapter Thirteen

I'm surprised as hell and must show it, because John Weinstein says, "I do hope you don't mind my bringing along Kenneth Black. Perhaps you're familiar with his work in locating missing persons?"

So, he's THAT Kenneth? Though I'd known he looked familiar when I'd fucked him—and me—to exhaustion in that hotel room, I'd never made the psychic connection until now.

"He's agreed to help me locate my missing grandparents," John hurries on.

"Mr. Black?" I say. It's one of those times I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to admit to knowing a past trick, or whether he prefers I not make any mention of our previous relationship. I opt for the latter. Obviously, just as surprised by our reunion as I am, he merely offers me his hand to shake.

I usher them in and make introductions to "my cousin" Jeremy, who is no longer a Nazi SS Officer with cum dribbling out of his asshole, but now simply a typical teenager straight from a shower; his blond hair is still damp.

"Kenneth Black, *the* candle reader!" Jeremy says, pumping Kenneth's offered hand as if it'll bring water from a well in some arid part of a drought-riddled Africa. Then, as if he's experienced an epiphany, he turns to me and says, "My God, a candle reader is what you are, too, buddy!"



I grimace. Kenneth and John look puzzled. Jeremy looks as if he's been born again and is out to convert everyone within Hallelujah-hailing distance.

"Think about it," he says. "There was that green candle smelling of pine when you told me about Maurice dying at summer camp. There was that red candle when you told that woman about what her mother had left her by way of legacy in the kitchen cabinet drawer."

"Mr. Weinstein and Mr. Black aren't here to discuss my little quirks as of late," I say, turning in John and Kenneth's direction and shrugging apologetically.

"You've been having visions, have you?" Kenneth asks.

"Not that *I* can remember," I pooh-pooh, wishing the conversation wasn't suddenly so focused on me.

"He gets in the presence of candles and starts spouting off all sorts of interesting things that he can't remember having said afterwards," Jeremy says, like a dog worrying a bone and refusing to turn loose of it.

"I'm sure Mr. Black remembers each and every one of his conversations with spirits," I parry, prepared to turn the conversation back to the real reason John and Kenneth have turned up on my—Talon Winland's—one-time doorstep.

"Actually, remembrance only came later," Kenneth says, seemingly as willing to play with the bone as Jeremy is. "In the beginning, people had to tell me what I said."

"See!" Jeremy looks tremendously pleased with himself.

"I'm still pretty positive, Mr. Black, that your experiences and mine are entirely different," I insist. "I have no history of clairvoyance in my family."

"How about your mother's paranoia about candles?" Jeremy asks.

"She never really came right out and said the reason for that," I say, "but I'm pretty sure it *would* have come out if she were being visited by the dead."

"There's no hint of clairvoyance in my family, either," Kenneth says.

"Some people prefer to ignore their potential, yes, Mr. Black?" Jeremy says as if he's suddenly the authority on a subject that, in reality, hasn't been all that long residing within the grey cells of his cute little blond head.

"Certainly, I tried to deny *my* clairvoyant abilities, but it didn't work," Kenneth says.

That shuts Jeremy up for a quick minute, and I decide to take advantage. "Mr. Weinstein, you said you had a favor to ask?"

"Do you think two candle readers are better than one?" John asks and throws more kindling on the fire I've just tried to put out.

"Tell them about how your smelling has started to go all queer," Jeremy says.

"What about your smelling?" Kenneth asks. I can see his mind wondering why I hadn't mentioned my strange experiences with smells when he'd mentioned his in that hotel room.

"He smells lavender when there's no lavender," Jeremy barrels on. "He smells lemons when there are no lemons. He smells pine trees when there are no pine trees."

"Jesus!" Kenneth says.

"Probably a brain tumor," I say. "I've been meaning to see a doctor about it."

"Possibly not, though," Kenneth says; he's covered this ground before. "Doctors have found no explanation for my similar ability to smell things not present on the physical plain."

"Bingo!" Jeremy says; I'd really like to drop his pants and deliver a really hard and fast disciplinary paddle whack to his ass.

"I just happened to be burning a pine-scented candle when I just happened to smell pine trees," I reminded. "There was lavender in my bubble-bath."

"How about the lemons?" Jeremy asks.

"Yes, tell me more about the lemons," Kenneth says.

"Something to do with the guy killing all the hustlers," Jeremy says before I can open my mouth.

"Jesus!" Kenneth says again and this time *really* looks surprised. "I've been smelling lemons ever since the police brought me in to consult on the hustler killings. In fact, I even went so far as to have a professional candle artisan make a lemon-scented candle for me to try and get to the bottom of it. It didn't work."

"It's in regard to having a candle professionally made to help Kenneth possibly locate the bodies of my missing grandparents that brings us here today," John says.

Thank God we're back on track! I don't want to be a psychic! I don't want to be clairvoyant! I don't want to talk to the dead! When I take a shit, I want to smell shit, not lemons!

Kenneth takes over the lead. "Sometimes, candle reading goes much better if the candle used is professionally made, especially when it includes something in the pouring of the wax that's pertinent to the query."

"It's our understanding," John says, facing me full on, "that you and Talon Winland were in no way related. Is that correct?"

"We were merely acquaintances," I say, figuring it best to leave it at that, even if Kenneth might be able to read between the lines.

"Personally, you've no Nazi affiliations." John makes it a statement.

*Aside from the fact that I have a whole attic of Nazi paraphernalia and just fucked Jeremy while he was all decked out in SS black?* "Jesus, no!"

"We once requested something of Dieter Winland from his son, for inclusion in a specially poured candle for Kenneth to use in making his query of the spirits regarding the whereabouts of my missing grandparents," John says. "Talon flatly refused our request. With him now dead, we're holding out hope that we can persuade you as his heir to provide us with some little piece of something—no need for it to be of any value: some little bit of cloth clipped from the inside seam of any old pair of Dieter's pants will do."

At this point, I can be expected to wonder aloud how I can possibly find, among everything in the house, something that belonged to Dieter Winland, but I already know the uniforms in the attic have to be his; Talon was never old enough to have worn them in Hitler's army.

"The Nazi uniforms have to have been the old man's!" Jeremy says before I've figured out what I'm going to say.

"You have Dieter Winland's uniforms?" John asks. He looks excited enough to wet his pants. "If so, all we need is just some little bit from one, right, Kenneth?"

"Yes," Kenneth agrees.

Do I even, for one second, consider what Talon would want under these circumstances? No. It's already obvious to me what he wanted. If he refused the same request and had wanted his heir apparent to follow in his footsteps, he should have chosen someone other than a black man whose ancestors knew all about persecution. That he chose me to give everything he owned tells me that he might have consciously, or subconsciously, been repentant in the end. All of his getting his ass whipped and fucked by my big black cock while he was alive, punctuated in finale by his gunshot to the head, might not have been nearly enough to compensate, in his own estimation, for what his father and he had foisted on mankind.

"So, Jeremy, why don't you find a pair of scissors and see if you can't scrounge up a bit of material from something in the wardrobe upstairs?" I suggest. He, more than I, knows what's available up there, where it is, and whether there's a spare scrap of any of it that can be donated to a good cause.

As soon as he's left the room, Kenneth says to me, "Why don't you come with me to the candlemaker? Jfay is the very best, and you may want to call upon her expertise in the days to come, especially if it turns out that you're suddenly realizing heretofore latent candle reading abilities."

"I really think it's some other peculiarity than my being visited by ghosts," I say.

"And you might like me to introduce you to Janet Maylord, who's even farther along in candle reading than I am. From personal experience, I can't begin to tell you how much easier this ability is to deal with when there's someone like Janet around who's been there, done that, got the t-shirt. Without her, I might well have gone off the deep end."

What he's insinuating, of course, is that I might well go off the deep end without him and Janet prepared to be there for me.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Sometimes things go like clockwork, like this time. *He* pulls the car to the curb and brakes to a complete stop.

Other times, like last time, the process can be filled with all sorts of frustrations. The hustler might not be where *he* expects him to be. Another customer might get to the hustler before *he* does. The hustler might take off with someone and not return the same evening. A patrol car or perhaps an undercover cop might be spotted. Something might happen to call attention to *him*, making it unsafe for *him* to proceed because *he's* more apt to be commented upon later...

The kid comes over. He has blond hair. *He* likes them with blond hair. He has a well-defined body. *He* likes them with well-defined bodies; not muscular physiques like body-builders, but anatomies like those of swimmers or long-dead young men who modeled for Greco-Roman statues.

"What's up?" the blond says. He has a low and pleasant voice. He has a winning smile. He has brown eyes, which are an interesting contrast to all that blondness.

"I'm just out trying to find a little action," *he* says. "You have any suggestions?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. You a cop?"

*He* laughs. "Hardly a cop with this hard," *he* says and uses one hand to better define the stiff dick *he* has in *his* pants, aligned along the inside of *his* left thigh.

"Bring along some spare change?"

"Only twenty-dollar bills, as it happens," *he* says.

The kid gets even more up close and personal. He's down on his haunches, giving *him* a good look at his handsome face. He has a slightly funky smell, as if he hasn't bathed in awhile. *He* likes that kind of smell.

"I don't do everything," the blond says, "not even for twenties."

"I'm not asking to fuck your ass or mouth," *he* says. "All I need is to buy a little time for swinging on your dick in an alley I know that's just up the way and devoid of all foot traffic."

"My dick might be available for a bit of sucking, but it'll have to be in an alley of my choice," the kid says. "You may think you know one that's completely private, but I know of one that is for sure."

The suggested change of venue is one of those little glitches *he* doesn't like to happen. It's something unplanned that makes it all the more exciting, but all the more frustrating as well.

"And if I insist my alley is better than your alley?" *he* asks, trying to steer everything back on track.

"I'd say there are likely plenty of other dicks ready, willing and able, for a few of those twenties in your pocket, to let you swallow their dicks and their cum anywhere you like. My dick and I, on the other hand, are only going to blast in the alley of my choice."

In the end, does it really matter in what alley it happens, as long as it happens, and there's no one around to see and hear it happen?



"You're sure it's private?" *he* says. "The last thing I need is for someone I know to see me giving head."

"I promise it'll only be you and me, my fucking dick, and your cock-gobbling face."

*He* asks for his price. *He* pays it. *He* tells him to get in. *He* gets in.

It's not *his* alley *he* takes *him* to, but it's in the same gone-derelect part of town. There's even the same kind of black block lettering on the brick wall near where they park. Not JOE'S BAR-B-Q AND GRILL but PAULANGELO'S BAKERY

They get out. Someone (he?) has cleared a place against the wall. *He* leans against it. His right hand massages the bulge *his* pecker makes in *his* pants, just like Paulangelo once likely kneaded a roll of bread dough in the bakery out front.

"Ready when you are," *he* says. "Why don't you give a try at unzipping my fly with your skillful lips and teeth?"

*He* drops to *his* knees, willing to give the request a try. *He's* succeeding, too, when someone or something hits *him* hard on the head from behind.

Someone or something takes a firm hold of *his* damaged head and pulls it back hard and fast. *He* ends up sprawled and hurting on the ground of the dirty alley that's not *his* dirty alley.

"Fucking faggot!" someone says in the haze above *him*. "Cock-sucking fairy queer!"

Someone or something starts to kick *him* hard, fast, and without mercy.

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## Chapter Fifteen

I'm expecting an old crone, candle making seeming to insinuate black magic or even witchery. I'm pleasantly surprised by Jfay, wax artisan who is an attractive woman, late thirties, with an absolutely charming southern accent. "Y'all come on in." Her brown hair is perfectly coiffed. Her eyes are dark chocolate. Her lips are colored with just a hint of pale red. "I thought we could have cold Coronas and jalapeno snacks while we discuss the candle in question."

Our chairs are grouped around a round coffee table upon which sits opened beer bottles and punctuated by a large punch bowl of ice. Two smaller bowls almost overflowing with spicy home-made chips parenthesize the larger punch bowl.

"You've a candle color definitely in mind?" she asks and drinks some of her beer straight from the bottle.

"I'm thinking black, maybe representing the dark and the unknown, but to be quite candid, I'm not quite sure why I think it should be black; just that it should be," Kenneth says. "If you can, please, include at least some brown, since I have an unmistakable feeling that those we seek are buried in the ground. You might slip in a bit of white by way of insinuating my hoped-for enlightenment."

"All of which can certainly be done," Jfay says and reaches for a jalapeno chip that she puts in her mouth and crunches between her white teeth. "Scent?"

"Pine scent," Kenneth says.

Before I can stop myself, I say, "And clove."

This is Kenneth's candle, and I've inadvertently intruded; I'm supposedly there as an interested bystander soaking up pointers. "I am sorry," I say. "That just slipped out."

"Pine *and* clove?" Jfay queries for clarification.

"*Just* pine," I say. "I hope there'll be no more such uncontrollable outbursts on my part. I don't know what got into me."

"Wait a minute," Kenneth says. "Can you tell me why you think there should be clove?"

"I haven't a clue why I even said it," I say, feeling genuinely embarrassed. It's not as if he and I are commissioning this candle together.

"Do think about the why," he persists. "It may be important. Do me a big favor and shut your eyes for a moment and count slowly to five."

"I can't imagine it being of any import in the slightest. I really..."

"I insist!" he interrupts. "Shut your eyes, count slowly to five, and try to give me some reason for you spontaneously suggesting clove."

Just to avoid additional attention and argument, I shut my eyes and count to five, after which time I have an answer, but I'd rather not give it to him.

"Well?" he persists.

"It's too macabre," I warn.

"Nonetheless..."

He has picked the color brown, because he suspects John's grandparents are buried; I've suggested clove fragrance because ...

"After all of these years, there'll still be a noticeable stench of death when the ground is disturbed," I say. John's immediately audible indrawn breath makes me regret my probably clueless insight.

"Make it pine *and* clove by way of scent," Kenneth tells Jfay; I hope I haven't just fucked up any possible chance he has ever had of conversing with the ghosts of John's missing relatives.

"Size?" Jfay asks next.

"I've always been fond of big," Kenneth says. His side glance at me, by way of emphasizing some possible sexual innuendo, hopefully goes unnoticed by John and the lady in the room.

John makes the final decision. "By all means, let's do the largest version. Doing so will allow me to keep on insisting Kenneth keep on trying until the whole thing has melted down and proves all possible attempts have been hopeless."

We retire to Jfay's studio, where we attend the whole candle-making process. Kenneth hopes one day to make his own professional candles, and Jfay shows no professional jealousy in explaining to him, me, and John each and every step she does ... from heating the wax and ladling a serving for each separate color—black, brown, white ... letting each cool just enough to handle but still hot enough to retain hot liquid centers; so they bond but remain separates ... all hand-pressed into a mold with the addition of cooler pieces of wax and the small piece of material snipped from the inside seam of a Deiter Winland Nazi uniform. Over which is poured hot white wax to bind the whole.

"We'll now let the candle set, periodically puncturing it to eliminate air bubbles," Jfay says. "In grand finale, we'll pour more brown wax to disguise and seal all venting holes."

"Could you make me a candle while we're waiting?" I ask spontaneously. While my request leaves me wondering, it doesn't keep me from adding, "It needs to be in variegated reds—brick and blood. It needs to contain black, and it has to smell like baked bread. Is there even anything that can make wax smell like bread?" The notion seems ludicrous, and I can't imagine why I'd ever want such a thing.

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## Chapter Sixteen

*Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-clack.*

Through a crack in the side of the wooden cattle-car's side, I see the posted metal sign of the train station outside: white-on-black—*Brenemenslen*. The train doesn't stop. It hasn't stopped since we were bullied out of our prison barracks at *Blesin-Bach*, herded, then stuffed, into the awaiting train. The gunfire of liberating Allied troops had been so close at the time that we could actually hear it in the blackness of the night. The farther, though, the longer it's been since the gunfire faded.

Kenneth Black sits huddled in a corner just to my right, looking cadaverous and dressed in rags, but it's not he who says, "It won't be long now." The older man who speaks is pressed tightly against Kenneth's right shoulder.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"He's John Weinstein's grandfather," Kenneth says. "That's why."

"Where are we exactly?" I ask. I've read the depot sign, but I haven't a clue where *Brenemenslen* is located on any map.

"In Germany, in the Black Forest," says the Raggedy-Ann woman to the right of John Weinstein's grandfather. "We've been waiting a very long time, and are glad you've finally found us here."

Frankly, I don't see anything to be thankful for. I'm cold. I'm hungry. I have aches. I have pains. I have a pounding

headache. All of my companions, and there are many, look even worse for wear.

"Don't leave us now, will you?" John's grandfather pleads and looks genuinely fearful that I might.

"And go where?" I ask. I can barely move; we're packed like sardines in a can. If it weren't for the mysterious scent of clove in the air, the combined stench of all our tightly compressed sweat-, shit-, and piss-smearred bodies would be genuinely unbearable.

"Just please don't go." Mrs. Weinstein's begging supplements that of her husband.

I stay right where I am, wanting to leave, wanting to get away, wanting to escape, but not knowing how. I'm trapped, as are the rest of us—headed into the blackness of the night.

Suddenly I know I've been asleep, standing up, unable to fully collapse because of everyone so crammed up against me, when the train slows.

I open my eyes. It's still dark. It still smells. I'm still cold, hungry, with aches, pains, and a headache. Somewhere off to my left a baby cries. Who in the hell would be perverse enough to bring a baby into these sordid circumstances?!

"It won't be long now," Mrs. Weinstein says. "Thank you for coming."

I press my face back to the crack that earlier had defined the train depot through which the train had been barreling. I see nothing through the breach now but blackness in and among the dark silhouettes of forest trees. I remember that the Black Forest is known for its cuckoo clocks: what a

strange thing to remember at such a strangely macabre time in my life.

The train jerks, then stops, then jerks, and finally stops for good. I'm even more aware of my continued body contact with those people jostled against and all around me. They seem all hard bone, no flesh—skeletal creatures from a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare.

I hear command-barking voices outside, although I can't decipher the commands. I've heard such sounds before, although I can't pinpoint when or where.

I hear barking dogs. I've heard just such frantic dog-barking before, but where?

There's the distant hiss of locomotive steam.

There's the crunch of jackboots upon the gravel on which the train tracks are laid.

Someone unfastens the chain affixed outside. Someone unlocks the bolt outside. Someone slides open the door from outside. Three people inside who have been pressed tightly against the door suddenly tumble out. I hear all three hit the ground.

"Out! Out! Out!" someone commands.

More of us are funneled toward and through the opening. When I finally make the journey through, I descend to step upon someone on the ground who had initially tumbled through the open door—never to get up again?

It's black and cold outside. I see my white breath float on black air that smells of pine and clove.

There are soldiers with guns. There are soldiers with dogs. There are soldiers with clubs.



"Move, asshole!" one of the soldiers with a club shouts at me; his wet-warm spittle splatters my face.

I move, I stumble. I join a line. I stand at attention. I look straight ahead and focus on the mile marker just across the way. I wonder where Kenneth is. I wonder where Mr. and Mrs. Weinstein are. And where in the hell is their grandson during all of this?

My legs are so weak ... I'm so weak ... I think for sure I'm going to collapse. What keeps me from doing so is the person next in line who collapses before I do. A soldier immediately moves up, leans down, puts a gun to the back of the fallen man's head, and pulls the trigger. My shoes, so tattered and worn that they hardly resemble shoes at all, my rag-wrapped toes sticking through, are splattered with blood, brain, and gore.

"It won't be long now," someone says on my other side. It's Mrs. Weinstein. Was she there only minutes before? I think not; in fact, I really thought I'd lost her.

"Where's your husband?" I ask. "Where's Kenneth? Where's John?"

"Silence! Silence! Silence!" a soldier bellows and comes quickly marching down the line, undoubtedly looking for talkative me but passing me by to whack a completely innocent young man against the side of the head with the butt of a Luger; the understandably wobbly hit kid starts to bleed from his ears and nose. "Not a fucking sound!"

"We'll all be together shortly," Mrs. Weinstein says, and I wish to hell she would shut up. I'm fearful she'll bring the

guard back. I'm fearful that we'll all be victims of his pistol butt against the sides of our heads, or worse.

Thank God she does shut up. Thank God pretty much everyone shuts up, except for their moans, groans, and the grunts still warranted whenever struck by soldiers who suddenly have us on the move. One man screams when bitten viciously on his left leg by one of the dogs.

"Move! Move! Move!"

I've been so long at attention that my legs hardly move now that they've been commanded to do so. However, those who don't move fast enough get whacked, which provides me incentive to try my best to do as I'm instructed.

Our handlers march us away from the train and the tracks and into the deeper blackness of the shadowy woods. A lot of the underbrush is made up of blackberry bushes; one is so up close and personal that one of its thorns rips a deep scratch along the whole length of my forearm.

"Bloody hell!" My response. My blood is black against the pale whiteness of my skinny-to-the-bone arm.

"Silence!"

Bright lights are suddenly turned on. They hurtfully blind my eyes so long accustomed to maximum dilation to compensate for utter darkness.

My line comes to a halt. Moves a few steps forward. Comes to a halt.

Gunshots!

My line comes to a halt. Moves a few steps forward. Comes to a halt.

Gunshots!

"What's happening?" I ask Mrs. Weinstein immediately ahead of me.

"Same as happened before," she says cryptically.

What in the hell is she talking about? Before? Before what?

What in the hell am I doing in the Black Forest of Germany in the middle of a black night suddenly illuminated by bright lights and punctuated with gunfire obviously not provided by liberating Allies? What Allies?

Gunshots!

Jesus! They're taking us from the line, six at a time. They're making us kneel on the lip of a large hole dug in the forest floor. They're shooting us in the back of our heads.

"I don't want to die!" I say.

"You think any of us wanted to die?" Mrs. Weinstein says; already she's speaking in the past tense.

I think I'll run. Into the black Black Forest. Lost in the woods, dying that way, eaten by wolves; better than having my brains blown out and my lifeless body kicked into a mass grave.

Except my legs don't have the strength in them to move. They've barely the strength to manage the few steps necessary to get me up the line until ...

A soldier grabs me by the arm ... provides a pull that almost topples me ... gives a shove that makes me stumble ... hits me hard against the back of my knees with a Billy club.

My legs collapse. My knees hit the ground. My spine painfully telescopes.

"Just remember," Mrs. Weinstein says. She kneels beside me, her head turned in my direction so that her sad eyes make and maintain contact. "Can you just somehow, please, manage to do that?"

My brain explodes at one and the same time as the force of another gunshot knocks Mrs. Weinstein off the edge of the pit and into the hole.

Strangely, although my body is simultaneously kicked to join hers, I'm not seeing the world from inside-out the pit but from up top, looking down. So many dead bodies! All of them, including mine, eventually disappear beneath more bodies, then lime, then dirt, then young blackberry bushes purposely placed in small holes dug periodically in the corpse-fertilized soil.

"Who would have guessed?" *he* says.

Amazingly, disconcertingly, I'm no longer in the forest but in some city's back alley with only one obviously dead man at my feet.

"Who would have guessed what?" I ask.

The air smells strangely, deliciously, of freshly baked bread. Faded block black lettering spell out PAULANGELO'S BAKERY across the dirty brick of a nearby building's back wall.

"Who would have guessed I'd end up dead this way?" *he* asks. "Irony, don't you think, that I've been killed by homophobes?"

I don't know what to think. I'm thoroughly confused. I keep getting disturbing sniffs of pine, clove, now lemon (or is it lime?), intermingled with the predominate smell of freshly

baked bread. The latter usually conjures pleasant memories, so why the presence of the body in my dream—since, yes, *I have to be* dreaming. There's no other explanation for travel on the astral plain. Haven't I just been to Germany? Haven't I just been killed? Someone else now dead. Who? And where the hell am I now?

"Oh, quit the fuck worrying so bloody much!" *he* says.

"Quit asking so many questions!" *he* says. "Go with the flow!" *he* says.

"I don't want to be here," I say. "I don't want to go with the flow."

"You think I like being where the fuck I am?" *he* says.

"Under normal circumstances, I'd have you up against the wall, your cock out and in my mouth, my knife deep-cutting your femoral artery. As it is, all you need do is check in and carry off the good news to the police and to your fellow queers on the streets. Ironical fate has laid me low, and made them safer. Why, I haven't a clue. Certainly, they're more deserving of death than I am, but whoever said life or death was fair?" *He* laughs, but it's not a very pleasant sound. "Just be thankful you've met me, here and now, where you can walk away, rather than when I would have seen you only as another convenient piece of meat for carving."

Someone calls my name from a distance. It's not *him*.

"Where in the hell are you people coming from?" *he* asks.

"Why back after so long an absence?"

I don't have a clue what *he's* talking about.

"You think I appreciate you being here, to carry back my tale," *he* says. "Think again! It would be far more satisfactory

to me for them not to have a clue, merely file me away in the morgue as another John Doe, or ..."

*He's* again interrupted by a call to me from the distance.

"Mother calling," *he* says, although it's not a woman's voice that's inquiring as to my whereabouts. "Better run. Fastest way, of course, is just to look into the candle flame. But you already know that, don't you?"

"What candle flame?" I ask; only to see not one but two flickering flames materialize in the space between me and the body and the wall stenciled with the words PAULANGELO'S BAKERY.

The alley dissolves. The surrounding buildings disappear. The body vanishes. *His* voice is no more.

What remains is a table with two partially consumed candles, along with the overpowering smells of pine, clove, lemon, lime, and freshly baked bread. My arms extend across the tabletop. There's a ragged scratch, leaking blood along the whole length of my right forearm. My hands are grasped tightly by a pair of other hands, belonging to ...

"Kenneth?"

He sits across from me, in shadows made less so by the two still flickering flames.

"What the fuck happened?" I ask him.

"Do you remember any of it?"

"Bits and pieces. Fragments. Flashes."

"More remembered than remembered at any time before, though?"

"Before?"

"Your boyfriend's camp counselor dead in the woods? The gal in the restaurant whose gift her mother had hidden at the bottom of a cabinet drawer?"

"*Blesin-Bach*," I remember. "*Brenemenslen*. Sweat and stench. Feces and piss. The Black Forest. Pine and clove. Lemon and lime. Bodies. An alley. Feces and piss. Pine and clove. Lemon and Lime. A dead man. Freshly baked bread."

"We've done very well this evening, my friend," Kenneth says. I see his look of tired satisfaction beyond the flickering candle flames. "Proving as John suspected that two candle readers can be better than one."

"Can we count on any of it really being true, though?" I'm dubious.

"Time will tell," he says, "won't it? In the meantime..." He shrugs, lets go of my hands, pushes his chair back from the table. "...let me make a couple of phone calls."

For a brief second, I think he might suggest sex so that he can get some sleep. I would have to say no, if just because I've already shared something with him far more personal and intimate than any mere exchange of body fluids. Sex with him now would be anticlimactic. Besides which, Talon has left me enough money and assets so that I no longer have to have sex with anyone when I don't want to.

At this point, what I really do want, what I really do need, is to go back to my apartment and cuddle with Jeremy, tell him I love him, tell him I need him ... have him tell me he loves me, have him tell me that he needs me, and have him tell me that everything is going to be all right.

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## About the Authors

William Maltese, the internationally best-selling author of short-story collections, novels, and his popular Stud Draqual Mystery Series, has been published (under various pseudonyms), over two hundred books in genres including erotica, sci-fi, science-fantasy, mystery, romance, western, and adventure/espionage, children. A Business/Advertising major in university, Mr. Maltese enlisted in the U.S. Army where he achieved and was honorably discharged at Sergeant (E-5) rank. Presently, he divides his time between the Pacific Northwest and New York City.

You can visit his websites at:

[www.williammaltese.com](http://www.williammaltese.com)

[www.myspace.com/williammaltese](http://www.myspace.com/williammaltese)

[www.myspace.com/flickerwarriors](http://www.myspace.com/flickerwarriors)

[www.myspace.com/draqual](http://www.myspace.com/draqual)

[www.myspace.com/maltesecandlegallery](http://www.myspace.com/maltesecandlegallery)

AM Riley is a film editor, and sometime poet, living in Los Angeles. Riley writes primarily LGBT paranormal and murder mysteries, and has been published with Torquere Press and Loose ID.

You can visit AM on the internet at:

[www.amriley.net/](http://www.amriley.net/)

Lex Valentine has been writing ever since she could hold a pencil. A few years ago, she began writing in an online paranormal serial story. When she posted snippets of work on her blog, her readers encouraged her to submit her writing to



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*by AM Riley*

publishers. Within a few months, she was published. Born and raised in Salinas, California, Lex moved to Southern California in 1992. She lives in Orange County with her Motley Crue stalking daughter Nikki and her very own long haired, tattooed musician, Rott. She loves loud music, builds her own computers, and has a propensity for having very weird vivid dreams about Nikki Sixx.

Find out more about Lex at:

[www.lexvalentine.com](http://www.lexvalentine.com)

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George Seaton  
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Richard Stevenson  
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## **the trevor project**

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: [www.thetrevorproject.org/](http://www.thetrevorproject.org/)

## **the gay men's domestic violence project**

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: [gmdvp.org/](http://gmdvp.org/)

## **the gay & lesbian alliance against defamation/glaad en espanol**

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (glaad) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: [www.glaad.org/](http://www.glaad.org/)

glaad en espanol: [www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php](http://www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php)

## **servicemembers legal defense network**

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (dadt). The sldn provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by dadt and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal dadt and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of dadt.

sldn Call: (202) 328-3244

PO Box 65301 or (202) 328-FAIR

Washington DC 20035-5301 e-mail: [sldn@sldn.org](mailto:sldn@sldn.org)

On the Web: [sldn.org/](http://sldn.org/)

## **the glbt national help center**

The glbt National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the

gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The glbt National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the glbt community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can't talk about anywhere else. The glbt National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: [www.glnh.org/](http://www.glnh.org/)

e-mail: [info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org](mailto:info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org)

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If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US Local GLBT college campus organizations

[dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html](http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html)

GLBT Scholarship Resources [tinyurl.com/6fx9v6](http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6)

Syracuse University [lgbt.syr.edu/](http://lgbt.syr.edu/)

Texas A&M [glbt.tamu.edu/](http://glbt.tamu.edu/)

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Tulane University [www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm](http://www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm)  
University of Alaska [www.uaf.edu/agla/](http://www.uaf.edu/agla/)  
University of California, Davis [lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/](http://lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/)  
University of California, San Francisco [lgbt.ucsf.edu/](http://lgbt.ucsf.edu/)  
University of Colorado [www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/](http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/)  
University of Florida [www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/)  
University of Hawaii, Manoa [manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/](http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/)  
University of Utah [www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/](http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/)  
University of Virginia  
[www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/](http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/)  
Vanderbilt University [www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/)

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