



A BRUSH OF WINGS

A Dreamspinner Press Anthology

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Dreamspinner Press

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INTRODUCTION

BE not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

~Hebrews 13:2

I BELIEVE in angels.

They may not have had wings or a halo, but I've felt their touch in my life: those rare, inexplicable moments of divine intervention and guidance, or the more common human gestures—the hand of friendship, a shoulder to cry on, the comfort of an intimate embrace—that are just as powerful, and just as divinely inspired.

The spirits you'll encounter in these stories range from traditional guardian angels to less familiar celestial beings, from the exalted to the fallen to the all-too-mortal. In whatever form they take, they offer healing, renewal, and love—especially love. Which is as it should be, since as my favorite definition from an old movie says, “An angel *is* love.”

Keep an eye out for angels in your own life; there are more of them around than you may think. And even if you haven't yet felt the brush of their wings, remember that you just might be an angel for someone else.

Anne Regan
March 2010

MORNING GLOW

Taylor Lockland

BENJAMIN Winfield rubbed his eyes, looked at the clock, and saw it was already six in the morning. He yawned, unsure he'd get through the remaining hour of his shift, and went back to work on the patient charts. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and the papers fluttered to the floor and landed in a pile against the counter.

"Sorry about that." Lisa, one of his fellow nurses, bent down to help retrieve the fallen paperwork. "You look like you're about ready to collapse. Still having trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah." It had been weeks since Benjamin managed a full eight hours, and it had nothing to do with working the night shift at the hospital. His two-year relationship with Ray had recently fallen apart, leaving Benjamin feeling like he was falling apart as well. Focusing on his work was the only thing that held him together, and that only barely.

"Maybe you should go home early and try to get some rest." Lisa handed him the folders and looked at him with a sympathetic smile. "It's slow right now. Tara and I can cover for you until the day shift gets here."

Benjamin set the charts down. He wasn't sure he wanted to go home to his empty apartment an hour earlier than he had to, but a wave of exhaustion that forced him to lean on the counter convinced him to accept the offer. "If you're sure it's all right."

"It's all right." Lisa folded her arms across her chest and nodded in the direction of the door. "Now get out of here. Your friend's out there waiting for you."

"My friend?"

"Yeah. Cute skinny guy, short brown hair, about your age. I take it you weren't expecting him?"

That woke Benjamin up. “No, but I think I know who it is.”

BENJAMIN clocked out, retrieved his things from his locker, and headed out into the waiting room. He grinned when Alan James, his oldest friend, looked up from a seat in the corner.

Alan closed the battered copy of *Field & Stream* he’d been reading. “Hi, Ben. Snuck out of your shift early, did you?” With the exception of slightly longer bangs, he looked the same as he had the last time they’d seen each other almost two years ago. It wasn’t the first time they’d been apart so long. Alan often had to go away for some reason or other, and even though they’d say they’d keep in touch, it never worked out that way. Still, Alan always managed to find his way back, usually when Benjamin needed him the most.

“They let me escape.” Benjamin glanced at the magazine. “In all the years I’ve known you, I never knew you were the outdoorsy type.”

Alan set the magazine on the nearby table. “It was that or *Ladies’ Home Journal*.”

“You can find some useful information in the *Journal*.”

“It’s a shame I didn’t have time to go through both.” Alan stood up, walked up to Benjamin, and threw his arms around him. “Sorry I haven’t been in touch.”

The world seemed a little brighter as Benjamin returned the hug. “It’s okay. I’m just glad to see you.” He gave Alan’s back a few pats and then pulled away. “What are you doing here?”

“Duh. What do you think? I’m looking for you. I got back to town a few days ago. I tried to call your cell, but Ray answered, and he told me you guys split up. Sorry to hear that.” Alan briefly touched Benjamin’s hand, and Benjamin felt even better. “He told me you still worked the night shift here, so I decided to drop by. I asked around and found out you were working today, so I waited for you.” Alan chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess that makes me your stalker.”

Benjamin laughed for the first time in days. “If it was anyone but you, I’d agree. Anyway, yeah, my old phone was under Ray’s plan, so I had to get a new one.”

Alan’s face grew serious. “I really am sorry to hear about you and

Ray.”

“We weren’t right for each other, so it was for the best.” Benjamin’s voice cracked a bit as he spoke the words. He sat down, suddenly unsteady again.

“I’m not sure if you actually believe that,” Alan said soothingly, putting a hand on Benjamin’s back. “I was going to suggest we go get some breakfast, but I think it would be better if I took you home. You look about ready to fall asleep right here.”

“So people keep telling me. My car’s in the lot, though.”

“Not a problem. I can bring you back after you’ve gotten some sleep. Do you work again tonight?” When Benjamin nodded, he continued. “Then it’s settled. Think you can stand up?” His lips curled into a mischievous smirk. “If you can’t, don’t hesitate to tell me. This is a hospital, after all, so I could probably get you a wheelchair.”

“You’re not taking me out of here in a wheelchair.” Benjamin forced himself to his feet and, with Alan’s help, made it out to Alan’s car.

BENJAMIN woke up around three in the afternoon and wondered why he didn’t feel as lonely as usual. When he turned over, he remembered why. He scooted closer to Alan to take in the familiar warmth and comfort. Benjamin sometimes wondered what it would be like to be more than a friend to Alan, and as he watched that sleeping face, the thought crept back into his mind. Alan was beautiful. Striking, even. However, the important thing was that they *got* each other. Or at least, Alan always seemed to get him.

I’m probably just thinking that because I’m on the rebound.

Benjamin reached up and touched Alan’s face, doing his best to keep his touch as light as possible.

Alan’s eyes fluttered open. “Hey. Good morning.” He looked at the clock. “Er... I mean afternoon.” There was that smile, and Benjamin’s heart pounded in his chest.

“Sorry.” Benjamin dropped his hand. “Didn’t mean to wake you up. Go back to sleep.”

“No, I slept enough.” Alan paused to yawn. “What time do you work tonight?”

“I start at eleven. You can take me to get my car earlier if you need to.”

“No. I don’t have anything going on today, and I’d like to spend time with you. If you don’t mind, that is.”

Benjamin grinned. “Of course I don’t mind.” He gazed into Alan’s eyes for a moment and then quickly looked away and got out of bed. He walked over to the computer chair and grabbed a pair of jeans off the back. “Are you hungry at all?”

Alan sat up, and the comforter slid down his body and pooled in his lap. “I could eat.”

Benjamin glanced at Alan’s bare skin and shoulders, then busied himself shaking out the jeans in an attempt to get rid of the wrinkles. “Good. Me too. Just so you know, my cooking hasn’t improved at all since I last saw you, so going out might be our best option. It’s terribly unhealthy, but we can go to the burger place we used to like.”

“As long as you don’t ramble on about how much fat we’re putting into our bodies like you did while you were in nursing school.”

“It’s a deal.” Benjamin put on the jeans and headed toward the closet. He paused when he felt those eyes on him. “What?”

“Nothing. I was thinking about something.”

“Are you going to share or keep it to yourself?”

“I think I’ll keep it to myself.”

Benjamin picked a dirty T-shirt off the floor and threw it him. “Smartass.”

Alan laughed and ducked. “If you really want to know, I was just thinking about how much I missed you. It’s one of those things I realize whenever I see you again.”

The rest of his clothes forgotten for the moment, Benjamin crawled back onto the bed and pulled Alan into an awkward hug. “I feel the same. I suppose we should learn our lesson and not lose touch.” He relaxed when he felt Alan’s arms return the gesture. “Seriously, how many times have we been through this?”

“Too many.”

When the feeling of skin against skin got to be too much, Benjamin pulled away and nodded in agreement. “Way too many.” He went to the closet without looking back, even though he felt Alan’s eyes still on him. “You should get dressed. You can borrow some of my clothes if you don’t want to wear the same ones you wore yesterday. They’ll probably be a little big, but they should do.”

“That would be great. Thank you. Just make sure they’re clean.” Alan flung the dirty T-shirt back at Benjamin.

AFTER they’d placed their orders, Alan leaned back in his chair. “Tell me what happened with Ray.”

The tone of voice, coupled with the look on Alan’s face, reminded Benjamin so much of a shrink that he had to bite his lower lip to keep from laughing.

“I’m serious, Ben.” Alan looked into Ben’s eyes. “Spill it.”

Benjamin returned the gaze, unable to turn away, and felt a gentle tug on his soul urging him to unburden himself. The Talk was the one thing he hated about his reunions with Alan, but he’d been through it many times before and knew there was no way around it. He might as well get it over with. “Well, I was just starting to date him the last time I saw you, right?”

“Yes, you’d been with him about six months or so, and you were quite happy, as I recall.”

Benjamin picked up his napkin and twirled it around his fingers. “In a nutshell, things didn’t work out.” He hoped it would be enough to get the point across, but Alan didn’t avert his eyes, and the tug didn’t let up.

“Why didn’t they?”

Benjamin pulled too hard on the napkin and tore it in half. He dropped the pieces on the table. “Would saying he turned out to be an asshole be enough?”

A half smile flickered across Alan’s face as he shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry for getting personal, but I’ve told you before it’s not good—”

Benjamin held up his hand. “To hold it in,” he said, finishing Alan’s statement. “I know. Doesn’t mean it’s comfortable to talk about.”

“As someone in the medical field, you know some cures are painful, but you feel better in the long run. Think of this as cutting out a thorn before it causes an infection.”

“Sounds a little cheesy, but it makes sense.” Benjamin was quiet for a moment, but once he finally started talking, the words flowed until it felt like he’d drown in them. He told Alan about how things were great with Ray for the first year or so, but how it all went to hell when they moved in together and it became apparent how incompatible they were. He went on about how he and Ray started off bickering about little things, like who’d forgotten to put the milk back in the fridge, and how those spats later seemed like nothing when Ray demanded Benjamin try to find a new job because his hours were so irregular and inconvenient. Benjamin paused for a breath before telling about how Ray wanted to bring a third partner into the relationship when he refused to change jobs, saying he needed someone to be there when Ben couldn’t be, and how that finally ended the relationship.

When the words stopped, Benjamin sipped his water and let out a sigh. He felt drained, but otherwise okay. He set his water glass back down and stared at his hand until Alan reached across the table and covered it with one of his own.

“Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Benjamin soaked up Alan’s healing touch for a few moments, letting it take away the lingering pain before reluctantly pulling his hand away. “You really should go into psychology or psychiatry or something. You have a gift.”

The waiter brought their drinks and set them on the table, and for once, Benjamin was thankful for slow service.

Alan shrugged, unwrapped his straw, and stuck it in his glass. “I couldn’t do a job like that. I’d get too attached to my patients.”

“I could see that.” Benjamin traced patterns in the condensation on the outside of his own glass. “Do you still do those odd jobs?”

“More or less. Mostly giving singing lessons.”

“Apologies for repeating myself, but again, I can see that. What age are you working with?”

“High school.”

Benjamin chuckled. “That must be dangerous. All your students are probably in love with you. Forgive the cliché, but you sing like an angel.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he busied himself with getting his straw lined up just right between the ice cubes in his iced tea, hoping the warmth that had once again come to his face wasn’t noticeable. “So, um... what brings you back to Harrisburg?”

“It was time.”

Benjamin would love Alan forever simply because he took the subject change in stride and either didn’t notice or didn’t care about any sudden awkwardness. To return the favor, he accepted Alan’s cryptic answer.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get in touch with you. I really don’t have an excuse.”

“Nothing to be done about it now. Anyway, I always know I’ll see you again eventually. You probably changed your number when you moved back, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

Benjamin pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. “Then give me your current number, and if you move and change it next time, be sure to let me know what it is, okay? I don’t want to lose touch with you again.”

“I promise.” Alan recited his number, and Benjamin punched it into his phone.

The waiter brought their burgers, and they were mostly silent as they ate, with the exception of occasional small talk. By the time they finished their meals, the restaurant was noisy and full of people.

“Definitely a good thing we came early.” Benjamin picked up one half of his torn napkin and wiped his mouth. He wiped his fingers on the other half and then balled both pieces up and dropped them on his plate.

Without discussing it, they each paid half of the bill, as they’d always done. “Ready?”

“Ready if you are.”

As they put on their coats, Benjamin checked the time. “We still have a few hours before my shift. Did you want to hang out a little while longer? Or you can take me to get my car now if you’d rather go home.”

“Don’t be an idiot. As I already said, I’d rather hang out with you.”

They headed to the historic district, and despite the cold February temperatures, they spent the next couple of hours aimlessly strolling around. Benjamin ignored the fact that he should have been resting his feet before his shift. Getting the chance to see Alan’s face light up when he saw the old houses was worth tired feet.

“I SHOULD have called off work so I could spend more time with you.” Benjamin sighed as Alan changed lanes and got ready to turn into the hospital parking lot.

“No, you have an important job. People depend on you, and it’s not like you won’t see me again soon.”

“Sure. Make me feel guilty for even thinking about it.”

Alan snorted. “That wasn’t my intention.” He pulled up to the hospital entrance and put the car in park. “I had a nice time today, Ben.” He turned toward Benjamin and spread his arms.

Benjamin leaned across the seat and accepted the hug. When he pulled away, Alan’s face glowed in the dim illumination from the streetlights. “Me too. Let’s meet for coffee tomorrow night. If you’re free, that is.”

Alan laughed, and it sounded almost as beautiful as his singing voice. “I have a lesson tomorrow afternoon, but I think I can squeeze in some time for coffee.”

BENJAMIN needed to see Alan every day if possible, even if just for a quick breakfast or dinner. For the next few weeks, they met whenever their schedules allowed. Sometimes they spent hours simply watching television or playing board games. Sometimes they conversed and caught up with each other over coffee. Benjamin didn’t care what they did as long as they spent time together.

It turned out Alan had spent the past two years doing what he’d always done. He moved around from place to place throughout the Midwest and along the East Coast and went wherever his whims and his

work took him.

After a month, the pain over the loss of the future Benjamin had thought he'd have with Ray was completely gone. He was ready to move on with his life and try to find love again. He didn't need to look very far.

Alan always made him feel good. Alan brought him peace.

Alan was the one he loved.

THE feelings of peace mixed with desire raged within Benjamin while he sat in front of the television with his microwave dinner. He picked up the remote and flipped through the channels, but his phone rang the moment he found something suitably mindless to watch. Annoyed at the interruption, he glanced at the display, but he quickly answered the call when he saw it was Alan.

"Hey, Alan. What's up?"

There was a sigh on the other end of the line and a slight pause before Alan spoke. "Are you busy this evening?"

"I'm free until work. Is something wrong?"

"Can you meet me at Starbucks in an hour?"

Benjamin set his food off to the side, turned off the television, and got to his feet. "Sure. Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"I can't do it over the phone. I'll see you there." Alan hung up before Benjamin could say anything else.

AS Benjamin sat at the table sipping his coffee, he realized he should have gotten decaf. He was jittery enough without the caffeine. He glanced at his watch, sighed, and drummed his fingers on the table, cursing himself for arriving so quickly. He'd been waiting twenty minutes already, and Alan wasn't due for another five.

The seconds ticked by slowly, or maybe it just seemed that way because of how fast his heart was beating. Every time the door opened, he looked up hoping it was Alan, but as usual, Alan arrived at exactly the

appointed time.

“Hey, I’m sorry to drag you out so suddenly like this,” Alan said softly as he approached the table. He smiled, but Benjamin saw something like pain or anxiety behind it.

“Alan, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“I... ” Alan sat down opposite Benjamin, paused, and took a breath. “I have to leave again.”

Benjamin’s world fell off its axis. “What?”

Alan rubbed his neck and dropped his head, his bangs fell over his eyes, and his voice shook a little as he spoke. “I have to leave again. I have some work lined up in Cleveland. It’s kind of a last-minute thing, so I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more warning.”

“Shit.” Benjamin wrapped his fingers around his paper cup, hurt and disappointment making his grip so tight that hot coffee spilled over the rim and scalded his skin. He jerked his hand back and knocked over the cup. “Fuck!” He shook out his hand and then curled his fingers as he waited for the sting to subside.

“Jeez. Let me help.” Alan picked up his napkin, reached across the table for Benjamin’s hand, and slowly wiped the coffee off his skin. As he worked, Benjamin saw a strange light around him.

Benjamin flexed his fingers when Alan let go of his hand, and the pink color and tenderness from the burn was completely gone.

“There. It wasn’t so bad.”

“Thanks. Guess it wasn’t as hot as it seemed.” Benjamin stood up, went to the counter to get more napkins, and returned to mop up the rest of the mess. He focused on the task, unable to look at Alan. If he did, he might be tempted to beg him to stay and cause an even bigger scene than the coffee spill had. There was also that damn sunlight shining in his eyes.

“Ben?” Alan’s voice was so soft that Benjamin barely heard it over the ambient sounds of conversation and typing on laptop keyboards.

“Yeah?” Benjamin continued to scrub the table, even though it no longer needed it.

Alan reached across the table and caught Benjamin’s wrist. “Ben. Look at me. I know you’re upset. So am I. I don’t want to go so soon

after getting reacquainted.”

Benjamin narrowed his eyes and finally looked up. He tossed the handful of coffee-soaked napkins into the center of the table. “Then don’t.”

“Damn it, Ben. It’s not that easy.” Alan grasped Benjamin’s hand with both of his own. “I don’t have much choice in the matter. I *have* to go. I don’t think I can bear the thought of you being pissed off at me.”

Benjamin’s jaw twitched. “Well, maybe *I* can’t bear the thought of you leaving.”

“I’ll be back. You know I always come back to you.”

“I know. You do, but you might be gone for years again, right?”

Alan squeezed Benjamin’s hand tighter. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“This really sucks, you know? My life’s so much better when you’re around.”

“Yeah. I agree. It does suck. Because you know what? I like being around you, too, Ben.” He paused to take a breath. “More than you know. I wish I wasn’t leaving, but—”

“But you have to. You already said that,” Benjamin snapped. “Fine. Go. Take care of whatever choir crisis you have to deal with in Cleveland.” He looked down at their hands. “Just go.” *Before I do something we’ll both regret.*

Alan stood up and moved around to Benjamin’s side of the table. He reached out and touched Benjamin’s face, seemingly undisturbed by the funny looks from the other patrons. “Goodbye, Ben. I’ll be in touch, and I’ll see you again. I promise.” Several seconds passed, and Benjamin remained silent and unmoving. Alan sighed and dropped his hand. He turned away, and the light around him faded.

Benjamin’s chest felt tight, and he had trouble breathing as he watched Alan walk out of the coffee house and out of his life once again.

WHAT the hell did I do?

Benjamin lay in bed staring at the ceiling. Once again, he couldn’t fall asleep.

Getting through work the previous night hadn't been easy, but at least there had been enough patients to keep his mind occupied. However, as soon as he got home, thoughts of Alan flooded back and hit him hard. He cringed when he remembered how he'd been an ass to Alan when Alan was just trying to say goodbye. *I wouldn't blame him if he didn't want to rush back to me after that.*

After over an hour of tossing and turning, Benjamin sat up, reached to the nightstand for his cell phone, and hit Alan's number on the speed dial. When the call went to voice mail, he snapped the phone shut and threw it as hard as he could.

Well, that was dumb. He got up and found his broken phone in the corner of the room. *Fuck.* He slumped down next to the pieces, put his head in his hands, and cursed himself for being an idiot. Not only had he destroyed something valuable, he'd never thought to write Alan's number down.

Shit, shit, shit. He took a deep breath. Maybe they'd be able to retrieve his phonebook when he went to get a new phone. Even if they couldn't, maybe Alan would call him like he promised.

Benjamin suddenly had another idea. *Doubtful, but I won't know until I try.* He forced himself back to his feet and turned on his computer. He'd never seen Alan use a computer, so he'd never thought to ask for an e-mail address or if he had an account on any of those social networking sites. After running a few searches, he found out Alan was either good at keeping his information private or he hadn't caught up to the modern age.

At least he carries a cell phone. To which I no longer have the number.

Benjamin knew he wasn't going to be able to sleep anytime soon, so he headed into the bathroom, got into the shower, and set the water as hot as he could tolerate. As it ran down his shoulders and his back, it soothed him, at least initially. However, nothing soothed him the way Alan did. Benjamin gritted his teeth, curled his hand into a fist, and beat on the tile to keep himself from breaking down.

A COUPLE of hours later, Benjamin returned from the Verizon store with his new cell phone—minus his phonebook. A few more hours

passed, and Alan's phone call didn't come. Neither did sleep. Every time Benjamin closed his eyes, he saw Alan's face or heard his voice. He picked up the extra pillow, hugged it to his chest, and buried his face in it. *Alan, come back to me.*

Benjamin gave up on both sleep and waiting. He had some vacation time at his disposal, and he was going to use it to try to find Alan.

He didn't want to leave the hospital short-handed in his sudden absence, so he called a few of his fellow nurses and convinced them to cover his next several shifts. While he packed his duffle bag, the rational part of his brain tried to tell him how crazy he was acting, how there was no way in hell he'd be able to find Alan in a large city with no information to go on. He pushed those thoughts aside. For once, he was going to listen to his heart. He zipped up the bag and headed out to his car. If he left right away, he could be in Cleveland by midnight.

Unfortunately, about two hours into the drive, the lack of sleep and the hypnotizing white lines of the road made his eyelids droop. He tried the usual tricks of rolling down the window to let in cold air and singing along to the radio at the top of his lungs, but nothing worked. He sighed in resignation. He'd never see Alan again if he fell asleep at the wheel and got himself killed, so he pulled off the turnpike and checked himself into a motel room. He barely made it to the bed before he passed out.

BENJAMIN wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep when a knock sounded at the door. The sound was soft and tentative at first, but when there was no answer, it gradually became louder.

He groaned, opened his eyes, and glanced at the clock. It wasn't even six in the morning yet. He put the pillow over his head, but the knocking continued. Benjamin didn't want to end up pissing off the neighbors, so he finally threw off the comforter, switched on the light, and got out of bed. "I'm coming," he muttered under his breath, surprised when the knocking stopped.

Benjamin ran a hand through his hair to tame any bed head, though he had no idea why he bothered. He tried to look as annoyed as possible as he opened the door, but he couldn't maintain the expression when he saw who was standing there.

“You dork. Did you really think you’d be able to track me down?” Alan grinned, shook his head, and tackled Benjamin with a hug that knocked them both off their feet.

As soon as Benjamin regained his wind, he laughed and returned the hug. The wash of relief at seeing Alan again so soon almost brought tears to his eyes. “How did you...?”

“Find you? Does it matter?”

“I suppose not, but inquiring minds and all that.”

Alan raised himself up on his elbows and looked down at Benjamin. He smirked, and his eyes danced. “I saw your car.”

Benjamin started to question that answer, but before any words came out, Alan captured his mouth in a crushing kiss. Benjamin froze in surprise, but Alan didn’t let up. He continued to work his lips over Benjamin’s with consistent intensity.

When Benjamin could move again, he returned the kiss with all the passion that had built up inside him over the past few weeks. Alan—the person he’d known the longest outside of his family, the one friend he could always depend on to be there for him when times were tough, the person he had finally realized he loved more than anything—seemed to love him back. Benjamin brought his hand up to smooth a stray lock of Alan’s hair, laughing and breaking the kiss as the short strands tickled his palm. He took a deep breath to center himself. The whirlwind of emotions made him feel like he was about to fly out of his body.

Alan closed his eyes and pressed their foreheads together. “Damn it. I’m sorry, Ben, for what I put you through.”

Benjamin took another breath. The relief and joy at seeing Alan again and the thrill of the kiss had made Benjamin feel the best he’d felt in a long time. Not just content or at peace this time, but purely *happy*. He wanted the same for Alan. “It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. I came back to you and helped heal your broken heart only to break it again by taking off on you. You deserve better than that. I knew you had feelings for me, and I shunned them.” Alan sighed. A few heartbeats passed, and he opened his eyes again. “Even though the feelings are mutual.”

Benjamin smiled and touched Alan’s cheek. “Well, you’re here now. That’s the important thing.” Alan’s arms tightened around him.

Benjamin was silent, afraid he would break the spell. Finally, it felt right to speak again. “You were on your way back to me anyway, weren’t you?”

“Well, duh. Why else would I be passing through Bedford?”

“What about your work in Cleveland?”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re all that matters.” Alan slowly pulled away and ran a hand through Benjamin’s hair. “Thank you for accepting me back.”

“As you like to say... well, duh.” Benjamin took Alan’s hand and pressed his lips to the palm. “I’ve got a king-sized bed in this room. It’s much more comfortable than the floor.”

Alan raised an eyebrow. “Jumping right into things, are we?”

“Is it too soon?”

Alan got to his feet and pulled Benjamin up with him. “No. Take me to the heaven of your bed. Or the motel’s bed, as the case may be.”

“My pleasure.” Benjamin tugged Alan to the bed and nudged him to lie down on his back. He stretched out on top of Alan, gently kissed his lips, and ran his fingers down Alan’s cheek and across his jaw line. He moved his fingers lower and unbuttoned Alan’s shirt, then slipped a hand under the fabric and caressed the smooth skin. The way Alan gasped and arched into the touch encouraged him, so he slid his hand further down Alan’s body until he felt the hardness between his legs. He popped the button of Alan’s jeans and pulled the zipper down, then released Alan’s mouth. “Are you absolutely sure you want this, Alan?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Benjamin slipped his hand inside Alan’s underwear. “I love you. I think I always have.” He closed his eyes and worked kisses down the front of Alan’s body.

“I love you, too, Ben. More than anything.”

Another rush of joy flowed through Benjamin, and his kisses faltered because of the smile on his lips. He felt Alan shift and heard him turn off the light, but he could still see brightness through his eyelids. He opened his eyes. “Holy shit.”

Alan was glowing. Literally.

Benjamin sat up and squinted as he looked at Alan’s face. “Um...

Alan?”

“I can’t help it, Ben. It happens when I’m with you.” Alan sat up as well and took one of Benjamin’s hands, lacing their fingers together. “I remember you once saying you didn’t believe in things like angels. Well.” He brought Benjamin’s hand to his lips and brushed them back and forth across the skin. “You should believe.”

“You’re telling me you’re... an angel?”

Alan nodded. “Haven’t you wondered why I’ve always come to you when you needed me? Or how I found you here?”

Benjamin was silent. He had to admit he’d wondered if Alan was psychic a few times.

Then something else clicked into place, and he jerked his hand away, the skin still tingling. “Shit, shit, shit! I’m fucked.”

“What are you talking about?”

Benjamin glanced at the hurt expression on Alan’s still-glowing face, and the feeling of guilt that had been poking at the edge of his consciousness swelled. “What do you think I’m talking about? I just felt up an angel!”

“Oh, jeez.” Alan sighed, shook his head, and reached for Benjamin’s hand.

The bed squeaked as Benjamin hopped off. He slumped into the chair on the far side of the room and put his head in his hands, confused about what to do. He loved Alan and wanted to be with him, but now he wasn’t sure if it was possible.

“Ben, please don’t be like this.”

Benjamin felt a hand on his shoulder. He hadn’t even heard the bed creak. He looked up, and there was Alan with his shirt open and his jeans sliding down his hips, his glow dimmer than it had been a moment before. Benjamin quickly looked down again. “It’s not every day that the friend I’m in love with tells me he loves me back, only for me to find out said friend is actually a celestial being.”

Alan rubbed Benjamin’s shoulder. “Look at me.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” Benjamin stared at the floor, but damn it, he saw the glow out of the corner of his eye.

“Ben. Please. Don’t be an ass.”

Benjamin finally looked up. “I’m not—”

Alan wrapped his hands around the sides of Benjamin’s head, jerked him forward, and crushed their lips together almost hard enough to hurt. He released Benjamin’s mouth, slid his hands down the sides of his neck, and gripped his shoulders. “I’ve helped thousands of people throughout my existence, but I’ve never told anyone what I am. Except for you. That’s how much you mean to me.”

“Wouldn’t getting involved with a human cause problems for you?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“It’s just....” Benjamin sighed. “I don’t want to be responsible if you end up falling from grace or anything like that.”

“It’s *my* choice. My responsibility. Besides, I’ve known a few other angels who got involved with humans, and nothing bad happened to them. As long as everything was done out of love, that is.”

“What about... what were they called... the Nephilim?”

Alan chuckled softly. “That’s just an old myth. You shouldn’t believe everything you read.”

Benjamin must still have looked unsure, because Alan touched his face, and there was that familiar calming energy, and mixed with the energy, there was love.

Alan wrapped his arms around Benjamin and whispered, “It’ll be okay. I promise.”

Benjamin returned the embrace and took in the love. He hoped Alan could feel him returning it. He wanted to be with Alan more than anything, angel or not. “What kind of a name is ‘Alan’ for an angel, anyway?”

Alan laughed. “You don’t think that’s my real name, do you? My real name’s Alahnrael, but it’s hard for humans to pronounce correctly.”

“So that stuff about having work in Cleveland?”

“Another person who needed my help. Someone who sees me as a friend from college. Don’t worry. I didn’t abandon her. I checked in on her today and got her set up with another angel so I could come back to you as soon as I could.”

“What about the singing lessons? Are all your students really

your... charges, I guess you'd call them?"

"No. They're really just my students. I need to earn some money while I'm here so I can properly function in society. Besides, sharing art is payment as well." He kissed Benjamin's cheek. "Now, enough questions for the time being. You have better things to do with your mouth." He pressed his lips to Benjamin's again.

Benjamin tentatively poked out his tongue, and Alan sucked it into his own mouth and ran his own tongue over and around it. Benjamin pulled Alan even closer as they kissed. He was amazed that nothing about him felt or smelled unusual except for the hint of sweetness in the taste of his lips.

When Benjamin came up for air, Alan took hold of his hands. "If you wouldn't mind, I think we should go back to bed and pick up where we left off."

"Are you sure you want to?"

Alan pulled one of Benjamin's hands to his crotch. "Haven't we already been over this? As I already told you, I'm sure."

Benjamin traced his fingers along the outline of Alan's cock through his underwear, making him gasp. "Mm, if I had any doubt before, it's gone now."

"I'm glad."

Benjamin headed back toward bed, gently tugging Alan along with him as a part of him still wondered if he'd just lost his mind. He pushed Alan's shirt off his shoulders and kissed the freshly exposed skin. He slid his hands down the side of Alan's body and pushed his jeans and underwear all the way down and out of the way.

Alan stepped out of the discarded clothing and kicked it aside. He pulled Benjamin's shirt off, helped him out of his jeans, and added both garments to the pile.

They lay down on the bed, and Benjamin kissed Alan's lips, then his neck, then his nipples. He brushed his fingers across Alan's cock and made it twitch. Alan moaned softly and pressed himself into Benjamin's hand, his skin glowing brighter with each touch. He raised his head to claim Benjamin's mouth with his own while running his own hands all over Benjamin's body. Benjamin gasped when Alan stroked the sides of his neck, along his arms, and his lower belly—all his most sensitive

spots.

Benjamin broke the kiss. “Oh shit,” he muttered and flopped back against the bed. “I don’t have any supplies with me.”

Alan laughed and shook his head. “Nothing to worry about. As you might guess, I can’t carry human diseases, so we don’t need protection.”

“Yeah, okay, but I don’t want to cause you any pain.”

“You won’t.” Alan leaned over the edge of the bed and picked his jeans up off the floor. He fished a small bottle of lube out of the pocket, held it up, and dropped it in Benjamin’s hand.

Benjamin stared at the bottle. He hadn’t felt anything in Alan’s pocket earlier. “How did you....” He shook his head. “Never mind.” He was dealing with an angel, after all. He flipped the cap, squeezed some of the gel onto his fingers, and got both himself and Alan slicked up.

“Lie down on your back.”

Benjamin did as requested. He watched as Alan shifted, straddled him, and leaned forward, pressing their lips together for another quick kiss. Alan pulled away and sat back, taking Benjamin’s cock inside, bit by bit, until it was buried to the hilt. At first, Benjamin couldn’t move. Alan was warmer and tighter than anyone he’d ever been with, and there was a sort of tingly sensation he’d never experienced before.

Alan brushed the back of his hand across Benjamin’s cheek. “Relax. Breathe.”

Just like that, Benjamin could move again. He took a deep breath, put his hands on Alan’s hips, and rocked his lower body in time to Alan’s rhythm.

They gazed at each other as they moved, and when Benjamin looked into Alan’s eyes, he saw the wisdom that could only come with age. Then Alan squeezed him as he moved, and Benjamin stopped worrying about things like eyes, ages, and angels.

“A-Alan,” he said with a moan as his eyes fluttered closed and he focused on the physical sensations that overwhelmed his body. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around Alan’s cock, pumping it in time to their other motions. He heard a sweet cry that sounded almost like music instead of the usual moan, grunt, or gasp he’d heard from previous lovers. When Alan got louder and his body tightened even more, Benjamin opened his eyes.

Alan's glow was brighter than before. In fact, it was so bright that it looked like high noon in the bedroom instead of half an hour before sunrise.

As Benjamin watched, he felt himself getting closer and closer to the edge, and based on Alan's sounds and his... aura... he was getting close as well. "Benjamin," Alan whispered just as his body arched and his cock spurted fluid all over Benjamin's hand and stomach.

Benjamin brought his hand to his mouth, dipped his tongue into the liquid, and found it sweet, almost like vanilla. Warmth spread down his throat as he swallowed, and as soon as the warmth reached his stomach, the muscles in his lower body tightened. He cried out, all the nerves in his body tingling and his legs and hips shaking as he climaxed.

When the spasms stopped, Benjamin collapsed back on the bed and took a moment to regain his breath. He looked up at Alan. The glow was brighter still. He raised a hand and touched Alan's face, almost expecting his skin to feel hot, but it was only slightly warmer than normal. "My angel."

Alan put a hand over Benjamin's. "Literally."

"How many people can say that?"

"More than you'd think, but still not many. Most of us try not to get emotionally involved, but sometimes it happens. Obviously." They both dropped their hands. Alan shifted and stretched out at Benjamin's side, the glow gradually fading as the faint light of dawn took its place. "I think it should have happened awhile ago with us."

"Yeah." Benjamin curled an arm around him and absently played with his hair. "There's something I don't get, though. You're an angel, but I've known you since high school. I've seen you age."

"I'm capable of changing my appearance, and that includes making myself look older or younger. Watch." A few new wrinkles appeared around Alan's eyes and lips, making him look like a man in his forties instead of the thirty-two year old Benjamin had believed him to be. "You'll never have to worry about looking older while I stay the same. Unless you'd rather I stay young-looking."

"No. I think I like us looking the same age. I don't want to look like a cradle-robber when I'm in my sixties."

Alan's lips curled into a smirk. "You mean you won't want to show

off your hot young stud when you're in the nursing home?"

Benjamin snorted. "I'd rather not." He watched as the new wrinkles smoothed out and Alan's face went back to normal. "How old are you, anyway?"

"A little over twenty-five hundred."

"Shit." Benjamin's hand slid down Alan's back, his fingers taking note of each rib and vertebrae. Nothing was out of place. "And in all those years, I'm the only one you've fallen for?" He chuckled sheepishly as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "Eh... I probably should have phrased that differently. Sorry."

Alan laughed his musical laugh. "It's okay. Anyway, yes, I've never felt this way about anyone before. I've had close feelings of friendship and attachment to several humans, but that's it."

Benjamin closed his eyes and was silent as he wondered what made him special enough to win an angel's romantic love. He opened his eyes again when he felt fingers playing with his hair and stroking his scalp.

"You're a great person, Ben. Isn't that enough of a reason?"

Benjamin pulled Alan closer and tucked his head in Alan's neck. "One of these days, you're going to have to tell me about everything you've seen. You must have done some amazing things in those twenty-five hundred years."

"I have." Alan's hand brushed across Benjamin's cheek, trailed down his neck and shoulders, and settled over his chest. "But nothing as amazing as this."

TAYLOR LOCHLAND has been reading and writing for as long as she can remember. As a child and a teenager, she spent many weekends holed up in her room with her books. If she didn't like something about a story, she'd often take it upon herself to write her own version. As an adult, she became involved in the anime fandom, which led to an interest in fan fiction and text-based online roleplaying. She later abandoned fan fiction when she discovered creating her own characters was more fun.

She's lived in the Detroit metropolitan area her entire life. When she's not reading or writing, she can often be found playing with her cats, sewing, looking at the night sky, watching baseball or hockey, or going to anime conventions.

Taylor is most creative after midnight but unfortunately has a job that usually requires her to be awake by 7:30 a.m. She just knows that the sleep deprivation will catch up to her one of these days.

Visit Taylor's blog at <http://taylor-lochland.livejournal.com> or her website at <http://taylorlochland.com>.

A TRAIL OF FEATHERS

Sarah Ann Watts

I'M stumbling out into the late dawn of another New Year's Day, trying to pretend that, like everyone else at this all-night party, I have somewhere to go, a family to welcome me—the prodigal son returning to the fold, a lover to keep me warm. I remember how Luke would have laughed at my headache and told me I deserved it, while at the same time giving me his own comfort. Now my new “friends” are dispersing in a scattering to lit homes. There was no milk for coffee, and the Bailey's we used instead only seemed like a good idea at the time, leaving a sickly taste upon the tongue.

This day is all too short; grey, crisp, and already people are out taking down festive lights, reeling in Christmas decorations, and stripping walls bare. The holiday is over, and after a score of crowded nights when I laughed louder, partied harder, went home to strangers' beds, and tried to lose myself in revelry, the truth hurts.

Another year later—another year older—and what do I have to show for it?

God, I feel the cold. I wrap my arms around myself to keep warm. I was a fool to venture out without a coat, and I left the car at home. I never expected to be walking home alone; somehow, when the inevitable invitation came, I said no.

That was one hell of a New Year's resolution, to say no, and for what? The chance to shiver just short of noon and trek back to a cold and empty flat. This glow of virtue doesn't keep me warm, but what else is there? Today of all days, on the cusp of a new year, I should be looking forward, not back. I should do a lot of things; caution tells me there is

grief in memory. I know I can't run forever. Not today. Not when I remember the day we first met. Today is for Luke.

There is nowhere more pointless than a church on New Year's Day, all festivity gone, burnt out like the Christmas candles, leaving only a mess to scrape away.

Still, I find myself drawn to the doors, and I push them open. There is little light in the grey skies, and the interior is subdued, a fusty taint to the air of stale incense and scattered prayers. The greenery is fading, brittle holly leaves and dying flowers spilling petals. Dust shifts beneath my feet, waiting for the cleaners to come in after the holidays.

There is nothing here to welcome me. I linger, trying to recapture the past, but it slips through my fingers.

I try to think why I came in here, why I want to light a candle for Luke, and why I won't put the taper to the wax to remember. Luke is worth more than a candle. I don't need to see his face new-kindled in the flame when it is with me always.

Leaving, I stoop and pick up a feather, dark with dried blood at the root. The feather is a broken thing, ragged like my thoughts. I think of dirt and disease, but somehow I can't leave it lying there. Thinking only that I will find a bin outside to discard it, I place it in my jeans pocket, crushing the quills.

There is another at the curb, and I look for roadkill, but there is nothing. Someone stumbles against me so hard I nearly fall, and I hear the feather snap in two.

He puts out his hands to steady himself, and I push him away more by reflex than intent. Some drunken kid barging into me, still high from the night before. His eyes glitter in his pale face.

At once, I realize how empty the street is and that this kid might have a knife, might be looking for his next fix.

He isn't dressed for the weather: a ripped shirt that has seen better days, jeans, bare feet. There is no color in his face, its aureole of pale hair lit by the low sun, and, spilling from his pockets, feathers. He kneels to pick them up, and I almost fall over him. The pavement isn't that wide; I can't just push past him, and rather to my surprise, I pick up the feathers and pass them back. His eyes widen, and he smiles. It is only then, when he thanks me, that I realize how bizarre this is, both of us

almost clashing heads to pick up the contents of a ripped pillowcase as if they were coins.

Curiosity wins out, and I have to ask. “What’s with the feathers? You’re an artist?”

He smiles. “You could say that. You may just have saved my life. Can I buy you a coffee?”

And there I was thinking him some kind of derelict. I’m still not sure about him, and I glance down at his feet again only to see that he is wearing trainers like anyone else, though the state of them would raise eyebrows at my gym. I shake my head. It must be my eyes playing tricks. I remember feet whiter than the dirty snow and the trace of blue veins like wire.

Looking up, I see he is smiling at me. “Coffee? Or did you have somewhere else to go?”

His eyes are guileless, innocent. I am embarrassed, as if he has taken pity on me. “It’s too cold to hang about out here.”

I’m dressed no more practically than he is, relying on the heat in my veins to keep warm, and my flat is only a brisk walk away. *Don’t get involved*, caution tells me, though when did I ever listen?

He shoves his hands into his pockets and I see what looks like a tattoo: feathering strokes of ink at his wrist. His shirt is open at the neck, and I am the one who is shivering. Still, he must be cold.

Suddenly I feel foolish. “All right.”

The words are gracelessly spoken, yet his smile is reward enough. He pushes open the door, and we walk into a steamy interior. My glasses mist, and I take them off. They’re designer frames. I couldn’t hack the contacts all night. The scene blurs; when I wipe my glasses and replace them, he is seated already, watching me. As I walk toward him, I have that sense of something beginning, as if I’ve met him many times before and this Sunday morning routine is part of an established ritual.

I sit facing him and pull off my jacket. Like everything about me, it has a label. Looking into his eyes, I feel that labels are unimportant. Less important than usual, anyway.

“Shall I order for you?”

“Coffee, please.”

He turns to give directions to the waitress, and she smiles at him and blushes.

"Leo." He gives me his name like a gift-wrapped present.

I pause for a moment, thinking, then shrug and say, "Daniel."

If he notes my hesitation, he is too well mannered to comment, and in truth, I'm surprised at myself, that I gave him my real name. Leo sounds unlikely; his coloring is dark, and he has eyes that are flecked with gold.

There is a silence filled with the clatter of crockery—coffee for two, an intimacy between two strangers. How long has it been, I think, since I met someone just for a drink? Although already I'm beginning to think of more. There is something about him. Maybe this sudden human contact has made me admit how alone I am. I'm also starving, and my body craves sugar. "Are you hungry?" I could curse myself—how gauche is that?—even as he smiles and pretends to consider. "I don't usually eat breakfast." *Why did I say that?*

"Neither do I, usually. But we could call it an early lunch."

"Only if I pay."

He smiles. "I thought you would. Though I can afford to treat you, and after all, this was my idea."

It seems churlish to refuse. He calls the waitress and speaks to her, asking for salmon and scrambled eggs and more coffee.

I ask for eggs and bacon, the full English. Unsophisticated, maybe, but with the head I have, I need the carbohydrates.

After the waitress leaves, he swiftly lays a hand on my forehead, a brief caress like a feather. "You look feverish." It is true that his touch has ignited a flame.

The food comes then, and he eats, chatting to me about the holiday and this part of town, which he says is new to him. He doesn't push for information or ask questions at all, and I find myself enjoying his company. I find it refreshing that he doesn't tell me where he works or what he drives. Neither does he hint at what he earns, though I'm revising my previous estimate of him. There is assurance that goes with a certain background, the kind of poise money can't buy except for its children. He impresses by not seeking to impress, as if he doesn't need to, and it is peaceful.

I can feel my resolution crumbling and think this must be some kind of record, even for me. I am still trying to place him. He gives the impression of not caring about his clothes, though looking at his hair, I know how long it would take me to achieve such casual perfection in front of the mirror.

I'm drinking him in even as we eat, and he knows it. As we finish the food, he gives me a direct glance and says, "Can I come home with you?"

In truth, it was a foregone conclusion that I would ask him; he anticipates my desire. He blinks. "Sorry, it's just—I'd like to talk to you, get to know you better."

I can't tell if he is innocent or brazen or just interested in the contents of my wallet. I remember he is paying for breakfast. Suddenly, I am as eager to get home as I was for excuses to stay away earlier.

He is smiling.

"Just to talk?" I say.

"Why not?"

Again, I feel that frisson of danger. *What am I getting myself into?* But I know how to look after myself. "Why not your place?"

"I'm staying with friends."

The excuse seems all right. "What makes you think the same isn't true for me?"

He glances at the house keys I've laid on the table. I'd taken them out of my jeans with the feather when I sat down.

"Shit, it has been a while. I'm sorry."

He glances up at that. "No, I'm sorry. I got the wrong idea."

I look at him then. He's given me an out if I choose to take it, but already I think we both know that in one way or another, I'd already issued an invitation.

Still, to take someone home seems like a betrayal, even though my partner is no longer there and likely would have been just as interested in Leo as I am. Competition, then. I smile at the thought, hearing Luke drawl in appreciation. He would have loved to tease me, knowing that I would never have shared him with anyone or betrayed his trust. That was then, and this is now.

For a moment I consider taking this new acquaintance to a hotel, but that is tacky and unworthy of him, as if we can't be friends. I already know the kind of "friendship" I have in mind, but there's a whisper in my mind that says, *No, this could be different.*

I glance at my watch. Breaking my New Year's resolution before noon has to be some kind of first, though in past years I was seldom conscious to resolve anything. I don't recall seeing morning on New Year's Day for what, a decade?

Not even with Luke in these past couple of years, when I had every reason to stay in bed.

Suddenly it feels right to take someone home, as a friend; that even if this is to prove a casual encounter like all the rest, that I give it a chance. I'm so sick of anonymous hotel rooms, a bill to pay, and the problem of who leaves first.

I've been staring at my watch for quite a while. A gift from Luke. Like the flat he paid for and left to me in his will. Not that he ever thought he'd die. For a moment time stops, and I remember.

I glance up at Leo to see his eyes lingering on me. It's been a while since anyone looked at me quite that way, and I feel my heart racing and my breath constrict and the inevitable response of my body even as I imagine that sensual mouth on mine and strip him with my eyes.

If he's bothered, he doesn't show it, even leaning back in his chair as if to give me a better view. It's amazing how good he looks, how comfortable in his skin and how clean. There's a faint color in his face now from the open fire, a quirk of this café.

I feel heat as if I am sitting closer to the fire than he is. I have a fear of being scorched. I draw closer, if only to see what I can read in the flames

I have the absurd idea that if I left, if I made some excuse, glancing at Luke's watch—a forgotten appointment—that he would go on sitting there, just as he is, waiting perhaps for a man less stupid than I am.

He meets my eyes. "Is there somewhere else you need to be?"

"What kind of question is that?" I think of places I could be, anywhere in the world. Places I went with Luke. Places we dreamed we'd see together. Do I really want to go through with this?

"I like you. I'm only in town one day. Can you not give me one

day?”

“I’m not looking for a relationship,” I say. Best to clear that out of the way right now.

“Neither am I.”

“Come on, then, but it’s quite a walk. You up for that?”

He shrugs. “Yeah.” He puts money on the table, old notes, way too much, not looking at the bill. The waitress comes chasing after him, and her eyes widen as he tells her to keep the change.

It’s a strange walk home. I say little or nothing. I’m confused, feeling like I’ve taken in a stray or that in some way I’m being taken advantage of. Am I so desperate that I’ll take in anyone?

I’m not anyone.

You do this often?

Often enough.

The ice sharpens perceptions, so I’m not sure if the voices are in my head or if we’re truly having this conversation.

I stop at a cash machine, and he waits for me at the other side of the road. I look for his reflection in the window, and when I turn, I almost expect him not to be there. I’m angry now, angry at him for knowing my need and my loneliness, angry at his presumption in thinking that I’d take a stranger home to my bed.

I get to the flat, key in past the alarm, and take him upstairs. The flat is as cold as I feared, though I click on lights, turn up the heating, and light the fire. As I hesitate over music, not knowing which of the tracks I loved and Luke loved to hate I can bear, he wanders into the kitchen. “Can I help?”

“No, wait in the sitting room.”

My tone is harsh, abrupt. I fix drinks for us. “Red wine okay for you?” I’m damned if I’ll give him the choice. When I walk in, he is sitting on the sofa like a guest, staring at the picture above my hearth. It is one of Luke’s: a landscape. I think of the other picture in my bedroom, and I remember why I’ve brought no one home, not here.

I drink my wine, and he watches me, leaving his glass untouched.

“How much?” I’m hurting and I want to lash out, let this stranger

know that he means nothing to me.

He blinks. “Do you usually pay for sex?” He has me there. Until today, it’s been my pride. “You think I was selling myself to you?” He leans forward and kisses me deliberately on the mouth. “How much did you think I’d be worth?”

Some instinct for danger takes over, and I can’t meet his clear look, feeling my face glow with something like shame. “More than I can afford.”

I’m wondering how long it is since anyone gave me anything I didn’t pay for. Money isn’t the only currency.

He looks at the picture again, really looks at it, and then he says, “Do you want to talk about it?”

I take his face in my hands. “No. I don’t want to talk about it. I didn’t invite you here to listen to you talking.”

“You didn’t invite me at all.” He stands up and pulls his shirt over his head. He is beautiful, but he also looks cold, like a statue. There are scars on his back that I trace with my fingers, and he shivers. “You know, if I only had one day a year on earth, I’d like to make it count for something.”

I shake my head. I thought I was over the night before, but this has to be the weirdest trip ever, and with the wine heating my veins, I don’t care. He smiles and picks up the glass, and I swear I can almost see the red staining his throat as he drinks. His skin is so fair as to be translucent, and all I want is to feel its texture under my mouth. So I cover his throat with kisses and seize hold of him, feeling him hard against me and my own response, and he gasps and holds me like he’ll never let me go.

I break away, dizzy, and I almost fall into a chair. He is kneeling, and I want him so badly, I’m shaking with something more than fear. I know I could lose myself in those eyes, and more, like his touch opens my mind, breaks down the walls I’ve built, and I am naked.

He places his hands on my shoulder, kisses me very gently, and then says, “You know, angels get lonely too.”

My face is wet, and he wipes it with his shirt, which suddenly feels like silk. Then he touches me, and I am so hard it hurts, and there is grief and ecstasy and in truth I’m not sure I know the difference any more.

When I come I cry out, and my cracked heart breaks open and bleeds. He holds me and takes me from the dark place where I am lost, and then he places his hand where I can feel the tear in my heart and says, “No looking back.”

I say nothing while the pain eases and shifts like a scab healing. Then I can speak. “I’m sorry. Go into the bedroom. Make yourself comfortable. I just need a minute.”

He nods and then says, “I could leave.”

“No!”

He walks away from me, not bothering to pick up the fallen shirt, and I pick it up and hold it close, breathing in his scent. I hesitate and then go to him. He’s sitting on the bed and pulling off those wretched trainers. He grimaces and kicks them out of sight, then looks up at me, laughing.

Then he stands and touches his lips to mine and wraps his arm around my neck, kissing me hard. My mouth opens under his, and as he draws me close, I feel his warmth and my body responds. He slides his hand under my shirt and pulls at the buttons awkwardly, and I help him. He is naked under his jeans, and I was right—his feet are bare, warm to the touch.

Later, we lie close, having created our own heaven on Earth, and I have only one question. “Why me?”

I’m not sure I even say the words aloud, but having felt the brush of wings, I’m not sure of anything. So I’m not surprised when he stretches and gives me that unearthly look, like he can see right through me and I am crystal to him. He traces the line of my jaw as he replies.

“The trail of feathers led me to you. You stooped to pick up one crushed feather in the dust, like you cared. Not many would.” He smiles crookedly. “There are fallen angels too.”

“Will I see you again?”

“I don’t know. Would you want to?”

I have to look away then, and there are tears glinting on my lashes. I feel miserable. If this was some kind of test, I’ve betrayed my dead lover so many times.

“You betray no one. Just yourself. You thought I might cut your

throat for my next fix, and you didn't care. You think Luke wants you to grieve forever, to bury yourself?"

"I said I'd never get over him."

He looks again at the drawing Luke made of me when we were first lovers. "Why should you want to? He didn't die because of you. You have to forgive yourself."

"Luke was too good for this world."

He shakes his head. "No one is too good for this world. Luke was no angel. I should know."

For a moment I want to kill him, but then I remember Luke in all his glory, saying I was out of this world, and I smile.

Leo kisses me—a feather shivering my skin. I reach for him, and together we burn.

When I wake, the window is open, and there is snow blowing in. I am grateful for the fire in the hearth. As I kneel to add kindling, I think of a flame that nearly went out, and I remember Luke, who was never afraid of anything, and I swear I will never forget.

Yet when I walk out the door into a new year, there is a sense of something buried deep but growing—a seed of hope, life renewed, and a second chance—that is at once a healing and a blessing. I sleep now with a feather under my pillow, and my dreams are no longer empty and dark.

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HEART'S SALVATION

Réve Garrison

THE statue stood, as it had for many, many years, outside a church atop a hill in a small Midwestern town. It could not remember a time when it had not been, as time was irrelevant to it—a concept created by man, much as it had been. Its days were long, as mankind would see them, but they passed by in a wink for the statue. It longed for Sundays and Wednesdays, when people flowed past in small clusters, groups of children played at its base, and happiness and joy surrounded it.

Days like today, when the hymns drifting from inside soothed it, uplifted it, and reminded it of the goodness of human beings and all that was and ever would be. It found comfort in the knowledge that He was there. Omnipotent and omnipresent, He watched over all with care and devotion, not unlike the mother who walked hand-in-hand with her child down the hill right this moment.

It could not see tomorrow; it knew only today, but it felt the love of the world around it in this humble community of faith, and it knew that love was good. The statue was filled with happiness at the sight of mother and child, the bond that could never be broken, the bond that was completely unequaled by anything within the earthly realm.

The hymns ended as the sun set again, and the statue said goodbye to each person as it always did, absorbing the love and returning it in kind. For it was a blessed thing to touch the statue—many believed it to have healing properties, though the only thing it could truly heal was a heart undone. It had not the same power of healing that He did.

The statue rested until the next night, when the sounds of weeping drew its attention. As it became aware of its surroundings once again, it realized that a light, misting rain was falling, making the chill of the evening more pronounced.

There, at its base, knelt a man. Broken and despondent, the man cried in agony, his eyes red and swollen as the extreme pain he felt inside poured from him. The statue reached out to him as best it could without sound or motion, pleading for the man to reach up and touch it. It could help him heal if only the man would extend his hand.

As if in answer to its silent prayer, it felt chilled fingers grasp the pedestal below it as a pair of haunted blue eyes caught its gaze. Love emanated from the statue as it felt the grief wash over it. Raw and new, it flowed from the man in overpowering waves. The statue doubled its efforts, trying to push back the man's anguish and find its source. What it finally beheld shocked it and brought forth its own sense of pain.

The mother and child it had seen only the day before had died tragically. This man was husband and father to them. His grief was palpable. Again the statue tried to soothe the man, but all it succeeded in doing was wrenching a sob from the man's battered heart.

It tried again, this time drawing on His love for empowerment, but the man released his grasp on the pedestal before the statue could finish. The statue had felt the man's despair and hopelessness, his disillusionment with life. Drastic measures would need to be taken to absolve this man of his guilt and pain. Searching deep within itself, it made the necessary transformation.

HE had given all his heart to the woman who had born his beloved child, and now they were both gone, taken from him forever by a drunk driver as they'd made their way home the night before. He had come to the church tonight seeking strength, hope, some reason to continue living without the people who made him happy, the two beautiful souls who gave him a sense of balance and harmony with the universe.

If only he had been there, he would have heard the car approaching on the gravel and moved them to safety. He had warned her repeatedly to stay off the road that late in the evening, but she insisted that she was perfectly capable of making it home without him to watch over her. Being deaf did not make her foolish, as she had informed him insistently on numerous occasions. But he knew that watching out for their daughter, who'd suffered the same disability, had taken her eyes as well as her mind off the road as they walked.

His body was numb, and his mind was being carried in the same direction. He could find no guidance, no light to shine upon him and show him how to escape the unbearable pain that ravaged his heart. The rain had begun to fall about the same time he reached the hallowed ground, as if sensing his torment and crying out with him.

His lungs burned from the heavy air and the brisk pace with which he'd made his way to the church. Collapsing to his knees, he tried to catch his breath but felt only an oppressive weight within him pulling him closer to the ground.

Looking for anyone about, anyone who might be able to help ease his suffering, he glanced up to see the base of the statue. It could heal him. He'd heard the stories of misery overcome simply by touching its foot.

Trembling fingers reached out to touch the base, and a shiver passed through him. His grief crested and fell in waves that washed over and through him, seeming to drag him down like an undertow. He felt the beginnings of a tingling in his hand and pulled it away from the statue, despair now overshadowing his soul. Still on his knees, he huddled into a ball and prayed for someone to help him bear this burden, his eyes and ears closed to the world around him.

If the man had looked up, he would have seen something resembling a flash of lightning illuminate the being who appeared beside him. It wasn't until he felt the gentle touch on his shoulder that he jerked upward.

Fear was the first thing that flooded the widower's body, for only seconds ago there had been no one around. Now, a tall man with an almost angelic face looked down upon him, his features blank, but a flash of amber shone in his dark eyes. He wore nondescript clothing and could easily have been one of the parishioners, but the man did not recognize him. He'd missed the last few services, so it was feasible that the young man was new.

The man extended a tanned hand to him, and he took it, his body instantly suffused with warmth against the chill of the rain. A voice within his mind bade him to follow, and he complied, no longer afraid of the stranger who led him toward the church.

Once inside, his hand was released, and he instantly missed the feeling of security it had provided. "Who are you?" the man asked as the

silent being walked down the aisle of pews.

Someone who cares, came the voice inside his head. *Do you feel better, Nathaniel?* The young man had stopped and was looking at him, but no words were coming from his lips.

“Yes, I do. Thank you.” A soft smile crossed the man’s face, and Nathaniel swore he heard a choir singing off in the distance, though he knew there was no practice scheduled for tonight.

Come, then, he beckoned with a graceful wave of his long fingers. *Kneel with me and pray.*

Still standing just inside the doorway, Nathaniel complied. Compelled by a force he didn’t understand, he hurriedly made his way to the front of the church. There they knelt before a large wooden cross, and Nathaniel reached up to caress the similar silver pendant that hung around his neck as he bowed his head in prayer.

When he finished, he still felt the raw edges of fresh grief, but the pain was not as pronounced as it had been. Opening his eyes, he found himself alone in the church. Somehow the discovery did not completely surprise him.

Lifting the silver cross to his lips, he kissed it softly before returning to prayer. This time, he prayed for the strength to make it home.

UNWILLING to return to the statue just yet, the young man watched from the shadows as Nathaniel began to pray again, feeling the honest and true nature of the man whose life he might have just saved. *Pride goeth before a fall*, he chided himself, then basked in the warmth of His love as he felt it flow through him in a rush of forgiveness.

He was now charged with the duty of making sure Nathaniel got home safely.

THE feeling of being watched hadn’t left him until he stepped inside his house. The hollow echo of his shoes on the hardwood floor as he walked the hallway revived his earlier feelings of guilt. There was no worse

feeling on earth than guilt, and the guilt for living when he only wanted to join his wife and daughter in the afterlife was nigh unbearable.

Whatever headway had been made by his pilgrimage was now undone. Lost again to his grief, he went straight to the bedroom and shucked his clothing, leaving it in a pile on the floor. He would not eat or drink. He would starve himself quickly; alone in his bed, he would die with her pillow clutched to his chest and await judgment.

THE young man had only just returned to the tranquility of the church when he felt weary resignation overcome Nathaniel. He searched Nathaniel's mind and discovered the lengths the man would take to end his life. A gasp of fear escaped him, and he rushed to Nathaniel's aid, hoping to forestall what he had seen.

Inside the dwelling but afraid to make himself seen lest he be mistaken for a burglar, he hid in the shadows outside the bedroom doorway, attempting to access Nathaniel's thoughts and steer them in a more rational direction. But Nathaniel was not letting him in. Each door he tried to turn was locked. When he found a crack in a window, the shade was quickly drawn shut.

This was not good. Granted, he was out of practice, but never before had he failed to find even the remotest of entry points into the subconscious. It was time to take this to a higher level. He vanished as instantly as he'd appeared.

He will not let me in.

*SEARCH YOUR HEART. YOU WILL FIND THE ANSWER.
TRUST YOURSELF. TRUST HIM. AM I NOT THE LIGHT?*

You are.

AM I NOT THE TRUTH?

Of course you are.

*THEN TRUST THE TRUTH TO GUIDE YOU. HE IS ONLY A
HEARTBEAT AWAY. GO TO HIM. SHINE ON HIM WITH THE GRACE
GIVEN YOU, ARIS.*

I will.

WHEN he returned, he found Nathaniel still on the bed in a fetal position, the pillow tight within his grasp and his eyes staring unfocused at a spot beyond the wall. Kneeling beside the bed, he ran his fingers over the widower's dark blond hair, smoothing the rain-matted strands away from his face. Nathaniel made no sound, but his body gave way to trembling.

Knowing he could not breach the defenses of the other man's mind, he used the voice given to him and spoke to the man. "I am here, Nathaniel. Let me in. Let me comfort you."

As quickly as they'd begun, the tremors ceased. Emboldened by this progress, the young man continued to speak, positioning himself on the bed behind Nathaniel and snuggling the worn man into his embrace. "Listen to the beating of my heart. Hear the love it sings for you? You need only to stop torturing yourself and move toward it. There is no shame in living when those whom you loved have departed. They are not gone forever. You will see them again, I promise."

Nathaniel jerked in his arms, as if coming back to himself from wherever he'd been in his mind. He exhaled, and on the breath was a soft, mournful cry. For a moment, Aris panicked, fearing that the man was giving up. Needing the connection even though Nathaniel was wrapped safely in his arms, Aris began to stroke his hair once more. The simple action seemed to calm Nathaniel, his anguished cry turning into mild whimpers.

"Come back to me, Nathaniel. Let me protect you. Let me shelter your heart." He rested his head tenderly at the other man's nape and sighed. He could easily give up what he was for this man.

The thought, so completely out of nowhere and groundless in nature, startled him. Where had it come from? And moreover, could he really? Aris searched his heart and realized that yes, he could. Even after such a short time knowing him, he felt the connection to Nathaniel deep within his soul. He'd been at that church for hundreds of years, watched countless people pass him by and offered succor to many of them, waiting for something that had not been revealed to him. Was this it? It

had to be. The big question was: would He let him?

Tears pricked Aris's eyes at the fear that things might not come to pass as he hoped. But he could not think upon that yet. Nathaniel needed him, and he must tend to the tortured soul in his arms before he could consider the rest. Sniffling, he dabbed the water from the corners of his eyes and reached up to resume stroking Nathaniel's hair only to discover the blond's face had turned back toward him.

Surprised and relieved, Aris could only manage to utter a timid hello. He marveled at the hue of the eyes that stared at him in wonder, their color that of a clear midday sky.

"I heard you," Nathaniel said, his throat hoarse from all the crying he'd done.

Aris leaned forward and kissed the man's temple, a contented smile lighting his whole face. "Good. I'm glad you came back. There is still much for you here."

Nathaniel shifted in his arms so that they faced each other. He looked over the man's face as the dawn of a new day cast its light inside his window. Streaks of brilliant light scattered across the room, but he was transfixed by the beauty of the man who held him so caringly. The streams of light curved around his form, creating a luminous aura. If not for the obvious fact that he was human, this creature of austere beauty could have been an angel sent from heaven above.

Nathaniel reached up, his hand trembling as he touched the young man's hair. It was silky; the long, dark strands slid through his fingers easily, the waves and curls giving his beauty a romantic quality.

Aris reveled in the touch. The reverent touches he received daily notwithstanding, he had gone so unbelievably long without the touch of another. He hadn't realized until he retook human form how much he'd missed such a simple thing. Unconsciously, he turned his face toward Nathaniel's hand and kissed the open palm.

Nathaniel's thoughts whirled out of control, his words disjointed. "Why... are you?" He was hard-pressed to define the feelings being kindled in his heart by the proximity of this comforting soul. Surely his grief was projecting something which wasn't truly there, the loss of his family magnifying even the most innocent touch far out of proportion. Compassion was not the same as passion, he reminded himself. His thoughts felt clear, regardless of the way his voice sounded.

The angel was not practiced in schooling his facial expressions, so his confusion showed openly. “Me?”

Nathaniel’s eyes were hopeful. “Are you here for me?”

“I am.” The angel sensed there was more to Nathaniel’s question, and he cautiously probed his mind. “I am here to help you. To comfort you and give you strength to carry on,” he explained. “Though I may not always be here, I will always be with you.”

Nathaniel pushed back the errant lock of hair that fell over the young man’s eyes. The purity within the dark cinnamon gaze drew him closer. Easing his hand around the neck of his angel—as he’d already come to think of him—and keeping his eyes open in case the other man balked, he pulled him in and placed a chaste kiss on the alluring lips.

Aris’s breathing stopped, his eyes staying open as Nathaniel kissed him. For all its innocence, when Nathaniel’s lips pulled free, Aris felt the remnants of feelings long-buried in the forgetfulness of time resurface.

Nathaniel saw the display of uncertainty pass over the youthful face and wondered at his own action. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why—”

Aris held him firm when Nathaniel attempted to roll away. “Do not be sorry. There was no harm done.” He smiled, making sure Nathaniel understood that he was forgiven for any trespass he might have thought he’d committed. Picking up Nathaniel’s hand, he kissed the palm again. “I have to go now, but I will return in a short time. Will you remain well while I am gone?”

Nathaniel nodded, completely entranced by the presence before him.

The angel stood and walked out of the bedroom, his footsteps nearly inaudible as he made his way through the house. It was only when the front door closed that Nathaniel bolted from the bed. “Wait!” he shouted as he ran to the front door, but upon opening it, he found no sign of the young man. He sighed as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders, leaning his head against the door. “I don’t even know your name.”

DAYS passed, and Nathaniel carried on as best he could after burying his

wife and child. In the times when he felt the deepest despair, his heart was lightened by a happy memory. Sometimes a comforting presence filled the air, as if a guardian angel was watching out for him. It was during those moments that he thought of the handsome, dark-haired stranger with the kind eyes that seemed to see inside his very soul.

For all the shortness of their meeting, Nathaniel was enraptured with the being who had saved him. On the nights when he lay in bed unable to sleep, he tried to remember how the young man had come to be with him that night. All he could remember was looking up into placid eyes and the feeling of being safe. He couldn't remember how he'd gotten home, though he assumed he'd walked, but he remembered that he'd awoken from a terrible nightmare with the man at his side. Some of the pieces just didn't fit, and if he dwelt upon them too long, his head began to reel.

Days turned into weeks, which quickly turned into months, and Nathaniel's hopes of seeing his savior angel again diminished until all that was left was a dull throbbing ache in his soul.

He needs me.

THEN GO TO HIM.

I cannot bear to leave him again. In the time that we have been apart, I have shared in his life through his memories, and I have come to care deeply for him. He is a good man, an honest man, and he deserves to be loved and be happy once more.

Silence.

YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ASK.

I do.

Silence.

I CANNOT INTERVENE ONCE THIS IS DONE, BUT I WILL ALWAYS WATCH OVER YOU, ARIS. YOU HAVE MY BLESSING.

Thank you.

A CHILL suffused the air that night, and Nathaniel had lit the fireplace for added warmth. He no longer slept in his bedroom, a pervading sense of loneliness filling him immediately upon entering his chamber. It was much easier to get the few hours of sleep he required in the recliner.

No sooner had he leaned it back and settled down for his rest than a knock came upon his front door. Ignoring it, he turned his head away from the sound and tried to concentrate on sleep.

Whoever it was, they were determined, for the pounding resounded again with increased fervor. Scratching an itch on his leg through his pajamas, Nathaniel sat the recliner up and padded barefoot to the front door. His eyes were greeted by the sight of someone he'd never expected to see again.

Nathaniel stood in the open doorway, stunned into speechlessness. After endless nights of being haunted by the face before him, he was certain he was asleep in the recliner and dreaming once more.

“Nathaniel?”

The vision in his dreams never spoke to him, however, so he must really be here. “It’s you,” was all he could think of to say.

“It is,” Aris replied, feeling a flush rise on his face despite the cool air surrounding him. He shivered when the wind picked up. “Might I come in?”

Nathaniel stepped aside and opened the door fully, his speech still not having caught up to the whirlwind of thoughts in his mind. As he shut the door, he watched his angel go to the fireplace and extend his hands to the flames. Light passed through the gauzy T-shirt he wore, and Nathaniel realized he must be freezing from the late autumn winds. At least his pants and shoes were decent covering, he thought as he regained enough of his manners to grab the quilt from the back of the couch.

Aris startled as Nathaniel wrapped the warm blanket around him, then blushed in mild embarrassment. “Thank you,” he murmured.

Nathaniel nodded and rubbed the young man’s arms through the thick fabric. The firelight flickered golden brown ribbons enchantingly over his hair, and it was all Nathaniel could do not to run his fingers through the enticing strands. He was already unable to move away from him, needing the contact like a lifeline. A feeling of déjà vu flashed in his mind.

Aris savored the feel of Nathaniel's hands upon him. Even from such an unassuming act, Aris already felt the connection between them reestablish itself. Now sufficiently warmed, Aris turned in the man's arms and smiled. He was elated when it was returned without hesitation.

"I just realized I still don't know your name." Nathaniel chuckled as the young man's cheeks turned rosy. His breath caught at the way the light and shadows played over the square features, giving much more depth and emotion to the dark eyes.

"I'm sorry. My name is Aris," he said, moving to sit on the couch.

Nathaniel's fingers itched with the need to touch him again. "Aris," he smiled. It was a beautiful name, and it fit him perfectly.

"Why are you grinning at me like that?" Aris inquired, his face showing nothing but happiness as he drew his knees up to his chest and covered them with the quilt.

Nathaniel sat down beside Aris with his legs beneath him, a relaxed posture that had not been comfortable in some while. "It's corny, I know, but I always knew your name would be as beautiful as you are." He reached out to Aris, placing his hand on his shoulder; the urge to remain connected was too overpowering to resist.

Aris sensed the change in the air before Nathaniel spoke, as the other man's eyes fell to the floor.

"I had almost convinced myself you weren't real. Why did you come back?"

It was a simple question, and one that Aris had known would be coming. Nathaniel had the right to an answer—an honest answer. "Because I missed you."

"I missed you too."

The sincerity in Nathaniel's words brought tears to Aris's eyes. Afraid to confess all, but understanding there was no other way if they were to continue to be a part of each other's life as he hoped, Aris decided the whole truth must come out.

Inhaling deeply, he began. "Nathaniel, there's something you should know."

Nathaniel panicked at the tone of Aris's voice. His pulse raced with thoughts of what profound secret the beauty before him was keeping.

“Okay.”

Aris didn't miss the tremor of fear in that one word, and he reached out from under the blanket to take Nathaniel's hand. He knew Nathaniel was strong and could handle this. It might take some getting used to, but he had faith that the man would overcome any doubts and misgivings about what Aris had been. He tilted his head to capture Nathaniel's attention.

“I'm an angel. Well, I was, at any rate.”

Nathaniel didn't realize he'd stopped breathing until he exhaled heavily in relief. He grinned, stroking Aris's palm with his thumb. “I could've told you that.”

Nathaniel's touch was distracting. Seeing that he didn't truly comprehend, Aris tried to make it clearer. “No, Nathaniel, a real angel. You know, the type with wings that float around in heaven? Although we don't really float; heaven is much the same as Earth in that He has created paths to walk on. And the wings, well, those are a myth, though they make the artwork very pretty. But heaven is perfect and ideal. I do hope to go back there after I've lived my life out here....” His voice trailed off as he realized he was rambling.

Nathaniel looked at him as if he had lost his mind. Rising slowly from the couch, he backed toward the kitchen, never taking his eyes off Aris.

That went well, Aris thought wryly, sighing as he put his head sideways on his knees so that he could watch Nathaniel. He just hoped that the wealth of love in his heart would bring the stunned man around. He hadn't expected it to be easy, but he hadn't expected Nathaniel to think him crazy either. What he wouldn't give for a bit of divine intervention right about now.

Rummaging through the kitchen, Nathaniel started a pot of coffee. Maybe he just needed some caffeine to wake up his tired mind. Surely he hadn't heard what he thought he'd heard. Aris could not be an angel. They simply didn't exist. Okay, they did, but.... He felt a dull ache begin behind his eyes and knew he'd need more than coffee. Sleep would be good, but he didn't think that would be coming anytime soon.

Nathaniel waited until the coffee was done and poured two cups full. Sipping his, he pondered the possibility that Aris was telling the truth. As he thought back over the last time he had seen him, Nathaniel

remembered the connection, the same one he'd felt moments ago. He thought of the morning sun coming through his bedroom window and the aura it seemed to create. The aura, he now understood, had been real.

Setting his cup on the counter and looking out the kitchen window, he saw, through what little light the moon could offer, that a light rain had begun to fall. It had rained that night too.

"Are you going to sleep in here tonight?"

Aris's voice startled him, and Nathaniel jumped, knocking his cup of coffee over in the process. "Shit," he cursed, turning to the opposite counter for some paper towels. Aris offered to help, but Nathaniel told him it was all right; it wasn't that big of a spill. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Aris had left the quilt in the living room. He was glad to know he'd recovered from the chill.

Feeling terrible for having scared him out of his wits, Aris poured Nathaniel another cup and picked up the one previously poured for himself.

Nathaniel threw the wet towels away and turned back to his guest. A thought was brewing in his mind as the pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of his life continued to fall together.

Aris saw the perplexed look as he handed Nathaniel his fresh cup of coffee. "You have to talk to me. I can't read your thoughts anymore."

Anymore? Nathaniel let the statement pass; it would be simpler that way, and it was a discussion that could wait until later. It should have shocked him, learning that Aris could read his mind, but at this point, it seemed very little remained to surprise him. "It just occurred to me that you wanted to give up what you are, or were, the last time you were here." Nathaniel looked deeply into the brown depths, memories of that first confused night becoming clearer with Aris's closeness. "No one has ever made such a selfless sacrifice for me."

"Who says it was a sacrifice?" Aris asked with a tender smile. Much consideration had gone into Aris's decision, and he had always come to the same result: he could wait a few dozen years to get back to heaven. Nothing was going to change there, and he would still be welcomed warmly by all. "I intend to take as much as I give, which is hardly selfless." He ran his smooth fingertips over Nathaniel's furrowed brow. "And yes, it is true I was already in love with you then. I'm pretty sure I fell for you the moment I touched your hand." He chuckled softly

at his choice of words, and Nathaniel's face softened.

The sound of Aris's gentle laughter was music to Nathaniel's ears. Yes, he was definitely smitten with the young man. It was difficult to comprehend how his heart could feel so full and yet so light at the same time. Nathaniel felt the sharp prick of guilt in his stomach and swallowed thickly. How could he so easily turn to another's arms for comfort? Even though it had been almost a year, the time seemed so short. It was wrong, wasn't it? But the man in front of him was gentle and loving and kind; his dark eyes were a reflection of his benevolent soul, despite his claim to the contrary. Early in their marriage, Nathaniel's wife had made him promise that if anything happened to her, he would try to find love again. And here it was, as if being handed to him on a silver platter with all of the trimmings. That the love came in the form of a man was not an issue. Love was love, regardless of gender. It was a feeling he and his wife had shared, and the reason they had chosen the nondenominational church on the hill.

The scent of lavender—her favorite perfume—wafted under his nose, and Nathaniel knew it was her blessing.

It was Aris's turn to look confused as Nathaniel's words penetrated. "Wait, how did you know I wanted to give up what I was?"

"You told me. Or maybe I should say that I heard you. Your thoughts. I remember that much now. You were talking to me out loud, and then I could hear this jumble of words that were louder than your actual voice, so I tuned into them instead." Nathaniel shrugged as if it was the most common occurrence in the world, and after all that had transpired, he was beginning to think it might be. "I didn't realize they were your thoughts until now." Hand reaching for Aris's, he added, "At least some of the pieces are starting to fit together."

"So when you said you heard me, you heard everything." Aris smiled. He was glad he'd decided to tell Nathaniel the truth. Besides aiding them in building their relationship, Aris had the feeling that Nathaniel would have figured it out given enough time.

Setting his cup down and taking Nathaniel's to put aside with it, Aris used his free hand to trace Nathaniel's lips. Starting at a tiny scar beside his nose and following it down to the lip, he traced back and forth across the top and bottom until Nathaniel smiled at the tickling sensation. Then he moved down to the cleft in his chin.

Nathaniel reached out and wrapped his arms around Aris; the touch on his lips was good, but he wanted more contact with his heavenly being. He nipped playfully at the finger that kept tormenting his lips. Apparently Aris liked to tease, and Nathaniel was happy to indulge him.

Squeezing a bit tighter, he dug his fingers into Aris's ribcage, thrilled with the result. Aris's legs buckled under him as a squeal of laughter greeted Nathaniel's ears.

"Stop! Stop, please!" Aris gasped, tears of happiness spilling down his cheeks.

Nathaniel relented and helped him to stand again, but he kept his arms loosely around Aris's waist. "I've missed that," he confessed, a smile still plastered to his face.

"Missed what?" Aris asked with genuine interest.

"Laughter. Happiness. You name it, my life has pretty much been without it lately."

"Do I make you happy, Nathaniel?"

"Yes, you do. I found my life very lacking this morning. In one night, you have filled it completely."

Touched deeply by Nathaniel's words, Aris felt his eyes brim with tears.

"No, no... sshhh... don't cry," Nathaniel soothed, leaning in to kiss away his tears. The scent of Aris's skin mixed with the velvety texture under his lips stirred Nathaniel in a way that should have surprised him but didn't. His kisses now trailed over Aris's face, teasing subtly, never getting too close to his lips. He needed to know Aris wanted this, and he didn't want to rush him. He could take a cold shower if he had to.

Aris knew the instant the tender kisses dabbing at his tears turned into something else, and he let Nathaniel continue to see how far he would go. He trusted Nathaniel implicitly; after seeing inside his heart and mind so many times, how could he do anything else? His arms betrayed his mind's wish to remain neutral and snaked around Nathaniel's waist, pulling him nearer.

It seemed that for all his naivety of the human world, Aris's body had a mind of its own. He felt the rush of adrenaline course through him when the front of Nathaniel's body met his, the intimate touch drawing a groan of pleasure from Nathaniel and a gasp from his own lips. When

Nathaniel leaned his forehead in to rest on Aris's, the former angel felt the connection pull from his center, a twining knot between them that could never be severed.

Nathaniel knew he had to stop this or finish it, but a decision had to be made. "You're fully human?" he asked, needing to hear the words to ease his conscience but closing his eyes against the possible negative answer.

Aris tickled Nathaniel's lips again until he looked into his eyes. "Yes, I am as human as you. I can eat, laugh, love, and die." The last word cast a shadow over Nathaniel's face, and Aris was sorry he'd said it. But he had to make sure Nathaniel understood fully what was taking place here. This was not a dream, nor a fantasy. Aris had given himself freely to the man before him, and an angel leaving heaven to become human was not something to be taken lightly.

Trying to ease the tension he felt growing, Aris pasted on a lopsided grin. "What I would really like right now is to learn how to love you. In the physical sense, I mean." His words gentled as he ran his fingers through Nathaniel's hair until his palm rested on his cheek. "You already have my heart."

Turning his face slightly, Nathaniel kissed Aris's palm, his heart swelling with reciprocal affection. Prior to his marriage, Nathaniel had had a few encounters with other men, so this wasn't completely new to him. His love was a virgin, though, and he intended to take things slow and easy; but those lush, pouty lips beckoned like a neon sign in a blizzard. He took them as tenderly as his awakening body could manage and was grateful when Aris's lips parted in welcome.

Oceans rose, seas parted, and mountains moved as Aris gave in to the sensations within him. His tongue flirted with Nathaniel's, teasing and tempting its mate until they were both panting for air.

"And you want me to believe you've never done this before?" Nathaniel's incredulous look made Aris laugh diffidently as he chewed his bottom lip.

He smiled back shyly. "I was just following your lead."

"Then I have another dance we need to try." Nathaniel took Aris's hand and led him to the bedroom. When they stopped at the side of the bed, Nathaniel looked at him seriously. "Last chance to change your mind. I won't hold anything against you."

“Why would I?” An impish grin shone through his eyes. “And if you don’t hold something against me, what’s the purpose?” he added, crawling onto what he’d decided was “his” side of the bed.

Aris’s unself-conscious movements as he climbed up the bed added visual fuel to Nathaniel’s fire. Reaching for the buttons on his pajama shirt, he was pleasantly surprised when Aris asked to do it for him.

Pink tongue peeking out of the side of his mouth as he concentrated, Aris worked on getting the buttons back through the holes. Nathaniel could see he was frustrated with the slow progress, but his determination to finish the task was clear.

“Finally,” Aris breathed as he leaned back on his knees, feeling his ineptitude at even the simplest human task.

“I take it you don’t have much to button in heaven?”

“No, mainly robes. They’re very comfortable. I only wore this when I was down here to blend in.” Aris caught the mirth in Nathaniel’s eyes. “You’re making fun.”

“Just a bit,” he admitted, shucking the shirt from his shoulders onto the floor. Aris’s eyes drank him in as he stood there, to the point where Nathaniel was beginning to feel uncomfortable under such scrutiny. Then Aris’s fingers met his skin, and all of his trepidation was forgotten.

The former angel’s fingers tingled as they wove through the dusting of hair on Nathaniel’s chest. He was captivated by the texture and even more intrigued by the soft sounds coming from Nathaniel himself. Wanting to experience everything about him, Aris placed his lips on Nathaniel’s collarbone and sucked lightly.

He startled when he felt Nathaniel grip his arms rather tightly. “Did I do something wrong?”

“On the contrary, you do that far too well.” Nathaniel leaned his lover back onto the bed. “Let’s see about getting you undressed, shall we?”

Aris’s breath caught several times when Nathaniel’s fingers glided over his skin as he efficiently undressed him. His skin wanted more, and judging by the way the rest of his body was responding, he was eager to be touched everywhere.

When Aris was finally bared to his gaze, Nathaniel appraised his young lover. Taut skin covered sculpted muscles. The olive complexion

reminded Nathaniel of a Greek god. He was perfection in human form.

His eyes traveled down Aris's torso until they reached something odd at the base of his ribcage. It reminded him of a tattoo, but it lacked a defined border. He asked Aris about the bright yellow rounded mark, which resembled a sun.

"It is His marking. All angels have one, though I guess mine will fade now," Aris explained.

Curious, for this was definitely not in his Bible, Nathaniel asked, "What does it mean?"

"He is the Light, and He shines from within you."

Nathaniel leaned down and kissed the mark reverently. Above him, he heard Aris's breath hitch. "If it will earn that treatment all of the time, I truly hope it does not fade."

Nathaniel grinned and continued placing meandering kisses down Aris's hips and thighs.

Aris's eyes were in the process of closing in response to the sensations when they caught sight of a dark patch of skin behind Nathaniel's ear. It was no bigger than a fingerprint and almost perfectly round like a moon. Aris didn't know how he'd missed seeing it before. "You are truly my counterpart."

Befuddled by the oblique comment, Nathaniel lifted his lips from the soft skin. "Excuse me?"

"The marking behind your ear," Aris explained, reaching out to touch it. "It is like a moon. A moon for my sun."

Nathaniel had forgotten all about his birthmark. Chuckling softly, he agreed, "When you put it that way, yeah, I guess I am your counterpart."

Crawling up Aris's prone form, Nathaniel left a trail of wet kisses up his abdomen. Aris shivered when he sucked a nipple into his mouth and worried it lightly with his teeth.

Desire to feel those lips on his own flooded him, and Aris pulled Nathaniel up the rest of the way, kissing him deeply.

Waning passions reignited in a glorious blaze as fingers mapped foreign terrain and lips quested for new territories to explore. Nathaniel's fingers skated down to and over his lover's swollen shaft, earning him a

whimper of protest when he moved off it. He felt the shudder beneath him as his hand journeyed farther down and cupped Aris's sac, gently fondling the balls in his palm.

Leaving Aris's lips behind, he scooted down the bed, laving a stripe down his side with his tongue as he went. The squeal of delight from above him urged him on.

He felt fingers twine in his hair when his breath ghosted through the nest of curls at the base of Aris's shaft. A clear drop of fluid dripped from the tip. Nathaniel watched in fascination as it fell, reaching out with his tongue to whisk it away before it could reach his lover's belly.

Panting and lightheaded, Aris's eyes rolled back in his head at the erotic image, leaving him completely unprepared for the swipe of Nathaniel's tongue along his throbbing flesh. His hips instinctively jerked up toward the unexpected moist heat, but Nathaniel had predicted his response and held him firmly in place.

"Nathaniel?" Aris gasped as he lifted his head, his voice a trembling whimper. "What are you doing to me?"

"I'm loving you," Nathaniel's raspy voice replied. "And I'm not anywhere near done yet."

"I don't think I can take much more," he sighed, his head falling back to the pillows.

"Yes, you can. Trust me."

"With everything that I am," Aris assured.

At any other time, he might have been moved to tears by the emotion conveyed in those words, but right then Nathaniel's only thought was of giving Aris a world of pleasure in one night.

Licking his finger, he slid it back along Aris's crease, feeling with care for the furred opening. Aris's body told him he'd found it as his hips thrust off the bed once more. Nathaniel grinned at his lover's enthusiastic response even as he verbally soothed him.

Calm once more, Aris focused on what Nathaniel was doing. After the initial panic had subsided, he realized it felt wonderful. When Nathaniel replaced his lips on his aching arousal, Aris believed in the existence of heaven on earth.

"Nathaniel! Oh Nathaniel...." He inhaled sharply as Nathaniel

sucked his length deep into his mouth and swallowed. The squeeze felt sublime. He felt Nathaniel's finger continue to gently prod his entrance until it slipped inside at the same time Nathaniel sucked hard on his member. His head swam as he felt his balls tighten, his release upon him before he knew it was happening.

"Nathaniel!" Aris bellowed as he came, and Nathaniel judiciously swallowed every drop.

Not having planned for such circumstances, Nathaniel found himself completely unprepared to love his angel. He left Aris to recover, telling him he'd be right back as he left for the bathroom. Opening the cabinet, he spied a small bottle of baby oil and snatched it off the shelf. It would have to do until they could make a trip into town.

The thought of having Aris as a permanent part of his life made him happier than he could have imagined possible yesterday. The smile was still plastered to his face when he returned to the bedroom, softening at the sight of the beautiful man succumbing to the afterglow.

Only his wife had looked as alluring.

The memory brought him up short and he stopped in the doorway, waiting for the pain and guilt to resurface. They never came. He still loved and missed her, but any sense of betrayal or wrongness to what he was about to do was nonexistent.

"Not going to sleep on me, are you?" he asked as he crawled back up beside Aris and nuzzled his neck.

"Mm... no... just resting." Nathaniel grinned at the innocence of his next words. "I had no idea of the intensity of human pleasure."

"That's just the beginning," Nathaniel said suggestively, prompting Aris's eyes to fly open.

"There's more?"

Nathaniel couldn't help but smile at the excitement in his angel's tone. He made sure he had Aris's undivided attention before he responded, gazing deeply into the passion-darkened depths. "Much more."

Aris's eyes widened, and a smile lit up his face at the revelation. "Show me?"

Nathaniel did not answer with words but with a kiss, his fingers

tweaking Aris's nipples in between nips and licks to his ear, neck, chest, and downward. The squirming figure below him aroused Nathaniel more than anyone ever had. Though he knew Aris's innocence would not last, Nathaniel had the feeling that his own fascination with discovering the divine creature would endure a lifetime.

Reaching for the bottle of oil, Nathaniel greased his fingers before tempting the virgin opening once more. This time he watched Aris's face as he gently entered him, enjoying the sight of his lover's bliss.

When he added a second finger, Aris hissed, but he didn't cry out in pain. "Tell me if I hurt you," Nathaniel said, meeting Aris's pleased gaze and receiving a nod. His angel was relishing the discovery of what it was to be a sexual creature—to be human—and Nathaniel would not deprive him of those sensations. His only goal was to add to them and make them memorable.

The whimpers and moans increased in frequency and volume when Nathaniel returned his mouth to Aris's reawakened flesh. He added a third finger and stretched his lover as best he could. He knew there would be discomfort and adjustment, but he wanted it to go as easily for him as possible.

Stopping before Aris climaxed again, Nathaniel withdrew his fingers and probed the bedside table for a condom before coating himself with lube. There would be a time, he hoped, that Aris would want to do it for him. That thought, along with the touch of his slick hand, was nearly enough to send him over the edge.

A dulcet voice from below caught his attention. "You are so beautiful like that."

Nathaniel's head tilted to the side as he gazed attentively upon his lover. "You beat me hands down."

Lifting Aris's legs, he spread the cheeks apart and placed himself at his entrance. He leaned forward enough to kiss Aris. "It's going to be uncomfortable for a minute, but I promise it won't last. Just remember to breathe and relax." Aris nodded, his face full of apprehension. Nathaniel took the opportunity to kiss him again, finding aphrodisia in his lips as he distracted the young man and entered him slowly.

It was not blinding pain, but Nathaniel had plainly understated how uncomfortable it would be. Remembering his lover's words, Aris willed his body to relax, and soon the burning disappeared, leaving only the

sensation of fullness.

“Okay?” Nathaniel asked, tense with the strain of holding back his body’s urge to thrust. Aris’s eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his teeth finding purchase on his bottom lip.

Not trusting his voice, Aris nodded, and Nathaniel began to move rhythmically in and out, slowly at first to give his lover a chance to get used to the feeling.

“Look at me. I want to watch you come undone.” Aris complied, his eyes holding so much trust and love that Nathaniel’s heart leaped in his chest. He canted his hips slightly and was blessed with a musical cry of exultation when he struck Aris’s prostate.

The brunet’s legs wrapped around him instinctively, changing the position and causing Nathaniel to brush his prostate repeatedly. Gasping, moaning, and crying his love for Nathaniel, Aris came, the convulsing muscles of his sheath dragging Nathaniel into oblivion with him.

The heady orgasmic rush left his body limp like a rag doll, but it didn’t stop him from snuggling into Nathaniel’s embrace after the man had collapsed on the bed beside him. Aris kissed his chin and murmured a thank-you.

“I should thank you,” Nathaniel whispered, hugging Aris tight. “You’ve salvaged my heart, where I once thought it lost forever.” Bending his head, he kissed the top of Aris’s curls. “You’re still my angel, you know.”

When Aris didn’t answer, Nathaniel lifted his head and saw that his angel had fallen off to sleep. Smiling softly, he reached down and pulled the comforter up over them, saying a silent prayer of thanks for his heart’s salvation.

AND He smiled down on them, because He knew that they were good. From that night on, the stars burned brighter, and for the rest of their lives, His love shined down with reverence upon them.

RÉVE GARRISON was born and raised in the western USA but drifted eastward until she landed in Tennessee. She has been blessed to travel in much of Europe, but there are still many pushpins marking her travel map.

Her writing started off primarily with poetry in grade school before progressing to articles written for the local newspaper in high school. Nowadays, her time in front of the computer is spent more on work than the pleasure of creative writing, but she manages to catch glimpses of her muses from time to time.

An avid fan of old cinema (a la Cary Grant) and ice hockey, she plans to take over the world, one letter at a time.

IN THE HANDS OF THE GODS

Jana Denardo

TIBERIUS Aelius Rufus wanted to stay in the warm cocoon of his bedding, but the day wouldn't wait for him. The young head of the house dressed reluctantly and padded his way across the mosaic floors to the corner of the atrium, where the family *lararium* sat. The niche held both the bronze statue of the Lar, the guardian spirit of his family, and a smaller statue of a man veiling his face with his toga, representing the head of the house. It felt strange to realize that the statue was now supposed to be him.

It was hard to think that his father had been dead two months now. A groundswell of grief made Tiberius's hand shake as he picked up the little saucer of milk that had been left as a sacrifice. He carried it to the kitchen, where his servants no doubt already had fresh milk waiting. If the Lar thought it disrespectful to give the old sacrifice to the household cats, it didn't show it. The Rufus family might be small now, just him and a sister who had been married off to a wine merchant last year, but it was wealthy. As olive oil merchants, the Rufuses had done very well for themselves, and Tiberius was poised to move into markets nearer to Rome. It had become a challenge managing all the sellers who worked under him. Yes, the Lares and the god, Priapus, had been very good to his family, though a long life didn't seem to be part of the blessing. His mother had died of childbirth fever just a week after he was born, and now his father was gone.

Tiberius put fresh milk in the *lararium* and went to take his own meal. Afterward, he paused under the mural of Priapus balancing heavy scales laden with gold coin on his massive erection, getting a good feel of the morning air. It was a cool day for this early in the fall, so he called

for a warmer wrap. As his servant fetched it, Tiberius gazed upon the mural. It had fascinated him since childhood, but he hadn't understood much of that interest until he became an adult. He gave the gold in the mural a pat for luck.

Tiberius headed out to deal with his day. He actually enjoyed selling and expanding the family business. Sometimes it was difficult dealing with the farmers—or worse, other merchants—but there was a certain amount of fun to be had in planning marketing strategies. He had just gotten Fabius Varro, one of the city's premier wrestlers, to agree to have his likeness painted onto Tiberius's olive oil jars. It was a triumph, and Tiberius was sure it would help him sell even more of his oil. What man didn't want to be like Fabius? Moreover, Fabius's handsome face would appeal to women and men like himself. Yes, it was going to be a good day, Tiberius decided as he sailed out the door.

Because his back was turned, he didn't see the statue of the Lar move slightly, its metal lips curving in a faint smile.

BEING invited to a dinner party at Appius Balbus Didius's *domus* was always a treat. The young textile merchant had the best entertainment and the most delicious food. Didius never would share his secrets in obtaining such delights, much to Tiberius's chagrin.

Tiberius stretched out on a padded *klinai* in Didius's *triclinium maius*, the largest of Didius's dining halls, over which a brilliant mural of Bacchus presided. Immediately, a young serving girl, autumn flowers tied into her hair, poured him wine. A number of nubile young men and women attended Didius's guests, catering to all tastes. None of Didius's guests would think it too odd if Tiberius were to invite over the handsome *aulos* player with hair such a light brown it looked kissed with gold. He was very interested in the way the young man's lips pursed around the double reed pipes of his *aulos*.

Sipping the *muslum*, watered honey wine, the girl had poured for him, Tiberius contemplated cajoling the young man to stretch out on the *klinai* with him. The subtle tastes of the wine awakened his tongue, so he reached for the *gustatio* arranged on the table before him. The pickled asparagus looked particularly succulent.

A motion just out of the corner of his eye drew Tiberius's attention. Settling on one of the two empty *klinai* around Tiberius's table was a young man Tiberius had never seen before. Tiberius's eyes swept over him, drinking in the fine cut of his toga and the brilliant red of his sandals. The young man's strong limbs were bronzed and simply marvelous to behold, but it was his stunning dark eyes and sable curls that captured Tiberius's imagination. He wanted to touch those ringlets, a completely inappropriate thought for a stranger of the same social class as he was, but Tiberius couldn't help himself.

The man's smile could have shone all the way to the heavens. "Hello."

Tiberius grinned. "Hello. I've never seen you at Didius's parties before."

"I'm visiting from Rome. I'm Marcus Lartius Priscus."

"Tiberius Aelius Rufus."

"Olive oil, right? Didius said to expect you."

"Are you in the same business?" Struck nervous by this handsome man, Tiberius reached for some of the salted snails on the table and sent one spinning. Flushing, he caught the shell before it fell to the floor.

"Yes, though I'm one of the younger sons. I don't really do much." Priscus offered up another smile that had to be a gift from Venus herself.

"Ah." Tiberius sucked the snail out of the shell, and Priscus's dark eyes gleamed at that. Tiberius almost forgot to chew. "Sadly, I was the only son."

Confusion veiled Priscus's face. "Sadly?"

"My father always wanted more than the two children he had, but it wasn't to be." Tiberius shrugged. "As for my part, I suppose not having any brothers makes things a bit easier. I inherited a large *domus* and a thriving business."

"I see your point." Priscus helped himself to the asparagus.

Tiberius leaned forward. "Priscus, tell me about Rome. I've only been there once with my father. I've manage to drive a wedge into the market there, but it's so very far away. I know nothing about it."

Priscus chewed on his appetizer before answering. "What would you like to know?"

“Tell me something fun.”

“Ah, you want to hear about the coliseum.”

Tiberius listened, enraptured by Priscus’s storytelling. Didius’s entertainers and guests fell away, and all Tiberius saw were the games that went on in the Coliseum: wrestling matches, chariot races, gladiators. It wasn’t that Pompeii had no entertainment—it most certainly did—but Rome was the jewel of the Empire. It shone brighter.

Tiberius didn’t even realize that the *primae mensae* had arrived until Priscus took a break from his narrative to grab some capon stewed in garum. The fragrant fermented fish sauce tickled Tiberius’s nose, making him hungry. The olive oil merchant beckoned for the serving girl who had the *muslum*. “Sorry, you must be parched. I’ve kept you talking too much.”

“I don’t mind.” Priscus accepted the refill of his honeyed wine. “I enjoy talking.”

Tiberius smiled, wanting to tell this man how much he liked listening to him. It wasn’t often he was so captivated by someone.

“Are you going to talk to anyone else tonight, Aelius?”

At Decimus Vedius’s petulant tones, Tiberius startled, twisting on his *klinai*. He tried to cover his embarrassment by reaching for some of the fattened goose liver among the delicacies on the table. He hadn’t even realized Decimus had taken the third *klinai* at their table, and he and Priscus had been very rude in not including the young man in their conversation. Decimus, the son of a politician, had originally impressed Tiberius enough to allow him to call by his *praenomen*, Aelius. That was before he realized all of the handsome young man’s bad habits, especially his habit of drinking unwatered wine—lots of it.

Tiberius savored the spiced liver, smacking his lips before answering. “I’m sorry, Decimus. You could have added something to the conversation.”

“You know I don’t care for gladiator games and chariot races,” the other man sniffed. Tiberius did know that, mostly because Decimus could always pick the loser to bet on without fail.

“Sorry,” Priscus said, spreading his hands apologetically. “We could talk theater.”

Decimus’s lips thinned, and Tiberius knew his former lover didn’t

want him talking to Priscus at all, not that it mattered much to him. Whether or not Priscus was there didn't change how Tiberius felt about Decimus now. "That's better than sports."

They ended up talking about theater in both Pompeii and Rome long past the dessert of grapes and honeyed cakes. Tiberius had suggested a game of *Ludus duodecim scriptorum*, knowing the game required more forethought and cunning than Decimus cared to exercise. Still, it didn't drive the young man off, but in some ways, Tiberius found he didn't mind. If Decimus could figure out that he was spending too much time with Priscus, that might cause others to wonder as well. Choosing a male slave to take to one's bed was fine, but the rules changed for men of equal standing. Tiberius needed to be more careful than he had been tonight.

In the end, however, returning home alone held no charms. It wasn't as if he might have another opportunity to see Priscus again. The man wouldn't be in Pompeii for long. Maybe it was just as well he didn't have the opportunity to do anything too daring with Priscus. Tiberius paused before the statue of the Lar, seeing one of the cats trying to figure out the best way to leap up and help itself to the offering plate. Shooing the beast away, Tiberius was struck by how oddly familiar the bronze statue seemed, and not in the sense that he had seen it every day since he was a child. He couldn't place the reason for this peculiar sense of familiarity, but it bothered him well into the night.

TIBERIUS adored his favored bath house. The attached *gymnasium* had a great array of weights, and he made good use of the pool in the *natatorium*, but what Tiberius truly enjoyed about this particular bath was the track he was racing along in the mid-afternoon sun. Tiberius love to run. He always looked forward to the feel of his muscles warming up, the strength in them. He felt free as his feet lightly kissed the ground as he whipped along the track.

All the worries slipped from his mind. The pressures of his expanding business in Rome were the first to fall away. His sense of mounting responsibility to his family was harder to shake free. He was past the usual age of getting married and having an heir, and people wondered at it. It was time to find a wife he wouldn't mind sharing a

house with, even if he wasn't interested in her sexually. He had to pick up the pace of his run to forget his choices of attempting to father an heir, giving his wife permission to take a lover and raising another man's bastard, or leaving his business to the eldest of his sister's ever-expanding brood.

The distracting, if pleasant, memories of Didius's party a few nights back were even harder to drive out of his mind. Tiberius couldn't forget the brightness of Priscus's smile or the way his curly hair moved when he talked, since Priscus gesticulated often, his whole body moving in time with his enthusiasm.

It wasn't often he found himself so captivated. Tiberius didn't know what it was about Priscus, but he was unforgettable, his memory staying with Tiberius through the entire run. The ground suddenly shook, the tremors lasting only a few moments. Tiberius turned his attention to Mount Vesuvius, wondering what Vulcan was up to and deciding if the god was hard at work making the earth move, he would do well to head back to the bath. As he neared the *gymnasium*, Tiberius nearly tripped. Priscus stood there watching him run, his black eyes bright, tracking Tiberius's every move.

Tiberius ran up to the tall young man, his chest heaving, all too aware of the sheen of sweat covering him. "I didn't expect you to be here."

"I came to lift weights." Priscus patted his flexing biceps.

"I was just about to head in to do the same," Tiberius lied. He wasn't usually fond of weights, but he was more than willing to play at it to spend a little time with Priscus. He had to head inside regardless, where his servant waited for him to be done with his run.

"Fortuna must be smiling upon us, then," Priscus said, heading into the *gymnasium*.

"Indeed."

Tiberius followed Priscus inside and watched as he worked with the weights. His own attempts were just a hair away from being pitiful, mostly because he spent too much of his time staring at Priscus's honed muscles. Tiberius was very glad to be done with the exercising, knowing he had to look like a complete fool, but if Priscus thought so, it didn't show.

Together, they headed into the *apodyterium* to get prepared for the baths. Mosaic gods from the high wall observed them as they undressed, the cool, hard stone rough on Tiberius's bared thighs as he sat on the long bench. They both handed their belongings off to the *capsarii*. Tiberius didn't know about Priscus, but he never brought much in the way of money to the baths. The *capsarii* couldn't be trusted not steal from the patrons. Tiberius's servant would keep an eye on the *capsarii* to be sure the man didn't rob him, and he trusted Priscus had servants of his own for the same purpose.

Another of the bath servants let them lie side by side on the slender cots in the *apodyterium*. The two wealthy men were covered in olive oil. Out of the corner of his eye, Tiberius watched the servant massage the oil into Priscus's tanned flesh until it gleamed. The oil highlighted the definition of Priscus's muscles. Tiberius shut his eyes as the bone *stirgil* touched his skin. He half drowsed as the servant scraped the dirt sticking to the oil off his body. When they were done, both men padded naked but for sandals toward the next stop in the bath, servants with towels trailing after them.

Tiberius was delighted to find the *frigidarium* to be empty. The snowy white marble matched the cold spring it encompassed. Without a word to Priscus, he slithered under the water, his whole body shuddering as his heated muscles were engulfed by the cold water. Sputtering, Tiberius surfaced, leaning against the marble to wait for Priscus to resurface.

Priscus came up, water sluicing off his dark curls. He rested on the marble, the deep bronze of his skin highlighted by the white stone. "That felt good."

"This is a wonderful bath," Tiberius replied, sinking down to his chin to let the cold water firm up his muscles.

"As fine as any we have in Rome," Priscus agreed, climbing back out.

Tiberius would have liked to linger in the cold water after his long run, but he didn't want Priscus to get too far ahead of him. Exercising hadn't been conducive to talking, but bathing would be.

The *tepidarium* was the prettiest room in the bath. Murals graced the deep red stucco walls. Ceilings arched over the mosaic floors. Three bronze benches sat next to the brazier. The gently heated metal warmed

his bottom, which could use it after the cold spring. Priscus sat with Tiberius on the bench. Tiberius's limbs loosened as he stared up at the ceiling, letting the *tepidarium's* warm air prepare his body for the next step.

Priscus's arm went slightly behind Tiberius's back as the other young man leaned on it. His dark eyes studied Tiberius as Priscus leaned closer. For a heart-racing moment, Tiberius thought Priscus might press his generous lips against his. "Have you given any thought to coming to Rome?"

Tiberius blinked at the suddenness of the question. "No, not really."

Priscus sat back a bit, his lips pinching into a pout. "I would have thought you might, since you've moved into that market."

"I haven't ruled that out," Tiberius replied, unsure where the question had come from. He had never given it any thought at all, and he had no idea what he would do in Rome. He'd know no one there, except for Priscus, that was.

"That's good to know." Priscus shifted on the bench. His thigh rubbed against Tiberius's.

Tiberius squirmed away just a little. The touch might have been accidental, but his interest in the man was too fevered. He didn't want to risk anything indecent happening in public. "Would there be anything there for me? It would be difficult to move there." He got up, ready for the next stop. "Or did you mean just for a visit, like you are here?"

"A visit is a start. I just think someone with your business sense would do very well there." Priscus stood. "I've been listening to Didius and some others talk about you. That's why I think you'd do so well wherever you are."

A flush crept up Tiberius's cheeks, and he got up to follow Priscus into the *caldarium*. The room sat directly above the *hypocaust*, and the room acted like a flue for that furnace. The hot air seemed to suck at Tiberius's breath, robbing him of it. The heat and humidity made it impossible to decorate this room as the others had been, but that wasn't necessary. All anyone wanted here was the nice, hot water. Tiberius took a quick tally of the bathers, only needing one hand to count them. That was good. It offered a modicum of privacy.

The warm water lapped around his torso as he sank in, and Tiberius found himself considering the idea of visiting Rome. It was an overwhelming thought, but maybe safer than the other thoughts roiling through his mind. A brief tumble with this man could be a good thing. The question was: could Tiberius keep their relationship brief?

“Tomorrow, Nautius Manius will be performing,” Priscus said, sinking deeper into the water. “I saw one of his pantomimes and was quite impressed.”

“I saw him playing in Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus* in the spring. I truly enjoyed it. Are you going tomorrow?”

Priscus nodded, his curls going lank from the rising steam. “I’d love to have company. Are you free?”

“Me? But aren’t you staying here with Didius?” Tiberius was too surprised to say yes as he wanted to.

Priscus waved him off. “My invitation there was just to keep the stream of guests fresh. I like my companions to be smart and fun to talk to. I enjoyed your company. That might sound odd, based on one dinner, but everything has to start somewhere.” Priscus leaned nearer.

Tiberius felt the man’s closeness acutely; it sent his blood coursing. “I feel very much the same way. I’d love to go.”

“Wonderful. Of course, if you come, you need to call me Lartius,” Priscus said.

There was no stopping the grin that sliced across Tiberius’s face. He hadn’t expected to be allowed the informality of using Priscus’s given name so soon. “Of course, and you must call me Aelius,” he replied.

“Naturally.” Priscus’s hand brushed along Tiberius’s thigh.

It was impossible to mistake the hungry look in Priscus’s eyes. His fingers stroked lightly along the inside of Tiberius’s thigh as the man leaned closer. Instead of meeting what had to be intended as a kiss, Tiberius backed away slightly. Priscus’s dark eyes widened. Tiberius lifted his chin at something over Priscus’ shoulder. What they had almost done was inappropriate for the public setting, and breaking the law could put them in danger. Worse, Tiberius had spotted Decimus coming into the bath. He should have known the man would still come here at times Decimus thought Tiberius might be around.

“Hello, Aelius.” Decimus put up a hand, padding over to the water. His vision canted toward Tiberius’s companion. “It’s Priscus, right?”

Priscus nodded. “That’s right. Join us.”

“We’re almost done, though, just so you know,” Tiberius added as Decimus waded in. If he took the hint that he wasn’t quite welcome, Decimus gave no sign.

“That’s all right.” Decimus’s jaw tightened, and he glanced at Priscus again. “Did I interrupt something?”

Priscus shook his head. “No, we’re just talking *tabula* strategies. I thought we could play the next time we attend a party.”

He lied very smoothly, Tiberius noticed, and he was rather relieved about it. They made some small talk about Didius’s party and about the one Numerius was going to have later in the week. Priscus got out of the water first, Decimus keeping Tiberius distracted for longer than the olive oil merchant cared for.

By the time he did make his escape, the bath had gotten more crowded. There was little that could be said or done with so many eyes about. Still, Tiberius went home very satisfied that Priscus felt the same way he did and that he would have the theater to look forward to. When he got home, he doubled the offering to his Lar, still wondering why the bronze statue was suddenly looking somehow different and more haunting than it ever had.

“THAT was wonderful. Manius’s performance amazed me,” Priscus said as they walked away from the theater.

“Definitely superb,” Tiberius replied.

“He rivals actors in Rome. You should see the theater there.” Priscus had given Tiberius subtle and not-so-subtle hints all evening about coming to Rome.

“Someday, maybe.” Tiberius dodged a feral cat that shot out of an alley in a four-legged assassination attempt. “What shall we do now?”

Priscus glanced up at the setting sun, shielding his eyes. “It’s about dinner time. We should get some food, and maybe I could see your *domus*, Aelius. I’m curious to see what you’re so reluctant to leave, even

for a short period of time.”

Tiberius flushed, his mind going to scenarios that had him showing Priscus one particular room in his home. He had already sent the servants off to their quarters, giving them the night off. There would be no interruptions. “We could do that.”

Tiberius chose the quickest thing he could eat at the *caupona*, noticing Priscus had done likewise. The conversation slowed as their pace toward his home increased. The ground gave several shakes on their way. Priscus shot Tiberius a worried look.

“It’s just Vulcan. You get used to it living here,” Tiberius assured the Roman.

Once they got to his home, he gave Priscus time to examine the atrium of his *domus*. Priscus moved almost immediately to the *lararium*. Tiberius took a step back, realizing why the bronze statue had taken on such an odd familiarity. Priscus resembled the old sculpture. The young man studied the two figures on either side of the niche where the Lar rested. Bacchus, jauntily wearing his wreath of ivy, lounged as he offered a panther his wine. To the other side, Mercury held a bag of coins.

Priscus’s fingers trailed up one of the two snakes, symbols of fortune, approaching the Lares’ altar. “This is a lovely *lararium*.”

“I do my best to honor our guardian,” Tiberius assured him, beckoning Priscus to follow him into the garden. “I think you’ll like this too, Lartius.”

Priscus turned from the *lararium* to follow. “I’m sure the Lares appreciate it.”

“My family has been blessed,” Tiberius replied. “It’s a small matter to keep appeasing our guardians.”

“You’d be amazed at those who wouldn’t take the time,” Priscus argued gently.

Tiberius grunted. He knew that all too well already. He showed his friend around the garden and the rest of his home. They paused in the *balinea* so Tiberius could turn on the pipes to show off his tub before taking Priscus to the *triclinium minus* so Tiberius could serve some *muslum* and grapes in the smaller of his dining rooms. Tiberius fetched the Lar statue so the guardian could partake of the repast, as was its right.

Priscus drank deeply. His body relaxed as the honeyed wine went over his tongue. "I can see why you're reluctant to leave."

Tiberius sipped his *muslum*. "Why are you so eager for me to come to Rome?"

A wicked grin slashed across Priscus's face. "I figured if I could convince you to winter in Rome, then maybe I could lure you there permanently. It's where someone with your skills belongs."

Tiberius almost argued that Priscus didn't know him well enough yet to make such claims, but he reminded himself that Priscus had investigated him. Besides, there were times when someone just *knew*, in his soul, everything that made up his compatriots. He had felt the instant kinship with Priscus, was flattered to be allowed to use his given name, and lusted for him with a passion that must have been placed inside his heart by Venus herself. "You make it sound very alluring."

Priscus took another mouthful of wine, the pink tip of his tongue chasing the ruby drops off his lips. "I'm hoping that's not the only thing I've made alluring."

"Definitely not." Tiberius moved closer, pressing his lips to Priscus's. Warmth and the hint of wine greeted his tongue as he slipped it into Priscus's mouth. He rolled his tongue over the roof of Priscus's mouth as the taller man ran his fingers through Tiberius's hair. Tiberius rested against Priscus's muscular body, deepening the kiss.

When the need to breathe interrupted the kiss, Tiberius pulled back a bit. "Not here, Lartius." He got to his feet, leading the way back to the *balinea*. He opened the pipes and let the pre-heated water flow into the large tub to finish the filling he had started earlier.

Grinning, Priscus shucked out of his toga. Even though he had seen the lithe young man naked in the baths, Tiberius watched with interest. Priscus's cock had begun to awaken. Tiberius wrapped one arm around the taller man's shoulders, pulling him back into a kiss as his other hand gently rubbed Priscus's foreskin against the head of his penis. The skin pulled back against his warm hand, like cupping a blooming flower. Priscus thrust into Tiberius's palm.

Priscus eased Tiberius's toga down off his shoulders, kissing his bared collarbone. Once Tiberius's toga puddled at his feet, Priscus guided the young man back toward the tub. One of the benefits of being a wealthy merchant was having luxuries such as the enormous tub. They

slipped into the warm water, which seemed to add heat to Tiberius's already warming flesh. Priscus pushed Tiberius back against the marble tub, his mouth conquering Tiberius's. Priscus's fingers trailed down Tiberius's torso until they found his nipples. Rolling over them, his skilled digits teased Tiberius's nipples into peaks to rival Vesuvius.

Submerging his hand, Tiberius cupped Priscus's testicles, rubbing them gently. He could feel Priscus's erection warm against his wrist. His own cock throbbed, growing thick and heavy. Priscus reached under the water, stroking Tiberius's shaft. The water swirled over his rampant flesh, the sensation unusual and arousing.

Tiberius swirled his hand, creating a vortex between their bodies. Priscus chuckled lowly as the water tickled over his engorged shaft. Priscus twisted in the tub, pulling Tiberius closer. His big hand caught both of their cocks, rubbing them together, hot water streaming over them. Tiberius kissed Priscus deeply as his hand worked swift and sure as a race horse.

Priscus massaged the sweet spot under the head of Tiberius's cock, making him grind his heels into the marble of the tub. His eyes fluttered shut, a low moan dribbling out of his mouth. Priscus's fingers worked him more enthusiastically, making Tiberius's testicles draw closer to his body.

"Stop," he stuttered. "I'll go too soon."

Priscus sucked briefly on Tiberius's earlobe. "So? We have all night." His dark eyes gleamed wickedly as one of his hands smoothed up Tiberius's cock while the other gently circled around the spot between his jewels and his ass. The sensation flooded Tiberius, his body shaking as he came.

When Tiberius's senses spiraled back down from the heavens, Priscus levered himself up out of the tub, his flesh a beautiful dusky rose from heat and arousal. He held out a hand to Tiberius and helped him out of the water. Priscus pointed to the oil decanter on the shelf. Usually, they would use it to moisturize their skin. "We could use that," he said, his fingers massaging Tiberius's rump.

Tiberius shook his head. He wasn't a *cinaedus* like Decimus. He didn't want to do that; he considered himself too dominant to take that role. "I'd rather do other things," he murmured, hoping Priscus wouldn't be too disappointed.

Priscus tipped Tiberius's chin up. "Show me."

Tiberius took a towel off the shelf, folding it on the cold stone floor. Kneeling, he tugged Priscus closer by his hips. He spiraled his hand up Priscus's cock. Wetting his lips, Tiberius laved his tongue along the wending path of the vein on the top of Priscus's shaft. Tiberius sucked and licked, his mouth eager, while Priscus ran his fingers through Tiberius's hair.

Sliding Priscus deep into his mouth, then back out again, Tiberius repeated the motion several times, his hand gliding along Priscus's damp, hot skin. As his tongue tickled along Priscus's thick cock, the young man groaned, spilling over Tiberius's tongue. Wiping his mouth, Tiberius sat back on his haunches, grinning up at his lover.

It took a moment for the haze of lust to leave Priscus's eyes. Tiberius stood up, and Priscus gathered him up in his arms. "That was...." Tiberius groped for words. "I want to do this again."

Priscus laughed. "No need to wait."

HE glided along, watching the mosaic pass below him as he swam under the crystal water of the *natatorium*. While Priscus had worked out with weights, Tiberius had tested his muscles, running around the *gymnasium*. They met up in the pool. However, neither running nor swimming did anything to bring him any sense of peace.

Tiberius had agreed to go with Priscus to Rome for the winter months. He would leave his business here under the watchful eye of one of the elder merchants who used to help his father. Gnaeus Ulpius had no ambition to own the business, far more content to be with people and making contacts. While Tiberius wasn't worried about the business, he couldn't relax. Going to a city the size of Rome frightened him. Tiberius couldn't say why. Pompeii was a big city with a rowdy reputation of its own. What did he think would happen?

Taking time off from his business here in Pompeii to try and expand it in Rome could mean it all would collapse. All of his friends were here, and outside of Priscus, he knew no one in Rome. What if he hated it? What would Priscus think? Could loving it there be even worse? His sister lived between Pompeii and Rome, and the few times he

did see her, he had gone to her husband's home. It wouldn't be an inconvenience that way. However, being able to stay close to this wonderful man, Tiberius knew it would be hard to do what he needed to in order to hold onto his inheritance.

Surfacing, he let the cool water sluice off his body. Tiberius treaded water, glancing around to see if he could find Priscus. His lover's lean bronzed body coursed down the length of the pool, away from Tiberius, who moved to the side so he could lever himself out. It was time to head to the *frigidarium* anyway. Priscus saw him and got out to follow.

By the time they reached the *caldarium*, Tiberius knew his peaceful day was about to end. Decimus lounged in the hot water, and the expression on his face set Tiberius's nerves on edge. He couldn't skip this part of the bath, but before he even stuck a toe in, he knew that he was going to cut the bath short. Aware of Priscus hovering close, Tiberius knew that his lover understood Decimus had something to say that they wouldn't like. Tiberius sat next to Decimus so the man wouldn't think he was avoiding him.

"Good afternoon," Tiberius said, hoping to ward off any hostility with pleasantries.

"Where have you been hiding?" Decimus asked. "I haven't seen you in weeks. I really wanted to talk to you about your business." The scent of alcohol wafted from the man's mouth.

Tiberius pulled back a bit. To be drunk at this hour was a disgrace. "What about my business?"

"Father thinks I should be working. Says I'm not a politician." Decimus slapped a hand on the water's surface. "Says I should talk to my friends about learning their business."

Tiberius kept his thought—that it was awfully late in life to be worrying about it now—private. Decimus had to be twenty. "I suppose we could try that," he replied evasively, thinking of where he could put Decimus. Preferably, he could convince him another of their friends would have a better place for him. "But not until late spring."

Decimus's brow furrowed, and Tiberius felt Priscus tense, his shoulder touching Tiberius's "Why? I need to do this soon. Father just won't let up."

“Because I’m leaving for Rome for the winter,” Tiberius said, glad for the excuse.

“Are you going with him?” Decimus shot Priscus a venomous look.

“Lartius has nothing to do with it,” Tiberius lied. “I’ve expanded the business into the city, and I need to supervise things there. Ulpius will run things for me here, but I won’t be around to find a place for you. You might ask Didius for training.”

“Some friend you are. Fine, go to Rome with him. See if I care.” Decimus slogged out of the bath, stomping away.

Priscus touched Tiberius’s arm. “Never mind him.”

He sighed. “Don’t worry. I’m not, but I’d like to go home now.”

They hurried through the remainder of the bath, walking back to Tiberius’s home. The unusually warm sun washed down over them as they went. When they returned to his *domus*, they caught Aula exchanging the bowls in the *lararium*. Priscus took the bowl of olive oil from her, ignoring the girl’s startled expression.

Tiberius raised his eyebrows. “She could do that, Lartius.”

“I have a plan for reusing this,” Priscus replied.

“Do you think the Lar would mind that?”

Priscus headed out into the garden. “I sincerely doubt it. Does he mind that you give the offerings of milk to the cats?”

“Not that I can tell,” Tiberius admitted, following him.

Priscus went beyond the row of hazelnuts into the nut-free grass behind them. From here, the *domus* wasn’t visible. To Tiberius’s surprise, Priscus set the bowl of oil down then stripped off his toga, laying it on the grass.

Tiberius eyed Priscus’s naked form, stunned. He had never even thought of doing something like this so exposed. Of course, the gardener was done for the day, and none of the servants could see from the *domus*. Still, he waited until Priscus pulled him close. The taller man’s lips pressed against Tiberius’s, Priscus’s tongue slipping into Tiberius’s mouth. Sucking on Priscus’s tongue, Tiberius fumbled with his toga, shrugging out of it.

Stretching out both togas to cover the grass, Tiberius sank to his knees. Priscus joined him, bowling him back against the soft cloth.

Above Priscus's head, fat, fluffy clouds passed by, riding on Zephyr's breath. Priscus's body rubbed over the length of Tiberius as their mouths warred. Tiberius hardened under the friction of Priscus's taut body, and he could feel his lover's arousal press into his belly.

Priscus levered himself off Tiberius and reached for the oil. His hands massaged it into Tiberius's cock, taking him slightly by surprise. Tiberius hadn't thought Priscus would want to try it this way. He struck Tiberius as being as dominant as himself, but Tiberius wasn't about to argue.

Shifting his weight, Tiberius dipped his own fingers into the oil, wondering again if the Lar would mind such a use of the sacrifice. His slick fingers passed easily over the swell of Priscus's backside, then between the two muscular cheeks to ring around his opening. Priscus groaned softly at the sensation.

Tiberius caught his lover's waist, trying to maneuver him up onto his knees, but Priscus pushed Tiberius's shoulders down against the toga. He could feel the dry autumn grass poking up through the cloth. His eyes widened as Priscus swung over him. None of his other lovers, though there hadn't been many yet in his young life, had tried it this way.

Priscus gave Tiberius's cock a few strokes, his fingers gliding effortlessly over the oiled member. Priscus guided it against himself, sinking down onto Tiberius's cock, just a little at first, his breath hitching, eyes fluttering shut. Then he took more of Tiberius into him. Tiberius groaned at the warmth sealing around him.

Bracing himself, grabbing Tiberius's hip, Priscus ground down on Tiberius, who thrust up to meet him. Priscus's cock beat out a rhythm against Tiberius's belly with every bounce. Tiberius captured it in one oily hand, stroking and teasing until Priscus cried out sharply, striping Tiberius's belly and chest with semen. Recovering, Priscus rode Tiberius harder, reaching back with one hand to massage Tiberius's balls. He eased one greased finger inside Tiberius. Shock and a twinge of discomfort fled in the face of extreme pleasure once Priscus's finger swept over a magical place inside him, and Tiberius couldn't keep in his cry. The heavens could probably hear his release. It coursed through him with such intensity that his vision, his whole being, constricted down to just this moment. It was the only thing there was.

Priscus collapsed onto the togas with Tiberius, painting a pattern on

his belly. “Did that make you forget about the scene at the baths?”

“You make me think of nothing but you,” Tiberius panted.

Priscus leaned down to kiss him. “Good.”

MAKING love in a tight ship’s berth was something Tiberius had never considered, and now, with a kink in his neck from sucking greedily on Priscus’s cock—and having his own sucked at the same time—Tiberius wasn’t sure he liked it. All he really wanted was to get to Rome and back on dry land.

Another swell rocked the boat, and he nearly choked as Priscus slipped too deep into his throat. As if sensing his discomfort, or maybe just as uncomfortable, Priscus picked up the pace, his tongue swirling around the top of Tiberius’s cock. The boat lurched again just as Tiberius came. Priscus lasted only moments longer, the bronze Lar statue toppling from its perch as he did. The loud clank startled the men apart.

Laughing, Priscus walked on unsteady legs to pick it up and replace it in its nest with the statue of the head of the Rufus household. “The sea is getting rough.”

“I’ve noticed.” Tiberius dug for the fresh peppermint leaves he had brought along in a silver tin. They had begun to wilt, but they still had the pleasant kick he wanted as he chewed them.

“We should go see,” Priscus said, reaching for his toga.

Tiberius nodded, dressing. He wasn’t sure if his stomach liked this much motion. How had he let himself get talked into this? Priscus had manipulated him into not just coming to Rome but bringing all his most precious items with him, along with his servants. Priscus’s reasoning was that Tiberius would be there for months, and he should have the comforts of home with him. On Priscus’s odd advice, Tiberius didn’t leave his most trusted servant to watch the *domus*. Instead, he left the most troublesome, reasoning that there wasn’t much the man could do while unsupervised.

Together, they went to the deck. Sailors bustled around doing things Tiberius had no clue about. These sorts of men helped his own mercantile empire expand, but he knew nothing about what they did.

Scanning about, Tiberius spotted something strange. Thick black smoke moved heavy and slow over the peak of Mount Vesuvius.

“Looks like Vulcan is busy.” He nodded to the peak.

Priscus rested a hand on Tiberius’s shoulder. “I see.”

His fingers tightened their grip on Tiberius’s shoulder just as the sky sounded as if it had shattered. Behind him, men shouted, but Tiberius couldn’t turn away from the mountain. The noise deafened him, and everything in view disappeared under a horrible grey cloud, which billowed up and spread like a tree reaching for the heavens. Something red and terrifying spat up into the column of black and grey smoke. Tiberius’s knees went to the consistency of that smoke, and if not for Priscus’s steadying hand, he would have fallen.

“Dear gods! What is happening?” he cried. “Did we do something to anger Vulcan?”

“I don’t know, but the mountain erupted,” Priscus said, pulling Tiberius closer. As the eruption made the sea turn to chop, the sailors had no time to spare on what the two men were doing. Tiberius rested his whole body against his lover’s. “Pompeii will not survive.”

Tiberius shuddered. “What do you mean? How could you know? Sometimes the mountain smokes. My grandfather told me so.”

Priscus shook his head, his curls wagging. “Not like this.”

“We have to go back help them, then, Lartius.” Tiberius tugged on Priscus’ toga.

“We’re too far away now. The captain won’t turn.” Priscus replied so calmly that it chilled Tiberius. “Pompeii will not die alone this day.”

“You knew.” Tiberius tore himself away from Priscus. “How?”

Priscus tilted his head to the side, his lips pressed together. For a moment he was so still, he seemed like a statue. “Have you figured it out now?”

An unstoppable trembling overcame Tiberius. “The statue of the Lar. You look like it. I knew that. Only a god could have known the future.”

“Not only a god.” Priscus reached for Tiberius, who jerked away, looking back at the erupting volcano.

“You’re one of the Lares,” Tiberius whispered.

Priscus's hand smoothed down Tiberius's hair. "Not just one of the Lares." He pulled Tiberius close, and this time the olive oil merchant didn't resist. He murmured in Tiberius's ear, "I'm *your* Lar. I have guarded the Rufus family for untold generations. I was there the day you were born, giving my blessings along with Diana. I loved you as you grew up, and when I knew this would devastate your home, I couldn't leave you there."

Tiberius twisted to look at Priscus full on. "That's why you pushed me so hard to go to Rome."

"You are so stubborn. I didn't think I could manage it," the Lar sighed.

"Why didn't you just *tell* me?" Tiberius fisted his hand in Priscus's toga.

"There are some things I am forbidden to do. I could have tried to give you the message in dreams. Most Lares would have, but I couldn't chance losing you to a misinterpretation of a dream." A wicked smile cut across Priscus's face. "Becoming your lover was a far more pleasurable way to accomplish my task, for both of us."

Leaning closer, tucking his face against Priscus's warm neck, Tiberius bit back a sob. "But all my friends...."

"I could only warn you. They have Lares of their own," Priscus replied matter-of-factly. "If they tended to their *lararium* as well as you did mine, then your friends will be cared for. You have taken good care of me."

Tiberius fought back tears as the only home he had ever known died under the wrath of the gods. "I always wanted to care for the *lararium* even as a small child. I loved that statue's face." Pulling away from Priscus, he wiped at a stray tear. The ship rolled, and again he would have fallen if not for Priscus's steadying hand. "Pleasure aside, why take form like this instead of sending a dream? I'm not sure I could bear it when you leave."

"Leave?" Priscus's brow beetled. "I couldn't leave the Rufuses even if I wanted to. I'm your guardian spirit. Just where would I go? Who could be a better mate for you? I *need* you to carry on the line. I won't be jealous of time spent with a wife, even if that's not really your inclination, which is more than other lovers can promise. I will always be there for you when you need me."

Tiberius took another look at the spreading evil rising out of Vesuvius. A wall of water kicked up from the shore of the bay, moving out toward their ship. Priscus raised a hand, and the wall shifted, cutting a path that would leave the ship safe. “You saved my life.”

“I would do anything for you.” Priscus cupped the back of Tiberius’s head, pulling him into a kiss. He caught hold of the rail, keeping them both firmly in place as the ship bucked and keeled. “We should get you back below.”

Tiberius shook his head, wrapping an arm around Priscus. “I need to see this. I have to know what could have been my fate.”

“A better fate awaits you in Rome. I’ll make sure of it,” Priscus promised. “You have nothing to fear, Tiberius.”

Tiberius startled at the use of his most private name. “I believe you, Lartius.”

The Lar captured Tiberius tightly in his arms as they watched the volcano vent its fury. “I’ll protect you always and forever,” he whispered, and Tiberius allowed himself to go weak and teary against the man. These arms would keep him safe eternally, and they were where he needed to be.

JANA DENARDO'S career choices and wanderlust take her all over the United States and beyond. Much of her travels make their way into her stories. Fantasy, science fiction, and mystery have been her favorite genres since she started reading, and they often flavor her works. In her secret identity, she works with the science of life and gives college students nightmares. When she's not chained to her computer writing, she functions as stray cat magnet. She's also learning that the road to enlightenment is filled with boulders she keeps falling over and that the words gardening and Zen don't go together no matter what anyone says.

Visit Jana's blog at <http://jana-denardo.livejournal.com/>.

A VOICE IN THE DARKNESS

Patric Michael

THE rain fell in ragged sheets as black, water-laden clouds released their cargo with mindless ferocity. The mountainside, already heavily eroded by a week of storms, gave in to the inexorable demands of gravity and began to slip.

Tree roots shrieked as the weight of centuries strained them beyond their limit. Tons of earth and stone, once a firmament that nurtured and protected, now razed the living wood as it pulled away from the granite face of the cliff. Slabs of stone, separated by eons of erosion and overbalanced by the sudden exposure, tipped outward even as they slid down, inch by agonized inch. At stake was naught but a stretch of highway below, wending its lonely way around the mountain and hugging it with the tenacity of a new lover.

A highway that was all but forgotten when the interstate was completed some sixty-three years ago save for those travelers who, instinctively or by design, were called to wander a more scenic route.

As though pleased with its latest victory over obdurate stone, the rain ceased and the clouds vanished, leaving the rapidly setting sun to bear witness as the mountainside tore free.

LANDON Hargrove woke to the sound of voices.

“Hey, hey buddy. Wake up, will ya?”

One voice, then. The others were only in his head, remnants of a dream he didn’t want to remember. “No, please. Let me sleep.” Landon

tried to turn away, tried to bury his face in a pillow that did not exist and came awake all at once, shouting at the stabbing bolt of pain that illuminated his right arm. “What the.... What happened?”

“You crashed, man. Looks like half the mountain came down on top of you. Are you all right?”

“I don’t know.” Landon reached across his body with his good left hand and fumbled in the billowy, red-tainted silence, searching for the buckle of the seat belt that held him fast. The voice that had drawn him out of peaceful darkness into this unbearable, painful reality urged him on and cheered when he found his prize.

“That’s it. Now get yourself out of that thing so you can help your friend.”

“Husband,” Landon said absently, his concentration divided between ignoring the searing pain that all but erased any other awareness of his right arm and pushing the buckle’s release with his clumsy left hand. “He’s my husband, Bryce.” Only then did the import of the stranger’s words sink in. “What’s wrong with him? Can you help him? The buckle is jammed, and I can’t see a damned thing. Is he breathing?” Landon alternated between tugging frantically at the harness and slapping at what had to be the partially deflated air bag he could feel trying to smother him. A hundred questions stumbled through his abused mind, each demanding answers at once.

“Hey, calm down, buddy. You won’t be any good to anyone if you panic, so breathe, and tell me your name.”

Landon stopped struggling, as much from exhaustion as any act of will. “Landon,” he said. “Who are you?” He wiped at his face and felt wet warmth in the palm of his hand. Groaning, he rubbed his face against the air bag and then tried to push the slack fabric down to his feet. Grimly, he realized he could not feel his legs.

“My name is Danyel. I felt the mountain shake, and when I looked, I saw you trapped in the rubble.”

“Oh. Did the landslide catch you too?” Landon pushed himself deeper into the driver’s seat, trying to get some slack in the taut harness and still reach the release despite the screaming agony of his right arm.

“No,” Danyel said. “But when I saw what had happened, I had to try and help. Do you feel better now?”

Landon realized with a start that he did. The panicky, clawing terror had abated in favor of concentrating on the stranger's voice, leaving him free to think, take stock of their situation, and remember.

The day had ended on a high note. Landon and Bryce had braved one of the worst storms in local history to make the long drive into the city, where a mountain of paperwork waited for their joint signatures. Paperwork that, in a month's time, once it had all been stamped, sealed, notarized, and countersigned, would finally see them coming home as the proud adoptive parents of a little boy. For now, however, all that remained was the long way home and the waiting.

"God, I'm so excited. I'm going to burst right here." The quivering joy in Landon's voice rang like a church bell, and Bryce laughed.

"You do and you're cleaning up the mess, mister."

Despite his pragmatic, almost gruff reply, Landon knew Bryce was as deeply thrilled and excited as he was. Maybe more so, if such a thing were possible. They had been working toward this day for so long, fighting the state, local bigotry, diffident social workers, and occasionally each other for the chance to create a family.

"So, how do you want to celebrate?" Bryce leaned closer, letting his words caress Landon's ear.

Landon kept his gaze resolutely on the road. Even at full speed, the windshield wipers were barely able to keep ahead of the sheeting rain as it poured down upon them. "Let's get home in one piece first. You keep doing that to me on this road, and we're going to end up a grease stain at the bottom of the ravine."

"You are an incurable romantic, Landon. Has anyone told you that lately?"

"Yes. I do feel better. Thanks." Landon slid his upper body sideways until the shoulder strap lay directly across his neck. His right side screeched in protest, but he felt the slack immediately as the lap portion eased. "Where are you, Dan? How can I even hear you?"

"The back window is gone, Landon. Can't you feel the cold air?"

Until that moment, Landon truly had not felt the drop in

temperature, and now he shivered with it. "Damn! I wish I could see. Where are we? Are we still on the road?" He pulled the shoulder strap to one side until his head was clear of the headrest attached to his seat and slipped out from beneath the strap. With the slack he gained, he was able to lean forward and twist his upper body to the right, giving him more room to tackle the problem of the buckle. His right shoulder grazed the seat back, and he bit his lip hard to hold back a scream. "Dan? Are you still there?"

"I'm right here, buddy. I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank God. Can you get to the passenger side? I can't reach Bryce." He hesitated. "Can you see if he's still alive?"

"I can't. I'm sorry. There is a ton of dirt and rocks blocking that side of the car. Both sides, really. Even if I could get to the car, I couldn't get to him." After a moment, Dan added, "Or you."

Bitter disappointment swept through Landon's body with an almost palpable wrench. "I understand. Are we still on the road?"

"Mostly," Dan said. "It's kind of hard to tell how much of the road is left."

Disappointment gave way to naked fear as Landon began to grasp the sheer scope of what had happened to them. He yanked savagely at the safety strap that still pinned him to the seat, drawing as much slack as he could. Landon let go and jabbed at the release with his thumb. For a moment, the balky thing resisted as though it were welded closed, and then with a snap, it released. Pain flooded through his hips and lower back as blood, long denied access to his extremities, coursed through his veins once again, awakening nerves and starved tissues alike. "Oh, fuck me," he cried as first his thighs and his feet began to protest, followed by his calves, until his entire lower half was a discordant symphony of pain.

"What happened? What's wrong?" Dan called out, concern giving his voice a sharp edge.

"Nothing. I'm fine. I got the seatbelt loose, and now my legs feel like they are on fire."

"At least you're free. Can you reach Bryce now?" Dan's voice sounded oddly muffled, as though his back was turned.

"I'm checking." Landon leaned across the console space and felt for his husband. His right arm bellowed in protest, and he bit his lip

again. He felt Bryce's chest first, and although he couldn't reach all the way to Bryce's right side, what he did find seemed at least intact. Landon gingerly felt his way to Bryce's face. For one heart-stopping minute, he was sure Bryce was dead, until a fine spray of warmth played across the back of his hand.

"He's alive!" Landon shouted his joy, and Dan laughed.

"That's great! Is he awake?"

"No. Not yet. I can't tell. Wait." Landon sat back and reached for the lever that would recline his seat back. It moved perhaps six inches before stopping. Landon pushed harder against his seat back, but it would go no further. He reached back, feeling for the obstruction, and was surprised to feel crumpled metal where the roof should have been.

"Dan, can you see the top of the car? Is the roof dented?"

"Yeah," Dan replied. "I can see it. The whole back half of the car is crushed. That's why there is no back window. Front half too, though not as bad."

"Jesus," Landon swore. "What in the hell happened to us?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Dan answered anyway. "Like I said, it looks like half the mountain landed on you."

"Then why weren't we crushed flat?" Frustration tore at his resolve, and Landon all but slammed his body back against the seat. "With a mountain on top of us, we should have been buried."

"No, not buried, Landon." Dan's voice had an oddly inflected note. "But there is a problem."

Landon froze in the act of trying to draw his legs up out of the foot well. The pain was monstrous, and he had difficulty getting his legs out of the significantly reduced space. "Tell me. What's wrong?"

"There's a slab of rock leaning out over your car. Looks like it deflected the worst of the slide, but it's caught between the debris at one end and a boulder underneath." Dan paused as if searching for words. "It's balanced, you know? I'm no geologist or anything, but you really need to get out of there before the whole works comes crashing down." As an afterthought, he added, "It's a really big rock."

Landon swore and wished desperately that Bryce were awake. Bryce was the stolid one, the pragmatic one. He was the one who

handled all of life's little emergencies while Landon fretted, knowing that afterward, Bryce would turn to him for comfort when the crisis was past.

"I'm sorry to tell you that, Landon." Dan's voice was muted and strange. "But I thought you should know."

"It's okay. I was just thinking about how Bryce is the one who handles all of our problems. If you hadn't told me, I'd probably be tempted to sit here and wait it out until help arrived."

"I don't think that's a good idea, but I can't see how to get you out."

As if on cue, Landon heard a sharp rattle skate across the roof of the car. The unmistakable sound of rocks rumbling down the mountainside followed.

"Dan? What's happening?" Panic gave Landon strength, and he yanked his legs free. He gripped the steering wheel for purchase and levered himself onto his knees so he could turn around, face the back of his seat, and most importantly, gain the full reach of his left arm to check Bryce.

"It's okay. Just some pebbles shifting. Even under normal conditions, that happens all the time."

"How do you know that?" Landon demanded as he palmed fresh blood from his face. He squinted, blinked several times, and was rewarded with a dim, hazy red glow. It wasn't much, but at least he wasn't completely blind after all.

"I've lived here for a long time, Landon. I see it often."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap like that."

"Not a problem," Dan said. "Unusual circumstances. It's not like we were shooting the breeze over a cup of coffee."

"I wish we were. Drinking coffee, I mean. I could sure use a cup right about now."

"You can buy me a cup when you get out of there," Dan said.

"That's a promise!"

Bryce moaned, and Landon reached for his face. "Bryce? Honey? Can you hear me?" Landon patted his cheek gently but got no other response. He thumbed the release on Bryce's seat belt, which, unlike his, came away easily. Landon shifted to kneel across the console and heard a

loud crunching sound as his left knee came down on a half-full water bottle. He grasped it between his legs, twisted off the cap, and splashed some of the cool liquid directly into his face, blinking and scrubbing at the blood that clouded his eyes. He armed the mess away with his sleeve and recapped the bottle.

“Landon? Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I found some water and washed out my eyes. Still can’t see a damn thing, though.”

“The moon’s not up yet,” Dan said. “Do you have a flashlight or anything?”

Did he? Landon couldn’t remember. Bryce was always bringing home gadgety things. Hadn’t one of them been some sort of emergency tool?

Landon felt for and found the glove box, already jarred open from the impact. He dug around the detritus, trying to imagine by feel the shapes he found. He was looking for something square, with a button on top. He vaguely remembered Bryce showing him the thing, as excited as a child in a candy shop.

“Look, Lan! It’s got a light, and a cutter, and even one of those sharp knocker things to break open a car window. Isn’t that cool?”

“Cool? What are you, fifteen again?” Landon laughed and dutifully examined the device.

This was one of the first of many trips they had taken to the city seeking permission to adopt, and it had not gone particularly well. The barrel-chested gorilla assigned as their advocate was anything but helpful. In fact, he seemed to go out of his way to be obstructive instead, and Bryce had been particularly incensed. As a sop, Landon bought lunch and stopped at the city’s largest hardware store. One of Bryce’s favorite pastimes was looking at tools.

“What else does it do?” Landon asked, handing the thing back to his husband.

Bryce shrugged. “What else does it need to do? Isn’t this enough?”

“For fifteen dollars, it could at least do our taxes or something.”

“For fifteen dollars, I’ll do our taxes,” Bryce said, grinning. His

eyes still had that haunted, angry shadow in them, but Landon would have happily paid three times the price just to see him smile.

“You got a deal, Mr. Man. Get your toy, and let’s head home. I’m thinking there is lasagna in our immediate dinner future. How does that sound?”

“Sounds cool,” Bryce said, and both men laughed.

Smiling at the memory, Landon nearly missed the gadget in his search, mistaking the smooth, rounded corner of the flat, rectangular-shaped object for something else entirely. It wasn’t until he started discarding things that obviously weren’t useful to their current situation—maps, a few travel-size packs of Kleenex, a bottle of something that might have been touch-up paint, the owner’s manual, and the plastic sleeve that held the registration and insurance information, all piled into the driver’s side foot well—that he found it.

“Gotcha,” he said, triumph ringing in his voice. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

Dan called out, “What’s that? I didn’t hear you.”

“I found a light!” Landon replied, then began to curse.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s one of those damned crank things that never needs batteries,” Landon said. “And I’ve only got one good hand.”

“Oh. Maybe you can brace it against something?”

“Wait. Give me a minute. I’ve got an idea.” Landon put the thing in his mouth, orienting the little crank out toward the left so he could reach it. He spun the handle, feeling vaguely nauseous as the vibrations rattled his teeth and pummeled his skull. After a minute or two, he stopped and spit the thing out into his palm. Landon thumbed the switch and cried out.

“Oh fuck! Bryce is bleeding!”

“Landon?” Dan called louder when Landon didn’t answer. “Buddy? Talk to me. Where is he hurt?”

“It’s his head. He’s been bleeding all this time I’ve been fucking around, and who knows how much blood he’s lost. Jesus, fuck! What am I going to do? What if he—”

“Landon!” Dan’s voice was sharp and brooked no nonsense. “Shut up and listen to me.”

Landon’s heart raced and his mind whirled, but he listened, brought up short by the deep resonance of Dan’s imperative. “I’m listening, but Dan, he’s my whole life!”

“I know, buddy. Believe me, and we’re gonna do everything we can to save *his* life, if you are willing to listen to what I tell you. Can you do that?”

“Yes. Please, just help him. I’ll do anything,” Landon said.

“First thing is to stop the bleeding. How big is the wound, and do you have anything you can use as a compress?”

“Wait, let me see.” Landon held the light between his teeth and gingerly turned Bryce’s head. “It’s a—” he began, and then swore as the light fell into his lap. “It’s about as long as my finger, and I can’t tell for sure, but it looks deep.” Landon’s gorge rose as he realized the dull gleam reflected in the bright white light was probably Bryce’s skull. “Oh man, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Don’t,” Dan commanded. “You’ll have plenty of time for that later. For now, I want you to press gently along the cut and tell me if you feel anything spongy. Don’t press hard!”

Landon held the light in his teeth and gently probed the wound. His fingers came back slick with blood. Another scatter of rocks peppered the roof overhead, and he flinched.

“No, nothing spongy. Are we all right out there?”

“You’re fine,” Dan replied. “Do you have anything you can use to press against the wound? Maybe a handkerchief or a jacket or something?”

Memory touched at Landon’s thoughts, and he scrabbled at it. In a moment, it came to him, and he turned in his seat to shine the light in the foot well, jarring his right arm in the process. The pain, which had quiesced to a dull sob, immediately roared back to life, and he swore under his breath even as tears rolled down his cheeks. He bent and retrieved the travel packs of tissues, plopping all three into his lap.

“I’ve got something that will work, I think,” Landon said as he tore the wrapper from one of the packs with his teeth.

“Good. Keep a steady pressure and don’t panic if you feel his blood soak through. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Landon replied. He put the light back in his mouth and pressed the entire wad of tissues against the gash on Bryce’s head. In moments, the wad was soaked through, just as Dan predicted, but he held it in place until his jaw screamed its outrage. He let the device fall into his lap, still keeping pressure on the wound, and called out.

“Dan, this isn’t going to work. I can’t hold the light and the compress and talk to you at the same time.”

“Okay, let me think. It’s because you are one-handed, right?”

“Yeah. And I can’t keep holding the light in my teeth, either. Not for long, anyway.”

The silence spun out, long enough for Landon to be afraid all over again. “Dan?”

“I’m here, buddy. I’m not leaving you. Are you by any chance wearing a belt?”

Landon groaned. He hadn’t worn a belt in donkey’s years. “No.”

“Is Bryce?”

If he had had a free hand, Landon would have smacked his own forehead for being so stupid. Bryce always wore a belt.

“Yes! Hang on a minute.” Landon tossed aside the bloody wad of paper and tugged at the buckle of Bryce’s belt. It was one of those lever action things that needed no prong, and in seconds, he slipped the belt free of its loops. “I’ve got it!” he called, and Dan cheered.

“That’s great, Landon. Use it to hold the compress in place. Cinch it tight, too. He’ll have a headache, but that’s better than the alternative.”

Landon sat, staring into the darkness. The flashlight in his lap grew dim, and he resolutely cranked the handle, trying to think around the nauseating vibrations the thing caused in his head. How in the hell was he going to juggle belt and pad and “cinch it tight” with only one hand? It was such a simple task with two, but with only one, it seemed impossible. He shone the flashlight on Bryce’s head and groaned as he saw fresh blood coursing around the man’s right ear like a miniature red waterfall.

“Dan! I can’t do this. I’m one-handed, remember?” Bitter frustration welled up in his chest, and on any other day, he would have thrown something in childish anger. Now, however, even that release was denied to him. He was strictly a right-handed pitcher.

“You have to, Landon. You simply don’t have any other option. Now quit whining and get the job done or Bryce dies.” Dan’s voice was harsh, and that last bit stung Landon all the way to his soul.

“Fuck you, asshole.”

“I’ll provide the grease, once you and Bryce are free,” Dan shot back. “Now get on with it. Think!”

The need to find a solution was nearly unbearable, and as Landon pressed another package of tissue against his husband’s head, he wept with the frustration of it. He wanted nothing more than to cradle Bryce in his arms, whisper nonsense into his ear, and wake up with his lover’s head on his chest to find out all this was just a nightmare. God knew they had done that often enough, each comforting the other through the long months when it seemed their goal of starting a family was an impossible, stupid dream.

“I don’t get it,” Bryce had said, his head on Landon’s bare chest and the smell of new sex strong in the room. “It’s not like we’re asking for the moon.”

“No, we’re not,” Landon replied. “But we are asking for the unusual.” He ran his fingers through bright auburn curls and sighed. “And you know as well as I do that anything unusual is always regarded with suspicion. It’s practically human nature.”

“I know, I know.” Bryce thumped a soft fist on his lover’s chest. “No one said I have to like it, though.”

Landon covered that fist with his hand, softening it still further like warm clay until both of their hands lay flat. He was not particularly surprised to feel fresh, wet warmth on his chest. “Poor Bryce,” Landon thought. “Always so pragmatic and secure with himself, and yet he’s the one that falls apart when there are too many minor obstacles.”

Landon ran his hand back and forth along his lover’s spine, more as comfort than caress, and kissed the top of his head. “We’ll get through this, love. I promise. They can’t keep denying us forever, and until they

give in and let us adopt, we still have each other.” He felt a shudder beneath his palm and hugged Bryce more tightly, cradling his head and whispering nonsense into curly hair that smelled of vanilla and sweet sweat.

Cradling his head.... The image stayed in his mind as Landon’s thoughts returned to the task at hand, and suddenly he understood how he might be able to do the impossible after all.

“Dan! I’ve got an idea!”

“You da man! What is it?”

Instant, unwavering faith and support. Landon felt a surge of emotion for this faceless stranger, this voice in the darkness. Not love, exactly, but something very much like it. “I’ll tell you if it works, and I’m warning you now, Dan, if it does and if we get out of this mess alive, straight or not, I’m kissing you full on the mouth!”

Dan laughed, and the sound ran like liquid sunshine through Landon’s body. “Okay, but no tongues,” he said.

“Deal! Now give me a minute. I need to hold the flashlight again.” Landon tipped his head to shine the light on Bryce’s belt. He formed a loop by threading the end through the buckle. The work was slow, and he briefly imagined the blood, which immediately began to seep once he removed the compress, was building up to its former gush. Once his loop was formed, Landon perched the belt atop Bryce’s head, then tore open the last package of tissues. He held it against Bryce’s head with the heel of his hand and used his fingertips to inch the loop down and over the makeshift compress. Holding the contraption with only his thumb and digging his fingers deep into his husband’s curls, Landon leaned back and drew Bryce to his chest, letting the man’s own weight hold the tissues and buckle in place while he slipped the rest of the looped belt around Bryce’s head. He gripped the loose end of the belt between his teeth, cast a silent prayer to the wind, and pushed Bryce’s head back against the seat.

Bryce moaned, and Landon swore, afraid he was doing some sort of irreparable harm, but the belt tightened as he drew back, and he heard the impossibly beautiful sound of the buckle clicking shut when he thumbed it closed. Almost as an afterthought, Landon became aware of the deep ache in his bent knees and legs. He shifted, careful not to lose

the small flashlight, and tried to find a position that would allow some sort of circulation. He settled for a kind of sideways, crabbed hunch, sitting on the console between the seats. That gave him some measure of relief, but already the unforgiving plastic and metal dug in to his butt.

“Landon? How’s it going?” Dan’s voice had that muffled quality again, and another scatter of pebbles fell across the roof, followed by a loud thump as something heavier bounced off it.

“I got it, I think. Best I can do, anyway. Are we still all right? What was that noise?”

“Just a rock. Nothing major,” Dan said as another scatter fell, longer and louder than before.

“Dan, are you all right?” Landon wondered at the man’s dedication. Even in high summer, mountain temperatures got pretty low at night. “Are you safe, I mean?”

“Right as rain,” Dan said, “which we’ve had more than enough of, please and thank you. The moon is up. Can you see it?”

Landon peered out through the undamaged driver’s side window. Faint silver touched the tops of the tree standing rooted in the ravine on the other side of the road. “No, but I can see its light, at least.”

“I ’spect it hasn’t quite come around to your side yet. She’s nearly full, so if the clouds don’t move in again, you’ll see it soon enough. How’s Bryce doing?”

Landon shined his light over Bryce’s body, twisting to his left to include the man’s legs. “I don’t know. He moans once in a while, but he won’t wake up.”

“I don’t guess I’m all that surprised. It was his side that got hit hardest, after all.”

Silence spun out. Rocks rattled down upon the car as Landon aimed his light into what remained of the back seat. The men had tossed their rain coats back there before heading home, and Landon spotted one of them sticking out. He tugged at it, felt something rip, and it came away otherwise intact. His jacket, waterproofed and really too warm for the season, but he was glad to have it. He tucked the garment around Bryce’s limp body and tried not to think too deeply about his husband’s continued unconsciousness.

Pulling the one jacket free revealed a sleeve of the other, Bryce’s

windbreaker, and Landon tugged that one out also, though its lighter-weight material was no match for the crumpled sheet metal that pinned it to the seat. Still, it would serve, and he wadded the thin, shredded fabric into a ball and tucked it under his butt to cushion against the implacable console.

Bryce startled him badly by crying out and shifting his body as though he were trying to ward off the oncoming landslide. Landon recovered, caught his husband's flailing arms, and tried to push him back upright. Without the leverage he would have had with the use of his right arm, Landon could do no more than control the man's fall, and he settled for laying Bryce's head in his lap.

"What is it? What happened?"

"It's Bryce. He's dreaming, I think." Landon prised the flashlight from beneath his husband's head and saw without enthusiasm that it had grown dim once again. He cranked it back to life and shone its comforting light at Bryce's legs. "I think his legs are pinned in the foot well, Dan. What am I going to do?"

"One or both?"

Landon tugged at Bryce's left pant leg and was gratified to see it moved freely. The right leg, however, did not. The foot remained securely caught by whatever had shifted when that side of the car was crushed.

"It's his right foot. I can't reach far enough to see what's holding it."

"Don't worry about it for now, buddy. Make him as comfortable as you can until help arrives. Are you warm enough?"

"Yeah," Landon replied. "I've got a jacket on him, and I'm sitting on the other one. What kind of help, Dan? This isn't exactly a busy road."

"Honestly, I don't know. Delivery guys go past here often enough. I'm expecting one of them will come out from the city, find the slide, and go back to report it."

Landon thought about that, and despair crawled across his skin. "How will they know we're stuck in the middle of it?" he asked, but he already knew the answer.

"They won't, buddy. At least not until someone comes out in a

helicopter or something to assess the damage. I'm sorry."

"Can you go for help, Dan? Maybe call somebody and let them know we're here?"

"I don't have a phone, Landon. I wish I did. I live pretty rough out here."

Landon tried not to let disappointment color his voice. He supposed he knew already that something as simple as Dan making a phone call wasn't an option, else the guy wouldn't be sitting out there in the dark and keeping him company. "That's okay. I'm glad you're here, though. We really will have to go get a cup of coffee when we get out of this. If nothing else, I'd like to see your face."

Dan laughed. "Not much to look at, me." His laughter subsided. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm afraid." Landon's voice was subdued, muted by the enormity of their situation now that he actually had time to think about it. "What if Bryce is asleep because his brain is damaged? What if there's more wrong with him than I can see? What if—"

"Easy, buddy," Dan interrupted. "Don't go down that road. There is plenty of room in the world for 'what ifs', and not all of them are bad."

"But...."

"Is something you sit on," Dan said. "Try not to think about it. We'll get through this, I promise. Are you sleepy? It'll help if you can get some rest."

"Sleep is about the last thing I want to do right now, Dan. Too keyed up." Landon looked down at Bryce's face and adjusted the belt. He was pleased to see the blood had stopped oozing from beneath the pad, but the last few drips slid slowly down to his husband's cheek and fell away into the darkness. Landon swiped them away with the sleeve of his shirt, heedless of the tears that coursed down his own cheeks.

"Dan?"

"I'm right here, buddy." Dan's reply was prompt.

"Looks like the bleeding stopped, at least."

"Hey, that's great news! You did a good job." Dan sounded genuinely pleased.

"Yeah, I guess I did at that," Landon said, brushing back the

tangled, blood soaked curls from his husband's face. Bryce always wore his hair a bit too long.

"He'll be very proud of you, I think." Dan's voice hummed with emotion. "Tell me, how did you two meet, anyway? Was it love at first sight?"

Landon laughed. The memory was as strong today as it had been nearly ten years ago. "Hardly that. In fact, we pretty much hated each other on sight."

"Oh ho!" Dan crowed. "Sounds like it'll be a good story, then. Dazzle me, buddy."

Landon leaned forward, adjusting Bryce's head to his new position, and let his own rest against the back of his seat. His right arm protested weakly, but that was old news, and he ignored it.

"We met almost ten years ago, Dan. I can hardly believe it's been that long...."

Landon stepped out of the elevator and crashed headlong into a tall man with dark red, curly hair and far too much attitude. The file folders he had been carrying scattered in all directions, disgorging their contents across the polished marble floor as they fell. The double latte that had been perched atop those folders burst when it hit the floor, splashing the man's polished loafers and dousing his pants legs.

"Jeez, man, watch where you're going, will ya?" The man all but snarled his irritation as Landon dropped to his hands and knees and frantically shook coffee from the handful of papers that had also been christened. He looked up into beautiful, angry green eyes as the man snarled again.

"Shit! Do you see what you did to my shoes?"

In point of fact, Landon had seen, given that he was all but yanking pages of notes from under the admittedly ruined footwear.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you charging into the elevator," Landon snapped. "I should have looked both ways before exiting."

"You're lucky I have an appointment to keep, or I'd drag you to whoever has the misfortune to be your manager and have you busted back to the mail room." The man stomped his feet as he stormed into the

elevator, leaving coffee-stained footprints on some of the pages. He stabbed at the button panel and snarled as the doors closed. "And use a box next time!"

Landon stared at his blurry reflection in the polished steel of the elevator and swore under his breath, utterly stymied by the man's insolence.

"Let me help with that, Mr. Hargrove." A pretty brunette named Kelly knelt primly beside him and began gathering papers. Landon smiled and nodded gratefully, still far too uncomfortable with being called "mister" to do anything else. He was, after all, barely a rung on the corporate ladder above the girl herself, and that only recently.

"Thanks, Kelly. I appreciate it."

"Can you believe that guy? He's the one who ran into you, and he didn't even offer to help."

"No, he didn't, did he? It takes all kinds, I guess."

"I guess," Kelly replied doubtfully. "I hope he gets what's coming to him." She handed Landon the stack she'd gathered. "Do you want me to do something with these for you?"

"Well, I was taking them to be scanned and stored. Old files and all."

"I can do that, and sort them, too, if you'll clear my time with Mr. Ellington."

"You've got a deal, Kelly. Thanks." Landon smiled and handed the stack back to the girl.

"Anytime, and congratulations on your promotion."

"Thanks. I'm still getting used to it myself."

They stood, and Landon pressed the call button as Kelly stared at the floor for a long moment. She smiled as Landon stepped into the next elevator going up, and he sighed as the doors closed on the wistful, hopeless expression on Kelly's face.

"Do you believe in fate, Dan?"

"Yep. Sure do, although I'd have to suppose there are many different names for it," Dan said. "Why?"

“Just curious. Bryce and I were drawn together in the worst possible way, and yet it ended up being for the best possible reasons.” Landon paused, thinking. “Do you have anyone, Dan? Someone you hate to leave in the morning and can’t wait to see again when you get home at night?”

“No. No one like that, but I do have people I look forward to seeing on a regular basis.” Dan’s voice was introspective, almost wistful, and Landon’s heart ached for him. “So, you really dumped coffee all over his shoes?” Laughter colored Dan’s words. Laughter with perhaps a touch of sadness, and Landon accepted the change of subject.

“Technically, yes, but he walked into me, so it wasn’t exactly my fault,” Landon replied.

“What finally attracted you to him?”

“His integrity and his eyes, but not exactly in that order, I guess.”

Landon would have given anything to see those stormy green eyes open. He shifted his weight, gritting his teeth through the cramps that spasmed his legs. The thin, plastic crunch reminded him of the water bottle, and he snatched it up, wondering if Bryce would be able to swallow anything. He discarded the idea almost at once. If Bryce weren’t turned sideways, maybe, but Landon had no real way to roll the man on his back one-handed, and especially not with Bryce’s foot caught like that. Instead, he settled for taking a drink himself and setting the bottle aside.

“His integrity,” Landon said again. “We ended up working together on a development project, and he was contracted as a consultant. When a question of cutting costs came up, he risked his job to decide against a certain contractor who had a great bid and a bad reputation. By then, we had stopped glaring at each other from across the room, and I got to know him better.”

“I should like to have been the fly on the wall when that happened,” Dan said. “It can’t have been easy for either of you.”

“No, it wasn’t, at first. I—”

Bryce coughed, a deep, racking sound that frightened Landon down to the pit of his stomach. Silver shadows cast by moonlight through the broken windshield tumbled across Bryce’s face as his eyes fluttered open. He struggled to sit up, and Landon nearly toppled over trying to

catch him as he fell back, unconscious again.

“Bryce. Bryce!” Landon shook his shoulder, but it was no use. Bryce’s eyes remained firmly shut.

Dan called out sharply. “What is it? What’s happening?”

“He almost woke up, Dan! That’s a good sign, isn’t it? He’s out again now, though.”

“I don’t know, Landon. I’m not a doctor, but I’d have to think any sign of awareness is good. Did he recognize you?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I’m sure he will, when he does wake up. You should try and get some sleep. It’ll be dawn soon.”

Landon pressed his palm against Bryce’s chest, reassured by the steady in and out of his breathing. Another scatter of rocks peppered the roof, and he cringed.

“What about you, Dan? You’ve got to be just as tired as me. Are you comfortable out there?”

“Like I said. Right as rain, buddy,” Dan replied, but that muffled quality was back in his voice. “Sleep if you can. I’ll keep an eye out for when help comes.”

Landon felt a surge of emotion very nearly overwhelm him at the thought of this stranger, who felt less like a stranger with each passing moment, sitting alone in the dark. “Thank you,” was all he could say without bursting into tears.

“My pleasure, my friend.”

Landon leaned sideways as he slid closer to the driver’s side door. His legs began to sing out, but by the time he figured out a way to arch himself across the console and rest his head on Bryce’s free leg, the prickly feeling was all but gone, leaving only the dull ache behind. Within minutes, he was fast asleep and dreaming.

“We can’t give up now, Bryce. We’ve come so far.”

“Not far enough, apparently!” Bryce slammed the letter down on the kitchen table hard enough to rattle the salt and pepper shakers. He glared at them for a moment, as though they were the source of his

frustration. “Every time we turn around, they throw one more stupid roadblock in our face!”

Landon reached for his husband’s hand, but Bryce pulled away.

“No, Lan. Not this time. You always try to mollify me, make me feel better, make me see something that probably isn’t even there, and I’m tired of it.” Bryce sat down heavily, as though his strength of will had simply run out. “It’s not fair, Landon. I don’t have the energy to fight them anymore.”

“But Bryce, this isn’t a denial.” Landon picked up the letter and scanned the contents again. Bryce was right—it was one more roadblock—but only that. He read the relevant paragraph aloud. “‘We are as yet unable to process your request for adoption. Our primary concern is for the safety and welfare of the child, and as such, we are requesting additional information as regards plans to cover emergencies, such as one or both presumptive parents becoming critically injured, ill, or expiring’.” Landon looked at his husband, who stared at the salt shaker and would not meet his gaze. “It’s just insurance, Bryce. They just want to know we have enough life insurance to cover an emergency, that’s all.”

Bryce lifted his head. “Yeah. Today it’s insurance. Last month it was whether the house was structurally sound, and who knows what it will be next month? The color of my underwear?”

“If that’s what they want to know, I’ll hand them a pair of your Jockeys.”

“Give them the whole damn drawer if that’s what they want. I’m done with it.”

Landon woke, startled by a cascade of debris on the roof, surrounded by the remnants of his dream and pummeled by Bryce’s flailing arms. One lucky shot across the bridge of his nose roused the deep anger he had felt three months ago when Bryce had apparently forsaken their dream. “Bryce, Bryce! Damn, knock it off!” He shook the man hard enough to disturb his aching right arm, and the bright flare of new pain brought him up short.

“Landon? What is it?” Dan’s voice, muffled and somehow distracted, broke past Landon’s fear.

“Dan! I think he’s having a seizure or something! You gotta help me, please!”

More debris tumbled across the car, spilling over the shattered windshield like a curtain and momentarily darkening the early dawn light. The car shook with the impact of something large striking the back end, and Landon instinctively threw himself across his husband’s still-twitching body.

“I can’t!” Dan nearly wailed. “I don’t dare move!”

“What’s happening out there? Are we sliding?”

For long, agonizing moments while dirt, rocks, and tree branches rained down on them, Dan was silent. When the cascade stopped, he spoke, and his voice was strained. “Yeah. You moved, a little. Mostly it’s stuff coming down from higher up. I think it’s knocking loose the bigger stuff on its way down.”

“Ah, shit. How bad is it?” Landon straightened as he spoke and peered out the driver’s side window. Sunlight touched the tops of the far peaks across the ravine, making them glow with eldritch light.

“I can’t lie to you, Landon. It’s bad. You’re still on the road and all, but it’s the rock above you I’m worried about.”

“What about it?” Landon asked, distracted by Bryce’s sudden stillness. He put his hand flat on Bryce’s chest, wanting to feel that steady rise and fall.

“Well, everything that’s falling on you now is what was keeping that thing pinned in place.” Dan paused, and Landon heard naked fear in the man’s voice when he added, “Is there any way *at all* you can get yourself out of there?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe.” Landon’s mind whirled, testing and discarding possibilities, fueled by the sudden adrenaline Dan’s concern triggered. “The driver’s side window is clear, but the damn things are electric. I can maybe break it open, but what about Bryce? He’s still stuck somehow.”

“Landon,” Dan said.

“No! Don’t you dare! Don’t you even suggest it! I am not leaving my husband trapped in this car to die!”

“Landon, you may not have a choice. There’s maybe still time for

you to try and get Bryce free, but this thing isn't going to stay put much longer, and one of you has got to survive."

Landon stared out the window, watching sunlight paint the far mountains with golden light. He had a chance of sorts, if Bryce's little toy actually worked, but the cost of his life would very likely be his sanity. He simply couldn't live without his husband.

"I'm sorry, Dan, but I can't leave him. You said you don't have anyone, and I'm sorry for that, but maybe you don't understand. Bryce is all the best parts of my life, and without him, there is no point in living."

"Then you'd best find a way to get him free, Landon. I can't hold out for long."

Landon stared down at his husband as he caressed his bloody cheek. Only then did he realize the flashlight had grown too dim to be useful and that the brightening day was what allowed him to see anything at all.

"The sun's coming up," Landon said. "When it gets a little brighter, maybe I can figure out how to get him free."

"Start now. I don't think you've got any time to waste."

As if to confirm Dan's observation, another cascade of dirt and rock tumbled down upon the car. Landon felt it lurch, shudder, and then come to rest again. He looked out the unbroken window and was horrified to see the detritus filling in around the car, rising like an impossibly slow, inexorable tide to bury them completely. The smell of damp earth was sharp in his nostrils as dirt filtered in through the broken rear window.

"Dan? Can you still hear me?" Landon shouted. "Dan?"

Dan's voice was oddly gentle, muffled by the diminished opening, but his words were sharp and commanding. "Get out of there, Landon. Right now! I can't hold on much longer!"

Fresh adrenaline surged through Landon's body, fueled by the sheer terror in Dan's voice. He fell forward and ran his hand along Bryce's leg and into the crumpled foot well until something sharp cut across the back of his hand. A sound like far away thunder rumbled through the car, shaking it like one of those IMAX movie rides he and Bryce had visited. Rain, in the form of earthen debris, poured down from above, and the sound was like hell swallowing them both.

“Hurry, Landon. There’s not much time,” Dan said, his voice sounding more in Landon’s head than from outside his ears, given the rapidly filling back window.

Landon ran his fingers beneath Bryce’s ankle, trying to imagine once again the shapes they described to his frantic mind. Something sharp on top, something long and thin below. Shoe laces, the tongue, and sticky wetness. His hand slipped and landed palm down on the floorboard. Landon heard the unmistakable sound of a splash, and his gorge rose when he drew his hand back and saw bright red, fresh blood dripping from it. Something had pierced Bryce’s foot, pinned it like a bug on one of those awful insect display boards he hated in college, and Bryce had been bleeding all this time. Landon bit back a cry and reached again to untie the laces, frantically drawing at the sticky strings and tugging the flaps open, hoping against hope that whatever had pinned his husband’s foot had not run too deeply into it.

A boulder, big enough to bounce the car on its springs, struck the hood and rolled away, and this time Landon did cry out, yanking Bryce’s foot with the mindless strength born of fear and desperation. There was a tearing sound, clearly audible despite the almost constant hail of dirt from above, and Bryce’s foot came free.

Bryce woke with a shriek that tore through Landon’s heart like a meat cleaver. He sat up, his eyes wide and unseeing, and his arms flew out. Landon pushed himself up and caught one flailing arm, dragging it and the body that informed it closer to the driver’s side seat.

“Bryce! Bryce! Can you hear me?”

Bryce slumped, and his eyes closed. A look of pain lay across his otherwise slack features. Landon fell back, defeated in spirit by whatever he had done to his beloved. “I should have waited, love. I’m so sorry,” he whispered. Resolutely, he dug for and found the little flashlight gadget. He turned it over and over in the growing light, trying to remember how the stupid thing was supposed to work for breaking car windows. He couldn’t remember, couldn’t puzzle it out, and defeat took its toll. Landon’s formidable strength of will collapsed, and he lay back down, hugging Bryce’s limp body as best he could.

“*Landon!*” Dan’s voice was a shout, deep and resonant between his ears, and the sound of it startled Landon to involuntary action. He donkey-kicked the driver’s side window twice, felt it shatter the third

time, and would have wept with relief were it not for the sensation of strong hands grabbing his foot and pulling him through the opening.

Searing bolts of pain ricocheted through Landon's right arm, and he cried out, struggling against the hands that held him.

"Jesus, mister, come on or we're all fucking hamburger!"

"Not without Bryce!"

"Tony's got him, see? Now stop struggling. We have got to get out of here. The whole fucking mountain is coming down on top of us!"

Landon slumped against his rescuer as the man hoisted him backward down the slippery, shifting mountain of dirt and debris. He saw someone dragging Bryce's limp body through the opening, and he cried out at the sound of something immense shifting above them. He looked up and felt the weight of the granite slab as though it were a physical thing beating against his senses, and for a moment he saw what looked like a giant man, young and strong, dressed in khakis and a blue chambray shirt, struggling to hold the granite slab at bay. The image collapsed as the stone finally pitched forward, crushing the vision as easily as it crushed the car beneath it. Shockwaves tore through the shifting debris as the great weight of the slab settled, pitching trees, boulders, and frail human bodies alike down the slope and into the ravine.

LANDON shifted his arm, adjusting the sling around it once again. The damn thing was forever slipping sideways. He sat down at the corner booth of the little diner and motioned to the waitress.

"Hi, Carol. Can I get a cup of coffee to start?"

"Sure thing, honey." Carol, the epitome of a small town waitress, right down to the pinned-on beehive she always wore, filled his cup with rich, brown liquid. "Do you know what you want?"

"No, not yet. This'll do me for now, though I'll want a cup to go after a bit." Landon tore open a packet of sugar and poured it into his cup. He shivered as he watched the steady stream of white crystals being swallowed without a sound. Seemed like everything reminded him of that landslide in one way or another.

“I’ll have it ready when you are,” Carol said. “If you change your mind about anything else, honey, you know where to find me.”

Landon looked up and smiled. “I’ll let you know.”

Carol leaned in, and her sharp, gum-cracking voice softened. “I heard your news. If Tony and those boys hadn’t found you when they did....” She trailed off, and the “what if” hung in the air between them. “You’ve got angels looking out for you, sugar. You know that?”

Landon’s smile faltered. “I guess so.”

Carol patted his arm and turned away. “You need anything else, you just shout.”

“I need Bryce,” Landon muttered softly as he stirred his coffee. He stared out the window, watching the busy life of his small town carry on as though nothing unusual had ever happened. On the other side of the glass, Landon saw a woman help her toddler negotiate the curb of the sidewalk, and he thought about Jacob, the little boy they had agreed to adopt.

“Buy me a cup of that, Mister?”

Startled, Landon turned to see a man in his mid-forties wearing khaki pants and a blue chambray shirt regarding him solemnly.

“Uh, yeah. Sure. I guess.” Landon watched as the man took his seat gingerly, as though he were eighty instead of forty. He motioned for Carol, who came and filled the man’s cup. She eyed the stranger warily until he looked at her. His smile was easy, and she reluctantly smiled in return and walked away.

“Are you okay, mister?”

“Right as rain, Landon,” the man said.

Like tumblers in a lock, it clicked, and Landon cried out. “Danyel?”

“In the flesh, so to speak. I see they got you patched up pretty well. How’s Bryce?”

Landon frowned. “He’s doing okay, all things considering. Aside from the concussion and the swelling in his head, I tore his foot up pretty bad pulling him free.”

“Needs must,” Dan said. “Given the alternative, I’m sure he’s grateful.”

“Yeah. He should be out of the hospital in a few days. I’m headed over there in a while. Figured I’d grab him a cup of real coffee on the way. That hospital stuff’ll kill ya.”

“Then I know he’ll be grateful,” Dan said, and they both laughed.

Dan sipped his coffee and set it aside. “When do you get Jacob?”

“We decided to wait another month until—” Landon broke off, startled. “How do you know about Jacob? We never talked about him, did we?”

Dan grinned. “Small town gossip, maybe. Your rescue was big news. Still is, to some people.”

“You were a big part of that rescue, Dan. You have no idea how much I appreciate the way you stayed like that.” Emotion filled Landon’s face and thickened his words. “I am so glad you’re safe. I hated the idea that you might have been killed just for keeping watch over us.”

“No sweat, buddy. I’m made of sterner stuff than that,” Dan said, but his eyes also filled, and he reached out his hand. “I’m glad you made it.”

In his haste to shake Dan’s hand, Landon knocked his coffee cup. Dark sable liquid spread out across the table, and Dan laughed as he snatched up a handful of napkins to stem the tide.

“Do you meet all your boys by spilling coffee on them?”

“My God, it really *is* you!” Landon laughed like a child, gleefully and without hesitation, and felt a shadow lift from his heart. “I can’t believe it. I asked around and none of the rescue team saw anyone but me and Bryce. No one believed me when I told them about you.”

“You saw me, though. And you believed in me, which is really all that matters.” Dan sipped his coffee and smiled. “You kept your promise, too, didn’t you?” He lifted his cup and grinned.

“One of them, anyway,” Landon replied. “But I didn’t see you anywhere, and I looked. As much as they’d let me,” he added.

“Sure you did. Right at the end. I felt your regard.”

Landon started as realization dawned. “No. It can’t be. That was just my imagination.”

“Was it?” Dan smiled. “Imagination is one of humanity’s greatest gifts, Landon. Surely you know that already.”

“But...” Landon faltered. “The man in my vision was young and strong.”

Dan shrugged. “Hey, it takes a lot out of a guy to hold up an entire mountain.” He ran his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair and smiled. “Sooner or later, something has to give.”

“But...”

“Is something you sit on. Did you honestly think we all danced on the head of a pin or sat around on clouds singing?”

Landon scowled. “So what are you saying? That you’re my guardian angel?”

Danyel laughed, and the sound, deep and rich and full of promise, ran through Landon like liquid sunshine once again.

“No, buddy. I’m not *your* guardian angel. I belong to your little boy, Jacob.”

Born during one of the worst fires in L.A. history, PATRIC MICHAEL escaped to the foothills of the Cascade Range where the world is a lot more green, even in summer. His wide-ranging and varied career, from ship building to making special effects movie props, has given him enough material for a lifetime of stories. He constantly reinvents himself with each new thing he creates. Now, it is as a writer of what he loves to read, but only when he can convince the cat that his keyboard isn't the only place in the house to sleep.

Visit Patric's web site at <http://www.patricmichael.com> and his blog at <http://blogs.patricmichael.com>.

SOME COMFORT

S. Blaise

IT WAS a beautiful, heartwarming scene. Rows of angels hovered over the ice rink, their wings spread and hands clasped devoutly, shimmering in multitudes of changing colors that shifted into each other with gentle ease, casting their glow on the skaters beneath. It could have been a painting straight from a Christmas card, and standing above the indoor ice rink, Dale felt he was viewing it as a picture, as though he were apart from the scene rather than immersed in it. It all felt so jarringly false to him, from the perfect oval-shaped ice rink being scored by sharp steel below to the electrically lit wires twisted into such pleasing shapes above. Rather than a heavenly chorus to accompany the scene, pop music blared from unseen speakers, echoing in a tinny way off the walls. He stared up at the decorations again with a frown. Where were the angels of destruction and death, with swords of fire and raging wings? People often forgot about those. But he would prefer them to these ineffectual creations of false light suspended above him on cables.

He shivered, pulling his arms closer to his body as he leaned against the railing. Going from desert heat to winter cold had only added to the feeling of unreality that seemed to be his constant companion recently. He tried to remember the blazing warmth of the sun, hoping it would somehow assist his meager body heat, held in by a thin nylon jacket and slightly thicker sweatshirt, keeping him from freezing. He remembered instead Mal's face staring down at him, the sun at his back. Gilded by the light, he'd seemed to glow radiantly, compassionate eyes fixed on Dale, who lay in the dirt, feeling like some lowly, earth-bound creature. There had been a missile attack on their base, and Mal had shoved him out of the way of a collapsing wall just in time. Dale knew Mal had saved his life. But when he'd tried to stutter his inadequate-sounding thanks, Mal had brushed it off, simply saying, "Someone has to

keep an eye on you. Figured I'd apply for the job."

He'd grinned, helped Dale up, and they'd both been kept too busy afterward to talk much further apart from a snatched hello here and there. But ever since then, he was sure he'd felt Mal's eyes on him. And if he turned to look in the other man's direction, there was always a friendly, reassuring smile ready for him. It made Dale feel that, even amidst the chaos and disaster, there was perhaps the slightest glimmer of hope.

He heard someone settle against the rail next to him and glanced over reflexively, recognizing the other in an instant. Dark hair, cropped close like his but that looked like it would grow out curly if given half the chance. They were roughly the same height and build, although Dale was slightly leaner. Mal's face had laughing eyes and an easy smile, although now it held a look of relaxed contemplation.

"What are you doing here?" Dale couldn't help asking.

"I could ask you the same thing," Mal returned easily, his eyes still sweeping the skaters below them.

Dale shrugged, taking a moment to answer. "Thinking about angels."

Mal turned to face him then, leaning on one arm with a grin. "Oh? You think about angels a lot? Or is it the time of year that brought this on?"

Dale shrugged again. "I don't know. It's not like I buy into the whole 'angel' belief really. It's only another thing people use to keep them from realizing just how shit life really is."

"Hmm," Mal replied noncommittally. "You didn't always think that way, though."

Dale's eyebrows rose. "No, I suppose not," he recalled. "We were never a religious family, but I remember in my bedroom there'd been this picture of an angel, an old painting I think had been my gran's. I'd always liked lying on my bed looking at it. Whenever I was upset or scared, it always calmed me down."

The angel had been wearing the typical loose-fitting white robe, with long, wavy hair flowing down. Dale couldn't remember now what she had been looking at in the painting, but he would always remember the expression on her face: one of sweet, benevolent serenity. He'd often felt she was looking at him, as if telling him everything would be all

right. He tried to describe the picture to Mal, holding back his feelings about it.

“Are you sure it was a female angel in that picture?” Mal asked him. “Angels are supposed to be sexless, you know.”

“Poor bastards.” Mal’s warm, delighted laugh washed over him, urging his own lips to turn up in a weak smile. “I’m probably going to Hell for saying that, aren’t I?”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it. You’re only human; you’re allowed to make a joke or two. So what happened to that picture?”

“I don’t know. I took it down when I hit my hormonal teenage years. It probably got thrown out or given to charity ages ago.”

“A shame.”

Dale shrugged once more. It wasn’t like he had any use for it now. Funny, the things you remembered from childhood. “What are you doing here, Mal?” he asked again, realizing the other man had never answered his question.

Mal gave him a relaxed smile. “It’s a big city. Maybe I felt like exploring it a little and happened to bump into you.”

Dale stared suspiciously. It *was* a big city—so the chances of them “bumping into” each other were even more remote. He didn’t think Mal was a local; in fact, he didn’t know much at all about the other man, who never seemed to talk much about himself. “Don’t you have family to go home to?”

“Don’t you?” Mal countered.

Dale shifted his feet, glancing away. “I don’t—I *do*, but—” He sighed.

Mal nodded. “Have you ever done it?” he asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Ice skating. You ever done it?”

Dale dumbly shook his head and found himself being tugged along to the rink below a moment later. Mal fetched skates for both of them and sat Dale down on a bench, kneeling before him to put the skates on his feet and do up the laces. Dale stared down at the head bent before him, knots beginning to form in his stomach, but whether they were from excitement or nerves, he couldn’t tell. Mal helped him clomp his way

over to the ice and step down onto it, where he promptly clutched the edge of the rink's wall as his feet started to flounder on this weird, slippery new surface.

Mal skated away, gliding easily over the ice as though born to it, while Dale shuffled along the perimeter, never releasing his death grip on the wall's edge. He wondered what in God's name had possessed someone back in antiquity to strap blades to their feet, move out onto the slick deathtrap of a frozen lake or river, and actually think, "Hey, this is fun!" Mal coasted back to him, a grin on his face, coming to an effortless stop before Dale, who simply stared at him with a disgruntled expression.

"It's easy," Mal coaxed, holding out a hand. "Come on."

With reluctance, Dale placed his cold, reddened hand in Mal's gloved one, allowing the other man to pull him away from the comforting safety of the edge. Other, more confident skaters zipped and dodged around them as Mal guided him a foot or so towards the center, steady as a rock compared to Dale's own flailing attempts to keep from falling, his death grip now transferred to Mal's forearms.

Dale panted as his feet tried to jack-knife in opposite directions yet again, too busy trying to stop them to pay much attention to Mal's patient instructions. He definitely preferred ice when it was small, cubed, and in a drink; if the drink was alcoholic, so much the better. He grabbed for Mal again and was pulled close to help keep his balance. Mal just had to make it look so easy. Dale wished he'd never gone along with the silly idea, but he couldn't really remember protesting. Mal continued treating his frustration with calm tolerance.

"What are you doing here, Mal?" he asked, feeling irrationally annoyed.

A corner of Mal's mouth crooked. "Trying to teach you to ice skate." Dale continued to stare at him in a silent demand for a proper answer, his eyebrows furrowing. Mal sighed. "I told you, didn't I? Someone has to keep an eye on you."

Dale frowned. It still wasn't really an answer. He wasn't sure what to make of it, really, but he decided to drop the subject. Mal was there with him, for whatever reason. If Mal had braved the cold and snow just to find him, he wouldn't complain. He couldn't help feeling a warm tingling in the pit of his stomach at the thought. He glanced at Mal

looking back at him and had a brief moment where he thought they were about to kiss. But then a group of giggling girls stumbled and fell close by, Mal shifted them both to avoid a collision, and the moment was broken.

They were standing under one of the suspended angels, Dale noticed as he looked up rather than at Mal again. Looking at it from beneath, it was harder to tell exactly what it was supposed to be. It simply looked like a tangle of wires and lights. Dale brought his gaze back down to Mal. The multi-colored hues the lights bathed them in gave him an ethereal glow, making everything look warm yet mysterious. The ice reflecting the colors glittered and shone like a precious stone, and he could see the faces of the skaters around them, friends and families, smiling and having a good time even if they weren't the best at the sport. And he was practically in the middle of it, his and Mal's arms around each other.

Mal started to move again, skating backward and widening the distance between them until their arms were stretched out, their hands the only thing linking them. And then Mal let go.

Dale slid along for a moment, trying not to move in case he upset his tenuous balance. But then it was as if his body wanted to go one way and his feet another. He shifted, his arms windmilling as he fought for control. His feet gave up, sliding out from under him, and he prepared himself for a hard greeting with the ice but found himself colliding with a firm chest instead, strong arms supporting him. Mal helped him stand up again, holding onto him with a smile.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't ever let you fall."

Dale kept a tight grip on him, and not just because he was afraid of falling. "I don't think ice skating is for me," he remarked dryly.

Mal laughed, holding him close in a comfortable grip. "At least you tried it. It just takes practice, and sometimes it can be good to try new things, take a chance, as long as you've got someone to help you back up again if you slip. But come on. It's too cold to stay out here for long. Let's get warmed up."

Their faces were close. Dale could feel Mal's breath puffing against his face, warm compared to the chill air. It was another almost-kiss moment, and Dale was trying to decide whether to close the distance between them when they reached the edge of the rink. Mal helped him

step onto the rubber matting and sat him down on a bench, kneeling again to take off his skates. Dale resisted the urge to run his fingers through the short, soft spikes before him. Mal soon returned with their shoes, and Dale followed him to the coffee shop in the food court above.

“It’s not too late. You could go spend some time with your family,” Mal commented once they were seated.

Dale remained silent, staring into the coffee cup his hands were melded around as though it could answer for him. “I don’t—it feels strange, seeing them. As though we don’t know how to act towards each other, like I’m different, or they are. I can’t explain it.”

Mal nodded. “It’s okay. But shutting yourself off from them won’t help either.”

“I know,” Dale sighed. “It’s... difficult.”

“You want me to come with you?” Mal asked quietly.

“What about your family? Won’t they miss you?”

Mal shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll think about it,” Dale said hesitantly. “Just not tonight.”

“Okay. What do you want to do tonight?”

Dale shrugged. “I don’t know.” He didn’t want to be alone. He knew that much. If he could spend more time with Mal, just the two of them, he would be happy. He didn’t think he could say that, though.

But Mal seemed to sense his thoughts without him saying anything. “I don’t have any plans. You don’t mind keeping me company a bit longer, do you?”

They ended up at a small hotel with a dingy exterior but which seemed clean enough once they got inside. Mal insisted he take a shower to warm up and took one himself afterward. They squeezed onto one of the twin beds together, leaning against the headboard and stretching out their legs, eating takeout while watching old sitcoms. Dale felt something inside of him ease, relaxing more than he had in a long time with Mal’s comfortable presence beside him.

Warmth surrounding him and his stomach pleasantly full, Dale felt his eyelids going heavy, his mind drifting. Mal eased an arm around his shoulders, pulling him against a broad chest. His cheek rested against slightly scratchy terrycloth, the heat from Mal’s body seeping through.

He yawned and settled into a more comfortable position, Mal taking his weight without complaint, and Dale allowed himself to indulge in his drowsy state.

“Why me, Mal?” he murmured, voicing the question that had been bothering him for a while. “You saved my life. You say you’re ‘keeping an eye on’ me, but why? I’m nothing special, just a member of the medical team. I’m not exactly an angel,” he finished derisively.

Mal’s chest vibrated as he chuckled. “No, you’re not an angel. You are a man, but you don’t seem to realize how amazing that is in itself. No one is ever ‘just’ something. You care for people. You help heal them when others are out there killing each other. You might not think you do much now, but maybe in the future, things will change. Perhaps you’ll continue to heal others, working in a hospital, and inspire those you heal to heal others, teach them about the horrors of war and what it can do to people. And perhaps those people will help others realize, until humans learn to resolve conflicts in more peaceful ways.”

Dale frowned, not sure what to think. Mal didn’t sound like he was merely hypothesizing. He sounded like he knew what he was talking about. “I’m really going to do all that?” he asked skeptically.

“Oh, not all of it,” Mal told him with a light-hearted smile. “A lot of it would take many generations to happen. But you could definitely set the ball rolling, don’t you think? All it takes is a little faith.”

“In what? Miracles?” Dale snorted.

Mal smiled. “Let’s start with some faith in you. You can leave the miracles up to me.”

Dale settled down again, though he wasn’t sure what to think about that statement. “And what about you, Mal? Where will you be for all this?” he asked, hating the uncertainty in his voice.

Mal grasped his chin gently, placing a kiss on his forehead, lips, and then both cheeks. The kisses were light and chaste but so tender that Dale felt tears pricking his eyes. Mal was smiling at him, but the look in his eyes was intense. “I’ll be by your side,” he said. “I’ll always be by your side. You don’t have to worry about that.”

Dale sighed as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He didn’t know much about Mal, couldn’t even recall his last name at that moment, though he was sure he must have heard it being yelled by a

superior at some point. He vaguely remembered hearing somewhere that his first name was actually Malachi, and that was about it. But he had never felt so secure, so relaxed, and happy in anyone else's presence before. If Mal said he would inspire future generations to put an end to war, he would believe it and do what he could to help make it happen. He shifted again, closing his eyes as the drowsiness began to engulf him.

Mal stroked Dale's hair fondly, his softly whispered words going unheard as Dale lay peacefully sleeping. "I will be by your side, I promise, Dale. As I always have been, even if you didn't realize it. I will continue to watch over you and protect you. I just wish I knew how to stop myself from falling in love with you."

Mal kissed Dale's forehead again, making sure to keep his eyes and anything else from straying below the spread wings of Dale's collarbones, revealed by the garment that had loosened while he slept. Mal knew that continuing to want what he could never have would only lead to his downfall. He had strained enough rules to the breaking point already. But for now, when it was just the two of them and the night outside, he could indulge himself a little, even with full knowledge of where giving in to temptation would lead. He would be there for Dale as long as the other man needed him, to protect him, to shelter him, and to chase away the darkness that threatened to cloud his soul. Not because of the future or Dale's role in it, but for Dale. And although he would never—could never—admit it, for himself as well.

S. BLAISE has loved reading and creating stories for as long as she can remember, but first got into the “male romance” genre through fan fiction. She found slash and yaoi quite by accident (honest!) and began voraciously reading stories online in many fandoms, finally getting up the courage to have a go at writing some fan fics herself before shifting to original fiction. She has lived on both sides of the Atlantic and so can write about Caribbean summers as easily as Scottish winters, since she has experienced both.

She loves sci-fi/fantasy, murder mysteries, comic books, anime, and yaoi manga, which she spends far too much money on while still having so much more to get. She’s a creature of nocturnal habits but really wishes story ideas would stop jumping around in her mind at three in the morning when she is finally trying to sleep.

Visit her blog at <http://sblaise-08.livejournal.com>.

ASCENSION

RJ Scott

FROM the half-world, Sabrael watched them all. For hundreds of years he had walked amongst them, wondering when he would find the reason he needed to ascend, to become mortal. His Father was patient; he had told Sabrael that one day he would find the reason to move on. One day something would make him ready to leave his heavenly home as an angel and become what his Father knew to be essential for him: mortal.

Sabrael, like all angels, had been given a charge, a family to guard and protect. For all of the long years granted to that family, Sabrael honored his charge faithfully and grew stronger and wiser as he watched and protected. It was his Father's plan for each of his angels to have a chance at a mortal life itself, to live amongst mortals as one of them, to share in the beauty and pure emotion of love. It was a gospel that each angel learned.

There remained one step for him to take, an act of supreme love, courage, and trust. He needed to become human, to experience the fullness of human emotions, of human life. And death. Trusting his fate to God and putting his life into another human's hands, and, in turn, accepting from that human his trust and love, Sabrael would ascend, climbing the one last step before he rejoined his Father.

IT was times like this morning, when snow blanketed the grays and blacks of the city, casting a beauty over ruin, that Sabrael wished to see the mortals, and he was filled with the need to touch, to walk, and taste the ice in the air. Today he would visit the family that he had sheltered and guided for so many years, his assigned children, the ones for whom he willingly served as guardian. It was with that thought in mind that he

left the half-world and approached the shop at the end of the winter-iced road, pushing open the door. The jingling tone of a silver bell announced his arrival in echoing emptiness. Something wasn't right; instead of racks of old, used, and much-loved second hand books vying for space with the latest novels, there was nothing, just rows of empty shelves. Boxes littered the floor, some marked with detailed addresses, two standing near the back wall marked with the simple word *Goodwill*. No one looked up to greet his arrival; the last of this family, the man that Sabrael had seen christened as Adam James Riley twenty-five years before, was absent from his spot behind the scuffed oak counter of his family's bookstore.

"Hello?" Sabrael called into the silent store, the large empty space devoid of what had given it purpose and life. Dust populated it now, the boxes of books and the empty shelves the only remaining witnesses to what it used to be. He listened for a reply and received none. He crouched down and picked up one of the books, a much-thumbed hardback copy of *Marley and Me*, from the left-hand Goodwill box. Just by touching it he could sense the people who had read each word, the images like a movie in his head. He stood in a smooth movement, the book still in his hand, and the book's memories of happiness and laughter crossed his thoughts. He didn't know what had happened here, but he needed to find his mortal.

"You can have that." A voice came from the back of the shop, and Sabrael turned to locate its owner, wondering how a mortal had managed to see him when Sabrael hadn't even sensed he was there. He looked down at the book in his hands, the last of the readers' reactions making his eyes tear. He was always stunned at the range of emotions the written word could conjure up in people's minds.

"Thank you," he responded simply. "How much do you want for it?"

The owner of the voice that had suggested he keep the book moved into the light flooding in through the lettered glass storefront. Sabrael blinked at the man with the deep voice—he was tall, so very tall, his chestnut hair worn short and neat, his eyes the hazel of fall greens and browns, and his body a trim build. "Seriously, take what you want, maybe donate something to charity, if you want to," Adam James Riley said simply. "It's all got to go." His voice hovered on the edge of sadness, full of emotions that Sabrael hadn't seen in this boy before:

anger, distrust, and a choking fear of the future. The last leaked into his words, no matter how hard he tried to hide it.

“Tell me?” Sabrael asked gently, losing his ability to form a full sentence as the man stopped in front of him and the sadness inside of Adam came, overwhelming, through Sabrael’s link to him.

“Tell you?” At first, Adam seemed confused, but immediately he snapped into comprehension. “Oh. The shop, you mean.” He waved his hand at the empty interior. “Usual story, I guess. We just can’t compete anymore, with web site sellers and the book superstores, so we decided to shut down. Cut our losses while we could.” Sabrael listened carefully to what Adam *wasn’t* saying and the use of the word *we*, when he knew there was no *we*. Adam was the last of his family, the last child of the original mortal Sabrael had been tasked to watch. The word said much.

“That is sad,” Sabrael said softly, wondering just what to say next. “I love this shop... the books in it. I have always loved it, the peace of it.”

“I don’t remember you visiting before,” Adam said. Sabrael sensed the absolute certainty in his mortal’s thoughts that he would have remembered Sabrael.

“It was a long time ago,” Sabrael responded. “I met your father,” he added gently. Again, Sabrael both saw and sensed sadness washing over Adam, grief so sudden and so cutting it stopped his breath. He knew he had to say something. It was what mortals did; it was usual to acknowledge other people’s pain in some way. “I was sorry to hear....” His voice trailed off. He knew what he should say in situations like this, where mortals grieved at the loss of a parent or a child, a loved one who was gone from them. He couldn’t bring himself to offer the usual platitudes, wanting only to say what he knew to be the truth: *he is with his God*. But he couldn’t; he wasn’t sure how Adam would take Sabrael’s quiet acceptance of this knowledge. Adam just nodded at the unspoken apology and bent to pick up the Goodwill boxes, juggling the different weights, smiling his thanks as the tall stranger took the second box from him.

“Goodwill is a few shops down,” Adam said, assuming his visitor was offering to assist, and Sabrael followed him to the door. There were no other words, the slap of cold ice hard on their faces as they left the small shop. After a short, silent trek, they dropped the boxes at the Goodwill storefront, exchanging pleasantries with the volunteer who

looked pathetically grateful for the donations, and then retraced their steps back to The Book Corner. As they hesitated at the door, Sabrael noticed the sign painted in red on a white sheet of paper—"Closing down"—and he felt something turn in his chest. He had visited The Book Corner since it had opened, since Adam's great-great-grandfather had taken his army severance and started the small shop. He had created it as a haven for those who wanted to meet and discuss books, drink bitter coffee, and pass the time of day in frock coats and long dresses. Now, though, it was the end of things here. Adam knew that, Sabrael knew that, but both men knew for different reasons.

For Sabrael, it was the knowledge that every family had its place in time and that the time for this family was reaching an end. He couldn't see what was to happen next; his Father had not bestowed such a gift of future sight upon him. Yet he sensed he was here for a reason, for this man... to help Adam somehow. For Adam, it was losing the will to fight anymore, losing his father, his mother long since dead. He had no siblings, and now the store, with its small world of fellow readers, patrons who had become a circle of friends, was gone too. Adam truly saw no reason to fight anymore.

"You knew my dad?" Adam finally said as they hovered inside the shop. "Knew that we lost him last Christmas?" Adam paused, waiting for the usual pleasantries, but there were none from this man who filled the empty shop with his quiet presence. Adam coughed to cover the odd silence, feeling suddenly worried as to why this man was still standing here with his face carefully blank of emotion. What did he want? His hair was the black of ebony, his eyes the brightest blue Adam had ever seen. He was striking, and a spur of want poked insistently at Adam's subconscious. It had been a long time since he had felt anything for another man—since he had found his ex with the next-door neighbor the day of his dad's funeral, and that had been fifteen months long past.

"I was planning on coffee," the man said, holding out his hand. "Sabrael," he offered, and Adam took the hand, his grip strong, certain, his gaze assessing. Sabrael knew his was a strange name, and he often used the name Sam to eliminate the need for explanations. Yet, and Sabrael knew it as clearly as he knew his Father's face, not sharing his true name with Adam would have been a disservice to him. Adam said nothing, merely thought the name in his head: *Sab-ray-all*.

"Adam," he finally offered, dropping his grip and waiting

expectantly. If this guy was trying to hit on him, he surely seemed a bit rusty as to how to go about it, because talking would help to carry the conversation further. He waited a good thirty seconds and then sighed. If they were to have coffee, he was going to have to push through his general misery to get it. “How about going to The Perk?” he offered, wondering if this Sabrael guy just wanted to reminisce about Adam’s dad or if maybe he was just trying to be a friend.

Adam’s ability to read the sexuality of others had taken a serious swing south recently. He felt sometimes as if he was in a cocoon of a world, one where grief and the overwhelming, life-changing decisions he had to make changed everything to inky black. He didn’t wait for an answer, just moved to the door, opening it, and stopped. He looked back at Sabrael expectantly. Light from the windows cast a luminous shimmer about the stranger. Sabrael’s blue eyes focused on Adam, looking back at him, intense and thoughtful.

“Coffee,” Sabrael finally agreed, and he moved past Adam, waiting patiently, relaxed, for *his* mortal to lock the door. The Perk wasn’t a known name, not one that Sabrael recognized anyway, not a Costa Coffee or a Starbucks, but it was another space very much like The Book Corner: old, established, a warm, inviting room of sofas and low chatter. As quickly as they ordered, they were served, and they found a small table in the far corner, where they sat, their backs to the door.

Sabrael concentrated on his character, on how he needed to be for Adam—comforting, supportive, and aware. They passed the time of day together for the twenty or so minutes it took to drink the coffee, exchanging little more than pleasantries and one or two memories of Adam’s father, of the bookshop he had taken so much pride in.

“It was nice to talk,” Adam said as they stood to leave, and suddenly Sabrael was unaccountably confused. He didn’t want to stop talking, and that reaction wasn’t right. Sabrael’s responsibilities included checking in, watching, and taking care to know how his mortal was doing, not unexpectedly and completely wanting a quick meeting to be more than that, to last longer.

“Yes,” Sabrael answered. “It would be nice to do it again.”

Adam frowned at the soft words and the speed with which he almost said *Let’s drink another cup*. His overactive imagination was surely responsible for suddenly reading much more than Sabrael actually meant into those simple words.

“Again... would be good.” He was probably misreading this situation. How likely was it that this guy, this gorgeous, strong, sensitive guy, was actually anything other than straight? He was losing the business after so many generations of Rileys had kept it prosperous and sound. He had no family left to speak of, no partner or children to brag about. It was a cold and sometimes very empty life; things couldn’t really get any worse. What could be worse than getting the wrong end of the stick with tall, dark, and sexy? He could stand a little embarrassment. “Maybe... more coffee... or dinner?” His voice rose at the end. He didn’t realize it, but he was giving away his hope in those few syllables.

Sabrael nodded. He needed to think on this, but his usual manner of standing back, of not knowing it all... it wasn’t working. He wanted to talk to *his* mortal more. There was a connection there that he... desired to extend. They left the coffee shop together, stopping outside, neither knowing what to say. Finally, it was Adam who stopped dithering and made the first move.

“If there are other books you would like to take, you are welcome to come back with me to check. The buyers won’t notice one or two missing; they’re doing a lot buy.” Adam looked almost nervous as he asked, and Sabrael understood his nerves, could see the indecision in *his* mortal, the attraction that twisted inside Adam for the stranger who had arrived at his bookshop. It was equally unnerving for Sabrael to feel indecisive—a new and strange feeling in him. Indecision was not in his makeup. Angels were confident, had purpose, yet there was something here, something beyond words and handshakes. There was some kind of connection that Sabrael had never felt before, and it redefined the very purpose of him being here.

They walked back to the shop, the door closing behind them, shutting out the snow and the cold. Both of them removed jackets, crouching down to rummage through boxes, exchanging opinions on books. It wasn’t as if Sabrael had read any of them, but when he touched each one, he could see into Adam’s thoughts, enough to make sensible conversation. The other angels would laugh at him, at his tongue-tied attempt to make small talk with this mortal, and he knew he would have to face them when Heaven opened to take him back. He wanted to stay and talk. He needed to understand why he was suddenly so clumsy with words, why he felt for and identified with Adam.

All Adam needed was affection, kindness, a single touch that

wasn't about soothing grief or solving problems, and that soon became Sabrael's focus. When Adam stood and stretched tall, reaching his fingers toward the ceiling, the shirt he was wearing rode up slightly to expose an inch of warm skin, and it was all Sabrael could do to curb his sudden incredibly earthly desire to touch *his* mortal. Adam tensed at the look in Sabrael's blue eyes, his own body reacting to the heat in them, and suddenly Adam didn't know what else to do other than to touch.

They met in the middle, a simple contact of fingers, a question on Adam's lips that he never actually formed into words as his breath was stolen by the gentle stroke of Sabrael's mouth on his. There was nothing more to the kiss than the connection of fingers and lips, but it was the most intense kiss that Adam had ever experienced. For his part, when they separated, Sabrael's eyes were half closed, a look of naked need painted across his face, and it stole Adam's breath to see the beauty there. The kiss turned to a second and then a third, until Adam leaned back against the wall and pulled Sabrael with him, Sabrael resting in between Adam's spread legs and deepening the kiss. It was like ambrosia—tasting, touching, whispering words of hope and want to each other and exchanging breath and body heat in the darkening shop. Adam adjusted slightly, hard and aching in his jeans, needing the touch of Sabrael against him and groaning deep in his throat as Sabrael brushed against him, slotting next to him. Sabrael was just as hard, just as desperate, the kiss becoming more frantic, his hands gripping at Adam's hips. Adam rested his head back, arching his neck as Sabrael kiss-bit a trail of pleasure-pain down his neck to the pulse at the base of his throat, feeling the flutter of life against his lips.

Was it that? Was it the gentle reminder of this mortal in his hands that recalled Sabrael to what he was? Or was it that somehow, at the back of his mind, he knew he needed to decide much bigger things than slaking his thirst for *his* mortal before this could go any further? He pulled back, his breathing unsteady, Adam moving his head to chase the kiss, beginning to mark his own pattern of kisses on Sabrael. In turn, the angel could feel them, soft, insistent, warm against his skin, and he turned his head, closing his eyes, lips only millimeters from Adam's, breathing in the scent of need and the essence that was Adam himself.

The kisses changed subtly, a small bite, a marking suck, a gentle taste, each one punctuated with a word of need and desire. Sabrael moved his hands, lifting them to frame Adam's face, eyes opening

briefly to look into Adam's hazel green gaze, then closing at the weight of desire in those eyes. There was a connection there that Sabrael couldn't begin to understand as he was now, and it was frustrating to have to pull back.

"Dinner?" he asked softly, and with a kiss, Adam agreed to cooling it down and moving on to dinner.

Dinner was nice—more than nice. They arranged to continue their conversation at seven, after Adam had finished what he needed to do at the store. They met at a restaurant that served food Sabrael remembered from his time in Italy—low lights, peace, and tastes that were ecstasy on his tongue. He had chosen a suit for the evening, dark, tailored, his shirt a pale blue, the top button open at his throat. He had made his hair slightly longer this time, loving the feel of it in his hands, and his eyes, without any design, seemed bluer than the mirror of the glass walls in the restaurant. There was a light inside him tonight, and he wondered at it, even as he sat opposite Adam and listened to *his* mortal talk.

"...and then it was just too much. The bank wanted the next installment, and I could make that one, but with Christmas being so quiet...." Adam paused, sighing at memories of his quiet Christmas and picking up his glass of water. "I knew there was no point in carrying on... of flogging a dead horse, you know?" Sabrael nodded his agreement. He had seen into Adam's heart, and it unnerved him to see the desperation in there, the struggle to make this decision.

"What are you planning to do now?" Sabrael asked. Unspoken were the words *with your freedom*. Adam didn't answer—he had no answer, and he had no idea what he wanted—that is, apart from the itch to have the man sitting opposite him. They finished the meal, the expectation in Adam growing stronger at each word they exchanged, at each mouthful of the sinful chocolate dessert, and at each smile that Sabrael gave him. Sabrael hadn't actually said anything, but Adam had given out so many signals, from gentle flirting to all-out touching, and if anything was going to happen, the ball was in Sabrael's court.

Sabrael made an excuse to leave the table, walking out and past the bathroom to the cold evening, his thoughts in so much turmoil he didn't even know how to explain what he felt. It was written that every angel had one mortal family to trace, one special family, one special person, and that when the angel's work was done, when that family was no more, then the guardian angel would ascend to become mortal. In God's

image. He couldn't understand what his job was here. Adam was the last of his family, Sabrael's last charge. All he needed to do was guide the man to his own destiny, whatever that was, to the final day of his natural life. Then he could be at peace. It would be in the blink of an eye, Heaven's time was so different to that of Earth. In fact, tonight could be the very end of it, the single day that Adam needed to be guided onto the right path. Sabrael's work would be done, finished, fulfilled.

The light that gathered around him couldn't be seen by anyone else, not even a shimmer or a movement, and he felt the familiar itch on his shoulder blades as his wings moved subtly under the jacket. He shrugged off the material, pulling at his shirt, thankful for the dark that sheltered him from mortal eyes. When night air touched his heated skin, he stretched to the sky, wings unfurling to span behind him, and the tension of the meal dissipated simply with the reassuring touch of his feathers curling around him. Adam could never see this, could never understand what Sabrael was, what choice he must make tonight. He lifted his face to the heavens. "I have made my decision, Father," he offered simply, feeling the question in the soundless reply. "I want to ascend. I choose to stay. It is my time." He felt his Father's grace surround him, and, stretching again, his back felt lighter, different, as a single white feather swirled to the ground beside him.

Picking it up, he smiled heavenward, knowing his mortal self would see his Father again; then he pocketed it as a reminder, wondering if his memories of his time before ascension would stay with him. He slipped back into the seat opposite the mortal he was ascending to be with, seeing the warmth in those hazel eyes, sure he had made the right decision, feeling it in the core of him.

"Would you like to come back to my place?" Adam asked shyly, quietly, knowing what he was asking. Sabrael didn't answer at first, and then he nodded. His destiny both ended and began with Adam.

In silence, they returned to Adam's small apartment and walked straight through to the bedroom, not stopping for words or drinks or anything unnecessary. For Adam, it was because he was so damned turned on, and, one-night-stand or not, the man who made him smile was his tonight. For Sabrael, it was the single moment that would define the human portion of his existence.

They kissed and touched and finally moved to lie on the cool white sheets. "Take my hands," Sabrael asked softly, and Adam did as he was

asked, his face inches from this man who made his heart beat faster. His eyes widened as Sabrael pulled his own hands, with Adam's fingers interlaced, above their heads, exposing his neck and putting Adam firmly in control. In seconds, Adam was harder than he had ever been, pushing insistently against Sabrael, who seemed to be waiting for what he was supposed to do next. Adam's gaze wandered down the warm skin and to the graceful stretched neck laid out under him... under him....

"Adam?" Sabrael prompted, moving his arousal as much as could, pressed by Adam's weight into the bed beneath him and listening as Adam simply groaned and dropped his head to slot into Sabrael's neck.

"I want to..." Adam almost whimpered into Sabrael's skin, blown away that this man was laid out under him, in his strong grip, offering himself up. Adam's control finally snapped, and he dragged his lips and teeth over neck and pulse, kissing up to soft, pouting lips and seeing blue eyes blown wide in sudden lust. The kiss was explosive, clashing, needy, hard, and Adam unconsciously tightened his grip on Sabrael's hands, pressing him harder, a rhythm as old as time between them. The sounds they made, sounds of need and want, were prayers cut off by deep kisses and promises. They rutted like teenagers, Sabrael holding back, letting Adam guide, lead, take them high, and he knew he had never felt anything like this. Never had a man touched him as Adam did, taken him down this path, and it was so different. Real. Tantalizing.

Orgasm curled in his spine, and the need to move, to tell Adam, was building in his head. "I can't... Adam... please." Adam kissed away the words, tasting Sabrael, cutting off his breathy moans with sounds of his own, gasping his release. Sabrael followed shortly after, collapsed sweaty and wet against his new lover. He had never... never felt....

They said nothing, Adam releasing Sabrael's hands, aware of what the other man had done, half falling in love in the space of seconds and having no words to tell Sabrael what he felt. Sabrael himself tried to breathe, tried to make sense of what had just happened. His eyes widened as he understood that there were some things he would never, nor should ever be able to make sense of. It was the first time he had ever had someone hold him down and taken their fill of him.

Adam was his first.

Would be his last.

RJ SCOTT is a web site designer living just outside London who longs for the day when writing can take over her business full time. She has been writing since age six, when she was made to stay in at lunchtime for an infraction involving cookies and was told to write a story. Two sides of A4 about a trapped princess later, a lover of writing was born. She loves reading anything from thrillers to sci-fi to horror; however, her first real love will always be the world of romance. Her goal is to write stories with a heart of romance, a troubled road to reach happiness, and more than a hint of happily ever after.

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SARIEL

Mary Calmes

I

OUT of the blue, I had been asked to go. Desmond Pierce, the Director of Antiquities, invited everyone, but as I was the most recent addition to the exhibition department, it came as a surprise to be included. The entire experience seemed like a dream, first the thrill of being chosen for the position, assistant to the exhibition designer, and second, being invited to travel to Italy along with the rest of the museum staff. Dr. Pierce, the man responsible for giving me my job, owned a villa in Gubbio, Italy, and he had extended an invitation to everyone who worked in his department to visit his home after we attended the unveiling of his family's donation to the *Piazza Museo Nazionale*. I felt honored at being asked to accompany my colleagues, but I had declined the gracious overture. I couldn't afford the plane fare and I didn't even have a passport. Being the son of hippies who owned a health food store in Petaluma, California made me the opposite of worldly. There was no way I was going first to Naples and then on to Gubbio.

My new boss, the exhibition designer, Amanda Bennett, was insistent that I go. She said that Dr. Pierce especially wanted all the new hires to attend. She got my passport application expedited and my ticket paid for by an anonymous benefactor. When I thanked her, she was embarrassed, told me it was all Dr. Pierce's doing and none of her own, and told me to get out of her office and have a good time, since I would be working night and day when I got back. She herself had declined the invitation, not wanting to be away from her family. As I boarded the plane in Chicago, I could not remember ever being more excited. It wasn't until we landed in Rome that I started to have a bad feeling.

I had been excited to make the trip, happy to be included, and, being an art major, I had wanted to see the *Gabinetto Segreto*, the Secret Gallery, in the museum desperately. But when I was told that there was a change, that we would be going to Gubbio first and it would be just Dr. Pierce and I making the trip along with his friend, Armand Oren, I became uneasy. It made no sense that we would be leaving the others, even though the unveiling was not for two more days. When I questioned him, I was told to relax and enjoy the trip.

An hour later, when we stopped to pick up two other men, I started to panic. I was alone, very far from home, and I had no way to call anybody in case I needed help. The men spoke rapid Italian, which I didn't understand at all and only added to my unease. I had opted to learn Mandarin instead of a Romance language, as the art I wanted to study resided not in Europe but in Asia.

"What is your name?" the larger of the two men asked me after several more minutes, his eyes raking over me in a way I was not comfortable with.

I squinted at the man sitting across from me in the back of the limousine. "Jake."

"Jake what?"

"Jake Gray."

"Jake Gray," the man repeated my name, leering at me. "Tell me—have you ever been raped?"

There was no time to think. On instinct, I dove for the door, ready to jump out of it even as fast as we were going, but a sharp pain in my leg stilled my motion. Looking down, I saw the syringe buried in my thigh and, turning my head, saw Mr. Oren shaking his head at me. "Normally we just pick up a prostitute in Rome and bring him along, but my friend Desmond here got a taste for you the second you walked into his office."

Everything was blurring, getting fuzzier by the second, and my body was so heavy, so hard to move.

"We're all going to have a taste when he's done," he whispered in my ear.

I couldn't lift my arms. When Dr. Pierce leaned in close to me, I wanted to recoil, but instead I fell back against the seat.

“Isn’t his face magnificent?” he asked the others, and I felt hands on me, pulling and tugging, my clothes being loosened. “I’m sure the body will not disappoint.”

I wanted to fight, but I was frozen, barely able to see him at all, my vision a long tunnel that was closing quickly.

“As I suspected... you’re gold all over. I will enjoy seeing your smooth, golden skin flayed off, Mr. Gray... I have to see you flogged, have to see the knife cut into you, see your face contort in pain... have to see you raped. I must hear you scream... I really can hardly wait. You are by far the most beautiful man I have ever seen, and watching you cry and beg and bleed... my Lord, I think I’m salivating at the very thought.”

I saw his smile, and my stomach lurched at the same time everything went black.

FRIGID water hitting my face woke me up. I gasped and lunged away from the hands that were groping me, running across my abdomen and fondling me through my jeans. As I scrambled away, I looked up and saw three men above me, advancing on me.

“Wait.”

I turned toward the voice, and so did everyone else. Directly across from me, across the torch-lined space, wearing long, red ceremonial robes, was Dr. Pierce.

“He has to be given a choice. He has to choose the torture over the beast, or the covenant is broken. Let him see and decide.”

I lunged backward, but I was still drugged and sluggish and slow. The two strangers from the car and Mr. Oren grabbed me and dragged me across the dirt floor to a thick wooden pole that had been driven deep into the ground. It didn’t give at all when they threw me into it.

“Many others have stood where you are now, Mr. Gray,” Dr. Pierce called, advancing toward me, his eyes catching the light from the flames, his pupils completely dilated, huge and black as he advanced toward me. “And they all chose to let us rape them and cut them and gut them instead of being consumed by the beast. You, too, will make the same

choice, I know it. You're weak. It's why I chose you, along with your beauty."

He didn't know anything about me, about the kind of man I was, but maybe, in this instance, that would work to my advantage.

I watched and listened as Dr. Pierce began chanting, and I saw Mr. Oren walk backward away from me. He was smiling. The other two men stepped back, and I straightened up, the cold, as biting as it was, helping to clear my head. Taking in my surroundings, I realized that I was in an enormous cave, an underground catacomb, and the only light at all was coming from the oil lamps that my boss was blowing out one by one.

"Mr. Gray," Desmond Pierce called over to me, his voice low. "Do you want to give up now?"

I shook my head.

"Are you certain? You will hear the beast come, and if you cry out, if you make any noise at all, even a whisper, we will light the torch and claim you, and yes... your death will be slow and agonizing, and you will howl. Still, in the end, it will be death, and the pain will stop. With the beast... I can't say how long it will go on, and the horror...." He smiled suddenly. "And the pain... and maybe, with us, if you're very good, maybe, just maybe... we'll let you live. Think about it, Mr. Gray," he cackled as he blew out the second to last lantern. "Think about what you truly can and cannot abide."

The light went out, and I was plunged into primordial darkness. I took a breath and shivered hard, wrapping my arms around myself before I started to jog in place. If I was already moving, there was less chance of being startled and crying out. I had to be silent, whatever happened. I couldn't utter a sound; that was the game.

A second later, I wanted to scream. The flutter of insect wings made me break out in goose bumps; there were sharp clicking sound like cicadas, and something spiky and hard slid over my shoulder. It stung, but still I was quiet. I remembered how my boss had looked, the twisted desire in his eyes and the leering faces of the other men, and so I stayed silent instead of begging to be saved.

"Be still," a deep, guttural voice commanded me.

Keeping my eyes shut tight even though it was dark anyway, I froze in place. When I swayed, there were several bristly strokes up my

side, abrading my skin painfully as I was kept from falling. When I felt the pressure on my back, I stepped forward.

The sound started as a hum, but in seconds it was as though I was standing in swarm of flies. There were insects crawling in my hair, over my skin, tickling my ears, my nose, the image in my mind so much worse because I could not open my eyes to see. I fought hard not to gag, even when the smells overwhelmed me. I breathed through my nose, took small sips of air, before there was the sharp scent of kerosene.

“The torch is lit, Mr. Gray. Come, open your eyes and behold the beast.”

But there was no rule about that. I didn’t have to look if I didn’t want to.

“Mr. Gray!”

“By your oath,” a voice snarled out, “it made no sound, so it’s mine!”

“No!” I heard Dr. Pierce scream.

I was grabbed roughly, jerked off my feet, and crushed in a vise-like grip. I trembled hard; the sound of rising breath, snarling like an animal, hot and wet, made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. There was pressure, what felt like claws digging into my skin. It hurt, but my brain could not fixate on that as needles of ice suddenly began hitting my skin. I heard the roar of wind in my ears, and when I opened one eye, there was a scream, a horrible, high-pitched scream. I wanted to cover my ears even as I felt the reverberations through the creature’s body. The beast was shrieking, whether in pain or glee I had no idea. I wanted to howl, but I clamped my jaw down tight, never uttering a sound.

It was like being on the down drop of a rollercoaster and just stopping all at once. The jerk was simply too severe. I felt pain like a knife in my right eye and then cool, consuming darkness.

II

I WAS warm, and as my eyes drifted open, I promised myself never to take that for granted again. My second thought was that I was in hell.

Surely the creature I was looking at lived there. It looked like a wasp and a spider had been fused together, but the head was a separate horror. It vibrated, shaking so hard it blurred, and every time it stopped, there was a different swarm of insects. I saw cockroaches, flies, locusts, and then spiders, slugs, beetles, and maggots dripping from the eye sockets. It took everything I had not to vomit. When it moved toward me, I held my ground, fighting down the nausea, gagging but not puking, panting, taking quick breaths, all the time concentrating on breathing. Whatever the outcome, I had passed the test; I was with the creature instead of being brutalized. I knew I could finally speak.

“Try something else,” I coughed, forcing a smile. “Please.”

Before my eyes, the creature collapsed, hitting the dirt floor and becoming millions of centipedes crawling toward me.

“What about bees?” I suggested quickly, hopefully.

The hum was deafening as I was suddenly surrounded by honeybees. I liked bees; they never scared me, because I wasn’t allergic. But that many could kill me if they decided to sting, so I called out something else. “Let’s try ladybugs.”

That was apparently too hard, because I got spiders instead. When I gasped and scrambled backward, they became scorpions. It took me only that one time, because I had always been the guy that figured out the puzzle on the first try. If I stayed calm, so would the creature. If I frustrated it, the vengeance would be swift, the retribution frightening.

“Being in a cave,” I began softly, my tone sympathetic, “you probably haven’t seen a ladybug in a long time. So how about a moth instead? How would that be?” I could play name that insect all day if that was what it took to keep me alive.

Instantly, I had a swarm of moths, which was creepy but better than the scorpions.

“Do you think maybe you could pick something and talk to me?”

Moths became crickets, which were gross, but I used to feed them to my pet lizard, Manny, so I was still okay. At least whatever-it-was and I were, in fact, communicating.

“Whatever you pick, I’ll be okay with, I swear. You can test me. I’ll pass. I was quiet, wasn’t I? I never screamed,” I reminded the creature.

Reforming before my eyes, it became something I had never seen, like an ant, but gray in color, the size of a horse, with an enormous head with rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth.

“Is this your true form?” I asked gently.

“No,” it answered, the voice more of a hiss than anything else.

“What are you?”

It didn’t answer.

No matter what it was, it had carried me to safety and kept me from being raped. I owed it my sanity, because I might have physically survived an assault, but mentally, emotionally, maybe not.

“I need to thank you,” I said, reaching toward it.

The creature lurched back beyond my trembling fingers.

“Oh.” I forced a smile. “You don’t want me to... sorry... I’m sorry, okay?”

Enormous eyes the size of footballs stared at me for long moments before it suddenly moved fast, preternaturally fast, back to my side, and then stood silently, waiting.

I was being trusted not to strike at it, not to try and hurt it, like I was the scary creature in the cave. Slowly, carefully, I reached out, and the second my hand grazed over it, I saw skin. “Oh shit,” I breathed out, startled, flinching away, and the creature once again skittered back from me.

The scream filled the fire-lit space around us and bounced off the stone, echoing out into the endless dark. I covered my ears, the vibrations tearing through me, the ground shaking beneath my feet. A wounded cry from the beast could start an earthquake. I needed to be more careful.

Silence returned, and I slowly moved back to crouch beside the crackling fire. After several long minutes, the creature slipped in close to the warmth as well. The flames bathed us both in a warm, golden glow.

“Listen.” I cleared my throat, deliberately lowering my voice. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

The beast tossed its head, and I noticed it was smaller, the jaw less threatening, suddenly resembling a dragon. Having always been a fan, I was comforted, and that, along with its size reminding me of a horse....

“Oh.” I exhaled slowly, remembering one of my favorite mythological creatures, one I used to love when I was a kid. “Can you be... a kirin?”

It changed before my eyes, became that which I had only ever seen in drawings, a half-horse, half-dragon hybrid, bathed in fire. It was gorgeous.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, my voice filled with awe. “If you can be this... why would you ever wanna be anything scary?”

It grew and shifted, becoming the palest blue, a dragon with three claws. I knew what I was looking at—I was an art major, after all. Ryū, a Japanese dragon, was very beautiful, and typically, in literature, kind. I took a chance and put my hand flat on its skin. It was warm to the touch, and when I felt it tremble under my palm, the skin jumping like a horse’s, a surge of feeling rose up in me. My jaw clenched and my eyes watered as I was momentarily overwhelmed. It was absolutely terrified of me.

“Why are you scared?” I asked, my voice kind, coaxing. “I’m not a bad guy.”

It leaned closer.

“I’m here,” I said, leaning into its side, closing my eyes as I stretched out my arms and breathed out all my fear. I was safe, and the warm huff of breath that slid down my back and ruffled my hair was comforting. “I’ll stay with you... you don’t hafta be alone anymore.”

It wrapped around me like a snake, coiling, squeezing, and even when I couldn’t breathe because I was wrapped so impossibly tight, I didn’t cry out. Dying like this would be all right. I surrendered myself to it and exhaled.

“No.” The gasp of alarm made my eyes snap open, and I was stunned to find myself held tight in the arms of an angel.

“Oh,” I stuttered, shoving away from him.

Never, ever, had I seen anything as beautiful as the being standing before me. He looked nothing like any of the paintings from college Art 101. The Renaissance masters never envisioned my angel. There was no hint of softness, no trace of doe-eyed innocence, and no creamy porcelain skin or flowing locks. What my angel had instead were hard, rippling muscles, towering height, a chiseled profile, and deep, dark

brown eyes filled with heat. His enormous wings were blue as well; folded behind him, they were taller than his six-five height, reaching above his head and dusting the ground at his feet. He was glorious, and I was speechless for the seconds before I was confused.

“I don’t understand,” I said slowly as he advanced on me.

“How could you?” he asked, and his voice was deep and husky.

I took in the armor of a Roman legionnaire, the sandals that laced up bulging calves, the thighs corded with muscle, and the roped veins in his hands and forearms. His hair was short, dark brown with traces of gold in it; his eyebrows looked as though they had been brushed on, thick and perfectly arched, dusted with the same gold. Truly I had never seen a more beautiful man. When he suddenly opened his wings, showing me the enormous wingspan, the movement stirred the air in the cave, creating a refreshing momentary breeze. The scent of the ocean hit me, flooding my senses with relief. As I watched, the wings were folded together once more before he started forward.

“You are a scholar?” he asked as he reached me, stopping inches away, staring down into my eyes. “Are you not?”

“Not quite,” I sighed, shivering hard, cold again, the farthest I had been from the fire.

The wings opened again, spread wide at the same time he grabbed me and crushed me to his chest, arms wrapped around me, his face buried in the crook of my neck. The leather armor was cold against my skin, but I didn’t care.

“Forgive me,” he grunted, letting me go quickly, fumbling with the buckles on his shoulders, the cuirass falling to the dirt at his feet before he gestured for me.

I had no idea what in the world was happening, wasn’t even sure if I was really awake, but a man, an angel, with the sexiest eyes I had ever seen wanted me back in his arms. I didn’t hesitate. I leaped at him. He caught me and held me tight, his face buried in my shoulder, mine in the hollow of his throat. I inhaled, the scent of clothes dried in the sun washing over me, the heat from his body warming mine.

“You have reminded me of what I was, and so I am salvaged from madness.”

He trembled in my arms, and I held tighter, my lips parting on his

skin, just wanting to taste him, the kiss feather light. The ensuing groan made me smile. “Who are you?”

“Sariel,” he said, rubbing his chin in my hair, breathing me in. “And you are Jacob.”

“Well, Jake, but... how’d you—”

“The men scream your name even now in the darkness.”

I didn’t ask how he could hear them. “Could you explain yourself to me?” I asked gently, lifting my head, finding his head bent forward, his lips only a hair’s breadth from mine. His warm breath ghosted across my face.

The smile was lazy as his eyes locked on my mouth. “May I?”

“What?”

“Taste you.” His voice dropped to a growl. “Please.”

I lifted up in silent invitation.

His mouth slanted down over mine fast, his tongue seeking entrance, sliding along the seam of my lips before I parted them for him. One hand fisted in my hair, yanking my head backward, while the other was pressed to the small of my back, holding me still, anchoring me against him. I molded my body to his, my knee sliding between his thighs as I reached up and put my hands on his face, kissing him back with all the heat he was giving me.

It was a consuming kiss, devouring, filled with ache and desire and overwhelming tenderness. I was aware of his hands moving, sliding down my back, lower to clutch my ass, cupping it in his large, strong hands, lifting me up. I wrapped my legs around his hips, my arms around his neck as I tipped his head back, my tongue taking inventory of his mouth, feasting on him, missing nothing. I was aware of tugging and heard the jingle of my belt buckle before the zipper parted. When his hands slid over my bare skin, I shuddered.

“Do you know your Bible, Jake Gray?” he whispered in my ear.

I nodded, too hot to speak, his fingers kneading my ass, sending electric shocks of pleasure to my groin. My cock had hardened painfully fast, and I needed relief desperately.

“After the fall of man, after being driven from the garden, eons after the death of Abel, man finally settled in the shadow of Mount

Hermon. God sent his angels to watch over them once more, but they were weak, the angels, and so lusted after the daughters of men.”

“You’re talking about the Grigori.” I swallowed hard to find my voice, only to lose it seconds later as his fingers trailed over my crease.

“Yes.”

“Oh please,” I panted, my tongue darting out, licking over his bottom lip before I drew it into my mouth, biting down on it hard.

He moved in a blur. I was on my feet, unsteady for seconds as my jeans were torn away violently under his hands, claws I couldn’t see shredding the denim to rags left clinging on my legs, easily brushed away like unwanted leaves. I stood there, naked, staring up at him.

“The angels, the Grigori, all lusted after the daughters of men,” he told me, stepping in close, his hand trailing down my chest, down over my abdomen and lower to my stiff, leaking cock. When his hand closed around it, I couldn’t stifle my moan. “Except for me.”

His hand was warm, callused, and his touch was searing and tender at the same time. As I slid my engorged shaft in and out of his grip, I watched his eyes. They darkened with heat and lust, and the idea of such thoughts filling the heart and mind of an angel made me breathless.

“I found greater beauty in the form of man,” he said, leaning his forehead against mine, his thumb rubbing pearly drops of precome over the throbbing head of my swollen cock. “Speak the words to me, Jake Gray. Tell me that your soul is mine, speak to me that you relinquish it willingly and will either rise or fall at my side.”

My eyes lifted to his. I didn’t even know him. We were strangers; I was me, and he was a fallen angel. If he was telling the truth, then he was Sariel, the angel who had taught men the knowledge of the moon, of planting and harvesting crops, the seasons to seed and sow and store. He had been damned with the rest of the Grigori, the watcher angels, for creating the Nephilim, the killers of men, the angels’ offspring with women. All of them, the Nephilim, had been destroyed in the great flood that Noah had to build his ark for. The Grigori had all been imprisoned, having fallen from grace, and supposedly still were. But now an angel stood before me, his hands all over me, his lips taking possession of mine once more, his fingers creating sensations I had never experienced before.

Logically, he could not exist, and so his hands, as he touched me, the heat, the pleasure he wrung from me—they, too, could not be. As a finger slid between my ass cheeks without benefit of lube or even saliva, I expected the burn, expected my body to be resistant, but there was nothing, only my muscles relaxing for him, accepting him, ready to receive him.

“I am like no other who has been inside you,” he told me, turning me in his arms, bending me forward, placing my hands on the cold, sharp wall of the cave. “Take me in.”

I let my head fall forward, my chin on my chest. “How are you doing this?”

“How does your body open for me, moisten? This is your question?” he asked, sliding a finger deep inside me, rubbing over the usually tight ring of muscle.

“Yes.”

“Have I cast a spell on you, robbed you of your reason?” he said, adding another finger to my fluttering, quivering hole. “I think not. You are a smart man, a brave man, and your body craves mine as your soul seeks its home.”

I shivered as he added a third finger, pushing in deep, and I felt my ass twitching, wanting to be filled, ready, as though he had rimmed me for hours. I was absolutely dripping.

“You are so hot inside, Jake, and you’re trying to suck my fingers in so deep. I think you need more... your body needs more.”

I gasped when he withdrew his fingers. At the same time, my ass cheeks were spread wide, and I felt the nudge of his penis against my entrance.

“I have waited for you past all endurance, and now you will bind with me. Speak the words, Jake, and become irin of an angel.”

“What is irin?”

“Mate.”

“Angels don’t have mates.”

“Not before the fall.”

It took everything in me not to push back and impale myself on him. I had no idea how thick or long he was, but I was going out of my

mind, so the mechanics hardly mattered. “You don’t even know me.” I trembled, my fingers gripping the rocky wall.

“The moment you touched me in faith and not fear was the moment I truly saw you,” he said, his lips kissing between my shoulder blades. “When I saw your heart, I was reminded that I am a creature of light and not darkness.”

My body needed him, needed the release, and I couldn’t remember ever wanting anybody more than the angel behind me.

“I will be irin of Sariel,” I pledged to him, letting my head fall back as he gripped my hips hard and buried himself inside me.

He stuffed me full, his cock rammed deeper than I thought my body would allow, and when I cried out, he wrapped his arms around me, his balls pressed to my ass, his chest plastered to my back. When he eased out a fraction only to plow back down into me, I cried his name.

“You are so tight and hot and wet,” he told me, licking behind my ear, clutching me tighter, one hand flat on my abdomen. “You were made to be filled with me, and now you will take all I give you and relinquish your soul as well.”

His words were terrifying and comforting at the same time, but as his hand fisted on my penis, pulsing hard in his hand, my mind went blank. It didn’t matter what he was or who he was, what mattered to my body was that he was needed, wanted, and craved. Pleasure beckoned, and I ran to meet it.

He set a pounding, driving pace, his enormous cock slamming into me over and over, so slick, gliding so deep, and when he grazed my gland, I roared his name.

“Once you bind with me, this can never be undone,” he said, the hand that was gripping my hip tightening, holding me against him. “You will remain at my side even here, in this place.”

He thought I cared. “As long as you’re with me.” I shivered, feeling the sizzling heat gathering in my groin, building momentum, begin its roll through me. “I’ll be happy.”

I heard his growl of pleasure before he impaled me hard, jerking me off at the same time. My orgasm came surging through me, my blood hot, racing through my veins, heat dancing over my skin as I shuddered in his arms, semen coating his hand as I pumped in and out of his fist.

“Irin of Sariel,” he gasped as I felt the liquid heat fill me, “you’re mine.”

The whispered declaration, coupled with the arms wrapped tight around me as his chest was pressed along my back, made breathing nearly impossible. The enormity of what I had just done suddenly drowned me. I had decided in the heat of passion to bind myself to an angel. How sane was that?

“Jake?”

I closed my eyes and willed the dream to stop, to release me so that I could open my eyes on the plane, where I surely was, and return to my life.

“You will trust me,” the low voice whispered in my ear as he eased from my body.

The wall, solid and abrasive under my hands, was the only piece of my world that made sense. I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears, and I was hot and cold all at once.

“You fear for all you are and must now give to me,” he said, and I felt him peel his skin from mine. “Look at me.”

The eyes I opened mine up to were infused with warmth.

“You look surprised.” He smiled at me.

“I just... are you going to stay this way or change again?”

“I am restored.”

I reached up to put my hand on his face, and when he leaned into the touch, when I felt the warm skin against mine, everything seemed less alien.

“Will you come with me?”

I nodded, and a smile curled his beautiful mouth as he released a breath, the relief showing clearly on his face a second before he stepped toward me. “You can make me do whatever you want,” I reminded him. “You’re an angel.”

“Your free will is precious to me,” he promised, his mouth next to my ear, sending chills down the side of my neck, covering me with goose bumps. “Never would I strip you of this.”

I would have said something, but he wrapped me in his arms, his

wings enfolding around us at the same time.

“Do you trust me?”

I could only nod.

The lift was a gentle sway before I felt the cool wind on my face and then the drop as we fell together. The water was a surprise, as was the golden light that came up through it, illuminating the pool and the area around it. I had not expected to find anything like this in a place of barren rock. That my bath was warm was another revelation.

“Are you magic?” I asked him.

He chuckled deep in his chest as the enormous wings made ripples in the water. “There are hot springs all over these mountains, and this one runs through these caves.”

“And the light?” I pressed him.

“Perhaps crystals. The glow reflected from somewhere else... it’s all natural, I assure you. I’m not trying to bewitch you, simply relax you, and let you bathe... can you remember the last time you had a hot bath?”

I couldn’t at that moment.

“Close your eyes.”

“Talk to me, then,” I bargained. “I have so many questions.”

“Speak.”

But the questions had all deserted me. I closed my eyes instead and let my head roll back on my shoulders, savoring the velvet warmth.

“Shall I tell you how I came to be here?” he offered

“Yes, please.”

His hands were on me, sliding over my chest, across my hardened nipples and lower, tracing the muscles in my abdomen; the quivering intake of breath made me smile.

“Your form is so very beautiful. You with your golden hair and skin, your eyes the color of the sea, your face, your features so fine and delicate and fragile.”

All my life, I had been told I was pretty instead of handsome, but now, for the first time, I didn’t care in the least.

“A lifetime ago I was damned.”

“Why?” I asked, my eyes drifting open so I could see his face.

“I was sent with the other angels to watch over man, but while the others lost their souls to women, I wanted only to lie with men.”

“And did you?”

Only a trace of a smile accompanied a slight shake of his head. “I did not. I was frightened then, as I knew it was forbidden.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but his hand rose to silence me.

“I don’t mean to say that I kept from the bed of a male lover because to lie with a man was forbidden. I mean to tell you that any contact with either a man or a woman was considered a sin. Angels may guide man and watch man, but they are not to be intimate with them.”

“So you obeyed the law.”

“I did.”

“Then I don’t understand. Why were you damned? Why are you one of the fallen?”

“The intent of sin is the same as sin.”

“No, it’s not.”

“For an angel it is, and I had sinned in my heart. But I had not had intercourse with another, I had not produced offspring, I had not fathered one of the Nephilim. So I was not hurled into the deep bowels of the earth and imprisoned there with the others. I was sent here... to be alone, parted from the rest of my brothers until such time as I could find redemption.”

“But something happened,” I whispered, moving away from him, wanting to look at his whole face, needing the distance between us.

“I felt betrayed, cast out, and as my bitterness grew, my grace was eaten away. I have been here, alone, longer than you can fathom.”

I nodded. “And that horror show you put on? What’s going on with that?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “I do not understand your—”

“The insects.” I shivered involuntarily. “Why were you scary, and why was I even brought here in the first place?”

His eyes were locked on mine.

“Tell me,” I pressed him. “Why did Dr. Pierce bring me here?”

He sank down under the water instead of answering, and I followed, but when I opened my eyes, I was no longer in a shallow bath but in the middle of a vast sea, drifting just below the surface, and I saw Sariel there beside me. I had never seen anything as beautiful. Naked, with his wings slowly stroking the current, floating in the sea, he was irresistible as he gestured me close.

I moved to his side, entwining myself around him, and together we dropped slowly into the bottomless azure deep. The water was so warm, the angel’s skin like silk against mine, so smooth, the arms so strong, so safe. Sinking faster, the water darkening in color, I felt lightheaded before I fell into blackness. Seconds later, my eyes flicked open, and I was wrapped in a blanket, lying beside a fire. Sitting up, I looked around for the angel but found no one. Beyond the glow of the fire, there was only a wall of darkness.

“You are a wonder to me.” The voice spoke from close by, but I couldn’t see him. “You truly trust me.”

“So that was what... another test?”

“Perhaps.”

“But why wouldn’t I trust you?”

He simply appeared. One moment I was alone, the next he sat across the fire from me, the flames dancing in his eyes, casting shadows across his face. “I fear your hatred.”

I was surprised. “You saved me. I could never hate you.”

“My failings have been great.”

“Let me decide for myself.”

Sariel gave a quick nod before he let out a sharp exhale of breath. “In the darkness, over time, seeing no others, I forgot my form. Seeing others of my kind reminded me that I was an angel, a creature of light, but here, alone, there was nothing, and so I became what I saw, mimicking it. Then a century ago, the man came, and I was discovered.”

“Not a century ago.” I shook my head. “Dr. Pierce can’t be more than—”

“Let me explain everything to you before you doubt my words.”

I nodded. “Sorry. What was he looking for?”

“I heard him speak to others in his party of underground cisterns where men bathed; they were looking for paintings, evidence of use.”

“Probably they were looking for frescoes from the Romans,” I told him. “That makes sense. But they found you instead.”

“The rock above falls often, and in one such collapse, I was buried.”

He was talking about cave-ins, which were probably common. “So they found you and what?”

“There was one among them, Dr. Pierce, who knew about angels and trapped me within a ring of death that I could not cross.”

I didn’t want to know, but I forced myself. “Tell me what that is.”

“Before I could guess his intention, the man cut the throat of another with him and drew a circle around me with her blood. I had to watch the young woman die, and as I did, I wept.”

I waited for the rest, watching his face, the sorrow in his eyes, the clenching of his jaw. It was painful for him to remember, and my heart went out to him.

“I could not move. I could do nothing but weep. I was not strong enough to rise or smite him, and the man, Desmond Pierce, wiped my face with his shirt, and I knew what he had done.”

“I don’t—you need to explain this to me.”

“By collecting my tears, my essence, he had taken some of my grace, bound me to him.”

“How?”

“By drinking my tears that he wrung from the cloth,” he answered solemnly.

I had to digest everything he said. “So you’re his slave?”

“No. He keeps me here, in darkness, and when he calls for me, summons me, I must appear before him. I cannot move until I am released.”

“You moved without permission when you took me.”

“Because you chose me,” he said, looking into my eyes, “by making no sound.”

“So that’s the deal? If the person is silent, you claim them, but if

not, Dr. Pierce, he kills them in front of you, rapes them, tortures them, and you collapse, unable to move, and the tears just come. You can't control it; you just weep."

He swallowed hard, turning away from me. "It is pathetic, and even more so when you use your human words to speak my action to me."

"Human words?"

"When Adam and Eve were cast from the garden, the angelic tongue was taken from man, and so word and action were forever split apart, both to speak and understand. Had you this blessing still, no one could lie, and I could speak to you my feelings without using such a small word like 'love'. This is why humans must prove their words in deeds, because the words themselves hold no promise."

"Words alone used to carry weight. That's what you're saying to me?"

"Yes."

"Words were bonds."

"Yes."

I got up and moved around the fire, sinking down beside him, the blanket falling to my lap as I reached for him, my hands framing his face as I returned his eyes to mine. "Well, I'm telling you now that my word still means something, and when I tell you that I am your mate, I am, and that won't change."

He nodded, the emotion welling up in him.

"And the word 'love' is a great big word, my friend, and never one to be used lightly."

"Yes."

"And as for you being pathetic... you're an angel. How were you supposed to bear seeing sin committed right in front of you?"

"I have seen war, Jake, pestilence, famine, and murder... all the horrors of your world, I have borne witness to, but before this one poor woman was slaughtered in my sight, no atrocity was ever committed because of *me*. If *I* did not exist, the hundreds who have died in my name since Desmond Pierce came upon me would still be alive."

"That's survivor's guilt talking," I assured him, my thumb tracing over his beautiful sensual lips, the pain in his eyes making my heart hurt.

“Tell me... do you know why he makes you weep?”

“He wants to live forever, and by taking the grace of an angel, this has been granted. I know not how long he has survived, but he is well past his natural years on Earth.”

“That’s what you meant earlier. He really is a hundred years old.”

“Yes.”

“So by drinking your tears, he’s immortal.”

“For a time.”

“It wears off?”

“He must drink my tears once every season to remain immortal.”

“Okay, it’s spring now, so if he doesn’t have any of your tears by the summer, he’s back to being a regular guy?”

He nodded, turning his head to kiss my palm. “Already he will be mortal.”

“How?”

“He made a covenant with me that he learned from one of the demon bowls—”

“What’s a demon bowl?”

“Curses and incantations that the Grigori imparted to men were inscribed on pottery and bowls—demon bowls, now, as the angels were cursed. These can be used to make covenants with angels.”

“And I bet to most people, they just look like old pieces of pottery or something, huh? Stuff you pass by under glass at a museum and don’t even care about.”

“Yes. Unless you know what you are looking for, these things would seem ordinary and without value or beauty,” he said, his hands settling on my hips.

“But a learned man like Desmond Pierce....” I shifted closer to him, allowing myself to respond to the gentle but insistent request in his fingers. “He would know what he was looking at.”

“Yes.”

“But now that the cycle is broken, now that he failed to trap you like all the other times he—”

“His life is forfeit to God’s law.”

“Why?”

It took several long minutes for him to speak. “To break covenant with an angel is death, and he swore that if any of his sacrifices ever chose me that he would reap the justice of the lake and burn for eternity.”

I scooted closer still, unable to stop myself. “But why would anyone make a bargain like that?”

“It is the only kind to be made. A covenant with an angel must be one of life and death; all else binds not. Just as I took your oath from your lips, your life freely given to me, there can be no rescinding of your promise. I will take your life should you try and take flight from my side.”

I smiled at him. “It’s scary when you say it like that.”

He looked confused, and I understood. There were no shades of gray for an angel, only black and white, good and evil, life and death.

“I won’t ever leave you,” I promised, and I realized I was utterly sincere.

His hand dropped down between us, slipping under the folds of the blanket to wrap around my slowly swelling cock. I couldn’t stop myself from pushing in and out of his hand.

“You crave my touch, my irin,” he said, leaning forward to slowly kiss his way up my throat.

“I want... I want you to be free,” I told him, lifting up to rock forward into his lap, my legs on either side of his hips as I settled against him.

“I am free,” he told me, his face lighting up, his eyes glittering. “You, my irin, you saved me. When you sought to understand instead of fear me, I was saved.”

“Then why... oh.” I sucked in my breath as he squeezed my shaft tight, fisting it only to increase his rhythm as his other hand slid under me and cupped my ass.

“Why do we remain?” He smiled at me, slipping one finger between my cheeks, pushing, pressing, until he reached my entrance.

“Yes,” I gasped, lifting up just slightly so he could curl it inside me,

past the strong ring of muscle and up into my ass.

“There is still my seed from before,” he rasped into the side of my throat before he opened his mouth against my skin. “It drips from you even now.”

He pressed his thumb against the head of my penis, rubbing the precome over the tip, at the same time adding a second finger, then a third, to my hole. I could not control the trembling.

“Sariel... please.”

He moved fast, and I was spilled over on my back, the hastily spread blanket cushioning me from the cold, hard ground. His arms slipped under my knees as he pressed them down against my chest. “Speak to me your desire.”

“Don’t test me anymore,” I exhaled, staring up into the now copper-colored eyes. “Just trust me and show me that I belong to you.”

The muscles in his jaw clenched as he drove down into me in one hard, fast, fluid motion.

Making love to an angel required nothing but heat and desire and skin. He slid inside me as though I was slippery with lube, and it was a wonder to me that my body would receive him without resistance, just swallow him and squeeze him tight.

“You belong to me.”

The words, the look in his eyes, and the ravaging thrusts let me know that he meant every word he said. All I was belonged to him.

I wrapped my legs around his waist as he pounded into me, one hand digging into my hip, holding me against him, the other stroking my cock, bringing me closer to a shattering climax with every thrust.

“Sariel!” I screamed his name as semen spilled over his hand and onto his abdomen and chest. The pleased look, very male and smug, took my breath away before he took hold of my calves, bent and leaned forward at the same time, draping my knees over his shoulders as he folded me in half. He filled my passage, stuffing me with the long, hard, thick length of him as he came deep inside my body.

It was too much, the sensations overwhelming. I felt as though I was on fire and freezing at the exact same time. I screamed his name, and it echoed off the walls.

“Say you will bide with me for all time,” he said, pushing in deeper, again hitting my prostate as he had done on every stroke before.

“Wherever you go, I’ll go,” I promised. “I swear on my life.”

“And now,” he said as he pulled out of me, my body not ready to release him, still in the throes of trembling pleasure, “I will take you from this darkness.”

I shivered as the tremors continued to course through me even as I was pulled back tight against his chest, his wings forming a cocoon around me, only my head peeking out from the feathers.

“But first I will smite down those who meant to sacrifice your beauty to a fallen angel.”

I was terrified, but the look in his eyes, the anticipation... I couldn’t say no. The second I nodded, the air shimmered around me, blurring, rushing by, and I was suddenly standing before the men who had kidnapped me.

There was a yell in what I thought might be ancient Greek as Dr. Pierce gestured to Sariel, commanding him to come forward and fall at his feet.

Enormous wings were spread wide as I took a step closer to my lover, realizing that I was dressed in a heavy silk robe of blue brocade tied at my waist. I watched in amazement as the men screamed and dropped to their knees in pain.

“Behold the irin of Sariel,” his voice boomed off the walls, “and know what your sin has brought upon you.”

Dr. Pierce lifted his face to me, and I saw the look of shock and amazement. He had underestimated both my spirit and Sariel’s heart.

“This cannot be. This is against God’s law! An angel cannot love a human! It’s a sin, and a mortal sin, for one man to lie with another.”

“In answer, I say you know nothing of grace or love.” Sariel’s voice was like thunder. “And as my irin has reminded me: I, too, am worthy of both.” He turned to look at me. “Wrap tight about me and close your eyes. Do not open them until I tell you.”

I stepped in front of him and grabbed him tight, my face buried in his shoulder. I heard the screams for mercy and my name, but I just clutched tighter, feeling a brush of hot desert wind across my face as I

was enfolded into a tight embrace. I sighed deeply, inhaling the scent of the angel, rain and musk all rolled up together. I felt the shroud of the velvet wings at my back and the rock-hard chest against mine. I trembled in his arms.

“Open your eyes.”

I found myself standing beside the car I had been brought in, my duffel bag still in the back seat, next to a man who had no wings. He was, in fact, dressed just like I was, in jeans and a T-shirt. “What happened?” I asked as I stepped out of his arms.

“I would not have you see divine law unleashed.”

“How long were we in there?” I asked, looking at the columns carved into the side of the rock. I had seen none of the beauty of the place when I was carried in unconscious.

“I was there from before Rome fell. You... a day.”

I wagged my eyebrows at him. “You win.”

The way he sucked in his breath, the bemused expression on his face before the slow, sweet smile... he was enchanted, and the knowledge warmed me.

“What now?”

“I will take you to Naples. You wanted to see the *Gabinetto Segreto*, did you not?”

I was stunned. “How did you know?”

“I know all that lives in your heart, my irin. Do you still want to go?”

I reached out for him, my hands on his face. “I do, but you’re more important. Tell me what’s going to happen now.”

“Make me understand your question,” he asked, hands on my hips.

“Are you going to stay with me?”

He took a slight step closer, and I had to tilt my head back to see his face. At six-five, he towered over my own height of five-ten, and he was staring down into my eyes with an intensity that was overwhelming and comforting at the exact same time. “You’re mine. We will never be parted.”

I held my breath. “Do you think that... someday you could grow

to—”

“Foolish man. I love you even now.” He scowled down at me. “Well you should know this. You are my irin.”

“Yeah, but it was just luck that—”

My breath was squeezed from me as I was grabbed tight and crushed against the broad chest of my massive lover. “You are a gift, make no mistake. I was forgiven and so was granted my irin. Your path to me was set the day you were born, as you were created to be the heart of an angel.”

The weirdest part of all was that I *knew*—I could feel the truth inside and accepted his words as absolute fact. I was his, he was mine, and it was simply done.

“Where are your wings?” I asked when I found my voice, looking up at him.

“As I am now completely restored, brought forth from my exile and forgiven, my wings go unseen but when I will it otherwise.”

“You have been forgiven? How do you know?”

“I was granted my irin, and my wings are mine to reveal or not as I see fit. This can only be given by God.”

I threw myself at him, and he caught me, clutching me tight.

“My irin, you are the only one in the world who was able to walk into the darkness and see me. Only you saw past the abomination to the angel underneath. Only you could conquer your own fear.”

“I had no choice.”

“No, it was all your choice.”

As I took a deep breath, I was dizzy for a moment. My head clearing, I realized I was in a room with wooden floors and a huge ceiling fan rotating lazily, just barely moving the air around.

“Where are we now?” I asked as he set me on my feet again.

He crossed the room to the shutters and threw them open. The city of Naples was spread out in front of me, twilight descending on buildings I knew from postcards and travel magazines, awash in a blaze of color. It was breathtaking, as was the man’s smile.

“You’re pleased.”

I nodded.

“Tomorrow we’ll go out together and see everything. Tonight we’re going to eat and drink, and you will sleep by my side.”

It sounded like heaven.

As he walked over and dove down onto the bed, I watched him, unable to tear my eyes away. He moved with the grace of a dancer, and the muscles moving under his clothes, the way he toed off his sneakers and rolled over on his back—just looking at the man flushed my skin with heat.

“Where did you get the jeans?” I asked, my eyes riveted on the piece of gold skin revealed by his T-shirt riding up when he laced his fingers behind his head.

“I mimic you now.”

I really needed to start wearing fewer clothes. Moving to the side of bed, I stared down at the long line of him. He belonged to me. It was hard to wrap my brain around.

“By saving me, you have saved countless others,” he said, looking up at me, his eyes heating, darkening to almost black. “For I am known by more than one name.”

I had to get my hands on him and so sank down beside him on the bed.

“Heard you my words?”

His words were barely registering, the need to be close to him overwhelming everything else.

“Jake?” My name came out as a rasp.

“In the cave, you were the master, but here... it’s me,” I said, watching his eyes drift closed, feeling him tremble under my hands as I skillfully, slowly, opened his belt and the buttons of his fly. He had copied my underwear as well, and I was glad as my hand snaked easily down inside the boxers to the hot skin beneath. When my fingers closed around the long, thick, hard length of him, he shuddered.

“I want this buried inside me, but first I’m going to make you scream.”

Confused eyes opened to look at me as I straddled his thighs, and I slid lower as I urged him to lift up, shucking down the jeans and

underwear, allowing the enormous swollen shaft to bounce free.

“I would tell you my—”

I cut him off as I bent and swallowed his cock.

He gasped my name, clutching my head, his body jolting under my mouth. I sucked and licked, missing nothing, coating him in saliva: the heavy sac, the underside of his beautiful cut penis, my mouth ravenous on his skin.

The writhing and the way he bucked up into me made me smile around the rigid velvet shaft, and I looked up into his clouded eyes.

“I would speak to... you,” he moaned, his head falling back, eyes closing as I sucked harder, swirling my tongue around him, gently using my teeth. “Jacob Gray!”

I chuckled over his yell and leaned back, unsealing my lips but still licking the flared head, loving the taste of him, his smell.

He was panting beneath me, his hands now fisted in the bed sheet as he stared at me.

“You taste so good,” I told him, leaning forward again, lowering back over him, urging him to move, to fuck my mouth.

He was helpless against the sensations I created, and his body, infused with heat and need, relinquished control to me. Pushing up, his cock thrusting against the back of my throat, he came hard, my name on his lips. I swallowed down the sweet, thick come as the aftershocks of his orgasm tore through him.

The eyes that stared up at me made me smile as I licked my lips. “What?”

He gestured for me.

I crawled up his body, and when I was close enough, he grabbed me and flipped me over on my back, coming down on top of me. Pinned hard to the bed, I let out a deep sigh as he ground his mouth down over mine. His tongue slid between my lips, taking absolute possession, and I sighed out my pleasure.

He was frantic to get my clothes off, pulling, yanking, and I smiled against his lips.

“Jake....” He whispered my name, and I opened my eyes to look up into his. “By your trust and faith, you have returned my grace and set

me back upon my path. For now I can speak again for man, to man, as I am more than Sariel but Metatron as well.”

My eyes widened even as he fisted my throbbing, aching shaft. “You’re the voice of God?”

His smile as he looked at me stole my breath. The love in the gaze was palpable. “Yes, love. I was in exile, and so men could no longer hear God’s words. Now, because of you, they will again.”

“You know, no one will ever believe me if I try and tell them who you really are.”

Gently, tenderly, he lifted my legs up over his arms, positioning himself above me. “I will be at your side, as your mate. Everyone will accept me as this. What more is there?”

He was right—there was nothing more, only his weight as he eased inside me, slowly, pressing inside deeper and deeper, filling me, stretching me. The sizzling, demanding heat stroked over my skin, and as I arched up against him, he pulled out just enough to then pound back down inside me. Teetering on the verge of an explosive orgasm, I could barely breathe.

“You belong to me,” he said, stroking over my prostate, making me cry out. “My savior, my irin.”

My answer was unnecessary: he knew my heart. I let my body speak for me as it welcomed him home.

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will *so* not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.

THE PLATYPUS LEARNS ASTROPHYSICS

Matthew Vandrew

JONAS reminded himself to be nice to his secretary. Considering the circumstances, she was the best he'd ever had. Mostly because she didn't hide under her desk when he stomped into his office. Not yet, anyway. Maybe that time would come. She was pale and visibly anxious but bravely said her good mornings.

He only grunted and, without a second glance, said in an almost normal tone, "I'm not here and I'll never be. If someone foolishly wants to come in anyway, just send them in and call the city morgue."

She was good enough to know what that meant. If someone tried to contact him, she would strongly advise against it. People who knew him didn't have to be told twice; they usually ran away quickly, grateful they didn't have to deal with him. Jonas was not pleasant on his best days, and if he was in bad mood... well, let's just say his P.A.s never lasted too long.

In the sanctuary of his office, he sank into his leather chair with a sigh. He glanced at the desk, which was covered with papers and general office junk that indicated he was a hardworking man. Well, he *was*. Maybe not right now, as he turned his chair and opted for staring out the window instead. He caught a glimpse of his sharp, handsome features in the reflection but ignored himself and gazed farther out. Here he was, in his early thirties, CEO of the company founded by his late father. Hardworking, no friends, no family except his mother. Unfortunately, her only companion was Alzheimer's, and she didn't recognize him anymore. Sometimes she was convinced she was a little girl waiting for her mother. Sometimes she was just lost, not comprehending a single

thing anyone told her and scared by the strange, unfamiliar world around her.

Jonas refused to think about her now. With another sigh, he turned back to face his laptop screen—and froze.

In the middle of his office was an angel.

No, Jonas corrected himself, it was a young man dressed as an angel, although *dressed* probably wasn't the best word to describe the state of his clothes. He wore only a loincloth and was proudly showing off his perfect muscles. He was definitely the most beautiful man Jonas had ever seen, but there was something odd about him, something other than the pair of huge, snow-white wings on his back.

"What the hell?" Jonas managed to say.

"Heaven," the youngster corrected him, then took a deep breath and continued with what sounded like a prepared speech. "Greetings, mortal. The happiest day of your life has come. No more shall you be desperate and make lives of other people miserable. Your heart will be filled with joy and love!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, cut it out, will you?" Jonas barked. He didn't know how this extravagant creature had got into his office, but he knew that his secretary would be deeply sorry for letting him in, especially without warning. She was going to get fired so quickly *she* would need a pair of wings. "You probably messed up the address. I'm pretty sure I haven't requested this little sexual fantasy. I'm not into angels, and my office makes me impotent, not aroused."

"Silence!" the angel roared. Jonas *felt* the window behind him rattle. He sat still, almost deaf from the unexpected visitor's thundering voice.

"I am not a sexual fantasy. There is nothing sexual about me," said the angel, much softer. The loincloth suddenly disappeared, and Jonas stared at nothing. There was nothing between the angel's legs. No balls, no cock, no hair. Like a Ken doll come alive.

"I am Micah, angel of the Divine Plan, a messenger sent to you, Jonas William Mason," the angel continued.

"Holy fuck," Jonas replied, still in shock.

"The words 'holy' and 'fuck' don't go well together."

“Yeah, I can see why,” Jonas snorted, pointing at the place where the angel’s genitals should have been. His visitor frowned, and the loincloth reappeared. Jonas got up and cautiously approached him, slowly getting behind him.

The angel’s wings were real. Jonas could clearly see they were a part of his body, not an addition. Nervously, he touched one wing and quickly withdrew his hand. The wing was warm and soft, definitely a part of Micah’s body.

“Oh-kay.... So, you are the real thing,” Jonas said slowly.

“Of course I am.”

Jonas was almost dumbfounded. He wasn’t religious, but neither was he an atheist. It was more like he didn’t care one way or another. The sudden and rather bizarre appearance of this creature was way beyond anything he had ever considered. He felt like a fish staring at a bicycle and trying to figure out what to do with it.

“So.” He cleared his throat. “What do you want from me? To live my life in celibacy and prayers? If so, I can tell you straight away: you’re wasting your breath. I have never been a churchgoer, and I never will be.”

“You are a lonely and unhappy soul, Jonas,” the angel said sincerely. “And yet there is no evil in you. You are just... annoying.”

“Thanks.”

“And therefore our Lord took mercy on you and sent me to enlighten your days.”

“He sent you to enlighten my days and didn’t provide you with a cock? Well, good luck with that.” Jonas snorted again.

Micah didn’t look offended. “I know you take almost all pleasure in your life from sex. But that’s not the way.”

“So what are you gonna do?”

The angel took a step closer. “I only will touch you,” he said dramatically.

Jonas didn’t like where this was going and held up his hand. “Now, wait a second. I’m not convinced I want you to touch me.”

Micah furrowed his eyebrows. “Why not?”

“See, I have never given a flying fuck about your boss and, honestly, I’m not planning to start now. Despite the fact... well, obviously He’s the real thing too. Why would He actually care about me? I mean, there are heaps of people who *really* need Him. People who actually *pray* to Him. I’m not one of them. Can’t you just go and enlighten someone else’s days?”

“Who are you to decide who needs His intervention?” Micah asked, irritated.

“Okay, I don’t care about the others. I never have. But don’t you think I have some say in what I need?”

Micah just sighed. “It would be much easier for both of us if you stopped making such a fuss. Here’s the deal: I will touch you and then go away. A few seconds. Let me do my job and you will never see me again, although probably you will want to, just to thank me. You know, I have things to do, and standing here arguing with you is a waste of time.”

“Oh yeah, you’re on a tight schedule, I know.”

“Lord, he *is* annoying.”

“Maybe I like to be annoying. Maybe I like my life just as it is, and I don’t need it to be... enlightened and joyful,” Jonas argued.

Micah rolled his eyes. “Right. That’s exactly why you can’t sleep and why you snap at anybody who comes your way. Save me from this act. I’m an angel. You can’t really fool me.”

Jonas opened his mouth, but another thundering “Silence!” effectively shut him up. “Good,” Micah said approvingly. “Now where were we? Oh, the touch. Ready?”

Jonas growled. “Oh, fuck it. Yeah. Whatever.”

“Good boy.” Micah took a step closer and gently put his hand on Jonas’s forehead. Jonas closed his eyes and waited. For a couple of seconds, nothing moved.

Jonas didn’t feel any change. Surreptitiously, he opened one eye and squinted at Micah, who stood there with a beatific smile and his eyes closed. His smile slowly transformed into a frown. He muttered something under his breath and changed the position of his hand.

“Well?” Jonas finally asked.

“Hush. It’s not... you know, just so...” the angel babbled nervously.

“Nothing’s happening,” Jonas observed.

“Shut up. I know. Something is not right.”

After several more seconds, it was clear that nothing was going to happen. Micah took a step back and looked so confused Jonas almost took pity on him.

“Well, looks like your boss changed his mind,” he said.

Micah shook his head wildly, blond curls flying around. “He didn’t. I would know that.”

“No offense, but you’re just an angel.”

This time Micah *did* look offended. “Hey, I’m an angel of the Divine Plan. Besides that, why would He change his mind?”

It was ridiculous, but Jonas felt a bit disappointed. “I don’t know, mate. Ask Him.”

The confusion on Micah’s face was almost painful. “It doesn’t make sense. He insists I complete my mission. But... how?”

“I’m glad they have their own Catch-22 in heaven. ‘Go do your task’. ‘The task is impossible’. ‘Doesn’t matter, just go and do it’.”

“But it shouldn’t be impossible!” Micah cried in frustration.

Jonas sighed and returned behind his desk. “Well, mate, I’m sure I can’t help you. Go home and try to figure out what went wrong. If you still feel like touching me, come back when you learn how to do it properly.”

He opened his laptop, and after a while he glanced at the unhappy angel. “What? I’m on a tight schedule too. Go!”

Micah bit his lip. “I can’t,” he whispered.

“Look, I’m sure your boss won’t be pissed off. Just go back, tell Him what happened, and He would be glad to share His wisdom and teach you something.”

“No, I mean... I want to go back, but it’s not working. Looks like I’m... stuck here.”

“What?” Jonas yelled. “Are you nuts? You can’t stay here in my office. I have to work, you know, and people will eventually come in.

How am I supposed to explain this? ‘Oh, don’t mind him, he’s just an angel sent here to change my life, but somehow he fucked up and is stuck here’!”

“Don’t yell at me. It’s not my fault.” Micah looked like he was about to cry, which infuriated Jonas even more.

“And whose fault is it? Not mine, that’s for sure. Your boss’s? Oh, wait, He doesn’t make mistakes, right? So whose fucking fault is it?”

“Stop it,” Micah whispered, and Jonas could see tears in his eyes. Strangely enough, it helped him to regain his composure.

“Okay. No need to cry,” he said in a normal tone again. “Just think. You’ve been doing this every day for thousands of years, right?”

“Not really.” Micah shook his head.

“How come?”

“I have never touched anyone. I wasn’t supposed to until now.”

“Well, you *did* touch me. Maybe, that’s just it. Who said there should be lightning and thunder and God knows what else?”

“Not a storm, but you should have felt it. I should too. *Something* was supposed to happen. We should have felt the change!”

“Can’t you just call home and ask someone?”

Micah sighed. “It doesn’t work that way. I’m an angel. I have never been in trouble.” He looked genuinely anxious. “It was supposed to go smoothly and quickly.”

“Welcome to the real world, buddy.” Jonas grinned. “Now you can see how it is for us poor mortals.”

“I’ve seen it all, thank you. But this is....” Micah sighed. “I think if I say ‘not supposed to happen’ one more time, my head will explode.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Micah shrugged uncertainly. “Well, looks like I have to hang around until I figure out how to touch you.”

Jonas’s eyebrows shot up to his forehead. “What do you mean, ‘hang around’?”

“I can’t leave, so I have to stay with you.”

Jonas stood up and very resolutely said, “No. Forget it. You can’t

just sit here with your wings and... clothes, or whatever that is.”

Micah perked up slightly. “Oh, the wings are not necessary. All this is more like our traditional image. If you want to be an angel, you must look like one. Otherwise it would be a really difficult task to convince someone. How about this?”

Jonas blinked. The wings were gone, and Micah was suddenly dressed in smart casual wear, his hair tucked neatly in a ponytail. He looked... gorgeous. Even if you knew what was—or wasn’t—between his legs.

“Uh... okay. I suppose you don’t have to convince me anymore,” Jonas forced out. “This actually is much better. You look... good.”

Micah smiled shyly. “Thanks.”

Jonas caught himself. *He’s an angel*, he reminded himself. *An asexual being sculpted to perfection... in a way. He’s not real. Not that kind of real.*

But why he does look much hotter now than when he was almost naked?

And why am I thinking about him as being hot anyway?

“Okay, now. Just sit over there, let me work, and try to figure out what to do. Ask your boss for a sign or something.”

“Jonas, that’s blasphemy.”

“Whatever. Pretend you’re not here.”

MICAH did his best just sitting there, reading the newspaper. Jonas didn’t explain his presence to anybody, and since he was the boss, nobody dared to call him on it. Still, he was very self-conscious and asked his P.A. to cut his day’s schedule to the bone. Before lunch, he was ready to go—and to remove the angel from his office.

“You hungry?” Jonas asked as they marched alongside a very surprised secretary who was pretty sure this unknown man hadn’t come in through the office’s only entrance.

“I don’t eat.” Micah smiled.

“Right.” Jonas actually flushed a bit. “But I do, so if you don’t

mind, let's go somewhere and have lunch."

They found a perfect restaurant, not too posh and not too crowded. Jonas ordered a meal for himself and a drink for Micah.

"I don't drink either," the angel said in a stage whisper.

"I know, but it would be a bit strange if you just sat here and watched me eating."

"Good thinking."

"Of course. Do you think I became CEO of the company just because I was my father's son? Trust me, if he'd thought I was useless, he wouldn't have hesitated a second to fire me."

"I knew him," Micah said absent-mindedly, and Jonas almost drowned in his drink.

"What?" he spat out when he was through coughing.

Micah shrugged. "Well, as you observed, I've been around for some time, dealing with people."

"Are you trying to tell me that you... made an appearance to my father?"

"Oh, no! We have to be careful who we show ourselves to, you know. No, I was just around as usual, just to make sure everything went according to the plan."

Jonas didn't respond for a while. The waitress brought him his meal, but he just stared at his plate. "What did you think of him?"

"About your father?" Micah asked, as if they were talking about someone else. Jonas nodded, but his companion was still uncertain. "Uh, I don't know. He was... a man."

"Yeah, but what kind of man?"

Micah struggled with words. "It's hard to say. Very smart, stubborn, brave. Why?"

"Just asking." Jonas grabbed his fork and knife and attacked the steak. "So." He cleared his throat. "You don't eat or drink, so where does the water you need come from?"

"I don't need water," Micah said patiently.

"Well, I can see your eyes glisten, you have some saliva... where does it come from, and where does it go?"

“I don’t know. I don’t have a degree in angelic biology. Besides, you just want to change the subject.”

Jonas shot him a nasty look, but it was completely lost on Micah. “Have you figured out how to touch me and get out of here?”

Micah fidgeted with his untouched glass. “We probably just have to keep on trying.”

“Now that’s definite proof of your superior intelligence. You’re older than the whole of mankind, a supernatural being with a direct connection to God, and all you can come up with is ‘keep on trying’?”

Finally, Micah looked like he was really getting pissed off. “Well, Mr. Good-Thinking-CEO, if you have a better idea, I’m listening.”

“Me? First, this wasn’t my idea. I didn’t ask for an angel to come down from heaven to save me or whatever you tried to do. Second, it wasn’t my fault your little miracle hasn’t worked.”

They glared at each other across the table. Micah growled, “I need to get out of here as soon as possible. I’ve been here for couple of hours and I’m acting like a... human!”

“That’s a real tragedy. And I would be more than happy never to see you again.”

Micah stood up and strode away. Jonas watched him enter the bathroom and shook his head. “I hope they’re holding a pissing contest there,” he murmured. “They will definitely see something very cool.”

MICAH came back after a couple of minutes, and Jonas raised his eyebrow. “What was that about? I didn’t think you had a bladder.”

“I don’t,” Micah answered icily. “I just needed a break.”

“You don’t have much patience, for an angel.”

“You are too much, even for an angel.”

“Cool.” Jonas finished his meal. “Any new ideas?”

“No.” Neither of them elaborated on it, because obviously they would end up arguing again.

Jonas waved for the waitress. “Well then, let’s go home and keep

on trying. For some reason, I don't feel like being touched in public."

"Why not? I mean, it's not like it would be the first time a man touched you in public."

Jonas wanted to snap back again, but then he realized Micah was not being sarcastic, just genuinely curious. "You're not a man, and I don't want to look like I'm being baptized or miraculously healed."

Micah watched him. "I think that's a good description of it. Healing. And it certainly requires a miracle."

"Hey, I'm trying to be civil."

"Oh. Okay."

Jonas thought Micah would have a problem figuring out how to get in the car, but the angel apparently knew what he was doing and didn't need to be reminded about seat belts. Of course, he'd had millions of opportunities to watch people do everything.

Everything.

Jonas couldn't help but wonder if, before his mission, Micah had ever watched him having sex with some almost anonymous guy.

"So," he said to break the silence. "Looks like it's not true what they say."

"As in what?"

"That God hates homos."

Micah shook his head. "Of course not. Why should He? Would you hate platypuses?"

"What? Why platypuses? Do I look like a platypus?"

"No, it was just the first thing that came into my mind. So, seriously, do you hate platypuses?"

"That's nonsense. I don't care about animals, actually. I mean, it's not like I hunt or buy fur coats. They are...." He shrugged.

"Exactly. They have their place under the sun. So why would anybody hate them? The same with homos."

"I believe the actual word is 'gay'."

"Of course. I'm sorry."

There was silence again in the car, but this time Jonas felt it was

much better. If this cutie was going to touch him, they should build some rapport, anyway.

Jonas blinked. Since when did he care about building a rapport with anyone, not to mention a nonhuman being?

And why did he feel nervous leading Micah into his apartment? Jonas had never brought a man there. He always either went to the other guy's place or to a hotel. His apartment was another sanctuary, much more personal than his office. And nobody would get in.

For the first time, Jonas looked at his apartment and tried to guess how it would appear to someone who had just come in. Very elegant, modern, cozy, worth all the money he'd spent on the apartment and on the designer, who had done a great job. And gave a great blowjob, for that matter, but that was another story.

Micah wasn't looking at the furniture or the intricate and very smart light positioning. With his head bowed to the side, he was watching Jonas.

"So... this is where I live. Have you been here before?"

Micah just shrugged noncommittally.

"What?" Jonas wanted to know. "You knew my father, so you've been hanging around my family for some time, although I have no idea why."

"Not just your family. I've been to many places. It's too difficult to explain. I don't have a physical body. Well, most of the time. It's a completely different state of existence. You wouldn't understand that. No—" He raised his hands. "I'm not underestimating you. Humans just don't have the capacity to understand that. It's nothing like anything they know. It's like trying to explain astrophysics to a...."

"A platypus?" Jonas offered, and Micah smiled.

"Yeah. It doesn't mean the platypus is stupid. It can be the smartest platypus on Earth. But he has no idea about Earth itself and therefore cannot understand anything beyond that."

"On the other hand," Jonas argued, "the smartest astrophysicist on Earth would have no idea how to catch a fish or whatever those creatures eat."

"Why would an astrophysicist want to catch a fish?"

“And why would a platypus want to study astrophysics?”

Micah smiled again. “Just in case a platypus encountered an astrophysicist and they had to co-operate?”

Jonas found himself smiling and getting lost in Micah’s eyes. “Just how likely is that?”

“How likely is it that somebody would meet an angel?”

“Good point,” Jonas said, breaking the eye contact. “Well, dear astrophysicist, make yourself at home and think about your mission.”

Micah looked around a bit helplessly, and his gaze stopped at the bookshelves. “Hey,” he said almost excitedly. Jonas turned around on his way to kitchen. “I was thinking, well, the astrophysicist knows nothing about the platypus, right?”

“Obviously,” Jonas deadpanned.

“But who knows all about the platypus?”

“A zoologist?”

“Another platypus!” Micah exclaimed and triumphantly pointed at the bookshelves. “I know what people do, I have some idea how they think, but it’s just not enough. They need to tell me things, and nobody’s better at that than writers! Books! Since the angel-human touch is not working, I need to know about human touching! Not only observe it, but know what it feels like and what it means!”

Jonas thought Micah was too optimistic, but he just shrugged. “Be my guest. You can find everything there. Classics, contemporary, nonfiction, even some romance, I think. The library was my mother’s, before... well, while she still was able to read.”

Jonas retreated, although he could feel Micah’s gaze on him. He had no desire to discuss his mother’s state with him. Or anyone else.

Either Micah felt his dismissal or he was very eager to start reading, because he didn’t say a word, just dug into the books.

THEY avoided each other for the rest of the day. When Jonas sat down at the kitchen table with his TV dinner, Micah emerged from the living room and sat opposite him.

“You know, platypus actually rarely eat fish,” Micah said unexpectedly. “Usually they hunt for worms and fresh-water prawns.”

Jonas gazed at his plate and suddenly wasn’t hungry anymore. “Okay. I didn’t get that metaphor.”

Micah looked at him, puzzled. Then he got it. “Oh, no, it wasn’t a metaphor. I’m talking about an actual platypus. I didn’t know what they ate, either, so I did some research.”

Jonas sighed. “Okay, that’s very nice, and I’m happy to know what platypuses eat, but, frankly, I don’t think you will find your answers in zoology books.”

“Oh, I read really quickly,” Micah said merrily. “And, actually, I might have come across an idea.”

“I’m all ears.”

“People touch each other all the time, right?”

“I suppose so.”

“Different touches have different meanings, but if I just touch you as anyone would, it’s... well, it’s just as if anyone else had touched you.”

“I can’t see where you’re going.”

“It should be something more,” Micah explained enthusiastically. “More intimate.”

“Intimate?” Jonas repeated, genuinely scared.

“What if I kissed you?”

Jonas’s jaw dropped almost to the floor. “What?”

“Kiss. In all the books I’ve read, a kiss is probably the most intimate and personal thing you can do with another person. Well, besides the obvious *more* intimate contact, but we can’t do that for equally obvious reasons,” Micah finished, looking at the dumbfounded Jonas expectantly. “Well?” he asked after a few seconds.

“What?”

“What do you say to that?”

“Uh... kissing you?”

“Exactly!”

“But you’re not a man. You’re not even a human being.”

“So? I have mouth. Do I need something else for kissing?”

“Uh... no, I guess not.”

“C’mon, then! I’ll be out of here in no time.”

Jonas stood up as if he was walking in his sleep. Was this beautiful creature really so eager to kiss him? He found the idea somewhat startling.

Micah didn’t let him think too much about it. He simply held Jonas by his shoulders and planted a nice, long kiss on his lips.

Jonas closed his eyes... and felt nothing. The angel’s lips were soft, warm, but the kiss felt wrong. As if he was making out with some complete stranger in a front of camera. He broke away and pushed Micah away from him.

“I guess it didn’t work,” Micah observed, and Jonas once again felt the tide of white fury.

“Of course not!” he yelled. “You don’t know how to kiss. You have no idea what a kiss actually is! You have no desire to kiss. You don’t have hormones to drive you! You’ve been around for millions of years, and another million years won’t help you, Mr. Astrophysicist!”

Micah was totally shocked. “Jonas?” He tried to say something, but Jonas stormed out of room with a final, “Leave me alone!”

SO Micah did. Jonas hid in his bedroom, ostensibly sleeping, but he couldn’t even close his eyes. His brain was slowly frying, tormented by the inexplicable fury and images of a puzzled Micah.

I’ve hurt him.

It didn’t make any sense. The angel shouldn’t have been hurt. Jonas shouldn’t have felt bad about it. And yet....

Jonas moaned and got up from bed. Barefoot, he ventured out of the bedroom and found Micah sitting in the dark, yet still reading.

For a moment, they just watched each other. Then Jonas cleared his throat. “Look. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. It’s not your fault. I don’t know why I was so angry.”

“That’s okay,” Micah replied softly. “People are sometimes

irrational. Maybe you were just upset because it didn't work."

Jonas felt like he had been punched in the stomach. Until now, he actually hadn't been thinking about Micah's mission. He wanted that *kiss* to work—which was insane, not to mention obviously completely different from what Micah wanted.

"Right," Jonas said, suddenly tired and unable to think of anything more. "Well... goodnight."

"Goodnight, Jonas," Micah said with a hint of smile, and Jonas couldn't help but think about how nice it sounded.

JONAS was worried about Micah tagging along the next day, but surprisingly, Micah said he didn't actually need to go with him to work and was absolutely happy staying at home and reading some more. Jonas was first relieved and then even more worried, because when he left for work, he discovered something odd.

He could actually feel Micah's presence. He just hadn't been aware of it until he couldn't feel it anymore. As if having an angel sitting at his home wasn't bad enough, he had some strange connection with him.

"Great," Jonas confided to the rear-view mirror. "I have my own angel. And I miss him now. Can you fucking believe it?"

And, oh, did he miss him! He caught himself a few times wanting to call home and ask how the angel was doing. He resisted, because if there was anything more bizarre than an angel in his life, it would be talking to him on the phone.

It was strange enough to hurry home to see him, to *feel* him again. And he was right. As he approached his apartment, Micah's presence felt stronger and stronger. Along with a smell of something unfamiliar.

"Micah?" he asked suspiciously from the hall.

"In the kitchen!"

Jonas headed there. "What are you... cooking?"

Micah grinned at him. "Don't be so surprised. The astrophysicist can tell the difference between a worm and a prawn without having to be a platypus."

Jonas was grinning too. “Yeah, but how can an astrophysicist know which worm is edible? I mean, you didn’t taste it, did you?”

“No, but I can smell. Are you hungry?”

“Well, let’s give it a shot. What is it?”

“A vegetable stir-fry. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Should be okay.” Jonas sat down while Micah finished the dinner and ceremoniously put a plate in front of him. Jonas took a mouthful.

“It’s very good,” he said.

“Surprised again.”

“Well, cooking is not something angels are known for.”

“I needed to do something to help me think. I read almost all of your books, and it was so much information I just needed a break.”

“And did it help?”

Micah blushed. “Not really. I enjoyed the cooking too much.”

“That’s good. Angels need a break, too, I guess.”

Neither of them mentioned Micah’s mission for the rest of the day, and Jonas didn’t mind at all.

THE next few days brought a comfortable routine. Jonas spent his days in his office and Micah at the city library. Since he never asked for a key or money, Jonas assumed he was able to transport himself wherever he wanted to go.

Micah even got into movies, methodically watching every DVD in Jonas’s collection as well as anything that was on TV. Sometimes he got upset because suddenly he perceived the life of humans from a very different perspective. He had plenty of questions. Most of them Jonas wasn’t able to answer, try as he might.

After that kissing fiasco, Micah didn’t try to touch him again. Strangely enough, sometimes Jonas found himself longing for his touch. He had to remind himself that this touch would be just the same as that kiss: without real desire, it would be like a handshake with a complete stranger.

And yet Micah's presence was something he enjoyed enormously. His odd mixture of childlike naïveté and millions of years of experience was as adorable as his smile. Jonas loved to make him smile.

On Saturday, Jonas got up as usual. Micah was reading some unfamiliar book, and Jonas decided he didn't need to know where he had stolen it from.

"Good morning. Going to work on Saturday?"

"Uh... no. I'm going to see my mother," Jonas said somewhat uncomfortably.

"Oh, okay." Micah closed the book and got up from the chair.

"No, no, no. I mean—alone."

"Why?"

"It's a personal thing, you know."

"I'd like to meet her."

"For what? She's... she's not herself anymore. She used to be... larger than life. Now she doesn't recognize me anymore. Hell, she doesn't recognize the world anymore."

Micah came closer and put his hand on Jonas's shoulder. "Hey. I've seen things like that before. You don't have to be ashamed."

"I'm not!" Jonas protested, shaking Micah's hand off. "Whatever. I can't really prevent you from coming along, can I?"

Micah shrugged almost apologetically.

They spent the ride in an almost uncomfortable silence, something Jonas wasn't accustomed to anymore. But he didn't break the silence, and Micah soon gave up his attempts at conversation.

"Mr. Mason." The nurse beamed at them. "We've been waiting for you." She glanced at Micah curiously but didn't ask anything, and Jonas didn't offer any explanation.

"How is she?" he wanted to know.

The nurse smiled. "Today she's having a good day. She actually tried to comb her hair by herself."

"Is she speaking?"

"No, Mr. Mason." She was still smiling. Jonas just nodded. His

mother hadn't spoken for a long time, and he couldn't really expect she would ever start again, but still....

Without further interrogation, he left the nurse at the station, and followed by Micah, he went to his mother's room.

The nursing home was designed to make everyone feel cheerful, but as far as its inhabitants were concerned, it failed miserably. Unlike other facilities Jonas had seen before he decided where to put his mother—and a considerable amount of money too—this one made a special effort to conceal the inevitable smell of urine.

Jonas's mother was sitting in her room, silent, cautious, and still on the verge of fear.

"Hi, Mom," Jonas said. She glanced his way and studied him for a moment, but then she looked at her hands, which were moving restlessly on her lap.

Jonas approached her and sat opposite her, taking her hand. She didn't protest, but she watched their hands as if they were something potentially dangerous.

"The nurse said you're having a good day. It's nice outside. We can take you out for a while, what do you think? You love to walk. You have always been a marathon walker, remember?"

She wasn't listening to him. Her eyes were fixed on something above his shoulder. Jonas inadvertently followed her gaze. She was staring at Micah, who was standing there, quiet and serious.

"Uh, Mom. This is Micah. He is... well, he's actually an angel. He dropped by on Monday and hasn't left since. It's a long story, and I don't want to confuse you any more."

Micah came closer and squatted down next to Jonas. All that time, Mrs. Mason held his gaze. Micah reached up and very gently put his hand to her cheek before Jonas had time to warn him that his mother hated being touched. And then there was nothing to say, as she smiled, leaned into Micah's touch, and closed her eyes.

"What... what is it?" Jonas whispered, bewildered.

"She can feel me," Micah said softly.

"Same as I can?" Jonas asked before thinking about it. Their eyes met, and Micah only nodded as he withdrew his hand.

Mrs. Mason opened her eyes, and Jonas's heart skipped a beat. There was something in them he hadn't seen for a long time.

"Jonas?" she asked suddenly.

Unable to talk, unable to even breathe, he only nodded.

"God, you're getting old!" she said, then glanced at her hands. "I guess that makes me ancient," she observed.

"Mom," he almost sobbed.

"Stop looking at me like that." She looked at Micah. "And who is this?"

"Uh... this is Micah. He's... my friend."

"Jonas, I'm a big girl. If he's your lover, I can deal with it. Must be someone special if you brought him along to see your demented mother. Well, at least you have good taste."

Jonas didn't know if he was about to cry or laugh. "Mom, he's not my lover."

"Pity," she said, offering Micah her hand. "I'm Jonas's mother. Call me Malin. My parents were Swedish, you know. Hence Jonas's name. Well, with 'Micah', you haven't had much luck either, have you?"

"I don't use my name very often." Micah smiled.

"I see." She nodded. "You're not from this world, are you?"

Micah didn't answer, and Jonas just exhaled. "How did you know?"

She looked at him again with a hint of annoyance. "I'm dying, Jonas. My soul is halfway to somewhere else, and I'm just waiting until this body finally gives up."

"Mom, don't say that."

"I'm sixty-five and I can say whatever I fucking please." She took a deep breath. "Your father hated when I swore. So." She turned her head back to Micah. "Is this it? Are you here to take me along?"

"No, Malin. That's not my job."

"Good Lord," she murmured. "I have to suffer here with those annoying chirpy nurses for God knows how long. Does that mean you're here for Jonas? Perhaps, I don't know, to beat some sense into him? God knows I failed at that."

“We’ll see what I can do,” Micah said cryptically.

Malin shook her head. “My thoughts are getting swirly again.” She looked sharply at Micah and nodded. “Oh, I got it. My last chance. I have no idea what to say.”

“What are you talking about?” Jonas had a sinking feeling this was not going to end well.

“I’m being allowed to say goodbye to you, son, but I don’t know how. I will be here for a while, but I’m out of my mind and don’t really care what’s going on.” She frowned, trying to focus. “Okay. Jonas, I know I haven’t been the best possible mother, but I tried. And you know what—I’m not worried about you. I can go.”

“You can’t,” Jonas whispered.

She took his face into her hands and smiled. “Shut up. I don’t have much time. One more thing, Jonas William Mason. You’d better keep this guy. He’s really nice.”

Jonas was crying and laughing at the same time. “Mom, he’s an angel.”

“Oh. I forgot. I’m forgetting again,” she said, and a hint of panic crept into her voice. “Just in case, make sure someone shoots you before you end up like this. Because this sucks, you know.”

For a couple of seconds, they stared into each other’s eyes... and then she was gone. She swept her gaze somewhere else, and her hands moved back to her lap.

“Mom?” He took her hand. She withdrew it, startled.

Micah’s hand on his shoulder felt warm, comforting. “Jonas.”

He looked up wildly. “Bring her back! Please!”

Micah just shook his head. “I can’t. She’s too far gone.”

“Please!”

“Jonas, I can’t.”

He stood up, violently wiping away tears. “Of course you can! You did it!”

“I can’t. That was it.”

“What kind of useless angel are you?” Jonas yelled. Malin whimpered and tried to get away from him. Jonas saw it, and it only

fueled his anger. “You failed. What good are you?” he hissed, ignoring Micah’s troubled expression and very obvious pain. It was too much. Jonas just stormed out, not looking anywhere. He ran by the surprised nurse and jumped into his car. He drove like a madman, away from all that pain, from the angel he loved and hated, from his mother who was and wasn’t there.

THEORETICALLY, there wasn’t anything bad that could happen to Micah. He was an angel, immortal, invulnerable, capable of disabling an army with nothing more than his voice. But Jonas was still worried and pissed off with himself for leaving Micah alone. At one point, he was already sitting in his car, getting ready to go back, but suddenly he was certain Micah was not at the nursing home anymore, and Jonas had no idea where to look for him.

He ran upstairs, secretly expecting to see Micah sitting in his chair with a book, but there was nobody there, and Jonas knew it even before he opened the door. All he could do was sit in the dark and feel miserable.

When someone knocked on the door, Jonas jumped up and ran to the hall. He knew it was him—and it was. Micah was standing outside, and he looked like hell. No pun intended.

“May I come in?” he asked nervously.

Jonas was unable to speak, flooded with the greatest relief of his life. He just nodded and opened the door wider.

Micah sheepishly stopped in his tracks in the hall. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“What?” Jonas’s eyes bugged out. “For what?”

Micah sighed. “Because I screwed it up. I knew how badly you wanted to speak to your mother once again. I knew that she, on some level, wanted to say goodbye. I didn’t realize how painful it could be for you.”

Jonas rubbed his eyes and let out a shaky laugh. “I wanted to apologize too.”

“You? Why?”

“I was thinking about it. The platypus tried to learn astrophysics and realized he was stupid. It’s not him in the world of astrophysics. It’s you in my world, and I should have known that. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I should have thanked you. You’re here for me, and you do what you can. I’m sorry, Micah.” Words were rolling off his tongue, and he couldn’t stop them. “I was so scared you had taken off and you were never coming back. I couldn’t stand the thought of losing you.”

The angel’s eyes were teary, and Jonas took a step closer. “Oh no. Please, don’t cry.”

“It’s... I have never heard anything so nice,” Micah said, and suddenly he was in Jonas’s arms and they were kissing. And this time, it wasn’t like making out with a stranger. This kiss was passionate, full of love, and Jonas didn’t give a shit about Micah’s anatomical incorrectness or the fact that he wasn’t human at all.

When Jonas broke their kiss to catch his breath, he said, still shakily, “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Me neither.”

“And I don’t care.”

“Neither do I.”

Something was moving under Jonas’s palms. Something soft and feathery. Jonas took a step back. Micah’s wings were growing rapidly, and his smart casual dress was suddenly gone—he was back to his loincloth and nothing else.

“Jonas?” Micah asked worriedly.

“What are you doing?” Jonas gestured at his outfit.

Micah looked at himself. “It’s not me,” he said, and suddenly his eyes grew wide. “Oh no.”

“What?” Jonas demanded. The hair on the back of his neck stood at attention. There was something definitely wrong with all this.

“I made it,” Micah said disbelievingly. “I completed my mission.”

“What? Now? How come?”

“I... wasn’t supposed to touch you *physically*!” Micah shook his head. “I was so stupid to take it literally. *I* am the platypus! And not a smart one.”

Jonas's throat went dry. "You're not leaving now, are you?"

"What?" Micah was in shock. He listened for something Jonas couldn't hear. "He's calling me back," he whispered.

"Don't go."

"I don't want to," Micah replied, sounding surprised with his own answer.

Suddenly Jonas became aware of another presence, and this one wasn't pleasant at all. His senses howled under an overload of contradicting inputs. The air was perfectly still, but Jonas felt like he was in the middle of a hurricane. Nothing changed in the room, yet his eyes stung from the intense light coming from nowhere; he couldn't tell whether it was too hot or too cold, and he was hardly able to breathe. His knees gave out as he was trying to catch his breath.

"It's Him," Micah explained coolly. He was pale but calm. Jonas felt his hand on his forehead, and it helped a bit. "Don't worry," Micah whispered. "He won't harm you."

"What about you?"

Their eyes met. "I made my choice," Micah said, and he smiled. Sadly. He didn't have to say that The Boss wasn't into long talks.

Jonas closed his eyes as the other presence grew stronger and stronger. It didn't help much. He couldn't feel Micah's hand anymore, and his brain, frying from the supernatural overload, produced only one coherent and shockingly cold thought: *What happens to insubordinate angels? Aren't they put into some lovely place to suffer forever?*

"God!" he yelled, without realizing what he was doing. "Listen to me! Please!" Nothing changed, but Jonas tried to go on—and not to lose consciousness. "Whatever You're doing to him, stop it!"

This time, Jonas felt a little indecision or surprise. "Micah said he's here to fill my heart with love and joy. That was your intention, right? So how the fuck am I supposed to be happy without him?" Jonas could have sworn he heard his brain crying in pain. "It was *Your* will, damn it! They say, 'Thy will be done'. So be it!" he yelled, and that was it.

The presence was too strong to bear, and just as Jonas was about to pass out, suddenly there was a loud *crack*, a real one this time, and he felt a burst of wind swirling around him.

And then everything was gone. Jonas lay huddled on the floor, catching his breath and trying to feel Micah's presence, to no avail.

He couldn't even cry. He wanted to lie there or just cease to exist. Anything was better than feeling that void and listening to those moans....

Wait a second. It wasn't him who was moaning.

Jonas opened his eyes. A few feet from him lay another person. Wingless, but in the same loincloth. And the person was moving and moaning.

"Micah?" Jonas croaked, crawling towards him.

"Awww. My head."

"Micah! You're here!"

"Am I?" Micah looked at him dizzily. "Jonas?"

"It's me... you're here!" Jonas blinked as his eyes stung.

Micah obviously didn't share his enthusiasm. "I feel... awful."

"Yeah, your boss is a bit too much to hang out with," Jonas babbled, feeling as if he had narrowly escaped death. Considering the nature of his latest visitor, he probably had.

"I can't feel him anymore," Micah said anxiously. "Everything is different." He swallowed once and then again, surprised. "Uh... I think... I'm a mortal," he squeaked.

Jonas stared at him and then cautiously touched his hand, neck, face. "I can feel a pulse. And you feel... different."

"Oh." Micah was too shaken to speak.

"Different in a good way," Jonas assured him, kneeling. "Can you stand up?"

"I'm not sure." Micah moved cautiously, trying his legs. "I think so. I..." He halted, and his eyes went wide. Kneeling, he tore his loincloth off and wordlessly stared at the perfectly shaped and considerably sized cock hanging between his legs.

"What the...." He moaned.

"I think that's your boss's goodbye gift. You have a cock. And balls too. Welcome to my world. Every platypus has a set of those." Jonas tried hard not to laugh.

“I have a penis!” Micah exclaimed. “What am I supposed to do with it?”

“Well, I can show you. But you need to recover first. It’s probably not that easy to be born at an adult age.”

Jonas tried to help him get up, but Micah shoved his hand off. “Wait. I think I’m going to throw up,” he said miserably.

This time, Jonas burst into laughter. He sat leaning against the wall and waited until Micah stopped vomiting. He felt as if he had the worst hangover ever, he had been arguing with God, there was a naked former angel retching in front him... and Jonas’s heart was filled with love and joy.

MATTHEW VANDREW was born somewhere in Europe, and once he got fed up with it, he moved to Australia. He doesn't have a husband, children, or pets, so his only company is characters he creates and torments with secret and very unsettling pleasure. For the rest of the world, he is just this nice what's-his-funny-name guy. He's a man of very few words, so nobody actually believes him when he comes out as a writer.

THE ANGEL BLUES

Cornelia Grey

IT WAS 11:32 p.m., it was dark, and the windows spread a cold halo into the room when Morgan decided he'd had *enough*.

He was slumped on his favorite armchair, old and puffy and placed at a strategic distance from his hi-fi, where Robert Johnson's *King of the Delta Blues Singers, Vol. II* was currently playing in hushed tones. Morgan stretched his arms, dark skin tense over his aching muscles, and poured himself another bourbon.

The glass was heavy and cool; the ice clicked as he lifted it to his head, pressing it against a throbbing temple. The cold spread slowly, a fresh veil smothering the pain, if just a little. Morgan closed his eyes and tried to relax against the backrest. The leather squeaked, adjusting under his weight. Morgan half-heartedly wished he could just shut his brain off. He distantly envisioned himself slamming the heavy tumbler against his forehead over and over until the bone broke open and the pulsing and throbbing and insisting refrains were free to drip out. There was no silence inside his head.

Mr. Johnson's chords reverberated through the empty room, curling around him in sleepy waves. It was pleasant. It almost helped.

"That doesn't sound like a good idea," said a voice, light and unobtrusive, slipping in as the guitar took a breath before unfolding in the finale.

"It was just a thought," Morgan grunted, without bothering to open his eyes. A trickle of breeze brushed against his neck, which was kind of nice. "Not like I'm that stupid."

"Yeah, well. It's good to know," the voice commented, seeming rather amused. Morgan could already feel a pinch of irritation towards the stranger, who thought it appropriate to—

—and right about then it *sunk in*. His hand was on his belt, the gun already in mid-air before his brain finally, *finally* caught up (*Assess: analyze the threat. Be rapid, efficient.*). His eyes snapped open, already scanning the room, and goddamn it, it looked like he actually *was* that stupid.

The window had been pushed open; the curtains were parted, and the street gleamed through the gap, peeking into the room, blinking. There was—Morgan’s gun was steady in his hand as he barked, “Freeze. Hands above your head. Now!”—there was someone, a slim young man, perched on the windowsill. And, in the mid-shadow of the room, the faint blue light spreading from the stereo display, he seemed to be smiling, of all things.

Morgan blinked and resisted the urge to shake his head. Something was *off*. “You. I said, hands above your head. Right *now*.”

The guy just looked at him, the hint of a smug smile curling his lips up. “You can relax. I assure you I pose no threat,” he said and leaned forward, hands folded in his lap. His eyes were bright and benign and oddly sort of sparkling. Morgan wondered why he should find that so damn irritating.

“I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t take your word for it,” Morgan replied, his aim accurate and steady. “Now, if you would—”

“Hands above my head. I heard,” the guy replied, his tone amused. He still did not comply, however. He tilted his head to the side, staring somewhere to Morgan’s left. He seemed to listen, intent, as the rumble of engines from outside seeped into the room, and the night air wove through his hair, wavy and messy, long enough to brush his chin. “‘Me and the Devil Blues’. This is one of the classics,” he said approvingly. His fingers were tapping the time on his thigh. “I can assume there is ‘Crossroads Blues’ too?”

“Yeah. Couple of songs on,” Morgan replied. He blinked again. He shouldn’t get distracted. But the street noises mixed beautifully with the song, counter-pointing it beat by beat, sliding around it with ease. The stranger’s fingers tapped the denim of his jeans, light and vaguely hypnotic. Morgan had to tear his gaze away, willing his eyes back on the gun. He should probably *stop talking*. “You know Robert Johnson?” he asked instead, the gun beginning to weigh on his tired arm.

“You could say that,” the stranger replied, gentle. “Also, you could put that down.” He motioned with his chin toward the gun. Morgan groaned and shifted the glass pressed against his temple.

“I don’t think so,” he said. For some reason, he couldn’t quite drag himself out of the heavy, quiet atmosphere that seemed to have enveloped the room. He sought sharpness and focus, and his senses responded too slowly, as if they’d been enveloped in warm, thick molasses. Morgan felt a tug of dread somewhere near his nape. He could have been drugged. He tried to remember if the whiskey tasted different, *wrong*, but he couldn’t seem to focus. “Hands on your head and identify yourself. This is your last warning.”

The stranger smiled, and it was shiny and silent and strangely luminous—and bordering on *infuriating*, now. “That’s a lot of rationality from someone who was just thinking of cracking his head open with a glass,” he said, all too happily. Morgan swallowed.

“I said it was just a thought,” he couldn’t quite stop himself from protesting, and it was a second too long before he realized what he was *saying*, and his blood temperature seemed to suddenly drop a good few degrees. He shifted his gaze on the smiling stranger, suddenly cautious. Somehow, the gun did not quite make him feel *that* safe anymore. “And you... you are not supposed to know that,” he said slowly. The stranger looked back at him, and God, if only he’d *stop smiling*.

“Yeah, well. Don’t worry,” he said. “I won’t tell anyone.” He shook his head as he chuckled to himself, a stray lock falling in front of his eyes. He brushed it back, careless, and adjusted himself more comfortably on the wooden window frame. “As I said, you can put that down. Perhaps a sip of that drink of yours would help.”

Morgan had been in all sorts of dangerous, crappy, even flat-out deadly situations, and he’d learned how to keep his cool and remain rational. He had *rules*, strong and unyielding like fucking iron bars, and he followed them without cutting himself a single inch. It was easier to make it out alive when the mind was not crippled by terror, the logic not smothered by screaming animal instincts. He clung to controlling his mind and body when there was nothing else he *could* control; he’d learned to appropriately restrain himself in the face of danger and fear, and if surviving this far was any indicator, he knew that it worked.

And that was pretty much why, Morgan mused, he hadn't got a fucking clue of how he should be behaving *now*. He tried to visualize the situation, adapt it to recognizable patterns, locate the danger, the unsolved equation, hazard a solution. There he was, sitting in his armchair in his freaking living room at ass o'clock in the morning and pointing a gun at a cheerful, blues-loving stranger who sat in his window and who had, apparently, just read his mind. Not much logic to be found there.

"You're not freaking out, are you?" said stranger inquired, his eyes glinting merrily. He seemed to be enjoying this, and Morgan's temper was quick to kick up again.

"That's *enough*," he growled, and he armed the gun with a flick of his thumb. The familiar weight of the weapon seemed to anchor him to a reality he could recognize, and he clung to that, grateful. "I demand to know who you are and what the hell you're doing in my house."

The stranger's eyes were gentle on Morgan's face, then seemed to grow distant, his smile softening as he tucked one hand under his chin. In the fragment of silence, Morgan could hear the music humming in the background in a familiar pattern.

"I was hoping I'd get to hear this before I left," the stranger said dreamily. Morgan thought he could detect a nostalgic shadow in his voice, but then, he couldn't be sure of much. "It's beautiful, don't you think?" The guy remained silent for an instant, listening, then stretched his shoulders, leaning back, his balance shifting dangerously toward the *outside*. "Well, well. I'll be on my way."

Morgan gripped the gun and made to get up, mild anger flaring behind his eyes. "Stop. I order you to stop *right*—"

"See you soon, agent," the stranger said, a tiny, luminous smile nestled on his lips. And just like that Morgan found himself alone, gun ready to blast toward an empty window, the old "Crossroads Blues" tune tap-dancing in his ears.

It was 9:40 in the morning when Morgan was awakened by the persistent shrieking of his cell phone, and his blossoming headache was not helped by Chief Wilson's yelling. After a groaned apology and a

promise that he'd show up at the station within the next ten minutes—which they both knew would be at least forty-five, but it didn't mean they had to *admit* it—Morgan dropped the phone on the nearby table and leaned forward, stretching his aching muscles. God, his neck was freaking killing him. He brought a hand up to rub it, slowly. He could at least have fallen asleep on the bloody couch.

His eyes shifted to the window. It was closed, as it was supposed to be. He got up, his every joint protesting, left knee threatening to give out, and went to shift the curtain, taking a look outside. The light was grey and uniform, and the traffic was already a mess, stretching out in a frazzled thread four stories below. Morgan tried the window, and the lock did not give. He rubbed at his neck one last time, hand brushing up to his shaved head, then dropped the curtain, and wandered to the coffee machine. No way for anyone to climb all the way up there, and the window was in perfect order. Case closed.

Morgan poured himself a cup of black, steaming coffee and vaguely wondered whether he'd had a very vivid dream, or if his therapist was right and he was finally losing it.

MORGAN groaned, eyes closed, as he tried to resist the urge to lay his head on the table and possibly slip into a coma right there beside his whiskey on the rocks. He could not remember the last time he got some decent sleep. The familiar exhaustion was pooling at the back of his head, weighing on his forehead, his eyeballs. It was nothing new.

He'd had his fair amount of rough cases over the years. He had deaths weighing on his conscience and bodies tiptoeing into his dreams to haunt his nights. Like many of his people, he had his secret list of names and faces of those who fell under his fire. Those were the ones he saw when he couldn't bear to close his eyes, the ones who seemed to wait for him hidden in his bedroom, in the cracks of the ceiling above his couch, around the small cone of light spreading from his lamp. There had been weeks when he would resign himself to sleeping fifteen minutes every now and then sitting at his desk at the station, hidden behind piles of overdue paperwork, in order to escape them. At times, it was frustration that kept him pacing in the evenings, that made him turn and toss hours away under the covers until he finally gave up and shrugged

back into his jacket, heading out to double-check some file or hunt down another mole to question. Morgan should have been well used to missing sleep. It was nothing new.

At times, trying to take care of the city felt like trying to set up traps for goddamn ghosts, and it drove him positively insane.

“Hiding in the crappiest bar of the year and drowning brain cells in alcohol. Not exactly how I would imagine a hot-shot agent to behave,” a familiar voice said, amiably ironic. Morgan snorted and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I am way too exhausted to be dealing with you right now. Can you just disappear?” he said, not very hopeful. It never worked, anyway.

Of course, there was the stranger. That tall, lean stranger with the messy chestnut hair, who seemed to take pleasure in materializing around him at the most inappropriate times. The young man who stared at him with bright brown eyes and mocked and talked and never shut the hell up and who melted away in shades as soon as Morgan shifted his gaze. He’d been a constant fixture in Morgan’s life for some time now, appearing in his car, the locker room at work, his goddamn bathroom, even—just that little touch of crazy he’d been missing, Morgan thought. The guy had no sense of personal space whatsoever, and—and the things he knew, some of the things he *said*. Morgan had no good explanation for any of it, except perhaps that something in his brain must have finally given in.

It was kind of nice, too, at times. If he tried not to think of himself as a rather pathetic man who actually enjoyed the company of his own hallucinations, that was.

Morgan resisted the urge to groan.

“Do not trouble yourself. I will only be a few minutes,” the stranger said, his smile well evident in his voice. Morgan wondered how the hell he *did* that. “Go home, agent. It’s time,” he pretty much instructed, his lean fingers reaching out to trace slow, intricate patterns in the air above the rim of Morgan’s glass.

Morgan snorted. He was too tired even to protest against his hallucination for ordering him around. Also, it was not like it wasn’t good advice. Perhaps people should listen to their hallucinations more often. Perhaps, instead, that was what happened before they picked up unregistered shotguns and set out to destroy portions of world. “Yeah.

One more drink,” he said, half-heartedly rubbing a hand over his head. “You gonna vanish again anytime soon?”

The stranger, who was in fact quite a familiar stranger by now, just smirked, although it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I was planning on walking out the door,” he said. He fixed his gaze on Morgan’s half-full glass, and his hands stilled. He straightened his index finger with childish concentration and used it to push the tumbler across the table, right in front of Morgan. “One more drink only,” he added and flicked the side of the glass. He pushed his chair back, silent on the squeaky linoleum floor, and walked to the door without looking back, hands tucked in the pockets of his baggy jeans.

Morgan wondered if he should consider the fact that he’d actually seen him leave for once as progress. Maybe things were more normal than he thought. Maybe he was not *that* crazy just yet, and there was a perfectly good, rational, and madness-free explanation, one which wouldn’t lead to him spending his sunset years in an asylum with the sole company of a sexy and irritating product of his imagination.

Which was when he decided to take a sip from his drink, and whereupon realized his whiskey had somehow changed into *fucking orange juice*.

Morgan swallowed, a single, freezing chill crawling its way down his back. “What the hell,” he murmured, turning to look at the door—which remained closed and seemed, oddly, to be smirking at him.

“HONESTLY. Haven’t you got anything better to do than hang around in my living room?”

Morgan leaned against the doorframe and popped the cap of the beer he’d just taken out of the fridge, slowly shaking his head. He’d walked back from the kitchen to find his favorite chair occupied by a familiar figure, sitting cross-legged, with messy hair and an oversized ugly sweater, and he couldn’t even bring himself to be surprised anymore.

“Yeah. Well, I rather enjoy your living room,” the stranger said, his head bent over the pile of CDs scattered on his lap. He picked one up and hummed in approval. “‘The original blues legend’. One of my favorites,”

he said, his blinding smile blossoming. Morgan took a sip and chuckled, then dropped onto the couch, stretching his legs.

“So, I’ve come up with a few options,” he began conversationally. “About you. And why you seem to pop up all over the place.”

The stranger lifted his gaze, still holding onto the CD. “By all means, let’s hear them, then,” he said, one eyebrow raised in kind curiosity.

Morgan slumped more comfortably into the cushions. “First, chances are you are just a figment of my imagination. I’m still pretty sure I made you up. You’re a hallucination.”

“Is that so?” the stranger commented, his smile unreadable. Strangely, Morgan could not remember the last time he had felt so... at peace.

“Yeah. And since I’m not on drugs, you may well be the sign of a deadly brain tumor or that my brain’s simply given up and is circling the drain. And remember,” he added, pointing his Beck’s toward the stranger, “if I end my days in an asylum because of you, I’ll be holding one serious grudge.”

The stranger just leaned back in the armchair, head cocked slightly to the side, that Mona Lisa smile still ghosting on his lips. Morgan sort of wondered if hallucinations could *flirt*.

“Second option, you’re someone’s ghost, and you’ve come to haunt me until I yield to whatever evil plan you have in mind. Or maybe an alien exploring outside the mother ship to study human behavior, and you wear those sweaters to hide the green tentacles. Or—you are some sort of—guardian angel. There, that’s all I can think of.” He paused, considering, and shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m actually having this conversation,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble in the room. The stranger chuckled.

“I guess all those years as a detective weren’t in vain,” he said, voice clear and almost luminous as it trickled across the half-darkness. He brought a lean hand up to brush the usual stray lock away from his face. Morgan’s eyes were drawn for a moment to the place where the man’s hair curled gracefully against his neck, brushing his shoulders. “At least I didn’t need to sprout wings and whip out a harp before you got it.”

Morgan's eyebrow shot up, almost of its own accord. "You're kidding," he exclaimed, intrigued, torn between fascination and a healthy dose of skepticism. "You really don't seem very angelic to me."

"And why would that be, if I may ask?" the stranger inquired, amusement now plain on his face. It should have been really irritating. Somehow—it wasn't quite.

"You're wearing jeans and a sweater. You've got no feathers," Morgan said gravely. "Also, it's not like you've done lots of angelic stuff around me, apart from a couple of tricks which would better suit a failed magician than an angel. No offense."

"None taken."

"And you like the blues," Morgan added, taking a sip of his beer. He felt strangely relaxed. Perhaps giving in to madness was the way to go for a quiet, happy life, he considered. That and a stereo system. "Not very appropriate for an angel. Isn't it supposed to be the devil's music?"

The stranger's eyes seemed to soften. "I guess you could say that," he said, barely louder than a whisper, and there he was again, seeming to travel miles in the space of an instant, suddenly as distant as a faraway light drowned in the mist. Morgan blinked.

"Perhaps I may be... slightly unorthodox. That, I will concede."

Morgan downed the rest of his beer and shook his head, smiling. "My money's still on the impending madness."

The stranger picked up the CDs and placed them on the nearby table in a neat pile. "Do you really need the wings and harp to believe?" he asked.

"That would be a start."

"Yeah, well. Perhaps some other time."

MORGAN pressed himself harder against the cold wall and adjusted his earpiece with chilled fingers. He could hear the squad members re-confirming their position over the crackling of static, Chief Wilson's sharp commands as he gave the last instructions and half-heartedly cursed sleazy drug dealers and the chill of December freezing his balls off.

Morgan flexed his arms, keeping the muscles warm, and double-checked his gun. It was black and heavy and sleek, its weight a familiar strain on his fingers. He turned to glance around the corner, exposing himself for the briefest moment. The alley stretched out, silent and badly lit, the cracked pavement damp with the rain, which had barely stopped, hanging precariously over the city. One hour and a half of waiting, no certainties except the tip of one of the new moles, a guy they weren't even sure they could trust yet. This was his test run. Hell, the guy hadn't even been able to say how many people would be involved. They could be up for anything from the on-and-off junkie dealer to half an army of old dogs, and the tension was eating through the unit like a quick, crippling infection. Morgan did not like that. Tension caused accidents.

"Honestly. Isn't it a little cold to be hanging out on the streets?" someone exclaimed, right behind his back—which caused Morgan's hands to clench and his index finger to squeeze on the trigger, and it was only his years-old habit of never releasing the safety until the last minute that prevented him from (a) setting the whole team in a frenzy, thus (b) botching the entire operation, and possibly (c) blasting a hole through his foot.

"What the—" He forced himself to silence and turned, his heart thumping like a goddamn sledgehammer, and was met with the clear gaze of limpid brown eyes, sparkly and plain mischievous and completely out of place.

Morgan remained still, his mouth pretty much hanging open, for one of the longest, most surreal instants of his life. Then he ripped the earpiece out, possibly to refrain from *smacking* the idiot, blooming anger converging in his eyeballs. "You—what the *hell* do you think you're doing?" he whispered, urgent, the rush of adrenaline still making his fingers twitch. "I could have *shot* you. Are you *insane*?"

It was hard to express exactly how infuriating he found the smiling face of the stranger—angel, whatever he said he was—which seemed to almost glow, all pale skin and sharp cheekbones in the cold shadow of the street. The man just grinned, sweet and perhaps slightly insane, given the situation.

"You just seemed so cold and miserable. I thought you could use some company," he announced, entirely too cheerful. He brushed his hair away from his face, tucking it behind an ear, and leaned forward to take a look around the corner like a curious kitten. His shoulder felt

warm where it brushed against Morgan's chest. "Anything interesting going on?"

Morgan barely refrained from shoving him back, still trying to balance himself between overwhelming frustration and the plain incredulity that still seemed to be clogging his brain cells. "You—stay back, you moron," he growled, shifting so he could stand between the man and the shallow, suddenly too-dangerous alleyway. "This is *so* not the right moment for your crap. Hey, I said stay back," he said, pressing a hand against the stranger's lean chest to prevent him from circling around him to take another peek. He lowered his eyes to the frayed mold-green sweater, which felt suspiciously thin under his touch.

"And this is way too thin for the season, kid. Can't you wear a damn coat?"

The stranger's laugh was soft and tingly and should not have felt warm as it reverberated against Morgan's ribcage, a neat contrast with the evening breeze. "Yeah, well. I guess I could," he said. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Morgan with his head tilted to the side, a vaguely pensive frown appearing on his face. "Did you know that Robert Johnson was killed with poisoned whiskey?" he asked, cheerful and utterly incongruous. Morgan blinked.

"Yeah, it was strychnine," he said. "Although some biographers don't believe—" He paused and shook his head, considering. He raised a hand, as if it could prevent all of those weird things that seemed to come with this annoyingly intricate person, real or imaginary (an *angel*, of all things, for God's *sake*) from capturing his focus like they tended to do. "Listen, this—this really isn't the time. I'm a little busy here, in case you didn't notice."

The stranger sighed. "All right. My bad," he said, shuffling idly from one foot to the other. His smirk seemed to be engraved in the night air, bright and luminous. "Anyway, there's two of them, and they'll come out from there," he added, casually pointing toward an emergency door on the other side of the road, glowing a faint green almost exactly opposite where Morgan—and the whole unit, at that—was focusing.

Morgan looked at it, one eyebrow cocked. "And how do you—" he began, only to realize he was now talking to a very empty space beside him where the grinning stranger was supposed to be. "Where the

hell...?” he murmured, and that was about when the emergency door clicked open, revealing two figures bundled in heavy coats.

“Police. Freeze!” Morgan called, chaos suddenly exploding in the earpiece still dangling on his chest.

The two figures promptly started running. It never worked.

“LUCKY you saw those guys, Morgan,” Wilson commented, looking with approving eyes at the car that was taking the dealers away, lights turning as discreetly as possible. “Would have really pissed me off to come out with nothing after freezing my precious parts off.”

Morgan nodded, vaguely thinking that the chief seemed to be very concerned with his “precious parts.” “Thanks, Chief,” he said. He crossed his arms over his chest, weighing some pros and cons, then decided to just goddamn ask, already. “Chief, did you—you see anyone leave my zone?”

The Chief’s gaze was heavy on his face. He did not falter; it was nothing new. “No. No one crossed the perimeter,” the man said, then took a step forward and leaned his gloved hand on Morgan’s shoulder. “We did a good job, Morgan. Don’t worry. No one could have escaped. Unless he could damn well *fly*,” he added, laughing, apparently very much amused at the idea. Morgan swallowed.

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice a little unstable. His throat felt tight.

Not worrying suddenly seemed very difficult.

“NO, really. You can’t be an angel. I haven’t been in a church in years. I mean, like, *many* years. I’m not really the type angels go for,” Morgan slurred. He leaned against the wall, which seemed to be strangely unstable, and that was when his legs decided to give up on him. He found himself sitting on the ground, ass hurting, vision all too blurred.

“You are an idiot. That’s what you are,” a voice replied with only the vaguest trace of exasperation. “And that’s not—that’s not the *point*.” The stranger crouched in front of him, and Morgan could make out his eyes, brown and warm and slightly annoyed. They seemed oddly still in

the constant turning of the alley, which, seriously, should not have been moving that much.

“See? An angel should be more supportive. Patient. You know? Angel-like,” he protested. He really didn’t need to be reprimanded all the time. He *had* left the pub of his own accord, after all. It had only been a couple of drinks too many. Or, well, all right, so he couldn’t quite remember the exact number. Big deal.

The stranger snorted. “Yeah, well. Let’s see you get to bed without vomiting all over me, and then we’ll discuss the value of traditional stereotypes in modern theology.”

“The... what?” Morgan asked. He shook his head and considered that vomiting *did* seem like a very good idea.

“Never mind,” the stranger replied, and he leaned forward to slip an arm under Morgan’s, circling his back. “Come on. On the count of three.”

Walking to his building wasn’t as awful as it could have been. It helped that he lived only two blocks away, and the arms supporting him were surprisingly strong for someone that skinny. The hike up the stairs was much worse, and about halfway up, the steps decided to start spiraling, and *that* did nothing to help Morgan’s stomach. On the second floor, he sat down on the nearest step and declared his firm and unshakeable determination not to move again, possibly ever.

The stranger looked at him with fond amusement, then quietly sat down beside him, patting him lightly on the back.

“Okay. But if you do vomit on me, you *will* have a taste of Heaven’s wrath.”

“Bossy,” Morgan mumbled, leaning his head on his arms. He turned to glance at the stranger, and that was about when he realized how easy it had become to recognize the angle of his cheekbones, the tilt of his head when he smiled in that half-ironic way of his. There was something almost painfully familiar in the way his eyes seemed always a little too deep, the way his hair fell around his face in messy waves that captured warm, golden reflections from whatever available light. Hell, the man was gorgeous, he thought, alcohol warming his brain. And not that much of a stranger anymore.

“What’s your name?” he asked suddenly. He wondered why he’d never asked before. Somehow, it seemed—*important*. To know something, to have something with which he could *label* this thing. This... person. Angel. Whatever.

The stranger leaned his head on one hand and turned to look at him. He seemed to be considering; then he just smiled and said, “Spencer.”

Morgan snorted a half-laugh. “Right. What kind of angel has a name like *Spencer*? It should sound, like, aristocratic. Something snobby and important, you know. Maybe in French,” he added, suddenly intrigued. French *did* seem very apt for an angel.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” the angel—Spencer, whatever—said, cocking his head to the side. “I’ll make sure I bring this very important matter up during the next council. All angels should switch their names to French.” He tapped his fingers on his chin, considering. “You just don’t want to admit that I could actually *be* an angel. What’s so difficult? I mean, you *did* use to believe in Santa. Honestly, I’m almost offended that you’d think a fat old man parking reindeer on your roof more likely than me being—”

Morgan’s hand was maybe too strong when it gripped the stranger’s wrist and pulled him close. He looked up into stunned, huge brown eyes, keenly aware of the sweep of red blossoming on the man’s pale cheeks, of the strong pulse on the inside of his wrist, and felt a tug of something not very heavenly rip through his muscles, hot and possessive, all the way down to his groin. “You’re way too *hot* to be an angel,” he said, serious, and leaned forward to capture the stranger’s lips with his own. His aim was sloppy and his balance frail, and he smeared a wet kiss on a soft cheek before he found his way to warm, plump lips, which parted in surprise under his tongue.

He slipped it inside, the intoxicating flavor shooting to his brain and then travelling *lower*, annihilating whatever self-control he had left. Sweet and spicy and exhilarating, and maybe that was what angels were supposed to taste like, because he couldn’t remember ever tasting anything like it. Eyes closed, he sought the stranger’s—*Spencer’s*—tongue with his own, wishing he could just drown in the kiss, fingers already brushing against a worn sweater, seeking the warm skin underneath....

And there was a warm hand, instead, on his forehead and then flat against his face, pushing him back. “You *dog*,” the stranger said, seeming rather flushed. (Spencer. He had a *name*, now.)

Morgan just looked at him, breathing through the fingers spread over his mouth. “Seriously. Are angels supposed to be hot?” he tried to say, and his tongue brushed against one of those fingers. Spencer snatched his hand away like he’d been burned, and the blush on his cheeks seemed to get worse. Morgan resisted the urge to giggle. God, he hadn’t felt this high and this stupid since high school, and it was *brilliant*.

“Shut up,” Spencer snorted, lowering his head, his hair falling onto his face. He half-tried to hide behind it, and Morgan should *not* have found that adorable. He was just opening his mouth to remark on that when the ex-stranger lifted a finger and pointed it toward him, glowering. “Enough,” he said, and flicked at Morgan’s forehead.

When he woke up in bed the next morning, Morgan’s head was pounding, and then he remembered. *God, I have molested an angel.* Perhaps he deserved it.

THE gun was heavy in his hand. It seemed to be growing heavier by the second, pulling him down, *down*. His legs too. They refused to move in a coherent way on the slippery pavement, and then they just plain *refused*. Morgan smacked his back against the wall, a hiss escaping from between his gritted teeth, and crumpled to the ground.

He unlocked the magazine, his sight wavering dangerously, fingers numb yet his touch somehow still exact—years of training did pay off, in the end. He let it drop to the ground, swiftly inserting the extra one he insisted on carrying around at all times, and thank fuck for that. He’d have to use every single bullet with care if he wanted to walk out of that alley.

Although, he thought vaguely as he lowered his gaze to look at the blood that had already soaked his jacket, trickling through the fingers he pressed on the throbbing wound, it might be a little late for that.

Morgan let his head thump back against the wall and tried to force his breath into regular huffs, fighting to ride out the wave of nausea that

rampaged through his abdomen along with the pulsing, searing pain. Holy *motherfucking* hell, you never remembered how much it hurt to get shot until it happened again. He tried to focus on the street stretching on both sides, knowing very well that the gang would be coming after him, and his sight went fuzzy, losing sharpness, losing *light*. Damn, he was fucked. If he couldn't aim—*fucked*.

And that was when his stranger—Spencer—deemed it appropriate to appear, kneeling in front of him, his pale face tense, huge eyes seeming to bear storms and distant thunderbolts within. “You moron. I cannot turn my back on you for *five minutes*,” he whispered, urgent, angrier than Morgan had ever seen him. For a moment, foolishly, he thought Spencer would hit him.

“Not the time,” he rasped, pressing harder on the wound, and sucked in a sharp breath. He pushed weakly at the stranger's—angel's, that still sounded so damn *crazy*—shoulders with the hand holding the gun, keeping him at a distance. “Get out of here, kid. This is no place for you. Go!”

“Shut up,” Spencer replied, his cheeks tinted scarlet with rage. He blinked, shaking his already damp locks out of his eyes. “Stay here, and don't you *dare*—”

And that was when *they* turned 'round the corner, having decided that they'd given enough time for the stupid cop to bleed out before they came to finish the job. Morgan groaned, his vision getting blurrier by the second, and tried to level his arm at them. “Just *leave*,” he murmured. His words were lost as Spencer sharply turned to look at the men and said, “I'm not allowed....” And then, under his breath, eyes flaring, “*Screw it.*”

Morgan found himself alone as Spencer stood up and turned to face the gang, arms at his sides, looking tall and thin and tousled like a wet puppy in the light, impalpable rain, and Jesus fucking Christ, they were gonna *slaughter* him. Morgan flexed his legs, trying to get to his feet, and he was pinned back down by another wave of pain, threatening to drown him, lapping at his brain, and it was difficult, too *damn*....

Morgan seemed to be shifting in and out of consciousness, or perhaps it was just his sight wavering, his senses blacking out and switching on again in irregular beats. He couldn't be sure of what he saw, and he probably wouldn't have been even if he'd watched from an

armchair wielding a camcorder. Everything seemed hazy, too distorted to discern, and a sudden, white light was hurting his eyes, too brilliant to look at. He couldn't seem to focus; for an instant he couldn't goddamn *breathe*—

Because in that moment he saw, he was *sure* he saw Spencer's shape delineate somewhere in the middle of that fuzzy, blinding light; he thought he saw him shine cloaked in whiteness, light spreading from him in a dozen luminous wings, royally unfolding through the air. They enveloped him, hiding him from sight, and then seemed to wipe out the street and reach out to Morgan, seeping into him with warm, irresistible, impossible *light*, filling up his eyes until he couldn't see nor taste nor breathe anything but—

“YOU are one lucky bastard, son.” Chief Wilson's voice was rough, oddly comforting, filtering through the thick haze. His brain felt strangely...fluffy. If a brain could be classified as fluffy. When Morgan tried to swallow, he registered a sick, sweet, medicinal taste. He tried to pull a face and wasn't sure he managed.

“What... the hell?” he croaked. He couldn't quite hear his voice.

“You'll have to explain me how you did it. Knocked out cold, all seven of them. That was one helluva job, Morgan,” the Chief said, deep, rumbling. Comforting, yes. Although not exactly what he'd expected to hear.

Morgan's eyelids were heavy. Something was numbing his mouth, a pungent smell of plastic and disinfectant. He tried to lift his hand to push it away. “T'was... you saw the... the angel?” he asked. He could hear Wilson's laughter somewhere beyond the fog.

“Yeah. You better thank your guardian angel, son,” he said. Morgan thought he felt a hand pat him on the shoulder. Yes, comforting, he thought. Yet, somehow—not *enough*.

His head was heavy, and he could see no light. Morgan slept.

FIVE weeks of enforced leave, back to active duty pending psych evaluation, mandatory counseling for three months. Eleven days to go.

Three weeks and three days that Morgan had spent trying not to groan as he got out of bed, when his exercises pulled at the fresh pink scar, a short, thick ridge sitting just below his ribcage. He'd followed his course of antibiotics and tried to comply with the doctor's orders, even though bed rest was not for him, and had managed not to call the Chief to beg to be allowed back to work early. He'd dragged himself out to the store for food and juice and some funny-tasting vitamin drinks, and the old lady at the newsstand where he bought the *Times* and the *National Geographic* and his fucking condoms had flashed him her brightest smile and called him a real hero and offered him a eucalyptus candy. She'd seen his picture in the papers, apparently. Morgan had thanked her and smiled back, politely; he'd picked up the sweet and walked away.

Twenty-four days—and nothing. No smiling stranger appearing on his armchair, no voice distracting him at inappropriate times, no wide brown eyes sparkling with mischief, no more weird conversations about the blues. Hell, Morgan even missed being mocked. He'd tried to call to him, a couple of times, feeling rather foolish, his voice inquisitive and uncertain in the silence of the street or in his kitchen, answered only by the steady buzz of the fridge.

Still, nothing. Spencer—assuming he even existed in the first place—was gone. And it was quite pathetic, Morgan mused, that he should feel so lonely because he could no longer talk to his hallucination. *An angel, my ass*, he considered grimly.

And then, the evening of the twenty-seventh day, Morgan decided he should put it to rest. He walked to his kitchen, poured himself half a glass of Jack Daniel's. He hesitated, half-listening to the rumble of the engines outside, which echoed strangely in the silent room. He emptied the whiskey into the sink, washed the tumbler, and put it back in the cupboard. Then he opened the fridge, pulled out a bottle of apple juice, and walked back to the living room.

Morgan sat down in the armchair, hands hanging between his knees, cleared his throat, and tried valiantly not to feel stupid. "Hello," he began, and, if his voice came out a little trembling, he pretended not to notice. "Spencer. I'm not quite sure how this works. I haven't actually prayed in... well, quite some time. And it's not like I ever expected

someone to answer. I mean, I'm still not even sure you... exist. Existed. I don't—" He paused and forced himself to take a deep breath. "I just... wanted to thank you. For, you know. Saving my life. And all." He rolled the bottle between his hands, raising his eyes to the ceiling. The light was switched off, and only the streetlights outside cast a cold glow into the room. "I... I'll put 'Crossroads Blues' on, sometimes. In case you want to listen," he said. He waited for one of the longest moments of his life—foolishly, he knew it, and yet he couldn't help it. Perhaps—

"That... that would be all. If you can hear. And if I'm not... some idiot who talks to himself and has probably gone nuts. Just... thanks."

It was sometime during the night—after he'd pretty much collapsed from exhaustion; two weeks since he'd resumed active duty, and he still tired too easily—that Morgan found himself awake in a soft, indiscernible instant, at once uncertain and all too sure of what had called him back to awareness.

A faint, greyish light painted a wobbly rectangle on the wall opposite the window, streaked dark with the drops of the light rain he could hear pattering on the glass. He blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the half-darkness, and thought he could hear soft breathing echoing his own.

"You here?" he whispered, his voice rough from sleep, and he thought he knew the answer, even though he didn't quite dare *hope*—

And a figure, God, such a heart-wrenchingly familiar figure seemed to step out of the shadows, standing in front of Morgan's bed, hands tucked in his pockets and a sheepish smile on his face. Morgan looked at him, intent. Spencer was as lean and pale and compelling as he remembered, clad in worn grey jeans and a dark sweater. His hair curled gently around his face, looking dry and warm and soft. Morgan's chest tightened with the sudden, overwhelming need to brush his fingers through it, to feel the softness for himself.

"Yeah," Spencer replied, his voice barely audible. He lifted his eyes to look at Morgan, his smile growing a little brighter, and Morgan, for a moment, thought he would goddamn *cry*.

"Hi," he said, and he couldn't find anything else to add.

“Hello, yourself,” Spencer replied. Trickle of rain shadows drew lines over his body, his pale cheeks. He hesitated. “I heard, you know. Every time you spoke to me. I heard.”

“Oh,” Morgan replied, feeling foolish. He wondered how he could be so stupid—weeks of wishing nothing more than to see him again, and now—he couldn’t even seem to articulate a proper sentence. His chest hurt, a little.

“I’m sorry that I never replied, but I cannot. Not any longer.” Spencer—an *angel*, oh sweet *Jesus*—was very still. “I was not *allowed*,” he said, his tone mildly apologetic. “I was not allowed to interfere. There are... rules. I was not supposed... to help.”

Morgan swallowed. He propped himself up, repressing a shiver as the cool air brushed against his chest. “Did you... get in trouble?”

Spencer’s smile was sad. “You could say that,” he replied. “Someone is pretty upset with me up there.”

“So... you been punished?”

“Not yet,” Spencer said, and he shrugged. “In the meantime, I am forbidden any further interaction with humans. I am forbidden... from seeing you.”

Spencer’s eyes seemed, all of a sudden, darker. Morgan found that breathing evenly wasn’t that easy anymore. “Then what—” he said, almost choking on the words. He cleared his throat. “What are you doing here?” he breathed.

The angel—*Spencer*—was silent, his eyes lowered. When he raised his gaze back to Morgan’s face, tracing an invisible, burning pattern over Morgan’s body, his eyes were wide and deep. They shone with something too secret to admit, almost too aching to bear, and God, Morgan had never thought that angels could *want*. His heart was thumping, resounding loudly in his ears.

“What’s gonna happen to you?” He couldn’t quite ask, his breath taken away by the sudden rush of images flooding his head. It was wrong and blasphemous and almost *terrifying*, but he could not remember the last time he had *desired* anything, anyone, with such need that he thought he’d suffocate if he didn’t—

And he was leaning forward, enough to capture Spencer’s wrist and the collar of his shirt and drag him *down*, hands and lips already

searching for warm skin. "I'm sure He'll understand," Spencer breathed as he followed him, his lithe body a pleasant, thrilling weight over Morgan's, and it was not enough, not even *close*.

Morgan could not remember ever *wanting* anything so badly, and he couldn't bring himself to care as he wrapped his arms around Spencer's body, half-expecting to be scorched. Who would have thought angels could be touched this way? He sought out his mouth and kissed it hard, Spencer's lips and tongue hot and demanding with a hunger that matched his own, Spencer's hands tracing heated patterns all over his skin, his back. Morgan lost his breath as he coaxed Spencer out of his sweater, watched him shrug off his worn-out jeans, his body taut and lean and strong, muscles tensing gracefully under his skin, pale and almost luminous in the darkened room. Morgan's hands were dark, too, a stark contrast as they travelled up the planes of Spencer's body, and God, angels *did* have a sex. He leaned down to trace it with his tongue, mouth wet against Spencer's length, Spencer's ragged moan reverberating fierce and urgent in his every nerve, shooting straight to his cock. He was so hard it almost *hurt*, and he wanted... *wanted*....

He let himself be guided down, Spencer's lips soft against his temple, Spencer's hands light yet demanding on his skin, and Spencer's legs... Spencer's legs strong around his hips, Spencer's whole body tense and vibrating under him. Morgan let his hands touch, wander, claim; he traced his palm along a lean, muscular thigh, pushing it up, pressing his hips *down*. Spencer shuddered, moaning for him, seeking his lips, trying to catch his breath to no avail. Morgan fought for his body to remain still as he kissed the corner of Spencer's mouth, bit lightly on his lip, refused to yield. "Do you—"

It was all he was able to say, robbed of his voice by the way Spencer arched into him, warm and luminous, grasping his body hard, pressing even closer with a strength that he wouldn't have seemed to possess.

"Yes," Spencer breathed back, eyes dark and pupils wide as he matched Morgan's half-kisses, unable to stop, mouth, creases, lips, *tongue*, just a hint, too little, too *much*. "Yes." It was all he repeated as Morgan's hand wandered lower, as they breathed inches from each other's mouths, just a little too far, as Morgan's eyes turned dark with desire and low, pulsating hunger. "Yes," as he arched back and *shone* when Morgan held him and pressed and breached and then just *sank*.

“Yes,” as he refused to close his eyes, as his muscles rippled and tensed and released under Spencer’s demanding hands, worth being punished for, God, worth being *damned* for. “Yes”—as he moaned, as he tried to breathe, as he felt like he would not survive if he *couldn’t*—“Yes.”

It was 10:02 a.m., and a white light seeped through the windows, tiptoeing into the bedroom when Morgan surfaced from sleep with a sigh and did not open his eyes.

He did not move, acknowledging the soft glow heaving on his eyelids, warming up his shoulders, his chest, his muscles still pleasantly aching, his head still heavy with sleep.

There were rules, Morgan thought, his eyes still closed. There were *rules*, and there was madness, and it only made painful sense that he wouldn’t feel warm skin pressed against his, there wouldn’t be a warm body wrapped around him, soft and pliant and *real* under his hands. Morgan flexed his fingers, hesitant to let them wander, to touch and know. He tried to listen for breaths, but blood was rushing in his ears, his heart pumping fast. He swallowed.

His hand ghosted up, brushing against rumpled sheets. It moved, a little too unsteady, mapping creases, fingers reaching out, and if they *were* trembling, he wasn’t about to admit it.

Morgan thought his chest would break open when his fingertips brushed against a patch of cool, soft skin and went on to trace the lean muscle of an arm, the rounded contours of a shoulder, up to a warm nape. He could hear Spencer sigh in his sleep, could feel him lean into his touch, muscles rippling as he stretched, and God, he would move to the asylum tomorrow, he vaguely thought, sleep still clogging his brain. He would settle for madness if it meant he wouldn’t have to give *this* up.

“You’re not going to an asylum, moron,” Spencer mumbled, voice thick with sleep, shining with the smile Morgan couldn’t see. “Stop thinking so loud.”

And Morgan entwined his fingers in soft, wavy hair and obediently settled back to sleep, a tiny, quiet smile hovering on his lips.

CORNELIA GREY is a student halfway through her creative writing degree with a penchant for fine arts and the blues. Born and raised in the hills of Northern Italy, where she collected her share of poetry and narrative prizes, she is now based in London, and she is thoroughly enjoying the cultural melting pot that is the City.

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REDEMPTION

Clare London

IT would have been a day like so many others, except that there was someone new, kneeling, at the back of the room. In the shadows, his head bowed. The light in the Arrivals Hall was dim as always, and the heat of so many new bodies was almost overwhelmingly distracting. I wouldn't have seen him at all if I hadn't raised my eyes above the mass of pale, dark, obese, taut, barely clad flesh, where hands grabbed at my gown, where men of all ages crouched, pawing oppressively at my feet.

"Master," they whispered and pleaded in a medley of languages.

"Ziba, choose me. Take me into your service."

"I'm a hard worker. I can prove myself to you. Let me show you what I can do."

A plump man on my right thrust out his chin and glared at me, grudging seductiveness mixed with aggression, never a sweet mix. His thoughts were brash and too loud. "Want me? Let's make a deal."

Behind him was a younger man he'd pushed roughly aside, with tousled black curls and frightened eyes. They met my gaze. "Sir," he murmured hoarsely. His eyes spoke more eloquently. "Whatever I can do, I'll do it," was his real thought. "I'm lost. I'm broken. It's up to you what happens to me, but I'm willing."

Without acknowledging any of them, I strode forward. The crowd parted on either side of me, outstretched arms snatched back, frightened eyes cast down, bare legs and feet scrambling out of my way before I stepped on them. I listened to their hearts as I moved among them. There was so little of merit, I could barely hear its potential above the self-serving clamor.

It would be another useless day, I imagined.

The caretaker hovered at my side, flustered with my silence, his bare head shining with sweat, his hands shaking. “Sir? There are others, if these disgust you. Far better ones.”

I didn’t turn toward him. I didn’t need to see his eyes to know they’d betray his lie. These were his best to date: his *only*. He should know better than to offer me the hopeless and the mean-spirited in the hope of clearing slow-moving goods. He’d made that mistake in the past and sometimes slipped back into deceitfulness. Now I could smell his fear as he desperately tried to think of something that would interest me.

“I’ll take a look at *him*,” I said, my gaze still on the kneeling man, and I took two more strides across the room, through the sea of sweaty, beseeching flesh.

Something had alerted me. Something emanating from *him*.

The men at my feet wailed and hissed, trying to recapture my attention. The caretaker’s hand clenched the whip on his belt, and he bit his lip very hard, as if trying to keep the whimper secured inside. “He’s....”

I paused. I didn’t need to hear any more words. My hands hung loosely at my side, and I still didn’t turn toward him.

He let the whimper escape, a thin thread of disappointment and desperation. “He’s not available, sir. But I’m sure I have someone just like him.” Harshly, he kicked at a man who had the misfortune to be within his range. “I’m sure I have many Arrivals who are even better than this heap of hopeless—”

I lifted my hand, palm upward.

The caretaker cried aloud, his head snapping back as if grabbed viciously from behind. Three of the men nearest to me groaned and tumbled away as if physically pushed, their limbs flailing, the reverberation crushing them back against their fellows. I admit, I wasn’t always able to keep the effect contained. There were more wails of protest from the others, many sobs. The caretaker’s assistants had taken up positions around the outer walls of the room, and I saw them tense up, ready to step in and herd the Arrivals back into place, if things got out of control. Their eyes flickered between me and the caretaker, their expressions confused and scared. I would have been satisfied to see the respect that fear would bring, but for the moment I was too distracted. My gut stirred with something unfamiliar and, as such, unidentifiable.

“I’ll take a look at him,” I repeated.

The caretaker had recovered, his face as white as my robe, his skull a shadow of foreboding under his fragile skin. “Of course.” He picked his way more carefully through the nearest bodies, moving back to stand at my side as if he were a colleague of mine and not just a supplier, one of many.

Or were we so different, at the heart of things?

We walked to the back of the room until I stood only a foot away from the kneeling man. I didn’t listen to any of the other voices, didn’t smell any of the other flesh. I waited for the required response.

None came. He remained with his head bowed and his hands held loosely behind his back. I stared down at the crown of his head. His hair was dark with sweat, but I could see it was dark auburn, thick and curled where it nestled against his neck. His skin was almost hairless, but his shoulders were broad and his arms and legs muscled. He was far from a boy.

“Tell me his story,” I said, speaking above him. For the first time, I saw a flicker of acknowledgment in the pulse below his ear, though he didn’t lift his head. Of course, I hadn’t given permission, but I didn’t think that was the only reason.

The caretaker’s throat bobbed with a heavy swallow. “What can I say? We haven’t been given all the paperwork yet. They dropped him off a while ago.” He glared at the bowed head as if it had caused him more grief than the combined workload of all the other Arrivals he’d ever handled. “But it must have been a grade eight offense at the least. There’s no recommended holding period or even a listing of mitigation.”

I glanced along the sweep of his bony torso. “No mark?”

“No, sir. Not yet. He must have come straight from Transition. It’s just another sign as to the severity of his case.”

“You said he wasn’t available.”

The caretaker’s eyes looked as if they’d roll up into his head. The fear dripped from him in his sweat. “That was the only paper he did have on him. A yellow slip.” His voice sank to a whisper. “Don’t think I’ve seen more than three of those in all my time here.”

I felt an unusual shiver across the back of my neck. The caretaker was staring down at my hands. An unimaginative man at best, with a

tendency to casual cruelty if not checked, he knew enough to watch for warning signs of punishment. It took me an effort to uncurl my fingers and relax the palm.

A yellow slip.

“Outcast,” I said. The body at my feet seemed to shiver as well. “Indefinite confinement, subject only to divine review. Not to be issued a ledger.”

The caretaker was silent.

“No opportunity for redemption,” I added, my voice sounding low and disturbingly bleak.

“No, sir,” the man at my side whispered. His tone was dejected. He, personally, had arrived with a medium-high grade offense, but even so, his ledger was gradually filling with credit. Every one of my visits added to that, if the Arrivals I took had been properly cared for.

But he also knew I’d arrived with a yellow slip, myself.

I took a step back. “Look at me,” I said to the man on his knees.

The caretaker tensed up beside me, his hand gripping his whip in case of resistance. It happened. This man wasn’t available for general service, but he was still subject to Arrival Hall rules. As, indeed, had I been. That was, until I had learned to use my unique powers to ease my way through the system.

After all, I had many years both behind and ahead of me to practice.

He stirred, the man who wasn’t bound and yet met me in the traditional submissive pose. I didn’t know if he were brave or foolish—or even if he fully understood his status. I couldn’t take him with me against his will. Nor would it benefit him to indenture himself to me, as it would the others. But I could still demand his attention.

He looked up at me. I felt nauseous.

“This is a mistake,” I said.

“Sir?” The caretaker looked aghast.

“This man shouldn’t be here.”

The other men around us were aware of something unusual happening. Some still hoped to seduce me to take them, and some feared

the caretaker's wrath after I'd ignored them. But most just watched with curiosity. Even the assistants had raised their gazes to me, rather than attending to their duty.

"I'm sorry, sir. But they don't make mistakes. The process into Arrivals is well established." The caretaker frowned, but his body had begun to tremble in fear of more confrontation with me. "Please come away, sir. Leave him. He's not important. There are so many others to do your bidding...."

I didn't move. I couldn't tear my gaze away. The kneeling man's skin was pale, his lips slightly swollen, his eyelids red from weeping. There would have been great pain when he traveled to Arrivals, both physical and emotional. There always was. But there was much more to him than that. His eyes were blue, but not pale like the sky had once been for me, nor were they bright like the sun, when I'd moved under its warmth. They were dark like the aftermath of a storm and flecked with gray. The pupils seemed to sink back into his head, reminiscent of a receding tunnel. Every feature cried of agony and need to me. But although his body was tense, there was no hostility in his gaze; he held himself still under my scrutiny. And he smiled at me.

Smiled.

I tried to recover my equilibrium, to use language that the caretaker could understand. "He has no mark. His papers show him to be outcast. He's no use to you. Send him back."

There were disturbed murmurs from the bodies around us. "Send *us* back! We never meant it. We'll change...."

The assistants strode into their midst, persuading them back against the walls.

The caretaker stared at me. His expression became sly. "You're a fine sponsor, sir, but I have no control over the trade of this one, as you know."

I had to struggle to keep my power abated. "This isn't a negotiation tactic, you fool. I mean that he's something different: something that doesn't fit in here."

"But he can't go back." The caretaker glanced over at a couple of the assistants, who shrugged with similar confusion. He stared back at me. "It doesn't work that way, Ziba. Sir. They work their ledger debt and

move on, or... they don't."

The anguish I felt then was a terrible reminder of the way things had been for me when I first arrived, when the horror and despair—though they were not forgotten, even now—were at their height. I stared at the man on his knees, and he gazed back up at me, his lips curved in a smile but his eyes in torment.

"Come with me," I said to him. Did I really want to do this? A slow, inevitable surrender suffused me, and I let the offer stand. What must be, would be. I turned to the caretaker. "I choose him this time."

The bald man's eyes flickered with the promise of relief, quickly replaced by the expectation of defeat. "I can't give you that, sir, he has no ledger. Don't mock me. He's not available, I said. The yellow slip, remember?"

He had strayed too far outside of proper respect. This man had to be rescued from here. I stretched out my palm, and the caretaker howled again in pain.

"Stop," came a voice from below me.

I closed my hand, and the caretaker stumbled back, gasping.

The man had pulled himself to his feet. His body was shaking, and I could see the pain wasn't only in his eyes. "You don't have to do that," he said to me. It was a low, firm voice, despite his physical state. "I'll come with you willingly."

The caretaker grimaced at him. "You know this trade won't be recorded?" He glanced back at me, though his words were for the man. "You're outside Arrivals' jurisdiction as soon as you leave, but with no formal itinerary, no formal sponsor." He leered at me. "No ledger to carry with you."

Outcast.

The man nodded. He was looking at me as well. The eyes were still dark, but there was animation in them now. I couldn't imagine he knew exactly what he was agreeing to.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Abdiel." Our gazes locked, each of us knowing the heritage of the other's name.

"Follow me." I turned and strode back toward the exit. This time,

although I could feel the other men's eyes following me and their need reaching out, they were kept from touching me. I knew Abdiel was watching them too. I could feel his horror, the shock rippling through him, as their despair and anger and confusion eddied around him. I was used to the sensation by now. Maybe he would have to learn a similar thing, to survive.

If that's what this existence was.

"Sir! Ziba...." The caretaker's voice was anguished. He knew there was no guarantee as to whether I'd be back soon or away for a long time. I kept to no regular schedule.

I paused, Abdiel close behind me. "That one," I said, nodding toward the young man with the tousled hair whose eyes had caught mine at the beginning of my visit. "I'll take him." I identified a couple more who kept to the back of the crowd. They were abject creatures, eager to reach me, to seek help, yet afraid they couldn't—wouldn't—be heard. They didn't realize that I didn't hear voices. I heard what was inside their hearts. And that told me whether they could be helped.

The caretaker drew a deep and satisfied breath. "I'll have their ledgers sent along to you. Sir."

"WHY haven't you put me to work like the others, Ziba?"

Abdiel didn't call me sir, didn't defer formally to me in any way, except with general respect. It was an unusual situation for me, yet one I should have expected from him. It was surprisingly refreshing. He stood before me in the sparse, cold room I called an office, clothed in loose pants, with his body and hair freshly washed. He looked magnificent, beautiful in the way that naturally handsome men are, the result of confidence without the taint of arrogance. The improvements in personal hygiene were some of the many small ways a man could declare his transfer from Arrivals, though at the discretion of his sponsor. The important progression, of course, wasn't dictated by his appearance.

"What work can you do?"

He winced. "I can surely do the same as the others. I'll try, anyway."

It wasn't pride that brought him here, I could see.

"I'll find you more work later," I said. I'd kept him with me for the early stages, just for clerical duties in my office. It was nonsense, of course, a waste of his time and skills, but no one was going to call me to account on it.

"So what do they do?"

I looked up from writing in a man's ledger, startled.

Abdiel shrugged, lifting his strong shoulders gracefully. His gaze met mine, no fear in it. He wasn't challenging me, just asking. There was such sweet, careful intelligence in his eyes that it made my gut clench.

"They're currently working on the dormitories in Arrivals. General construction work. The supplies of tools need repair, linen and clothing need mending."

He laughed softly, the sound warm and melodic.

"Why do you laugh?" I was angry, but primarily uneasy. I got up from my seat and moved around the table to stand beside him. He was an inch or so shorter than I and of lighter build. I could have lifted my palm and seen him fall to his knees, twisted with pain. But of course I didn't.

"That's not what's important, though, is it?" He looked pleased, as if he had done well to work things out by himself. "What they make, what they build." He held out his hands in an expressive, expansive gesture. "Nothing changes here, does it? There are no physical limits or parameters to judge by. Nothing gets bigger or smaller, nothing breaks or is mended, not really." A shiver ran through his body, as if at a further, unwelcome thought. "That's what's so terrible. That realization is what brings such despair and need."

I wondered how long he'd actually been in Arrivals, crouched at the back of the room, his lack of ledger status making him both invisible to sponsors and feared by his peers. He would have had time to observe all of this and watch the effect on its unwilling guests. "I'm not sure what you mean, Abdiel."

"It's only in moving on from Arrivals that anything changes." For the first time, his face clouded over. His hair was a soft curtain over his neck and shoulders, and the curls at the sides fell forward when he bowed his head, shielding his expression from full scrutiny. "It's the acceptance of that which is the real step forward."

A strange, ugly sound came from my throat.

He started. “Ziba, I’m sorry.” Then he hesitated, staring at the expression on my face. I’d been unable to hold back my instinctive reaction. “You look shocked. Don’t the men say that, here? Surely it’s the first thing—”

“Stop,” I said, raising my hand.

He stayed silent, watching me. His pupils had dilated.

“It’s in their nature,” I said slowly. “Denial, self-aggrandizement, blame, though never of themselves. No, they don’t often say it. At least, not at first.” Some men took a very long time to realize that *they* were the masters of their fate, not I. That there was far more required from them than a pair of strong hands or a willing, biddable body.

Abdiel nodded thoughtfully. “But you can tell, can’t you?”

I frowned. “Tell what?”

He reached a hand out to me slowly, as if making sure I didn’t feel threatened or confused by the gesture. His warm palm settled on my arm, and I sucked in a sharp breath. “You can tell if it’s genuine, Ziba, however they behave in Arrivals.”

I stared at his hand, at the long, slim fingers. There were no marks of physical labor on his body, no calluses, no scars from long-ago accidents, no tension in the muscles except for pure, unadulterated strength. “*It?*”

“Repentance,” he murmured.

There was a moment’s silence between us. In the background, I could hear the murmur of other men’s voices, the occasional thud or grinding noise of work being completed. There was no other noise in my office.

“Yes,” I said finally. I looked back into Abdiel’s face, though I realized I was half afraid of what I’d see. A tightness shifted in my chest, as if bindings had been partially loosened. It felt as if I were exposing myself, and to a man who should have been nothing more than a stranger. “Yes, I can tell if they’re genuinely repentant or if they’re just trying to save themselves by any other means. If they don’t understand what they did, if they don’t admit it, I can’t do anything for them. But if they’re sorry and scared and willing to make reparation....”

“Then you find them work.”

I stared at him. “It all counts toward transfer.” I felt anger rising in me, though I wasn’t sure why. “Transfer out of here!”

Abdiel nodded. “Please, I do understand. They are given the chance of redemption through work and through reconciliation. You help that process.” He looked calm, though slightly disorientated. “But you, Ziba... you do not have that option for yourself.”

The anger was inside me, but for the first time in a long while, I was concerned that it didn’t spill out. It would harm him. *I* would harm him. “Get out,” I said sharply. “Report for work with company two, if that’s what you want. No more talking.”

But he didn’t move away. All he did was remove his hand from my arm.

“This is madness. You shouldn’t be here!” My words were harsh, and I saw him flinch. “There’s no evil in you, no cruelty, no selfishness.”

“Can you tell that too?”

I glared at him. Was he mocking me? “Yes, I can. What did you do to get sent here?”

Abdiel was very pale. His breathing was shallow, and the muscles tightened on his bare belly. “It was a grade nine offense.”

The very worst. “Tell me. Did you fight? Harm a companion? Did you—”

“I doubted,” he interrupted. His warm voice had become cold with pain and shame. “I doubted Him.”

“Was there some kind of misunderstanding?”

“No.”

I was stunned. “I can’t believe it of you.” He’d been with me only a short while, but I’d learned that time had no relevance here, in the assessment of a man. Instinct was a far more reliable judge.

Abdiel’s eyes were wide and unfocused, the pupils reflecting the same torment as when I first saw him. “I didn’t do it lightly, Ziba.”

“Tell me,” I repeated.

He shook his head.

Men did not shake their heads at me. They did not refuse me.

“You don’t need to know,” he whispered. “I doubted Him, just once. But He was angry and cast me out. It has destroyed me, and I’ll never forgive myself.” His voice was hoarse. “Punish me if you wish, I will not tell you more.”

I turned away and put my hands on the edge of the table to steady myself. And maybe to prevent myself from striking him down. It was a shock when I felt him move even closer, when he put his hand on my shoulder. I felt his breath on my neck as he rested his cheek against my hair. “Go,” I said.

“No,” he whispered. “I want to be with you.”

“It can’t be.”

“Ziba, you know....”

“What I know is you’re not a man!” I cried out, astonishing myself with the anguish in my tone. I turned back, trying to shake off his grasp, but he still held me, his face now close to mine. His fingers dug into my upper arm; his stance was steady. I had not underestimated the strength in his body, even after his trials. “You’re not a man, not even one who’s lied and whored and cheated and destroyed for all of his life. You will never be that bad, and yet, you can be so much worse.”

Abdiel’s eyes were swollen, like a river at the flood. “You tell *me*,” he murmured, mimicking my earlier words.

“You’re an angel,” I growled. I reached out to him and grasped his waist, the pair of us clutching each other. “An *angel*!”

He was shaking, I could feel it. “A lower order, that’s all....”

“Did you think I wouldn’t see? Not just the yellow slip or the lack of status or the humiliation of being in the Arrivals Hall with them all, and yet... *not* with them.” I was so angry, the power was seeping through my hand, gripping at his flesh, the pressure turning his face even whiter. But he made no move to pull away.

“And what about *you*, Ziba?” he hissed.

“Me?” Too late, I tried to withdraw, both my hand and my emotions.

“Why do you care?”

“Why do I *care*?” I stared at him, astounded. “You’ve lost more than any of them, been made outcast in a way that none of them will ever

comprehend. You have been abandoned. You've lost the only sanctuary and love that anyone should ever hope for. That's more important than anything—than life, or reward, or ledger marks, or the satisfaction of physical touch....”

Too late, again.

Abdiel's eyes were far more than a river. They were a tornado, tossing me aside as a featherweight. They were a whirlpool, sucking me down into confusion and grief.

“And so have you, Ziba.”

I couldn't speak. I still gripped him, but the power had dissipated like sand through my fingers. I was still conscious of it, but I had no strength to draw it together, to make a cohesive defense. His hand on me was far stronger, its warmth covering me, the long, pale fingers imprinting on my flesh.

“You are an angel too.”

“*Was.*” Were those tears on my cheeks? “I was, but no longer.” Many people here knew my history, but the very nature of Arrivals meant they were far more interested in their own fate than mine. The ones who registered me saw me as a sponsor and only that. Sometimes one to be feared, and one with powers that other sponsors did not have—but just one more potential step toward their own escape. The caretaker and his like had dealt with me for a long time; we had an understanding. But that would never have been taken for either friendship or sympathy.

Abdiel slipped his other arm around my shoulders, drawing me in against him. “I know you were. I would have recognized you here, anyway, still with your powers, still with your beauty and spirit. But I already knew you were here.”

“No,” I whispered. I tried to turn away from him so that he wouldn't see my weakness.

“It's not fair,” he said, his lips against my neck. “You shouldn't be here, either. I knew you before, though you never saw me.” I felt his mouth twist into a small smile. “I was, indeed, a lower order. But I admired you so much.”

I found I was holding him in return, my body pressing against him. Desire leaped in me, a wave of response that I hadn't known since I had lived with his kind, since I *was* one of them.

“So much,” he murmured, almost to himself. “So, so much. You were marvelous. Proud, strong.”

Yes, I knew how proud. Because that had been my downfall.

“Ziba? He shows you only the men.” Abdiel sounded breathless.

“What do you mean? Who does?”

“The caretaker.” I saw a blush on his cheeks, a gentle nervousness that had no place here. “In the Arrivals Hall where I was. He shows you only the men.”

I smiled as well, a mix of rue and relief. My hand ran down his arm, tracing the swell of muscle, masculine and glorious. “Yes. They know I have the best judgment for men.”

He looked up at me, his eyes laughing as well as his mouth. “And you like that?”

I laughed with him, astonished, amazed at the pleasure of holding him. “Yes, I do.”

“I imagine they offer you sexual favors as well.”

I sighed and nodded. “Sometimes. There are few enough joys in this existence, albeit fleeting.” I waited for his embarrassment or disapproval, knowing I had often washed in those waters in the past. Neither came.

Instead, his lips brushed my throat, and his hand slipped inside the front of my robe. “Would this be a joy like that? I want you, Ziba, and in here we are almost the same order.”

“Not at all,” I groaned. “You are better, much better.”

He persisted, his mouth finding mine, his beautiful fingers running over my skin. “Would you want *me*? I don’t offer for any chance of advancement or credit.”

“There is none, not for us.” My breath hitched. I spoke for us both, but whereas *I* was reconciled to it, he was still so new and so undeserving. “It won’t progress you. Nothing ever will.”

“That doesn’t matter,” he whispered. “Because I do it for us.” He pushed at me, though gently, bending me back over my table. I would have taken him somewhere more pleasant, if there’d been anywhere. But this wasn’t a place anyone was in by choice. There was no comfort, let alone luxury. I rested back on my elbows, and he sank to his knees on

the stone floor, crouched between my outstretched legs. I placed my palm very gently on the top of his head, letting the dark red curls run through my fingers. He opened my pants, and my cock bobbed up, swollen and dark with excitement. I'd been that way since his lips first touched my neck.

He sighed with pleasure. "Yes, you do like that."

"Abdiel. I... must warn you. They don't satisfy me. The men." I didn't know how to explain to him how weary I'd grown of it all, what little I'd come to expect of my sexual entertainment here. "Please don't be disappointed."

He didn't answer, just slid his mouth down over me, taking me deep, licking me with his tongue. His strokes were long and slow, and his hand slid under my balls to soothe my fevered skin. "Ziba," he breathed into my skin. "This is all I want."

He sucked softly and steadily until I felt the excitement rising through my veins. I waited to feel the usual distraction and loss of interest, but it didn't happen. I gripped harder at his hair, and my senses swam. I smelled his scent and heard his soft gulps. Everything was heightened; it all felt rich and treasured and new. "Abdiel!" I couldn't find the words to describe delight, because it had been too long absent. I came, gasping and thrusting into his mouth, unable to hold myself back.

As my body shuddered with the aftershocks, he knelt back on his heels, looking up at me, grinning with both mischief and awe. His face was flushed with arousal, and he'd slipped a hand inside his own pants, cupped around his cock. His strokes were gentle and slow, and he kept on with them while I watched.

"Was that joy for you, Ziba?"

I laughed shakily. "It was, indeed."

"But you might want to pursue more?" His look was sly, his free hand still caressing the soft skin between my thighs.

I shivered, laughing and nodding my head. Reaching down to draw him back up beside me, I determined to return the favor. And after I had kissed and licked pleasure for both of us, I would turn him on his back on the table and make him cry out his ecstasy as loudly as I had.

LATER on, satisfied for the moment, we lay together on a bench at the side of my room. We were both still naked, but the very basic nature of clothing here meant it was easily forgotten. I knew there were papers I had to complete, ledgers to update. But maybe the only benefit of potentially endless time in Arrivals was that no one was keeping watch on it anymore.

Abdiel kissed my face, pushed back the tousled hair at my brow. “What did you do, Ziba? To be sent here?”

I didn’t want to answer. His skin was warm and smooth, and I wanted to continue to savor it. I wanted to hear his cries of excitement again, wanted to feel his kiss, wanted more opportunities to show him how he had made me feel. To thank him.

I couldn’t seem to think of anyone or anything but Abdiel. And what *he* deserved.

“I was a warrior,” I said. “And I challenged Him.”

Abdiel’s breath stilled for a second or two.

“You don’t have to ask,” I continued, keeping my tone as gentle as I could. “There was no misunderstanding, as I asked you the same. I thought myself better than He was. Of course I wasn’t, could never be. And so I was outcast.”

“A moment’s aberration,” Abdiel murmured in my ear. A tear ran along the curve of his cheek and dropped on to my shoulder.

“No. Too much pride in my ability, too possessive of my position.” I shook my head. “I didn’t agree with sharing my power with others, and I thought I could be master of my own fate.” And now I was, yet also an eternal prisoner at the same time. Punished and abandoned for it, my lunacy was always painful to recall, and that was why I rarely did. But I never ceased to think about it, especially when I had such a perfect setting to remind me of how I was as lost as any man here, and worse than most. But I didn’t need the extra hardship, for the worst thing of all was the loss of His love.

I had never believed the tales of exile to be true until I found myself one of the Fallen.

“You said....” Abdiel shifted slightly, but only to draw his discarded pants over his legs as cover against the habitual cold. “You said that they did not satisfy you. The other men who serve you.”

I smiled, hopefully hiding the sadness underlying it. “Are you trying to get another compliment from me?”

He laughed, that gentle, rich sound I craved already, after so short a time with him. “Not at all. But I imagine many of them offer to you, just to get favor.”

I frowned and looked away. “I don’t take them, then. Only if it’s genuine, if they are truly willing.”

“Of course.”

“Sexual favors don’t move them on,” I said, sharply now. “I make sure they are all aware of that.”

“No act moves them on, solely.” Abdiel was nodding. “Only if accompanied with repentance.”

I nodded.

“How can you bear it?” Abdiel’s voice was a sorry whisper.

I tightened my hold on him, growing suddenly colder. “I make sure they enjoy it.”

“You do it purely for them?” He frowned and tugged at my chin, bringing my face around to look fully at him. “Tell me, Ziba.”

I gazed into his extraordinary eyes, different every time I looked. If I hadn’t known how gentle and generous he could be, I might have seen anger buried there. “It’s not a hardship. And they do give me something.”

“Their touch?”

I laughed rather bitterly. “No, their care. Not necessarily for me, but the care they have in their hearts, that they might give a lover. They share that for a moment, and so I’m happy to please them in return.”

“And that will act in their favor?”

I nodded. I had no idea why he wanted to know all this, unless he were to be a sponsor as well. If he had similar powers to mine, he could find a role here. He would be needed; he would be allocated to the work, like I had been....

“If they show care and consideration to anyone, that will help them move on as well.” Abdiel nodded, too, as if checking he had understood, as if marking notes in his mind’s ledger. “Yet *you* can never move on

from here. That hurts you, Ziba.”

I grimaced. “Hurt from my own hands is a luxury I’m not allowed. My pride taught me so.”

“Yet you help them. You help all these tortured souls. You should resent helping others move on, while you remain imprisoned, but you still do it, and well.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. His hand stroked at my belly, half in lustful jest, half soothing. I didn’t know what he thought my reaction might be, but I wasn’t going to challenge him. I had seen his strength, felt his lovemaking.

Could I call it that? I was suddenly afraid that even that would be taken away from me. Abdiel had reawakened my senses to both satisfaction and joy, and yet now I knew how easily I could lose them again.

“You have kept your power,” he said. “You could have used it to make your own time more palatable.”

I shook my head. There was no use to that, and he must know. Even if angels hadn’t been created to be a community, I could never bear being alone. I might have Fallen, but I could not be without all purpose.

“So you use it to make the system work for you.”

“I do.”

“To make it better.”

I was puzzled. “For those who deserve to move on, yes. I can mark them out, can promote them farther. My power allows me that.”

“You do it well,” he repeated. “You show care too. For *them*.” He sat up beside me, his back to the wall. There was a strange cast to his eyes, as if the color were changing, as if it were brighter than before. The light was poor in my office, as it was everywhere else, and I was obviously mistaken. “You’ve been progressing, too, Ziba.”

“Don’t be a fool.” I was angry again. I sat up as well, grasping his arm, my hand tightening around his wrist. “Don’t be cruel.”

“*You* never are?”

“No.” I glared at him. “I try not to be, because there’s no use in that. We are all the lowest we can go. I’m not interested in dragging men further down, but in smoothing their path back up toward respect.”

He pulled easily away from me, as if my grip were only a pinch, and stood. He seemed taller than I now, his shoulders even broader. There was a shadow at his back, as if it cast its own light source. The pants slid down his legs onto the floor, leaving him naked again, yet I hesitated to admire his body when I was fascinated by his face.

“Why are you here, Abdiel?”

He smiled, though sadly. “I told you.”

“No.” I knew something wasn’t true.

“I couldn’t have come here without serious transgression, Ziba. But you’re right. It’s only part of the reason. He sent me to find you. To see if you were repentant.”

I was suddenly, shockingly furious, not sure if it were at my situation or at my own shame. Tears sprang into my eyes. “Repentant? Of course I am. Every second of every immeasurable day!”

Abdiel smiled at me, and it was the smile of the man I’d just lain with. But when his eyes stared at me, they were from someplace else. “I have redeemed you, Ziba. He will take you back. You’ve served enough.”

I stared at him. Hope was a painful knot over my heart, but I didn’t dare unravel it. “That can’t be.”

Abdiel moved toward me, and I saw the wings unfurl at his back. They stretched high and wide, moving the air around us with their strong beat. Lifting up his arms, Abdiel reveled in their return. His eyes were bright with divine light but mischievous with the joy of a man in his proper body again, allowed the proper delight in it. His smile was wonderful to see.

“Take them from me!” He held out his hands to me. “You can have your wings back now. You can return to His side. You’ve suffered long enough.”

I could feel the wounds on my back from my lost wings like aching sores, a pain I’d managed to repress for so long yet now as fresh as the first day I arrived. I stood, reaching out for Abdiel, my anticipation as bright as the sun that lit my most poignant memories. Then I hesitated.

“Ziba?”

“What about you?” I said.

Abdiel frowned. The angel in him was strong and bright, but the man's light wavered. "I haven't suffered long enough. I must stay."

I gaped at him. "Who will come to find you? Who will come to measure *your* repentance?"

He smiled, but his eyes glittered with tears. His hands fell to his side, the fists clenching. "No one, I hope, for it would mean someone else had Fallen."

"I'll come back for you. I will intercede with Him—"

Abdiel shook his head. "You cannot come back, not like that." His smile twisted. "The process into Arrivals is well established."

"No," I said. I stepped back, and the backs of my legs knocked painfully against the edge of the bench. "You'll stay here forever. Indefinite confinement. No opportunity for redemption."

His eyes widened, the expression beseeching. "It doesn't matter! You deserve this, Ziba. I've admired you for so long. I've loved you too. I want to give this to you. You must take the gift."

"No!" I shouted, although there was no one there to listen except for us two. "*That's* not fair."

Abdiel's wings were thickening, the light dimming. "You mustn't question His way."

I was torn between wanting to gather him to me, to feel those wings fold against me, and to push him and his divine gift away from my aching temptation. "I'm part of this now, but you are still fresh." My gaze ran over him, my flesh still feeling the pressure of him beside me, smelling and tasting his skin. "*Beautiful*. You must go back. I'll stay here."

"No!" Abdiel shouted, louder than I'd ever imagined his beautiful voice could cry.

"Take him back instead!" I shouted, lifting my face to the ceiling, though I of all people knew that He could be anywhere at any time. Or nowhere, for a Fallen angel like me. "Let Abdiel return!"

Abdiel collapsed to the floor, sobbing. His wings were fluttering but translucent, as if they were fading into illusion. "You must trust Him, Ziba. You must not doubt Him!"

I fell to my knees beside him. It was difficult to see him through

the tears in my eyes, but I wanted the last sight of my lover to last me for a long time. “I won’t go.”

“Don’t doubt!” he sobbed. He grasped my hand. “Please!”

“Abdiel...”

“For me!” he gasped. His whole body was shaking. “Promise me!”

I shook my head, but I had to give him what he wanted. I owed him that. “I promise I do not doubt Him,” I said. The words physically hurt to say, but I forced them out. “His way is mine. For you, Abdiel.”

I gripped his hand so hard that I didn’t see how anything could part us. His wings beat one more time, disturbing the air around us, and began to shrink in size.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Abdiel, no—”

“Hush.” He leaned over, cupped his hand to my face, and kissed me. “You wanted to know why I doubted Him myself? It was because I didn’t think you could be saved. I didn’t believe that such beauty and integrity could still survive here.” His whisper grew even softer. “That I could redeem you with my love.”

I kissed him back, loving it, terrified I was losing him, needing him beyond belief. “It’s enough for me. It’s enough for me.”

He put his finger to my lips. His eyes were bright again but without the frenzy. We knelt, face to face, kissing and touching. And slowly, most painfully, the sores at my back started to swell.

“Wings,” Abdiel whispered. “Your wings are returning.”

I stared into his face, feeling the power at my shoulders, the new growth racing through my veins like fresh blood. *New life!* “What does this mean?”

“You’ve redeemed us both, Ziba.”

“I won’t have these wings if it’s at the expense of yours!” I grasped him more tightly. “Will we both return—will we be together?”

He nodded. “They’ll be smaller wings, but we’ll both have them.” There was a sparkle in his eye at last. “Can you bear being of a lower order with me, Ziba?”

I pulled him to me, weeping, ignoring the awkwardness of our new

wings, forgetting the cold floor, wanting only to feel him and hold him. “I can bear it,” I muttered into his neck, my lips seeking his skin. “I can bear it very well.”

CLARE LONDON took her pen name from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. A lone, brave female in a frenetic, testosterone-fueled family home, she juggles her writing with the weekly wash, waiting for the far distant day when she can afford to give up her day job as an accountant.

She's written in many genres and across many settings, with novels and short stories published both online and in print. She says she likes variety in her writing while friends say she's just fickle, but as long as both theories spawn good fiction, she's happy. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama with a healthy serving of physical passion, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic, and sexy characters.

Clare currently has several novels sulking at that tricky chapter three stage and plenty of other projects in mind... she just has to find out where she left them in that frenetic, testosterone-fueled family home.

Visit Clare's web site at <http://www.clarelondon.co.uk> and her blog at <http://clarelondon.livejournal.com/>.

HERBAL TEA

H.J. Brues

I LOOKED at the rainbow flag and tried not to clench my fists. Maybe I was being my usual paranoid self and it was just one of those equal opportunity things, but I had the impression they were laughing themselves sick back at headquarters.

The place looked harmless enough on the outside, with its potted geraniums and clear windows, the stenciled sign reading “The Ancient Herbalist” in simple, blue cursive. At least it wasn’t a sex shop or one of those sleazy bookstores, though it reeked of alternative bullshit; that, I could bear for one day, or so I told myself as I pushed the door open to the chime of a dozen little bells and almost gagged on the overpowering scent of herbs. Jesus. “Herbalist” was right, by the smell of it.

There were no patrons sitting at the white, wrought-iron tables yet, so I walked over to study the prints on the nearest wall. They were all renderings of plants—medicinal, I guessed—with a sure hand for detail and sedate backgrounds that emphasized the almost botanical textbook air to them. As I moved closer, I noticed a few smaller frames holding something that looked like... tea bags? Yeah, several tea bags, the front of two cardboard tea boxes, and a row of teabag labels. Weird, the things people choose to hang on a wall.

“Welcome.”

I turned around to meet the most amazing violet eyes I’d ever seen on a man. My old neighbor Wallace used to have a cat with those eyes, though they weren’t as full of healthy curiosity as the pair holding my gaze in the herbal-scented room.

“Would you care for a cup of tea?” he asked, his voice a little too much on the amused side for my comfort. I was glad he didn’t wait for my answer, because I might have blurted out the wrong thing,

considering I only drink black coffee, and it gave me time to study his retreating form as he walked back to the counter.

He was wearing drawstring pants that hung loosely on his lean hips, two layers of oversized T-shirts blurring the contours of his light frame. I felt overdressed in my black suit, almost the cartoon image of an FBI agent trying to get some answers from a skater punk.

“You don’t look ancient to me,” I said, surprising a laugh out of him.

“I don’t look like an herbalist, either,” he replied with a smile. A very nice smile—of the sexy-nice kind. Definitely someone was having a ball back at headquarters.

“I wouldn’t know. Never seen one,” I said as I sat on a stool, trying to appear less tall, less threatening. That was as far as my public relations skills would go. It wasn’t my fault if the usual recruiter was out of town.

“You have now.” Those strange eyes studied me for a moment. “The question is: will you trust this herbalist?”

Trust. My favorite word. “Could you be more specific?”

His full lips drew another pretty smile, just this side of mischievous. “Well, you see, we have a little tradition here at The Ancient Herbalist.” He leaned forward over the counter, his tone conspiratorial. “We offer our patrons a special infusion, carefully chosen to meet their deepest needs.”

“Uh huh.”

His smile became tantalizing. “It’s on the house. Satisfaction guaranteed.”

“So, you’ll take a good look at me and prepare a concoction that’s going to fulfill my *deepest needs*?”

“Yep.”

“And you do this with every patron that crosses your door?”

“Yeah.” He leaned even closer, those lips pouring seduction into every syllable. “Sounds too risky for you, maybe?”

I heard myself answer, “I take a lot of risk in my line of work,” my tone defensive as it gets, and had to stifle a laugh. I was beginning to see why they wanted to recruit a skinny kid like him.

“Let me guess.” He gave me the once-over, violet eyes narrowing in a classic, fake-reflective pose. As if he hadn’t reached his own conclusions the moment he first saw me, the little shit. “I think it’s either law enforcement or—” *No kidding.*

“Or?” I took the bait in spite of myself.

“Insurance.”

I laughed hard. “Yeah, that’s one hell of a risky business.”

He shrugged, smiling widely. I wondered how many different kinds of smiles he could pull out of his seemingly inexhaustible supply, each one with its particular taste and purpose, very much like the medicinal plants he stored behind the counter in big, blue tin cans.

“So,” he said as he waved a blue kettle in front of my eyes, “will you take this particular risk?”

I studied the azure enamel surface for a second, wondering if I’d ever seen a kettle that startlingly blue before. “Yeah, let’s do it. I feel brave today.”

He gave me a nod and a flash of white teeth that felt like a pat to my head, as if he’d offered a reassuring “good boy” to his favorite pet. I was glad he turned around then, for my brows had almost reached my hairline. To put it mildly, I wasn’t used to people being so carefree around me. Even the regulation smiles of fast-food servers would freeze when they took one look at my face. And yet this cheeky runt could hold my stare as only the meanest bastards would and then reach out and ruffle my hair with the easy confidence of a lion tamer. I didn’t know whether to feel insulted or amused.

He picked up a blue tin can from the shelf and lowered it onto the counter, and then he placed a blue, ball-shaped infuser right beside it.

“People must have a hard time guessing your favorite color,” I said.

He chuckled. “What makes you think I had a say in the decoration?”

“I assume The Ancient wouldn’t frame tea bags.”

He shook his head, laughing. “No, he wouldn’t approve of trash as a form of art.” His expression changed then, some thought or recollection clouding his eyes. “Most people wouldn’t, for that matter.”

I found myself wanting to fix whatever it was that bothered him,

and the thought startled me. Hurt feelings weren't on my list of things to solve. As if he'd felt my unease, he turned to grab another tin can and busied himself filling the infuser with some herbs from each of the two cans on the counter. He repeated the process two more times, my eyes following the deft movements of his long fingers as he measured fragrant herbs and placed a blue ceramic tea pot in front of me. Then the kettle made a half-hearted attempt at whistling, and I couldn't help snorting at the ineffectual sound.

"It's mean to make fun of the whistle-impaired, you know," he chided, his eyes twinkling in his serious face.

"Sorry. Political correctness is not my strong suit."

He reached out to smooth the lapels of my jacket, his fingers looking pale and delicate against the dark fabric. "Doesn't matter. You'd look good in any suit." Christ. Those incredible eyes were as purple now as a cardinal's robe, and I had to think such an artificial shade must have been the product of some illness or injury, because he certainly wasn't wearing contacts. I was close enough to tell, so close I could smell him, the peculiar mix of herbs and male that seemed uniquely his.

The kettle let out a half-choked shriek, and he turned to pick it up and pour boiling water into the teapot. The smell of the plants he'd mixed wafted about us, and I wrinkled my nose.

"My deepest needs must be very dark, the way that stinks," I muttered, trying not to breathe too much. He threw back his head and laughed, the imp.

"I never said it'd smell good, did I?" It seemed he couldn't stop laughing. Every time he looked at me he would start chortling, even when I decided to go for my best intimidating glower.

"I'm glad you find it amusing," I retorted, a little snappishly.

He sobered at that, his eyes going as serious and big as those of a chastised puppy. "Sorry. I wasn't making fun of you. You just looked like a kid in front of a plate of spinach." And before I could react, his hand reached out to smooth my brow, soft fingers dancing on my heated skin, making me want things I wasn't supposed to need anymore, much less from the likes of him. He gave me a soft smile. "If you could relax, let go a little, things would start looking different for you."

I felt so out of sorts that I tried to change the subject, though it

came out rather brusque. “I hope that skunk soup you’re giving me isn’t going to knock me out. I need all my wits about me.”

He rolled his eyes and moved away. “Yeah. Selling life insurance policies can be mind-boggling. I get it.”

I instantly regretted the loss of contact, the sarcasm in his voice, but I didn’t know what to say to make it better, so I just kept watching as he rummaged under the counter, thick black hair tumbling forward in untamed curls that I would’ve liked to sink my fingers in to test their softness.

He finally straightened and placed a mug by the teapot in front of me. I did a double take when I saw the big block characters reading “FBI”, and then I noticed the diminutive letters between them that completed the words “Freshly Brewed Infusion.” I let out a surprised laugh. “Don’t tell me you even have customized mugs.”

He gave me a proud smile. “Of course I do. If you wanted uniformity you should have gone to Starbucks, though the infusions you’d find there are only suited for Ethiopian goats.”

“What?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Never mind. It’ll be ready in five minutes.” He placed his elbows on the counter and rested his chin on his palms, locking eyes with me. “Would you like to—?”

All the Christmasy bells over the door went off, cutting short whatever offer he was about to make. Just as well. I wasn’t there to fight long-forgotten desires; I was there to make an offer of my own, a job proposition with a deadline attached, so I’d better focus on the task at hand.

The guy at the door looked like one of those trendy, no-animal-testing activists who spent every waking moment trying to be present, whatever that means. But then his eyes scanned the room and met mine, and I could see he would never be fully present in any of the multiple dimensions his brain was trying to inhabit at the same time.

Violet-eyes frowned, and I thought he was going to exercise the right of admission and send the guy back to the loony bin. “You’re early, Cy,” he said instead, a hint of worry in his voice.

“Didn’t catch the spacecraft, Justin.” He made it sound like *just tin*. “Got hold of these beauties on my way to the spaceport.”

Cy walked over to the counter and laid a brown paper bag on it, making my eyes narrow. I told myself recreational drugs weren't my jurisdiction, that they wouldn't even affect my mission, but still, for some obscure reason, I wanted Justin to be clean.

"Don't get your feathers ruffled, Demonslayer." I glanced up sharply at Cy's words to find him nodding gravely at me before he continued. "This is just Justin here, and Just-Justin is the omega of my pack."

I took a deep breath. He thought he belonged to a werewolf pack. Fine by me, as long as he didn't start biting.

Justin took a peek into the brown sack and smiled. "Wow, they look great. Thank you!"

Cy smiled like a kid, all traces of his manic persona gone for a single moment of perfect happiness. Then he turned and left without a word, as if he were in a hurry to store away that brilliant moment.

Justin sighed and put the evidence bag under the counter. At least he wasn't so hooked that he had to get a hit as soon as he laid hands on the stuff. Yeah, what a great relief that was.

He moved closer to me and gave me a look I couldn't read. Then he put a blue ceramic container on the counter and fished a sugar cube from it with a silver spoon.

"I don't take sugar," I said, but he ignored me and put the cube in the FBI mug anyway.

"With this, you do," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Infusions are to be enjoyed, not swallowed. Same as life."

I wasn't in the mood to be given free good-life-for-dummies lessons, and the nasty smell of the dark liquid he was pouring into my mug didn't help at all.

"Are you sure nothing died in that teapot?"

He gave me the first unfriendly look I'd seen on that handsome face, and I thought his violet eyes would be a sight to see when he got really mad.

"I don't usually reveal my recipes, but since suspicion seems to be a given in your *line of work*, I'll tell you exactly what I put in that infusion." He paused, maybe waiting for me to contradict him, but I

couldn't deny I was a touch suspicious after the exchange I'd just witnessed. My silence made his tone go professionally cold. "I used mostly St. John's wort, which has proven effective in moderate depression; feverfew, for migraine prevention; valerian, good for anxiety and insomnia—in spite of its foul smell—and a little bit of lavender, also good for anxiety."

I frowned. "In short, you think I'm a nutcase."

"No. I think you're a bitter, uptight, mistrustful son of a bitch." He considered me for a moment and then added, "And *I* must be a nutcase for liking you anyway."

I opened and closed my mouth like a fish on the riverbank. I'd been warned about this kind of situation, but given the sort of people I usually dealt with, I hadn't had to worry about getting too close to anyone involved in my cases before.

What could I say to him now? *Don't get any high hopes because I'm only here temporarily? Just on a mission to recruit you?* There wasn't much I could say or do except carry on and get it over with as soon as possible.

"What do you think of law enforcement?" There. I'd already asked. The rest should be easy.

He blinked twice and then doubled over with laughter.

"Oh my," he said between outbursts of mirth. "That must be the most original come-on line I've ever heard."

I glared at him. "Just because this is a gay place, you shouldn't expect every man who comes through that door to hit on you."

"I shouldn't?" he asked, batting his eyelashes at me for a second before letting out a loud guffaw. I tried to keep scowling, but his laughter was too distracting. The things I have to deal with in my line of work are not exactly funny, and the most I ever get from my perpetrators is that special kind of insane hilarity—of the blood-curdling type—that only manages to contract one or two facial muscles. Justin laughed with his whole body, his mouth open to reveal white teeth, his eyes creasing in myriad laugh lines, black curls bobbing over his forehead, one hand clutching his belly and the other lying flat on the counter, his long fingers stretched out as if he was offering me a live connection to plug into his feelings. And against my better judgment, I took him up on his

offer, my hand moving of its own accord to rest over his, my big, ungainly paw closing over his delicate bones, Snow White holding hands with the Abominable in the most unlikely fairy tale.

His laughter died down, but his smile was there for me still, less mocking now, more intense, open and waiting. It felt like I'd truly entered the fairy realms, for my heart was slowly melting, the armor I was given with my new occupation creaking loudly as I sensed my body moving as a separate entity from its protective layer. For the first time in what seemed like eons to me, I felt distinctly alive, and I was in no hurry to analyze either causes or consequences.

"You want to know what I think about law enforcement in general?" he asked in a seductive whisper. "Or about you in that capacity?"

I cracked a smile, literally, my face feeling too solidly fixed in its neutral mask to do anything but break. "Both, I guess."

He nodded, his free hand reaching out to sandwich mine between his, warmth spreading up my arm 'til I imagined rivulets of melted ice running down my back. "Okay. Here's the deal: you take at least one sip of that infusion, and I'll tell you what I think."

I chuckled. "You're persistent, have to give you that."

"Yeah, well, you're stubborn. So I guess we're well matched."

I searched his violet eyes and found that strange color was oddly suited for seriousness, deep meanings swimming easily in purplish-blue waters. "All right. You win. I'll try the magical potion."

The hand over mine moved swiftly to swat my head. "No. *You* win, you big lug. I made it only for you."

I let out a laugh I myself couldn't recognize in its joyful ringing. It made me absurdly happy that he'd done anything just for me. He shook his head in frustration, but his hand returned dutifully to its place on top of mine, as if he hadn't yet deemed me a lost cause.

When I raised the mug to my lips, I felt his eyes following my every move, and it gave me a strange sense of safety to have my own personal herbalist watch over me through my first herbal experience. So I took a tentative sip, trying to ignore the smell of rotten fish tickling the back of my nose. Once the hot liquid slid down my throat, there was an aftertaste of bittersweet that prompted me to try again, and soon I found

myself sipping steadily, almost enjoying the contrasting flavors and the warmth settling in my stomach.

He gave me a smug smile. “See? Now I bet I got you addicted to herbal infusions.”

That was the wrong thing to say, for obvious reasons. He blinked in rapid succession, as though he’d just realized what he’d said, and his hands moved hastily away from mine, but I caught his wrist and held him close.

He tried to wiggle free with no success. “What’s wrong with you? Let me go!”

I kept my grip tight. “You tell me what’s wrong. What did you put in that damn infusion?”

As I had guessed, his eyes were incredible when he got angry, flames of purple fire threatening to burn everything they touched, blue-red laser lights aimed to destroy.

“I already told you, you square-headed asshole,” he spat, “and so you know, except for chocolate-flavored tea, there’s nothing in this whole joint that could create an addiction.”

“Oh yeah? Not even that stuff from Cy?”

He frowned his confusion ’til realization dawned on him. He rubbed his free hand over his face.

“You know?” he said in a calm, disappointed voice. “It would almost be funny if I didn’t find your assumptions so insulting.”

I was about to counter that things you could prove were not assumptions but facts when a cheerful little tune sprang from somewhere in his multiple layers of clothing. Shit. I hated it when people turned their phones into badly insulated mobile dance clubs.

Justin glared pointedly at my restraining hand as the tune grew louder and less cheerful in its urgent trill, and I finally let go, if only to stop the damned noise. He took a quick look at the caller ID, and his expression went from angry to worried in a second.

“Hey, Jamie.” His voice didn’t show a bit of what was in his face. It came out warm and reassuring, as if he were dealing with a skittish young animal. “No, he hasn’t. Not even once.” He was so focused on the conversation that he didn’t move away for the sake of privacy, and I was

glad, because I wanted to know everything that concerned him. “Has he been following you again?” My ears perked up like those of a retriever. “Jamie, you know what I think about that. He’s crossing every acceptable boundary, and you have the right to protect yourself.” Now Justin let out a resigned sigh. “Okay. I won’t say it again. Just come down here and I’ll make you that rooibos tea you like so much.” He closed his eyes as if he were mentally counting to ten. “No, baby, I promise. Just come and relax a little with me. Okay?” I felt so many contrasting emotions on hearing him call someone “baby” that I had to shake my head in an effort to clear my thoughts. Why on earth did it have to affect me so much? It wasn’t supposed to happen. It hadn’t happened even when I was a rookie, when everything I’d always known became new and surprising from the unexpected point of view of my new position. So why now? Why Justin? I wouldn’t put it past my boss to have known all along that I would react exactly the way I was reacting, but why send me, then? Was it some kind of test? Was he expecting me to screw it up, just so he could go on with his favorite not-even-we-are-perfect speech? It was driving me crazy, not knowing why or what for.

I looked up to find Justin standing in the same place, with his cell still open, looking far ahead, so obviously worried that I instantly forgot all my uncertainties.

“Bad news?” My question shook him out of his trance, and he looked at me, his previous anger completely gone, making me think admiringly that he wasn’t the kind to hold a grudge.

“It’s just this friend of mine. He’s so sweet he always gets trampled on, and I can’t force him to get help.”

“Is there something I can do?” My years as a uniformed cop had given me a lot of experience in dealing with that kind of problem, and I was good at it. Much better than at recruiting, anyway.

Justin searched my eyes, and whatever he saw in them made his face soften into an expression I’d never seen on him before, something that made my insides keep steadily melting into a puddle of warmth.

“I don’t think so, but thanks for offering.” He laughed self-consciously for the first time, and I found it endearing. “I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Douglas,” I said, our hands coming together once again.

“Hmm, a good old name you don’t often hear anymore.”

“That’s because I’m older than I look.” Too old to be holding a kid’s hand much longer than a decent handshake required.

“Yeah, well, I’m ancient, so we must be pretty even,” he said, holding on tight when I tried to retrieve my hand. I shrugged to myself. I wasn’t going to complain if he insisted on touching me. He must have been one of those children who always picked the ugliest animal when their parents took them to the dog pound to adopt a puppy.

He gave me a new smile from his personal repertoire, and I lost myself trying to find the right words to describe it. If he were my companion, I was sure eternity wouldn’t be enough to classify each and every one of his smiles. And the moment I thought that, I understood there was something definitely wrong with me, or this mission, or me in this mission, especially because I didn’t care anymore if it was so.

The doorbells rattled so softly that it seemed it was just the wind pushing the door open until a head peeked inside. Big brown eyes scanned the room fearfully, and Justin gave my hand a reassuring squeeze before letting go to wave invitingly at the stranger.

Jamie, I thought, as a very short, pretty young man approached the counter gingerly. Yeah, “sweet” was the right word for him. He had one of those perfect oval faces, with the kind of huge eyes and pouty lips that you only saw in Japanese anime.

“Come here,” Justin called, throwing his arms over the counter to hug Jamie. I couldn’t blame him. The kid was cute and cuddly as a koala. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too.” Damn. He even had a sweet voice. I had to take a sip of the bitter concoction in the mug in front of me just to remember what reality tasted like.

When I looked up, I found two set of eyes fixed on me, amused violet irises and shy brown ones studying me so carefully that I had to repress the urge to shout “What?”

“Douglas, this is my friend Jamie.” And to Jamie, he said, “Douglas is brave enough to drink what I’ve prepared for him even though he suspects I’m drugging him.”

Oh shit. I’d completely forgotten.

“Justin would never do that!” Jamie’s eyes went wide with

outraged surprise. “He always knows what’s best for you. He would never do anyone harm.”

“Anyone but Bill.”

“Justin...”

“Sorry, baby,” Justin apologized, petting his friend’s head. Jamie pouted for all of a heartbeat and then smiled sweetly. I guessed if Justin couldn’t hold a grudge, grudges spilled through Jamie’s fingers like water.

“What are you making that face for?” Justin startled me out of my thoughts.

“What face?”

He rolled his eyes. “The one that says, ‘If you knew what I know, you wouldn’t be so candid’.” And the little bastard even managed to mimic my signature, raised-eyebrow expression to its slightest detail.

I shrugged. “Don’t let me get started on Roswell.” Justin laughed heartily. He was too smart to believe I was *that kind* of special agent, but Jamie watched me with apprehension.

“Just ignore the big bully, Jamie,” Justin said as he filled the azure kettle with fresh water. “He’s one of the good ol’ reliable guys.” I shook my head at him, but Jamie seemed visibly relieved. No wonder Justin called him “baby.” “You want some rooibos, or are you feeling adventurous?”

“Cy has been here?” Jamie asked in return.

“Yeah, wanna risk a taste?”

“Nah, last time I tried I was dizzy for two hours.”

If they went on like that, my eyes were going to pop out of their sockets, especially when Jamie turned to me and asked, “Did you know Justin collects them?”

My mouth was so dry that I could only repeat the one word that bothered me. “‘Them’?”

“Yeah, you know, teabag labels.” He gave me a serious look. “Justin came up with the idea to keep Cy focused on a task. It soothes him.”

“Teabag labels,” I muttered, and Justin turned suspiciously quickly

to study the rows of blue tin cans on the shelves behind him while his friend went on babbling.

“They’re amazing. He even has some shaped like people, so it looks as if they were bathing in your teacup. You’d be surprised at how weird they can get.”

“Yeah, I bet I’d be surprised.”

Jamie ignored the irony in my voice and turned eagerly to Justin. “Why don’t you show him? I’m sure he’d love to see your collection.” Oh God. I resisted the urge to hide my face in my hands while Justin took his time picking one of the large cans from the shelves and placing it on the counter. When he looked up at me, his eyes were full of laughter and mischief.

“Is that so, Douglas?” he asked, leaning dangerously close to me. “Would you like to come upstairs and see my treasures?”

I was saved by the squeak of the kettle, which made Justin move away to quickly fill another blue infuser with a new assortment of herbs. Then he placed it in a teapot and poured briskly boiling water over it. The smell that reached my nostrils was heady and sweet, and I saw him put a mug in front of Jamie that was accurately fitting in its cutesy, Hello Kitty design.

“That one smells better than mine,” I couldn’t resist pointing out.

Justin dropped two sugar cubes in his friend’s mug before answering me. “It does, but I wouldn’t recommend it for you. It might trigger your gag reflex.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, maybe. What did you put in it?”

“Secret recipe. I can only tell you that it’s mostly rooibos, orange peel, and marigold. A heart-warming combination.”

The doorbells went crazy as a man stormed in. He was big, or rather wide, in the classic trapezoidal, bodybuilding fashion.

“There you are,” the man’s voice boomed, and I saw pure terror spread over Jamie’s sweet features. Before I could even narrow my eyes, Justin had lifted the flap at the end of the counter and planted himself in front of the intruder.

“You’re not welcome here, Bill.”

The light-framed herbalist looked tiny in front of the man, but he

didn't seem intimidated by the obvious difference in bulk.

"I don't give a damn. I came for Jamie, not to drink your pansy-assed infusions."

I guessed we were in the right place for the pot to call the kettle black, but still.

Justin kept his voice level, his eyes trained on the other man's. "Jamie doesn't want to be with you, so I'm gonna have to ask you to leave."

Bill snorted. "You can ask all you want."

Justin didn't budge, his voice sounding even calmer than before. "You're disturbing my patrons, Bill. Please go now."

"I don't care about your fucking patrons." He looked up. "Jamie, come here."

Jamie didn't even turn to look at Bill. He was frozen on the stool, his small body shaking as he clutched the counter for dear life.

I needed to let Justin handle things on his own—it was departmental policy—but even as I admired his courage and calm demeanor, something primal was squeezing the walls of my stomach, and I found it really hard to settle into the cool detachment of our special breed of law enforcers.

"Jamie, get your ass moving and come here. Now." Bill's loud voice made Jamie's body jerk, but he kept his deadly grip on the lifeline of the counter. His way of fighting might not have been the most assertive, but at least he was fighting, backing Justin as best he could.

"Jamie is not going anywhere with you, so please leave now," Justin said, and his even tone must have shouted loudly in Bill's ear, telling him how quickly he was losing this battle. He glared at Jamie's back for a second and then turned his bloodshot eyes to the real culprit of what was turning into a public humiliation.

"You don't get to tell me what to do, you stupid motherfucker."

The moment Bill's hand moved in Justin's general direction, I stood to my full height, projecting my voice across the room. "Don't even think about it, buddy."

Bill's eyes darted to me, and I saw him take in my size, my clothes, my aggressive stance, the sharp edges of the look I was directing him.

Even as he watched, I reached out to rest my hand on Jamie's nape in a clear territorial gesture. I didn't know why I was doing it, but it felt just right.

Jamie's warm body tensed under my fingers and then suddenly relaxed, leaning into the contact. It made me remember what it felt like to protect the people you cared about when it all came down to the simple, messy reality of physical threats. I was so used to fighting what were only abstractions to the common man that my fingers had gone numb, my eyes incapable of narrowing down to the meager perspective of everyday life and its insignificant struggles.

"Please go now, Bill. You had your chance with Jamie, and it didn't work out. Just let it rest. Don't get into trouble for this."

I felt a wave of pride at Justin's cleverly chosen words. He was offering Bill a dignified way out, only vaguely hinting at the fact that I might be there in an official capacity, that he might get into more trouble than the mere exchange of threats or even punches would have amounted to.

"You're right. That cowardly little slut isn't worth my time." I felt Jamie flinch under my fingers, and I gave his neck a reassuring squeeze. "Go on hiding behind your friends, but don't come back crying to me when you need a real man."

Bill yanked the door open and disappeared in a commotion of outraged bells. We all stood there frozen for a second, mute puppets hanging from invisible, tense strings, until Jamie let his torso dip forward to rest his head on the counter, and, as if on cue, Justin's shoulders went down a notch and my body finally relaxed from its fighting stance.

Justin turned and walked over to his friend. I could see his face was pale, and the hand he laid on Jamie's nape, right where my own hand had been a moment before, was shaking slightly. Jamie shifted, blindly seeking the comfort of his friend's body as he hid his face in Justin's belly and threw his arms around the slim waist. His sobs might have been almost inaudible any other time, but right then they seemed as loud as the doorbells had been.

"Hush, baby. It's all right. It's over now," Justin soothed, his fingers caressing Jamie's hair. He turned to me then. "It's incredible how people react sometimes."

"Yeah, incredible." I felt violet eyes on me at the appreciative tone

in my voice, and I hoped they could catch all the layers of meaning behind that single word. They must have, because the almost-blue became almost-purple in a heartbeat, and the tip of a pink tongue came out to lick suddenly dry lips.

The baby koala plastered to Justin seemed to have sensed the odd quality to our silence, and he raised his face to look first at his friend, then at me, and then back at Justin.

“I think Douglas would love to see your collection now,” the sweet voice said before breaking into giggles. Justin blushed to the roots of his hair, and he swatted Jamie’s head playfully.

“Shut up, you whackadoodle.”

The giggles went on as Jamie stood and threw his arms around Justin’s neck to kiss his cheek with a loud smack. “Thank you for being my knight in shining armor. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Justin answered with a smile.

Jamie turned to me with the obvious intention of repeating the process all over me, and I couldn’t help myself. “Don’t even think about it, buddy.” That stopped his arms halfway to my neck, and he gave me a hesitant look before bursting into laughter, the sweet little madman. I almost had to lift his small body off the floor before he could thank me properly.

He wouldn’t let Justin take him home, so we just walked him to the door to exchange goodbyes and reassurances that he would call if he needed anything. He hadn’t taken more than a few steps when he turned. “You should keep him, Justin. He’s funny.” And before he darted off running, he shouted, “And he’s big!”

Justin shook his head, chuckling, and the heat I sensed in my face felt suspiciously close to a blush. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to recognize myself when this mission was over. Of course, as soon as I thought about it ending anytime soon, I panicked. Only a few minutes before, I’d just wanted to get it over with; now all I could think was that there had to be a way for me to be forever recruiting Justin.

I watched his nimble fingers flip the Closed sign and lock the jingly door. His eyes met mine, purplish pools of desire enticing me to get closer and dive into that beautiful soul. I knew I shouldn’t, but what I should and what I desperately *had* to do seemed as close and yet as far

apart as heaven and earth, and so when he touched my elbow, all that I had been up to that moment suddenly disappeared, replaced by a ravenous beast with eyes only for the tasty prey in front of me.

I lunged forward, shoving Justin's back against the door, my mouth closing on his luscious lips with a growl barely covered by the annoying chorus of bells. Justin's paralyzing surprise lasted for all of a heartbeat, and then he was opening up for me and fighting me for dominance at the same time, our hunger so well matched that I had a hard time keeping myself upright with a fierce wolverine crawling on top of me.

Our bodies wouldn't even disentangle when we came up for air, my eyes registering every little change in that beautiful face: the light flush on his smooth skin, the dilated pupils, the iridescent purple reflections around them, the swollen lips, slightly parted now and shining wet. Violet eyes studied me in return, so thirsty that I could almost believe I was all Justin had ever wanted. Almost. Life had taught me the hard way that there was always a purpose behind the most selfless of intentions, no matter how carefully wrapped up in self-delusional abstractions like friendship, loyalty, or love.

Justin reached out to grab my head in a painful grip, as if he knew I was getting distracted. He showed me white teeth in a feral smile that I felt my mouth strain to give back with the same cannibalistic need to possess. "I want you in me now," he whispered so close to my lips that I breathed the air of his lungs as if I were incapable of procuring my own. "Anyway you'll have me."

The growl that came out of me sounded so much like ancient despair that I wondered if I was changing yet again into another strange creature with new goals and tasks to fulfill, but with the same old broken heart trying to sustain the whole system.

Justin groaned as I lifted him off the floor, long legs wrapping around my waist as my hands slid down to cup his ass and hold him in place while I carried him to the closest flat surface. Our mouths latched onto each other, tongues moving in a frenzied battle to conquer as much territory as they could reach, Justin's fingers digging into my scalp, hungry little noises driving me crazy with the need to tear myself open for him to devour the most tender meat, deep inside where bruises never healed and blood flowed at simple words.

I sat Justin on the first iron table, his strong legs pulling me against

his body while his hands fought with the knot of my tie. My own hands were free now to grab a bunch of T-shirts and lift them as far as they would go, revealing a mouth-watering expanse of white, hairless skin and two rosy nipples my fingers itched to pinch. I laughed breathlessly into his mouth. “We have a logistical problem here.”

He nibbled my chin like a small piranha. “Logistical?”

“Yep. Can’t get rid of your clothes while you cling to me.”

“Uh huh.” He licked my lips, baiting my tongue out. “And you want me to stop clinging?” His legs pulled me impossibly closer, our erections rubbing together through all the layers of fabric.

“No,” I whined, drowning my frustration in his open mouth, catching his lower lip between my teeth and pulling a little before letting go. “I like you all clingy. I also want you naked. Hence the problem.”

He had already undone my tie and was attacking my shirt buttons while he answered me between kisses. “You’re lucky I’m a good problem solver.”

“Prove it,” I said, a little growly, giving a pointed tug at the T-shirts stuck under his raised arms.

He shrugged. “They’re old. Just tear away.” I didn’t have time to show surprise before he opened my shirt and bent to close his mouth over my left nipple. Jesus Christ. My body shuddered from head to toe, nerves I didn’t know I had coming to life in the screeching agony of long-forgotten pleasure.

I felt him smile against the skin of my chest, and that small gesture made me want so many things at the same time that my whole system of contention went out of whack and my hands tore the flimsy cotton between them savagely, my throat letting out the weirdest of sounds to match the satisfying ripping noise of the fabric.

Justin chuckled. “I knew you’d like that.”

I probably gave him a manic smile. “Yeah, but I like this better.” My hands were finally free to press a blazing trail from his waist up to his collarbone, all that smooth skin sliding under my avid fingers, his hot body arching up to meet my fevered touch, a loud moan escaping him as my nails grazed his nipples.

He shoved my jacket and shirt off my shoulders, and I engaged in a frenzy of destruction, tearing about every single piece of clothing left on

his torso, not sure if it was the childish pleasure of breaking things that was driving me crazier by the moment or the much more adult pleasure of his mouth all over my naked skin. I didn't care which; I only wanted more, now, and he didn't seem to have more patience than I had, the way his hands fumbled with my belt, button, and fly even as he kept licking, nibbling, and outright biting every single inch of me he could reach.

I pulled at the string of his pants with one hand, shaking my clothes off the other while I kicked my shoes off. He scooted over to the edge of the table and shoved my pants and underwear down. My pants slid down easily enough, but the elastic band of my shorts proved a little trickier.

"You should've worn a kilt," he grouched.

I chuckled against the tender skin of his throat. "My department's not that slack on the dress code, you know."

"Then you should cross over to the herbalist side. We're more natural about things."

As soon as I let my jacket and shirt finally drop to the floor, I discovered just how natural about things herbalists were, the hands I shoved under his loosened waistband meeting only soft, naked skin along the curves of his ass.

"Oh shit." It almost did me in, the notion that only a flimsy piece of clothing separated me from a gorgeously naked herbalist. And the way he reacted to the touch of my hands, desperately trying to both push back into my hands and press forward to free me from the growing constriction of my boxers, was not helping.

"Hurry, Douglas, I can't—"

I shook my head. No way in hell was I taking my hands off his ass. "Tear away."

He snickered. "I'm not that strong, Special Agent Godzilla. I'll have to be inventive."

His sneakers hit the floor with loud thuds, and then I had both fingers and toes sliding under my waistband and slowly pushing my underwear down, so slowly that the elastic dragged all the way down my straining shaft, drawing a loud moan out of me.

"I like inventive," I said in a throaty whisper. Justin made a sound, half chuckle, half whimper, his eyes fixed on my cock, his hands prisoner for a moment under the elastic, until it finally slid down and the

last of my clothes joined the heap around my ankles.

“Put your legs down,” I growled, barely waiting for him to disentangle from my waist before I was lifting him off the table and against my body. He threw his arms around my neck, his pants all but gliding down his long legs, his naked body suddenly pressing against mine, fitting so well that I wondered how I had managed to trudge on without that big missing chunk.

Justin let out a moan that resonated deep inside my chest, his cock pressing hard and wet against my thigh.

“Douglas, please. Fuck me. Now. Please.” He sounded as desperate as I was feeling, and I was about to spread him out on the table when it hit me.

“Have you any condoms here?”

He groaned in frustration. “Shit.”

“You don’t?” I instantly knew I’d fucked up. His eyes blazed purple and his hands tried to shove me away.

“I don’t keep any condoms at work because, contrary to what you believe, I neither do drugs nor do I let every stranger that comes through that door fuck me on top of a table.”

“I’m sorry, Justin.” He still tried to wiggle free from my grip, but I wouldn’t let him, not like that. “I know you don’t. I really do.” He searched my eyes for a long moment, and I held his gaze and his body close to me. “Forgive me, please? It’s very difficult for me to trust people.” And I couldn’t possibly tell him how difficult it was to even acknowledge that, how it still hurt to remember the day I found my loving wife in bed with another guy, the very same day my loyal partner would leave me bleeding to death in the back alley of the club he’d been extorting protection money from. I couldn’t tell Justin that was the reason I’d chosen our own kind of internal affairs, the only department where I wouldn’t be paired to work on my cases.

Justin sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know why, but I can’t stay mad at you. You make me feel....”

I pressed him even closer to me. “What?”

He stood on his toes to breathe it into my lips. “Needed.”

I felt it in the pit of my stomach, the truth in that word. I *did* need

him; I couldn't explain why. I didn't even know if it was right, but I had no doubt he was exactly what I needed.

I cupped his face with my hands. "I know I've been a jerk, but I hope you can trust me if I tell you that I'm clean, that I would never cause you any harm."

"I trust you, Douglas." He held my gaze steadily, violet eyes serious. "The question is: can you trust *me* if I tell you the same?"

I didn't have to think it over, not this time, not ever again. "Yes, I trust you."

"Then fuck me, you big dork. I'm about to go off just by proximity."

I let out a throaty laugh, my lips immediately searching out his as if he were my own personal respirator, my hands grabbing his taut ass to lift him onto the table once again. He clung to me with renewed desperation, his arms snaking around my neck, his legs bracketing me until his heels pressed against the small of my back and pushed me forward, making our bodies collide in a delicious crash of naked skin and hard need.

We both cursed loudly, too far gone by then to even find it funny, too lost in the taste of each other to spare any breath for witty remarks. His cock was leaking pre-come all over mine, and I gave in to the urge to shove my fingers between us to feel his arousal, stroking his shaft with a rough caress that made Justin cry out and hide his face in my shoulder.

"Please, Douglas," he begged in a strained whisper, "don't make me come. I want you inside me, want to come on your cock."

I couldn't even make a sound, but his words, the way his whole body had started to shake with need, hit me like a wrecking ball, and I thought the noise of walls shattering inside me would be heard out in the street. Justin must have felt I was drowning, because he raised his beautiful face to give me a look that was caring and desperate in the same single flash of brilliant purple. Others had looked at me with desire in their eyes, but no one had ever searched my eyes to find out what was really in them. No one had ever been that brave. Even then, Justin could have chosen to retreat from the gaping wounds he saw, keep our exchange in the shallow waters of casual sex. But not Justin. He was a diver; wherever he saw pain, he jumped right in with his arms stretched as far as they'd go and a lifeline held tight between his teeth.

“Come here, love,” he said softly, as if we weren’t already joined in a bone-crushing embrace, his chin tilting to take my lips and let me taste the word “love” in his sweet mouth, hips shifting to let my cock slide into place, smearing pre-come behind his balls and over his hole.

I shuddered and fought to keep my eyes open, to stop my body from plunging into him in a single, savage thrust. “Lube,” I managed to croak.

“It’s all right. You won’t hurt me.”

We both knew it was a lie, that I would hurt him every possible way. I looked into his eyes and saw that he understood it and wanted me anyway, with all the sharp edges that would tear and scratch. I would hurt him, but he would never harm me. As I bared myself for him in a way I’d never done before, I was sure that, even when I gave him the power to destroy me, he would die before hurting me. That was the kind of man Justin was.

His legs pulled me to him, forcing the head of my cock to breach the tight ring of muscle guarding his opening. We both made strangled sounds in our throats, and I desperately tried to brace my arms against the iron table to slow down, but he wouldn’t let me, his arms pulling my head down for him to pour a single word into my mouth.

“Please.”

The full weight of need behind that word brought down my last defenses, and I pushed all the way into Justin’s inviting body with an inhuman cry of pleasure and despair. There was no going back after that, and even as his face contorted in a gesture of pure pain, Justin pushed back against my thrusts, giving me even more, and yet it was not enough, because by then I needed it all, every inch of his body, every corner of his soul.

I took his shaft in my hand and stroked him roughly in time with my shoves. He arched into me, his swollen lips letting out moans and whimpers whenever I stopped ravishing them, his fingers digging into my shoulders to grind his slender body against the force of my thrusts.

He called out my name when his body tightened around me, and I looked into his eyes expecting to find the look of a man at his most vulnerable, a silent plea to be kept safe while pleasure took over. But it wasn’t there. Justin’s violet eyes didn’t ask for my protection but offered me the world instead, with no restrictions, no masks, no shame, no fear.

And it broke me in so many pieces that only a shard of my soul was left intact, so small, so fragile, that I desperately held back my own climax to keep my core from shattering. Yet even as Justin shuddered in long waves of pleasure, he reached out for me, took my glass heart in his gentle fingers and held it like a precious jewel, his eyes open wide for me, letting me know that *I* was, finally, safe.

I don't think I'd ever cried in the throes of pleasure before. Then again, I'd never made love under the influence of herbs before. I laughed quietly in Justin's embrace, making him look up at me with big, tenderly amused violet eyes.

And just then, the buzzer went off somewhere in my discarded suit.

"I have to go, Justin." I clenched my jaw as I moved away from him, hoping for the impossible.

He blinked and busied himself with his clothes. "Okay. I'll walk you to the corner," he offered.

God. It was happening. And even then I couldn't stop admiring his resolve. He tried to pretend that it was no big deal just so I had the freedom to choose what I wanted to do with the gift of his love, as if having it returned unopened wouldn't hurt him.

We finished dressing and left the shop in silence. When we reached the corner, Justin looked up and smiled, only his eyes betraying how hard it was for him to let me go. I looked away and nodded, unable to lie to make it easier for us both. It had to be that way, and no word would provide the comfort I was neither prepared to offer nor allowed to give, but still I couldn't help reverting to a little trick of my trade.

I turned the corner out of Justin's sight and made my steps keep echoing away while my incorporeal form drifted back to him. Damn. There was a single tear trapped in his long lashes, his eyes a liquid mirror of violet pain. He turned slowly, not even seeing the two figures standing in his way until the first blow of the iron pipe landed on his shoulder.

I found myself trying hard to keep breathing. No. Not like that. The report just said he'd be attacked, and I'd assumed some thief was going to shoot him: a quick, painless death. Nobody had bothered to tell me it'd be a gay bashing.

I heard the sickening sound of crashing bones and saw Justin fall to

the ground like a broken doll. He didn't cry, didn't beg. He just lifted his hands in a feeble attempt to stop the savage blows that kept raining on him. And I just knew what would happen, knew that his silent resistance would only enrage his attackers even more, that his strength would keep him conscious until the end, until they left him lying on the curb, dying for long hours of unbearable pain without the comforting presence of another human soul.

To say that I found it unfair would have been a joke. I'd seen that man collect bits of paper just to give a crazy guy a mission; I'd seen him stand up to a man twice his size to defend a friend; I'd seen him take a look at my glitchy heart and give me his own to replace it; I'd seen him let go of the man he loved because he knew his lover wasn't ready to trust love. And that was the way he was going to die? Feeling hurt, alone and betrayed? I knew only too well what it felt like, dying with the sour taste of betrayal in your mouth, and I knew I couldn't let it happen. Not on my watch.

I didn't even feel rage or doubt. I just stepped into my human shoes and shouted at Justin's attackers. Breaking the balance between life and death was that simple. Any fledgling could do it, just as long as you were ready to pay the price. I was more than ready. I would have done anything to stop Justin from suffering, no matter how wrong it was.

When the two men had disappeared from view, I felt the familiar contraction of time that meant my boss was near. Archangels always go for dramatic appearances; I guess it's just the way they're made.

"You knew this would happen, didn't you, Michael?" I said without looking up.

"I expected as much, yes." He let the tip of his blazing sword rest on the asphalt, his voice tired with disappointment. "I'd wanted to promote you for a long a time, but you would have needed a partner for that."

"Yeah, well, you won't have to worry about it anymore." I felt a little sad to have failed him, but I couldn't find it in me to regret my choice.

He gave me a stern look. "You know I can't let this go, Douglas. You've crossed the line."

"I know. Just do what you have to do."

He nodded solemnly, and time started moving again. Then I saw Bill coming toward me with a gun in his hand, and I sighed at Michael's theatrics. He couldn't simply kick me back to earth. He had to make a whole production of it.

"You won't keep Jamie from me!" Bill hollered, his finger pulling the trigger.

The bullet hit my left knee, and I sank to the ground, cursing Bill silently. He could at least aim right, Jesus.

I was bracing myself for the second shot when my peripheral vision registered movement, and I suddenly had a body on top of mine, crushing me into the curb, the second bullet lodging squarely into the easy target. I caught a glimpse of violet and then nothing, just dead weight pressing against me.

The inhuman cry that shook the buildings around us to their foundations must have come from my throat, because the words I chewed out next sounded like sandpaper to me. "Come back here, you righteous bastard!"

Even my boss didn't dare to face the rage boiling inside me, for only his voice floated down to me over the noise of Bill's receding steps. "He had to die, Douglas."

"Like shit he did! You knew I was ready to take his place."

"So was he. And you wouldn't have trusted him any other way, you stubborn mule."

I blinked, not yet ready to stop glowering. "Trust him?"

"Yeah, you know, putting your life in his hands? As you would do with a *trusted* partner?"

Partner? I looked down at the man who'd given his last breath for me and then back up at the source of the ironic voice. Could it be—? Then Justin shuddered in my arms, and I instantly forgot all about Michael and his lofty tricks.

I shifted to carefully lay the slim body on the curb and felt violet eyes on me.

"Douglas! You have wings!"

I rolled my eyes. "So do you." He turned so quickly to look at his big, fluffy new wings that he almost fell off the curb. I couldn't help

grinning.

“But I can’t be—”

I tried to stifle the laughter that was bubbling up inside me. “You’ve always been an angel, Justin.” But I felt so happy that it just poured out with my words. “You’re just not freelance anymore.”

He smacked my arm. “Stop laughing at me, you big bully with wings.”

I smiled, my heart feeling warm, whole, at peace. Maybe his herbal concoction had finally managed to settle me. “Now, Justin. What do you think of law enforcement?”

H. J. BRUES lives in Spain, enjoying the hot weather, the brisk language, the warm-hearted people, and the thousands of books of the library she works in. She has a degree in medieval history and loves castles, knights in shining armor, and barbarian warriors with no armor at all. She practiced fencing till her knees started complaining, took archery till her elbow almost fell off, and then, wisely, switched to the less martial of the martial arts, tai chi.

THE TENTH AVATAR

Roland Graeme

“I’M the disgrace of my family,” Arun lamented.

“Good for you. Bah, bah, little black sheep,” Efrain teased him.

Arun grimaced. “Listen, buddy, I’m just brown enough to take offense at that.”

Arun and Efrain were coworkers, friends, and occasional fuck buddies. Arun had come to the United States to work and was getting accustomed to a climate in which it actually snowed during the winter and the summer temperatures never approached the searing equatorial heat he was used to back home in Madurai, where all his relatives still lived.

They were having a drink in one of the city’s several gay bars. Arun was getting used to *that*—to gay life in an American city—although he still felt shy about making the initial advance toward another man. Part of this reluctance stemmed from the fact that some guys obviously didn’t want to trick with a dark-skinned, foreign-looking man.

Efrain, who, as a Latino, had his own take on ethnic and racial prejudices, had once told him there were three kinds of gay men: “The first kind are turned off by your skin. Let ’em go fuck themselves! Then there will be the ones who are turned *on* by the way you look. You can have a nice hot time with a guy like that, but don’t expect him to look past his hot little fantasy about you and see what’s inside. Then there are the few decent guys who are really and truly color-blind. If you latch onto one like that and he’s any good in bed, hang onto him.” Efrain grinned. “And share him with me!”

Efrain was Arun’s mentor in this strange new world of gay bars, porno DVDs, and cruising for sex partners via the Internet. He’d talked Arun into not only participating in a couple of three-way sex scenes with

pickups, but into attending a group sex party with him. The experiences had left Arun feeling physically satisfied but vaguely ashamed—ashamed of his *lack* of shame, to be exact. Back home in Madurai, nice Hindu boys from respectable families didn't do these sorts of things, let alone enjoy them so much!

Arun, who confided in Efrain about everything, had suggested they get together for a drink after work so he could show Efrain the letter he had received from a law firm in Madurai. The relative whom Arun always referred to as his “Uncle Ramveer” had recently died. He was, in fact, Arun's mother's uncle. No one was surprised when Ramveer, a successful businessman, had remembered each of his relatives in his will, to a greater or lesser extent. He had left Arun two million rupees—two million and one rupees, to be exact, since it was considered auspicious to make gifts of money in odd, rather than even, amounts.

“But don't get too excited,” Arun warned Efrain. “It's only about forty-two thousand and six hundred dollars in American money.”

“That's still a nice piece of change. What are you going to do with it?”

Arun shrugged. “I'd like to invest it, but now... my parents are putting more pressure on me than ever to get married. They say I can use this money to set up housekeeping. They want to put me on one of those awful matrimonial websites.”

“You have got to be kidding.” Efrain had been incredulous about the prevalence of arranged marriages in India until Arun had shown him some of the Internet services in which prospective brides and bridegrooms were advertised—by their relatives, since it would be indecorous to advertise oneself. “I thought all that marriage talk was put on the back burner after you finally came out to your Mom and Dad.”

“It was, for a while, but now they're taking a different tack. They say it shouldn't be an impediment. They say they can find some village girl for me who doesn't know about such things, or some career woman who wouldn't care. That way, I could get married and have children and still have my little flings on the side, as long as I was discreet.”

“Jesus! No offense, but doesn't that sound kind of—well, hypocritical?”

“You could call it being cynical—or just realistic. Such things do go on. There was even talk about Uncle Ramveer, as a matter of fact.

That he had his ‘special men friends’, as my mother used to put it, on the side. Even though he seemed to be quite happily married. You don’t understand what a big deal this whole marriage thing is back in India.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Efrain replied. “It’s really no different where I come from. But parents are still parents, for Christ’s sake, no matter what part of the world you’re talking about. And so are grandparents, for that matter. Are you really telling me that if you married some good-looking guy here and adopted a couple of adorable kids, your parents wouldn’t come around? Before you know it, they’d be showing everybody the pictures of the grandchildren and bragging about their gay American son-in-law.”

Arun laughed. “He’d have to be a doctor or a lawyer or a banker, though, to suit them. Anyway, let me find a guy who’s good for more than a one-night stand before we start dragging the kids into it.” Arun took a sip of his drink, and, feeling more relaxed now that he’d unburdened himself to Efrain, he began to look around the bar, wondering if there might be any likely prospects there this evening.

“Didn’t you say there was something else in the letter?” Efrain asked.

The law firm’s letter was still on the table; Arun retrieved it and put it back in his pocket. “Yes, Uncle Ramveer also left me this big bronze statue of Kalki that he always had in his house. The lawyers say they’re going to have it shipped to me. When I was little and we visited Uncle Ramveer, I was afraid of the statue at first. I guess I thought it was going to come to life and bite me or something. That was always a family joke, you see, so that’s got to be why he left it to me. It’s strange—I don’t even remember what the statue looks like, now. Still, it was a nice gesture. The statue’s over a hundred years old and probably worth some money. Not that I’d ever sell it, it being a family heirloom and all.”

He forgot about the statue of Kalki as he noticed a group of three men talking together at the other end of the room. One of them was wearing jeans, work boots, and a frayed sweatshirt that hugged what was obviously a nicely muscled torso. Even from this distance, Arun could make out the logo and the block lettering on the front of the sweatshirt: it advertised some establishment called The White Horse Inn. The man in the sweatshirt was a dark blond, his neatly trimmed beard contrasting with his mop of long, unruly hair.

“Okay, who are you cruising?” Efrain demanded.

“The one in the sweatshirt.”

“Mister White Horse Inn? Not bad. I wonder if he’s *hung* like a horse,” Efrain speculated salaciously. “Don’t know him. I’ve seen the two he’s with in here before, though. I thought you were aiming higher than blue-collar types?”

“I don’t want to *marry* the guy. I’d just like to suck his dick,” Arun retorted with a boldness unusual for him. Efrain was no doubt a bad influence on him. Arun always felt freer when he was with his friend.

“So, go on over there, introduce yourself, and offer to buy him a drink. He seems to be swilling down the beer pretty fast.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Arun! You have *got* to stop being so shy. I’ll go and ask them to join us. We might be able to get a group thing going, if we play our cards right.”

“No, don’t—”

“He’s headed toward the john. Now’s your chance. Follow him, stand beside him while you’re both taking a piss, strike up a conversation, and at least get a good look at his dick. I *dare* you to, you little Hindu Mama’s boy.”

Arun grinned. “All right! I’ll show *you!*”

But despite his display of bravado, he made his way rather slowly through the crowd. He didn’t want to appear to be too eager. This was a mistake, for by the time he reached the alcove that led to the men’s room, the door opened, and the man in the White Horse Inn sweatshirt emerged, unself-consciously zipping up his fly.

“Hi!” The bearded dark blond had beautiful eyes. Arun couldn’t tell, in the dim light, whether they were light blue or light gray. There was a slight alcohol-induced sheen in them at the moment; he wasn’t drunk, but he definitely had a beer buzz on. He also had a most seductive smile.

“Hello there, yourself.”

“I had to take a quick piss before my friends and I left.”

They were leaving! Arun hoped his face didn’t betray his disappointment. “So I see.”

“Is that guy you’re with your boyfriend?”

Of course, it’s Efrain he’s interested in, not me. Just my luck! “No, we’re just good friends.”

“I like your accent. Are you some sort of a Pakistani, or something?”

The question was asked so naively that Arun wasn’t offended. “You’re about a thousand miles off, I’m afraid. I’m a Tamil. We come from southeast India.”

“Really? Well, I’m from Ohio originally, myself,” the blond replied, as though that were an equally exotic origin.

“Where’s the White Horse Inn?”

“Back home in Ohio.”

From across the room somebody yelled, “Hey, Jack! Hurry up!”

“Oh, those are the guys I’m with. Gotta run. See ya!” The blond flashed that smile again, and then he was gone.

Jack... his name is Jack. Jack, from Ohio. Jack, with a white horse on his shirt. That’s all I know about him.

“Did you get his phone number?” Efrain demanded when Arun rejoined him.

“He was in too much of a hurry.”

“Or you were too shy to ask for it. You wuss!”

“I did talk to him, though. He was nice.”

“Well, that’s a start.” Efrain scrutinized Arun. “That guy got you kind of hot and bothered, didn’t he?” Arun didn’t deny it but returned Efrain’s knowing grin. Efrain moved in closer to Arun and put his hand on his thigh. His fingertips inched upward and began to stroke the growing bulge in Arun’s pants. “Oh yeah,” Efrain purred. “That dude *really* did a number on you. Maybe there’s hope for you yet. Do you want to have another drink, or should we go to my place and play around a little?”

“Let’s go to your place,” Arun said. Playing around with Efrain was exactly what he needed at the moment.

“All right! Come to think of it, I’ve always wondered what it would be like to fuck a millionaire.” They both laughed.

Less than half an hour later, Efrain was making the most of having his curiosity satisfied.

Arun and Efrain sometimes slept together, but tomorrow was a workday, so Arun reluctantly dragged himself out of his friend's arms and went home to his own bed. As he slipped between his sheets, already groggy, he pondered the experience. Physically, he was once again sated, and yet somehow his deeper emotions had not been stirred. For all the affection he felt for Efrain, having sex with him was almost like a couple of horny schoolboys experimenting with each other. Not that Arun was ungrateful. Without Efrain—and the occasional sex partner like him—life would be bleak indeed.

During the weeks that followed, Arun's life resumed its routine, with a couple of exceptions. He received the check containing his inheritance, as promised, and deposited it in his savings account. The financial advisor at his bank gave him some brochures outlining possible investments, and Arun studied them at home in his free time. The mere possibility of doing something contrary to his parents' expressed wishes gave him a strange, guilty pleasure.

One Saturday night, he went back to the bar—alone—half hoping that Jack might show up. He didn't, and Arun went home alone, feeling foolish.

On the following Thursday, he received an e-mail from a delivery service, advising him that his shipment from India had arrived and asking him to phone to arrange a day and time for the delivery. He set it up for late the following afternoon. Arun had a flexible work schedule; by coming in an hour early on Friday morning, he could leave an hour earlier than usual and get home in time.

He had already decided that he would set the statue of Kalki on top of a tall, narrow chest of drawers in his living room, where it would be properly elevated and could be seen from the sofa and the armchairs. At home on Thursday night, he cleared the top of the chest, dusted it off, and spread a patterned piece of cloth over it to cushion the statue's base.

The next afternoon, he hurried home from work but decided, upon his arrival, that he had time to take a shower and change clothes. After all, deliverymen never came at exactly the time they had promised; they were always late!

He had barely toweled himself off and pulled on sweatpants and a

T-shirt when the buzz of the intercom startled him. *This* deliveryman was obviously an exception to the rule.

“I’ve got a delivery for a Mister Arun Kumar,” a male voice said over the intercom.

“That’s me. I’ll come right down.” After buzzing the man through the apartment building’s front door, Arun hurried down the hallway and went down in the elevator barefoot.

In the lobby, the deliveryman, in a khaki uniform and a baseball cap, was wrestling with a large wooden crate set on a two-wheeler. It wasn’t until after the two men had exchanged polite greetings that Arun got a good look at the face under the brim of the cap. Then recognition dawned. The eyes were definitely light gray, not light blue, and they belonged to none other than Jack!

“It’s you!” Jack exclaimed, looking and sounding delighted.

“Yes—”

“I should’ve guessed when I saw that this came all the way from India.”

They were at the elevator, and Arun held the door open. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“No, I’ve got it. Well, you can carry this, if you want to.” Jack handed Arun a small crowbar, which he’d had tucked under one arm. “You’ll want to open it and make sure there isn’t any damage before you sign the receipt,” he explained. He glanced down at Arun’s bare brown feet. “Watch your toes,” he warned as he maneuvered the two-wheeler and its load into the elevator.

Arun noticed with a touch of envy, as they rode up in the elevator and then went down the hall together, that Jack was perfectly at ease in the situation, as though the two of them were old friends.

“I hope I wasn’t obnoxiously drunk, that night in the bar,” Jack said. He didn’t sound particularly penitent, however, as he flashed Arun that peculiarly intimate and suggestive smile of his.

“No, you were just sort of friendly drunk,” Arun assured him. “I’m glad you got home all right.”

“Oh, we had a D.D.—you know, designated driver. How’d you make out that night?”

“I went home with my friend,” Arun admitted without thinking.

Jack gave him an appraising look over the top edge of the crate, which was between them. “Lucky friend.”

Flustered, Arun led Jack inside the apartment and showed him where to deposit the crate in front of the chest of drawers.

“Want me to open it for you?”

“Sure.”

Jack removed his cap and ran his fingers through his hair, brushing it back from his forehead, before he took the crowbar from Arun and, squatting down, set to work. Arun wondered what he would look like with a decent haircut. *No, I like him just the way he is*, he decided. He watched, fascinated, as Jack, who was obviously an old hand at this sort of thing, deftly removed and collected nails, then took the lid off the crate. Inside was a cardboard shipping carton, taped shut and cushioned by blocks of foam packing material. A transparent plastic envelope, taped to the carton, held the usual customs forms; Jack peeled the envelope off and handed it to Arun. Jack extracted the carton from the crate, set it on the floor, and carefully slit its flaps open. There was what looked like another large, single block of the foam, but it turned out to be in two pieces, with the statue’s bulk sandwiched and cushioned between them. Jack pried loose and lifted the top layer of protective material—and there, suddenly, was the bronze Kalki, looking disconcertingly like a dead body lying in a plush-lined coffin.

“Wow!” Jack exclaimed. “Isn’t that something?”

“It’s been in my family for ages.”

“Isn’t he *neat*?” Jack hesitated. “It *is* a he, isn’t it?”

“Yes, he’s Kalki, the tenth avatar of Vishnu. Vishnu is a god, you see, and an avatar is sort of an incarnation of a god. Vishnu has already come down to earth in the form of nine different avatars, usually to help people or defeat demons. He’ll take the form of Kalki, his tenth avatar, to destroy the world—and then re-create it. That hasn’t happened yet. Obviously.” Arun realized that, as usual, he was talking too much in order to cover up his nervousness at being alone with an attractive man. “All this must seem really strange to you.”

“Not at all. You’re talking to a Catholic boy. It can’t be any weirder than the Immaculate Conception. Let’s get him out of there so

you can take a good look at him and make sure he survived the trip in one piece.” Jack pried the statue free from its bed of plastic foam and set it upright on the floor. “He’s a heavy motherfucker,” he observed in an unintentional display of irreverence in the presence of the deity.

Both men stood there examining the statue in silence. It was larger than Arun had anticipated, almost three feet tall; no wonder he had been intimidated by it as a child. The bronze was a warm honey color. Kalki, with the body of a man and the head of a horse, stood barefoot on an elaborate double lotus patterned pedestal. His head was topped not only by a pair of upward-pointing equine ears, but by an elaborate conical crown. The so-called sacred thread, a sign of high caste, was draped across his bare torso from his left shoulder down to his waist, and he was further adorned with dangling earrings, necklaces, bracelets, anklets, and jeweled chains slung around his hips. No wonder Jack hadn’t been sure of the image’s gender at first glance!

Jack finally broke the silence. “He’s got four arms!”

“Yes—”

“He’d be popular in some bars I know, on Leather Night. Fisting, you know?”

Thanks to Efrain’s tutelage, Arun did know, if not from personal experience, but there was enough of the prudish middle-class Indian boy left in him to keep him from admitting it. “He needs four arms to hold all of his attributes. They’re the objects that identify him. You see, he’s got that little sword and shield—and then, in his other two hands, he’s carrying Vishnu’s discus and conch.”

“Vishnu’s—? What are they for?”

“The discus is a weapon, as a matter of fact. And this one is the conch—that’s a symbol of prayer.” Arun reached down and touched the metal. “It’s cold!”

“That’s because he’s been in the back of the truck all day. He’ll warm up.” Jack had a way of making the most innocuous statements sound sexually suggestive. “Why is he wearing those bike shorts?”

Arun had to smile. “I think that’s supposed to be some sort of skirt wrapped around his waist and tied. We call it a dhoti. It’s considered formal wear where I come from. It’s usually made out of cotton, very comfortable in hot weather. There’s a more casual version of the same

thing called a lunghee. I wear them here, around the house. If you pull the material up between your legs and tuck it in at your waist, it does almost look like a pair of shorts. That's why some people call it a 'rickshaw puller'—because you can ride a bicycle wearing it—or—" His voice faltered. "Or whatever," he concluded lamely.

Jack was looking at him. "You're kind of shy, aren't you?"

"Am I? I guess I am."

"It's all right. I don't mind. I don't see any damage. To the statue, I mean."

"No, he's fine. He's perfect." *So are you*, Arun wanted to say. *So are you*.

Jack indicated the chest of drawers. "Is that where you're going to put him?"

"Yes."

"I'd better help you lift him. It's definitely a two-man job. Come on, you grab him under one pair of arms, and I'll grab him under the other. Got him? Okay, straight up, on three? One—two—three—up! Careful... okay... hold it, he's not quite centered. There we go, let him down. Perfect!" Jack said with satisfaction when the statue was set in place. Kalki's enigmatic horse face was now at eye level. Jack eyed him dubiously. "I can't decide if he's scary or actually kind of cute." He reached out and rubbed Kalki's nose.

"I imagine he can be both. Most of the gods can protect, as well as punish or destroy. That's why Vishnu is called 'the Preserver'. We—we Hindus, I mean—believe that there can't be any life without decay and destruction. Death always leads to new life. So change, you see, is inevitable, and it's actually always a good thing." He was rambling again, but he didn't care. Anything to stall for time, to delay the deliveryman's departure. And Jack was staring at him again, smiling again, but Arun no longer felt flustered. "Anyway, that's the way it's supposed to work. I'd better sign the receipt."

He did so, and Jack gave him his copy.

"This is my last delivery for the day," Jack remarked. Before Arun could think about the possible implications of the remark, let alone respond to it, Jack added, "I thought I'd be in a big hurry to take the truck back and then get home, but now I'm not so sure. It's been really

nice seeing you again, talking to you—” He took a step toward Arun. “Getting to know you, a little.” He had lowered his voice. They were almost close enough to touch each other now. “Hearing all about Calico, or whatever you said his name is.” They *were* touching; Jack’s hands were on his shoulders. He was a little taller than Arun, but not too much taller, Arun noticed for the first time. He was muscular, but compactly built. That was good. So many American men towered over Arun.

“It’s Kalki, not Calico.”

“Kalki. Got it.” One of Jack’s hands was on the back of Arun’s neck now, his fingertips stroking Arun’s black hair. And then they were kissing, Jack’s soft blond beard brushing against Arun’s chin and cheeks, Jack’s lips pressing against Arun’s lips with an increasing urgency, Jack’s tongue pushing its way inside Arun’s mouth, Jack’s grip on his shoulder and the back of his head tightening. And Arun was grabbing at Jack in turn, his hands kneading the firm flesh of the other man’s torso through his khaki shirt.

“This is kind of unprofessional,” Jack purred, his mouth still close to Arun’s, his breath warm against Arun’s lips. “Putting the make on a customer like this.”

“Yes, you’re a very bad boy, a very bad deliveryman, aren’t you? I think I’m going to have to pick up the phone and complain to your boss.” To his astonishment, Arun heard himself responding to Jack’s teasing banter in kind. *This can’t be me talking. I’m not like this. I’m not bold like Efrain. This can’t be happening!*

“Oh, please,” Jack was whispering, “please don’t report me to my employer, sir.” Their chests and crotches were pressed together; Jack’s hands slid down Arun’s back to his ass, grabbing his buttocks and pulling on them so that their bodies were jammed together even more closely. “Maybe I can do something to persuade you not to report me, maybe we can work something out?”

“I’m sure we can. Maybe... come to think of it, now that I’ve already signed that delivery receipt, I guess I’m no longer a customer. I’m an ex-customer. Technically speaking. I guess it’s all right for you to put the make on an ex-customer.” Arun’s fingers were busy unbuttoning Jack’s shirt. Jack had a hairy chest, as he’d anticipated. And round, hard pecs crowned by stiffened nipples.

“I think you’re right. Goddamn it, you’re not just cute, you’re

smart. I am *so* glad that you are now just an ex-customer. Technically speaking.” Jack had Arun’s T-shirt off him, by now; they were both stripped to the waist. They were embracing, kissing, caressing. “You are so fucking sweet,” Jack whispered. “It’s a shame you don’t know just how sweet you are. But I’m sure as hell going to show you. Right now.” He kissed Arun again, then lowered his face to Arun’s shoulder and licked his skin. Arun shivered. “Oh, you’re all dark and smooth, like your buddy Calico over there. Only you’re a lot nicer to touch.”

“It’s *Kalki!*” Arun gasped.

“Kalki, yeah, right. It’s an honest mistake. There *are* such things as calico horses, you know. Well, your little buddy Kalki can watch *this*. Maybe he’ll learn something!” Jack went down on his knees in front of Arun, pulled Arun’s sweatpants down to his ankles, and seized Arun’s cock, which was already hard. He stared at Arun’s dark, puckered foreskin, which wasn’t quite fully retracted yet. “Holy fuck, you haven’t been clipped!”

“No, the men aren’t circumcised where I come from. Sorry.”

“Don’t fucking apologize! I like it. It turns me on. Can I play with it?” Jack sounded like a kid given a new toy. Without waiting for permission, he did indeed begin to play with Arun’s cock, expertly working the foreskin back and forth over the fat head. Next, he pulled the foreskin taut, stretching it between two of his fingertips. And then, incredibly, he was pushing the tip of his tongue into the space he had created between Arun’s glans and foreskin, licking it, rubbing it, making Arun’s shaft throb almost painfully and sending jets of liquid fire coursing up through Arun’s veins.

“Oh, Jack, no, don’t... I mean, don’t stop... it’s... no one’s ever done that to me before!”

The admission seemed to spur on Jack’s excitement: he swabbed even more efficiently and with instantaneous results.

“I’m going to come too fast if you keep that up,” Arun warned.

With obvious reluctance, Jack backed off. “Oh, you taste so good,” he moaned. “I want to suck you and suck you. Let’s get naked.” No longer kneeling, he was already sitting on the floor on his butt, tearing at the laces of his work boots.

Watching Jack strip, Arun stepped out of his sweatpants, then

looked up again and was startled to see himself face to face, as it were, with the statue of Kalki. He had almost forgotten the hefty bronze object was there. The equine facial features seemed unnervingly lifelike. "Let's go into the bedroom," he suggested.

"I'm kind of hot and sweaty," Jack warned as, naked, he joined Arun on the bed. "It's been a long day."

"That's all right." It was more than all right. Arun wanted to smell this man's body odor, taste his sweat. He did so, sucking on Jack's nipples, licking his armpits, his crotch, even the soles of his feet. He'd never been this aggressive with another man, not even with Efrain. Jack writhed under the oral onslaught. They were both panting for breath by the time Arun finally got around to sucking Jack's cock. When Jack cupped Arun's head between his hands, Arun reached up, pressed Jack's fingers more firmly against his skull, and silently encouraged him to fuck his face. He gorged himself on the blond man's shaft, taking it until he gagged but refusing to relinquish so much as an inch of it.

Arun jerked himself with his right hand while he slid his left hand in between Jack's buttocks and the mattress. The tip of his middle finger touched and teased Jack's puckered sphincter, which flexed in response.

"Go ahead," Jack gasped. "Stick your finger up my ass!"

They played with each other until Arun could feel a warning drop of semen ooze out of the tip of his overexcited penis. "You're going to make me come," he warned Jack again. "I don't want to come yet. I want—" He didn't know what he wanted, except for this sheer, intoxicating abandon never to come to an end.

"Do you like to fuck?" Arun grunted in the affirmative. "I like it either way. Why don't *you* fuck *me*?"

Arun couldn't believe that this butch number wanted Arun to top him. In a fever of anticipation, he opened the drawer in his nightstand, where he kept his supply of condoms and lubricant. Jack was already lying on his back with his legs raised and his hands gripping his hard-muscled buttocks, pulling them apart, exposing his hairy cleft.

"Don't use too much of that," he cautioned, watching Arun avail himself of the lube. "I really want to feel you going in and out of me!"

For all his eagerness, Jack let out a sharp cry when Arun entered him. His legs tightened around Arun's waist. He didn't wait for Arun to

start thrusting; he began to fuck himself on Arun's cock.

"Fuck me, stud. Show me how much of a man you are. Let me have it and keep it coming!"

"Am I hurting you?"

"Yeah," Jack groaned. "You're hurting me just fine, baby. Don't you worry about it. Fucking is a lot like loving. It's got to hurt a little to be any damn good!"

Arun lost himself on top of the other man's shuddering body. They were co-conspirators, participants in some arcane homoerotic rite. Celebrants, fellow phallic worshippers.

He could see his own lust reflected in Jack's face. There was something like triumph in Jack's gray eyes. Arun was sure he knew exactly how the other man felt. This wasn't just sexual pleasure. This was exultation.

"So fucking sweet," Jack kept gasping in between kisses, as he held Arun tightly against him and Arun continued to pulverize his ass. "You are *so fucking sweet!*"

"I'm going to come," Arun warned. "I can't stand it anymore. You're going to make me come!"

"Go ahead and come. I'm just about ready to shoot, myself. You're doing it to me, you hot little fucker. Oh God, are you ever doing it to me!"

To his delight, Jack turned out to be the kind of guy who liked to snuggle after sex. They lay on the bed with Jack's head resting on Arun's chest. Arun stroked Jack's sweat-dampened mane of hair.

Maybe not a drastic haircut, he mused. Just a trim, to tame the beast.

Jack stirred first. "Arun?"

"Yes?"

"Tell me some more about that crazy religion of yours."

Arun wasn't sure he was up to a theological discussion, at the moment. "What do you want to know?"

"Oh, anything. I like to hear you talk. How do you guys feel about what we just did, for starters?"

“Men have sex together in India all the time, the same as here. They just don’t talk about it.”

“So, officially, it’s still a sin?”

“India’s still a very conservative country. But we don’t see sex—in general—as necessarily bad. It’s a gift. Hindus believe that there’s a little bit of the divine in everybody and everything, if you could only see it. You never know where you might come across it.” Arun felt a need to lighten the mood. “For all you know, that guy who shows up on your doorstep hauling a crate could be some sort of a messenger from the gods. With a gift inside the crate. The gift of sex, maybe.”

Jack laughed. “Well, you did sign the receipt, as I recall. So the delivery must’ve lived up to your expectations, sir. And speaking of hauling—this messenger had better haul his ass out of your bed and get moving.” Jack got off the bed, and Arun followed him into the living room.

“Do you really have to go?”

“Afraid so. I have to take the truck back to the depot before they start thinking I’ve been hijacked or something.” Jack started dressing. And then he looked at Arun and said the magic words, the words that Arun had scarcely hoped to hear: “I like you a lot. When can I see you again?”

THEY saw each other repeatedly during the next two weeks.

They didn’t spend *all* of their time together in bed—just most of it. They met for lunch, went out to dinner together, and Arun brushed up on his own neglected cooking skills, inviting Jack to his place to sample what Jack called “all that spicy Indian stuff.” (Admittedly, the meal was followed by a prolonged romp in bed, by way of further gluttonous physical indulgence.) Jack took Arun to a ball game. They spent one Sunday afternoon just walking around downtown, talking, window-shopping, stopping at a coffee shop. Jack told Arun about growing up in a factory town in Ohio—which seemed as exotic to Arun as Arun’s own stories about life in Madurai no doubt seemed to Jack.

They *did* sleep together, every chance they got, usually at Arun’s place, occasionally in Jack’s more modest studio apartment. Jack, Arun

guessed, didn't earn a huge wage as a truck driver; however, like Arun, Jack was instinctively thrifty and careful with money. It was one of the many things they seemed to have in common, although Arun wouldn't have cared if Jack didn't have a rupee to his name.

Arun finally found the time to invite Efrain to come to his apartment to see the statue. Efrain eyed Kalki with visible distrust. "And to think that people call the Santeria religion weird! This looks like something you'd sacrifice virgins to." He grinned. "Lucky neither of *us* has anything to worry about, as far as *that* goes."

As usual, Arun told Efrain everything. "I think I'm in love," he confided to his friend.

"Oh, I can *tell* you're in love. If only you could see yourself, man. You are positively glowing. This Jack must really be something. I may have to arrange for something to be delivered—delivered to me personally, late at night, in my bedroom."

"You keep your hands off him. I saw him first."

"I suppose this means I won't be receiving an invitation to a traditional Hindu wedding anytime soon?"

"You would have to mention that. It's all still up in the air."

"Maybe Jack looks good in drag. You could wrap a sari around him and tell your Mom and Dad that American women tend to be big-boned. And bearded."

Arun snickered. "He's big-boned, all right. Where it counts."

"Listen to you! You really *are* gay. I was beginning to have my doubts." Efrain leaned back on the sofa and spread his legs. He had a bulge in his crotch. "All this talk about your new boyfriend and his big dick is starting to get to me. You and Jack haven't talked about maybe being monogamous, have you?"

Arun caught himself staring at Efrain's display. "It's a little early for that."

"Good. Are you in the mood for a quickie?" Efrain wasn't deterred by Arun's hesitation. "Don't be silly. You can love one man and still play around with another. Come on, let's at least jerk off together."

But "jerk off together" quickly and inevitably led to their old habitual intimacies, and Arun found himself doing (almost) everything

with Efrain that he'd been doing with Jack—and enjoying it (almost) as much, on the purely carnal level.

Afterward, when a fucked-out Efrain had left, Arun was prey to confusion. He felt he had betrayed Jack, even though Jack had made no demands upon him. He realized that he didn't know what Jack's expectations were. For all he knew, Jack was whoring around just as promiscuously, just as casually.

In fact... wasn't this exactly what his parents had suggested? That he sneak around and satisfy his needs in quick, furtive encounters, then return home to his wife and pretend that nothing had happened?

Animals, he thought with disgust. *Like animals, sniffing each other and rutting. Although at least that would be honest!*

He was already dividing his evenings into “nights with Jack” (exciting and all too short) and “nights without Jack” (boring and seemingly endless). On his next lonely, non-Jack night, Arun sat down at his computer and caught up on his e-mails.

There was a message from his mother, who was rather more computer literate than her husband. It contained the ominous words: *we may have found a girl who would be very suitable for you*. Arun read the rest of the e-mail, which went into details, with a growing sense of panic.

He composed an evasive reply, complaining how busy he was at work. (He made no mention of how busy he had been *outside* of work, with Jack.) He added, among other inconsequential remarks, *Uncle Ramveer's statue of Kalki looks very handsome here in my apartment. Every time I look at it, I think of home*. After he had sent his message off into the electronic void, he remained at the keyboard for a moment, lost in thought.

Was that true? Had he really done so much thinking about home, ever since he had met Jack? Wasn't America now his home? And wasn't he secretly glad that he was thousands of miles away from India and the kind of “very suitable girl” that his parents had found for him?

He looked at the statue. It reminded him not of India, but of Jack. He remembered the crate, Jack's two-wheeler, his khaki deliveryman's uniform, his eyes under the brim of his baseball cap... the arrival of Kalki, and everything that had happened as a result.

The arrival of Kalki... the descent of the avatar.

Then he did an Internet search on the word “avatar” to refresh his memory. He skimmed an article and paused at one sentence: *The avatars descend not only to combat evil and protect mankind, but to instruct mortals in eternal truths.*

“All right, Kalki,” Arun muttered under his breath. “You can start dishing out the instruction any time now. I sure could use it.”

Next, out of curiosity, he searched for “Kalki.” He read a couple of articles on the subject, and then some words on the screen seemed to jump out at him: *Kalki is traditionally depicted in Hindu art either as a man riding a white horse, or as a composite being with the body of a man and a horse’s head.*

That was right. Arun had forgotten that. Kalki wasn’t just a horse-headed god. He could also be a reasonably human-looking god, mounted on a *white* horse.

The White Horse Inn. Jack’s sweatshirt. The *White Horse Inn*, in Jack’s hometown.

Coincidence. Surely?

“Don’t be silly,” Arun told himself. There were probably hundreds of White Horse Inns in the United States. If Jack had been wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned *Vishnu Bar and Grill*, or *Avatars R Us*, then there might be something to worry about.

“Don’t be silly,” Arun repeated. “After all, it’s not the end of the world.”

Not yet. He wasn’t married—yet.

He turned off the computer and went to bed. Alone.

In the middle of the night, Arun had the kind of dream in which, despite the vividness of the images, he was aware that he was dreaming the entire time. As a result, the unfolding dream was engrossing, rather than disturbing. He seemed to be both actor and spectator, observing himself.

First, he was in Uncle Ramveer’s house, but although he, Arun, was a grown man, Uncle Ramveer had not aged: he looked the same as he had when Arun visited him as a small boy. He was trying, as usual, to coax Arun into approaching the statue of Kalki.

“You see, there’s nothing to be afraid of, Arun,” Uncle Ramveer

insisted in his clipped British English. “It’s just a horse. A nice horse. See, you can touch him.”

Arun reached out and touched the statue, which no longer seemed to tower above him—further evidence that, in this dream, he was an adult. The bronze was hot; it seemed to burn his fingers, which made him jerk away.

Suddenly, the scene changed. He seemed to be outdoors, an outdoors bathed in the bright sunlight of Madurai, although objects in this sunlight, impossibly, cast no shadows. Arun was standing at the bottom of an immense flight of broad, weathered stone steps; to one side was a large stone *Shiva linga*, its phallic-shaped contours similarly softened by long exposure to the elements. And Jack was sitting on the steps, grinning up at him, looking as he had the first time Arun had seen him in the bar—beautiful, with tousled hair, even wearing the same jeans and his White Horse Inn sweatshirt, although now he was barefoot.

“Come on,” Jack said in Tamil, with a hint of impatience in his voice. “I want to show you what’s inside the temple.”

Why was Jack speaking to him in perfect Tamil? And, how, if they were in Madurai, as they seemed to be, did Jack know what was inside the temple? If they were in India, it should be Arun who was showing Jack the sights, not the other way around.

He realized that Jack was waiting for him to kick off his own shoes. He did so, and Jack stood up, and they climbed the steps together.

In another abrupt transition, they were presumably inside the temple, although this was a temple interior unlike any Arun had ever seen. Instead of a somewhat claustrophobic, dark, confined inner sanctuary, this was a vast paved courtyard, open to that same eerily shadowless light pouring in from above. And the statue of Kalki, before which they were now standing, had once again assumed gigantic proportions, as though seen from below by a small child. Arun and Jack stood with their heads level with the statue’s monumental base, which was littered with offerings of flowers, and on which numerous open, shallow oil lamps and sticks of incense were burning.

Jack turned to face Arun, a secretive smile creasing his features, and held out his hand. Cupped in his palm, a tiny pool of oil gleamed, and a burning wick floated in it.

“Look,” Jack whispered, still speaking in Arun’s native tongue.

“Look! I can hold the fire in my hand without being burned. And so can you, if you try.” Arun instinctively held out his hand. As though in a magic trick, Jack poured the burning oil into Arun’s palm—or, rather, the flame seemed to divide itself, so that now both of their hands were lit. The flame in Arun’s palm generated no heat.

“We have to offer it to the god,” Jack said matter-of-factly. They held their hands over the statue’s base, tilted their palms, and suddenly the flames spilled down and multiplied themselves again, until the entire base of the statue appeared to be blazing and the streams of incense thickened into dense clouds.

“Is it going to be all right?” Arun asked.

“Of course it’s going to be all right,” Jack replied. “Everything’s going to be all right. Why wouldn’t it be? But you have to have faith. You have to put your faith in Calico.”

Calico? How many times do I have to tell you, you gorgeous, sexy, muscle-bound hunk? It isn’t Calico, it’s Kalki!

Jack seemed to read his unspoken thoughts. “Khaki, Kalki, Calico,” he chanted, like a bratty schoolboy teasing a classmate—mocking Arun, with that irresistible grin on his face. “Khaki, Kalki, Calico!”

“Oh, shut up!” Arun grumbled. Jack only laughed.

There was a sound, distant at first, then swelling in a crescendo, a sound familiar to Arun from innumerable religious festivals: drums, cymbals, rattles, the dissonant blare of horns.

“He’s coming down, he’s coming down,” Jack started chanting in Tamil in measured cadences. He took off his White Horse Inn sweatshirt, and, in his jeans, barefoot and bare-chested, waving the sweatshirt high above his head with both hands, he began dancing—clumsily, Arun couldn’t help thinking, but with an undeniable sexy abandon. “Dance with me, Arun!” Jack shouted, his glee infectious. “Dance with me, we have to dance for him, he’s coming down! The avatar, the avatar, Vishnu the Preserver, the avatar!”

“He’s coming down,” Arun chanted dutifully as he shuffled his feet on the pavement in an awkward dance step of his own. The drums and cymbals and rattles and horns were now a thunderous din beating against his ears; he had to shout to make himself heard. “The avatar is coming down... the avatar, the avatar, Vishnu the Preserver, the avatar, is

coming down to destroy the earth! All things made new! Vishnu! Vishnu! *Vishnu!*”

Jack was hopping up and down, his disheveled blond head bobbing, his hairy chest bedewed with sweat. He waved his sweatshirt high above his head and spun it around like a cowboy twirling a lasso. Arun wanted to fuck him and get fucked by him, fuck him and get fucked by him, over and over again, right there, for all the gods to see and approve of and envy.

“All things made new!” Jack shouted in ecstasy. “*All things made new! Vishnu!*”

Arun jerked awake. The unnaturally bright light, the flames, the clouds of incense, the dancing and chanting and loud noises—all gone, replaced by the cool silence and gloom of his bedroom. He was lying on his stomach with his face on his pillow, and he could see the red numerals of the digital alarm clock beside his bed: 2:10 a.m.

What a stupid dream, he thought. But he was still enough of a Tamil to have a certain superstitious respect for dreams, even when his intellect dismissed them. He got out of bed and went, naked, into the living room. In the dim light that penetrated the window drapes, the statue was an indistinct presence, by no means intimidating. There was nothing sinister or supernatural about it; it was only metal, cast, no doubt, by poor, hardworking men in some rural Indian village long ago. Men who were now long dead—dead, whether in life they had been believers or not.

And yet... Arun felt a compulsion to approach the statue, to touch it, to run his hand over the bronze, which was now not at all cold, as it had been when Jack had first unpacked it, but warmed by its subsequent continued exposure to the air in the room.

This is ridiculous. I should go back to bed and go to sleep. But he did not go back to bed. In the bedroom, without bothering to turn on a light, he retrieved a lunghee from where he'd carelessly tossed it across the foot of the bed and tied the brightly patterned rectangle of cotton cloth around his waist. In the kitchen, again in the dark, he opened the drawer in which he kept the items needed to perform a puja. He hadn't used them in some time.

Standing in front of Kalki again, he lit with one match a tea light and a stick of incense and set them before the god. The ceremony he then

performed was, by Hindu standards, an informal and improvisatory one, but it fulfilled its intended purpose of treating the image, as convention dictated, as an honored guest in his home.

“You are welcome to this house,” he said aloud. “Please honor us with your continued presence and safeguard those who enter this place.” He suddenly thought of Jack, who had transformed his life from the moment he’d first entered Arun’s apartment, but his warm feelings for Jack did not seem at all incompatible with religious sentiments. He deposited a small round tablet of camphor in a bowl with a handle and lit it with a second match. The camphor flared up brightly, in writhing flames that emitted little smoke. Arun remembered the flames in his dream, even as the faintly medicinal scent of the camphor reminded him of his youth. They had always burned camphor as part of puja ceremonies before the household shrine.

He lifted the bowl and rotated it clockwise in front of the statue, observing how the flame lit up Kalki’s face, crown, discus, conch, sword, and shield, while throwing deep shadows elsewhere as he moved the bowl. He set the bowl down and cupped his hands over it, fingertips together, in an arch. The flame warmed his palms.

“I humbly ask you for—” But what, exactly, did he want to ask for? For wealth? For success? These things suddenly seemed selfish to pray for. For love? Yes, he desperately wanted to love and to be loved, a love that would unashamedly incorporate sexual desire, sexual fulfillment... he wanted a man, he wanted Jack. Did he dare to ask for that? It almost seemed like too much to ask for, too much for even a god to grant.

No, he would ask for nothing for himself, at least not directly.

“I humbly ask you to look after my family back home. I ask you to bring peace of mind to my father and my mother. Even though I have disappointed them, help them to understand.” He thought of his dream and had to smile, if only in self-deprecating response to his own solemnity. “I put my faith in you, Kalki, Calico, or whatever you choose to call yourself.”

He waited until the camphor burned itself out, then sat down in his armchair and watched the wavering flame of the tea light and the glowing red dot of the smoldering incense as it slowly burned down. His thoughts wandered—decidedly secular thoughts, of Jack’s face, his

smile, his nude body, his erect cock.

He leaned back in the chair. The leather upholstery caressed his bare back. His own cock was stiffening, a tent pole pushing up the thin cotton fabric of the lunghee stretched across his lap. His nipples, when he put one hand on his chest and gave himself some exploratory caresses, were reassuringly hard. He began to pinch them, moving back and forth from one pec to the other at random. With his other hand, he undid the knot of the lunghee, opened its folds to expose himself, and began to masturbate—not quickly and eagerly, but with a languid, teasing concentration.

Their first time together. Jack's voice, tremulous with lust: *Can I play with it? Oh, you taste so good!* Jack's tongue between his foreskin and his glans, tormenting him. Jack's bulbous cockhead inside his own mouth. Jack's ass spasming around his buried, plunging shaft. *I can't stand it anymore; you're going to make me come!* And then: *He's coming, he's coming down, the avatar, he's coming!*

The tea light and the incense stick had both burned themselves out. In the darkness, Arun slumped in the armchair, breathing hard, his forehead and chest beaded with sweat. His fingers, his thigh, and his belly were wet with dappled spots of come.

He went into the bathroom, wiped himself off with a washcloth, and then climbed gratefully back into his bed. He fell asleep almost at once. He didn't dream.

"I dreamed about you the other night," he told Jack the next time they got together. "You were in a temple, and you were dancing. Dancing in honor of the gods. In honor of Vishnu, to be exact."

"Really? Me, dancing? Was I any good?"

"You sucked. Don't quit your day job."

Jack rolled on top of Arun, pinning him down on the bed. "I have other talents," he boasted. And he proceeded to demonstrate them, at length, to his and Arun's mutual satisfaction. This time, after their preliminary sexual horseplay, Arun was the one who got fucked. He lay belly down with his lover on top of him. As he humped, Jack's arms slid around Arun's waist, holding him tight. Jack's fingers sought and found the hot conical spikes of Arun's nipples and pinched them relentlessly. Every pinch made Arun's asshole contract sharply against the blond stud's rutting cock. Arun came without even having his own cock

touched, his semen soaking into the sheet they were lying on.

“Don’t stop,” he begged Jack. “Don’t ever stop!”

“Don’t you worry about it, baby. I’m going to fuck you until you yell for mercy. Only you’re not going to get any mercy.” Nor did Jack show him any.

Afterward, when they were cuddling, Jack said, “Let me ask you something.”

“What?”

“How would you feel—?” Jack hesitated. It wasn’t like him to be reticent. “I was thinking, how would you feel about us not fucking around with other guys? I mean, we do seem to be hitting it off pretty well together.”

“I’d feel fine.”

“I think we should give it a try.”

“I think so too. There’s just one thing. If you’re going to be my boyfriend, we’re going to have to get you a decent haircut.”

“Aw, fuck you!”

“That’s the second good idea you’ve just come up with. Let’s give that a try too. Right now. If you’re up to it, after that pounding you just gave me.”

Efrain—when Arun told him his news—was a good sport about it. “I’m still looking forward to that wedding invitation,” he teased. “May not be such a long wait.”

On his next non-Jack evening—they were becoming infrequent—Arun sat down at his home computer and spent the better part of two hours writing and rewriting a letter to his parents.

Earlier that day, he had gone to his bank and instructed his financial advisor on how to invest the money he had inherited from Uncle Ramveer.

Now, in his letter, he outlined in detail all the reasons why he felt he could not enter into an arranged marriage with a woman. *I know now that I could never live with a woman and be happy*, he typed, by way of conclusion. *And I know that I could never make her happy, either. Please find it in your hearts to forgive me. If this means that you must go so far as to disown me as your son, then I will have to accept—*

He stopped typing in mid-sentence. It had gotten dark outside; his living room was lit only by the glow of the PC's screen. Arun got up, went into the kitchen, and drank a glass of water.

On his way back to his desk, he stopped in front of the statue of Kalki and lit the tea light and stick of incense that were already at hand there. Now that he was praying more often, he had transferred the puja supplies from the kitchen to the top drawer of the chest. In the flickering light from the little candle, the horse-headed god almost seemed to nod to him.

He remembered: *You see, there's nothing to be afraid of, Arun. And: Everything's going to be all right... but you have to have faith.*

He seated himself again at the keyboard and erased the incomplete sentence that had begun with the words "if this means." Some possibilities, after all, were too terrible to contemplate. He added a new paragraph:

I have met a man I think I could love the way you two have always loved each other. I hope he feels the same way about me. Of course it may be too early to tell. I ask you for your blessing as I try to start a life with this man. There's one other thing. He's not a Hindu. I suppose that makes it even worse. But he's wonderful, and I love him.

Arun looked up at Kalki. He took a deep breath. "You have to destroy in order to create, don't you?" he said aloud. Then, in a whisper, he uttered the nonsense words he remembered from his dream, as though they were some secret, potent mantra: "*Khaki, Kalki, Calico.*"

He hit the key to send the letter via e-mail.

When he came home from work the next day, there was an e-mail waiting for him from his mother. Numbly, he opened the message, not knowing what to expect.

My dear son, your letter made me cry, because I couldn't believe that we have caused you such pain. Your father and I have had a long talk, and we now realize that you must make your own decisions, and we want you to know that we will love and support you no matter what.

Arun couldn't believe what he was reading. The e-mail continued:

When your father read your letter, he said, "It's so strange, because before this he always still sounded like a boy when he wrote to us from America, but now he talks like a grown man. It makes me feel

old, all of a sudden, to have such a grown-up son.” We miss you so much and send you all our love.

All things made new. It was true.

And then, by way of a postscript:

The next time you write, tell us all about this man. What is his astrological sign? What kind of a family does he come from? What does he do for a living? Is he a doctor? Send me a photo of him. I want to see if he is good enough for my handsome son!

As Efrain would say, moms were moms the world over.

Jack was indeed full of surprises, whether in bed or out. He even got a haircut. And the next time he showed up at Arun’s door, he was carrying a massive bouquet of flowers.

“They’re beautiful,” Arun said after greeting his lover with a kiss. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, but they’re not really for you. I’ll give you *your* gift later. They’re for Kalki. I was reading this book I got out of the library, you see, all about Hinduism, and it explained all about this thing you guys do called puja, and how you offer fruit or flowers or candy to the images of the gods—right?”

“Right.”

“So I decided that it was about time I gave Kalki a gift. After all, he’s the one who brought the two of us together in the first place. He’s one smart little dude.” Jack grinned. “I guess that’s why they call it horse sense.”

ROLAND GRAEME, a native of Pennsylvania, lives in Buffalo, New York. Although he earned a Ph.D. in English literature, he long ago realized that the Halls of Academe could not contain his overactive imagination. He has written both fiction (most of it erotic) and classical music criticism. An enthusiastic although spectacularly untalented amateur musician and artist, he is also interested in literature, history, and world cultures and religions. Like so many writers, he is a cat fancier and finds it easier to work with a feline in his lap.

SANTANGELO

Zahra Owens

I TASTED something metallic and instantly knew I'd broken skin. I was disorientated, and it took me a few moments to stop the image in front of my eyes from swimming.

"Don't move," a soothing voice said. The voice was calm and seemed in control of the situation, and although the same couldn't be said about me, I felt reassured.

"What...?"

He shushed me and put a soft, warm, and dry hand on my neck. I was trying to get up, but he stopped me, and I let him.

"Try to stay down. Here you go. Rest your head."

I felt the softness of something he put under my head. It smelled of fabric softener. I opened my eyes and saw my guardian angel hovering over me. Longish, greying hair tucked behind his ear, bright, light grey eyes, a reassuring smile, the slightest hint of a five o'clock shadow on a square jaw. If my body hadn't ached the way it did, he would have turned me on like nobody's business, but here I was, lying on my side on the cold, wet concrete of a deserted alley, and the images flooded back—images of the three or four young skinheads who'd heckled me and followed me home from my place of business.

I was used to working long hours late into the night, and I wasn't the type to be afraid of the dark. At just over six feet tall with a buzz cut, the physique of a football player, and several visible tribal tattoos, I looked intimidating enough for most people to cross the street when I passed them. Evidently these kids had been high on something when they decided I was easy prey. They'd come at me with a baseball bat and a few less-refined pieces of wood, and the rest I didn't remember.

His hands were doing unspeakable things to me despite the circumstances and his touch was nowhere near sexual.

“You don’t seem to have broken anything major. Think you can sit up now?” he asked in a calm, professional voice.

I nodded and let him help me until I was sitting with my back against a dumpster. The world spun for a few moments and then came to a slow halt again. He cradled my face with his hands and looked into my eyes. Although there was a concerned crease over his eyebrows, he didn’t seem too bothered by what he saw, because he stepped back to pick up his bag, and I got a chance to look him over. I estimated we were about the same height, but he was a lot skinnier. He looked like a runner, with long, slender limbs, narrow hips, and average shoulders. His grip had been firm, and when he helped me to sit, I’d had no doubt about his strength.

“I’m fine. Thanks for the help,” I said as I tried to get up. He held out his hand and pulled me to my feet, giving me another sign of just how deceptive his slight frame was. I felt something warm and wet trickle down my forehead and reached for it. As I stared at the dark blood on my hand, he handed me a tissue, and I gratefully accepted.

“I’d feel better if you let me take you to the hospital. It’s just around the corner.” He obviously spotted my resistance. “Just to see whether that gash needs a stitch or two. I’ll make sure they don’t keep you. They know me there.”

Although I was no big fan of hospital emergency rooms, he made sense. I was still feeling a little fuzzy, and as soon as I let go of my forehead, it started bleeding again, so I figured I at least needed a bandage.

He walked next to me, taking it slow until I realized I was the one slowing us down, so I picked up the pace.

“Easy,” that soothing voice of his said. “We have time.”

I nodded at him, and he smiled, showing a nice row of well-maintained but far from perfect teeth. I had no idea why this turned me on. I’d never considered myself some helpless virgin who found it romantic to be rescued.

Although it was already past midnight and we weren’t exactly in the best neighborhood in town, the emergency room wasn’t

overcrowded. He walked me inside as if he owned the place, right past the triage nurse and the people in the waiting room, and I didn't question it.

"Hey, there, Dr. Santangelo. Back so soon?"

My rescuer smiled at her. "Hey, Adriana. Can I use one of the cubicles? This guy looks like he might need a few stitches."

She looked at me and then back at him, her smile never leaving her face. "C3 is free. You'll find suture material there. Davis has a trauma in the shock room, so you're on your own, but I'll come lend a hand in about ten if you like."

"I'll manage, thanks, *muñeca hermosa*."

He gently pushed me behind a curtain and onto a gurney before turning around to gather his stuff. I noticed the bag he brought sitting in the corner. It had a pale pink stuffed rabbit sticking out the top. I thought it looked weird that this grown man would be carting around a child's toy, but I didn't get a chance to ask him about it then.

He pulled my hand away from my forehead and looked at what was obviously a bigger gash than he'd estimated.

"About four stitches should do, I think," he said without looking me in the eye. He donned a double pair of white latex gloves and opened a wound set to clean me up.

I hissed at the sting of the antiseptic, and he shushed me.

"So you're a doctor?"

He nodded, still scrutinizing my forehead.

"You work here?"

"No," he answered curtly.

"You pick up victims of muggings for a living?"

This time he chuckled. "Not if I can help it."

I tried to get him to look at me, but then he started filling a syringe, and I squirmed.

"Ah, Doc, is that necessary?"

This time he did look me in the eye. "You're covered in tattoos and you're afraid of needles? Figures."

“I’m not afraid of needles,” I answered gruffly. “I work with needles every day. Just stitch me up, okay?”

He looked at me as if he wanted to ask me whether I was serious, but his mouth stayed closed.

“It’s four stitches, which means I need to stick the needle into your skin eight times. If I numb the area, you’d only have to feel the sting twice.” My face obviously showed I wasn’t going to change my mind. “Fine, but if you hold this against me, I’m not going to finish the job.”

“I can sit still, Doc.”

He shook his head but didn’t say anything. He simply finished preparing everything he needed, giving me the time to look at him. His actions were fluid, as if he knew what he was doing, but he was careful and meticulous, not like most ER cowboys I’d watched. I couldn’t keep my eyes off his hands, though. The fact that his long, slender fingers were encased in latex only made it worse. The blow to my head must have shaken my libido as well, and I hoped the bulge in my pants would make him think I was well endowed rather than a guy who couldn’t keep his arousal under control.

I wasn’t lying when I said I wasn’t afraid of needles, but when he lowered the gurney until I was flat on my back, seeing him come closer made me swallow. To distract myself, I tried to make my penis behave by willing it to deflate. Flat on my back, I was sure he wouldn’t be able to ignore my clearly visible bulge, but he seemed to have no problem doing just that.

“Close your eyes. The needle’s sort of daunting.”

I chuckled, which made him stop what he was doing.

“And lie still.” There was no recrimination in his voice, but rather amusement.

I felt like a child who needed to be approached with patience and some caution, so I tried to behave as he partially covered me with a blue paper towel.

“Relax. This might hurt,” he said in a soft, raspy voice that went straight to my nether regions. I tried to think of intricate tribal designs and the Escher drawing someone had asked me to do earlier in the week instead of what that voice was doing to me. The first jab was quick and felt like the piercing I had done across my eyebrow when it first came

into fashion. I discarded it a few months later because it just wasn't me. The second jab was just as quick, but it hurt more. I felt him tie the knot with deft precision.

"One down, three to go. You all right? There's still time to add a little pain relief."

"No thanks," I answered, trying to lie as still as possible.

"Well, it's your forehead."

"I like it too much," I admitted. "The meds. I'm an ex-addict." Damn, I'd never admitted that to anyone. Even the people at rehab years ago had never gotten it out of me.

"The 'ex' sounds good. Congratulations."

I froze as he stuck the needle into my skin again. "Been almost twenty years," I added after he'd finished the second stitch. "So now I get high off a beer."

"I know the feeling," he said with a chuckle.

"So, Doc, where do you work if you don't work here?" I wanted to keep the conversation going, partly to distract myself and partly because I wanted to find an excuse to see him again.

"From home, mostly."

"You're a family doctor?"

"Nope. I write medical textbooks and articles for professional magazines."

Curious. "And that's supposed to make me feel confident to let you do needlepoint on my forehead?"

He chuckled again, and I looked up at his bright smile, albeit upside down, which made it look really funny.

"I'm actually very good at this. Well, I used to be. I'm just a little out of practice." He tied the last knot and cleared away his stuff. I sat up and had to hold onto the gurney to keep myself from swaying and crashing down.

"Wow! Easy," he cautioned.

Anything to keep his hands on me, I couldn't help thinking. How I loved that firm grip.

"I'm okay, Doc. Just gimme a minute."

“Gabe,” he replied.

I threw him a curious look.

“Well, Gabriel actually, but only my mother calls me that. I usually go by Gabe.”

“Gabriel Santangelo?”

“Yeah, I know,” he sighed, smiling sort of lopsidedly at the joke.

I smiled back and looked at him sideways. Was this for real, or had the thugs done a better job on me than I’d thought and this was some warped version of heaven? The guy who rescued me was named after an archangel? Someone up there had a warped sense of humor.

“So how come they know you here?”

Gabe shrugged and picked up his bag while taking out the pink bunny, then sat down next to me on the gurney. I noticed he kept his distance but mimicked my posture.

“This belongs to my daughter. We have a running tab here. She’s always in and out of the hospital.”

“I’m sorry about that.” I could totally see him being a dad. The way his voice and his posture softened when he talked about her made the picture complete. Although it appeared likely that he was actually straight.

“She has a metabolic disorder which makes her really small for her age and also severely disabled. She has breathing difficulties and other problems that bring us back here a lot.” He got up from the gurney and grabbed his bag. “In fact, I should probably go up to her. Do you have anyone to take care of you at home? You’ve had a blow to your head and really shouldn’t be alone for the next few hours.”

“I can come up with you, if you like,” I said. Obviously my mouth had forgotten to check with my brain before talking, because as soon as I heard myself say the words, I thought they sounded ridiculous. He’d played the Good Samaritan and picked me up off the street after a mugging. I had no right to interfere in something as personal as his family life.

“Sure,” Gabe answered with a soft smile. “I’ll introduce you. But I should warn you. She can’t talk, but she’ll wrap you around her little finger with that smile of hers so fast your head might spin. Again.”

What was I getting myself into? I didn't know the first thing about babies, and I'd never had any inclination toward being a father. It wasn't hard for me to figure out that I simply didn't want him to leave, and since he was going to see his daughter, I was going to have to follow him to her.

Gabe waited by the cubicle curtain until I crawled down from the gurney, stretching my aching body.

"I could prescribe you something for the pain," Gabe offered.

I shook my head. "Recovering addict, remember?"

He nodded but didn't comment. He was still hugging the pink bunny, and somehow it looked right.

We walked to the elevators and then up to the children's ward in silence. The corridors were dark, with lights on around the nurses' station and in some of the rooms, and it was soothingly quiet. I followed Gabe into a room opposite the nurses' desk and stayed back as he peered into the cot.

"Hey there, Mia. Still awake, I see. They never told you you're supposed to sleep at night, did they?"

Gabe lifted a tiny child out of the crib and snuggled her into his arms. I saw a cap on her head and a tube sticking out of her nose. She had pitch-black hair and large dark eyes, and she was far from a beautiful child, but I could tell that didn't matter to Gabe. He smoothed her hair around her face and caressed her cheek as he turned her toward me.

"Mia, this is...." He hesitated and turned from her to me. "Can you believe I never asked your name?"

"Michael," I answered, realizing he was right.

He looked at his daughter again. "Mia, meet my fellow archangel, Michael."

"People usually call me Mike," I added superfluously. "But you can call me whatever you like."

When he smiled at me, I realized that despite what he'd said about his daughter's smile, his was the one that made my heart beat faster. I took a step closer, still keeping a safe distance, and he held her out to me.

"Go on, she's not shy around strangers."

"No thanks," I answered way too quickly, and his smile faded. We

were interrupted by a nurse entering with a large syringe. “Gabe,” she nodded. “Got her dinner here.”

“I’ll do it, thanks.”

She left again, and he took the syringe, installing it into a pump and cleaning the end of the tube sticking out of Mia’s nose before connecting it. I was amazed at how handy he was, since he was still holding her as well. Her dark eyes followed his every move, and so did mine, until he settled into a comfortable chair next to her feeding pump.

“Grab a seat,” Gabe offered.

He didn’t check whether I did and instead turned his attention to Mia, talking to her in grown-up language but in a soothing, animated voice. I was mesmerized by the way he was caring for this downright awkward-looking child, until her unbalanced face and malnourished body faded and I only saw his love for her. She did have a killer smile, and I could understand how it could warm his heart, since it seemed to be their sole means of communicating.

I sat down next to them, feeling surprisingly relaxed, until she slowly fell asleep and he returned his attention to me.

“So what were you doing in that alley?” Gabe asked.

“I was on my way home,” I replied. “I work until midnight in a tattoo shop slash art gallery.”

“Isn’t the tattoo world a little macho for a gay man?” he asked audaciously. He must have seen me raise my eyebrows, but went on. “I mean, are you able to be open about yourself or do you need to hide your preferences?”

For a moment, I was taken aback that he’d read me so easily, but then I vaguely remembered the bigoted words my attackers had shouted at me in the alleyway, and I figured he’d heard them too. His question was an open one, and I sensed that if I denied being gay, he’d apologize and let me get away with it, but somehow I didn’t want to. I’d come out of the closet after high school at a time when being a gay man wasn’t exactly fashionable. In fact, I’d spent most of my twenties campaigning for gay rights and more funding for AIDS research, and I’d walked a fair amount of Gay Pride parades in the eighties and nineties. I wasn’t about to deny who I was, so I smiled and looked away.

“It’s a macho world, but we gays survive. Together with the

women tattooists, I suppose,” I admitted. “It’s a community of artists, and talent is appreciated regardless of sexual preference. Not that I advertise, but I get to tattoo my fair share of leather boys and bikers who want male pin-ups on their biceps.”

He smiled at me knowingly, and I felt myself blush. I was glad of the subdued lighting, since there was nothing more ridiculous than a two hundred and twenty pound, forty-five-year-old man turning crimson. I was looking away from him when I felt his hand on mine.

“I see,” Gabe said softly. “My gaydar usually fails me, but not this time.”

I’d had my idea about him, too, but since I usually fell for the straight ones, I hadn’t been sure. “Can’t be easy to find dates when you have her to take care of,” I said softly. “Or do you have someone in your life already?”

He didn’t answer right away, and I cursed myself for being so forward. I had no idea where this had come from. I wasn’t a lovey-dovey sort of guy, more the love-’em-and-leave-’em kind, but Gabe made me feel comfortable and relaxed, and I suspected we would get along really well if we ever got to spend more time together.

“I don’t date,” Gabe answered quietly, looking at a sleeping Mia and kissing her head. “But yeah, I could see where a lot of guys would find this daunting.”

I wanted to say I didn’t, but that would be a lie. He made it seem effortless, though. We sat together in silence for a while, and although I was usually the chatty one, this time, I didn’t mind the silence, and he didn’t either, it seemed. We exchanged occasional looks as if we’d known each other for years, but eventually the adrenaline rush of the mugging wore off, and I felt myself grow tired.

I didn’t notice I’d dozed off until Gabe got up and I heard Mia crying. Her voice didn’t sound like most babies I’d heard, but I knew she was upset about something.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked, feeling helpless. “Should I call the nurse?”

“No, it’s okay.” Gabe looked at me, and I felt myself grow warm again. Oh, the things this tender, caring man did to me. “I’m used to it. She usually wakes up crying. She’ll settle down again once she’s had a

little time breathing in some more oxygen.”

I realized I was exhausted and that tomorrow—or later that day—was another working day. “I better go home,” I said. “Can I take you out for coffee sometime? Lunch, maybe? I don’t usually start working until afternoons, so dinner’s a bit harder to arrange, but if you like, I can try to get an evening off.”

“Why don’t you come back here in about five days so I can look at those stitches?” It wasn’t an outright dismissal, but I got the message. “If your headache gets worse or you start feeling drowsy, don’t hesitate coming back sooner.”

There was nothing I could do, and I already felt like I’d taken up enough of his time, so I nodded and silently left the room.

THE next evening, I found myself still thinking about Gabe and his daughter. Despite my encounter the night before, I didn’t change the route of my walk home, and so I passed by the hospital. Almost before I realized it, I was heading inside and up to the children’s ward.

I waited outside the room until the nurse came out and then peered inside. For a moment, I was worried Gabe would throw me out, but then he spotted me and smiled.

“Good to see you. Grab a chair.”

We talked while he fed Mia, and it was comfortable and relaxed, just like the night before. Although finding things to talk about was never a problem for me—being a tattoo artist was like being a hairdresser: any subject was good enough as long as it kept the client distracted—Gabe seemed to be genuinely interested in me and had an uncanny way of making me talk about myself, something I’d always avoided with my clients.

It wasn’t until our fifth “date”, while he was taking the stitches out of my forehead, that I realized this strange talent of his had one reason: it prevented me from asking about his life. I knew next to nothing about him. Although he hadn’t expressly acknowledged it, I was pretty sure he was gay, too, and while he’d divulged that he was a single dad, I didn’t know who Mia’s mother was or what part she played in his little family. I had no idea where he lived, and apart from the knowledge he was a

doctor and didn't work in the emergency room downstairs, I barely knew more about him than what I'd seen here.

I'd tried to coax him to come with me for coffee, even suggested he bring Mia after she came out of the hospital, but he'd always avoided directly answering me by changing the subject or coyly telling me he didn't date. I was pretty sure our attraction was mutual, though. As I watched him soothe Mia after another crying session, I realized I was going to have to take desperate measures. I was no good at the whole seduction game and felt sorely inadequate in communicating my feelings for him, but then the whole thing was new to me. I'd never had a serious relationship, so I didn't know how to proceed.

When Gabe got up to put Mia in her cot, I followed and pretended to watch over his shoulder. When he turned around, I was in his personal space, and he didn't pull away. He avoided my gaze, but as I slowly put my hand on the back of his head, our eyes met. He had the most beautiful grey-blue eyes, and for a moment, I shamelessly looked into them before pulling him closer and kissing him. Despite my taste for one-night stands, I loved kissing, and feeling Gabe surrender to me made me so turned on I could have flipped him over and fucked him right there. I obviously didn't, though. He was tense under my hands, despite kissing me back somewhat hesitantly. Finally he pulled away, and I let him, feeling I'd pushed him enough for one night. For all I knew, he would throw me out and never want to see me again.

Surprisingly, Gabe didn't move out of my personal space. It took me a few moments to realize that I'd cornered him between the wall and Mia's cot, so I stepped back.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I'm not," I answered equally quietly. It was an understatement. I could still taste him, and my body remembered the hardness of his sinewy frame and the rigidness of his groin. Nevertheless, I gave him space to move around the room, and he walked toward his bag, which was sitting next to the couch.

"Mike... Michael," he said hesitantly before sighing dejectedly.

"I'm the one who should apologize, not you," I said, hoping it would make him smile again, but it didn't. "I took liberties that I shouldn't have. For all I know you're not the slightest bit interested in me and you're just tolerating my presence here every night because it

makes the time pass more quickly.”

“I’m not just tolerating you.”

Gabe wasn’t looking at me, but I had a feeling he wanted to. Maybe I just wanted to drown in those gorgeous eyes of his again.

“I more than want you here, but it’s complicated.”

I took another step closer to him, and he took one back until he bumped into the waste paper basket, which made him startle. I backed off to give him more room.

“Two unattached people who are attracted to each other—there’s nothing complicated about that.” I could tell my words didn’t change his mind. “I already know about Mia, and I think it’s amazing what you do for her.”

“Mia is just the bit I’m willing to share with you.” Gabe sat down on the edge of the couch, as if he wanted to be able to get up if I made another move toward him. So I stayed put.

“You don’t have to tell me all your secrets right away, Gabe. Every man is entitled to some privacy.” Damn, I sounded like one of those rehab counselors.

He nodded.

“Just give me a little hope? Tell me you’ll let me take you out for coffee. Or you can take me out for coffee if you prefer,” I said with a chuckle. I realized I was *this close* to begging. “If I need to promise you that I won’t kiss you again, I’ll find a way to live with that.”

Gabe let his fingers trail over his lips, and that very gesture made me instantly hard. He could still feel me, feel my lips against his, maybe even still taste me like I could him. He didn’t say anything, though, and I knew that if I wanted to keep some semblance of self-control I had to leave.

“Gabe?” I asked. He looked up at me. “If I go now, will you let me in again tomorrow?”

Gabe didn’t respond right away, so I grabbed my jacket and inched towards the door. I was already holding the handle when I heard a whispered, “Yes.”

“I’ll see you two tomorrow, then,” I said just before quietly rounding the door.

THE next day I was off work, which meant I had too much time to think. I knew Gabe was holding back for some reason, but I was also pretty sure the reason wasn't that he wasn't interested in me. I was definitely still interested in him, even more so now than that first day we met, making it clear to me I hadn't just fallen for my rescuer. I simply had to find a way to get him to open up to me and agree for us to spend more time together.

The bruises and soreness I'd suffered after my attack were slowly easing, so I'd gone to the gym to work out. I was on the bench press when I saw Gabe walk in and settle on one of the treadmills. I was right all along. He was a runner. As I continued my round of muscle-building exercises, I got a chance to feast my eyes. He kept a good pace and barely broke a sweat for the longest time. After a good forty minutes, I was done and he was just winding down. I walked over to him.

"So you do have some spare time."

He smiled at me and pressed a few buttons on the touch screen of his treadmill until it slowed down to a walking pace. "All I do is sit around a hospital room all day. If I didn't do this, I'd end up even more out of shape than I already am."

He wasn't even breathing heavily. "I doubt you're out of shape," I said truthfully, although I sounded like I was trying to flatter him.

"I used to run marathons for kicks," he said as he stepped off. "Now I'm lucky if I can run a ten-mile."

"Then I guess it won't hurt if I treat you to lunch?"

He smiled shyly, and I knew I was going to get turned down again.

"Fine," he said to my considerable surprise. "But we're going Dutch."

I was easily persuaded, since he'd finally agreed to something more than just me keeping him company. I tried hard not to get my hopes up, but I knew getting him away from his daughter for even an hour was a triumph, so I was happy nevertheless.

We settled on a small Italian restaurant just around the corner from the gym and found a table for two in a back corner. It was fairly busy, so

there was no chance of any privacy, and I had the feeling this was the reason Gabe seemed relaxed and easygoing. Maybe I had been coming on too strong, and all he wanted was friendship? I smiled at my own arrogance, thinking I shouldn't have taken his rejection personally. I promised myself I'd back off and give him space, hoping we could build a comfortable friendship but quietly wishing for more.

We ordered pasta, and I dug in, only noticing he wasn't a big eater like me when I'd already inhaled most of my lasagna verde.

"You know, you're never going to grow big and strong if you eat like a sparrow," I joked, pointing at his mostly full plate.

"Yes, mom," he answered with an amused smile, taking another bite of his salmon pasta pesto.

"So do you get a lot of support from your family taking care of Mia?" I asked, feeling it was safe ground since he loved to talk about his daughter.

"No," Gabe answered quietly. "My mother has a hard time knowing Mia's going to die."

I took his hand across the table to console him and only realized how it looked when he pulled it back. I didn't care and left my hand there, turning my palm upward in the hope he'd put his hand back. He didn't.

"It's hard for parents to deal with their children or grandchildren dying before them," I told him. I was used to dealing with clients who asked for commemorative portraits of their deceased loved ones to be tattooed on their bodies, so this wasn't the first time I'd seen that pain. "But she should be there for you." He looked at me as if he'd gotten caught, and I didn't know what I'd said wrong. He didn't give me the chance to ask him about it either.

"We talk all the time," Gabe said, his gaze directed at my hand again. "She just feels uncomfortable around Mia."

"To be honest, so do I. She seems so brittle."

"Yeah, but you look at her, and you're okay when we talk about her. My mother...." He sighed, and I could tell from his expression how much it hurt that this woman didn't share his love for her grandchild. My hand was still on the table, palm facing up, and a little hesitantly, he put his hand into mine. Despite the toasty atmosphere in the restaurant,

Gabe's hand was cold, and almost automatically I put my other hand on top of his, hoping to warm it. He smiled, still looking at our clasped hands.

"I keep telling myself she's a different generation and she *has* been through a lot with her only son," Gabe added.

"What about Mia's mother?" I asked a little hesitantly, figuring we were already on thin ice, but I wanted to keep him talking.

"She calls sometimes but rarely comes to see her anymore. She's built her own life. I guess she's already said goodbye."

"But you miss her?" I asked, thinking I'd finally tapped into the sadness written all over his face.

"No," he said, shaking his head in confusion. "Oh." Gabe raised his head and looked straight at me as if something had dawned on him. "You think that Mia's mother and I..." He made a gesture with his free hand as if toward someone who wasn't in the room. "Oh, God, no. Mia's my foster child. A few days after she was born, her mother was told that her daughter probably wouldn't live beyond her first birthday. Mia's mom is a teenager and not exactly from a supportive family, and she couldn't cope, so Mia ended up with child services, and that's how I ended up being her dad."

I smiled back at Gabe, and the breath I let out gave away my relief. So there had been no woman in his life, and he wasn't Mia's biological father. Which still meant that he could be....

"I'm gay, Mike. I thought that was obvious."

His confession interrupted my thoughts, and I squeezed his hand. "And since I usually fall for the straight ones, I figured: young dad with a baby and probably pining over a lost love, no way he could be interested in me." Now it was my turn to avert my gaze.

"I am interested, but it's complicated, Mike."

When I looked up, he was looking straight at me. His smile was apologetic, so I told myself he was going to let me down gently, but it only fixed my resolve to stay his friend. I could do it. "I'm a patient man," I heard myself tell him. "But you saved my life, so I owe you one. I just want to be around when you come to collect." I winked to tell him "no hard feelings" and noticed he still hadn't withdrawn his hand. It was warmer now, and I gave it another squeeze.

We each paid our own bill like we'd agreed, and I walked him to the hospital. I didn't join him to visit his daughter, since I had some errands to run, but decided I'd stop by that night, since it was only around the block from my apartment.

I was so used to being greeted by Gabe's broad smile and lit up eyes when I arrived at the hospital that I couldn't be bothered with niceties like knocking before entering anymore. My heart stopped when I saw the room was empty. The cot was made up, the furniture was rearranged, and there were no more fluffy toys and baby blankets and diapers.

I walked outside again in search of the nurse who brought Mia's food every night, but I couldn't find her.

"Can I help you, sir?" a young nurse asked me.

I pointed at the doorway I'd just come out of. "In there," I fumbled. "Santangelo. Mia. The little girl and her father?"

"You're the nice man who visits Mr. Santangelo every night, right?"

"Yes."

"Hang on. Let me check. I believe he left you a message."

I followed her to the nurses' station, almost asking her to hurry up. Gabe hadn't said anything about taking Mia home, and didn't they usually announce that beforehand? What if something happened to Mia? What if she'd died? I needed to get to Gabe fast, but I didn't know how to reach him and had no idea where he lived. A million things were going through my head.

"This is it," the young nurse said as she unearthed an envelope from the desk drawer.

I pulled it out of her hands and ripped the paper open. Inside was a small card with Gabe's name and telephone number. In neat, printed handwriting, it said, "Please call me." I pulled out my cell phone and started dialing.

"I'm afraid you'll have to—"

"I know," I interrupted her and started walking out. Then I retraced my steps. "Thank you," I told her, trying to apologize for my rude behavior all in one go. I had to get out, call him, and ask him if he was

okay. If Mia was okay.

On my way out, I noticed the card also had his address. It was just around the corner from the hospital, but at the opposite end from where I lived. I started to run once I hit the curb and was pretty much out of breath by the time I rang his doorbell.

When he opened the door, I couldn't speak, and neither did he. He stepped aside to let me in, though.

"Are you okay?" I eventually asked.

"I'm fine," Gabe replied, and the amused smile on his face managed to annoy me. All the way over here I was worried sick about him, and he was just "fine"?

"And Mia?"

"She's asleep. Just had her dinner, so she'll be quiet for an hour, possibly two."

We were still standing in the hallway, and as his words sank in and the tension dissipated, I had the uncontrollable urge to kiss him. I needed to feel him, taste him, prove to myself he was real. We both took a step toward each other, and I'll never know whether it was his intention to actually invade my personal space, but I put one hand at the back of his skull and pulled him to me until our mouths crashed and I could devour him. He didn't resist, and I noticed I didn't even have to hold him in place. Soon after he opened his lips, I felt more than heard him moan, and then he did take a step back. I finally opened my eyes, and he was looking at me with his fingers covering his lips as if he was ashamed of what we'd done.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what..."

"You know exactly what got into you," he interrupted as I was apologizing once more. It didn't feel like enough for what I'd done, but then he licked his lips so deliciously I had to mimic his gesture, just to try and capture some remnant of him. And then he held out his hand.

"Come here. I think we need to talk."

He guided me to the couch and sat down after removing a stuffed toy and a baby blanket. He pulled me down to sit next to him and didn't let go of my hand. For a guy like me, this was very intimate. I rarely "talked" to my lovers, yet I somehow found the patience with Gabe. Then again, we weren't exactly lovers, were we?

Gabe was sitting next to me, absent-mindedly playing with my fingers and staring at the carpet. I had no idea what to expect.

“There’s a reason they chose me to be Mia’s father,” he started.

“You’re an angel,” I replied shortly. “I knew it when you rescued me and I looked up into the street light and there you were, looming over me. You even had a halo.”

Gabe chuckled. “You’d been hit over the head. You saw stars, maybe, but no angel.”

“Okay, so you’re a saint, then,” I said with a shrug.

“That’s not why they gave me Mia, trust me. And I’m far from a saint.” Gabe took a deep breath. “There’s also a reason why my mother and I have this love/hate relationship, and it’s not just because of Mia.”

“Well, mine still thinks I’m God’s gift to Earth, and although I came out to her in the eighties, she still wishes out loud that I would find a nice girl and settle down.”

Gabe’s only acknowledgement of my statement was his smile. “There’s a good reason I don’t date, and there’s a reason why I blow hot and cold around you, and it’s not because I’m a tease,” Gabe rushed out as if he was afraid I’d interrupt him again. I took the hint and bit my tongue instead of telling him to get on with it.

“Mike, I’m.... There’s a reason why I don’t practice medicine anymore.”

“You did just fine on me,” I said barely audibly.

“For heaven’s sake, stop interrupting me!”

I looked up at him, and there was no anger in his face. In fact, he was smiling yet again. Then his face turned serious.

“Michael.”

Uh oh, full name.

“Michael, I’m HIV positive.”

He could have knocked me over with a feather, but I stood my ground.

“That makes sense,” I answered, since it was the only thing that came into my mind.

“It does?” Gabe asked.

I nodded. “Do you have it under control? How’s your viral load?”

He sighed and shook his head as if he couldn’t believe his ears. “I tell you I’m a dead man walking and can’t have sex with you, although God knows if my dreams are anything to go by that’s all I want these days, and you ask me about my viral load? Where do you get this stuff?”

“I spend a fair amount of my spare time answering calls on an HIV hotline, so although I’m not a health care professional, I know my way around the terminology.”

“Most people I tell want to know how I got it.”

I looked at Gabe, and he seemed shy all of a sudden. “Don’t see how it matters. I suppose like me you spent the eighties getting laid in dark back rooms of gay bars. Wish I could say for myself that all the sex was safe, but far from. I just got lucky, and I’m damn aware of that fact.”

Gabe seemed to relax a bit. “It... it doesn’t scare you?”

“Hell, no. I don’t live in fear. Ever. I confront my fear. Why do you think I still walk the same route home every night although I still get clammy hands when I pass by the spot where they cornered me? Because if I don’t do that, there’ll be this street I don’t walk down anymore, and tomorrow it’ll be a whole block, and the next week three blocks, and so on. No way.”

“This isn’t quite the same, is it?” Gabe asked. He was still playing with my hand. It felt sort of soothing.

“Yes, it is. Listen, I’m a tattoo artist, right? People bleed under my hands every day. I never ask them their HIV status. We just take precautions. I wear gloves and use sterilized material, keep a clean desk, and dispose of my swabs and tissues as hazardous material. It’s second nature. I think I can handle safe sex in my sleep, Gabe.”

“Oh God,” he sighed. “I’d have a fit if the condom broke.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had....” I couldn’t quite wrap my head around what he was trying to convey to me. “How long have you known you were positive?”

He looked up at the ceiling, and all I could think was: *That long?*

“November 24th, 1991.”

“The day the music died,” I said without thinking.

“No, that was somewhere in 1959, I think.”

“Not for me,” I said with a sigh. “November 24th, 1991, was the day Freddie died.”

“You’re a Queen fan?” Gabe asked, sounding very surprised.

“Hell, yeah!” I almost shouted before realizing there was a sleeping infant in the next room. “Freddie was the best. There’ll never be anyone like him. I had long hair in the seventies and wore leather and chains like him. My mother didn’t know what to do with me and made me change into something decent before I could leave the house.” I chuckled at the memory.

“Mike, the leather boy,” Gabe teased.

“‘Crazy Little Thing Called Love’,” I said, raising our entwined hands and kissing Gabe’s knuckles. “So you haven’t had sex for eighteen years because of this?” I asked, still having a hard time believing it and hoping he’d say I was wrong.

“Hell, that time you kissed me in the hospital was probably the first time in I don’t know how many years I’ve had a man’s hands on me.” Gabe didn’t seem to find it hard to say, but it was hard for me to wrap my head around.

“I guess it’s high time we remedy that, then.” I leaned a little closer to him, but he backed off.

“Mike, I don’t think you understand.”

“So explain it to me, then. You already admitted you’re attracted to me, and I’ve shown you I am to you.”

Gabe sighed as if he was trying to muster the courage to stay calm and explain something to a petulant child who wouldn’t listen.

“I’m pretty good now, but I don’t know what tomorrow will bring. That’s why I get the hopeless children to take care of. I only take the ones who aren’t expected to live anyway, so if I should get sick and die, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Oh, I think it would matter. It would matter to Mia, and it would certainly matter to me.”

“Fuck, Mike. I can’t do this to you!”

I didn’t know how I could make it any clearer to him that it didn’t matter to me. I pulled on his arm and dragged him closer so I could hug him. He didn’t fight me. “Let me decide what you can do to me, okay?” I

whispered. “We’ll be extra careful. I’ll take good care of you.”

“I can’t let you fall in love with me knowing I might die tomorrow.”

“You take care of this kid who might die tomorrow too. She deserves to be loved and taken care of and spoiled. So do you.” I couldn’t be sure, but I thought he was crying. Here I was, big, butch tattoo guy, sitting on a couch consoling the man I loved, and it felt all right. In fact, it felt better than all right. In all my years of counseling scared gay men on the phone and in chat rooms, I realized this was the first time I’d felt comfortable enough to do it face to face. I wasn’t going to give Gabe the chance to back away, no matter how much this scared me too.

When Gabe was finally starting to relax in my arms, Mia started crying in the other room.

“I better go get her,” he said softly as he pulled out of my embrace. To my surprise, his eyes were a little bloodshot, but not as wet as I’d expected. He returned a little while later, carrying Mia wrapped in her blanket.

“I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to get used to her demanding my attention at all hours of the night. This isn’t the sort of child you can teach to sleep on her own.” I could see the apologetic expression on Gabe’s face, but his words gave me hope nevertheless.

“Does that mean you’ll let me stay?”

Gabe settled on the couch with Mia and leaned against my side. “Only if you want. I’ll understand if you don’t,” he said quietly.

If I was totally honest with myself, I had to admit I had my doubts too. Gabe was right. I was setting myself up for heartache, something I’d avoided most of my life by not getting involved with anyone on a more than amicable basis. Now I was literally asking for it. The chance that I’d lose Gabe in the foreseeable future was realistic. In all likelihood, he’d get sick and then slowly fade away, and I’d have a front row seat. I’d seen it happen in the eighties with more than a handful of my friends. Pharmaceutical research had brought better medication, curbing the amount of people dying from the dreaded disease, but they still did. And despite the fact he still seemed quite healthy after living with this for so long, he hadn’t answered my question about his viral load, so I didn’t know just how under control his disease was.

I hadn't realized how quiet I was until I saw Gabe look at me. There was hope in his eyes, but also a certain defeat, as if he was anticipating my telling him I couldn't do it.

The thing was, I'd always followed my heart. I'd never doubted my sexual orientation, and although my head told me it wouldn't help my popularity with the masses, I'd always been open about it. I also never hid my artistic streak and became a tattoo artist when tattooing was still something for punks and sailors. It didn't bother me that it would never make me rich. So here I was, in love for the first time in my life, and I knew I was going to lose him at some point, lose him in the worst possible way. Not to another man or because we were bored with each other, but to a stupid little virus.

And I couldn't back away.

I caressed Gabe's cheek with my hand so he would look at me, and I kissed him softly. Our lips touched for a long time, but we didn't deepen the kiss. I needed this contact, hoping I could somehow use it to tell him that I was here to stay. When I finally backed away from Gabe, I saw Mia look up at us with a wide smile. She was tucked in between us and clearly felt comfortably warm.

"She likes this," Gabe said softly. "Two heartbeats instead of just one."

"I'll stay, Gabe," I answered, and I wasn't ashamed of the emotion that was clearly audible in my voice. I was scared shitless, but I knew it was the right decision. "I'll stay as long as you need me and want me here." Gabe nodded and settled his head on my shoulder, the hair on top of his head tickling my jaw.

Mia was still looking up at me, unable to turn her head in any other direction. I moved my hand so I could support it. "Would you like that, Mia? To have me around?" She smiled again, and although Gabe had explained to me she simply reacted to the sound of my voice and couldn't really understand me, I felt like she did. It felt like she'd given me permission to love her father. We didn't talk, and I saw Mia drifting off to sleep. I was tired too. It had been a long, emotional day.

I must have nodded off as well, because I startled when Gabe moved, and I was cold all of a sudden.

"She's asleep, and so were you," Gabe said with a teasing smile. "I should tuck her in now that she's quiet, and then you and I can enjoy

being alone for a while before she wakes up again.”

I recognized the promise in Gabe’s words and followed him to Mia’s room. She didn’t wake up when Gabe put her to bed, and he was already coming out again by the time I arrived. I could see he was hesitant, so I held out my hand to him. I knew I was going to have to make the first move.

“I think we can both use a little rest. Will you show me your bedroom?”

Gabe took my hand and nodded, leading me to the room next to Mia’s. It was a sparse room with a neatly made up bed and one chair standing to the side. Gabe rushed to grab the few clothes that were hanging over it and tucked them into the closet.

I smiled. “Don’t worry about a little clutter. I’m a neat freak at work, but my bedroom is a mess.”

“Well, mine doesn’t see a lot of action.”

I wanted to tell him I was going to change that, but I didn’t dare. He was a grown man with a lifetime of history, but he looked like a frightened deer caught in the headlights. I wanted to make him comfortable, show him I was okay with everything he wanted, at the pace he wanted it.

“Come here,” I urged him softly, holding out my hand. He took it with some hesitancy but allowed me to coax him into my arms. “There’s no place else I want to be tonight, Gabriel, but we have time. We can take it as slow or as fast as you want.”

He kissed me instead of answering me, his movements more urgent than they’d been on the couch. To my delight, his hands were all over me, and I had a hard time not getting too carried away. I felt his arousal grinding against my hip and couldn’t resist moving my own groin in the same direction. When he pulled away from me, his lips were rosy and he was panting. He closed his eyes, and his face contorted in a pained expression I could only interpret as regret, so I held him again.

“It’s okay. Whatever you decide is okay.”

“It’s not okay,” Gabe said, his face buried in the crook of my neck. “Up until yesterday I was doing just fine without sex, but right now I want nothing more than to feel you inside of me. It’s fucking ridiculous.”

“No, it isn’t,” I replied.

“It is if you’re not packing extra-strength condoms. I don’t trust the ones you get at the supermarket, and mine are way past their expiration date. And even then I’m going to be scared shitless.”

I couldn’t stifle a chuckle. Gabe was right, it was a little ridiculous. I didn’t go around with a wad of condoms in my jeans pocket. I should have planned better. Then again, I was still getting over Gabe’s admission that he was positive, and I wanted to be careful for both of us.

“There are other ways of making love, Gabe,” I heard myself say. The man I used to be before I met Gabe would never have said that. It hit me how much he’d changed me. It had taken me this long to finally realize that there was more to sex than... sex. That there was such a thing as intimacy and sharing and thinking of another person before you thought of yourself.

Gabe slowly extricated himself and walked out. Although I kept my distance, I couldn’t resist following him as he walked into the bathroom. Like any man accustomed to only himself for company, he didn’t close the bathroom door as he pulled his sweater over his head and revealed his naked torso in the mirror. My eyes were drawn to his back, where a gorgeous tattoo of pale blue wings covered his shoulder blades right down to the band of his jeans. Before I knew what I was doing, I’d taken a few steps until I was standing right behind him and my hand touched the ink.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were really an angel?”

Gabe smiled as he looked at me in the mirror. “Well, with a name like Gabriel Santangelo, I’ve been in the angel business since I was born.”

I wrapped my arms around him and looked at our reflection. Gabe’s face was soft, and his earlier insecurity had dissipated, even when confronted with the contrast between my buff body and his more sinewy frame. He was scrutinizing me, and I couldn’t resist admiring his slim physique with both my eyes and hands, trying to convey that I found him more than a little alluring.

When I touched his lean abs, his muscles involuntarily contracted. “You’re tickling me.”

“I’m sorry,” I started to apologize, but he turned around in my embrace and kissed me.

“And it’s making me horny like I haven’t had any in years!”

I chuckled. I wanted to say, “You haven’t” but opted for “I can remedy that.”

He looked at me with steely grey eyes, and I saw him give in. I don’t know how we made it back to the bedroom, shedding clothes along the way. He remained in his boxers, and I didn’t take off my T-shirt or briefs before plopping down on the bed, but it didn’t matter. His hands were on my bulge before I could object, and after that, the last thing on my mind was protesting. Feeling him stroke me through the fabric of my briefs made me grow hard instantly, and although I was a little more hesitant, I returned the gesture. Feeling more than hearing him moan into our kiss made me smile. So he was human after all.

“Fuck yeah,” Gabe sighed. “I feel like a teenager again.” He laughed, and I melted. He rubbed his tented boxers against my belly, and I thought I would come right there and then.

And then he pulled away from me.

“What?” I asked, worry in my voice. I tried not to sound annoyed, and he gave me his regretful face again.

“I need to go see to her,” he said, and that was when I heard Mia’s faint cry.

I nodded as I watched him leave, his chest blushing with arousal and his boxers clearly more filled than they should have been. When I saw him move through the hallway with the bundled-up infant, I got up and followed him. Mia was crying, and he was shushing her as he took items out of cupboards to prepare her food.

“I’ll hold her for you, if you like,” I offered.

He hesitated, but then he handed her to me. “Walk her, she likes that.” Although my experience with infants was almost nonexistent, his encouraging smile as he continued preparing her milk while I tried to copy the sounds and movements he’d made earlier gave me the courage to continue, although Mia didn’t seem to notice.

“Stop moving for a moment,” he asked quietly as he connected the syringe to her feeding tube. “She’ll settle down soon, just keep rocking her.”

It took a while, but eventually she did.

“You look good holding her, and she likes it.”

I shrugged. “It took her a long time to stop crying.”

“I would have taken me just as long to settle her,” Gabe said before he kissed me tenderly. “I’m sorry we got interrupted.”

I didn’t answer right away but simply looked at Gabe. Then it hit me. He was my savior, but maybe I was his as well. Maybe I could help him carry the burden of a sick child, and maybe he could allow somebody into his sheltered life. Maybe we could share more than just a bed or a space. Maybe we could share a responsibility as well.

“We have time, Gabe. How about the rest of the night, or the rest of the week or the year?”

Gabe looked at me, and I saw some of the courage and *joie de vivre* I’d seen when he first picked me up from the hard concrete of a dirty alley return.

“If you can take it one day at a time, I like the idea of having lots of days to look forward to.”

“Deal,” I said softly, leaning toward him to beg for another kiss.

We walked to his bedroom and got back into bed. Mia woke up every now and then, and we soothed her as she lay between us.

“This is what nights are like, I’m afraid,” Gabe said apologetically. “Don’t think I’ve slept more than two or three hours straight since I brought her home.”

“I can take it,” I assured him.

“I know you can,” Gabe answered, nestling himself and Mia closer.

For the first time in my life, I’d made an actual personal commitment, and it wasn’t making me worry or lose sleep. I trusted Gabe, and he trusted me.

“My viral load is zero,” Gabe admitted somewhere near morning. “Has been for the past four years. I live by my little alarm that tells me when to take my meds, but other than that, I haven’t been sick in years.”

“Which means I’m probably safer in your arms than with any other guy I might pick up,” I replied. “We could even have unsafe sex, and you still wouldn’t infect me.”

He raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “Let’s not take those chances,

okay? I know a pharmacy that stocks extra-strength condoms.”

“I’ll go get some in the morning.”

Gabe kissed me. “Please do, because I think I’ll burst if I need to wait another night.”

“Think she can sleep in her own bed for an hour or so?” I suggested. “So I can help you with that bursting feeling?”

Gabe bit his lip and growled. “She better.”

ZAHRA OWENS was born in Europe just before Woodstock and the moon landing and was given a much less pronounceable name by her non-English-speaking parents. Being an Aquarian meant she would never quite conform, and people learned to expect the unexpected.

She started writing fairy tales in first grade; the same year she came into contact with her first group of English-speaking friends, a group which would eventually grow to include people from all over the world. On the outside she was a typical only child, accustomed to being with adults most of the time. On the inside, she sought ways to channel her wild imagination.

During the daytime she earns a living as a computer specialist, but it's her former career as an intensive care nurse that tends to seep into her fiction. Maybe this has to do with her weak spot for flawed characters and imperfect bodies, or maybe it's just her sadistic streak coming through. You be the judge.

Visit her web site at <http://www.zahraowens.com/> and blog at <http://zahra-owens.livejournal.com/>.

THE ARCHANGEL OF CASTRO

Dianna Copland

IT was a miserable night outside, cold, foggy and drizzling, and the weather had cut into business. The regular customers were still in their regular booths, huddled over cups of coffee. In most cases, it was all that they could afford. Too broke to hit the bars, they sometimes nursed those refills for hours. Benji, the head waiter, would get really miffed when all they left him was a quarter for his trouble, but Nick Ellison didn't care. He'd owned the diner on the small side street just off of the main drag in San Francisco's Castro district for nearly ten years. He knew when times were better those very men nursing their coffee were the ones who would bring in their fifteen closest friends and feed them. And so he smiled at them as he wiped down the counter, absently setting plain but immaculately clean stainless steel utensils on white paper napkins, thinking he might as well get a start on the morning set-up while it was so quiet.

When he'd purchased the little diner, his family had thought him out of his mind. He'd been a real estate broker, a successful one, living in a sumptuously decorated Victorian row house just off the line of cable cars that ran between the wharf and Union Square. But his high-profile, high-stress lifestyle and his relationship with his long-time lover ran their course at about the same time. The real estate market bottomed out, and Theo left him for someone "younger and much more exciting." Nick salvaged what was left of his life savings, his 401(k), and his pride, and found the small fifties-style diner with the walk-up apartment above. He bought it on a whim after seeing it exactly once.

For some reason, the small place had felt like home to him, even with its soaped-over windows and run-down interior. Now, after sinking

most of his reserves and a back-breaking amount of work into it, Nick's On Ninth was a little neighborhood gem of a place. With black and white tile floors, red vinyl booths, and green-speckled Formica tables and counters, it looked like something straight out of *Happy Days*. The stools lining the counter were chrome with matching red vinyl seats, and old-fashioned salt and pepper shakers, the glass ones with the stainless steel tops, sat at intervals surrounded by bottles of ketchup, mustard, and Tabasco sauce.

He heard the sound of cursing coming from the kitchen and grinned slightly as he rubbed out a spot of ketchup on the counter. Nick counted among his blessings Milt, the cantankerous, old short-order cook who manned the stove. His old-fashioned cooking techniques and an unhealthy quantity of grease had earned them a reputation all over the district for the best burgers and fries to be found in San Francisco.

Nick found surprising satisfaction in his new life. He'd never aspired to own a restaurant, but he liked it. He liked the sound of the grill and the smell of the sautéing onions and burgers. He liked the happy chatter of "rush hour", those four golden hours between four and eight when they did the majority of their business, but even more, he liked the regular breakfast trade and his late-night crowd, the ones that sat there now with their coffee. He liked the fact that he could openly hang a rainbow flag outside the business's door, and instead of it of being a detriment, it was like a fluttering, brightly hued welcome sign. He liked that his clientele was mostly made up of gay men and women who lived in the district. And he liked mentoring the young ones, the kids who came to San Francisco from all over the country just trying to find out who they were, who almost unerringly found their way through his door.

It was one of the things his sister, Mona, complained about the most. "The leeches," she called them, her twice-fixed nose in the air. The ones who had no money, whose families had either thrown them out or simply watched helplessly, incapable of understanding what was happening to their sons or daughters. The ones who had been beaten up or disowned or tossed aside. The Orphans, as he thought of them. The young, lost gay children of the night. He took them in, fed them, gave them clothes, found them jobs. Occasionally one of them stole from him, but more often than not, they eventually found their own way, their own place, and then came back to him as not just customers, but as dear as

family. Some of his older friends called him a sap and a “soft touch”, and he supposed that they had a point. But he also knew that he wouldn’t stop. He’d been young, frightened, and queer once himself; he’d never turn them away.

He finished the counter, satisfied by the faint gleam and the scent of Windex, and stuck the damp cloth through the loop of his Levi’s, putting out more place settings. He’d rolled up the sleeves of his long-sleeved denim shirt long ago, and the muscles under the skin of his forearms flexed, the soft brown hair catching the golden glow of the lights above. He had workman’s hands, someone had once reflected. Square of finger and broad of palm, sturdy, steady hands. Much like the man himself.

Nick had no delusions. At forty-two, he was completely average in almost every way. He wasn’t overweight, but he was solid through the chest and shoulders, and while he still wore the same size jeans he had in college, he’d never be thought of as slender. There was nothing objectionable about his face, he thought often enough as he watched himself shave in the morning, but nothing particularly spectacular about it either. He had a square jaw and a straight nose, brown eyes, and short, medium-brown hair. Coupled with the fact that he was of medium height and medium build, he considered himself a tribute to the average and was quite certain that people looked at him once and then didn’t bother to again.

The only time that had hurt was when he’d been young and had wanted to be something special. Everyone wanted to be beautiful, he supposed, even if just for a short time, but that ambition had died in him early. He was nothing if not a pragmatist. He’d dated quite a bit in his twenties, but he hadn’t been especially successful in the relationships he’d had until he’d met Theo. They were together for nearly a decade, but it had never been what he would have called a grand passion. He’d been sad when it had ended, but not particularly surprised. Some people were destined for soaring romance, he’d concluded, and some weren’t. He really had no problem with his place in the world; he had his business, his customers, his “orphans”, and his friends. He loved them but didn’t need to be “in love”—or so he’d convinced himself until about eight months ago.

The bell over the front door rang merrily as it was pushed open, and Nick looked up to see another of his “regulars” coming in from the

cold. He grinned at the unusual sight the customer made.

“Greetings, mortals,” the new arrival called out brightly.

“You’re going to catch your death, trotting around out there like that,” Nick replied, and the man in question merely rolled his eyes and headed for the counter.

He’d known Gabriel for years. He thought he’d been one of the first people to ever come in to the place, and he hadn’t been dressed much differently then. An attractive man anywhere from twenty-five to forty, Gabriel had short, feathered blond hair liberally streaked with soft blue highlights and wide blue eyes that seemed both worldly and innocent at the same time. He wore very short cut-off jeans, a pristine white tank top, and sandals that laced up his calves. But that wasn’t the most unusual thing about his appearance. Every time that Nick had ever seen him, he’d been wearing a wire halo on his head, complete with sparkly gold garland, and a pair of gauzy fairy wings attached over his shoulders by wide loops of elastic. When people first saw him, there was something of a startled reaction, but he’d been such a fixture in the neighborhood for so long that most people merely greeted him with a smile. He was Gabriel, the self-described Archangel of Castro.

”You know that I can’t ‘catch my death’,” he said in his musical voice, making a flicking gesture with one hand. “Celestial beings cannot die. I keep telling you....”

“Oh, that’s right, sorry,” Nick said with a slight smile. “I forgot. Can celestial beings get cold?”

“Not so you’d notice,” Gabriel answered flippantly. He was wearing gold glitter on his brow bone and the bridge of his nose, and it caught and sparkled in the overhead lights.

“What can I get you?” Nick asked, leaning on his elbows.

“Just the usual,” Gabriel replied, sitting on a stool decorously and linking his fingers before him like a schoolgirl. Nick glanced over his shoulder into the kitchen.

“Gabriel would like his usual, Milt,” he called with a grin. Milt muttered something about “fruit loops” and turned away.

“His people skills are atrocious,” Gabriel said primly, crossing his long legs. “Perhaps obedience school?”

“I think trying to change Milt at this point would be an exercise in

futility,” Nick countered, and Gabriel just pursed his lips.

“Night, Nick.”

Nick glanced up and saw that the three boys who’d been in booth seven were headed toward the door.

“Night, boys,” he called. “Tell me that you left your tab on the table so I don’t have Benji bitching at me in the morning.”

They grinned. “Solemn oath,” one of them said, crossing his hand over his chest. “With his tip.”

“Thank you,” Nick said. “You saved me a lecture.”

They chuckled lightly and went on their way, leaving the diner deserted but for Gabriel and old Mrs. Horowitz, who sat in a back booth feeding her Chihuahua, Fritzzy, her French fries and reading the *Evening Standard*.

“Order up!” Milt called out in his hoarse, smoke-roughened voice, and Nick turned to find the vanilla milkshake and a bagel topped with Cool Whip on the pass-through window. He’d asked Gabriel once about the unusual topping on the bagel; his response had been to hold it on his palm and look at it wistfully. “It reminds me of home,” he’d said with a soft sigh, and Nick had merely nodded and left it at that. He picked up the tall frosted glass and the small ceramic plate and placed them in front of Gabriel, who gave him a flirtatious smile as he laid his napkin neatly across his lap.

The door at the far end of the counter opened and closed, and Nick looked up expectantly, feeling his lips pull up in an involuntary smile. His heart beat slightly harder in his chest, and he felt a not wholly unpleasant swooping sensation in his stomach when he saw the young man who came through. But then, he always felt those things when Brian came into view.

Brian had been living in the spare bedroom upstairs for almost a year. Twenty-five years old, he was the son of devotedly Mormon parents from Provo, Utah. He’d known that he was gay at thirteen but had tried valiantly not to be for the next ten years. He’d gone to college, gone on his mission, even gotten himself engaged to a nice Mormon girl, but as the date for his marriage approached, he realized that he just couldn’t do it to himself or to her. He’d told his parents the truth; they’d wanted to send him to a “retreat” to “cure him of his unnatural urges.”

He'd disappeared before they could.

Brian had no idea where to go or who to turn to. And as most of Nick's "orphans" before him, he'd come to San Francisco because he'd heard that at the very least, he could find acceptance there. What he hadn't known was that being as stunningly beautiful as he was, he could also find a world of unscrupulous bastards who would do just about anything to get into his pants.

Brian was, in truth, movie-star handsome. He had thick, curling chestnut brown hair and cerulean blue eyes with black lashes so thick they looked as if he'd taken a mascara wand to them. His cheekbones were high, his nose was perfect and straight but for one slight hook at the bridge, and his lips were full. Finishing off the arresting face was a square chin with a slight cleft and cheeks that dimpled when he smiled his Crest toothpaste smile. Built like an Olympic swimmer, all broad shoulders and smooth, long limbs, he'd been offered a modeling contract by someone in a bar almost the moment he arrived in town; what he hadn't known was that in this case, "modeling" was a euphemism for gay porn. He'd just managed to figure out what was going on and escape before he was immortalized on film forever. Homeless, he'd been reduced to eating at the soup kitchen and had almost been desperate enough to start hooking when someone told him about Nick.

When he'd shown up in the diner, he'd been fifteen pounds underweight and running a temperature of a hundred and two. Nick had taken one look at him, seen the flushed cheeks and the glazed eyes, and called a friend of his who was a physician's assistant. He'd had pneumonia, he was malnourished, and he had fainted while the man was taking his pulse. Nick had put him to bed in his guest room, filled the prescription for antibiotics, and ran up and down the stairs for the next week with soup and tepid tea, taking care of Brian and the restaurant both.

Nick thought that his attraction to Brian could probably be traced to those first few days. Even as sick as his was, nearly out of his head with fever, he kept apologizing for "being a burden." Nick sponged his face and his arms and chest and kept assuring him that he wasn't a burden, but Brian merely shook his head, his eyes filling.

"I am," he said brokenly. "I am. To everyone."

It had broken Nick's heart.

It had also captured it.

Brian was polite and unassuming, something that Nick found endearing. In his experience, men who looked like Brian were well aware of their charms. Brian, on the other hand, didn't seem to be at all. There was nothing sly or flirtatious about him. His smiles, when they finally came, were shy but genuine, his eyes level and full of guileless honesty. And even as he knew that it was a disaster in the making, Nick felt himself responding to the young man more than he had to anyone in years. When Brian asked what he could do to repay Nick's kindness, he'd been ashamed of where his mind had gone. "Nothing," he'd said instead. "Just get well."

Once he was recovered, Brian had been prepared to try to find someplace else to live, but Nick had told him that he could stay as long as he needed to. He'd known it would be something of a double-edged sword: being with him every day would be both pleasure and torture, but he really hadn't wanted him to leave. For his part, Brian wouldn't hear of just living off of Nick's generosity. He began to bus tables in the diner unasked. He did shifts washing dishes. He began to sweep and mop the floors and take out the garbage and just generally make himself useful. The only disagreement they'd ever had occurred when Nick told Brian that if he was going to work, he was going to be paid. Brian had threatened to leave, but they'd come to an understanding instead. Nick allowed Brian to work without being paid for three months so that he could assuage his pride; then he began to pay him.

That had been seven months ago. Brian had offered tentatively once to move out of the guest room and get his own place, but the thought of it made Nick's heart ache. He'd told him instead that he enjoyed the company and that it was nice to have a "roommate." Rents were too high, he'd argued; Brian would end up in a dump. Brian had gratefully agreed, and they'd settled into a comfortable routine. There were moments when it was agonizing, so desperately did Nick wish it could be more.

He knew that he was torturing himself; he was keenly aware of everything about Brian. Every time Brian got in the shower or wandered around the apartment in just his pajama bottoms, Nick had to become studiously busy in order to keep his mind occupied and his eyes averted. He heard him click off his light at night, knew when he woke by the change of sounds from the guest room. He even liked the sounds he

made when he ate, and when he was reading, he'd stretch out on the sofa, stocking feet on the arm, and he'd make these little... sounds. Sighs, hums. Nick was sure he didn't even know that he did it, which was what made it so charming. And his scent—the smell of Brian went straight to his head and then detoured to his groin, and he'd had some uncomfortably close calls when his pants didn't hide everything he wanted them to. He knew that a forty-two-year-old man with nothing much to recommend him had no chance with a twenty-five-year-old who looked like Brian. He accepted the fact that one day Brian would move out, move on, and find someone of his own: Nick had resolved, when the time came, to be gracious about it even if it killed him. But in the meantime, he enjoyed what he did have and didn't allow himself to dwell on the future. Too much.

Brian smiled that movie-star smile as he came around the counter, and Nick felt his heart expand in his chest. "Headed out?" he asked, noticing the denim jacket encasing the square shoulders.

"Mark asked me to meet him for a drink," Brian answered with a shrug and a twist of his lips. "I wasn't doing anything else."

Nick removed the towel from his belt loop and studiously began to work on a non-existent spot on the pristine counter top, refusing to look up. Mark Bryant was someone relatively new in Brian's life; they'd met at one of the night classes that Brian was taking, and he'd called his cell phone several times. Nick had had to force himself not to eavesdrop on those conversations.

"That sounds like fun," Nick remarked, relieved that his voice came out evenly around the lump in his throat.

"I guess," Brian answered, but he didn't leave as Nick expected. He stood there until Nick finally looked up. "Do you want me to stay? Help you close up instead?" His blue eyes were wide and so very blue that Nick could almost get lost in them. Almost.

"Why would you want to do that?" he said instead, forcing a smile. "Go on, go out and have some fun. You've helped close every night this week."

Brian frowned slightly, hesitating. "You're sure?"

Nick waved at him with the towel. "Go on. It's so quiet I'm already doing the breakfast set-up. I'll be fine."

“Okay,” Brian said with a shrug, and then leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to Nick’s cheek. Nick closed his eyes, feeling his hand clench around the towel. Brian was so easy in his shows of affection, so generous with them. It didn’t mean anything, he told himself. “I won’t be late.”

Nick swallowed heavily and forced his eyes open. “You don’t have a curfew,” he said with a laugh that sounded almost as forced as if felt.

“But you worry,” Brian said. “And I don’t want you to, so no later than midnight. ’Night, Gabriel,” he said with a smile as he passed.

“Cherub,” Gabriel said with a regal inclination of his head. Brian’s smile widened, and then he was out through the door.

Nick watched his silhouette until it disappeared in the mist, then sighed unconsciously as he reached for another salt shaker to fill.

“You know,” Gabriel said slowly, and Nick glanced up to see him primly wiping his lips with his napkin, “you could be a bigger idiot, but I’m not quite sure how.”

Nick blinked. “Pardon?”

“You,” Gabriel said pointedly, “are an idiot. And you’re making my job here unnecessarily difficult.”

Nick frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you and the Cherub, you nincompoop,” Gabriel retorted sharply. “God in heaven, man. What in the world are you waiting for? An engraved invitation? Someone to skywrite it for you? Perhaps a little golden arrow in the ass? Not going to happen. Cupid is retired. That’s why I’m here.”

Nick stared at him, feeling like he’d just entered a parallel universe. “You’re here instead of Cupid,” he said stupidly.

“Well, they got tired of all his pissing and moaning about his arthritis, so they put him out to pasture, as it were. He’s still pissing and moaning. Reminds me a bit of Milt, now I think about it,” he said, looking thoughtfully towards the pass-through, his index finger on his chin. “They might be related....”

“Gabriel,” Nick said, gentling his voice. “There’s nothing going on between me and Brian. He’s my friend. That’s all.”

“God, you’re stupid.” Gabriel scowled at him, and the expression

was completely at odds with the circle of garland dancing above his head. He looked like a rather grumpy cherubim in a school Christmas pageant. "He's crazy about you, you moron."

"He is not," Nick retorted, even though his heart gave a little lurch. He leaned across the counter. "And are angels supposed to call people names? Because you've been doing a lot of that this evening."

"Listen, pal," Gabriel said pointedly, leaning closer as well. "I'm an Archangel. I can break out the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune if I feel like it." He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. "Which really should not be necessary in this case. In fact, none of this would be necessary if you'd just open your eyes."

Nick shook his head. "What in the world would Brian want with someone like me?" he said, voicing his thoughts aloud. "I'm old enough to be his father."

"Hardly," Gabriel said wryly. "He's twenty-five; you're forty-two. I suppose if you'd been a particularly ambitious seventeen-year-old it's possible, but rumor has it you've never much fancied girls, and they're rather essential to the process. Only my boss could get a child any other way." He blinked his long lashes rapidly.

"Very cute," Nick muttered. "Brian can do better than me."

Gabriel bristled and brought his palm down hard, slapping the counter. Nick jumped at the sharp sound, and Fritzzy whimpered in the corner. Mrs. Horowitz didn't seem to notice.

"Stop that," he said into Nick's startled face. "Right now. What in the world makes you think that you are not worthy of being loved?"

Nick stared into his narrowed eyes, blinking quickly. "I didn't say that," he answered faintly.

"Yes, you did," Gabriel pressed on. "And you've said it before. You say it every time you tell the Cherub to get on with his life, to find someone else...."

"I've never said that," Nick responded, stunned. "I've never told him to find someone else."

Gabriel shook his head pityingly. "You have every time you manufacture that horrid fake smile when he walks out the door. You do every time you turn your eyes away so that you don't have to look at his face. You do," he lowered his voice, his eyes going cold, "every time

you stiffen up when he kisses your cheek. You might as well be wearing a sign that says ‘you can do better’. So tell me, Nicholas Dean Ellison,” he murmured, and Nick stiffened. How did Gabriel know his middle name? “What is it about you that makes you unworthy of that young man’s love?”

“He doesn’t love me,” Nick said, dampening his lips with his tongue. “He’s... grateful, that’s all.”

Gabriel shook his head. “I’ve argued and argued that you’re actually smarter than you act. You’re not helping my case here.”

“Argued with whom?” Nick said, his brow furrowing.

“Of course, he’s grateful,” Gabriel went on as if he hadn’t heard the question. “You saved his life.”

“I didn’t,” Nick retorted. “I just got him help—”

“Which in turn saved his life.” Gabriel slapped the counter again sharply, and Fritzzy barked in response, almost as if in agreement. Nick shot the little dog a look. Was everything around him crazy this evening? Fritzzy’s stumpy little tail wagged, and Mrs. Horowitz turned the page of her newspaper. “Stop being so stubborn and look at this objectively, Nicholas. He’s told you in every way that he knows how.”

Nick frowned. “He hasn’t....”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Honestly,” he said with a huff. “He’s been working in this restaurant for how long? Washing dishes, clearing tables, sweeping and mopping, just so that he could be near to *you*.”

“That was just—”

“If you say gratitude, I will slap you,” Gabriel said fiercely, cutting him off. “What you do not see, because you’re afraid to look at him, is that his eyes follow you everywhere you go. He’s the first to laugh at your jokes, and believe me.” Gabriel pursed his lips. “Some of them aren’t that funny. He makes you take breaks, brings you tea, and makes sure that you eat. For God’s sake, Nicholas”—he glanced skyward with a muttered “pardon me”—“the man rubs the kinks out of your neck every evening just to have an excuse to touch you!”

Nick’s mouth fell open. “How do you know about that?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Celestial being, remember?” he asked archly. “I know everything.”

Nick fervently hoped that wasn't true. He shuddered to think that Gabriel might know that he brought himself off in the shower, remembering Brian's hands on his shoulders. But something about the smirk Gabriel was now sending him made him very much afraid that he might.

"Listen, Gabriel," he began in a softer tone, "I know you're just trying to help—"

"That isn't it," Gabriel interrupted. "I'm merely trying to make you see the obvious." He reached over the counter and put his hand on Nick's, and it was surprisingly warm. "Nick," he murmured, his voice gentling. "What are you afraid of?"

Nick wasn't sure what it was, whether it was the gentleness in Gabriel's touch or the soft understanding in his eyes, but suddenly the back of his nose began to sting and his eyes burned. He blinked quickly, swallowing the thickness in his throat.

"Why would he want me, Gabriel?" he asked hoarsely. "Look at him, and then look at me."

"I'm looking at you," Gabriel said softly. "And I see a man who is generous of spirit, who takes in the sick and the lost, who welcomes everyone with an open heart and turns no one away. I see a man who has done good works, and that's not such a common thing in today's world. Why is it so hard for you to believe that someone might love you for those qualities and not care that you don't look like Brad Pitt?"

Nick chuckled weakly. "Oh, so angels know all about Brad Pitt, do they?"

"We know about *all* of God's celestial beings, my dear," Gabriel answered wryly, and Nick laughed. "So tell me, Nicholas," Gabriel went on finally, "you do believe in love?"

Nick inhaled sharply. "Of course I do," he answered.

"And do you believe that it is a gift?"

Nick nodded. "Yes. Probably the greatest one there is."

Gabriel nodded in approval. "Then stop being an ass and quit looking the gift horse in the mouth." He glanced toward the ceiling meaningfully and lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "You're going to piss Him off, and that's never a good idea." He picked up his milkshake and emptied the glass, then stood, placing his napkin on the counter.

When he reached into his back pocket, Nick caught his arm at the elbow, not really sure what possessed him but going with the impulse.

“This one’s on me, Gabriel,” he said softly.

Gabriel’s smile was brilliant. “A good man who does good works, Nicholas, and who is deserving of love.”

He gifted Nick with another blinding smile, then turned and flounced to the door, his halo bobbing and his gauzy wings bouncing. When he opened it, he glanced up as the bell rang. “Another cherubim is born!” he sang, and swept out into the night.

Nick stared after him in bemusement, then shook his head with a sigh. The man was certifiable. He came around the counter and was putting the salt shakers back where they belonged when he felt a tug on his sleeve. Turning, he found old Mrs. Horowitz standing there, all five-foot-one of her, Fritzy under her arm. She reached up and touched his cheek with her gnarled hand, and Nick startled in surprise.

“You need to listen to him,” she said, her rheumy eyes bright. “You are a nice man.” She patted his cheek with a fond smile, then turned and walked away, Fritzy looking back at him, little tail whipping madly and beady doggy eyes bright. If he didn’t know better, he’d have sworn the little dog was grinning at him. When she opened the door and the bell above her head rang, old Mrs. Horowitz giggled.

“I made an angel, Nick!” She shot him a grin, and then she, too, went out into the night.

Nick stared at the door, utterly astounded. “I think everyone’s gone completely insane,” he muttered, shaking his head.

Milt left at eleven, and Nick followed him to the door, turning the sign to “closed”, then going back to finish the set-up on the tables in the dimmed light. His hands moved through the motions of laying out the place settings, but his mind kept going over what Gabriel had said.

“He’s been working in this restaurant for how long? Washing dishes, clearing tables, sweeping and mopping, just so that he could be near to you. He’s crazy about you....”

It frightened Nick how much he longed to believe it. Frightened him so much that his hands were unsteady and his chest felt tight. He’d been so afraid to admit the truth, even to himself, but he’d been in love with Brian for months. But Gabriel was insane, he reminded himself. For

God's sake, he trotted around in a Christmas garland halo and *wings*. How was Nick supposed to believe anything he said? He couldn't, Nick resolved with a shake of his head. Gabriel was wrong. Brian didn't feel anything for him but friendship. But the seed had been planted, and all of Nick's carefully constructed defenses were in danger of collapsing. Finally he sat on one of the stools, his head in his hands, and sighed shakily. God, what did he do now? How could he even look at Brian again?

The bell over the door behind him rang loudly, and Nick didn't even turn his head.

"Sorry, we're closed," he said into the mask of his hands.

"I know that," came the answer, and Nick stiffened. "Why didn't you turn the lock? I have my key."

Nick dropped his hands from his face, squaring his shoulders. He could do this, he told himself resolutely before turning. He could do this.

He swiveled on the stool and saw Brian closing the door. His hair was damp from the mist and curling wildly, and the shoulders of the denim jacket were darkened with rain.

"You're back early," he said, forcing his voice to come out evenly.

Brian turned, thrusting his hands into the pocket of his jacket, his shoulders hunched. "Yeah," he answered, his eyes on the floor.

"How's Mark?" Nick forced himself to ask.

Brian shrugged. "He's Mark," he answered, glancing up with a wry grimace.

"I thought you liked him," Nick said, his breath catching in his throat when Brian shook his head slightly.

He walked closer. "I probably won't be seeing him anymore. I think I pissed him off."

Nick frowned. "What happened?"

Brian exhaled, stopping not far from Nick's knees before he lifted his eyes. Those beautiful, beautiful eyes. Even in the dim light, they looked so blue. "He wanted me to go home with him, and I said no."

Nick stared into his eyes for a long moment. "Oh," he said, his voice small. "You... didn't like him *that way*, then."

Brian made a face. “No,” he answered. “I mean, he’s all right, I guess. But he’s pretty full of himself.”

Nick had thought so, too, but he had never said it.

“And tonight, he couldn’t keep his hands to himself,” Brian said darkly, and Nick had to squash a sudden urge to go find Mark and punch him in the mouth. “He isn’t what I want.”

Fighting down the desire to do violence, Nick cleared his throat instead. “I’m sure you’ll find someone, when the time is right,” he said softly, hoping he sounded sincere. He was startled when Brian’s eyes narrowed in anger.

“Why do you do that?” he asked sharply, and Nick straightened.

“I... what?”

“Why do you keep telling me that I’ll ‘find someone’?” Brian’s eyes searched his almost desperately. “What if I already have?”

Nick stared at him, his mouth slightly open. “Well, then, if you have... I...” He stopped when Brian took a step closer to him, his eyes still flashing. He came so close that Nick’s knees were pressed into his thighs.

“What is it, Nick?” he asked, his face a sudden blend of anger and vulnerability. “Is there something wrong with me?”

Nick felt his mouth go dry. “Something... wrong with you?”

“I mean, I’ve tried to figure it out,” Brian went on, his hand coming up, his fingers raking through his damp curls. “Is it something I said? Or did? Or do you just not like me?”

“Not like you?” Nick finally managed. “Brian, you know I like you.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean, I know that you like me. I just wished that you *liked* me, liked me.” He gripped his hair with both hands, growling in exasperation. “And now I sound like an idiot.”

Nick just stared at him, thunderstruck. Good God, could Gabriel be right?

“Nick,” Brian said in resignation when he lowered his hands, “I have to tell you something, and if it makes you uncomfortable, then... I’ll find somewhere else to live or something. But...” He stared into Nick’s eyes, his own suddenly suspiciously bright. “I’m in love with

you,” he said, his voice hesitant. “I think I have been almost since the beginning. It’s driving me insane, being so close to you all the time and not being able to touch you or kiss you. I don’t want to just be your friend. I don’t think I can anymore.” He stared into Nick’s stunned face, his own falling. “And now I’ve ruined it. Shit.”

He started to turn away, and Nick reached out and caught his arm. “Brian,” he said softly, but Brian was trying to pull away.

“No, no, I’ll go. This is stupid. I never should have said anything. But it’s so hard, Nick. I can’t just keep pretending I don’t feel anything—”

“Brian,” Nick repeated, more firmly, and the younger man stopped talking and lifted his eyes. He must have seen something on Nick’s face, because he stopped trying to pull away, his wrist still encircled by Nick’s hand. Nick could feel his pulse pounding against his palm, and he softened his grip. “It isn’t stupid,” he finally said, his voice rough.

“It isn’t?” Nick saw hope bloom in the blue eyes and couldn’t believe that it was hope for *him*. He shook his head slowly.

“I... care a great deal for you too,” he whispered, his voice dropping until it was a breath of sound.

If joy was an expression, he watched as it transformed Brian’s face. He was so beautiful, so damn beautiful. He pressed forward against Nick’s knees, his lips beginning to curl.

“But I’m forty-two years old, Brian,” Nick went on quickly. “And I’m nothing special. You could do so much better...”

Brian stopped for a moment, and Nick felt his heart begin to sink, certain he’d withdraw. Instead, Brian stared into his eyes, his free hand lifting to press over Nick’s heart. His hand was warm through the denim, and Nick was sure he must be able to feel how his heart was racing.

“Why do you do that?” he whispered. “Why do you sell yourself so short?” He shook his head slowly, his eyes full. “I can’t do better, Nick. I’ve never known a better man than you. And I don’t care about your age. So you’re forty-two. So what?”

“Brian,” Nick said, a last-ditch effort to try to make him see reason. “You’re so beautiful. You could have anyone.”

Brian frowned. “If that’s true,” he murmured, “then why can’t I have you?”

Nick's mouth opened, but he didn't have an answer for that.

"I want *you*," Brian went on. "And I have no idea why you think you're not attractive. You have great hair." He lifted his hand to it, carding his fingers into it, and Nick couldn't help it: he leaned into the touch. Brian pulled his other hand from Nick's slackened grip and laid it on his shoulder. "You have these broad shoulders and strong arms, and your neck...." His hand drifted to the side of Nick's neck, his thumb stroking his throat. "You have no idea how many times I've fantasized about kissing you"—his thumb brushed over Nick's Adam's apple—"right here."

Nick swallowed convulsively, his Adam's apple bobbing, and he saw Brian's lips curl up at the corners. He was hardening in his jeans, and soon there would be no way that he could hide it. "Brian," he wheezed, dampening his lips with his tongue. He watched Brian's eyes devour the movement.

"You've got the most beautiful brown eyes," he went on, his eyes still glued to Nick's mouth. "They're so kind, so gentle. But your mouth...." It was his turn to dampen his lips, those full, perfectly shaped lips, and Nick nearly moaned aloud. "Nick, I've so wanted your mouth."

He leaned in tentatively, pausing when their lips were just inches apart. "Can I have it, Nick. Please?"

Nick wasn't even aware of moving, but suddenly his hand was around Brian's nape, pulling him in gently. He saw those insanely long lashes flutter, then close over the blue eyes just as he gave Brian what he wanted and offered up his mouth.

He felt the gasp of air that was inhaled against his lips, then felt the warm flow of Brian's welcoming sigh fill his mouth. He tasted of something spicy, maybe a Bloody Mary, which was his favorite drink. The taste grew even more pronounced when Nick slipped his tongue between parted lips and flicked it against the roof of Brian's mouth.

He felt the shudder that went through the lithe body, felt the tremble in the arms that slid almost hesitantly around his neck. The fingers of the hand at Brian's nape slipped up into the damp curls, and Nick's other arm sneaked around his back, pulling him closer. He couldn't stop the moan that slipped into Brian's mouth when he straddled Nick's lap.

Their mouths moved over one another's in a long, slow, thorough

exploration, and they just kissed for a long time. Kissing Brian was all that Nick might have hoped and more; he was so responsive, angling his head at the perfect moment, returning the sweeping caresses of Nick's tongue. He let Nick take the lead, but he was right there with him, his tongue lithe and sinuous, and when he caught Nick's tongue against the roof of his mouth and sucked on it, Nick's hips jerked involuntarily.

Brian's hand moved in Nick's hair, caressing his scalp, then his nape as he shifted closer, and Nick groaned when he felt Brian's groin press against his almost painful hardness.

"Oh God," Brian moaned against Nick's mouth. "Nick...."

Nick thought his eyes might roll up into his head at the sound of his name, spoken by Brian with such longing. He pushed Brian's jacket from his shoulders, and Brian dropped his arms just long enough for it to fall to the floor in a soft rush of fabric.

That seemed to be some sort of cue, and their movements went from slow and languorous to almost desperate. Nick pushed Brian's sweater up until it was bunched beneath his arms, running the flat of his hand over the hard stomach and chest as Brian yanked at the buttons down the front of Nick's shirt. When he had it open, he pulled his head back and lowered it, running his mouth over Nick's neck, tonguing the hollow of his collarbone. Nick gasped at the wet heat, his upper body leaning back against the counter and his eyes closing as Brian mapped his chest with his mouth. When he finally settled over one dark nipple and teased it with his teeth before soothing it with his tongue, Nick fisted his hand in Brian's thick hair.

"I want you," Brian said against his chest.

Instead of answering with words, Nick reached around and grabbed Brian's ass, then thrust up with his hips. Brian made a soft, whimpering sound when their cocks rubbed through the layers of fabric and responded with a tentative rolling motion of his own. He began to move on top of Nick, rubbing against him in a fluid, rocking motion, and in a very short amount of time, Nick was afraid if he didn't stop, he'd embarrass himself by spilling in his pants. He grabbed Brian's hips, stilling him. Brian's hair had fallen over his forehead, and wide, feverish eyes looked down into Nick's.

"Let me," Nick whispered, leaning up to take the swollen lips. "Just let me," he said against them, then brought his hands to the

straining front of Brian's slacks.

He made short work of the button and zipper, reaching inside and caressing the hard column of flesh through the cotton boxers. Brian gasped and canted his hips forward, and Nick found the opening in the front, slipping the long, slender cock free. It was so much like Brian: perfect, tapered, slightly pink, seeping a pearly drop of pre-come from the tip. Nick caught it on his thumb and brought it to his own lips, and the musky taste spread through his mouth. He licked his palm and returned it to Brian's groin, encircling him and stroking him slowly from base to tip and back again.

"Oh God," Brian gasped, his hips jerking, his hand digging into Nick's bicep. "So good, oh God...." He began to move, thrusting through Nick's grip, his head back and his eyes closed. He was so beautiful that Nick thought he could come from just watching him, but suddenly Brian stopped, a shudder running from his shoulders down his slim body as he held himself still. He took a deep breath and reached trembling hands for Nick's fly.

"Don't worry about that," Nick said quickly. "Just let me take care of you."

"No," Brian said breathlessly, shaking his head. "I want us to come together." He lifted pleading eyes to Nick's. "Please, this first time, together...."

Nick stared into his eyes for a moment, then pulled him in for another lingering kiss before releasing Brian just long enough to open his own pants and pull his straining erection free. He heard Brian gasp and looked up at the wonder on his face.

"You're beautiful," he murmured, reaching out to touch Nick's cock with trembling fingers. "So thick, so perfect...." His eyes lifted back to Nick's, and his heart was in them. "You're perfect," he said again, and for the first time in his life, Nick felt like he might be.

"Shift closer," he murmured, and Brian did, pressing forward until Nick could surround both of their cocks with his fist. When he squeezed them together, Brian made a strangled sound in the back of his throat and pressed his forehead to Nick's shoulder. Nick turned his head and spoke gently into his ear.

"Now, move," he whispered, and Brian shuddered and thrust forward. He gasped as his cock dragged the length of Nick's, and his

arms came up and circled Nick's neck, holding on tight. He pulled back and thrust forward again, his cheek pressed to Nick's, and Nick wrapped his free arm around him, placing his hand gently over his spine.

"That's it, baby," he breathed into Brian's ear. "That's it, just like that."

It didn't take long. Brian was moving gracelessly and moaning, his breath hitching. Within minutes, his body jerked and his nails dug into Nick's shoulders, and he spilled between them with a shattered cry. Nick squeezed hard as Brian was still coming, moving his fist up and down in a few rough jerks that had Brian shuddering and his own release splattering onto the long, lean stomach in a warm burst. They pressed together, moaning, arching for a straining moment as if they could absorb one another; then the tension went out of their bodies and they folded together, breathing harsh, hearts pounding.

Brian pressed his face against Nick's neck, his hot breath moving over Nick's skin as he struggled with his own tortured gasps, his hand stroking the damp skin over Brian's spine. Silence settled around them, soft in the dim lights, and Nick felt a rush of tenderness unlike anything he'd ever felt in his life when Brian pressed a gentle kiss against the side of his throat.

"I love you," Brian whispered, and Nick could feel his mouth moving against his skin. He blinked against a rush of emotion and dampened his lips before speaking.

"I love you too," he whispered roughly in reply, and he felt Brian stiffen for a moment in his arms, then go completely limp as a sigh moved through his body. The arms around Nick tightened and held on.

"Thank you," Brian breathed, and Nick's lips curled up in a slight smile.

"My pleasure, I assure you," he said, his hand still stroking Brian's spine. It paused when Brian sat up and looked into his eyes, his head cocked to one side. His lips curled up at the corners before he spoke, his blue eyes full of light.

"I wasn't talking to you."

For some reason, Nick's mind filled with an image of Gabriel, and he slowly returned Brian's smile.

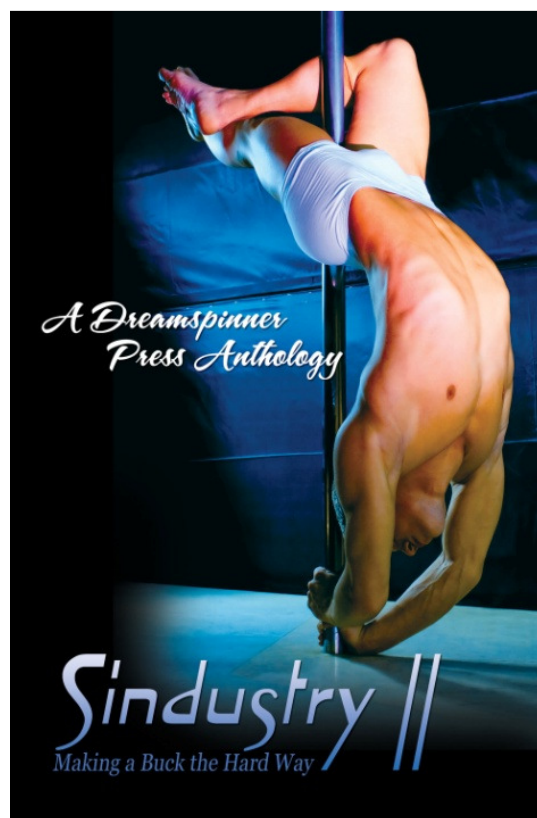
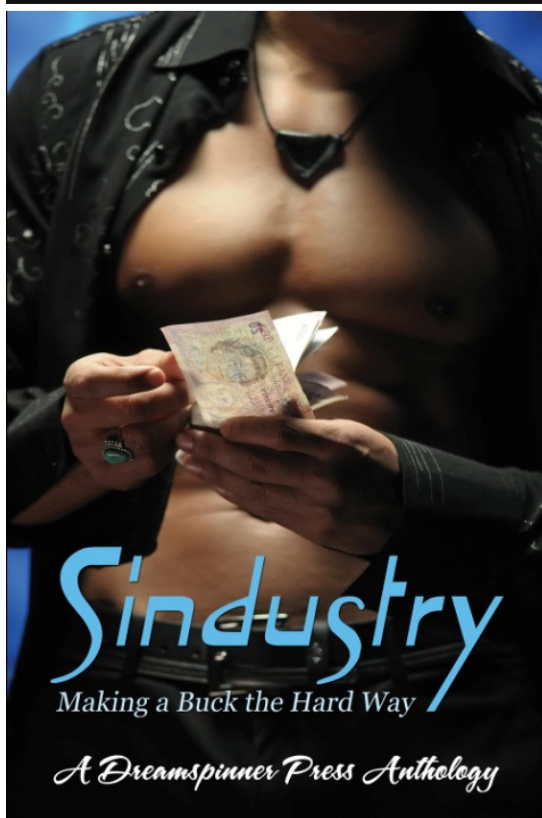
GABRIEL glanced through the foggy windows into the diner, a slight smirk pulling at his lips. The light was very dim and the windows clouded, but he could still faintly see the two men on the one stool, one seated, the other straddling his lap as they stole soft, slow kisses and smiled in sleepy wonder. Whistling softly, Gabriel waved his hand. He heard the lock slip into place and saw the windows go completely opaque with mist, and he smiled. He'd seen what he needed to see. And if St. Peter asked, the old busybody, he'd just say he went back to make sure that everything turned out all right. Which, clearly, it had.

He glanced at his own reflection in the glass, straightened his halo, then gave himself a saucy smile before he turned and slipped away.

DIANA COPLAND began writing in the seventh grade, when she shamelessly combined elements of *Jane Eyre* and *Dark Shadows* to produce an overwrought gothic tale that earned her an A- in creative writing, thanks entirely to the generosity of her teacher. She wrote for pure enjoyment for the next three decades before discovering LiveJournal and a wonderful group of supportive fanfiction writers, who after gifting her with a “Best New Author” Award encouraged her to try her hand at original gay fiction.

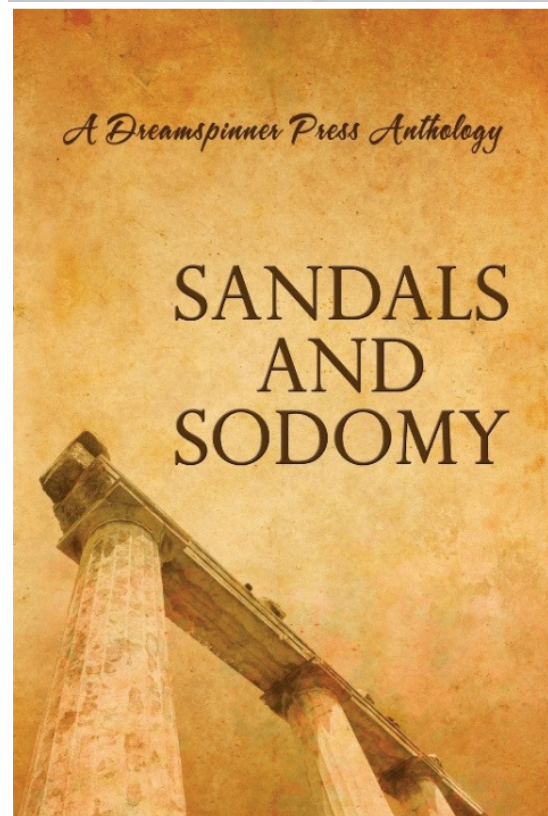
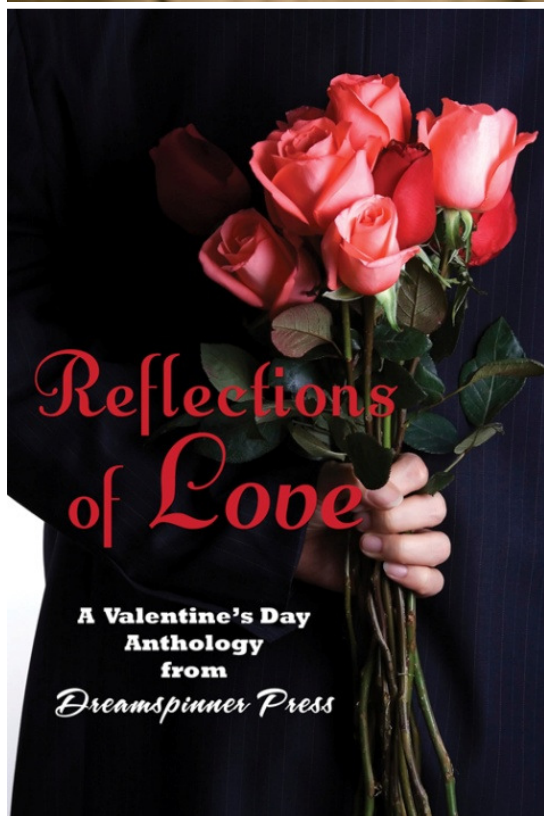
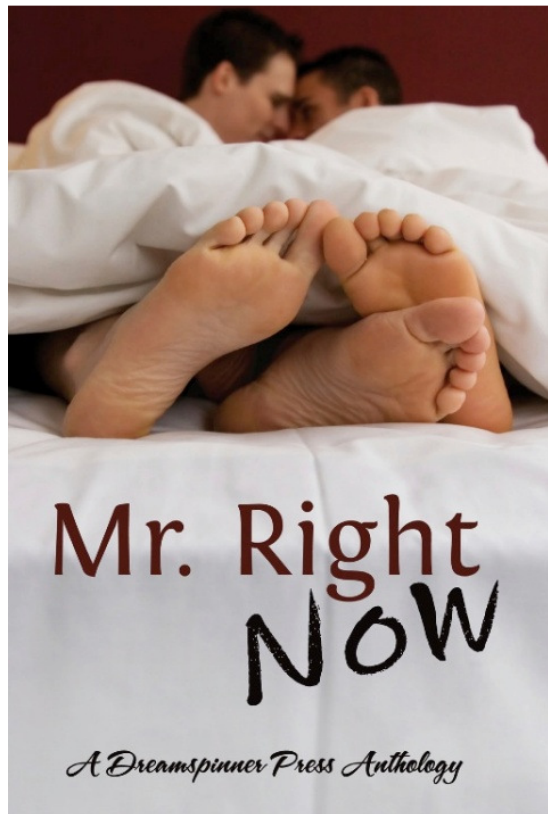
Born and raised in southern California, Diana moved to the Pacific Northwest after losing a beloved spouse to AIDS in 1995. She lives in eastern Washington near her two wonderful adult children and her surprisingly supportive parents.

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