



WILLA OKATI

*Lovers
Dreamers*
AND ME

Loose Id

LOVERS, DREAMERS, AND ME

Willa Okati

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Chapter One

It wasn't love at first sight.

Sarah, Tolliver's kid sister, saw him first. Perched on the Old Curiosity checkout counter doing her homework, she swung her heels and nudged Tolliver with the toe of her sneaker. "Incoming customer."

Tolliver reluctantly turned away from the page of the old book he'd been halfway through, its faded type and strange serifs tempting him back in. "I got it. Keep working." He closed the book and lifted his chin in the customer's direction, his eyes still on the book's worn leather cover. "Can I help you?"

"Hope so," the man said, his voice a deep, melodious tenor that shaded toward baritone. "I was told you might have some hard-to-find tarot decks in stock. There's one, a local artist - Judy Schuyler. She did an abstract Impressionism set. Do you have that deck?"

"We might have sold hers," Tolliver said, not really paying attention to the guy and registering no more than a vague impression of height, tousled brown hair, and bare arms. He kept one eye on the flyleaf of the 1891 edition of *Great Expectations*, pencil poised to sketch his reseller's price. *Amazing*. He almost wanted to keep this one for himself.

"Can you check?" The customer was persistent, and patiently unruffled. "Maybe for Sharice Donough, too? She's not local, but she did a mountain-music-inspired. There's a stringed instrument on the front --"

"Right. It was a mandolin, I think?" He'd caught Tolliver's attention at last. Tolliver reached for an inventory log, still kept on paper for the most part -- he was a traditionalist -- and started flipping through pages. "I'd swear I remember getting one of those last year. Wait. Do you mean the Wisconsin Sharice or the Montauk Falls Donough?"

Tolliver's fingers slipped on the light-lead pencil he held and sent it clattering to the floor. "Sorry, let me get that."

“No problem,” the customer answered, his stance relaxed. “I’m not in a rush.”

Tolliver crouched, scanning the flotsam and jetsam he kept stashed under the old four-legged breakfront he used as a checkout counter. “Did you check in the glass cases on the back wall?” he called. “Ha. There you are.” The pencil had come to a stop halfway in, halfway out of the desk’s boundaries.

“Hang on, I think I see it.” The tip of a sneaker, encasing a foot of amazing length, prodded the pencil. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

Tolliver had reached for the pencil at the same time. Together, they sent it skittering across the shop floor.

“I’ve got it,” the customer said, rich amusement lacing his tone. He crouched. “Do you always work this hard for this little?”

“I pay attention to detail,” Tolliver replied, slightly annoyed. He caught a glimpse of long, tapered fingers with solid knuckles snaffling the pencil.

He stood, brushing the layer of dust he’d acquired down there off the knees of his khakis and reached, still not looking, for the pencil. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” The customer tipped his head to one side and studied Tolliver. Tolliver noticed, sort of, the lionlike amber of his eyes and the generous width of a smile over white teeth. “The Schuyler?”

“Back wall, glass case,” Tolliver said, already drawn back to the Dickens. He ran his fingers reverently over the binding. Ruined from years of handling, but a piece of history all the same. “What you see is what we’ve got. If it’s not there, sorry, you’re out of luck.”

The customer laughed, low and rolling.

Tolliver frowned up at him over the book. “What?”

“It’s nothing.” The customer swung around, loose limbed and graceful, and tossed a casual wave at him.

“No, what?” Tolliver held his pencil point down on the counter. “Share the joke.”

The customer shrugged and half turned, the leonine cast to his features shadowed. “I’d heard the owner of Old Curiosity was cranky, but it was still worth shopping here. You never know what you’re going to find.” His grin was still bright. “Back wall?”

“Back wall,” Tolliver confirmed, frowning. He kept an eye on the customer as the man ambled away, long feet, lengthy stretch of legs, and arms held loosely comfortable at his sides, thumbs tucked into his belt loops.

Weird guy.

So, no. Not love at first sight.

Intrigue, though. That was part of it.

* * * * *

“You think you’re ready for that kind of responsibility?”

“Ready, willing, and able.”

Tolliver rubbed his forehead and scratched his jaw. He shook his head. “Yeah, well, I’m not. I’m sorry, but the answer’s no.” He used his box cutter to slice open a carton of midfifties classics he’d taken on consignment.

“*Tolliver.*” Sarah sulked.

God, Tolliver hated disappointing her, but he was her guardian. Doing the hard thing was his job. “Price these, would you?”

Pouting, Sarah nudged him with the toe of her sneaker. “I’m almost sixteen. You’ve got to accept sometime that your baby sister is nearly old enough to drive. We need to talk cars.”

“We need to talk your working extra hours to earn the money to buy your own.” Tolliver propped his loosely fisted hands on the counter and caught Sarah’s eye. “Hey. Look at me.”

Sarah sighed in a way Tolliver had learned came naturally to teenage girls and crossed her arms. “What?”

Tolliver had never pulled punches with her, and didn’t start now. “Even if I thought you were ready, sis, you know we can’t afford another car, not even a used one. We can barely manage upkeep on the junker we do have.”

“Okay, I get that. But maybe if I got a second job outside the Old Curiosity, waiting tables or serving coffee or something, I could earn tips.” Sarah brightened, painfully eager, her bright blue eyes lambent behind her thick-rimmed, black cat’s-eye glasses. She tucked her hair behind her ears. “Tolliver, please?”

“I’m sorry. No. You need to stay where I can keep an eye on you.” He shrugged. “It is what it is, Sarah. I’m responsible for you.”

“And you’re still thinking about how I screwed up,” Sarah said. She grabbed an old pulp novel and picked at the remnants of a flea-market price tag. “I’ve done everything you said, Tolliver. Studied, worked hard, spent all my free time here. I haven’t even talked to Silver, not once.”

“I know. You’ve done good with Ella, too.”

Sarah bit her lip. She tugged her baggy sweater, loosening it further. Never wore anything that didn’t cover her from neck to wrists to waist. “I saw her this morning,” she said. “Mrs. Thompson was in the park with a stroller. She’s got hair now. Curly, but dark like mine, with a pink bow on top. She’s getting big.”

“Aw, Sarah...” Tolliver turned away from the books and gave her his full attention. “You didn’t --”

“No.” Sarah’s hair fell loose and covered her face. “I didn’t say hi. No one even knew I was there.”

"You're the one who made the rules about giving her a chance to grow up without interference," Tolliver reminded Sarah, careful not to chide her.

"Sometimes I wish I'd gotten a chance to know her before I gave her to the Thompsons," Sarah said.

"You made the right choice."

"Whatever." She slid off the counter. "Okay, are we done here?"

"Not yet, no. You already know, so don't even ask, but you're not going to the coffee shop to 'study.' Not on a school night."

"Tolliver, God!" Sarah heaved her full knapsack off the floor and slung the strap over her shoulder. "Have you ever had fun once in your whole life?"

"I've been busy raising you." Tolliver tried to stop Sarah, to ruffle her hair the way he'd done when they were both still kids. Before he'd been named the man who had to raise her and do right by her when their parents passed. "It's a full-time job, and with this place to keep afloat, too? No time to play around. I still know how to have fun, though, and I enjoy myself. I make do."

Sarah let Tolliver block her path. "It's not fair," she said. "You should have your own life."

"When did this become about me? Besides, I have a life. Plenty of it." He waved around at the interior of Old Curiosity, the jumbled mix of old scarred wood and light corkboard, worn books in six dozen cases arranged in a labyrinth, and walls full of glassed-in treasures. Flyers papering the walls and bizarrely cubist art done by local college students. "This is my life."

"Tolliver," Sarah started, shaking her head.

"It's enough life for me." He tugged her ear. "Go home, get your homework started. Finish by seven and you get an hour of phone time."

"What about dinner?"

"If you can wait until eight, I'll cook. Anything you want."

Sarah brightened. "Macaroni and cheese with ketchup and sliced hot dogs?"

"And economy-sized antacids on standby, yes." Tolliver kissed the shining top of Sarah's head and gave her a gentle push. "Go. I have customers."

"Okay." Sarah walked away with a lighter gait to her step.

At the door, she paused and looked at Tolliver, her eyebrows drawn together.

"What?"

"Name one time."

"One time what?"

"One time you had fun in the past year," Sarah clarified.

Tolliver opened his mouth to reply. Nothing came to mind. He closed it.

Sarah made a *humph* noise and let the door close firmly behind her with a jingle of silver bells.

* * * * *

"She'll be okay, you know."

The customer stood at an angle to Tolliver, nearly as tall and broad in the shoulders as the oversized bookcase he'd stopped perusing. "Your sister. She's a good kid. She'll be fine."

"Thanks." Tolliver's overprotectiveness kicked in. No one was allowed to comment on his sister but him. "I think you should leave now."

"Whoa, wait." The customer held up his hands. "Sorry. I was out of line."

"Yeah, you were."

"I'm sorry," the customer repeated, glancing sideways, apologetically, at Tolliver. He raised one shoulder. "You don't need to worry. Sounds like she's had enough to deal with. I wouldn't be the one to hurt her again."

"Nope, you wouldn't be." Tolliver jerked his chin at the door. "Time to go."

"Wait." The customer reshelfed the slim, frayed blue volume he'd taken out to examine. "Don't kick me out. Not yet."

He turned from the waist to look directly at Tolliver. Tolliver saw him in full view for the first time. He was tall, lean, and corded as a basketball player. His ribbed crimson sleeveless shirt was stretched tight over a firm chest and tucked into faded blue jeans. Cotton strings trailed from the worn cuffs and from a hole near the knee.

Tolliver's wary anger died somewhere between intent and action. He scanned the length of the man, from sneakers to bed head, and couldn't figure out what was different about him that made him want to keep looking.

Neither did he get why a wave of embarrassment swept over him or why he glanced sideways at a mirrored cabinet at his darker hair, cut short so the curls wouldn't run wildly out of control, his jaw dusted with stubble and the horn-rimmed reading glasses he'd forgotten he was wearing the slightest bit askew. He was shorter than the customer by at least four inches and looked smaller in his dust-covered plain clothes. Too ordinary and too outlandish at the same time.

The customer approached, one hand extended. "Let's start again. I'm Noble."

Common sense told Tolliver not to take it, and instinct said otherwise.

He took Noble's hand for a shake. When Noble's dry, callused fingers grazed his, Tolliver flinched. Weirdest thing ever, but for a second, it'd seemed as if the warmth in Noble's hand filled Tolliver's body, heating his blood.

Then Noble let go, and the strangeness faded. Noble pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and stood with one hip cocked, studying Tolliver as Tolliver would study a first edition. Assessing him.

"What's your name?" Noble prompted, interrupting the strange silence.

"Tolliver Bennigan. Like it says on the front door over 'proprietor' and on the insert in every book."

"Growly." Noble's eyebrow quirked. "You really are every bit as cantankerous as they say you are."

That stung, though it wasn't the first time Tolliver had heard it. "They who?"

"People." Noble's grin reappeared. He stood his ground, studying Tolliver. "I'm not mentioning her name, because she's not who I'm talking about, but she was right, wasn't she? How long's it been since you had fun?"

Enough. "Out," Tolliver ordered, pointing at the door. "And stay out. Understand?"

"I'll be back," Noble said, calm as a lake on a day without breezes. "Soon. You'll let me in and want to see me again. You're here every day, all day. I see you when I walk past on my way to and from work, and you're never not here. Is this place all there is to your life?"

Uneasy prickles juddered down Tolliver's spine. "I'll call the cops if I need to. Don't think I won't."

"You don't have to. That's all I needed to say." Noble ambled past him, the strange feline grace imbuing his every movement.

He stopped at the door as Sarah had, and looked over his shoulder at Tolliver. "You should have some fun, you know. Take some time for yourself and figure out what you want out of life."

"What I want is what I do. I take care of my own," Tolliver replied, an odd sense of breathlessness threatening to break over him. He didn't like it. "Go."

Noble tipped him a nod. "Later."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Tolliver muttered under the jingling of the bells as the door shut.

Without consciously knowing what he was doing, Tolliver massaged the hand Noble had shaken. His palm still tingled and his skin had heated.

"Weird guy," he grumbled. The air still smelled of him, warm skin and faint, burned-cinnamon cologne. Made the walls close in a little too tight and his throat thicken.

Maybe it wouldn't hurt him to call an early night for once. Go ahead and get out of here where he could breathe.

Not that it had anything to do with what Noble had said. Tolliver *wanted* to take some time to wind down. End of story, right?

Chapter Two

"You're early." Sarah looked up, pen trailing away from a sheet scribbled over with algorithms and question marks. She blew fallen strands of hair off her glasses. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Tolliver tried to shrug off the minor irritation her question sparked. She meant well. "The customers dried up and it's Wednesday. Foot traffic's nil. We wouldn't have had more than one or two more buyers tonight."

"That's never stopped you before." Sarah watched him warily, as if worried. "Seriously, is something wrong?"

"I'm fine. I promise." Tolliver dropped the heavy plastic bags he carried on the small Formica-topped island that separated their kitchenette from the den where Sarah had spread out her homework. He flexed his fingers, marked with grooves from the bag handles. "C'mon. Chow time."

"Oh my God. Is that takeout?" Sarah dropped her books and lunged for the island. "Chinese? No way."

"Yes, way." Tolliver stood back and let her have at it. "You still like the moo shu pork with the plum sauce and the pancake things, right?"

She wrinkled her nose. "No, that would be you. I like --" she dug a white box marked with bright red characters out and crowed -- "broccoli beef. You're awesome, Tolliver, thank you! Where are the forks?"

"Got egg rolls, too." Tolliver unfurled the greasy, translucent bag and waved them at her. He bit off the end of the smallest, nearly moaning at the taste of peppery cabbage and the spicy sharpness of the seasoned shreds of meat in its crispy, fried shell.

"Soy sauce?"

"Near the bottom, I think." Tolliver collected his share of the food and spread the wealth over the island. "Pour me a glass of tea, would you?"

"Mmf," Sarah said around a mouthful of broccoli smeared with duck sauce.

"God, that's gross." He tugged a lock of her hair. "Wait, I changed my mind. Hand me one of the Coronas at the back of the fridge."

Sarah stared at him. "Whoa. I said maybe you should have fun, not turn into a party animal. Should I hide the lamp shades before you start dancing around wearing them on your head?"

"Laugh it up, lady." Tolliver wrinkled his nose at her.

He watched Sarah in his peripheral vision as she struggled with the bottle opener, not lending a hand so she'd have the pleasure of doing it for herself. That'd been the hardest lesson for him to learn, for damn sure. Riding a bike, doing the laundry, figuring out the bus route to her new high school, and operating the till in Old Curiosity.

She'd done great. They'd done great. For the first time since he'd been eighteen years old and told he had a choice to either raise his baby sister or let the system have her, Tolliver had let himself breathe easy and think maybe they'd get through this.

Then there'd been Silver, and nine months later Ella, and they'd had to start all over again.

So maybe Tolliver was a little too overprotective. He'd learned he couldn't afford to slack.

His egg roll had gone cold while he watched Sarah, greasy and flat when he took a bite. He took the beer from Sarah and washed down the oily aftertaste.

She was okay these days. Did her work, tried her best, and she still tried to help him, too. Tolliver had to give her credit for that.

Ignorant of his musing, Sarah used chopsticks to poke a huge bite of sautéed beef and broccoli into her mouth and chewed blissfully. "Tell me for real," she insisted, her mouth still full. "What's the occasion? Did you make a big sale? Something had to have happened."

Tolliver flashed back to a memory of ribbed red cotton and trailing denim strings. Of large hands, and a deep rolling voice, and a white smile. He frowned and slathered plum sauce over a pancake. "Nothing major," he said. "I'm taking your advice. This is fun, isn't it?"

Sarah considered him thoughtfully. "Yeah, it is. It'd be more fun if you let me have a sip of your beer."

He pointed his fork at her. "That would be what I'd call 'not fun.'"

"I'm teasing you, dork." Tolliver wasn't any too sure that she hadn't been serious, trying to test him, but she seemed to forget quickly enough and hummed happily around a mouthful of fried rice. "So what happened with that big guy who helped you find your pencil?"

"You saw that?" Tolliver's plum sauce dripped a purple slash on the counter. He swore under his breath and dug out a napkin to mop up with. "Nothing happened. Guy didn't find what he needed and left. End of story."

"But --"

"Leave it alone, Sarah."

"Grouch," she mumbled, stabbing the rice. "Did you like him?"

"Did I what?"

"You know." She shrugged, pretending to be intent on her food. "I thought maybe he asked you out or something."

Tolliver's swallow of beer almost went down the wrong way. "*What?*"

"Jeez, don't act like I just told you the neighbors have Ebola." Sarah scowled. "It's been years since you went out on a date. At least I don't remember when you last did. Actually, I can't remember, period." She paused. "Tolliver, no way."

Heat prickled under the skin of Tolliver's cheeks. "Eat your dinner."

"You haven't been on a date since you were eighteen? Tolliver, God, that's not --" Sarah tried to tuck a stubborn strand of hair behind her ear. "Why? You could have left me with a sitter."

There was never a right time to tell your kid sister that you thought, for all intents and purposes, that for all the desire you'd ever felt for anyone, you might as well be asexual. Tolliver knew it wasn't normal for a guy in his early twenties not to have had at least a few sexual encounters, but...he'd been a geek first, and then he'd been busy, and in recent years, no one had ever caught his eye long enough or given him the eye back.

He was used to it. Didn't mean he wanted to explain himself.

Red shirt and long runner's legs. Sturdy muscles in his bare arms.

Tolliver shook himself out of his reverie before Sarah could notice. "I've got the store and I've got you," he said, overly careless. "And I'm not in any rush to play the field. It'll still be there later." He stole her broccoli beef in self-defense.

"Hey!"

"You snooze, you lose," he informed her, and went for the ultimate distraction, rustling the smallest of the plastic bags. "Eat all your veggies, sis, and there's dessert. Cheesecake from Joey's."

Sarah lit up, blue eyes glowing and hands waving. "Strawberry caramel?" She flew at Tolliver and hugged him around the waist. "You're the best!"

While she had him there, she mumbled, "I just want you to be happy."

She snagged the cheesecake bag and dug in. Good thing she did. Without a clue what to say, Tolliver forked in a vast bite of moo shu pork and filled his mouth as an excuse to stay quiet.

Visions of red cotton and white smiles filled his head. He couldn't get rid of them, and he didn't know why.

His hand still tingled when he remembered the touch of Noble's rough fingertips.

* * * * *

Awake at five a.m., thirty minutes before the alarm clock would sound, Tolliver stared at the ceiling. His eyes were dry, a sensation of cracker crumbs behind his eyelids, and his limbs ached from tossing and turning and falling asleep in tangled positions.

He'd been hard since three a.m. maybe, when he'd woken from a dream so vivid he could have tasted it, touched it, smelled it. He'd felt it, one of those bizarre dreams where sensations were realer than life.

A man in a red ribbed shirt had knelt between Tolliver's legs, holding his thighs apart with his large hands. He rubbed his thumbs in small circles over the tops of Tolliver's legs, which soothed him. "Shh. It's okay. You'll love this, I promise."

He'd threaded his fingers through the man's leonine hair and tugged, the strands rough and silky-soft at the same time. "*Noble*."

When he'd said the name in his dream, Tolliver had jerked out of sleep and sat halfway upright with a sharp gasp, twisted and bound by his blankets and sheets. The night outside was still, almost no sounds of traffic going by. Sarah had left her music playing, something quiet by a whiskey-voiced balladeer humming through the air. His cock had jerked, swollen tight and thick, flush against his hip.

Two hours later, he hadn't been able to sleep again -- hadn't really wanted to -- and his hard-on wasn't going anywhere.

Though he almost resented it -- no, no "almost" about it -- Tolliver took himself in hand and hissed through his teeth at the rushing hungry heat.

He tried to concentrate on insubstantial memories of glossy centerfolds and ripe, full breasts, but all he saw in his mind's eye as he beat off, cock slipping through his fist, was Noble's smile and the strength in his hands, the easy loping stride of his walk, and his way of looking at a man as if he saw through the skin and down to who they really were.

Tolliver spat on his hand and stroked harder. His toes curled. Sweat beaded on his skin. Jesus, when had it ever...never like this, not that he could remember. Tension throbbing in his clenching muscles and drops of precum dripping from his cockhead, one hand fisted in the sheets and one gliding friction-burn fast up and down his shaft.

He squeezed his eyes shut, his mouth open, panting as quietly as he could. *What's wrong with me?* he wondered, rubbing his palm over his cockhead and palming his balls, drawn up so tight to his body. He needed to come. *Had* to, but couldn't...not quite there... God, it hurt.

“Let it come,” he imagined Noble whispering, so vividly that Tolliver turned around, startled, thinking the man was actually in the room with him.

“Noble?” he whispered, the sound of his voice harsh in the dim predawn light.

“I told you you’d like it,” he imagined Noble saying. He closed his eyes again and pictured the breadth of Noble’s callused palm sweeping up the length of his bare chest. “Let it happen, Tolliver. It’s okay. Let it come.”

Tolliver stuffed his fist in his mouth and bit down to stifle his yell as he came, jizz rolling down his fist and splashing his thighs. His hips lifted, spasming, needing more than he could give.

He was breathing as hard as if he’d run a race when his vision finally cleared and let him blink, dazed, into the silent, empty night. Looking at the clock, he saw it was one minute shy of six a.m., time to get up. Though he should have been exhausted, small aftershocks charged his blood and made him want to run to work off this overflow of energy.

Lightheaded from lack of oxygen, Tolliver rested his hand on his chest and felt his heart thundering in time with the pulse in his ears.

What’s happening to me?

The alarm clock shrilled, jolting him abruptly out of his foggy confusion. He slapped it silent, kicked free of the sheets, and used a corner to wipe the spunk off. His head buzzed as if filled with a thousand angry bees.

Noble had no right to turn his head upside down and inside out like this. No right at all. Tolliver wasn’t even into guys. He shouldn’t have been able to.

But he had, hadn’t he? Come harder than he could ever remember, even when he’d first discovered what his dick was for and how to work it.

He’d dreamed about Noble, Noble working him up, and he’d gotten off on it.

Tolliver shook his head like a terrier, determinedly trying -- and failing -- to shunt the dream aside.

Fine. Fuck it. He’d take the first shower. Cold water would clear his mind, and he could move on. Dreams had nothing to do with the real world. He knew better.

The sooner he got back to the store, and to his everyday life, he could forget about all of this, and the happier he’d be.

Chapter Three

Tolliver found himself in a softer mood at work that day, his movements slower and his focus on the books slipping. He could still feel Noble's dry, firm hands skimming over his legs and the moist heat of Noble's breath over his cock, half-hard as it'd been all morning. He moved carefully. Any kind of friction and he'd stiffen fully, and he couldn't do anything about it behind the register.

When he had to adjust himself, he gritted his teeth. Jeez, had it even been like this when he was sixteen? Not that he could remember.

When the silver bells jingled over the door and Noble ducked through, almost too tall to make it under the frame without ducking, Tolliver wasn't surprised. Think of the devil all day long and he'd appear, right?

A taut pressure eased in Tolliver's chest, letting him breathe freely. It wasn't *right*. He bit his lip to keep from smiling when Noble waved to him.

He *was* surprised when Noble only waved casually, grinned, and headed back toward the glass cases that held Old Curiosity's collection of rarities and miscellany.

Tolliver glowered at the till, counting cash until he realized he was pissed off, and that was the last he could cope with. He *didn't* care.

Idiot, he told himself darkly. Keep it separate. *Dreams are just dreams, no matter how...crazy. This Noble guy barely knows you from Adam. Let it go.*

A small whispering voice inside Tolliver's mind told him: *you don't want to.*

Annoyed, Tolliver dusted off his hands and glanced up as the bells jingled again. A short stack of pale green cardboard bakery boxes entered first, the younger guy who carried them nodding up in greeting. His loose blond hair had already mostly escaped its queue, pale curls wisping around his boyish face.

“Joey,” Tolliver said, waving a little more warmly than usual, glad to see a familiar face. “I keep telling you I’m not opening a coffee bar. Why waste the leftover cookies on us?”

Joey shrugged as he put the boxes down. “You like them,” he said, his normally quiet voice barely audible, though rough and gravelly as if he smoked a pack a day and chased them with whiskey. God’s gift to him, since as far as Tolliver knew, Joey was only twenty-three. He’d started his business on his own, and if he had any family, Joey never mentioned them. A self-made man; Tolliver liked that about him.

“I do, but you don’t get any money out of my eating your cookies.” Tolliver took a box from Joey and peeked inside. Snickerdoodles, still warm. Leftovers, he’d said? Not likely.

“Not from *you*, but when your customers sample, they come buy from me. My customers see your business cards and walk over to browse while they’re snacking. Benefits both our businesses. Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because that’s crap. You don’t need me.” Joey did fine on his own. Better than fine. Tolliver knew from firsthand taste experience that Joey had a light hand with rich, buttery pastry and a wizardlike way with honey and brown sugar. The things he could do with apples would make America weep.

“So indulge me.” Joey ducked his head.

Tolliver mentally shrugged his shoulders even as he bit into a cookie, the sweetness melting on his tongue. “Your cash loss, my gain.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Joey brushed off his hands and clapped them on his legs. Didn’t help. Joey carried a fine layer of flour around with him everywhere he went, every hour of the day, along with the scents of vanilla and almond extract.

“You smell as pretty as a girl,” Tolliver teased.

“Is that a complaint?” Flecks of pink darkened Joey’s cheeks. “Listen, Tolliver, I was thinking...”

Tolliver bit into a butterscotch-chip cookie. “Mmf?” He’d caught sight of an open book dropped by some careless customer on the counter. God, he hated that. *Reshelve the freaking things, people*. Had they broken the spine?

“Tolliver?” Joey’s question dragged him back. He winced.

“Sorry, I just...” Tolliver jerked his thumb at the book. “It’s like someone stepping on your kid’s foot.”

Joey nodded, aiming his smile at his knitted-together hands. “I was thinking.”

“So you said.” Tolliver checked the book for damage. Someone had dog-eared a page, the son of a... “Is something wrong?”

“No! No, I --”

“Found the tarot deck I was looking for yesterday.” Noble slid up to fill the empty space behind Joey, as natural and graceful as if he belonged in the shop, as if he had always been there and Tolliver just hadn’t noticed him before now. He wore a blue shirt today, cerulean, still sleeveless and molded to him, and lighter-faded jeans with one more hole at the thigh. Just by being there, he stole the air from the room, drowned out the fragrant smells of the baked goods, and was all Tolliver could see.

Tolliver swallowed down a lump in his throat and stared at Noble, searching for answers in his leonine eyes.

Joey didn’t seem to have noticed. He rubbed the back of his neck and raised one shoulder, his grin rueful. “Don’t worry about it. Wasn’t a big deal. I’ll be back tomorrow, same time. Maybe I could bring some coffee, too.”

“Yeah,” Tolliver said, his mouth dry as powder. “Coffee would be terrific.”

“Okay.” Joey lingered for a moment, mouth slightly open. He laughed under his breath and turned to go. “Do you need anything else?”

“What? Uh, no. I think I’m good.”

Joey closed his mouth, turned down slightly at the corners. “Okay. See you tomorrow.”

Tolliver didn’t really see him leave, though he heard the bells jangle.

“Tarot,” Noble said, propping himself on one forearm. He studied Tolliver as intently as ever, and Tolliver had a feeling there was something in the undercurrent of Noble’s tone that went right over his head when Noble added, “I need the case unlocked. Do you have a key?”

“Yeah, sure.” Tolliver backed up a step. He reached for the chain of keys he wore on his belt, the rough-edged coolness slipping through his fingers. “Which case?”

“Your own store, and you don’t know where the Sharice Donough is kept?”

Tolliver’s jaw tightened before he saw the dark sparkle in Noble’s eye. “Funny guy.”

“Not really.” Noble put one hand out, letting it hang in the air between them. “We got off on the wrong foot yesterday. How about we start again?”

Tolliver hesitated.

“I’m Noble,” Noble prompted. “And you are?”

“Tolliver Bennigan,” Tolliver replied. He made himself take Noble’s hand, Noble’s rough, dry palm pressed to his. His ribs felt too tightly compressed around his lungs and his groin ached. This was crazy. “The owner of Old Curiosity.”

“Much better.” Noble’s thumb traced briefly around the pulse in Tolliver’s wrist. Tolliver had only just registered it and the racing of his blood when Noble let go. “You’re young to own your own business, aren’t you?”

“It was my mother’s. My grandmother’s before her.”

“Your family’s matrilineal?”

Tolliver nodded, swaying in the rush of relief at finding familiar ground. He'd told this story times beyond numbering. "Things go from mother to daughter. Mom passed a few years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He hated pity. "Sarah wasn't even in middle school yet, so I filled in. I only own the store until Sarah's twenty-one."

Noble crossed both his arms on the counter and leaned, propping himself up. He kept his gaze fixed on Tolliver's face, the odd sensation that he was looking past the body into deeper places heavier than ever.

"Why do you keep doing that?" Tolliver asked.

"Doing what?" The dark sparkle in Noble's eye deepened to midnight black. Stars on a cloudless night in the city.

Tolliver fidgeted. "Staring at me like I'm something you don't have a name for. Like you're trying to figure out what makes me tick."

"I am."

Oh. Tolliver rubbed his wrist where Noble had touched him more intimately during the handshake. What was a guy supposed to say to something like that?

"You were telling me about your family," Noble prompted. "Hey. It's okay, I don't bite." He drew an X over his chest. "Do you trust me? You can, you know."

Tolliver drew up short. The exact words of his dream. Same tone, same dark promise, same layers of meaning. He started to ask --

And stopped. Too crazy. A dose of crazy might make Noble go away, but...but....

"So you're a sort of regent?" Noble asked, tipping his head to one side. "And Sarah's the heiress to the throne?"

"If she decides she wants the place when she's of age, yeah." Tolliver made himself breathe regularly, in slowly and out more slowly still. He was acutely aware of the rigid fullness of his cock aching behind his zipper, its metal teeth cutting in. No way could he try to ease the pressure without Noble noticing. He'd grit his teeth and bear it.

"What if she doesn't? It's yours?"

"She'd sign the deeds over to me, and yeah, it'd be mine."

"How's that make you feel?" Noble studied him as if the answer actually mattered. "You love this place. It's in your veins. I see that as clear as anything."

Tolliver's forehead furrowed. Noble added a weird emphasis to the word *see*, as if it should have been capitalized. Like it was printed on a page with a drop cap or an illuminated decoration.

"Yes, I'm strange. I'm used to me. You'll get used to me." Noble caught Tolliver's hand when Tolliver wasn't ready for it and held it fast. He stroked the back, down the soft

webbing between forefinger and thumb. “Why are you ready to let this place go when it’s what you live for?”

Tolliver tried to take his hand back. Didn’t work. Noble had a grip like steel. “Because it’s not mine. I’m just minding the store.”

“Hmm.” Noble pressed his thumb to Noble’s palm. “Is the store all you live for?”

“I take care of Sarah.”

“Sarah and the store are bound up together.”

Tolliver bristled. “That’s not how it is.”

Noble slid his hand farther up and loosely clasped Tolliver’s wrist. “My name’s Noble Ryan.”

“We covered that part before.”

“I know. It’s a prelude. You shared, and I can see you’re curious...”

There it was again. *See*.

“...about me. What can I tell you?”

“Who *are* you?” Tolliver asked, testing Noble’s hold on him. Seemed loose, but when he tried to slip away, it tightened and pulled him back. “What do you want from me?”

Noble laughed. It changed his face when he didn’t have any secret agenda going on in his head.

Tolliver wondered if he was too suspicious of Noble. Then he decided he probably wasn’t wary *enough*. Noble did strange things to his head just by breathing the same air.

“Who am I? That’s a good question.” Noble finally let go of Tolliver’s hand, but otherwise stood his ground. “I can tell you things, if you want. For starters, my middle name’s Eustace.”

“Ouch.” Tolliver wrinkled his nose.

“Tell me about it. I used to catch hell for that in school.”

Tolliver deliberately gave Noble a once-over. “A guy your size? I can’t see you having much trouble for long.”

“It was what it was. What else? I’ve traveled more than my share,” Noble went on. “Mostly for business. India, China, Spain, Russia, France... I’d like to go back someday to do more than look out a hotel window while I work. To really taste the life.”

Tolliver nodded, understanding what Noble meant.

“I drove cross-country and ended up in Louisiana, before Katrina. Stayed there for a while afterwards to help clean up. The food was and is unbelievable. Shrimp étouffée and gumbo and coffee thick enough to stand the spoon in. Chicory. Spices that’d catch your tongue on fire. Then I ended up going to Iceland for a couple of months next to lend a friend a hand. Go figure.”

“Don’t tell me you like lutefisk.”

"God, no. No one likes lutefisk. It's a rite of passage. Keep a mouthful down and you're respected for having balls big enough to drag the ground when you walk." His grin tipped. "Or they know you're woman enough to keep any man in his place."

"Sounds fair." Man, this was a dumb conversation. Still, Tolliver's tongue was loosened, and he couldn't seem to stop. "If you went to all those places, why aren't you still out there seeing the world?"

Noble's gaze shifted minutely away. "I move on," he said. "It's what I do."

Ah. So he wouldn't be here long. Tolliver deliberately pushed aside the sharp sinking disappointment. He *didn't* care, and frankly, the sooner Noble went on his way, the sooner his heart would calm down.

"Small-town America, though," Noble mused. "There's something to it. Places like this, for one. No one's bought you out to smack down a mega-mart. The guy next door hasn't been replaced by Otis Spunkmeyer. Personality. I like the unusual. And then sometimes I like knowing the names of people I pass by on the street. I can have both here."

"Do you stalk these other people you know the same way you haunt me?" Tolliver hadn't meant to say that.

The words were out, and no taking them back. Noble didn't seem to mind. "Not really. I saw you a while back --"

Saw.

"-- and I saw something in you I wanted to find out more about."

Saw. Tolliver stiffened his limbs against a shiver.

"Does that bother you?"

Yes.

"I don't know," Tolliver said, the warmth of Noble's body heating his skin. "You're bizarre. The strangest guy I've ever known."

Noble laughed, no less warmly. Almost infectiously, tempting Tolliver to a returning grin. "I get that a lot." He reached for Tolliver's hand.

Almost -- *almost* -- without thinking, Tolliver took it and wrapped his fingers around Noble's. "What do you do now?" Tolliver asked, honestly wanting to know.

"Whatever I feel like turning my hand to. Mostly, I volunteer, and I try to give people a hand with what they need."

"What they need," Tolliver echoed. "Not what they want, or what they ask for?"

"The two aren't always mutually exclusive." Noble traced a vein up Tolliver's arm. Tolliver couldn't hold back the shiver this time. "You," Noble mused aloud. "I see so many things in you that you have no idea are there."

See. Tolliver rallied and tried to joke. "So I'm like, what? An onion?"

“You’ve heard that one, too? No. Onions have layers, sure. Lots to go around, but they don’t make a meal for anyone. You’re more like...hmm...Greek pastry. A thousand layers, with bitter almonds, cinnamon, and sweetness. Plain on the outside and so much more inside.”

“And you know all of that after meeting me less than a day ago. No, wait. You’ve been stalking me, right? Lots of time to learn.”

Noble didn’t deny either one or the other. He took Tolliver’s other arm and kneaded his upper arms, meeting him eye to eye. “I see that you’re more than what you think you are. I think you dream, only you don’t realize it. I see you’re not past changing, even if you believe different.”

Tolliver’s thoughts had snagged, beyond retrieval, on the word *dream*. “You don’t say.” He pulled away. Noble let him go. “What do you know about dreams?”

“I know that when they’re deferred, they shrivel. Langston Hughes.”

“I’ve read *A Raisin in the Sun*, thanks. We might have an early copy somewhere around here.”

“Don’t try and distract me. It doesn’t work.” Noble brushed hair out of his face, the thick coarse leonine locks falling back in place straightaway. “What did you dream about?”

Tolliver’s face fired blood hot and stinging red.

“Ah.” Noble sounded amused, yet the tenor of his voice deepened, rolling smooth and sultry as dark molasses. “You dreamed about me. Didn’t you?”

“I didn’t say that. God, you’re conceited.”

“I’m really not. Looking at you, I can see the truth. You did. What were we doing in your dream?”

Tolliver closed his mouth firmly, pressed his lips tight, and shook his head.

“I see.” Noble gently pushed Tolliver’s hands away from him. Until he did, Tolliver hadn’t realizing the position had shifted, him hanging on to Noble and not the other way around. “Dreams are mostly just dreams, Tolliver. They don’t mean anything unless you want them to.”

Tolliver caught his breath as Noble brushed the back of his fingers over Tolliver’s temple. “Sure you don’t want to tell me what your dreams were?”

“No.” Tolliver pushed on the counter to propel himself two steps away from Noble. He could feel the distance stretching like a rubber band, the taut extension demanding a return. “They were just dreams. Like you said.”

“I said ‘mostly.’ Sometimes they’re not. I think I see now. Dreams,” Noble said, tracing a pattern on the side of Tolliver’s head, “dreams are the brain’s way of dealing with everything you take in during the day, but you knew that.”

Tolliver stood still -- no, was unable to move -- only to watch as Noble trailed his hand down to rest over Tolliver's heart, then lower still, one inch at a time. "What are you doing?"

"I think you know," Noble murmured, toying with the lowest button on Tolliver's thin chambray shirt. "I think you knew last night, too."

"That's crazy talk."

"It's not." Noble thumbed Tolliver's belt buckle, his trailing fingers close enough to lend warmth, yet fractions away from resting on Tolliver's throbbing hard-on. There was no way he couldn't notice. "Stop trying to blind yourself. You're not fooling anyone."

"I think you should go," Tolliver said, his tongue parched almost too dry to manipulate and speak. "Please. Go."

"If that's what you really want." Noble molded his palm over the stiff bulge of Tolliver's cock.

With his head buzzing, Tolliver groaned and rocked forward, once, shocked at himself.

Not moving his hand, Noble leaned over the counter and brushed his lips, only for a half second, against Tolliver's. "I'll come back tomorrow. Tonight, do something for me. Think."

Tolliver half laughed. "Like I'd be able not to."

"If you really didn't want to, you'd be able to avoid it." Noble rubbed the heel of his hand against Tolliver's cock.

Tolliver bit his tongue to keep from crying out.

"Think about what I said tonight, and..." Noble withdrew, taking a small glossy box from his back pocket. No label, no logo. He tucked it into Tolliver's hip pocket. The warmth burned through the denim to heat Tolliver's skin, too close to his groin. "Save that," he said, caressing his oversensitive cock all too briefly, "for when you're alone with this."

"What is it?" Tolliver asked, suspicious again. Noble got under his skin deeper and deeper every time, and it was like drowning in opium fields. He made it harder to want to climb out. Tolliver put his hand in his pocket, bumping his cock and Noble's fingers. His toes curled inside his shoes.

"You'll find out. You won't like it at first, but give it a chance. Do your thinking with this in hand. Then you might see the truth and see what's really going on inside your head." Noble stepped back, slinky and graceful as ever, this time more of a prowling tiger in his shape and form. "Don't run from the truth. It'll only come after you again. You'll dream of what you should face when you wake. Remember that."

Tolliver moistened his lips. "Go."

Noble inclined his head. "Okay. But I'll see you tomorrow." He turned, presenting Tolliver with the view of his shoulders, broad and strong, and the sinuous curve of his back, long, clean lines leading to a firm ass and his long, long legs. Loose strings trailed the floor from his frayed-off cuffs.

He stopped in the doorway to grin back at Tolliver. “And you’ll see me, too. Excuse me, Sarah. How have you been?”

Noble stepped aside to hold the door open for Sarah, her arms weighed down with books that wouldn’t fit in her knapsack. He tugged his forelock.

“Good, thanks.” Sarah stopped, eyes going impossibly wide and a grin of pure gleeful delight lighting her up.

Sometimes, Tolliver knew he was slow on the uptake. Pieces of a puzzle, some of them at least, fell into place. “Sarah, come here.”

“In a sec, sure. I --”

“*Now.*”

Behind her, Noble held a finger to his lips and winked, and then he was gone.

Chapter Four

Sarah had started picking through one of Joey's bakery boxes by the time Tolliver reached her. He'd brought her favorite, puff pastry shells with sliced lemon-infused apples, spiced honey syrup, and powdered sugar.

He watched her in silence as she concocted the treat, gathering his thoughts and shaping them in simple words.

In the end, it came down to, "You set us up, didn't you?"

Sarah went beet red and ducked her head, hiding behind the glossy curtain of her dark hair.

"Not going to deny it, huh?"

Sarah mumbled unintelligibly, then cleared her throat. "How'd you know?"

"All that talk about having fun, and then Noble just happens along?" Tolliver shrugged. "I connected the dots. Hey." Tolliver lifted her chin and tried to meet her eyes. "Sarah, I'm not mad."

"Yes, you are," she mumbled. She jerked away and stuffed the tiny layered pastry into her mouth.

"Okay, maybe I am, a little," Tolliver allowed. "I mostly just want to know why." He hooked a stool from behind the counter, dragged it to him with his foot, and sat. "What did you think was going to happen?"

"I don't know," she muttered, wiping crumbs off her chin. "Maybe that you'd find someone you liked and spend some time with them. Do something besides work and watch me and sleep."

"Sarah, not this again." Tolliver rubbed the bridge of his nose. "How many times do I have to tell you? I'm fine. I like my life. I'm not lonely, or --"

"That's a lie." Sarah raised her head to narrow her eyes at him. Color, not that of shame, rose in her face. Anger. "If you're not lonely, why were you looking at Noble like he was the last bar of chocolate on Earth?"

"What? I wasn't," Tolliver protested.

"Yes, you were. But I bet you *didn't* notice. Jeez, Tolliver, what do you think he looked at you like? He was two inches from kissing you." Sarah tossed her hair over her shoulder, looking abruptly far more grown-up than fifteen years.

He was? A low twist of heat roiled in Tolliver's stomach. People didn't kiss unless they cared, and that...

"That's not the point," he said when he'd recovered. "You can't spy on me, and you can't play games like that, Sarah. I'm not a kid. If and when I want something, I'll go out and find it on my own."

"No, you won't." Sarah snagged a slice of sugarcoated apple and savagely snapped off the end. "Because you never leave home. You don't see anything that isn't part of this shop. That's why he had to come to you."

"Where did you meet him, Sarah?"

"You *are* mad."

"Fine, okay. I am. This isn't *The Parent Trap*, and it's not cute. Spill."

Sarah's lower lip jutted out. "I met him at the street fair last month, at the arts and crafts show. He read my fortune, and he was so nice and funny that I just *knew* he was the one for you. I can't explain it." She caught her own stool and sat, facing Tolliver, her hands moving animatedly as she talked. "Besides, I got to thinking that afternoon how it wasn't *fair* for me to have the day off, walking around in the sunshine and trying these things, when you were in here like you always are."

"I didn't mind staying."

"Tolliver!" She balled up one small fist and punched his arm. "Noble and I started talking, and he's been *everywhere*. He's tried everything new he can, and you've barely ever left town. I thought he'd be good for you."

Ah, jeez. Tolliver whoofed out a long breath and kneaded the back of his neck. "I don't want pity, and I don't need help."

Sarah glared at him.

"Don't give me that look. Something else, sis." Tolliver leaned forward so he could emphasize this next. "I don't even like men. Why would you choose a man?"

"I didn't pick him because he's a guy; I picked him because he's different. That's the whole point. You've never tried anything new, so how would you know what you like and what you don't?" She spread her hands in frustration.

"I'm not attracted to men," Tolliver reiterated. "Maybe I haven't ever had luck with any woman, that's true."

Never wanted to try to find out, either, his brain reminded him. *What if that means more than what you want to think it does?*

"I'm not attracted to Noble."

Sarah snorted indelicately and stood up, the legs of her stool skittering back. "If you don't like men, then why did you start breathing fast when I told you Noble wanted to kiss you?"

Tolliver stared at her, lost for words.

"Thought so." Sarah caught up her knapsack and threw the strap over one slim shoulder. "See you at home. I'm cooking. Taco night."

"Don't make too much. I don't think I'll be in before dark."

Sarah shook her head, hair slipping free and sliding forward. "Whatever. Just think about it, would you? Think about Noble. Maybe you'll see how wrong you are, but maybe not. You're really stupid sometimes, Tolliver."

Tolliver watched her go, almost unconsciously touching the bulk of the box in his pocket. "I'm not stupid," he said under his breath. "I *like* knowing what to expect."

Seemed like all he could do in the past twenty-four hours was expect the unexpected, though, huh?

He stroked the box with the tip of his finger. He'd wait until he was alone before he opened it. Whatever was inside, whatever Noble had chosen to give him, he knew for sure he didn't want Sarah to see.

Come to that, Tolliver wasn't so sure he wanted to see, himself.

But he'd still open the box and find out. He knew it as surely as the moon would rise.

* * * * *

Only he didn't. In the apartment he and Sarah shared, Tolliver was almost too tired to find his way to bed. Moving silently, his feet bare, Tolliver was, on top of his exhaustion, driven half-mad by things that wouldn't click in his head or even coalesce into more than a swirling miasma of red ribbed cotton, denim, white teeth, catlike eyes, and cerulean blue.

He skinned out of his jeans and dropped them on the floor. The box, and whatever it held, made a muted *thunk* when they landed.

Tolliver hesitated, lower lip caught between his teeth. His hand hovered over the lump in his discarded pocket.

One look. What could one look hurt? It probably wasn't important, or it'd be something that made no sense, and that, Tolliver decided, he didn't need more of in one day.

He left the jeans and the box where they lay and crawled into bed, between the cool sheets, too wiped out to bother thinking about showering.

A huge yawn split his face, his jaw creaking. Tucking one hand behind his head, Tolliver closed his eyes and let the tension drain from his aching limbs.

A local yoga instructor, who used to come by almost every day and talk earnestly to him, twining her hair around one finger and speaking breathlessly, had once tipped him off on the way to relax. Imagine your body going limp, one inch at a time. Toes, relax. Legs, relax. Chest, relax. Inhale, exhale, and let it all go.

Tolliver wondered why she'd stopped coming around. Maybe it had something to do with her thirtieth birthday. He hadn't been able to make it to the party when she'd asked, and then he never saw her again.

People were strange. And they wondered why he liked books better.

He wiggled his toes and started the process, breathing in and out.

But it didn't work. His body followed the mandates of his brain, still active as a brushfire, and wouldn't settle. Tolliver set his jaw and stubbornly tried again. And again.

When the clock ticked to tell him an hour had gone past, he gave up. Throwing his arm over his eyes, he growled and dealt the sheets a kick.

What did they even mean, "think" about it? he wondered mutinously. Like he'd be able to stop. Why did they have to get involved? He'd been fine before now. Great, even.

So maybe nothing ever happened anymore that he didn't plan on. So what? Routines were safe. No surprises.

Until there was Noble.

Tolliver grunted, surprised, though he figured immediately that he shouldn't have been when his body reacted to the visual memory of Noble, sleeveless shirt stretched over the hard muscles of his chest and the flex of his hips as he leaned on the Old Curiosity counter.

He started to reach for his waking cock and stopped halfway there as if he'd been burned. No way was he doing this again.

His fingers drifted without permission while he argued with himself inside his head. They brushed his cock and electric sparks had sizzled through him before Tolliver knew what he was doing, and then he couldn't stop. He wrapped his hand securely around his fully rigid cock and pumped, arching into his grasp.

He imagined, for a second, Noble's hand instead of his. Noble's weight atop him, pinning him down, not letting him move as he hadn't let him back off at the store.

Precum bubbled from his cockhead. Tolliver stuffed his fist in his mouth and bit, squeezing his eyes shut.

God, he could almost feel the heat of Noble's skin. Smell him, soap and slightly musky scent and the last traces of shampoo. He could *feel* Noble's long legs tangling with his own.

If he let himself, and he tried not to, Tolliver could imagine the slick length of Noble's cock stroking next to his.

He bit his knuckles hard enough to draw blood, but couldn't stop.

Oh, God. He wanted... and he never had before...

Tolliver groaned, low and angry, and flipped over, thrusting into the tunnel of his hand and humping the mattress. The fire was building in him, too hot, out of control, and yet he still wanted more.

He caught his breath and held it, lungs burning. The air seeped out a sip at a time while he fought with himself and then, his face burning, traced the seam of his ass.

Couldn't do this. Shouldn't.

Tolliver slid one finger between his cheeks and brushed his entrance. The phantom pressure of teeth on his shoulder accompanied the touch and came with the purring rumble of Noble's voice, and Noble's breath feathering over his temple.

"Dreams are what we don't want to admit to when we're awake," he said. *"I'm here."*

Tolliver sucked in a shocked breath and drove into his fist. He came hard, heavy spurts soaking his sheets.

Before he'd stopped coming, he'd raised himself on his arms, head hanging low. "No," he muttered, and wiped sweat out of his eyes. "This is not who I am. I don't need anyone. I don't need him."

He kicked away the mess he'd made of his bedding, shed his wet boxer shorts, and crept as silently as he could to the shower to wash off this mess.

Didn't change anything once he'd gotten there and found his place under the spray. With the shower water running cold, Tolliver pressed his forehead to the tiles and closed his eyes.

So I thought about you, Noble, and what you said. You know what? You're still fucking with my head, and I don't want you there mixing everything up because if I lose control, then I lose everything I traded my life for, and I won't let you do that to me. I won't.

Or is that what you wanted all along?

No. Screw this.

Deliberately and slowly, Tolliver stood beneath the spray. Its needlelike droplets pelted his skin, turning him red beneath the skin of soapsuds he scrubbed in and let wash away. He washed his hair, though it waved into a nightmarish mess if he slept on it damp, and between his toes, and tilted his face to the water to let it cascade over his face.

He didn't get out until the water ran cold and the bathroom was nearly chokingly full of steam. He looked in the fogged-over mirror and couldn't really see himself.

Somehow, that made him feel better.

Dirty clothes stuffed in the overstuffed hamper and a towel tied around his waist in case Sarah woke up, Tolliver crept mostly naked back to bed.

Even tousled and rumpled, the covers looked inviting, and his pillows were fat and full, beckoning him to lay his head to rest. His thoughts were blessedly empty, lulled into white noise from his deliberate drifting away in the shower.

Once Tolliver's door was closed, he untied the towel and laid it to dry over the back of a chair. The night had grown darker, the town lights all doused for the night, and with the minuscule glow of the streetlights, he could barely see where he was going. Though he knew his room well enough to navigate blindfolded, he found himself too out of it to remember or place his feet on the right path.

His toes encountered the crumpled, still body-warm coarseness of his discarded jeans, and bumped the box still in his pocket.

Tolliver stopped, breathing quickening. He wanted to know what Noble had given him. God, did he want to know.

No. You're not getting the better of me.

He stepped over his jeans with an effort of will and slid into bed, avoiding the wet spot even if it did mean he had to sleep nearly hanging off the side. With his face pressed into the softness of the pillows, he knotted his fists beneath them and fell asleep between one breath and the next.

Chapter Five

The next morning, when digging in his pocket for the keys to Old Curiosity, Tolliver's fingers brushed a familiar sharp edge. He drew back as if burned, baffled. How? The box had been in his other jeans.

He struggled to remember through his usual morning fog. With no shower to wake him up, he'd been more dazed than usual.

He'd found his way to the breakfast table in old track shorts and a muscle shirt, both of which Sarah thought were hysterical. "Chicken legs, chicken legs," she'd mocked, holding the box of Crispy Rice over his head.

"Ha, ha," Tolliver had grumbled, snaffling it away from her. "Get ready f'r school."

"Already am." Sarah'd nudged her full knapsack at her side. Blinking blearily at her, Tolliver had seen she'd dressed in clean clothes and brushed her hair, the dark smoothness shining. Her glasses sat a quarter of the way down her nose so she could look at him over the tops, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "And you just woke up, which means *you're* the one who's going to be late."

Tolliver blinked at the clock, the number sinking in. He hurled himself out of his chair and pelted to his bedroom, Sarah's laughter echoing after him. "It's not funny!" he yelled back, grabbing the first clothes he could find.

Ah. So that was how.

Noble struck again, huh? Tolliver gripped the box, tempted to just pull it out, throw it away, and be done with the whole mess.

Somehow, he couldn't. He made a disgusted noise and fished out his keys instead, shoving one into the front door lock with more vicious emphasis than was necessary.

He stood still and let the first wash of book smell and old leather roll over him. Better.

As he shut the door behind him and flipped over the Open/Closed sign, he found himself looking over his shoulder. He didn't *know* Noble would be coming by again today, not.

But he thought he could make a good guess, and if he were to put money on it, he'd come away richer.

The only question was *when* he'd come.

No, two questions. *When?* and *What would he do next?*

A ripple of something that wasn't fear shuddered beneath Tolliver's skin. He swallowed hard and shook it off.

* * * * *

Noble arrived around ten a.m., idling through the door as if he owned the place, calm mien and confidence clinging mantlelike to his shoulders.

Tolliver grunted at him, trying to radiate stay-away-from-me vibes.

"If you don't want me here, all you have to do is say so and mean it, and I'll leave." Noble stopped, hands in his pockets, and tipped slightly back on his heels.

Tolliver didn't have to look at Noble to know he was grinning. He snorted and kept on with what he'd been doing, assessing the value of a new shipment of Agatha Christie novels. Mostly junk with a few gems hidden among the yellowed, cracking paperbacks.

Noble chuckled and moved on. "I'll be in the back, browsing," he said as he withdrew. "I don't have anything else to do today, so I'll take my time."

Tolliver clamped his mouth shut. He could *feel* the teasing and the challenge in Noble's oh-so-innocent-sounding question, and he refused to dignify it with a response.

He had the uneasy feeling that by not replying he'd given Noble exactly what Noble wanted, though.

Minutes ticked past, almost sixty of them. A system of mirrors, Sarah's brainstorm -- she was great at geometry -- let Tolliver see every corner of Old Curiosity's interior, even among the labyrinthine bookshelves that let customers *think* they were snug and comfortably alone in a world of stories.

Every time he caught himself sneaking a look at Noble, Noble appeared perfectly at home. Whether he lounged in one of the overstuffed armchairs, one leg hooked over an arm and his chin propped in his hand while reading, or stood with his hands folded behind his back while perusing the shelves, he seemed as if he didn't have a care in the world.

The only time his Zen faltered was when he looked at the tarot. His fingers moved in the air, forming invisible layouts. His forehead furrowed and eyebrows knitted together, his lips pressed together in concentration.

Memorizing the subtleties that differentiated these decks from others? Probably. Cheapskate, then, wasn't he? That was like copying the puzzles from a sudoku book.

He took another look and caught sight of Noble leaning on the bookshelves that shaped the furthest back corner, his eyes closed and lips curled in a catlike expression of bliss.

No, not bliss. Lazy... afterglow. Riding the waves of something so good that it almost beat coming.

Tolliver snapped. He tossed his pricing pencil down, let it roll off the counter and clatter to the floor, ran his hands through his stubborn bed-head hair, and stalked back to where he'd last seen Noble, muttering under his breath all the way.

Noble cracked open his eyes a slit and his smile took on an extra degree of mischief when Tolliver rounded the final corner. "I wondered how long it'd take you."

"This is the third day in a row I'm asking you to leave. Three strikes and you're out."

Noble rolled one shoulder, the movement drawing Tolliver's gaze to the lazy flex of muscles outlined by his sleeveless green T-shirt, as green as foreign oceans. "You didn't open the box, did you?"

Tolliver's hand flew instinctively to his pocket and covered the angled edges of the box he was *still* carrying around with him, damn it. "What's it to you?"

Noble smiled and shook his head, thick slides of hair falling over his shoulders. Hair like his should have come across as feminine, and would have been perfect for a power chick who wore a lot of hemp. In Noble's case, it only made him look dangerous, like a true lion amusing itself by wearing a human disguise.

Tolliver kept his mouth shut and didn't answer the question. Tit for tat.

"I didn't think you would," Noble said. "Not on the first night. I didn't see it happening, but I saw the time was right to give it to you now."

See.

Tolliver broke.

"Who are you?" he demanded, desperate for an answer to the question Noble kept dodging. He gripped hard at the splintering wooden side of a teetering bookshelf. "What do you *want* from me, to keep you coming around day after day after day? I know Sarah tried to hook us up, and *I'm not interested.*"

"Yes, you are." Noble uncurled from his lazy pose and leaned forward, hands behind him on a shelf and his weight propped on his wrists. "I can see you are."

"And what does that even *mean*, you 'see' this, and you 'see' that?" Tolliver demanded, dangerously close to losing his cool.

Noble faltered, his easy stance tightening. Only for a second. Then, he half laughed and relaxed. "This'll piss you off, but...you'll see."

Tolliver tightened his fists, itching to slam one into Noble's jaw. He breathed through his nose while counting the cost of getting a reputation as a maverick who assaulted his customers and made himself turn away.

"Tolliver, wait!" Noble called after him.

Tolliver's feet stopped of their own accord. He turned from the waist to look at Noble, letting his disgust show through. "Why should I?"

"I said 'you'll see.'" Noble approached, seeming almost serpentine in the way he moved, as if his bones could shift to suit his mood and his pace.

Tolliver's breath caught.

Noble reached him, too close for comfort, bare inches separating their bodies. "I didn't say *when* you'd see," he murmured. "Tolliver? Look at me."

"Into your eyes?" Tolliver kept his focus on the round neck of Noble's sleeveless T-shirt. Such a deep, compelling amber. Almost mesmerizing... "Why? Look into your eyes and breathe deeply, count to ten, that kind of thing?"

"If I didn't see who you were on the inside..." Noble exhaled deeply. "I'd be tempted to get impatient."

"Oh, yeah? What do you 'see'? A soft, gooey center?"

"Nope." A dimple appeared in Noble's cheek when he smiled more broadly than ever before. "I see walls on top of walls on top of ramparts. You're tougher to break into than Fort Knox."

"Then don't."

"Too late. I've already started, and the thing about your walls, Tolliver, is that once the first chink's been cracked open, the rest are on their way to falling down."

Cold uneasiness knotted in Tolliver's throat. "You're a freak."

Noble nodded. "Always have been. Tolliver, all I want is to help you know who you are. I see that I'm the one to help you do that. You have to believe me."

"I don't *have* to believe anything."

"That's true. But if you don't believe in anything, then who are you? What are you? You want to believe, Tolliver."

"You see that, too?"

"I do. Tolliver." Noble rested two fingers beneath Tolliver's chin and coaxed him to look up. "Do you want the truth? All of it? I'm not a good man, Tolliver, but I'm an honest one."

"So you're a bad guy?"

"Depends on your point of view. Yes or no, Tolliver. Do you trust me to tell you the truth?"

Tolliver tried to moisten his lips. "Yes."

Noble studied him for a long moment, then inclined his head slightly. "You won't believe me when I do tell you, but fine. You'll hear all of it."

"When?"

"Sooner than you'll be ready to listen."

Tolliver scoffed.

"Today. Around noon. Close the store for lunch and come meet me at the café across the street. Tres Bean. You know the one."

"I worked there for a couple of months when I was eighteen," Tolliver said. "When I needed some extra money besides what this place brought in when I first started looking after Sarah by myself." He stopped, appalled at the flow of words, a piece of him that he'd had no idea he was going to let spill out. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"I did. You had a good time, even if you didn't stay long. Thought about working there part-time during college... only college didn't happen." Noble stroked Tolliver's face too gently. "You wish, deep down, it had."

"*Stop it.*"

"Still willing to meet me there?"

Tolliver wanted nothing less. "I'm not backing down."

"That wasn't a yes," Noble noted almost idly. "And it matters enough to you to have your questions answered that you'll come meet me?"

"*Yes.*"

"Why?"

"Because you won't leave me alone."

Noble curled his fingers, stroking -- almost scratching -- the underside of Tolliver's chin, as if Tolliver were a cat who'd come to him, seeking the caresses. "No. Tell me the real reason why."

Tolliver tried to hold it back, but he broke anyway. "Because I can't get you out of my head!" He caught Noble's wrist and meant to jerk Noble's hand away from his face. The moment he touched Noble's skin, warm and dry, he lost the strength. "And you do this to me. And I don't understand any of it."

Noble regarded him thoughtfully. "You do understand, Tolliver. You don't want to admit to yourself what it is, or that you do."

"Noble, *please*. Stop it, okay? Just stop."

"Can't. Tolliver..."

Tolliver knew it was coming the moment before it did. He could have stepped back, gotten out of the way, put his hand up between them and stopped Noble.

He didn't. Noble brushed his lips against Tolliver's, closed and nearly chaste. He breathed in through his nose; Tolliver did the same and wavered on his feet, Noble's scent intoxicating him and clouding his head.

His mouth fell open, not on purpose, but it didn't seem to matter. Noble cradled Tolliver's face, huge palms cupping most of his head. His warm tongue, tasting of thick, spicy coffee and air, slid slowly between Tolliver's lips and stroked Tolliver's tongue, tantalizing him.

Tolliver moaned from somewhere deep inside and grasped Noble's upper arms, digging in. He shook Noble, hard...but he didn't pull away.

Noble hummed, turning his head to the side to fit their mouths together differently and yeah, that was it. Tolliver's bones turned to water, his knees wobbling. Noble held him up, turning them and backing Tolliver into a corner.

When Noble stroked the roof of Tolliver's mouth with the tip of his tongue and drew away slowly, slowly, Tolliver stared at him, barely able to focus. "Why are you doing this to me?" he asked one more time, not enough air in his lungs to give the question any force.

"Because it's meant to be like this," Noble answered simply. He pressed another, barely-there kiss to Tolliver's lip. "See you at noon. I'll order for us. Triple-shot café au lait, no sugar. Your favorite, right?"

Tolliver stopped himself before he could ask how Noble knew. He wouldn't get an answer anyway. Licking his kiss-swollen lips, he nodded instead. His cock ached heavy, hard, and full, and when he looked down, he saw Noble had the same problem, his erection solidly thick behind the buttons of his fly.

Noble flicked him a rueful grimace. "If I said I was sorry about that, would you believe me?"

Tolliver laughed, surprising himself. "No."

"You're learning." Noble trailed his fingertips over Tolliver's cheek. "See you at noon."

And he was gone.

Chapter Six

Tolliver rubbed his mouth, testing its tenderness. Movement, faint and flickering, glimmered in the corner of his eye.

“Noble?” He turned on his heel, searching.

Sarah peeked around the corner of a bookshelf, eyes sparkling.

“Why aren’t you in school?” Tolliver demanded.

“Half day. You forgot, didn’t you? Doesn’t matter. That means I can mind the store while you’re at lunch.”

Ah...crap. “You saw that?”

Sarah giggled. She gave him a thumbs-up and disappeared, retreating the way she’d come.

Great. That’s just...great.

* * * * *

Parked at one of the back corner tables in Tres Bean, Noble looked up from a casual chef type magazine, his grin pleasantly surprised. “You made it.”

“Don’t act surprised. You knew I’d be here.” Tolliver slid into the seat opposite Noble and shifted his weight to get comfortable. The chairs weren’t designed to keep people lazing around all day nursing a single cup. Get in, get caffeinated, get out.

Used to be different with the woman who’d owned the place when he worked there. A real sweetheart of a lady who’d let him taste test new blends when he needed a morning pick-me-up and always watched him when he closed his eyes to better savor the taste. Great coffee.

She'd moved out of town somewhere along the way, and she hadn't said good-bye. Tolliver never had thought much about it before, but now he wondered why.

"Yeah, I knew." Noble flipped his magazine closed and pushed it away, the glossy pages sliding toward Tolliver. He leaned back and stretched his long, long legs. God, those legs went on for miles. The length of their span meant one foot ended up at rest at Tolliver's side.

He tried not to look down and mostly succeeded. Noble's feet were incredible. Elephantine.

"You ever heard what they say about men with big feet?" Noble asked, tone rippling with amusement.

Tolliver's face warmed. He muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

"I said, 'they have big mouths, too.'"

Noble laughed, throwing his head back and slapping his thigh.

Tolliver glared at him. "It wasn't that funny."

"No, no, it's not the joke. It's you being comfortable enough to smart off to me. It's a start in the right direction."

Tolliver muttered again, not intending to share this time, and opened the magazine. Some kind of DIY-gourmet extravaganza. The insets of steak and chicken and ribs made his stomach grumble, and reminded him. "Thought you said you were going to put in the orders."

"I was, and I did. Waited for you so they wouldn't get cold." Noble coiled his limbs in, stood gracefully, and loped away to the counter.

Tolliver watched. The tiny, blonde-ponytailed girl working the machines gazed at Noble with a total case of puppy love that almost made her glow.

Something tight and angry prickled beneath Tolliver's skin at the way she stared adoringly.

Noble tipped her with a five in the jar and turned back to Tolliver.

The prickle faded.

"More on the way," Noble informed him, placing Tolliver's coffee at his elbow. "How does potato and leek soup in bread bowls sound?"

Tolliver's mouth watered. "You even have to ask?"

"Unfortunately, I do. All they've got here is vegetable beef."

His heart sank. "For the second time today, not funny."

Noble's lips quirked. "I know. Sorry. I was trying to loosen you up."

"Still not funny."

“Sorry.” Noble brushed the back of his hand. “Hey. If you really want the good stuff, then I’ll take us out to a classy restaurant sometime. French onion soup with gruyere, sizzling flank steaks, Caesar salads and fresh baguettes and hand-churned garlic butter.”

Tolliver tried, heroically, not to moan. He hadn’t eaten anything that didn’t come out of a box or a can or a ready-to-cook kit or takeout for too long, all his money going toward Sarah’s college fund and upkeep on Old Curiosity.

“Maybe some lamb, instead,” Noble said thoughtfully, watching Tolliver for his reaction. “A Brazilian steakhouse, nine different kinds of meat all tender enough to melt in your mouth.”

“Would you stop it already and ask them to bring the damn soup?” Before Noble could turn, Tolliver grabbed him by the wrist. “No. Wait.”

Noble stilled, so patient that Tolliver’s temper, too easily roused these days, flared to life. No one had ever pushed his buttons like Noble, who found them with uncanny ease and then leaned on them hard.

“I don’t want the soup,” he said. “And I don’t want to get distracted.”

“You’re hungry,” Noble pointed out gently even as Tolliver’s stomach growled. “You treat yourself too rarely, and when you do, you give most of it to Sarah. You’re always a little hungry, even if you’re full.”

Though infuriated, Tolliver pushed that aside -- he was wrong, anyway, *wrong* -- and didn’t let go of Noble in the here and now. “I have a can of vegetable beef back at the store, and I can warm it over a hot plate. I don’t want to take anything from you that I don’t need, and I have all I need.”

Noble’s focus deepened. “Ah. I see. That’s your problem, isn’t it?”

“God *damn* it, Noble!” Tolliver shook his wrist, hard. “Quit the Yoda crap! Stop it, okay? You promised me answers, and I *want* them. Sit down and talk to me.”

“Or what?” Noble asked, though he slid obediently into his seat. “You’ll leave?”

“No. You’d only come after me.”

Noble nodded.

“Then give me a break.” Tolliver let him go and held his hands out, palms up. “I can’t take it anymore. Talk to me.”

His companion fiddled with the lid to his disposable cup, a bizarre uncertainty crossing his features before they smoothed. “Okay. You want to know what it means when I say ‘see,’ is that it?”

“*Yes.*”

“It means exactly what it sounds like.” Noble touched Tolliver’s temple, the pressure featherlight yet sending shivers down Tolliver’s spine.

He closed his eyes and exhaled, confused.

"It'll be okay," Noble promised. He drew senseless patterns on the side of Tolliver's face, maintaining the contact as he said, "I see what's inside a person, and what could happen to them. I've been able to do it since before I could talk and tell anyone what I knew to be true."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It does, and it doesn't. I am who I am. It's not a lie. I see the truth in the heart of you, and I see what'll happen to you. I see *you*, Tolliver, and I see me with you." Noble feathered his thumb over Tolliver's lips. "I see you happy with me. That's why I won't leave you alone. And that's why you can't walk away from me, not really. Because you want to be happy."

Tolliver's lips parted.

Noble let him go. "That's it." He sat back, lacing his hands over his stomach. "That's all. The question now is, what are you going to do with what you know?"

"You're crazy."

"I don't deny that, but here's the thing." The intensity of Noble's presence dominated Tolliver's senses. "What's 'crazy' mean, really? The Earth's round? Crazy idea. A black man could be president? Crazy. Someone can see the future? Is that crazy?"

"Stuff like that isn't *real*." Tolliver hadn't opened his eyes. He didn't want to see the terrible earnestness he *knew* Noble would be wearing. If he did, he might believe him.

"But you know it's true." Noble laced his fingers with Tolliver's and rubbed their thumbs together.

An innocent gesture, almost sweet. It shouldn't have gone straight to Tolliver's groin, a hot pool of *want* forming low in his belly. He hissed between his teeth and shifted, needing and refusing to touch.

"Something else you know to be true," Noble said, lowering his voice to a bare, rumbling whisper. "You want me."

"No." Tolliver tried to shake off Noble's grasp.

Noble wouldn't let him go. "It is true. You do. I see you, Tolliver." Still holding on, he rose from his chair -- Tolliver could tell by the sounds -- and knelt beside him. "There are ways I see you," he murmured. "Ways you want to know about."

"Don't."

"I have to." Noble rested their joined hands on Tolliver's leg, close to his inseam. Not touching, but close enough to feel the heat. "It's not...it's in me, too, Tolliver, and it's killing me. You're not like me, and you don't know how long it's been since I let myself get this close, because you..." He opened their fingers and stretched his palm flat, brushing the ridge of Tolliver's cock. "And it's not just your body. It's *you*. I can't even see it, and it's making me crazy, but there's something about you that I've been waiting for. I *know* it."

Tolliver couldn't slow his breathing, and he knew people would be staring at them, if they weren't already. "I should go."

"Not yet." Noble pressed his head to Tolliver's chest, lips open over the thin cotton of Tolliver's shirt. He sensed them as intimately as if they touched bare skin.

"Stop."

"Not before I tell you what you won't ask for. You want to hear me tell you the ways I see us together, first." Noble's low cadences were made of burnished sin. "Say you do. Give me that."

"*Yes*. Are you happy now?"

"I will be." Noble kneaded Tolliver's leg, tempting, tantalizing, too much and not enough at the same time. "Something small this time." He nudged Tolliver's cock. "Not that. That's not small at all."

Tolliver's skin heated with a painful blush.

Noble chuckled quietly. "I see you...in my home, on my couch. It's a plain couch, oatmeal colored, nubbled. There are pillows, red and blue and green and saffron, and there's an Indian blanket draped over the back."

Though he knew it was all in his head, Tolliver could see them in his mind's eye, and he could see himself sitting among them. His legs were drawn up beneath him, crossed.

"You're watching me cook," Noble went on, developing a rhythm that was halfway to song. "I'm not a professional, but I have favorites from around the world I learned to do well. Spices. Lemon, aniseed, feta. Olives. There's a glass of ouzo in your hand, and you haven't drunk any. You're waiting for the coffee with pepper and nutmeg and cardamom. Now."

He pressed closer. The rest of the world faded away into a blur of faded colors and white noise. If Tolliver hadn't been sitting, he'd have been afraid he was about to fall. "Why are you doing this to me?" he asked, almost slurring, feeling drugged.

"I'm not. It's all you. You just don't see that yet. There's more, Tolliver. I'm going to tell you."

"No." Tolliver pulled.

"Yes." Noble held fast. "Small things. I have an aquarium. A big one. Bright blue fish. Electric blue. A candle on a glass table. A hearth, and on the mantel above it, a green glass bottle full of seawater, with a carved cork. You can see yourself among these things, can't you?"

"I can't."

"Liar," Noble breathed, heat and warmth so close to where he ached for it.

"Oh, God." Tolliver's head was spinning, the images coming thick and fast. His cock throbbed, and he couldn't stop himself from pressing the heel of his hand to the thickness, trying in vain to ease the hunger.

"You want to hear more. Give me the truth."

"*Yes*," Tolliver hissed. "Does that make you happy? *Yes*. Tell me."

"No." Noble kneaded his leg. "You tell me. When you think of yourself there, what's happening? Are we watching a game or tasting the food, or..."

"Damn you," Tolliver said, tongue parched. "You're taking my...you're undressing me. I'm..."

"Hard, like this?" Noble nudged Tolliver's hand out of the way and replaced it with his own. He was breathing fast now, too. "What do you look like?"

"I can't. Don't ask me to."

"What do I look like?" The smile in Noble's voice was strained.

Tolliver spoke on the sigh of his exhale. "Hot. Turning me on. Hard. So hard. Slick, leaking. Shines on your skin."

"God, Tolliver. *God*." Noble squeezed his leg brutally hard, out of breath. Tolliver blinked out of his trance and looked down. His hips jerked, needing friction.

Noble, on his knees, strung open with *want*.

"God," Tolliver breathed. "*You*."

"If I had you alone right now..." Noble looked away. "Come to my place, Tolliver. Tonight."

The suggestion, though not unexpected, hit Tolliver as with a shock of cold water. Dreams were dreams. This was the real world, and what Noble wanted from him...no way. He couldn't. Tolliver was cold to his bones, ice water in his veins. "Get away."

"Tolliver, don't."

"Enjoy the dream. It's all you're getting." Tolliver tugged sharply and shook his hand free of Noble's. He untucked his shirt to hide the diamond-hard distortion in his jeans and stood, leaving Noble on his knees.

Noble stayed on the ground. "I know you believe me. I saw it in you. You do."

Tolliver turned away, flexing his hands to try to rid them of the sensation of being touched and to warm them. "It doesn't matter."

"It does." Noble locked his fist on the cuff of Tolliver's jeans. "You're the first one who ever did."

"I don't care. I'm done."

"No, you're not. You don't want to be. But you will sabotage yourself, if you're allowed to." Noble rose to his feet, pulling his own shirt down over his groin, graceful again. Predatory, his eyes dark as night. "You're not walking away from this. You won't let yourself."

"Dream on," Tolliver scoffed. He hid his hands in his pockets and touched the damned box. "No."

"Yes. Come to my place tonight, after Old Curiosity closes."

"So I can get naked on your couch and make the fantasy come true?"

Why wasn't he walking away yet?

"You're afraid."

"Damn right I'm afraid! This all came out of nowhere, and I'm supposed to say 'cool!' and jump right in? Do you even know how that sounds?"

"I get that. I do." Noble finger-combed his thick, leonine hair away from his face, breathing settling in a steady rhythm and calm that smoothed out his expression.

Tolliver looked at him, and could still see the Noble he'd let himself fantasize about just for a second. The both of them naked on Noble's couch. The strung-open, nothing-but-hunger ravenous look Noble had worn, the victor's wicked curl of his lips, warm and wet as he knelt between Tolliver's spread legs and slid them down Tolliver's cock.

The burning pool of *want* almost undid Tolliver. He gritted his teeth, choking down a groan.

"Come to my house tonight," Noble repeated, as smooth and deep as an undisturbed well. "And Tolliver?"

Tolliver stopped.

Noble was on him immediately, tugging Tolliver's head back by the hair and slotting their mouths together. Nothing about his kiss was calm, nor in the way he knotted his fist in Tolliver's shirt as if claiming him with that as well as his mouth.

When he let Tolliver go, Tolliver's ears roared. "That's only the start. It'll be good between us. I'll make it better than your dream." He traced the tip of his tongue over the shell of Tolliver's ear.

Tolliver shivered. "Stop."

"Stop what?" Noble nuzzled beneath the pulse under his ear.

"Stop making me want it."

"I'm not. That's you. All you." He withdrew, only to speak nearly mouth-to-mouth with Tolliver. "Tonight," Noble said, his eyes gone darker than midnight skies. "I know you won't say no. Not after you think about it. *Think*. The way I asked you to."

"Go to hell."

"They wouldn't want me, and heaven's not interested either."

"No," Tolliver scoffed. "A fine, upstanding man like yourself?"

"I never said I was a *good* man. Just one that knows you, and won't hurt you." Suddenly unreadable, Noble took his seat behind their cooling coffee, the lion at watchful rest. "I'll see you then."

"No, you won't." Tolliver left him behind, not risking another second near the man. A few steps away, and his ears registered nothing more than the chatter and hum of disinterested coffee drinkers. How could they not have noticed? Why didn't they care?

"I will," Noble called after him, quiet yet carrying.

Tolliver shook his head in stubborn silence. *No.*

Chapter Seven

Tolliver couldn't remember ever having done this before, not once since he unlocked the Old Curiosity door and knew no one else would be inside, in charge.

He disconnected halfway through dialing twice before letting the call go through.

She answered on the first ring, shrill in his ear. Alarmed.

"Sarah? Hey...no, nothing's wrong." He stuffed his hand farther in his pocket and clutched the box Noble had given him. "Think you could manage the store this afternoon by yourself? I'm fine...just need to go for a walk. Need some air. Okay...okay. I'll be home before you go to sleep. Call me if you need anything. I mean that...yeah. Love you, too."

Call end.

* * * * *

He picked an oak tree to sit beneath. No big, important reason, he told himself. The colors reminded him of the leather on old books and the ink inside, sepia fading from rich brown to pale orange. The bark's roughness and the bole's sturdiness kept him from drowning in daydreams. Helped him stay focused.

Handfuls of leaves sifted crumbled through his fingers, flakes drifting down to cover his feet. Tolliver remembered how, a long time ago, he'd chased his bratty baby sister around the yard of the house they'd shared with Mom and Grandmom. Lots of oaks there. Huge, fat leaves in drifts as thick as snow banks. He'd bury Sarah up to her neck, haul her out when she cried, and heap up piles that they both jumped in for hours.

Then they'd burn the leaves. A sense memory of the smell, smoky and strangely sweet, made Tolliver close his eyes.

"Days gone by," he muttered, dropping the few shreds of leaves still in his hands. Jeez. When *was* the last time he'd gone outside to do nothing in the fall?

And that was what he was doing, he insisted inside his head. Clearing his thoughts. Meditating, if you wanted to give it a name. Centering himself. He'd used the technique before, and it'd never failed. Huh. Today might break his lucky streak, mightn't it?

No way he'd go to Noble, though. The only language that guy knew was crazy talk. Tolliver barely knew Noble anyway, definitely not enough to trust he'd be safe on Noble's stomping grounds. All Tolliver knew for sure was that Noble was a creepy-ass, crazy stalker type who took too much for granted and thought he knew better than everyone else.

He'd hang out here until the sun went down, and go home. Make sure Sarah had done her homework and maybe watch some TV. Get up in the morning and open Old Curiosity.

Noble would probably wait up watching out his window, sure Tolliver would knuckle under and come to him. Yeah, well, he could spin on it. Frigging caveman was what Noble was.

He sifted through the leaves and let them drift over his hand, wondering what Noble's hair would feel like. Looked coarse and rough, but it fell so easily and smoothly when he moved, like water.

Was it raining? Tolliver tilted his face to the sky and checked out the gathering gray clouds. Figured.

A cool breeze caressed his upturned cheeks, and his eyes closed reflexively. Soft. Silky, the brush of air.

What would Noble's skin feel like to the touch? His hands were rough, callused, and Tolliver had enough clues to figure that Noble played something with strings in his downtime. Was the rest of his body soft? What, with the open shirts Noble wore, Tolliver knew he didn't have chest hair. Natural, he guessed. Noble wouldn't be the kind who shaved.

His legs would have a light coat of dark blond hair, he guessed. Soft, like his mane, or coarser, like Tolliver's own?

Would the muscles that flexed so fluidly in Noble's bare arms and chest flow with the same easiness in his thighs and calves?

Tolliver closed his eyes, his hand stilling in the leaves. The only sound around him was raindrops slowly starting to patter through the trees. He couldn't hear anyone else in the park. No kids running and screaming, no moms chatting on their cells, no one yelling at a dog to "fetch."

You picked this oak because it's on the far edge, and because no one can see you here.

Shut up.

Leaves slid over his feet, crackly, silky, as he slowly unbent his knees from where he'd tucked them under his chin. His legs fell open, and he brushed away leaves to rest his palm over his lower belly.

Not quite on his cock. Not yet. He was hard underneath. Seemed like he'd been and stayed hard since he'd met Noble.

What does that say about you?

"I don't know," Tolliver said aloud. "No. Oh, no."

He recognized the tones of his internal inquisitor now. Warm, blurring around the edges. He'd gone and put Noble in his head.

"Get out," he said through gritted teeth, sliding his palm down to knead his groin. His hips hitched, working toward the counter pressure. He arched his head back at the first shock of pleasure and wanted more.

You could enjoy yourself, if you wanted. No one's here to see.

"I'm in public. Jeez, no."

Maybe not under the oak, then, but you need this.

"Get out of my head!"

Noble's not in here. You only think he is. This is all you, Tolliver.

"Can't be." Tolliver rubbed his eyes. "I don't..."

You do. You want him. And not just in your thoughts. You want to see what he looks like naked. You want to see him the way you dreamed him, wondering if he'll match up to the fantasy. Or better.

Tolliver groaned, bearing the heel of his palm down on his swollen cock. His balls ached, denied too many times.

You want to taste him. The salt on his skin. To know how his flavor is different from yours.

"I don't."

You do. And as much as you want him, he wants you more. He needs you.

"No."

It's true. He's thinking about you now. You know he is. Hand on his cock, mirroring you. Wondering if you don't believe him after all.

"I do, but it's...come on. It's too much."

What do you have to lose?

"Myself. All I am. All that makes me, me."

Do you like who you are so much that you don't want to try something else? Even for one night?

Tolliver shook his head and said nothing.

He would make it as good as he promised.

"Think I don't know that?"

His lips on you. His tongue. His legs tangled with yours. Sliding together, slick, fast, hard, hot --

"Stop, stop, *stop*." Tolliver bit his lip hard enough to taste blood. He slid his hand inside his jeans and squeezed the root of his cock, breathing hard through his nose.

You want him. Stop lying.

"I'm scared," he hissed, furious with himself, mottling crimson-hot.

You can't let that stop you. If you do, you'll always wonder, and it'll drive you mad.

"Quoting C.S. Lewis," Tolliver said under his breath. A fat drop of rain sieved through the sparse canopy of leaves and ran down his throat. "God, I'm a geek, and he's already made me crazy. I'm sitting here talking to myself."

Crazy happens. The thing to do then is let it ride; let it carry you along. You could drown...

Or you could make it to the other side.

Rain fell more steadily, wetting Tolliver's hair and darkening his shirt with cold water. The urgent need to come subsided at last. Tolliver carefully released his cock, its length bulging and filling his jeans. He might not come.

He wanted to. He did.

Noble was waiting for him. Tolliver knew it.

Tolliver fisted his hands tight, swore under his breath, and stood, shoving at the now-soggy leaves clinging to his legs and ass.

Noble was waiting for him, and Tolliver knew where he'd go. And it wasn't home.

He wiped the rain out of his eyes and started walking, choosing a direction at random. It'd take him there. Whatever this was inside him, it'd lead him to Noble as sure as a compass pointed north, even in the middle of a storm.

* * * * *

"I get to make my own choices," Tolliver said when Noble opened the door. Amber light spilled out, beckoning him closer. He hugged his arms tighter to himself in the heavy, soaked chill of his gray hoodie. Water spilled down his forehead and his arms.

Noble didn't ask, but nodded instead and leaned on the door frame. "I don't want a robot, you know. I want a man who knows himself."

"That isn't me. I thought it was, but --"

"Life changes people." Noble rolled one shoulder back. "What did you come here for, Tolliver?"

Tolliver blinked, his eyelashes spiky with rainwater. "You asked me."

"You were the one who chose to say yes. Tell me why."

“Ah, Noble, cut me some slack. Don’t make me say it.”

Noble smiled and shook his head. “Sorry. You have to.”

“Fine.” Tolliver stood as straight and tall as he could, still shorter than Noble by four inches. The guy could eat him alive if he wanted, and probably would. “I want to come in where you are. Let me inside.”

“If you come in, I’m keeping you.”

“I said I get to make my own --”

“I know you did.” Noble reached to touch Tolliver at last and pushed wet hair out of his eyes. “And you will, when you know they’re the right ones.”

Tolliver’s shoulders sagged. “Please let me in.”

“You choose to come in?”

Tolliver nodded.

“To be with me?”

Swallowing hard, the knot in his throat painful and his hands shaking, Tolliver nodded.

“Don’t be afraid.” Noble stood aside, the amber light behind him casting shadows over his face. “Come in. My home is your home. I’ll get you some dry clothes.”

* * * * *

Tolliver crossed his legs, ankles tucked beneath him, feet warm in a pair of thick socks Noble had told him he’d bought in Norway. He was all but drowning in the old T-shirt Noble had given him, brown washed to sepia, almost pale gold. Tolliver wasn’t a *small* man. Average height, maybe a little on the too-thin side.

Noble made him feel as if he was small. Sixteen again, scared out of his mind. On that same edge of not knowing what could happen. Tiny in a huge world he’d never really seen for himself before.

“I won’t bite,” Noble said, handing him a highball glass. “Drink up. It’ll help warm you.”

“People don’t catch their deaths of cold anymore,” Tolliver mumbled. He sniffed the amber liquid in the glass and took a cautious sip. “It’s not ouzo.”

“No, it’s brandy.” Noble tapped the glass with his fingernail. Crystal chimed. “Things can change, even when I see them.”

Tolliver took a longer, slower sip, letting the alcohol burn his tongue.

“Go ahead and say it.” Noble stood in front of him, too tall when Tolliver was sitting below him. “You don’t have to be on your guard.”

“I couldn’t change this,” Tolliver said, intent on his glass. “How’s that make sense?”

“You could have. If you’d really wanted to.”

“So I could leave now?”

Noble inclined his head. “If that was all you wanted. But it’s not, is it?”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re the most conceited dick on the planet?”

“Sometimes.” Noble laughed. “They’re wrong, though. They don’t believe the truth is all. No one wants to. They won’t even consider it.”

Tolliver licked a drop of brandy from the corner of his mouth. “You said that earlier.” A bubbling sound caught his ear. “What’s that noise?”

“Turkish coffee.”

“I’ve never had it before.”

“I know. You’ll like Turkish coffee. A lot.”

“You said I was the first one who’d believed you.” Tolliver drained his glass and thrust it clumsily at Noble, who caught it before it could fall. He watched Noble pad away, his feet bare and soundless on the thick rugs he’d layered over the hardwood floor, their muted jewel tones blurring into one quiet roar of intense color.

“I did.” Noble was only just visible in the doorway of his kitchen, more of the soft amber light forming a nimbus around his outline.

“What’s that mean?”

Noble snorted, the lack of humor surprising Tolliver. “Have you ever heard of Cassandra?”

“The oracle? Greek mythology?”

“You’re a smart man. That Cassandra, yes. No one ever believed her, either.”

Tolliver frowned, trying to uncross his legs. He was a beer guy, when he drank at all, and the brandy had gone to his head. “So you’re what, some kind of oracle?”

“Sort of. It’s the closest analogy. I like to think I’m mostly just me.”

Tolliver heard liquid pouring as if through a sieve and the muted clinking of metal. Noble appeared, a small bronze tray balanced effortlessly in both hands. The smell of coffee so rich and dark and sweet that it overpowered Tolliver’s senses accompanied him.

Noble deposited the tray on a small side table made of some dull red wood and offered Tolliver one of the tiny cups. Espresso size. “Try it. It’ll clear your head.” He nudged Tolliver’s knee. “Are you warm enough now?”

Perplexed, Tolliver nodded.

“Then drink up. I don’t want you to tell yourself tomorrow this was because you were drunk, and you would. I see that in you.” Noble watched Tolliver intently as Tolliver blew on the thick coffee to cool it. “One step forward, two steps back. That’s how it’s going to be with you.”

Tolliver tried a tiny taste of the coffee. Spices and sweetness burst over his tongue. He moaned without meaning to.

“Good?”

“Better than good.”

“I’m glad.” Noble leaned back, propping his elbow on the couch arm yet still keeping his gaze fixed on Tolliver. “One step, two steps,” he murmured. “Still, always one step forward, and that’s something. I see how this’ll play out, you know. You’ll fight me every step of the way until you finally learn how to see what you need, for yourself.”

Tolliver shivered. He drank deeply of the coffee and found himself with a mouthful of grounds. He spluttered and choked.

Noble laughed and handed him an etched glass full of cool, clean water right away. “Sorry. I should have warned you.”

“Why didn’t you?” Tolliver swished the water, trying to clear coffee grounds off his teeth, grimaced and swallowed.

“Because I was distracted,” Noble murmured, *watching* him. “Tolliver. Still cold? You’re shaking.”

Tolliver looked away.

“I told you, you don’t have to be afraid.” Noble slid forward, the heat of his body simmering the air that separated them. He laid his hand on Tolliver’s leg, but only lightly. “Tell me. Why did I ask you here?”

“I...I...” Surprised, Tolliver looked up, then down again, fast. “I thought you’d...”

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know,” Tolliver admitted. “Yes. No. Both.”

“You told me the truth there, didn’t you?”

Tolliver nodded. “But you already knew that.”

“I did.” Noble slid closer. “I want it. Want you. You don’t know how much.” He spread his palm, fingers wide, over Tolliver’s stomach.

Tolliver stiffened, his breath speeding up.

“But only if you let me. I’m not forcing you. If you ask for it, then I’ll give you what you need. And me.”

“I thought --”

“I won’t force your body.”

“You don’t mind messing with my head.”

Noble laughed, loud, delighted. “Touché.” He sobered. “This is where it’s touch and go, Tolliver. I see that. It’s why I gave you brandy, not ouzo. Things can change. The future’s not etched in stone. So if you tell me no, or not yet, then we don’t have to have sex now. It doesn’t ever *have* to be sex.”

The air slipped from Tolliver’s lungs. “But you --”

"Doesn't have to be, I said." Noble's lips curled, catlike and sharing the mischievous secret. "You want it, though. As much as I do."

Tolliver said nothing. He couldn't have.

"What's stopping you?" Noble rubbed Tolliver's stomach, heat sinking through his thin shirt.

Tolliver shut his eyes.

"Tell me."

"I don't know what to do," Tolliver said in a rush. "I'm out of my zone, Noble, and I don't have a clue what comes next. I can't 'see' a damn thing."

"Okay." Noble's lips pressed against the pulse in Tolliver's throat. "Then will you let me teach you?"

Tolliver didn't let himself stop to think. "Yes."

"Thank you," Noble breathed, stilling for a moment. "You... God, Tolliver, you." He sucked lightly over Tolliver's pulse. "You won't be sorry."

"You 'see' that?"

"Yes. I do." Noble drew away, only to push Tolliver backward, easing him down. "That's in my head, though. Let me look at you in the real world now."

"How?"

Noble stroked the inseam of Tolliver's thigh. "Without these in the way."

Tolliver struggled not to jerk away, and to stay, at the same time.

Noble caught the Turkish coffee mug before it fell from Tolliver's nerveless grasp. "Sorry."

"S'okay." Tolliver couldn't look away from Noble. His heart hammered so hard it hurt. He wondered, for a panicked second, if it might really burst.

"See?" Noble put the cup behind them and cupped Tolliver's cheek, the light pressure coffee-warm. "I can make mistakes, too."

Tolliver scoffed, though breathlessly. "Comforting."

"Don't worry," Noble murmured, gazing at Tolliver in a way that made Tolliver want to throw his arm over his eyes. He'd heard of devouring stares before, sure, but life wasn't much like books at all, was it?

"Hey." Noble rested his palm over Tolliver's heart. "This isn't one of my mistakes."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I've ever been. Let me take care of you."

Tolliver laughed, not happily. "It's been a long time, Noble. I don't know if I remember how. And sex, I've --" His cheeks burned searingly hot. "I haven't --"

"I saw that in you, and I can teach you that, too. Now, shh." Noble pressed his forefinger to Tolliver's lips. "Let me take over. You can let go for once, for a little while. Will you?"

Tolliver tried for a calming breath. He nodded.

"Thank you." Noble rested his forehead, just for a moment, over Tolliver's heart. He plucked at the hem of the loaned T-shirt. "I want to take this off of you."

Tolliver raised his shoulders, obeying almost without thought --

And stopped. "No. Noble, no, wait." He struggled again to sit up, not believing he was about to do this, but he *was*, because he *wanted* to. "Let me."

Noble straightened, forehead wrinkled. "What?"

Tolliver smirked, obliquely pleased. "I took you by surprise. Didn't know it was possible." He pushed past the uncertainty and touched Noble, sifting Noble's hair through his fingers as he had the leaves. Softer than it looked, and rougher, too, as he'd dreamed it the first night he'd met Noble. "If I'm going to do this, I want to know if I *can*."

"I said I'd take care of you," Noble said, letting Tolliver push him in the other direction.

"You did. I..." Tolliver couldn't think of the right words. "This is what I have to do first. Can you see that?"

Noble tilted his head to one side; his eyes widened slightly. "Oh." He cleared his throat and lay back fully, opening himself for Tolliver. "Okay."

Tolliver rested his hands on Noble's legs. He inhaled through his nose and focused on his center, finding it easily this time.

Does that mean what I'm doing is right? Tolliver still didn't know.

"No more than what you want," Noble cautioned, though his body told a different story, one of need and hunger, his legs falling apart to let Tolliver in. His long hand shook the tiniest bit when he set it on the small of Tolliver's back to coax him closer.

"Okay," Tolliver said, mostly to himself, and let Noble guide him this small step forward. He braced his weight on his arms, on either side of Noble's ribs, and breathed in the rich scent of him. Coffee, spice, soap, and warm skin. Some of it sort of like his own smells, yet different at the same time.

He pressed his nose, and then his lips, to the flesh bared by Noble's sleeveless T-shirt. "Don't you ever get cold?"

"Sometimes." Noble sounded strained. He fidgeted, and probably didn't mean to jostle his erection against Tolliver's leg. "Not cold now."

"Me neither." Tolliver tried another kiss. He tasted the dimple between Noble's collarbones.

Noble hissed through his teeth.

"Did I hurt you?"

“God, no.” Noble touched Tolliver’s hair. “Can I?”

Tolliver nodded choppily. “Yeah.”

Noble threaded his fingers through Tolliver’s shorter hair and kept him there, Tolliver’s lips and tongue on Noble’s chest. Noble let him move, tasting a path up Noble’s arched neck, nibbling behind his ear, and finally, blindly, pressing his lips to Noble’s.

It was different. So completely not the same. Noble was the one beneath him who moaned and shifted his weight, the strong solidity of his thighs rising to clasp Tolliver’s hips. Noble was the one who opened his mouth to let Tolliver inside, curiously tasting him. Growing bolder and slanting to a different side to take things deeper.

Noble’s grip on Tolliver’s hair tightened, almost painful, nowhere near enough to make him want to stop. He flexed his hand uncertainly, then let himself do what he wanted. He stroked down the length of Noble’s side and rested on Noble’s hip.

They moved together, and it was by accident, electrifying, when their cocks aligned, Noble’s nestling into the groove of Tolliver’s hip. Tolliver bit Noble’s shoulder to keep from crying out. He’d never missed not having sex. How could you miss what you’d never had?

He’d been a fool.

“Like that,” Noble coaxed, kneading Tolliver’s back. “That’s good.”

“No.” Tolliver shook his head and bit at Noble’s lips. “I want more.”

“Anything you’re ready for.” Noble pulled him in for a deeper kiss. “What do you want? Tell me.”

It was still almost impossible to say, and nearly harder to do. Tolliver pushed his hand between their bodies, still rocking slowly together, and found Noble’s cock. He took the measure of its width and length and squeezed the way he liked best himself.

Noble shuddered. “Tell me.”

“I want to see you,” Tolliver said, unable to speak above the sound of Noble’s breath. “I’ve never. With anyone. And I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Noble groaned. “I saw,” he said, breathing shallowly. “I didn’t think it’d be this intense.”

“Surprised again?”

“You do that to me.” Noble released Tolliver’s hair and drew a trail down the curve of his back, stopping at the cleft of his ass. He teased at the dimple above. “Do what you want with me.” He traced around, Tolliver’s rocking speeding when he knew Noble was going to ask the same of him, and he’d give it, God, would he give it --

Noble stopped. “Wait.”

“Aw, *no*,” Tolliver begged. Then, anger sparking, “Don’t you get me here and stop. You don’t get to do that.”

"I'm not. I won't." Noble struggled onto one elbow, capturing and kissing Tolliver all the way, biting his mouth. "But there's this." He wriggled his fingers into Tolliver's front pocket.

Oh.

Tolliver watched, his heart sinking, as Noble retrieved the small black box and held it with two fingers between them. "Open it first. If you still want me, this, after you see what's inside, then okay. But not before."

Tolliver shook his head. "I don't want to."

"I'm not giving you the choice." Noble pressed the box on him. "I see, but I want to know. It makes a difference."

He wasn't going to give up. Noble never did. Tolliver groaned and butted his forehead to Noble's shoulder. It nearly killed him to sit up and draw away from the breathless pressure. He took the box with a halfhearted glare and, not letting himself have time for second thoughts, pried open the lid.

The box was empty. Tolliver blinked at Noble, confused. "Is this a joke?"

"No." Noble sat, far more smoothly than Tolliver.

"Good. It's not funny." Tolliver thrust the box back at Noble, the distance separating them prickly now. "Is this what it's always going to be like with *you*? It is, isn't it? Games and guess-this and answer-me-that."

"One step forward, two steps back," Noble said quietly, lying down to rest. He let the box drop to the floor and watched Tolliver all the while. "And one step forward again."

Tolliver stared at him, silent. Anger warred with need, which warred with confusion. He'd grown chilly away from Noble, and his cock burned, his balls swollen and as hard as walnuts. "You don't make any sense. Ever."

"Someday, to you, I will." Noble laid his arms to rest beside him. "Go, if that's what you want. I won't come after you."

"You would." Tolliver couldn't take it anymore, the being apart. He covered Noble's body with his own, desperately seeking his mouth. "You'd never let me rest."

"It's you chasing me, now," Noble said between crushes of their lips. He panted and opened the cradle of his thighs, his hand firm on Tolliver's ass holding him there.

"I have to," Tolliver said, mouth moving uselessly over Noble's bare skin. He pulled in vain at Noble's shirt, at his jeans. He couldn't grasp anything solidly enough to open the clasps. "Want to see."

"You will," Noble promised him. "Soon. Right now, this is enough."

"Not enough." Tolliver sucked hard on the tender flesh of Noble's throat. He found his way under Noble's shirt, flexing and pressing his taut skin, skimming it impatiently down. He fumbled the button again and snarled in frustration. "Help me."

"Yeah." Noble caught Tolliver's hand and moved it over the bulge of his cock. A jerk on the buttons and they came open at last. Noble's cock surged through, hot and silky. It filled Tolliver's hand, trails of precum slicking the length.

"Oh, *God*," Tolliver groaned.

"Hey." Noble nipped his ear. "You aren't the only one who wants to see."

Tolliver's chest hitched. "Okay," he said hoarsely, forcing himself up, fighting off another attack of fear. What if Noble didn't like --

"Shh. Thinking too loud." Noble kissed him quickly and undid Tolliver's fly. The first touch of callused skin encircling him nearly sent Tolliver into orbit. "Ohh," Noble breathed out, stroking him slow, too slow. "You feel..."

"Not like you do." The angle was different, strange, but Tolliver couldn't not move. He tentatively skimmed his closed fist down to the base, crinkling hairs tickling him, then up to the head.

A fresh pulse of precum dampened his fingers.

"Close," Noble warned, chest heaving.

"Already?" Tolliver asked, though he was almost there himself. "Not enough."

"There'll be another time. Soon."

"You see that?" Accidentally, but so, so good, the way their cocks slid together. He couldn't tell which was his hand and which was Noble's anymore, stroking in staccato counterpoint, faster and faster still.

"I see it. I see you." Noble arched, his throat a long curve, tendons standing out in sharp relief. "*Tolliver* --"

Heat spurted over Tolliver's hand, dripping down his wrist in creamy ribbons. He couldn't take it. His muscles spasmed, his cock jerked, and he couldn't muffle his yell fast enough. He beat his forehead on Noble's chest and came harder, longer, more than he could remember.

It wasn't enough, but he had to see. Just a little. Tolliver thrust himself up and stared down to where their groins met, his cum mixing with Noble's in a pearly mess that smeared wet and thick over their stomachs, gleaming drops caught in coarse hair. He hitched, another stream escaping him.

Noble relaxed, his tension flowing away from the lean stretch of his body as fluidly as water over a river-smoothed stone. A smile, different from the ones Tolliver had seen on him before, softer and more open, made him look almost boyish. His hair curled from the dampness of sweat.

Tolliver wondered what he looked like to Noble. Couldn't be much. Short hair standing up in messy spikes, pupils blown wide, face flushed and mottled with exertion, lips parted because he couldn't get enough oxygen.

"Stop it," Noble mumbled, eyes opening a slit. He thumbed Tolliver's cheek. "Hotter than ever. Yes. You. Stop thinking and come here."

"Messy."

"That's part of the fun." Insistent, Noble pulled lazily at Tolliver until Tolliver gave in and lay atop Noble, the cooling spunk between them slick and sticky. He could hear Noble's heart slowing under his ear, though, and didn't care as much.

Everything's changing, he thought.

"It is, yeah, but it'll be okay." Noble yawned, rippling as he stretched and hooked one ankle around Tolliver's to make sure he'd stay put. "This is just the start."

"Jesus." Tolliver knotted his fist in Noble's damp shirt. "I don't know --"

"I do." Noble kissed the top of his head, no more than a sleepy brush of lips. "You'll see."

Tolliver pinched the thin skin on Noble's side and, grumbling without meaning it, settled down.

Or at least his body did, worn out and insisting he sleep.

"First times are like that," Noble said drowsily. He rubbed Tolliver's back. "You don't know it's an honor, but I do."

Tolliver blushed.

Noble laughed softly. "Rest."

Tolliver tried, he did, but his mind raced on, repeating the same refrain over and over and over again, *what now? What now? What now?*

Am I still who I was? No. I'm not. I know I'm not.

But who am I now?

"You'll see," Noble rumbled. "I promise you that you will. Sleep now. Sleep, and I'll wake you in time to walk you home. I swear to that, too."

And lost between wakeful wariness and a cloud of ebbing adrenaline, Tolliver believed him.

Chapter Eight

“Sarah! Do you want peanut butter and banana or bologna and mustard?” Tolliver snagged the two slices of lightly toasted bread and tossed them -- *ow, hot* -- on a waiting square of wax paper.

Why Sarah insisted on toasted bread when it'd be soggy and limp by lunchtime was anybody's guess but it made her happy, so...

Tolliver flushed and rubbed the back of his neck. He'd barely made it home before she went to bed, his hair wet from a fast shower -- alone -- at Noble's place, catching her crossing the tiny corridor from bathroom to bedroom with her eyes red and puffy. She must have been exhausted, he guessed.

He still felt vaguely guilty, somehow, as if he'd been sneaking around behind her back. C'mon, though, he couldn't be expected to explain that her big brother had stayed out past curfew getting laid.

Could he?

Uncomfortable memories of the few times Sarah had stayed out too late, with Silver as he'd later discovered, made Tolliver itchy beneath his skin. He *should* have told her that he was with Noble, he realized.

Yet, he still couldn't make himself open his mouth.

Besides, she hadn't pushed for anything, just giggled at him and asked if getting stuck in a mud puddle was like getting stuck in traffic, only on foot, to make him this late.

He'd kissed the top of her head and collapsed on the couch, shaky with relief, when she was gone and that'd been all she had commented on.

Tolliver tentatively prodded a sore spot on his collarbone, well hidden by his shirt. When he'd glanced in the mirror that morning he'd been surprised at first to see a black-and-blue bruise rising.

Surprised until he realized it was a love bite. Noble had gone and given him a *hickey*. It really was like being sixteen all over again.

"Sarah!" Tolliver hollered. "Speak now, or forever hold your peace, and you're getting egg salad!"

"Eww." Sarah slouched around the corner, her nose wrinkled. "Yeah, I really want my locker to smell sulfuric by noon."

"Tuna salad?"

"Tolli-ver." She socked his shoulder. Holy cow, the kid hit hard. "I want cheese and tomato."

"You hate tomatoes."

"I can change. Oh! Cream cheese, not American. Do we have any of that?"

"Think so." Tolliver rummaged the fridge and crisper while Sarah propped herself on the counter and started to rearrange leftover soy sauce packets.

"Busy day at the shop today?" she asked, stacking the squishy plastic bags one on top of the other.

"Same old, same old." Tolliver found some slightly aged cream cheese, but it had chives. He held it up for her inspection.

"Cool." She carefully balanced another packet. "So were you with Noble last night?"

Tolliver froze.

Sarah giggled. "It's okay, you know. I'm not dumb. I figured it out fine on my own."

"But you figured you'd wait until I was ready to go work and then give me the heart attack?"

"Maybe a little. It's not anything to be ashamed of, though, is it?" She shrugged. "You came home like you said you would. That's all I worried about."

"Sarah." Tolliver frowned at her. "You know I'll do what I said. I'm still taking care of you."

Sarah flicked her towering stack of soy sauce. They fell, scattering over the old Formica of the island. "Okay." She sucked her lip between her teeth. "You really like him, don't you?"

Tolliver carefully spread cream cheese on bread. How was he supposed to answer that? "I guess."

"He likes you a lot." Sarah started sorting packets again. It was starting to make Tolliver's head hurt. "You don't mind that he's treating you like a girl?"

"What? He's not," Tolliver scoffed, slicing into the ripe red meat of a tomato. Halfway through the first slice, he stopped.

Was Noble...? Christ, he was. Wooing him. Courting him. Coaxing him along like a shy horse.

Tolliver wondered why that didn't enrage him, because all he felt was an odd, growing warmth beneath his navel. He coughed, cleared his throat, and sliced the tomatoes faster.

"He's a great guy," Sarah said quietly. "Honest. I like him." She ducked behind her hair. "How much do you like him?"

"Does it matter?" Tolliver's temples ached. "I don't even know if it's going to last."

Liar.

Sarah sighed. She held out her hand. "Sandwich, please. I've got to go."

If Tolliver lived to be a hundred, he'd never understand women; he was sure of it. Not even Sarah.

"Yes, madam." He presented it to her and scrunched her hair, halfway between an Indian burn to her scalp and a tousle. She yelped and dodged out of his way before retaliating by throwing a handful of soy sauce packets at him.

"Creep!" She mock-glowered at him, then grinned, pleased as punch by the teasing. "Tolliver? Do you maybe want to walk --"

Ding, ding, ding, brrring.

"Who the...?" Tolliver wiped his hands on a paper towel and headed for the door.

Thump, thump, thump.

"Who's there?" Sarah hovered behind him.

"Got me." Tolliver peeked through the peephole. Warmth suffused him in waves of mixed embarrassment, mild annoyance, and pleasure. "It's Noble."

"Oh," Sarah said.

Tolliver pulled the door open, unable to keep a goofy grin from turning up the corners of his mouth. Noble looked good enough to eat, better than tomatoes and cream cheese on toast for sure, in his sleeveless, seal gray T-shirt and a pair of track shorts that bared his legs. Tolliver compared them against the way they'd cradled and pinned him last night, and wasn't surprised by the lean strength of runner's muscles cording calves and thighs.

But he was turned on. More than he'd thought he'd be.

"Tolliver? I'm up here," Noble said, trying not to laugh, though his smile told a different story. He looked...flattered? "Morning."

"Hi," Tolliver said intelligently, blinking. "What's up?"

"This." Heedless of Sarah lurking behind them, Noble lifted Tolliver's chin with two fingers beneath and kissed him. Almost chaste, and would have been if he hadn't touched his tongue briefly to Tolliver's lips.

"Good morning to you too," Sarah muttered. "I'm doing great, thanks."

Unperturbed, Noble looked up and nodded cheerfully to her. "Good morning."

"Morning." Pause. "So, what *are* you doing here?" she chirped, a false note somewhere in there.

"Thought I'd see if I could borrow your brother for a jog through the park."

"He doesn't jog."

"Then I'll teach you," Noble said, speaking to Tolliver instead of over him. He stroked Tolliver's cheekbone with the two fingers he'd used to capture him before. "What do you say? We'll go slow."

Tolliver couldn't look away from him. He moistened his lips. "Yeah. Yeah, okay, sure."

"You won't be late?"

"Nah. I'm the boss. And I don't have to open the door before nine. I just usually do."

"Shaking up your routine already," Noble murmured, speaking closer to Tolliver's ear than he needed to. Not that Tolliver was going to complain. "I like it."

"Jeez, you two." Sarah pushed past them, her knapsack on her shoulder. "I've got to get to school."

Noble gazed after her, eyebrows knitting together. "What's wrong?"

"With her? Nothing. Sarah's fine."

"Hmm." Noble watched the stairwell, lost in thought. He jostled Tolliver's shoulder almost absently. "Change into something you don't mind getting sweaty. Early morning's the best time for runs."

"She was telling the truth. I haven't run for fun since I was a kid."

"Then it's something else you should try." Noble kissed him for a fleeting second. "Go on. I'll be waiting right here."

Tolliver went.

* * * * *

"How are you holding up?" Noble elbowed Tolliver.

Tolliver grunted and saved his air for moving his body forward. Noble had been right about the "sweaty" part, for sure. The old T-shirt he'd thrown on was soaked through.

Noble ran as easily and gracefully as a born athlete. They had to look ridiculous together. "I wouldn't have guessed this was your first time jogging," he said. He slowed his pace to better match Tolliver's. "You're doing great."

Tolliver huffed. "Yeah, right."

"It's true. We're halfway through the park. No one else I've ever run with would've made it this far their first time out." Noble's gaze darkened. "But you do that, don't you? You surprise people. Even me." He hip checked Tolliver. Playfully. "I like that about you."

Tolliver's heart fluttered. He stumbled.

"It's okay to ease up. Slow it down now," Noble said. "To a fast walk, though. Don't stop. Keep going this way, and it'll take us back to Main Street."

Tolliver obeyed, the burn in his calves making itself known as he stepped down the pace. "I didn't know that."

"Mm-hmm." Noble strode with him in silence, then walked, then ambled. He clapped Tolliver on the back. "Good job."

Tolliver wiped sweat off his forehead and beamed at Noble, not bothering to hold it back. "Really?"

"Cross my heart." Noble drew an *X* over his chest. He tilted his head. "You've lived here all your life, and you didn't know the running trail circled." It wasn't a question.

Tolliver shrugged, vaguely embarrassed. "I was young, and then I was busy."

"Ah," was all Noble said in return.

Tolliver tried to wait for the other shoe to drop. Noble never kept quiet for long. Any second now, he'd come out with something sage and pithy.

"Are you courting me?" Tolliver blurted instead.

Noble didn't splutter, or ask "What?" in incredulous tones. He slanted a sideways, catlike look at Tolliver instead. "Maybe. Is it working?"

Tolliver looked away. "Maybe."

"Good." Noble caught his hand. "Sidestep."

"Huh?"

"I meant, follow me. We're going off trail for a minute."

"Why -- oh. *Oh*." Tolliver stopped, trying to tug Noble back on the running path. "No way! Not here."

"I'm not going to ravish you behind a tree," Noble said. He hooked his pointer fingers in the waist of Tolliver's sweats and pulled, walking backward. "Follow me. You'll like this."

Though suspicious, Tolliver followed him, stretching out the tightening muscles in his sore legs. "What're you up to?"

He yelled in surprise when the full weight of Noble crashed into him, whirled him around -- and then he was flying. Not far, not fast, and then he landed in a mounded pile of autumn leaves.

Tolliver emerged spitting out leaf crumbles and dazed. He shouted and covered his face, Noble coming in from a flying leap next to him.

He barely had time to laugh or shout before Noble had rolled them together, nearly hidden by the leaves, and slanted their mouths together.

"I changed my mind," he said. "Ravishing you behind a tree sounds like a good idea after all."

"Oh," Tolliver said, nearly cross-eyed, when Noble let him go to breathe. He pressed his forehead to Noble's. "Is this how you court all the guys?"

"Nope." Noble hooked his leg over Tolliver's under the cover of the leaves. "Just you. I haven't 'courted' anyone else in a long, long time, and things...were different, then."

Tolliver frowned, trying to catch Noble's gaze. Something had been off in him when he'd spoken just now. He couldn't put his finger on...

"Stop thinking so hard," Noble ordered, pulling Tolliver halfway over his body. He circled his hips, letting Tolliver know he was interested, but his movements were slow and lazy. "'Ravishing' doesn't have to mean all the way," he reminded Tolliver. "Is there any reason why we can't play?"

"Define play."

"Like this," Noble said, and kissed him again, the breadth of his palm skating down Tolliver's back. "No stakes. No winners or losers. You see that, don't you?"

Tolliver shivered, and not from cold. A wave of...something...was close to sweeping over his head and carrying him under, and he wasn't sure...wasn't sure...

"Hey." Noble nudged him. "You're thinking too hard about something."

"I thought you wanted me to dig deeper and figure stuff out."

"Not and leave me out of it." Noble palmed Tolliver's face and made him meet his eyes. "You're upset. Why?"

"I'm not," Tolliver protested, knowing it came out without conviction. He kicked up some leaves. "I..."

"You can tell me." Noble drew his forefinger along Tolliver's cheek. "You know you can."

"It's just...you know what you're doing. And what you haven't done before, you can 'see.' Me, I'm clueless. What we did last night --"

"You loved what we did."

"I did, but a handjob... Was that a handjob?"

Noble chuckled quietly, tucking his head in Tolliver's shoulder and biting lightly at the underside of his jaw. "Yes."

"See? I don't know anything about" -- Tolliver gestured vaguely -- "this. I meant it when I said I have no idea how to do this. How to make you --"

"How to make me feel good?" Noble prompted between light nips that were lighting fires in Tolliver's veins.

"I can't think when you do that," he complained, but made no move to push Noble away.

"Good." Noble's fingers crept lower and circled Tolliver's navel. "I'm enjoying this plenty, for a start."

A gentle nudge of his hips proved how much he enjoyed it. Tolliver shivered.

"What you don't know, I'll teach you. No, don't say it." Noble sighed, though not in frustration. More fondly. "You want to find out for yourself. Do it on your own."

Stiffly, Tolliver nodded.

"I see that in you. You always have to stand on your own two feet. No one helping." Thinking, Noble clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Let me make a suggestion, then."

Tolliver rolled his head to the side, looking at the top of Noble's head. "Okay."

"You own a bookstore," Noble said. He pinched Tolliver's thigh. "Read a book."

"Yeah, that's the thing." Tolliver let himself stroke Noble's hair. Noble almost purred, curling tighter to him, and Tolliver's knees turned to water. "I've been thinking that life isn't anything like what you read about. It's never big enough to be the same."

"True."

They lay quietly for a moment.

"It's still a place to start."

Tolliver exhaled heavily. "Yeah."

"Don't worry so much," Noble whispered in his ear. He nuzzled Tolliver's neck. "Stay with me." He lifted his face, angling for a kiss, his hand firm yet gentle at the small of Tolliver's back. "Right now is what matters. Okay? Stay with me in the now. Can you do that?"

Tolliver nodded, mouth to mouth with Noble. "Okay."

"Good." Noble pulled him farther beneath the leaves. "Come here."

Tolliver came.

Chapter Nine

The rich smells of almonds and warm sugar preceded Joey through the Old Curiosity door.

“Plain cardboard boxes today?” Tolliver joked. Glad to take a break, he tossed down his pencil. Numbers and publication dates had had a tendency to swim in front of his eyes, the vagueness of his sight leading to idle fantasies about Noble.

Noble in the leaves, brown and red and gold bits of autumn tangled in his hair. Stretching lazily, satiated, never more like a great cat than then. Right down to the cat-in-the-cream smile that never left his lips.

Noble at his door at the crack of day, bright eyed and eager.

Noble on the couch, solid and hot beneath him, his panting breath stinging Tolliver’s skin. The rigid length of Noble’s cock in his hand. Noble’s cum on his skin.

Noble sucking the tender bruise on his collarbone. Tolliver touched that one, not quite absently, remembering.

He realized, almost too late, that Joey had been talking. Sounded as if he’d been asking a question. Tolliver dredged up a rueful laugh and a grimace. “Sorry. I’m a million miles away.”

Three miles away, in the park. His legs burned, and he knew he’d pay big-time later for the effort to keep up with Noble.

Worth it, though.

“No problem.” Joey carefully stacked the bakery boxes, three of them, on the counter in front of Tolliver, rather than on the side table where he usually deposited his goods. “I was just saying I’d run out of the green. I like these better, I think. Do you?”

They looked like plain boxes to Tolliver. Thin cardboard, paper bag brown, no logo. “You should have your name on here somewhere,” he said, carefully lifting the top box. A waft of cinnamon-honey scent almost made him moan. “Wow.”

Joey stilled. “Something wrong?”

“Huh? No, not at all.” Tolliver resisted the urge to open the box and snag a fingerful or a bite of a cookie or whatever Joey had secreted within. “Logo. Right. Your name, the shop’s name --”

Oh, crap. Tolliver couldn’t remember. Joey had run his business out of the shop front next door for almost a year, and he was drawing a blank about what it was actually called.

Joey wrinkled his nose. “I guess. I’ve been putting that off. I think maybe I should have come up with a better name than just Joey’s.”

Whew. “A good name takes time to figure out,” Tolliver hazarded. “Glad I didn’t have to name this place. It’s been Old Curiosity since my grandmom opened the doors in nineteen twenty.”

“I knew it had history, but not that much.” Joey dusted off his hands as he turned in a slow circle to survey the place. “Almost a hundred years of business feels about right. It’s thick. Layered, like biscuits and strawberries.”

“If you ever decided to make *real* strawberry shortcake, I’d go to my knees to thank you,” Tolliver told Joey in all seriousness.

Baffled, he wondered why on earth Joey went bright red at that, mumbled unintelligibly, and turned away.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Joey glanced sideways, almost shyly, at Tolliver. “I’ll see what I can do about the shortcake. And about a name, and a logo. You’re right. I need those.”

Tolliver grinned at him, trying to copy the brightness of Noble’s smile to see if it’d better express how he felt than his usual self-effacing quirk of the lips.

Joey looked startled.

The pile of books waiting to be assessed reminded Tolliver of their presence when he laid the box back down and caught sight of them in his peripheral vision.

“Joey,” he started, unsure where he wanted to go or even why he wanted to talk to Joey about it. Possibly being gay didn’t mean he could open up and share with the world.

Possibly? his inner self queried, dripping with skepticism.

Tolliver shrugged it off. Joey was waiting, looking at him expectantly.

“Is it always like this when you fall for someone?” he asked, looking at the bakery box instead of Joey.

Joey swallowed hard. Probably as weirded out by relationship talk as Tolliver was. Still, good man that he was, he did answer. “How do you mean?”

"Nervous." Tolliver picked at a cuticle. "Like it's the best thing ever, but it's like you're standing on the edge of a cliff, too."

"Scary, but exciting? Yeah." Joey cleared his throat. "Sometimes. You're..."

"I'm thinking about things," Tolliver said. He looked up, aware of the red hue in his face, and gave an apologetic shrug. "I'm figuring out that for a guy who's supposed to be book smart, I'm really dumb sometimes."

Joey laughed. Tolliver stared. He'd never seen Joey light up like that before, and it hadn't been that funny.

When Joey stopped, he'd softened somehow. Lost some sort of edge, like he was easier in his own skin. "It's like that for me too," he said. "Sometimes you wonder if a guy even notices."

"Yeah." Tolliver tapped the edge of a bakery box. "You think there's anything in any of these books" -- he gestured around them -- "that'd help me figure myself out?"

"Maybe." Joey took a half step forward, then back again. "You need more thinking time?"

"I'm not sure what I need," Tolliver admitted.

Joey nodded thoughtfully. "Then start reading. It couldn't hurt. And no one's going anywhere if they haven't already."

"Are you saying I'm insensitive?" Tolliver teased.

"No. I'm saying you're oblivious." Joey grinned, roguish dimples appearing in his cheeks. Tolliver had never seen those make an appearance before; they startled him so he forgot to respond.

Joey stepped back farther. "I'd better get back to the store. Enjoy the cookies." He caught his lower lip between his teeth. "They're your favorites. They always are."

"I thought they might be. Networking business, bah." Tolliver flipped open the top box and gazed lustfully at the warm cookies. "You're something else, Joey. You know that, right?"

"Sometimes I do." Joey was at the door by now, hand on the knob. "See you soon?"

"Same time, same place, tomorrow," Tolliver replied. He studied Joey, a niggling awareness that he was missing something needling just under his skin.

Joey tossed him a wave and left, a lightness in his step.

Tolliver guessed whatever it was, it wasn't a bad thing. Joey would most likely tell him if there was something wrong between them, right?

He tried one of the cookies. The buttery crunch melted on his tongue, the toffee chips a lingering bitter sweetness to savor afterward. Still warm. Why *did* Joey claim these were leftovers when it was pretty clear he brought over the first batch of the day?

Go figure. Tolliver brushed crumbs off his hands and picked up his pencil. Back to work.

Unless...he paused. There *were* a couple of books. He remembered them now. Kind of doubtful how much practical use they'd really be, as old as they were, but if they hadn't already sold...

Tolliver tucked his pencil behind his ear, set a bell on the counter for any customers to ring if they showed up and wanted help, and headed purposefully toward the back corner of the store despite the unsteadiness of his hands.

Reading, that was one thing he could do. It wasn't much.

But it could be a start.

* * * * *

Halfway through the biography section, the shrill ringing of the shop phone brought Tolliver to a halt. He groaned through his teeth.

Tempting as it was to keep going he turned on his heel and raced for the front of the store. The books would still be there after he took care of business.

He reached the phone on the last ring before the old answering machine kicked in. "Old Curiosity. May I help you?"

"Mr. Bennigan?" a flat, uninterested female voice addressed him, husky from too many years of two packs a day.

Tolliver knew that voice. "Principal Masters."

"We'll need you to come pick Sarah up."

"What happened?" His mind raced. "Is she sick? Did she get hurt?" She'd had a rough time with being picked on, though she swore it'd stopped in the past year.

"No, Mr. Bennigan. She's on a three-day suspension for leaving school grounds without permission."

"What?" Tolliver wanted to wiggle his finger in his ears. "There must be some mistake. Sarah doesn't do things like --"

"She did this time, Mr. Bennigan. I was the one to see her leaving in the company of the young man who calls himself Silver."

Tolliver's heart sank. He couldn't think of what to say.

"I think you and I need to have a talk, Mr. Bennigan," Principal Masters said neutrally enough, but not so much as to conceal her underlying disapproval. "Can you be here in thirty minutes?"

"I'm on my way," Tolliver said numbly. He replaced the phone in the cradle and stared blankly at the shop window for a moment.

Sarah, with Silver. She'd promised she'd never make contact with him again. Silver had a restraining order, for Christ's sake. He was nineteen after what he'd done to Sarah, the statutory charge levied against him had stuck.

Sarah had supported the decision. *She'd* been the one to ask for a restraining order, for Christ's sake.

So why now...?

Tolliver shook himself out of his daze and snagged his keys off their hook beneath the register. He wanted answers.

The books were pushed to the back of his mind along with Noble, and by the time he'd reached the school, Tolliver had forgotten about everything but Sarah.

* * * * *

"Get in." Tolliver held the passenger side door open for Sarah and gestured curtly.

Head drooping, hair hiding her face, Sarah threw her armload of books into the foot well and climbed in sulkily. She folded her arms over her chest and wouldn't look up at him.

If that was the way she wanted to play it, fine. Tolliver waited to hit the open road and organized his thoughts, or tried to, before he spoke.

"So why'd you do it?" he asked, eyes on the road. It was easier than looking at Sarah, and so far it was keeping his injured anger in check.

"I didn't *do* anything," Sarah muttered.

"Sarah, don't lie to me. I'm not that stupid, and it sucks that you think I'd fall for that for one second."

She *had* been with Silver. School surveillance cameras provided indisputable proof. They weren't within touching distance, but Tolliver didn't think he was exaggerating the predatory smirk on Silver's face as he watched Sarah from behind.

"Yeah? You're not as smart as you think you are. You didn't notice a thing about me tricking you into thinking I was still a good little girl before I came home pregnant."

The sucker punch took the breath from Tolliver's lungs.

Sarah crumpled. "That was mean. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, it was." The way back to Old Curiosity from Sarah's high school wasn't complicated or long, a short, straight stretch, one right, one left, and down Main Street. Tolliver flipped on his turn signal. He could have walked it with time to spare but was glad he hadn't.

"Tolliver?" He could sense Sarah peeking at him. "I said I'm sorry."

God. He'd love nothing more than to say, "It's okay, people make mistakes," and never mention it again. He couldn't, though. "I know you are," he said, hating himself for not being able to say it back as he swung into the turn. "Tell me why you did it."

Sarah fidgeted. "I don't know."

"Sarah."

"I *don't*!" she protested, pivoting from the waist. He could feel the heat of her glare. "I saw him outside, and I just...I don't know. I wanted to see how he was doing."

"Mmm." Tolliver nodded. "Then why'd you try and leave the grounds with him?"

"He was... I don't know."

"Okay." Tolliver took the last turn and made sure the locks on the car, controlled from his side, were secure. "Until you figure it out, you're working full shifts at the store. If that lasts longer than the three days you were kicked out of school, so be it."

"Tolliver --"

"If I ever hear of or see you with Silver again, you're on house arrest."

"*Tolliver!*" Sarah grabbed her hair and pulled. "It was one skipped class. Why are you overreacting like this?"

"Let me think. Because he knocked up my sister and left her to twist? Because he's old enough to know better? Because he's legally not allowed within fifty feet of you, and even if you don't care, he should have?"

Sarah shrugged, sulking.

"This isn't like you. At all." Tolliver lowered his voice. "We've been through this. You mess up again, and they could decide I'm unfit to be your guardian."

"So it's all about you, now."

"Not even close. They take you away from me, and *you'd* be the one to get stuck in the system. What about going to college then? What about the store?"

"Life's more than college and the store, Tolliver." She glared obliquely at him. "That's the whole point. Besides, I wanted to see what was the difference."

"Say again?" Tolliver coasted to a slow stop, relieved to be able to look directly at her. When she wouldn't look back, he gently nudged her shoulder. "Sarah."

"I was happy with Silver, when things were good. He could be really sweet. He paid attention to me and told me I was pretty." She shook her head to let her hair hide her face. "I wanted to know why it went wrong. If it was something about me."

"Sarah, how could you even think that?" Tolliver protested.

Sarah stuck out her chin. "Doesn't matter. You're happy with what you've got now. Really happy. It kind of makes me sick."

Tolliver was stunned speechless. *You were the one who set us up!*

"Besides, what right do you have to yell at me when you were out until almost midnight and come home all marked up with hickeys? Anyway, that's why. Nothing else, I swear, and you can believe me or not. I don't care." She jerked at the door handle. "Let me out."

* * * * *

"I wondered where you'd gone." Noble had taken command of an old, weatherworn public bench near Old Curiosity. He marked his place in the ragged-edged copy of *On Golden Pond* he'd been reading and rested his forearms on his knees.

He scanned the pair of them, from Tolliver to Sarah and back again, and made a *huh* sound. "This isn't a good time. I should stop back by later."

Tolliver, pride stinging and temper prickling, shook his head without hesitation. "No, come on in. I could use the company."

Sarah threw him a dirty look.

"I see," Noble murmured, eyebrows slowly rising. "Tolliver, it doesn't seem like a good idea."

"Do you 'see,' or are you just guessing?"

"A little of both." Noble turned to address Sarah. "Do you want me to go?"

Sarah's pause before answering went on too long, and her tone was too stilted when she said, "No."

Noble exchanged a glance with Tolliver and lifted his shoulders slightly. Tolliver nodded.

"All right." Noble stood and tucked the book in his back pocket. "If you change your mind, let me know."

"It's not my decision," Sarah said darkly. She snatched the store keys from Tolliver's hand and opened the door with a crash and a clatter.

Tolliver stayed on the sidewalk, rubbing his forehead. He didn't move until the broad warmth of Noble's palm settled on the small of his back. The heat radiated through his tensed muscles, relaxing him where he hadn't even realized he was drawn up tight.

"Rough day?"

"You have no idea." Tolliver frowned at him. "Unless you..."

"No. Not this time." A vague impression of worry floated through Noble's eyes. "I should go."

"Don't." Tolliver locked his hand around Noble's wrist, surprising both of them, he thought. He tried to shrug his apology. "I need you to stay."

Noble regarded him thoughtfully. "All right," he agreed at last. "We'll see how it goes." He looked after Sarah and shook his head.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Noble said. "Probably nothing." He stroked his thumb on Tolliver's back. "I think it might rain." He nodded to the darkening sky. "Let's get inside."

Chapter Ten

Heavy thumping and clinking from the back of Old Curiosity told Tolliver what Sarah was up to. Water was churning into a glass decanter, and he could smell the cheap coffee grounds being spooned out.

Noble's hand on his shoulder kept Tolliver from going after Sarah. "Leave her be. At least for a while."

"I told her she'd have to work."

"She will, soon." Noble gestured at one of the bar stools. "May I?"

"Yeah, of course. You don't need to ask, not after..." A vivid memory of Noble's sweat-dampened hair and the heavy weight of his erect cock in Tolliver's hand made his ears prickle with a mixture of shyness and embarrassment. "You know."

Noble's grin was mischievous. "After what, I should know?"

"Smart aleck." Tolliver poked him on his way past, taking his accustomed, comfortable seat behind the register.

Rather than turn his attention to the stack of books beside the old till, as he normally would, Tolliver didn't want to look away from Noble. "What am I doing here?" he asked, hoping Noble would understand what he meant. All of it.

Noble propped his chin on his hand and looked back, as open as a book and as unreadable as if it were printed in Sanskrit. "What do you think you're doing?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you." Tolliver snorted. He pushed the books away to give himself room to rest his elbow on the counter.

"Tell me what you think you're doing, then. Start there."

"I don't even know that," Tolliver admitted. He caught his lip between his teeth. "Maybe this, us, what we're doing...maybe it's a bad idea. I'm not sure."

"You were sure last night."

Tolliver looked away, toward the books. "I was sure up until an hour ago, too." He stroked the clothlike, faded blue spine of an obscure chapbook. "Now..."

"Sarah's not in favor, is she?"

Tolliver snorted.

"I'll take that as a no."

"I don't get it, Noble. It's like she's..." Tolliver gestured inarticulately. "She's changed her mind, seems to be."

Noble hooked his ankles in the rungs of the chair. The move should have been gawky and giraffelike for a man of his height, but instead, Tolliver was reminded of the lazy twine of a cougar's tail around a high branch. "She's jealous."

Tolliver started to protest, and stopped.

"I don't mind, Tolliver, and neither should you. It's natural."

"Hasn't ever happened before."

"Because there hasn't ever been anyone for her to be jealous *of* before." Noble rubbed the knees of his jeans, worn and stringed out as ever. The shredded hems covered half his feet. "Give her time to adjust. She'd have to do this sooner or later." He held his hands palms up. "It happens to be now. That's all."

Tolliver sighed. "Do you see that?"

"No. But I had a... I was related to a girl who could be a lot like Sarah, once upon a time. They even looked alike. She was the same, probably even more hell on wheels if -- when she got older. Don't let it eat at you."

"She's my first priority, Noble."

Noble inclined his head. "As she should be. You wouldn't hold her back, would you?"

"No."

"Then don't let her do the same for you."

"God, you make it sound so easy."

"I know it isn't." The faraway look crossed Noble's face again. He blinked and shook it off. "All I'm saying is you should make up your own mind. If you decide you want to break this off, then that's what you should do. But only if you *think* about it and *know* yourself. Not before."

Tolliver dragged his thumbnail across the spine of the blue book, even though that was usually akin to nails on a blackboard for him.

"Go ahead and ask," Noble said, quietly encouraging. "You won't upset me."

"I'm starting to wonder what could," Tolliver said, half joking. "It's just... Do you 'see' this working out? I have to know. If it doesn't --"

Noble stood, all lithe grace and smoothly flowing musculature, and moved smoothly into Tolliver's personal space. Tolliver found himself adjusting to let Noble in, parting his knees to let Noble get closer.

He closed his eyes at the soft, warm pressure of Noble's palm cupping his face. Noble's lips brushed lightly over his. "There's your answer," Noble said, his breath caressing Tolliver's cheek. "And I don't 'see' this ending. Unless you make it end. And if you don't, it won't."

Illumination dawned. Finally, Tolliver understood the meaning of the empty box Noble had given him. "Pandora's box," he said, resisting the urge to punch him. "That's what it was. Cute."

"I thought so."

"Funny. Ha-ha. What was the point?"

"The point was that you had the courage to open it. Do you remember the story?"

"Yes. When Pandora opened the box, she let out all the world's troubles."

"You let go of your troubles when you let me in," Noble murmured.

Tolliver shivered. "And?"

"Go on."

"The last thing left in the box was hope, wasn't it?"

"Not this time. What's left in the box is trust. Do you trust me?"

"I..."

"It's okay. You will. In every way. Soon." Noble withdrew. "I see it."

"How's it work?" Tolliver asked, not knowing he was going to say it until he had. "You told me it was like Cassandra. The way no one ever believed her. Is it that they never believe at all, or they don't believe the first time, or...?"

"The first time is usually the only chance they get," Noble replied almost absently, narrowing his eyes and looking intently at nothing at all. "After that, it's too late."

"But I'm different?" Tolliver didn't know why it mattered so much to him, but realized that it did.

Noble returned to the present and focused all his attention on Tolliver, the hunger in his gaze making Tolliver's toes curl in his sneakers. "You don't even know how different yet."

A loud clatter from the back of the store drew both their attention.

"Sarah," Tolliver said with a grimace. "Got any insight on what to do about her? We don't fight. I'm not sure what happens now, you know?"

"Hmm." Noble tapped the toe of one shoe on the floor. "Do you trust me?"

Tolliver blinked, confused, his head fogged with the arousal just being that close to Noble had caused. "I think I do."

“Would you trust me with Sarah?” Noble warded off his exclamation. “Working here isn’t much of a discipline. It’s what she’s used to.”

Tolliver subsided, though he still frowned at Noble. “I don’t have anywhere else to send her. This is the only job she’s ever known.”

“Would you trust me to put her to work?”

“Huh?”

“Habitat for Humanity’s finishing a project this afternoon. They need volunteers to help clean up site debris and to clean all the inside surfaces.” A wicked smile began to lift the corner of Noble’s mouth. “Windows to be washed. Floors to be vacuumed. Trash to be collected. It’d keep her busy, and I could use the help.”

“And it’d give you a chance to talk with her.”

Noble brushed the tip of Tolliver’s nose. “You’re learning. May I have permission?”

Tolliver gave it due thought before nodding. “Watch after her.”

“I will.” He leaned in to kiss Tolliver once more. “While we’re gone, take advantage of the time alone,” he said, his hand drifting close to Tolliver’s inseam. “Do some thinking.”

Tolliver exhaled a long, slow breath. “What kind of thinking?”

“I’m pretty sure you can guess.” Noble sucked Tolliver’s upper lip briefly and let him go. “Maybe you can catch up on your reading.”

“How’d you know I hadn’t...”

Retreating, Noble grinned easily and tapped his temple. “How do you think?”

His comment surprised Tolliver into laughter.

“That’s more like it,” Noble said, and went to collect Sarah.

Time alone, then, with Sarah in good, trustworthy hands. Time alone to figure out what was going on with his head.

Tolliver scrubbed his hands on his thighs. He wasn’t as worked up as he had been before, but maybe...maybe that was a good thing.

He could see things clearly, in his lesser way, now.

Mostly.

* * * * *

As Tolliver reached the final row of bookshelves lining the back wall of Old Curiosity, smothering silence his only companion in the store, he found himself uncertain again.

Noble “saw” this, and Noble “saw” that. Did it really mean anything, though? Did it make any kind of difference in the real world?

You let him take Sarah for the afternoon, the small voice in Tolliver’s head reminded him. You went to him last night, and you’d never known it could be that good.

Trust Noble. He knows what he's doing.

"Yeah, well, I don't know me like he says I should," Tolliver muttered, warily jingling the keys to the glass cases.

That's why he told you to think. And to read. To learn what you can and see where you can go.

Tolliver closed his mouth tightly, shook his head, and unlocked the glass case. He reached for the book he'd planned on reading, a how-to guide from the early 1990s. No real value except for the dedication to Old Curiosity as a haven of research, and the signature. The author had passed not long after the book's publication.

He pulled the volume out, and barely reacted quickly enough to catch the slim black box that tumbled out after it, hidden behind the tome on its shelf. *What the...* "Pandora, the sequel," he grumbled.

Only this time, when Tolliver opened the box it wasn't empty. It held a small collection of tarot cards, rare and fragile, hand painted on thick card stock. One of a kind. Priceless.

Noble had to have left them for him. Why?

Tolliver took a closer look at the top card and blushed. *Oh.* Though the shapes and figures were deliberately vague, he didn't need his glasses to be able to tell they were erotic. A man on a high, elaborate dais, stretched out indolently, wickedly waiting. The next card portrayed the man on his knees nuzzling another, definitely male, form on his stomach.

As for the card labeled The Lovers...

Tolliver stared, drank in the details, couldn't look away. He wanted to touch, and this could hardly even be called explicit. A man, his face composed of shadows, and his shoulders, broad, lay full-length atop a slimmer, smaller fellow. The man on the bottom had his arm around the dominant man's neck, his far knee raised and visible above the dominant man's back. The dominant man's hand was splayed wide over the younger man's heart, and the younger man's head was slightly turned so he could look up at his companion.

The cards seemed old and almost fragile in Tolliver's hand but time hadn't erased the easy affection between the couple, nor had it dimmed the somehow flowing sense of fire passing between them.

Clever bastard, he thought, admiring Noble's wiles while feeling an odd pang of disappointment. If he'd been nudged this way and if Noble had left him the cards on purpose, then maybe Noble hadn't "seen" anything after all.

Before the thought could sink in deeper, he caught sight of the next card and promptly forgot everything else.

This picture's colors were sharp and strong, and the dominant man no longer covered the slimmer one's body. He'd come to rest between the man's knees, spreading him open, the slimmer man's erect cock halfway between the dominant man's lips. The dominant man's

eyes were shut, his expression rapturous. The slimmer man's hand was speared through the dominant man's hair, fingers knotted tight, his face indulgent even though his body strained up to meet his lover.

God. Tolliver shifted in his chair, letting his legs fall open unconsciously to give his swelling cock room.

He studied card after card, glancing sometimes at the inscriptions. His face was on fire. The things he saw in these paintings... *oh, God.* He'd known, on some nebulous kind of level, that men did these kinds of things, but even with Noble, he hadn't *thought*.

Now, he couldn't stop. Tolliver blindly set the cards aside and let his eyes slip shut, images flashing through his thoughts. He saw himself and Noble in Noble's bed, bare of clothes.

Noble holding him down, himself grasping the headboard when Noble told him to. The unyielding edges of wooden slats biting into his fingers. Not letting go without permission.

Stroking one against the other, Noble's cock sliding through the intercrural join of his groin and thigh on its own leaking lubrication.

He could *see* the strain in the tendons of Noble's neck and could almost smell his rich scent.

More. Noble parting his cheeks and a wet tongue rimming him; himself lying back split open and unable to reach his cock to ease the need; Noble holding him on his lap, one strong arm around his waist teaching him how to ride.

More. More. Noble's fingers, sliding inside him, tormenting him with pleasure, driving him crazy. Noble had huge fingers. Tolliver had barely teased himself, and only once, and his more slender finger wouldn't have fit. The illustrations on the cards showed two, three, four...

Tolliver groaned and palmed his cock, risen to aching stiffness while he looked and dreamed. He rubbed the heel of his hand hard, not about to whip it out here but God, if he didn't get some relief soon...

When he ran one finger down the length, his thoughts flew back to the vision of Noble stretching him open, getting him ready to accept his cock. Low flares of heat exploded in Tolliver's lowest belly, precum dampening his jeans. Couldn't work, wouldn't fit, but...

He saw himself with his knees hooked over Noble's shoulders, and it wasn't silly. He could hear Noble whispering things like, "That's it, so good. You're doing so well, Tolliver, so perfect," as he thrust, slow rolls of his hips and Tolliver's body opening to take him.

Tolliver squeezed his eyes as tightly shut as he could and moaned. God, he couldn't take this. If thinking was all it took to get him this strung out, then the real thing would kill him.

"There's a reason why they call it the 'little death,'" Noble's low rumble surprised him.

Tolliver shot upright, heart racing. "You scared me."

"You would have stayed lost in that deck of cards for hours if I hadn't." Noble knelt beside Tolliver's chair and rubbed his thigh. "I hoped you'd find these."

Exasperated, but too turned on to be angry, he brushed the hair off Noble's forehead to better see his face. "Little death, huh?" he asked, referring to the most explicit card of all, the Death card.

"In tarot, all death means is change. Rebirth. And it's a good 'little death,' if you do it right." Noble nestled his chin on Tolliver's leg. "But you're not ready for that yet."

"I think I'm close to ready," Tolliver said honestly. He splayed his legs, parting his knees so Noble could witness the proof for himself.

Noble chuckled. "I don't need prescience to see that." He blew warm air over the distorting bulge behind Tolliver's fly. Tolliver bit the inside of his cheek hard to keep from crying out. "Slow, Tolliver, we're going slow. I see that you know what you want now."

"But?"

"But I see that there's more you don't know." Noble nudged Tolliver's hand out of the way and replaced it with his own, massaging with roughness and grace, perfection. "And I see that if you try to go too far too fast, you'll fall, or you'll run."

"Thought you said you didn't see this ending," Tolliver protested, trying not to buck into the friction Noble provided.

"That's not what I meant. Don't worry about that right now." Noble helped him by guiding his hips. "I've got you. I'll take care of you. Trust me." He bent lower to nuzzle the denim straining over Tolliver's cock, then cupped him and kneaded lightly as a brush of feathers. "I won't leave you alone."

Tolliver's breathing hitched. He thrust into the too-faint pressure of Noble's hand and came, soaking his jeans, his vision blurring into white static.

He came down slowly, reality blurring back into place and Noble waiting, watching him with what he'd swear was honest affection, and maybe a little amusement.

"One step at a time," Noble said, drawing back. "One step forward, bigger than the two steps you want to retreat. I'll get you there."

"Think you already did," Tolliver said, voice cracking with the strain of speech. "Noble..." His eyes snapped open. "Noble, where's Sarah?"

Noble rumbled a quiet laugh. "She's safe. Fell asleep in the passenger seat of my delivery truck, and I brought her in. Now she's asleep in one of the reader's chairs up front. It was harder work than she'd thought. We talked a little, too."

"And?"

"And it's a start. Everything starts somewhere. Here, now, this is where we begin."

"I thought we started a long time ago." Tolliver frowned. "Seems longer than it really is."

Noble shook his head and kissed above Tolliver's navel. "Every step is a new start. You'll see."

"I don't get it, Noble."

"You will."

"No, that's not it. I... Noble, I think I'm stupidly naive," Tolliver said honestly as he shrugged helplessly at Noble. "I sat here trying to figure out how any of this could possibly feel good."

Noble lapped at the wet spot on Tolliver's jeans. "You answered that question for yourself."

"That's fantasy." Tolliver pushed him away. "What if reality's different? What if I can't?"

"You'd be surprised," Noble assured him, settling back on his heels with an easy grace. "That's why we're taking it slow."

Tolliver bit at his thumbnail. "Still makes no sense to me. Noble, you're...look at you. Why would you even want someone who's this much of a hassle and comes complete with family?"

Noble huffed, not quite a laugh. More...something else, something Tolliver couldn't identify. "I forget you still don't know me very well. But you will." Noble took him by the hand and pulled him smoothly to his feet.

Tolliver wobbled, loose limbed from climax.

Noble caught him. "Come back to my place tonight. If you're ready. If you want to. The choice is up to you."

Tolliver's throat was parched, and his blood ran too hot for his body to cope with. He didn't have to think about it. "Yes."

"I hoped you'd say that," Noble replied as if he hadn't wondered at all about Tolliver's answer, and kissed him. Deeply. Tolliver closed his eyes and lost himself to the sweeping pressure of Noble's tongue. He let himself be claimed, and decided he wouldn't let himself think too much about *this*.

All he had to do was trust Noble, and Tolliver thought he could do that.

But he'd see how it worked out in practice tonight.

Chapter Eleven

Tolliver's knuckles brushed the natural, unvarnished wood of Noble's door. He hadn't noticed the small details the last time he was there, distracted by the rain and cold and his attempt to outrun fear.

Noble opened the door at the first quiet knock. He stood gracefully, easily, 100 percent comfortable in his own skin. Barefooted, ragged jeans, a dark, whiskey-colored sleeveless T-shirt. His smile was slow and soft around the edges, a match to the dim amber light behind him.

"Sometimes I wonder if you pose for me," Tolliver admitted, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He bit his tongue.

Noble wasn't offended. He chuckled and stood aside. "Not really, no."

"Then why does it always come across as a dramatic effect every time I see you?"

"I don't know." Noble slid forward and cupped Tolliver's cheek, bending to kiss him. "Maybe you should ask yourself that."

When their lips touched, Tolliver shivered, his uncertainty splintering apart. He let Noble in, and though he wasn't able to get it together enough to kiss back, he could let Noble have his way.

Noble purred, deepening the kiss, tracing the tip of his tongue over the ridge of Tolliver's soft palate, then stroking against Tolliver's tongue in a slow, lazy imitation of making love. He held Tolliver up with an arm around his waist when Tolliver's knees turned to water.

Too soon, he let go and rested his forehead against Tolliver's. "Come inside with me," he murmured. "You're ready for this."

"You see that?" Unsure of what to do with his hands, Tolliver let them settle lightly on Noble's hips.

“Mm-hmm.”

“What if I don’t?” Jitters turned Tolliver’s blood chilly. “Noble, what if I’m no good at this?”

Noble nipped his earlobe. It stung, shaking him out of his rising upset. “Trust me.” He palmed Tolliver’s ass, intimate and just dominating enough to shake off the fears. “You’re all I want. Come inside.”

Tolliver swallowed hard. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Noble repeated. He untangled them from their embrace on his doorstep but kept one arm around Tolliver’s waist, guiding both over to the mantel.

Embarrassed -- or was it bashful? -- for reasons Tolliver didn’t want to think about, because they’d get in the way and make him doubt again, instead of watching Noble he scanned Noble’s home to see what else he’d missed.

His attention was drawn instead by what he saw had changed. A hearth he hadn’t seen before, a low fire of fragrant cedar logs burning. The amber light he’d seen was from an oil shadow lantern, which sent mysterious shapes circling the edges of the ceiling, and from a fat, three-wick candle on either end of Noble’s catch-all table. Thick rugs had been rearranged, piled thick and soft seemingly at random. One, a sheepskin, begged to be touched.

“Romantic.” Tolliver tried to joke, still unable to look at Noble. “It looks like you’re trying to impress a girl in here.”

“I don’t think you’re a girl.” Noble blanketed him from behind, fitting his groin to Tolliver’s ass. “I think you’re you, and you’re the one I want.” He rocked forward, the hardness unmistakable.

“I’m surprised there aren’t rose petals and champagne.”

Noble laughed quietly, his breath warm in Tolliver’s ear. “Even I have my limits and except for ouzo I’m not a big drinker.”

“The brandy you gave me?”

Noble shrugged. “I bought it that day.”

“For me?”

“Mm-hmm.” Noble nuzzled the nape of his neck. Tolliver felt him smiling there. “Tell you what... I’ll make more Turkish coffee later.”

“Later?” Tolliver’s heart rate picked up.

“Much later.” Noble’s lips traveled down Tolliver’s throat, stopping to playfully worry the juncture of neck and shoulder. He rested his palm over Tolliver’s rising cock. “Don’t be afraid. Trust me. I won’t hurt you.”

“That’s not it. I *know* you won’t, I just...” Tolliver trailed off, not sure what he needed to say.

Noble nodded, the fringes of his hair tickling Tolliver. "I understand you, you know." He found his way inside Tolliver's shirt and stroked his belly.

Tolliver's muscles tightened. God, how could one simple touch light him on fire like this? He breathed out, hitching back to feel Noble pushing against him.

"Let me take care of you," Noble coaxed, tightening their fit until no air could pass between where they were joined. "I want to."

Tolliver closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay."

"One step forward," Noble said. He kissed the back of Tolliver's neck and sighed, though he didn't sound unhappy. "Do you trust me?"

Tolliver licked his lips and nodded, his eyes still closed.

"Then sit on the couch."

"What?"

"I'll walk you there. Keep hold of my hand, and I won't let you fall."

"Okay."

Tolliver could have opened his eyes, now. Could have taken it all in. He thought he liked this better somehow, walking through the dark. Noble stopped him long enough to ask him to remove his shoes. When he'd toed his sneakers off, and then his socks, the softness of the sheepskin, which he'd barely registered before, sent a slow rolling wave of need through him.

Noble nudged him gently. "Almost there."

He let Noble ease him down to the couch, its nubby texture softened by a thick throw blanket of some kind that embraced him.

"Shirt off," Noble said, helping him raise his arms. Cool air washed his bare skin, the heat of the fire a distant warmth.

Should he...?

"It's good this way," Noble said, his voice lower. He took Tolliver by the calves and moved them apart.

Oh, God. He was kneeling. Even as Tolliver opened to let Noble in, he jolted.

"I want to suck you," Noble told him, stroking the inside of his thighs. "Tell me I can."

"I've never..."

"I know." The featherlight pressure of a kiss brushed under his navel. "Let me show you how good it is."

Tolliver's mouth tasted metallic. He tried to clear it with sweeps of his tongue and nodded.

Noble bit him gently. "Everything I ever wanted," he said, drawing Tolliver's zipper open. Tolliver threw his head back, the stuffed softness of the couch cushioning the blow, when Noble's dry, callused fingers drew his cock out.

"Can I?" Tolliver heard himself ask while fumbling for Noble, needing something to hold onto.

Noble bumped his head to Tolliver's abs. "Hard as you want," he said, and let Tolliver find his grip in Noble's hair before sliding his lips around Tolliver's cock.

"Oh, *God!*" He couldn't. Too much.

"Yes, you can," Noble drew off to say. "Hush."

Tolliver's eyes drifted open of their own accord. His vision was hazy, but what he saw dizzied him: his cock gliding into Noble's mouth in time with the slick, sleek firmness of Noble's tongue on the underside, tickling the nerves just beneath.

Noble made a hungry noise and clasped Tolliver's hip, the pressure of his grip strong enough to leave bruises later. Tolliver didn't care. He knotted Noble's hair around his knuckles and clung to him. Watching, unable to look away, not wanting to look away. Noble's cheeks were distorted, full of cock, the darkening hue of his lips impossibly hot wrapped around his cock.

His balls began to tighten and draw up against his body. He whined wordlessly, not wanting this to be over so soon.

Noble's grip lightened. He stroked Tolliver's abused skin and slowed down his rise and fall on Tolliver's cock. When he pulled off to ask, "Better?" a thin string of precum trailed from his lower lip to Tolliver's hard-on.

Tolliver gritted his teeth and pressed his head to the back of the couch. "You," he said, helpless to think of what to say next.

"Better," Noble said, amusement warming the word. He lapped around the mushroom crown of Tolliver's cock and slid back down slowly, slowly, slowly.

The firelight's warmth, and Noble's, suffused him. Tolliver's world dwindled down to nothing more than wetness, heat, pressure, all his essence concentrated in Noble's skilled mouth and the need to come.

Noble kept him on the edge for Tolliver didn't know how long, always stopping when he got too close, waiting for him to calm down.

Tolliver shook his head the last time, sweat rolling down his chest. He ached, burned, throbbed with need. "Hurts. Please."

"Please what?" Noble tugged his sore sac.

"Let me come."

"Where?" Noble guided the head of Tolliver's cock around his lips, and across his cheekbones, painting his face. Tolliver's hips bucked at the sight of the shiny, wet trails he left behind and at the dark gleam in Noble's eye.

Tolliver understood what Noble was asking. He shuddered. "I don't know."

"In my mouth?" Noble tongued the thick vein standing out on Tolliver's cock, laving it with wetness.

Tolliver whimpered.

"All you have to do is ask."

"God. Yes. Please."

"Yes," Noble echoed on a breath. He took Tolliver in his mouth once more and set a fast rhythm, bobbing on his cock, tongue's pressure firm, unrelenting. He kneaded Tolliver's legs and made small, desperate, hungry noises.

Tolliver cried out, a hoarse and ragged yell, and held Noble's head still by the hair to thrust into his mouth. When he bumped the softness at the back of Noble's throat and realized how far he'd gone, his yell ended on the last of his air and he hiccupped, coming in a scalding wash that Noble swallowed every drop of.

Though he could barely focus, much less make his limbs cooperate, Tolliver tugged Noble's hair. "Up here," he begged. "Come up with me."

Noble surged to the couch to join Tolliver and straddled him with one knee braced on the couch and one foot on the floor. He crushed his mouth to Tolliver's, and this time, it was Tolliver who swept Noble's mouth, hunting down the flavor he realized was his own cum.

Too impatient to waste time on a zipper or the buttons, he thrust his hand in Noble's jeans and found that Noble's cock filled his grasp as if they'd been made to go together. He kept Noble's mouth fused to his and jacked him off with rough, clumsy strokes, rewarded by thick ropes of cum spilling down his wrist.

They parted, both gasping for air. It wasn't until then that Tolliver comprehended what he'd done: he'd reached for Noble on his own and had done this by his own choice. Because he'd *wanted* it. Craved, like an addiction, the sensation of Noble shuddering apart because *he* drove Noble there.

Noble huffed a quiet laugh and rested his forehead on Tolliver's shoulder. "See?" he asked, drawing meaningless patterns on Tolliver's sweat-slick chest. "See how good?"

"Yeah. I do. I see." Tolliver rested his chin atop Noble's head, breathed in the scent of musk and man, and was content.

* * * * *

Noble deftly washed Tolliver's forearm clean with the soft, damp cloth he'd insisted on bringing them. "Hungry?"

Something of the devil in Tolliver, a wicked corner that he hadn't known he owned before tonight -- before Noble -- rose in him. "Starving." He raised his wrist to his mouth and licked off a speck of bitter, salty cum. "You missed a spot."

He savored the momentary blink of astonishment almost as much as the spreading predatory and pleased smile that curved Noble's lips over his white, white teeth.

"I could eat." Returning tit for tat, Noble nuzzled the wing of Tolliver's pelvis while at the same time sliding his hand down the back of Tolliver's jeans and fingering the cleft of his ass.

Tolliver was puzzled until he remembered what the cards had suggested, one of them depicting the process of licking a man open. He stilled, shocked.

Noble's laughter wasn't cruel. "Are you hungry for *food*?" he asked, standing and offering Tolliver a hand.

Tolliver shook off his astonishment and let Noble pull him to his feet. He felt lighter than usual, as if he didn't quite touch the ground. "Very," he admitted.

"You forget to eat lunch more often than you should," Noble remarked. He walked away, letting Tolliver admire the curve of his back and its narrow tapering over his firm ass.

"I don't *forget*, not per se."

Noble stopped. His eyes went briefly out of focus. "Oh. You don't. You 'forget' to make your lunch so there's extra in the fridge for dinner. Tolliver," he said in reproach.

Tolliver turned away, refusing to look Noble in the eye. "It's not like that."

"You do without to provide for her," Noble said quietly. "Don't tell me it's not true."

"She needs more than I do," Tolliver tried to excuse himself. "She's still growing. She needs milk and protein. Dairy and meat are expensive, and I have to put aside enough for her to go to college. If that means I make do with a tomato sandwich, then fine. It won't hurt me. I don't go literally hungry."

"Don't you?" Tolliver could sense Noble's weighing him in the balance. "You don't think you do, but this is the first thing you've taken for yourself since you agreed to take care of her. How is that not starving yourself?"

And for that, Tolliver had no argument. Feeling abruptly bereft and forlorn, he watched in silence as Noble disappeared into the kitchen.

Noble reappeared, leaning around the door frame. "Keep me company while I cook?"

Tolliver's upset melted, leaving only relief in its wake. "I can do that."

"You can." Noble twinkled at him and beckoned with one curled finger.

Tolliver followed him.

* * * * *

Lingering by the side of the gas range, Tolliver watched, idly fascinated, at the skill with which Noble whisked eggs and cream together over low heat, added fresh grated cheese, fragrant chopped mushrooms, and bits of crumbled bacon.

"It hasn't always been like this," he found himself saying.

Noble added white pepper. He didn't look up at Tolliver, for which Tolliver was grateful. "How so?"

"I was eighteen when Mom died."

Noble nodded, listening.

"Don't be sorry for me. It was a long time ago."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-four."

"Hasn't been that long," Noble said mildly, but didn't push it further.

"I'm not sure about Dad's side of the family. I think he was an only child, and he and his parents didn't get along. He vanished into thin air sometime before Sarah was even born. We heard a few years afterward that he'd had a head-on collision with a tree."

"I'm sorry."

"I told you, don't be. I barely remember him."

"That's not what I was sorry for," Noble said obliquely. "Go on."

Tolliver fidgeted, once again feeling as if he'd missed a key point somehow. "Grandmom went back in the nineties, and Mom..." Tolliver growled, frustrated with himself. "I'm trying to explain why things are the way they are."

"No one said you were doing a bad job." Noble cut him a quick, patient glance. No pity, just sympathy. Tolliver wouldn't have been able to explain the difference to anyone, but he thought he was sure of it. "No one thinks that about what you do with Sarah, either, you know."

Tolliver slumped, propping himself on the refrigerator. "Don't they?" He laughed, the taste of it bitter. "They were going to stick her in foster care. She was only nine. Maybe it would have been better for her, but the store...and she was the only family I had left, you know?"

Noble nodded silently. He added chopped green peppers to the slowly forming omelet. The oven's timer went off, surprising Tolliver.

The tray of sausage puffs, redolent with sage and pepper, that Noble pulled out to cool, drew water to Tolliver's mouth.

"Go on," Noble said.

"Kind of hard to concentrate when I'm looking at that."

Noble chuckled. "Try."

"I did the best I could by her. Didn't know how, but I worked hard. And then..." He scrubbed angrily at his face. "What kind of guardian is it, though, who's too busy to see that his sister's in trouble until he finds her crying in the bathroom over a positive pregnancy test?"

Damn. He hadn't meant to say that much.

Noble only nodded. "I wondered. A customer came in with a baby, a little girl, in a stroller. The sadness in her eyes... Sarah gave her baby up for adoption, didn't she? And the father was this Silver guy she tried to walk away with today."

"Yeah. I don't know, Noble, I just..." Tolliver started to back away from the range, his appetite dwindling. "I feel like I'm failing her somehow by doing this. Like it's not something I can do before she's grown up. She meant well by trying to hook us up, but I don't think she got what it'd mean for me to divide my time."

"No, she didn't." Noble calmly slid the omelet pan off the burner and snuffed the blue gas flame. He turned to Tolliver and wiped his hands on a worn pale yellow hand towel. The openness with which he studied Tolliver made him uncomfortable, too small and too much an open book.

Turned him on too much, to have someone looking at him and *seeing* him.

"I don't regret what I chose to do with my life," he said abruptly.

"No. You did the right thing and the best thing by your sister. But Tolliver..." Noble reached for him and stopped halfway. "That's your life for her. What about a life for you? Where does that start?"

"Don't ask me that."

"Why?"

"Because *I don't know!*"

The silence echoed after Tolliver's shout. He turned away, already walking. "I should go."

Noble's hand landed on his shoulder, stopping him and whirling him around. Tolliver found himself bent nearly backward, Noble the only thing holding him up, Noble covering him, the fiery light of something Tolliver recognized but didn't want to burning him up from the inside.

That kind of heat would scorch them both alive.

Tolliver pressed his palms to Noble's chest. "Let me go."

"No." Noble did something Tolliver couldn't track, ending up with one wrist pinned in one of Noble's hands and one of his arms held out taut with Noble keeping it from moving. "I see you with me, Tolliver. I see you with me always. I'm not letting you go now."

A fine tremor worked its way through Tolliver. "Then what are you going to do about it?"

"What we're both ready for now," Noble said, low and dangerous as a stalking cougar, and seized Tolliver's mouth with his own.

Chapter Twelve

Tolliver hit the bed -- Noble's bed -- on his back, pushed down hard. The mattress jounced, rocking him as if he were at sea, and rolled again with the added weight of Noble joining him.

He stared up at Noble, caught between fear and fascination and demanding hunger.

Noble kneeled, pulling his shirt over his head. *God*. Tolliver had seen the muscles through his unending succession of sleeveless T's, but without the cloth in the way...

He reached out to touch, hissing at the sensation of rippling muscle beneath smooth skin.

"The things you do to me." Noble pulled his hands away and drew them to the slats of the headboard. "Keep them there. Don't let go."

The way he'd dreamed. Tolliver swallowed, dry of saliva, his throat scratchy, and nodded, not trusting himself to speech.

High above him, Noble slid his belt free of its loops and threw it on the bed by Tolliver's side. The gleam of the buckle on the rawhide drew his attention with a frisson of alarm and a startling rush of heat.

Noble shoved down his jeans and dark red boxer briefs, skinning free of them. Completely naked for the first time in Tolliver's presence, a colossus of a man on fire, caught in the throes of something Tolliver couldn't even begin to understand.

It terrified him, but he couldn't think about fighting. He gripped the slats tighter, staring at Noble.

The thick length of Noble's engorged cock, heavy yet hard enough to strain up, slapped his belly wetly. Saliva returned to Tolliver's mouth, along with the burning need to taste and touch.

Noble pushed him down. "These go first," he said thickly, opening Tolliver's jeans and skimming them down his legs. Tolliver raised his hips to help, hoping it was the right thing. Needing it to be.

He only understood, after the denim cleared his toes, that he was naked now too. His lips parted on a soundless repetition of Noble's name.

Noble's full weight came to rest on him. He stole Tolliver's mouth with his own, savaging him, turning the angle to go deeper and deeper still.

When he tore away for breath, his eyes were squeezed tightly shut and his breathing harsh. "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry, you just... Tolliver, there's so much you don't know about yourself. So much."

"Don't be sorry." Tolliver wanted to smooth down the tangles of Noble's leonine hair. Wanted to stroke the long, sculpted planes of his back. "I want..."

"Do you?" Noble lowered his mouth to Tolliver's nipple and latched on, worrying the bit of flesh between his teeth until Tolliver cried out. "You don't know yourself. The things you want, you need, and you don't see them there. But I do. I do."

"Then show me," Tolliver begged. He worked up the nerve to hook his knee around Noble's. Though he hadn't known it would happen, the move brought their cocks together.

The first skin-to-skin brush of his cock with another man's made him want to shout though, his voice was worn down to almost nothing; the rough pressure of Noble claspings their erections together and working both shafts at once made his toes curl.

"Noble," Tolliver said in a hoarse whisper, shaking apart. "Show me what you see. Okay? I need to know."

"I have to either way. I have to." Noble twisted his wrist on the down stroke and let go, sliding their bodies together. It was the way he'd dreamed it would happen, Noble's cock gliding slickly in the crux of Tolliver's thigh, fitting as if the space had been made and meant for this.

Tolliver read between the lines. "I have to" meant "I need to."

And so did he.

"Please," Noble begged, rolling their bodies together. "I have to."

Meant "I can't stop."

He didn't want Noble to stop. "Okay." He found he was able to kiss Noble's shoulder and hung on, sucking his own mark dark and deep. "Okay."

Tolliver raised his hips to meet Noble's and found his rhythm. Every time their cocks bumped, he moaned low in his throat. He couldn't think. Couldn't do anything but exist and let this consume him from the inside out.

When Noble broke free, he cried out in dismay. "Don't stop. More."

"No." Noble's throat worked, a near-painful sound. "There are things you need to know you like."

"I like *this*," Tolliver said, laughing breathlessly. "Please, more."

"Not yet. You have to know." Noble moved over him, licking a long stripe down his sternum. He bit Tolliver's navel, buried his nose in the coarse dark hair surrounding Tolliver's urgently throbbing cock and sucked him for far too quick a second, both groaning. He surged back up and licked the side of Tolliver's armpit.

Tolliver's hips jerked. Who'd ever even want...

Noble did. And he did too.

"So many things," Noble echoed himself, words rolling one into the other; Tolliver didn't even think Noble was hearing himself speak. "Turn over."

Tolliver stiffened, but only for a second. He let go of the headboard, his knuckles feeling stiff and rusty to him, and rolled to his stomach. Without being asked, he grasped the slats again and held on tight, his shoulders tense.

"You like this," Noble rasped. He slid atop Tolliver from behind and straddled him. The wet bluntness of his cock nudged Tolliver's ass.

Tolliver sucked in a harsh breath and stifled his groan in the tousled blankets beneath him.

"I won't hurt you." Noble spoke with an effort, each word in sync with a nudge of his cock. He stroked through the cleft of Tolliver's ass and circled the tightly drawn ring of muscle. "One finger. Okay?"

Tolliver wanted to say no. One fingertip, barely breaching him, was too much. But he *wanted* more, no matter what the cost. He keened softly instead and made himself nod.

"Shh. I won't hurt you," he soothed, dropping hot, stinging kisses over Tolliver's shoulders. He shifted position, his cock sliding between Tolliver's parted legs and hitting his sac from behind.

"Oh *God*."

"Just this. For now," Noble said, stroking fast and sure.

"No. More." Tolliver tried to move back to meet Noble, tried to move so he invited Noble back up. The wood slats burned his fingers where he gripped them too hard, but he didn't care.

"Not time yet."

"*More*," Tolliver pleaded, writhing beneath Noble. Sweat dripped into his eyes. For a crazy second, he wondered how they'd gotten there. How Noble had changed him so fast from a man happy with the life he'd always known to a...to an animal, desperate for what only Noble could give him.

"A taste," Noble breathed hotly on Tolliver's neck. He prodded Tolliver's lips with his pointer finger.

When Tolliver understood, his stomach churned with something he couldn't put a name to. He sucked Noble's finger, laving it with his tongue.

Noble drew it free with an obscenely wet sound. He shifted his weight, and Tolliver was acutely aware of each small movement. He shuddered out a rough-edged breath, every wisp he had in him, when Noble's saliva-slicked finger found his hole again and pushed, all the while fucking between the V of his legs.

"Tight," Noble said, sounding as if his teeth were gritted.

Tolliver grunted, trying to hold still. He *wanted*, he did, but... "Hurts," he panted.

"Always does. At first." Noble pressed his lips to the back of Tolliver's neck. "You can do it."

He closed his eyes and let himself return to the dream he'd had in the bookstore. Noble licking him open. The wet stroke of Noble's finger was almost like his tongue.

A stinging burn jolted him alert. He gasped, his grasp on the slats flexing spasmodically. Noble was inside him. God.

"Make it so good for you," Noble whispered urgently, speeding his thrusts, losing his pace. "Wait, wait -- like this --"

He caught Tolliver by the waist and pulled him up, away from the headboard and backward onto Noble's lap, Noble more than strong enough to hold him there. With the shift, his finger came free but his cock, slippery with precum, stroked harder through the cleft in Tolliver's ass. When Noble grasped Tolliver's cock too tight and thrust up, exactly as the head of his cock wetly bumped Tolliver's entrance, Tolliver lost control. His cum splashed the sheets, and in the next second, along with the sharp bite of Noble's teeth to the back of his neck, heated wetness coursed over him.

They hung together, Tolliver too worn out to think or to move, yet somehow he found the strength to turn his head blindly seeking Noble's kiss.

Their mouths moved together, less a kiss than a stroking of lips to lips. Noble's chest heaved far harder than it had when they were running in the park.

The thought made Tolliver laugh aloud.

Noble's lips quirked against his. "What's funny?"

"I am," Tolliver said. "For not knowing before what this'd be like. What it'd do for me."

"Mmm." Noble pressed his forehead to Tolliver's. "Now you do."

"Mmm."

"Stay awhile?" Noble asked, not letting go. "Sleep an hour or two with me. This is what you needed. You had to know how much *I* need you, too. I need you to let me in your world. I..." He stroked Tolliver's hair. "I see it as what makes us both whole."

Chapter Thirteen

The sun came up behind dense, iron gray clouds, yet the air was clear, the wind sharp. The smell of snow saturated the air.

“Winter settles in fast around here.” Noble turned his face to the sky. “Is it always like this?”

“Every year’s different.” Tolliver kept pace beside Noble, one gloved hand in his jacket pocket for warmth and one wrapped around a tall paper cup of coffee from Tres Bean.

“I like that. Change is good.” Noble sipped idly from his own cup, leaving Tolliver wondering what he was thinking *now*, as he had since Noble had turned up at his doorstep at eight o’clock with a broad smile and two hot coffees to ask if Tolliver wanted company on his walk to work.

“You didn’t have to get me this,” he said, awkwardly gesturing with the cup.

“Why not?” Noble glanced sideways at him, sly and mischievous. “I thought we’d both figured out by now that I was courting you.”

“If you want to call what we’re doing *courting*.” Tolliver poked the irregularly shaped love bruise he’d left on Noble’s collarbone.

Noble laughed and dodged, all without spilling a drop of his tall coffee. Sometimes, Tolliver wondered if he was really part animal, with his grace and lionlike appearance. It’d sure explain his tolerance for the cold.

For example, his sole concession to the change in weather was to throw a long-sleeved, blue-striped cotton shirt over his customary sleeveless T-shirt, a warm brown today. He hadn’t even done up the buttons.

“How are you not freezing?” Tolliver asked, honestly curious.

"I'm warm-blooded," Noble replied in the absent manner of one who'd been answering that question for most of his life. He added, more directly, "I like to feel the world around me. Sun, rain, wind, warmth, cold. I need to stay connected."

"Huh." Tolliver thought that one over. "Because what you 'see' sets you apart."

He could feel the warmth of Noble's approval better than the heat of his body, less than a foot away. "I told you, you're special. No one's ever figured that one out before."

Tolliver stopped walking. Two paces ahead, Noble stopped too and turned back, quizzical. "No one. Not ever. Honestly?"

The light in Noble's eyes shuttered and went dark, but not with the sensual heat Tolliver was used to coming with that change. This time he looked...empty. The dull, bleak emptiness of a window boarded up with angry strokes of a hammer. "No one."

He walked on.

Tolliver hurried to catch up, sloshing coffee over the faux leather of his glove. "Not even your family?"

Noble shrugged, face forward, his movement strangely stiff. "I don't have any family."

The admission came as a surprise. A guy like Noble, jeez, Tolliver would have expected him to be the type raised by strong parents who urged him to be the best he could be. He should have had a home, surrounded by friends, and -- and a lover, even if he didn't believe in Noble's second sight.

Why hadn't he ever questioned why Noble had come to live here alone? Troubled, Tolliver lengthened his strides to keep pace with Noble's longer legs taking quicker paces. "Sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Noble shook his head terrier-style and grinned at Tolliver, almost at his full wattage. Almost. "Don't worry about it. A guy like me who roams around the way I do? Nah. It's better this way. I've been free to go where the world calls me."

His words hit Tolliver low in the gut. He hadn't thought... No, of course Noble wouldn't stay here forever.

"Don't." Noble caught the wrist attached to the hand Tolliver still held in his pocket and pulled it out. "I saw what you were thinking just there." He squeezed Tolliver's gloved fingers. "I'm not leaving you of my own will or choice."

Sounded ambiguous to Tolliver. "Which means?"

"Which means I'm not leaving you."

Something was still off. Tolliver tried to figure a way to say what he meant, to phrase the question in a way that made sense.

"Not unless you kick me out of the nest," Noble said, his grip tightening.

"You're hardly a fledgling."

"We all are, in our ways. I'm not going anywhere if I can help it, and I'm going to do my best to see that day never comes. Now enough of the doom and gloom, okay?" Noble shoulder-bumped him affectionately.

"Answer another question for me?"

"If it's something you need to hear."

Fair enough. "What did you mean when you said 'where the world called you'?" Tolliver deliberately used the past tense to see what would happen.

He noted a slight relaxing of Noble's shoulders even as Noble tapped his head. "Mostly, I've moved on when I saw places I needed to be. People who needed to be warned, or helped."

"So you're like a wandering superhero."

Noble laughed. "Not exactly. No cape and tights --"

"And no one ever believes you."

"Nope."

"But you go to them anyway."

Noble inclined his head. "I do. Drink your coffee before it goes cold."

Tolliver sipped obediently, the smooth wash of coffee and cream going down in a soothing rush. He thought as he swallowed and, before he could lose his nerve, asked, "When you came here...was it because you'd seen me? God, that sounds conceited."

"No, it doesn't." Noble tucked his and Tolliver's linked hands in Tolliver's coat pocket, nestling deep. "I didn't specifically see you." A line formed between his eyebrows. "More like I saw an emptiness that shouldn't have been there."

"Is that usual?"

"Not at all." Noble drained his cup and sent it soaring into a public trash can. "That's why I came as fast as I could. I saw how it really was when Sarah asked to have her fortune read at the street fair."

"You're being honest with me."

"Always. Why do you sound like that's confusing?"

"Because I still can't figure you out." Tolliver grinned ruefully as Noble laughed. "It wasn't a compliment."

"Yes, it was."

"So maybe it was." They drew to a stop one door down from Old Curiosity, in front of Joey's bakery.

"I hear he's the best in town. Does he do Turkish coffee?" Noble asked, indicating the store with its intoxicating smells of vanilla and dark chocolate.

"Nope."

Noble scanned the shop window. Joey stood inside, behind the display case at his flour-dusted worktable, rolling dough. "I should meet him sometime soon. Wonder why I haven't before?" Again, he looked troubled.

Tolliver didn't care at all for that look on Noble's face and spoke without thinking to try to erase it. "I've been thinking."

"When don't you?" Noble reached across them to knuckle-rub Tolliver's head lightly.

Ow. Still, Noble looked almost back to normal, and that was good enough to keep Tolliver going. "Thinking about what we do together."

"Oh." Noble sobered, but not in the dark and unhappy way. More attentive.

That was the thing about Noble, Tolliver realized all over again -- the way he focused on you as if you were the only thing in the world he could see when you spoke. And if he looked too deeply for comfort, well...that was Noble, too.

"Tolliver," Noble prompted him. "What're you thinking about?"

"About sex." Tolliver's cheeks heated, but he pressed on. "I mean...more than last night. More than fingers."

"Ah." Noble's expression slid into the smoky, predatory pleasure Tolliver was learning he liked best. He parted their joined hands and faced Tolliver head-on, smoothing his hand down Tolliver's arm in light but stimulating strokes. "And?"

"And I want it." Tolliver showed him the respect due by meeting his gaze. Inviting him to look and see. "I don't know if I can, though. If I'll like it. If I'll be any good at it."

"Trust me. You don't need to worry about that," Noble said, the low sensuality of his tone curling Tolliver's toes. "There's time. You'll understand soon."

"And if I don't?"

"You will." Noble brushed Tolliver's hair off the nape of his neck. "I see you for who you are, and I know you're more than you think yourself to be. I'd said you were everything I'd ever wanted, and I meant it."

A surge of energy provoked by the words demanded a vent. Tolliver surged up on his toes and pressed his lips to Noble's.

Guess Noble had seen that coming too. No pause, no surprise, but only his arms going around Tolliver's waist and holding him tight. They lingered together for a span of time Tolliver didn't try to measure, tasting and slowly savoring.

Noble's skin was flushed warmer than ever and his hair disarranged when they let go. "Told you so."

"You're unreal."

"True." Noble kissed him quickly, a bare taste that left Tolliver wanting more. "That one was for good luck at work today."

A thought came to Tolliver. "Do you want to...?" He nodded at Old Curiosity.

There was no denying the light of desire, though completely nonsexual, that brightened Noble. "Do you want me to?"

"If you don't have work of your own that you should be doing instead."

"It'll keep," Noble said, drawing Tolliver in for a third kiss. "The baker's watching us," he murmured, threaded with gentle humor. "Let's take this inside."

Tolliver glanced up to see Joey, hands still in a kneading bowl, watching them. He couldn't make out Joey's expression through distance and glass. Slightly embarrassed, he tried to wave.

Joey didn't move.

Uncomfortable, Tolliver rolled his shoulders and caught Noble's hand, pulling him toward Old Curiosity. "Don't think I won't put you to work, though," he warned, searching for his keys.

"What makes you think I'd mind?"

"Nothing, really."

"There you go, then."

* * * * *

"Almost out of nails," Noble said after taking the last one cradled between his lips and centering it on the bookshelf he'd busied himself repairing. He struck true, *bam, bam, bam*. "Are there any other boxes in the back room anywhere, or should I make a hardware store run?"

Tolliver had spent most of the hour it'd taken Noble to fit the broken bookshelf back together alternating between attempts at constructing an online storefront and surreptitiously watching him. Noble wasn't a natural carpenter, and he sometimes banded his thumb or hit a nail wrong, skewing it sideways. He made up for the mistakes with the fluidity of his body, muscles moving smoothly beneath his skin.

More than once, Tolliver had lost himself in a daydream of laying his hands over Noble's body to feel that power working for himself, to see if it was as intense as it looked.

At the moment Noble spoke, he'd just looked back at the lines of perplexing HTML code on the notebook computer's screen. Sarah used the computer for her homework, but she'd loaned it when he'd asked. The two customers who'd been in had given him strange looks, as if wondering but too polite to ask about the Hello Kitty decals.

"There might be more nails in the sundry supply cabinets," he said, trying to play it cool.

The warmth of Noble's tilted grin told Tolliver that Noble had known all along he was being watched.

Tolliver cleared his throat and focused intently on the screen. "I can't help it. Exhibitionist."

"Voyeur," Noble tossed back casually. "You and Kitty hold down the fort."

Tolliver pretended to aim a pencil in readiness for throwing. "Go, go."

He'd gotten bogged down in something called "Flash," perplexed as to how he'd gotten there, and had lost track of time when Noble's brushing his shoulder jerked him out of his computer coma.

Noble asked, forehead furrowed, "Did Sarah go out for anything?"

"No." Tolliver frowned. "Why?"

"I didn't see her in the store." Noble shook his head, hair tucked behind his ears. "I looked everywhere. She's nowhere in the labyrinth."

Oh, God. Tolliver's blood ran cold. Gone? He hadn't even noticed her slipping out, too busy watching Noble. "I thought she was feeling better about things today --"

"Yeah," said Noble, impassive and unreadable again -- if you didn't know him and couldn't see the flare of alarm behind his Zen. "So did I."

Tolliver broke. "Sarah?" he called, dodging around Noble. He sprinted through the stacks, looking this way and looking that way, ignoring Noble's calls to come back.

No Sarah. Not anywhere.

Tolliver knew he was paler than library dust when he made his way back to Noble, who stood with his hands in his pockets by the register. "Noble --"

"Don't panic. Has she done this before?"

"Sometimes." Tolliver tugged at his hair, trying to think. "Before you, though. Not for months. Mostly when she was going through her troubles."

Noble bit his lip.

"What?" Tolliver demanded, irritable and figuring he had every right to be.

"It's not priority right now, but do you know that you never *say* what happened to Sarah?" He held up a hand, palm out. "You hint. You imply. I see, and you confirm."

Tolliver didn't like where this conversation was headed -- and they were wasting time.

"You and she never actually talked about it, did you?" Noble regarded him far too thoughtfully. "She learned her oblique, sweep-it-under-the-rug, bottle-it-up-until-you-implode technique from you."

Tolliver's fists doubled, knuckles straining at the skin. "Are you saying I don't take care of her the way I should?"

"I'm not saying anything of the sort." Noble looked tired and not a little sad. He stepped back. "I don't expect you to believe any of this. No one really is perfect, are they?"

There was something to that, but in the midst of his worries about Sarah, Tolliver couldn't stop to put his finger on it. "Are you going to help me look for her, or what?"

"Of course." Noble had retreated to some place inside his head Tolliver couldn't reach. "I'll search on foot. Check the shops and the park."

"I'll make some calls. Noble?" Tolliver caught the leonine man as he swung about to go. "Noble, I..."

Noble met his gaze, waiting.

Tolliver couldn't find the words. Instead, he pressed his palm to Noble's chest, over his heart and felt the beating. He maintained their eye contact and waited, hoping Noble would understand he was still with him. Confused, angry, but still believing in him.

The subtle undercurrent of sorrow was crosscut by a gleam of hope. Noble lifted Tolliver's hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles, then bit wickedly at one of them. "Don't worry. We *will* find her."

"And she'll be okay?"

Noble hesitated. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't --" Tolliver stopped himself. He wasn't tying that knot again. "Go. If you find her, bring her back."

"I promise." Noble squeezed Tolliver's hand, reluctantly let go, and jogged out of the store.

Tolliver waited until Noble had disappeared from sight before reaching for the store phone. He kept a particular number stored in his memory, not written down anywhere that Sarah might stumble across it.

His fingers found the keypad without his looking. He watched the street, hoping to see his sister, and listened to the ringing on the other end.

"H'lo?" a slurred male voice answered. "Who's 'is?"

"Silver," Tolliver said quietly, levelly. "If she's with you, I'll kill you."

"Wha'...?" Silver coughed in his ear. "The fuck, man? If who's with me? Sarah?"

"Don't play dumb, Silver. Okay? You're an adult."

"I'm twenty years old, asshole. Look..." Silver whoofed out a breath. "Sarah's not with me, 'kay? Haven't seen her since that whole school thing."

"Why should I believe you?" Tolliver knew his temper was rising too high and hot to be rational, but if he had Sarah --

"Maybe 'cuz I'm in a meeting with my probation officer right now?" Silver snorted. "Here. You wanna talk with her?"

Tolliver's thoughts came to a jumbling halt. "Wait. You're what?"

"Probation officer, man. Told her about what happened, figured you might come after me. Damn, was I right. Sarah ain't here, Mr. Bennigan. Swear to God."

Tolliver didn't want to believe him. "So let me talk to this 'officer,' then. Right now."

"Your wish," Silver said. Plastic-sounding clunks and rattles broke the conversation.

A crisp yet fluid voice with a slight Hispanic accent addressed him. "Mr. Bennigan, does there seem to be a problem?"

"Who are you?"

"Lieutenant Dyan. I'm the officer assigned to oversee Silver's rehabilitation."

"Tell 'im I been on detox for six weeks now!" Silver called in the background.

"Is that true?"

Papers rustled. "Five weeks and four days. Mr. Bennigan, I can assure you Sarah's not in my office with Silver right now. If she were, I would be the one calling you, and yes, Silver has confessed that he did meet her. He claims she called him."

Words escaped Tolliver, all but "What?"

"Silver confessed of his own free will, and we are renegotiating the terms of his probation," Dyan said.

"See? 'M not that bad a guy," Silver butted in.

"Yes, you are."

"Gentlemen!" Dyan snapped. "Mr. Bennigan, your sister. Is she missing?"

"Just for an hour or two. Maybe three." Tolliver's tongue had gone numb. "We're looking for her."

"The required waiting period to report a missing person --"

"I know!" Tolliver interrupted. "Ask Silver if he knows where she went."

Dyan must have covered the mouthpiece, muffled as she relayed the question. Crisp again, she informed Tolliver simply, "No. But he says to check the park."

"Okay." Tolliver rubbed his forehead. "Okay."

"Mr. Bennigan, I would suggest you calm down. Take some deep breaths."

"Thank you," Tolliver said instead and hung up the phone. He stared into space, registering nothing but the thrumming panic. He'd screwed up again, and God knew where Sarah was now --

Barely thinking, more moving on impulse, Tolliver caught up his keys and rushed out of Old Curiosity. He clumsily locked the door behind him, cursing his unsteady hands, and banged on Joey's window to alert him before diving inside.

Joey, up to his elbows in some stiff dough, flour dusting his face, stopped and looked oddly at Tolliver. "What's wrong?"

"Sarah. Have you seen her?"

"When? She isn't at work with you?"

Tolliver thumped his fists on the checkout counter. "No! C'mon, Joey, this is important. She's gone missing."

"No, she hasn't." Joey looked away and thumped his dough. "She's across the street on the park bench under that old maple. Your guy's with her."

Tolliver's heart twisted. "Are you serious?"

Joey wouldn't look at him. "Yeah. Go see for yourself."

Turning on his heel, Tolliver bolted for the door. With his hand on the latch, he found himself hesitating. "Joey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." *Thump, thump, thump* was the sound the dough made as Joey kneaded. "Go take care of your sister. Make sure she's okay."

As earlier with Noble, Tolliver knew there was something off here, but he shook his head to try and clear it.

"Tolliver?"

Tolliver tried to look past the fresh gold paint on the glass door. Joey had gotten a logo? He couldn't make out the park clearly enough. "Yeah?"

"If I'd known she was out on her own, I would have touched base with you," Joey said quietly, pausing in his kneading. "I figured you and the big guy had it covered."

"I wasn't paying attention like I should have," Tolliver admitted. He gave Joey an apologetic, helpless shrug. Seemed like there was more Joey wanted to say, but he had to take care of Sarah first.

Once on the sidewalk, Tolliver scanned the park for the old maple Joey had mentioned. Couldn't be far if Joey saw it from the bakery. What did a maple look like, though? He --

Tolliver saw the park bench first. He saw the tree second.

Third, he saw Noble, down on one knee. Noble had taken one of Sarah's small hands between both of his, enveloping it whole to the wrist.

Fourth, he saw -- halfway across the park -- a bright pink stroller festooned with a birthday girl bow.

Oh, God. He'd forgotten what day it was. Hadn't even remembered it was coming up fast. How could he have forgotten --

Because I was with Noble, and I wasn't thinking about anything else.

And because we never have talked about this day.

Fifth, he looked at Sarah and saw her. She'd bent forward, hair hiding her face. He couldn't tell if she was speaking, or what she said, but her shoulders were shaking and the look on Noble's face as Noble spoke to her... God. Worry mixed with nothing-hidden honesty mixed with compassion and empathy.

That, not more than anything but close, shook Tolliver. He only realized he'd slumped against Joey's window when the chill of the glass seeped through his clothes. He dragged his hand over his mouth, the taste inside sour with dying adrenaline.

Noble tried to pull Sarah to him for a hug. Sarah resisted, and Noble didn't push it. Neither did he let go of her hand or stop talking to her, his eyes even from a distance radiating concern and caring.

"It'll be okay," Joey said. Tolliver hadn't heard the bakery door open and only now noticed the smell of almonds, vanilla, and raw sugar. Joey touched his arm, no more than a butterfly-light brush. "It will."

Tolliver barely heard him, too intent on Sarah and Noble, and not trusting himself to go to them yet. His head was too twisted up, anger warring with the kind of relief that threatened to take him to *his* knees.

He watched instead, a strange thought coming to him. Noble didn't move the same or look the same, but there was something familiar...

Illumination dawned. Noble approached Sarah as if she was a daughter, not the kid sister of his boyfriend. Boyfriend? Lover? He didn't back down, but he listened to her, and he tried to help. It was what Tolliver had done for years, only with his own spin, but maybe Noble was better at it.

Tolliver swallowed down an uncomfortable lump. What he'd do with this, he didn't know. And neither did he know where to go from here.

Was *this* why Noble wanted him? Not for himself, but for a ready-made family?

Couldn't be.

Could it?

Chapter Fourteen

Four days, nearly five later, and Tolliver hadn't found any answers that felt right.

He thought maybe it was because he hadn't asked the proper questions.

He really didn't talk about what he should. Noble had been on the mark with that one, damn it, and that was something he didn't know what to do about.

Shouldn't he have been able to figure this stuff out on his own, though?

He wiped his hands on a dish towel and watched Sarah and Noble from his place in the kitchen by the sink. With the water running, he couldn't hear what they were saying to each other.

Seemed to be a trend these days. It wasn't the first time he'd caught them talking quietly.

Not that Tolliver thought for a second anything untoward was going on between them. God, no. After that moment in the park, he'd stood at least a foot or two feet away from Sarah when they had these conversations, his arms crossed or hands in his pockets, and it was all innocent.

All...fatherly.

The changes in Noble fascinated Tolliver. Around him, Noble was all leonine grace and agile prowling. Around Sarah, his intensity softened and his smile was different. Understanding. Sympathetic.

No, Tolliver thought, surprised. *Empathetic*. What...?

As he watched, Noble laughed. Not his usual, uninhibited laugh. Something gentler. He plucked a pack of playing cards from the clutter on the coffee table, magazines and textbooks and logbooks.

Sarah watched, one eyebrow crooked skeptically, but her lips quirked in a smile.

Noble winked at her and, with a flourish any stage magician would be proud of, shuffled the cards lightning fast. He sent an arc of kings and queens and spades through the air from one hand to the other, a perfect half circle without a single card lost.

Tolliver's mouth dropped open, as did Sarah's.

He turned off the water, unable to resist the temptation of curiosity, and went to join them. "Where'd you learn how to do that?"

"Here and there." Noble had cleared a section of the table and laid his cards in a row. He lifted the edge of the farthest one, raised them, and ran them back and forth up on their edges like a fan. He grinned at Tolliver. "It's easier than it looks."

"I doubt that." Tolliver tossed the towel over his shoulder and sat by Noble. He took a quick look at Sarah to gauge her reaction.

There was none, all of her focus on the cards. "They're like dominos when you do that," she said, awe in her voice. "Can you teach me?"

"If you'd like for me to, sure." The cards slipped smoothly, looking like they did it of their own accord, into a smooth-edged stack in Noble's palm. He tossed them down, and they were ordinary cards again with no magic to them.

"Teach me, too?" Tolliver asked, picking the deck up. The slick surfaces were warm from Noble's touch.

Noble put his arm casually around Tolliver's shoulders and addressed Sarah instead. "You'd asked before about my teaching you the tarot. Have you changed your mind?"

Sarah blinked. "That was all the way back at the street fair. You remember that?"

Noble nodded.

"Can't you teach me both?"

"One at a time, but yes. They're not the same. One is illusion. One's perception. Whichever you learn first imbues what you learn second."

"I don't understand," Sarah said, frowning. She leaned over to take the playing cards from Tolliver and tried to shuffle.

"You will."

Sarah huffed and rolled her eyes. "God, you're annoying."

"Am I?" Noble turned to Tolliver, his grin indulgent. Still, Tolliver thought he saw, deep down, the question uneasily genuine in Noble's eyes.

"No," he said, after honest thought. "And yes."

Noble didn't seem displeased by that. He bent to kiss Tolliver fleetingly, chastely.

Tolliver blushed, heat spreading to the roots of his hair. He resisted the urge to reach for Noble in return. There were things he wasn't willing to do in front of Sarah. If you asked him, kisses were pushing it.

Because with Noble, kisses longer than a half second led to more.

Though it'd been almost a week, the night before the morning Sarah went missing, since anything had happened...

Tolliver shook off that particular train of thought and tried settling back, leaning into Noble to satiate his need for touch without being overt. Sarah *seemed* better about his and Noble's relationship. He still didn't want to push it. "How did you meet?" he asked. "At the street fair. How?"

"Tarot," Noble said. He took the playing cards from Sarah and fanned them effortlessly one-handed. "I do a little of everything, but tarot's always been my main focus. I do readings for charity. The money from the street fair went to Lambda Legal."

"Huh?" Tolliver wanted to ask...

Noble tipped his head. "Sometimes, I'll tell fortunes for a reason," he said simply. "When I see something, and I think maybe they'll believe the cards, if not me."

Tolliver checked Sarah for her reaction. She'd drifted off, sorting through the miscellany on the table. He leaned more closely to Noble and looked up at him. "You don't *read* their cards, no matter what they're dealt. You tell them their real future."

"Tarot divination is a real art, Tolliver. It works for some practitioners with intuition and skill. But that's not why I deal and shuffle, no."

"Does it ever work?"

Noble looked uncomfortable. Before Tolliver could move, thinking he'd pushed too far somehow, he answered. "No. Not really. Sometimes, I think, maybe..." He laid his hands on Tolliver's hip and on his left knee, palms up. "But no. Doesn't mean I can quit trying. I have to, to be me. Do you understand that?"

Tolliver nodded.

"No. Be honest with me. *Do* you understand?"

Noble's intensity, sudden and fast like a tiger's leap, confused Tolliver. "Yes. I do. I don't know everything about you" -- *sometimes, I think I know almost nothing at all* -- "but that's you, yeah. It's what you do." He shrugged helplessly. "You can see I'm telling the truth. Why are you asking?"

"No reason." Noble corrected himself, "Nothing that matters. Anymore." He kissed Tolliver's temple and rumbled up his hair.

Tolliver licked his lips to moisten them. "Do you...do you maybe want to go out for a while?"

Noble studied him, curious and seeing deeper than the surface again, the way he had almost a week ago and not since. "What about Sarah?"

"I can call Joey to come hang out here for the night."

"I don't know that that's such a good idea."

“He’d do it. He and Sarah get along well enough.” Tolliver leaned into Noble and placed his hand over Noble’s heart almost unconsciously. It grounded him, to feel Noble’s heart beating. “Please. I want you to myself for a while.”

Noble studied him for long enough for Tolliver to think he’d get a no response. Instead, he smiled. “All right. If Sarah agrees?”

Guiltily, Tolliver turned his head sharply to see Sarah watching them. She’d folded her arms, and the look on her face was impossible to read. Her eyes didn’t match the set of her lips or the color in her cheeks. “Sarah?”

“Go on. I’ll be fine,” she said right away. She picked up a magazine and leafed through it, then looked up to grin at them. “What? It’s okay, I swear. You two have been hanging around me all week like mother hens. Get off my back for a night, please.” She laced the sharp words with soft teasing. “Besides, Joey’s fun. He promised he’d teach me how to make fruit tarts.”

“There’s enough money in household petty cash to do a grocery run. Don’t let him buy everything,” Tolliver cautioned, hesitantly standing.

“I promise, *Der Kommissar*.”

“Cute.” Tolliver couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off. “I’ll give Joey a call.”

The pressure of Noble’s assessing gaze drew his attention. “What?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“I don’t know.” Noble tugged a hank of his hair, twiddling the strands absently. “There’s something about Joey.”

Tolliver lowered his voice. “The way you say that, Noble. Should I be worried about him? Should I not leave him alone with Sarah?”

“What? No. He’d never hurt her.” Noble tickled his cheek with his hair. “There’s something else.”

“What do you see in him?”

“That’s the thing.” Noble shook his head. “I can barely see inside his head.” He looked away from Tolliver’s shocked stare. “Some still waters run deeper than most, I guess,” he said, grinning ruefully. It didn’t quite look right. “I can see that he’s harmless. He’s trustworthy. A nice guy. One of the few left in the world.”

“What about you?” Tolliver tried a playful punch to Noble’s arm. “You can’t tell me you’re not one of the nice guys, too.”

Noble’s smile dropped. “No, Tolliver. I can’t, because I’m not.”

“But you are.”

“I told you once before. I never said I was a good man,” Noble said. He turned abruptly away and made for the door. “Meet you outside, Tolliver.”

Tolliver stared after him, baffled.

“Hey.” Sarah got his attention with a tug on the sleeve. She looked up at him, her black-framed glasses resting halfway down her nose. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Tolliver said, lost all over again. “Are you sure it’s okay if I --”

She pushed him, hard, at the small of the back. “*Yes*. Jeez! Go already, would you?”

* * * * *

Joey answered his phone yawning but agreed after an odd pause. Fifteen minutes later and he was there, nodding sideways to Tolliver, his arms full of grocery sacks.

“You’re too generous,” Tolliver said, feeling strangely awkward, the words limping.

Joey shrugged, still turned away. “I know.”

By the time Tolliver caught up with Noble outside his apartment, whatever was bothering him seemed to have resolved itself. Either that, or he’d put it out of his mind. He greeted Tolliver with the same broad grin and a hand extended to him.

Tolliver took it even as he huddled deeper in his coat. “I still don’t get how you haven’t turned into a Noblesicle by now what with the way you walk around mostly naked.”

“I have jeans, and sandals, and I’m wearing an overshirt,” Noble rebutted, looking amused.

“Kleenex-thin. You’ll catch your death of cold.”

“No, I won’t. It’s only in the midfifties tonight. Here.” Noble slipped behind Tolliver and began to pull the coat off him.

“Hey!” Tolliver protested, resisting.

“Let me.” The old assurance and near-hypnotic soothing power of Noble’s personality eased the fight out of Tolliver. “Trust me. You’ll like this.”

“Like what?” Tolliver asked, suspicious even as he let Noble peel him out of his protective layers.

“This,” Noble said, smoothing his palm down Tolliver’s arm. He opened the buttons at the cuffs of Tolliver’s sleeve and rolled it neatly up to his elbow, then repeated the process on Tolliver’s other arm. He opened the collar three buttons for a finish.

“I don’t get it.”

“Not yet, no. Close your eyes.” Noble placed his hand over Tolliver’s eyes as well. “Use your other senses. *Feel*.”

Tolliver grumbled under his breath as he obeyed.

At first, he didn’t sense anything different.

But then...

He heard the sound of rain beginning to fall, faint pattering he hadn't noticed before. Felt the wet, cool drops on his bare skin. A breeze skirling past raised gooseflesh on his arms. He shivered, cold.

Warmth enveloped and blanketed Tolliver. Noble's chin rested on his shoulder; he held Tolliver with one strong arm around his waist, his hands knotted and resting on Tolliver's belly.

"See' what I meant?" Noble asked, lips brushing Tolliver's ear. His breath tickled. Tolliver pressed closer to him.

"I do," Tolliver said. He tipped forward and back on the balls of his feet, testing his balance and letting Noble support him. "What you see out here in the real world, it isn't exactly what you get. How things really are. There's more. Is that right?"

"Exactly." Noble's laugh was soft and surprised. And impressed.

Pride suffused Tolliver. He didn't open his eyes even when Noble took his hand away.

Soft, hot pressure teased at his lips. "Look at me," Noble requested, no louder than the falling rain.

Tolliver let his eyelids drift open. "I see you."

Noble cupped Tolliver's cheek and feathered strokes of his thumb over Tolliver's cheekbone. "You're starting to. Come on. I have an idea."

He caught Tolliver by the hand and pulled him along.

"Where are we going?"

Noble grinned at him, the old familiar devil in his eye. "You'll see."

"*Noble.*"

"Shh. It's a surprise. Follow me."

* * * * *

"You're joking."

"I'm not." Noble stepped into the water, ankle deep. Raindrops pattering on the surface sent rippling eddies in concentric, connecting circles. He stood naked and unashamed, hidden by the trees around the small pond that Tolliver had never known was on the edge of town.

"I don't know about this."

"Yes, you do." Noble waited patiently for him.

"Anyone could come by and get an eyeful."

"They won't. This is a forgotten place. Besides," Noble said, lips quirking, "they won't get a look at much of anything if you undress fast and come join me in the deeper water."

"Otherwise you'll stand there naked until the sun rises?"

“Something like that.” Noble’s cheeks dimpled at the apex of his widest grin. “Come on. Come play.”

Tolliver shook his head. He kept his eyes on Noble as he started unbuttoning and unzipping. He checked to make sure his cell phone was turned on and tucked safely in his pocket.

“It’s all right,” Noble encouraged.

“Don’t...don’t talk to me right now. Okay? This is hard enough.”

Noble drew his finger across his lips and was quiet. Tolliver knew he understood.

When he’d finished undressing, he shook with the cold and with uneasy embarrassment when he stood naked on the banks of the pond. Though he wanted to, almost more than anything, he didn’t look away.

He was soft, his cock flaccid, and his limbs covered in goose bumps. The rain had plastered his hair to his skull.

The way Noble looked at him, though... God. It took Tolliver’s breath away.

He stepped into the water, hissing between his teeth at the shock of the cold, *ice* cold, and took Noble’s hand.

Letting Noble lead the way, Tolliver followed in his footsteps. The muddy bottom of the pond squished between his toes and was slippery, but if he walked where Noble walked, he didn’t risk a misstep.

Noble stopped when the water reached his breastbone and Tolliver’s collarbones. He turned so that they faced each other, studying Tolliver. “What do you think?”

“I think you really might be crazy,” Tolliver said. “And I think it’s like nothing I’ve ever even thought about doing.”

“I know.” Noble lifted off the pond bottom and closed the space between them, aligning his body with Tolliver’s. The cold of the water dissipated, replaced by the heat Noble emanated. “What else?”

“I think it’s amazing,” Tolliver admitted.

“Good answers,” Noble said, and kissed him.

Tolliver’s eyes closed on a deep sigh of relief. He’d almost wondered if they were going to do this again, naked swimming or not. God, he’d missed the skimming slide of Noble’s tongue between his lips and the firm pressure of Noble’s hand sliding down his back to knead his ass.

He moaned, letting Noble swallow the sound, and jostled Noble, trying to hook his ankle around Noble’s leg without falling.

“Here,” Noble murmured, shifting their balance. He held Tolliver almost fully afloat in the water, in his arms. “Do what you want. Anything you want.”

Tolliver’s pulse sped. “Anything?”

“Almost anything,” Noble tapped his lip. “All but one thing.”

“Why not?” Tolliver didn’t know if he was annoyed, disappointed, relieved, or all of the above.

“Because I have plans,” Noble said. He lapped a path up Tolliver’s throat and stroked his ass, effectively distracting him. “And because I see it shouldn’t be here. Also, because mud gets in strange places.”

Tolliver cracked up. Once he’d started laughing he couldn’t stop, head thrown back to whoop at the starry, dazzling sky above him.

Noble joined him, both arms locked around Tolliver’s waist, swirling them in a slow circle in the water. When Tolliver ran out of breath, Noble pulled him closer with a hand in his hair and kissed him long, slow, and lazy.

“I want to,” Tolliver said, sharing Noble’s breath. “I might be scared, some, but I *want*.”

“I know,” Noble said simply, kissing him again. He shifted fluidly, his grace multiplied in the water, and aligned the iron stiffness of his cock in the crux of Tolliver’s groin. He rubbed Tolliver’s cock one-handed in a slow rhythm. “You do the same to me,” he murmured. He guided Tolliver’s hand to his cock and showed him how to curl his fingers around another man’s swollen shaft and stroke him.

Tolliver was shaking. He hadn’t noticed himself getting hard. He’d been too lost in the rest of the world around him, his senses on overload. Everything was brighter, sharper, almost too much. Even this, as good as it was, almost overcame him.

Noble looked at him, eye to eye, truly eye to eye, their foreheads touching. He ran his thumb over Tolliver’s cockhead and hitched into Tolliver’s hand. “I know,” he said, the two words encapsulating the answers to everything Tolliver could have asked.

“Good,” was all Tolliver could think to say. He stroked Noble’s cock, languid pulls meant to make this last, if he could.

Noble’s eyes rolled back.

“Better,” Tolliver said, and for the first time covered Noble’s mouth with his own, taking instead of taken.

Noble went pliant in Tolliver’s arms and let him in.

* * * * *

“Still cold?”

“Yes, I’m still cold. I’m freezing.” Tolliver huddled in the depths of his jacket, which Noble had kindly given back to him after he’d climbed out of the deep pond with his teeth chattering.

“Mmm.” Noble draped his arm over Tolliver’s shoulders and pulled Tolliver close to his side.

Tolliver closed his eyes and fell into the body heat Noble radiated.

"Better now?" Noble asked, more than a hint of teasing in his question.

"Getting there," Tolliver allowed. He bumped his hip to Noble's. "I can't help my thin blood."

"So you're always cold, except when I'm with you?"

Tolliver cut a suspicious look at Noble. "That's a little too philosophical for me to cope with after skinny-dipping."

Noble laughed and jostled him in a sideways hug. "All you have to do to make me stop is say, 'Stop.' I'm too used to playing the mystic. Fell into it when I was alone."

"Why?"

"No reason not to. I can say this for you," Noble murmured, deftly changing the subject by nibbling at Tolliver's ear as he spoke, diverting his attention. "I wouldn't call you cold. I'd say you're hot."

"Noble." Tolliver squirmed uncomfortably, though he slowed his pace so Noble wouldn't stop nuzzling him.

"If you could have seen yourself," Noble whispered, tracing the shell of Tolliver's ear with the tip of his tongue. "You're a water creature, and you never knew it. You came to life in there. Fell apart so beautifully."

Tolliver knew what Noble was talking about. Could remember it so vividly that his cock twitched at the memory. His legs had wrapped around Noble's waist, the water holding him up and Noble's strong arms not giving him a chance to fall. Noble's tongue stroking hot over his and Noble's hand on his rigid cock, tugging him slick and sure.

"Always knew *you* were hot," Tolliver mumbled, recalling Noble's rutting against him, his cock sliding through the wing of Tolliver's pelvis and Noble's teeth set in his neck.

"There's no fire without fuel." Noble sighed and stood up straight, shaking his head. He pinched Tolliver's ass. "Crick in my neck," he explained when Tolliver yelped.

"A crick in your neck turns you into a surreptitious, sneaky gooser?"

"Yep." Noble nodded solemnly. "Come here." He turned Tolliver in his arms and lifted Tolliver's face to his with two fingers under his chin.

When their lips touched, almost sore from too much kissing already, Tolliver moaned and threaded his fingers through Noble's mane.

It took a passerby's wolf whistle for Tolliver to remember they were in public. He broke the kiss for a half moment...and came back.

Noble welcomed him with a murmur that wasn't words and splayed his palms over Tolliver's back. He tilted his head so their mouths slid together exactly right and exhaled, the sigh of a man who saw home at the end of a long day.

Funny how it got easier and easier to do this with Noble, Tolliver mused. No way would he have made out with anyone where people could see, before him. With a man, no less.

But with Noble, it was all so easy.

Noble let him go when they needed more air than they could get while kissing. Tolliver licked his lips, still tasting Noble there.

"You have stars in your eyes." Noble stroked the delicate skin beside each. "Want a beer?"

Tolliver blinked. He laughed. "That's a prize-winning non sequitur."

"I see a bar two storefronts down. I'm thirsty."

"Thought you said you weren't much of a drinker?"

"I'm not." Noble took on his faraway look, the one Tolliver had learned to associate with his drifting away into seeing more than the physical world around them. "It's odd...it's not vivid, not clear at all, but I see that there's something that needs to happen in that bar."

"Something good?"

Noble shook his head. "I don't know."

"Answer uncertain, try again later?" Tolliver tried to joke.

The humor worked, lifting some of the tension from Noble's shoulders. "I'm not a Magic Eight-Ball. Will you come with me?"

"You should know I will."

"Because you're still floating on the afterglow, or because you want to?" Noble spoke the words for Tolliver alone, breathed against the top of his head.

"Both, I think."

"Good." Noble kissed his scalp and took Tolliver's hand. Tolliver let him, easier still with the public contact. "Let's go."

* * * * *

Tolliver had been in the bar once, maybe twice, since he'd reached legal drinking age. He didn't have any friends in his age group, his high school group having long since drifted away and having no college buddies to replace them. Besides, he'd had Sarah to think of. Friday nights were spent watching TV or reading.

I'm an old man before my time, Tolliver thought. It wasn't the first time the knowledge had come to him, but it was the first occasion on which it'd depressed him. *And I've barely lived at all.*

The warmth and pressure of Noble's hand linked in his pulled Tolliver out of his drifting.

"You're living now," Noble said quietly. "In the moment, even."

Not knowing what to say in return that'd mean what he wanted it to, Tolliver squeezed his hand in return.

He glanced around the inside of the bar, taking in the polished, scarred dark wood and the low lighting. Neon beer signs, clinking glasses and bottles, the yeasty and sharp and bitter smells of alcohol. People he recognized and people he didn't all blended in a sea of faces, their chatter reduced to the hum of meaningless noise of a crowd.

"Do you know what's good on tap?" Noble asked, studying the labels behind the bar.

"Not a clue," Tolliver admitted, tickled more and more by the absurdity of two nondrinkers playing barfly. "Some of the contemporary books I've read say local brews are better."

"We'll try one of those." Carrying Tolliver with him, Noble approached the bar with his same rolling, graceful gait --

And stopped. His limbs stiffened.

The change confused Tolliver. "What's wrong?" he asked, poking Noble to try to get Noble to look at him.

Noble didn't even seem to hear or notice him. "What are you doing here?" he asked, low and silky smooth and *dangerous*, no mistaking that note.

Tolliver didn't get it. He'd spoken to a woman in a low-cut crimson halter and a short black skirt, her glossy dark hair pulled up in a messy knot fixed in place with two chopsticks.

She stilled, dropping her conversation with the young military cadet next to her, polished in his uniform and earnest in his expression. "Go away."

"Turn around and look at me," Noble ordered, quietly furious. "Why would you do this?"

The cadet looked askance at Noble, at least two heads taller than him and half again as muscled. "The lady said to beat it."

"She's not a lady." Noble took the young woman by the shoulder and pulled her around to profile view.

Sarah, glasses off and dark eye makeup on, lifted her chin despite the trembling of her red-painted lips. "Yes, I am."

"Oh, God." Tolliver's stomach twisted. "Sarah."

She jerked, looking at him with dismay-widened eyes before her features settled again into stubborn defiance. "What do you want?"

"Sarie, babe, who are these two clowns?" The cadet, smaller though he might be, looked as if he was gearing up for a fistfight to protect the lady's honor. "You know what? I think you guys should leave the lady alone."

"I'm her brother," Tolliver said, his lips numb. "She's not your babe, damn it, and she's not a *lady*," he went on, his temper rising. "She's *fifteen*."

The cadet paled. "Shit. Sarie?"

Sarah jerked away from all three and hunched forward, arms planted on the bar. "Leave me alone!"

"You gave up the right to have it your way when you decided to pull a stunt like this." As effortlessly as if she weighed nothing, Noble lifted Sarah off her bar stool. She tottered when he set her down, her heels too high and *God*, like nothing Tolliver had had a clue she owned.

"What the hell, Sarah?" he asked, knowing he sounded dazed instead of furious. "Why would you --"

"I said leave me alone!" Sarah tried to push past him.

Tolliver caught her by the wrist. "*No*."

Noble flanked him on the other side.

"I'm sorry, man, jeez, she said she was twenty-one." The cadet hovered, obviously terrified enough to nearly soil himself. He should have been. If his CO found out he'd bought a fifteen-year-old the half-drunk pink cocktail Tolliver saw on the bar...

"And you believed her?"

"She said she had a kid." The cadet didn't know when to shut up. "She showed me a picture!"

"*Sarah*." Tolliver tried to make her look at him. "What's going on with you?"

"Are you -- you're not going to report this, are you?" the cadet babbled.

"Depends on the story we get out of her," Noble said, biting off each word. "Sarah, are you coming, or do we have to carry you out? Believe me, we will."

Her too-red lips twisted, ugly. "You and Tolliver can both go to hell."

"Watch your mouth when you talk to the man who sacrificed his life to try and give you a good one." Noble hauled her off her hooker shoes and threw her over his shoulder. She screamed and beat at his back with her small fists.

No good. Noble didn't even break stride. Tolliver followed, a fine fury boiling within him.

"I hate you," Sarah shrieked, glaring at Tolliver.

"Go ahead and hate me then," Tolliver said, taut with anger, his heart cracking. "It doesn't change anything."

Only it did, and he knew it, and from the dark, nasty gleam in her eye, Sarah did too.

If Noble understood, he gave no indication -- except for kicking open the bar door with the toe of his shoe.

Everything had just changed.

* * * * *

The doorknob rattled and Joey yanked it open from the inside before Tolliver could use his key. His hair stuck up in wild disarray and ridges from the corduroy couch cushion marred the right side of his face.

"Tolliver, I --" He looked past Tolliver to Noble, and to Sarah still hanging over his shoulder. "You found her. Thank God. I've called everywhere. I've --"

"How'd she get out?" Tolliver growled.

Joey's hand flew to his cheek, brushing his pillow marks. "I didn't mean to fall asleep, Tolliver, I'm sorry. The tarts were in the oven and we were watching TV until the timer went off --"

"The tart was at the bar," Tolliver said, the unfamiliar words bitter on his tongue.

"That's not fair." Noble touched his elbow.

"How is that not fair?" Tolliver rounded on him in disbelief. "And you, you were -- just a second ago -- damn it, Noble." He turned away as quickly, his mind caught in a snarl of discord, and pushed Joey away. "Get out."

"Tolliver, I didn't mean to --"

"I don't care. *Get out.*"

Joey looked as if he wanted to say something else. He closed his mouth instead, anger in his eyes, and pushed past Tolliver, half knocking him against the door frame.

Tolliver stood back, arms crossed, feeling like a powder keg about to blow. "Put her in her room," he told Noble. "It locks from the outside."

"Tolliver."

He heard the warning caution in Noble's tone and didn't care. "Either you do it or I will."

Noble's lips thinned. "We're talking when I come back."

Sarah said nothing. The ugly anger he saw in the rigid set of her shoulders didn't fade as Noble carried her away.

When she was out of sight, Tolliver's knees finally refused to cooperate any longer. He sank to the couch, head in his hands, the front door of his -- their -- apartment still wide ajar. Sarah. His baby sister. Christ. How had he not seen this coming after all the stunts she'd pulled so far?

He heard but didn't raise his head to acknowledge the soft *pad-pad-pad* of Noble's footsteps returning. Noble walked lightly for such a large man. *Catlike*, Tolliver thought, stifling a laugh that had nothing at all to do with humor.

"You should look at me now," Noble said.

Tolliver shook his head. "Why?"

"Because we have to talk about this. I told you before I did what you said. Now it's your turn to do as I say."

"And that's what I always do, isn't it? Listen to you."

Noble remained impassive in the face of Tolliver's glare. "I've only ever told the truth or guided you toward what I see you need. What you did and do with it is up to you."

"Don't go pulling the guilt card on me now." Tolliver stood, unable to sit still next to Noble's solid warmth. It'd be too tempting to lean against him and let him absorb all the worries. He couldn't do that. This was *his* mess to clean up.

Noble laid his hands on his knees, palms up, and followed Tolliver with his gaze as Tolliver paced angrily. "Tell me what you mean by 'guilt card.'"

"And don't play innocent, either. You know damn well what I mean." Tolliver jabbed his pointer finger at Noble in accusation.

The first flicker of anger Tolliver had seen directed at him darkened Noble's irises. "Don't point that at me unless you want it bitten."

"Is that how we're playing now?" Tolliver quashed his dismay with vicious adrenaline.

"Tell me about this guilt card," Noble said, leaning into the couch, his lazy physical abandon belied by the slowly rising darkness. "You've had it on your mind for a while. I know. Let me have it."

If Tolliver were calmer, he'd worry and wonder about what had cracked Noble's calm so deeply. *If*. Right then, he couldn't. "You think I don't believe you when it counts. You 'see' something about Sarah I don't, and that's what you want to talk about. And you 'see' that I don't want to hear it. So you lay it on, because all you've been about since day one is how I'm the only one who gets you."

"That's all true. Almost all." Noble's posture was stiff now. "I don't have to see anything to know you're interpreting the help I'm trying to give you as showing up your ability to parent her. Saying you were wrong."

"And that you're right, because you know everything." Tolliver's fists clenched tight. "You're so smart, Noble? Fine. Tell me what you see in there. In here." He rapped his knuckles to his temple. "Take a shot."

Noble opened his mouth, then shut it and turned away. "You won't listen. There's no point."

His resignation only fueled the fires of Tolliver's temper. "No? Come on, wise guy. Lay it on me. Why do you even care? You walk into this town following a hunch and you latch on. Less than a month and you act like you've been her guardian for longer than I have."

Noble said nothing. He did turn to watch Tolliver as intently as ever, the tight focus inflaming Tolliver's tightly strung nerves.

"No. You don't get to shut your mouth, either."

"Are you trying for a fight?" Noble asked, too level. Tolliver recognized it as a warning and still didn't care. "Do you want me to yell at you? Would that make you happy? I wonder."

"I *want* you to tell me what *you* think I'm doing wrong."

"You won't believe me. There's no point."

"So you're giving up?" The hatefulness burned Tolliver's tongue, but he couldn't stop now. "I figured you would. Get what you want and hit the road."

"It's not like that."

"Then tell me how it's different. Huh?"

"Be quiet. It won't help Sarah if she hears us fighting."

Tolliver turned sharply to punch the wall. It was old, solid wood, and bruised his knuckles. He welcomed the bite of pain. "And there you go again. What makes you qualified to act like a father when you're a freewheeling, go-where-I-please vagabond with a coffee pot and a deck of cards?"

Noble paled. "That's not fair, Tolliver. You know it isn't."

"How am I supposed to know what's fair and what's not?" Tolliver shook off the stinging ache in his hand. His vision had begun to blur with anger. "You *act* like her father and that's not your job. It's mine. She's *my* responsibility. I take care of her. Not you. You don't know better than me. You don't have kids, and you don't have family."

Noble's lips had gone white. "Tolliver, stop."

He couldn't. "You think you know better than me how to handle all of this? Fine. Lay it on me." He beckoned with curled fingers, taunting Noble, recognizing his deliberate cruelty, and hating its darkness even as he let it rage out of him. "Tell me what I'm doing wrong. Tell me what's going to happen like the ghost of Christmas future."

Noble shook his head and kept his mouth closed.

Tolliver snapped. He'd taken Noble by the shoulders and shaken him before he knew he was moving. "Tell me!"

"I don't know what'll happen," Noble said, almost too quietly to be heard.

Not sure that he *had* heard Noble right, Tolliver stilled. "What?"

"I said I don't know." Noble focused on his hands instead of Tolliver. "Ever since we saw Sarah with that cadet, it's been like there's an unwritten scroll inside my head. I can't see a thing about you."

The words hit hard and sank deep. Tolliver backed away. "You've been playing me?"

"No!" Noble's head shot up. "*No*. You don't understand me, and you didn't let me finish. I *can* see. Too much. All the time. You have no idea what it's like, walking around with all this in my head. Things I shouldn't know but that I *always* have playing in live color

behind my eyes.” He pointed at his temple. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to sleep at night?”

Tolliver almost wavered. The hurt in Noble’s voice, the shaking of his hands...

Noble didn’t stop talking. His fires were barely under control. Tolliver could see that. Whatever this was, it’d hit him deep as the score of a sharp, hooked talon. “It’s happened before. A time when I couldn’t see. Only once. And everything I had then, I lost it all.”

“What?” Tolliver took a step backwards, suddenly unsure. “When?”

Noble laughed darkly and didn’t answer. “This is what it’s like right now, Tolliver. What I see is always crystal clear. Too clear. I can’t forget what I see in every detail, but now...it’s like being at sea when the clouds are so close to the water all I can see is a few steps in front of me. Ghost mists blocking my senses.”

Tolliver almost forgot his anger. God, the pain inside Noble. He hadn’t thought it would be possible. “Why? What happened?”

“I think I’m too close. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.” Noble raked his fingers through his hair, taking deep breaths in an obvious effort to calm himself that only half-worked. “Fog. I can see choices, paths, branches in the road, but I can’t tell where they’re going.”

“And what’s that mean?” A cold knot had formed in Tolliver’s chest.

“I don’t know what it means.”

“You’re lying to me. You do.” Tolliver’s temper, banked, grew from the smoldering coals, flames licking over the last of its tinder. “Tell me.”

Noble squeezed his eyes shut as he knotted his fists. “It means something bad’s coming. The way it did before, when -- once upon a time. I think.”

“Bad for who?”

“I don’t *know*. Maybe her.” Noble jerked his chin in the direction of Sarah’s room. “Maybe you. Maybe me.” He exhaled slowly and looked at Tolliver as an ordinary man would, with human eyes that saw nothing deeper than the surface. They stood closer together than Tolliver had realized.

Tolliver’s breathing stopped for a hitching moment when Noble extended his hand, brushed his cheek, and then cupped it. “Could be us. What we have.”

He forced himself to inhale. “What if it is?”

Noble’s hand fell away. “Then I don’t know what’ll come afterward. When this happened before, I --” He cut himself off and bit his lower lip. “I think if you let me help, you it’ll make a difference. One step at a time, Tolliver, taken side by side. We might find the right path. But only if you believe me.”

Tolliver’s lips were closed tightly.

Standing in front of him, Noble's hands in his pockets, he seemed suddenly worn down and beaten. "You don't want to, though. You've had enough, and you mean it."

"Thought you said you couldn't see," Tolliver fired back. The coldness of the knot had spread through him, the unnerving sensation undoing him. *Mistake*, his head screamed at him. *You're making a mistake*.

He stepped aside anyway, leaving a path open to the ajar door. "I think you should go."

Noble nodded, as if he'd expected this. It irritated Tolliver. "For good?"

There was no satisfaction in echoing Noble's words back at him. "I don't know."

"I love you, you know," Noble said, not looking away. "I don't have to see what I feel."

"God. Don't." Tolliver turned from him.

"It's true." Noble treaded quietly to Tolliver, the soft padding of his feet stopping inches from Tolliver's. The soft, hot pressure of a kiss branded the corner of his mouth. "It always will be true. But I can't see how you feel about me. I'm too close."

"Please, just go."

"If that's what you really want." Noble's Zen flowed back over him like river water over smooth stones.

"It is."

The warmth of Noble's sigh tickled his skin. His lips moved, though not forming words. He placed his hand briefly at the small of Tolliver's back and rested his forehead to the side of Tolliver's head.

Then, he let go of Tolliver and walked away. Tolliver waited until the door clicked shut behind Noble before looking up.

He'd half expected to see a heat trail shimmering in Noble's wake. He'd expected to feel something other than numb.

He didn't.

Chapter Fifteen

The door shifted on its hinges, the lock sliding out of its catch. Did that sometimes; it came with renting an old place.

Though the last thing he wanted was to move, still stunned that Noble had actually gone, Tolliver forced himself forward.

His hand hovered over the deadbolt. If he turned it, if he heard that *thunk* of solid iron slotting home, it was too much like --

He couldn't do it.

Tolliver balled up his fist and rested it by his head as he leaned on the door, its painted-over metal cold on his too-hot skin.

Standing there, he was able to hear what he might have missed otherwise: a sigh outside, a hushed shuffle of feet, a quiet exhalation.

Noble?

Tolliver hurriedly jiggled the lock fully apart, opened the door, and swung his head to and fro. "Noble?"

"He didn't stick around."

Joey sat on the edge of an empty brick planter, hunched in on himself. A loosely clasped cigarette dangled between two fingers, a dusting of ash at his feet, the ember glowing bright.

"What are you doing here?" Tolliver couldn't wrap his head around it. Why would Joey be here when Noble had gone? "I didn't think you smoked."

"I don't. Not often. I quit when I moved here." Joey took a drag and winced. He tapped off the ashes. "It ruins my taste buds and my olfactory senses. I can't bake the way I need to when I'm smoking. Things have been different here. I thought everything would change."

"Like what?" He looked over Joey as he asked, past him, searching for a sign of Noble. The words he'd spoken in anger were already souring in his belly, were raising bile in his throat.

"I don't know which way he went," Joey said. He dug a nearly full pack of smokes from his pocket and lit a fresh one with the cherry of the other. He coughed around the sharper, renewed smoke. "You had a falling out, huh? Seems to be the night for that. Can I tell you something, Tolliver?"

Tolliver dragged his attention back to Joey. Wasn't easy. He kept one eye out for Noble on his horizon. "What?"

"You're oblivious as fuck."

"I'm what?" All Tolliver's focus zeroed in on Joey. "Say that again?"

"You don't have a clue." Joey dropped his cigarette and crushed it with his toe. Angry color rose in his cheeks. "There's a forest you can't see for the trees, and I've known that for as long as I've known you, but you never have. Never will until someone cuts the forest down."

"Who do you think you are, lecturing me?" The hairs on the back of Tolliver's neck bristled, standing on end. "God, it's not enough that Noble picks tonight to get in my face and mess with my head, now you want to take a shot?"

"Him? I doubt he picked anything, and not whatever fight you had."

"You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know him."

"No, I don't. And I'm not a mind reader. I'm not even good at reading people. If I was, I'd have saved myself a lot of trouble. I'd hoped, though. See, that's what I do wrong, I think. I *hope*."

Tolliver was confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Trade you answer for answer." Joey held his head high in a way Tolliver hadn't seen from him before. "What did you fight about?"

Not wanting to answer, Tolliver pressed his lips shut.

"Sarah. You fought over what to do with her."

Tolliver nodded tightly.

"I thought so." Joey sat. He took a cheap plastic lighter from his pocket and played with it, striking the flint to produce burst after burst of sparks. "I *am* sorry for what happened. But you don't get what's wrong with her."

"And that's supposed to mean you do?"

Joey nodded. "She's *scared*, Tolliver."

The breath rushed from Tolliver's chest. "But...she said she wasn't."

"She also said she'd stay here and behave all night." Joey let the butane flame burn for three beats. "Guess maybe she's not always truthful."

Tolliver needed to sit down. He couldn't make himself join Joey, and slid down to the worn-out welcome mat in front of his door.

Joey acknowledged his move by letting the fire go out.

"Scared?" Tolliver tried to wrap his head around the idea. "Why?"

"Oblivious," Joey murmured as if to himself. "I'm an idiot." Louder, to Tolliver, he answered, "Mommy's got a new boyfriend. Daddy's got a new boyfriend. She thinks he'll replace her. That she won't matter. That you're already giving him everything and she's got so little left that she's got to be flashier, louder, scarier to get your attention."

"She's *fifteen years old*," Tolliver burst out, frustrated.

Joey aimed a level look at him. "Exactly."

"No." Tolliver didn't want to agree. It was dumb. "Sarah's too old for that crap. She should trust me. And she's the one who hooked us up!"

"Maybe so. Fifteen years old. She didn't think it through. She's had some big troubles to face, but she's still a kid, and I bet that for most of the life she can remember, you've been 'Dad,' and no matter what her good intentions were, now she's running scared, looking for love to replace what she thinks she's already lost."

Tolliver started to stand. "I don't need this. I don't have to stand here and listen to you telling me how stupid I am when I already got that memo, thanks."

"Did you?" Joey lit a third cigarette and let the butane burn. He gazed flatly at Tolliver. "You never figured out that I'd carried a torch for you since I moved into the storefront next to yours, did you?"

Tolliver stilled. "What?"

"Guess that answers that question." Joey stood, brushing leaf crumbles and brick dust off his jeans.

"Joey, I --"

"You what?" Joey asked, shrugging too casually. "Would you have done anything about it, if you'd known?"

Tolliver couldn't answer that.

"No. You wouldn't have. Because I'd have *asked*. That guy?" Joey pointed in the direction Noble must have left by. "I'd bet he didn't *ask*. He *took*, didn't he? He made you open your eyes. And you keep trying to close them again."

"Two steps back, one step forward," Tolliver said under his breath, his mind racing.

"It's got to be like trying to dig through a brick wall with a spoon." The acrid smell of Joey's cigarette stung Tolliver's nose. "Does it surprise you, me talking like this?"

"Yes."

"Good." Joey's smile was halfhearted and tip-tilted. "Maybe I should have done it before. Maybe I'd have had a chance."

"You don't want one anymore?"

"No."

Tolliver nodded. He hadn't wanted that now, and yes, he would have turned Joey down back then, but what he'd done to earn the disdain... God, it burned.

"He loves you. One fight isn't going to change that," Joey said. "If you went after him, he'd have his arms open. Once you eat your bite of crow, that is, because God, even I can see he was just trying to help."

"I don't..."

Joey waited.

Tolliver gathered the will to speak. He wasn't used to this with anyone else. Noble had been right. He didn't even speak this openly with Sarah, and he was the one who'd been ranting about being responsible for her.

Joey waited on.

"I don't know if I can live my life the way he wants me to," Tolliver said, looking intently at his fingers, lacing them between his knees. "It's too much."

"Then it's your loss if you aren't man enough, and you let him stay gone," Joey said simply. "Do you want it to end this way, though? I've only seen you together a couple of times, but I knew right away, Tolliver, I *knew* what you two have..." He sighed. "I can't make you see it."

"See," Tolliver murmured.

"No matter what you want, don't let it end angry," Joey said. "If you're any kind of smart, don't let it end at all."

"I still... I don't know if I can cope."

"Try." Joey turned and walked away.

Before he was out of earshot, Tolliver found the courage to give voice to what had been tickling in his throat. "Joey? I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Joey said without looking back. "So am I."

He stood, flexing his fingers uncertainly. "Joey, what do I do now?"

Joey shook his head, blond hair sweeping his shoulders. "It's not my place to say."

"Joey --"

"Figure it out yourself."

Tolliver fell silent.

"Good night, Tolliver." Joey turned up the collar of his coat.

With no way to keep him, Tolliver let him go.

"Figure it out myself," he said in an undertone. "How?"

* * * * *

In the end, Tolliver let it be simple. He hung the Closed sign on the door of Old Curiosity and walked to Tres Bean instead. With two cups of coffee, one in each hand, he found the park bench that Sarah had taken refuge on and sat still. Waiting. Hoping.

Half the morning went by. Early fog burned away with the rising sun, the dew drying on autumn-browned grass and late fall sun almost too warm on his face.

He waited.

Townpeople, most of whom Tolliver didn't know by name and a few he'd never seen, all passed by. Some gave him strange looks. Others didn't even seem to notice him.

The coffee grew cold, but he didn't throw the cups away.

A clock had chimed twelve, possibly in an old church on the far side of Main Street -- Tolliver had never noticed it from inside the store except as background noise -- before he heard it, finally. The tread of sneakers with their soles worn thin, a gait he'd recognize anywhere.

Afraid he was wrong anyway, Tolliver focused on the cold coffee he held instead of turning to the person approaching him.

When Noble slid onto the bench at his side, Tolliver closed his eyes in silent relief. He put the coffee cups at his feet before he dropped them, fingers shaking.

Noble laid his hand over Tolliver's, his palm to the back of Tolliver's hand, and let Tolliver feel the warmth, the realness of his presence.

Tolliver had planned for this. He'd thought of everything he wanted to say -- should say -- and couldn't bring forth a single word. Couldn't even look at Noble.

"I didn't know if you'd be here," Noble said first, at last. "I still can't see more than one step ahead. Do you know how scary that is, Tolliver?"

He started to nod, then shook his head, and found his voice. "No. I don't know what it's like for you. Not at all."

An infinitesimal relief that Tolliver hadn't seen in Noble melted from him. He squeezed Tolliver's hand, and Tolliver had the thought that he'd just passed some kind of test.

They sat in silence until Tolliver made himself ask, "What happens now?"

Noble stroked the back of Tolliver's wrist. "I think that's up to you. There are two ways. Maybe more."

"I walk away, or you walk away, or we stay here, or we leave together."

"You've thought about this," Noble observed.

Tolliver raised one shoulder self-deprecatingly. "For a change."

"Then what do you want?"

He could hear the searching for the right answer this time. All he could be was honest. "I don't know."

Noble's slow caresses stilled.

"It's not like that," Tolliver protested. "I *do* have Sarah to think about, even if I think I get why she's acting like she is now. She has to come first, Noble. She always has."

He sensed Noble nodding, and knew by heart already, without looking, the thoughtfulness and wariness -- God, why hadn't he ever noticed it before -- in Noble when Noble asked, "When will she stop coming first?"

"Never." The question, not what he'd expected, threw Tolliver. He clamped Noble's fingers, not wanting him to go before he'd finished this, afraid he would. "I have to be there for her until --"

"Until she graduates high school?"

"Yes."

"Until she graduates college? Until she's married? Tolliver, where does it stop? When do you start making choices for your own life?"

"I already have!" Tolliver looked at Noble for this first time with a glare. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Noble regarded him steadily. "For now you are. What about later?"

"Why even talk about later?" Tolliver pushed past his uncertainty and touched Noble's leg, jostling him. "Now's what matters. Isn't it?"

"Sometimes." Noble lifted his head to look at the sun. "Is it enough, though?"

"I don't know. Noble? Look at me." Tolliver pushed him harder. "This is huge for me, okay? I'm saying I'm sorry. I'm saying I'm choosing to trust you. If it's hard for you, the way this has changed you, then it's done a hell of a lot to me and I'm still figuring it all out. I don't know if I ever will, all the way, but you --"

He ran out of breath. Noble's expression had changed.

"All I can do is right now," Tolliver said, willing Noble to hear him. "Please let that be enough for today."

For too long a span, Tolliver thought Noble would say no, that he'd say, "I'm sorry," and choose the step that took him away, leaving Tolliver alone with cold coffee left undrunk.

"For today," Noble said. "And tomorrow? Where do you see this going, Tolliver? Where does it end? I'm flying blind and I don't want to remember what that's like because --" He stopped, bent from the waist to pick up one of the cups, and drank deeply.

"Because?" Tolliver asked. He had to.

"Because if I don't know what's coming, then I don't know how to be ready. When no one believes me, the bad things happen, but I'm prepared for them. Like this, I don't know." Noble drank deeply. "I don't want to lose you."

"One day at a time, Noble. That's all I can do." Tolliver licked his bottom lip. "I don't want to lose you either. Jesus. I wouldn't *be* here if I did. I could have let it all end last night.

I didn't." He shoved Noble's leg. "Ask me what I want from today. If you can't see, then I'll tell you. Ask me."

He focused on their hands again, still joined.

Noble's sigh was quiet. "Did you mean what you said just now?"

"I did. I do."

"I want to ask you a different question first."

Tolliver didn't want anything getting in the way, but he owed Noble. It was fair. "Okay."

"I said I love you. Do you..."

There was no way to answer that the way it should be answered. Tolliver raised their joined hands to his lips instead and pressed a kiss to Noble's knuckles. "Too much," he said quietly, his eyes closed. "And it still scares the hell out of me."

"Then what do you want, Tolliver? I need you to tell me."

"I want you. One step at a time until I can see the way, too." Tolliver's ears heated. "I *want* you."

The change in Noble was subtle but noticeable.

"This, for now. And it could get better, or it could get worse. I'm human. So are you. But... today, Noble. I want you. Every way I can have you. If you'll give me that." Tolliver tried to meet Noble's eyes, and found it easy. "I need this. Because it's simpler than everything else, and you want it, too." He swallowed hard. "Can you see the next step now?"

"I can. Promise me one thing, Tolliver." Noble's grip tightened. "And then I'll answer your question. Be honest with me. I have to know what you're thinking, or I can't do this."

"Promise," Tolliver repeated, meaning the word as an oath. "Okay."

"You asked me to ask you what you wanted from today." Noble's posture changed, the cat with its fur on end relaxing, drawing in its defenses. "I think you want me inside you."

Tolliver's lips parted. "Yes. God, yes."

"Why?"

"Because I need you there."

"Good." Noble drew his nail down the length of Tolliver's arm and leaned into him, kissing the thin skin beneath his ear. "I need it, too. To be inside."

Tolliver's pulse raced in his ears, part panicked, part eager, part adrenaline rush. "Yes. When?"

"Now." Noble stood, pulling Tolliver with him. "Want you so much, Tolliver, God. You don't even know." He buried his face in Tolliver's neck, biting sharp kisses, marking him. "You're mine. Do you understand that? I saw that a long time ago, and I --"

"Noble." Tolliver pushed him far enough back to press his fingers to Noble's lips, no matter how little he wanted to let Noble go. "You said now. I want now. Let's go."

A glimmer of the old amusement returned to Noble, his lips quirking. "Right now?" He skated his palm down Tolliver's back. "Or do you want to go back to my place?"

"Right now," Tolliver said, mirroring Noble, making Noble look at him. "With you."

Noble's eyelids drifted closed. "Thank you," he murmured. It sounded almost reverent.

The kiss he gave Tolliver, a crush of mouth to mouth, delving inside hot and hungry, was dirty and wet and went on almost too long, draining Tolliver dry of air. "Let's go."

* * * * *

Tolliver's back aligned with the wall, the bare wood cool and smooth against his shoulder blades and his ass, even through his sweatshirt and track pants.

Noble loomed over him, eclipsing light and shadow. The warm glow of daylight filtering through an open window surrounded him as would a nimbus, a fallen seraphim's crown.

There was nothing else in Tolliver's world but Noble...and, from somewhere -- the kitchen? -- a faint, sharp smell of rosemary.

"For remembrance," Tolliver said lowly.

Noble didn't need to ask what Tolliver meant. "Yes." He dipped his head and mouthed Tolliver's neck, traveling up as Tolliver arched his throat to give him room for more, more, more. "There's rue, for you. Too much." He traced his tongue over Tolliver's hammering pulse.

"And some for you," Tolliver rasped. "God, Noble."

"We may call it an herb of grace. You must wear it with a difference."

"Ophelia," Tolliver said, drowning in Noble's closeness, going under with every press of heated lips and hands that shook with urgency, but made themselves slow after each hurried stroke.

His world had been swallowed by Noble, by his height and the bulk of him, which pinned Tolliver where he stood. One knee nudged at his, coaxing them open for Noble to fit between and press closer still.

"You know the play." Noble chuckled, tickling Tolliver's cheek. His kiss was off center. Tolliver chased it with a moan, and Noble evaded him, teasing, moving to place his lips elsewhere, always one step again.

He dug his knuckles into Noble's bicep. "Stop it. Kiss me."

"Kiss you how?" Noble asked, his lips ghosting over Tolliver's collarbone.

"The way I want you to," Tolliver rasped, trying to twine his fingers through Noble's leonine hair to pull him away, to give him a look at Noble's face.

Noble let Tolliver lift him. The sight of Noble -- he took Tolliver's breath away. Hunger like that, a fire burning so hot in dilated pupils and parted lips...hunger for *him*. Christ.

"I can see you," Tolliver said, tracing Noble's face the way Noble had so often done with him. Noble closed his eyes and, rumbling low in his throat, pushed into Tolliver's hand. Tolliver brushed Noble's eyelids with the faintest glance of his fingertip.

"You're shaking," Noble murmured.

"I know." Tolliver swallowed. Thinking only of embarrassment, he dropped his hand.

"Don't. Stop." Noble caught his wrist. "I didn't say I didn't like it."

"I'm too old to be this...this --"

"Eager?" Noble turned his arm and kissed the inside of his wrist, his tongue wet over the thin skin there.

"Naive."

"I could teach you."

"The way you've taught me so far?"

"Mm-hmm." Noble aligned their lower bodies and rolled his hips.

Tolliver hissed, falling into the rhythm. He clutched at Noble's back, crumpling fistfuls of tightly fitted green T-shirt. So good; too good. "Stop."

Puffs of air tickled Tolliver's shoulder, and he felt the shape of Noble's mouth change, smiling. "Why?"

"Keep it up, and I'll come like this."

"Might not be a bad thing," Noble murmured. He teased the drawstring of Tolliver's track pants back. "Take the edge off."

Tolliver grunted, his urgently stiff cock straining up, wanting the touch of Noble's hand. It'd be so easy to give in and let Noble have his way. He wouldn't complain. He'd lick his fingers clean and --

And it'd be too easy to lose his wavering nerve. "*No*," Tolliver repeated, nudging the top of Noble's head with his chin. "I want what we said. Before."

"You have to tell me again." Despite what he said, Noble traced a path from front to back around Tolliver's waist and hooked his fingers in the waistband of Tolliver's track pants.

"Why?"

"Because I want to hear it. The words."

Tolliver nodded jerkily. His mouth was dry, and he could barely speak, but he rasped, "I want your cock inside me. Want you to fuck me. Please."

Noble lifted his head and fumbled their mouths together. He sucked greedily on Tolliver's tongue and rocked their hips together. "Want that too," he said, raspy as a cat's purr. "So much. Wanted it since the first time I had my hands on you. God."

“Why’d you wait?”

“I wanted you to want it just as much.” Noble let go of him, groaning in time with Tolliver’s moan at even this small separation. “Now you do. My turn. I’ll make it good for you, Tolliver. So good, you don’t know, but I do.” He stiffened. “My God, I do know. I can *see* it.”

Tolliver’s breath caught. “Thought you couldn’t anymore.”

Noble’s lust-blown pupils wide in startled eyes. “Nothing else. Just you, but I *see* you here, now.” He shook his head. “Only now. Good enough. Better than good. God, you...” He attacked Tolliver’s mouth, kissing him with a desperation that almost unnerved Tolliver.

Almost.

“What do you see?” Tolliver caught the hem of Noble’s T-shirt and pulled, urging his arms up. He pressed his face to the bare skin and ridged muscles of Noble’s chest, breathing deeply of his scent. Trailing his way up, he let himself do what he wanted and took Noble’s nipple between his teeth, biting firmly.

Noble drew in a sharp breath. He held Tolliver’s head to him with one hand and slid the other down Tolliver’s pants, kneading his ass. “Impressions. Shadowy images. It’s dark. Just you. And me. And that it’s good.”

“As good as you said?” Tolliver let himself go, again, and cupped Noble’s rigid cock through his old blue jeans, dampness moistening his palm.

“Better,” Noble said. He caught his breath with a hitch and found Tolliver’s mouth, coaxed his lips open by nipping at them, then slid his tongue inside. He thrust his hips in time with the strokes of his tongue.

He slid Tolliver’s track pants down. Overlarge and slippery, they fell to his feet. Tolliver stepped out and, eyes closed, let Noble pull the shirt over his head.

Not the first time he’d been naked with Noble, but God, it seemed different. He wanted to turn his face or hide it in Noble’s shoulder.

“No. You’re in this or you aren’t.” Noble cradled Tolliver’s cheeks and tilted his face up.

Eye to eye, Tolliver couldn’t hide it any longer. He could see that Noble saw it, too, in both ways. “I *want* it, God do I want, it, but I don’t know if I can.”

Noble didn’t turn away from him or back down in disgust. He nodded, seeing Tolliver as he had before, under the surface, deep in his soul, even if there were shadows. “You mean you don’t know if you’ll like it. Don’t know how much it’ll hurt and if you can take the pain.”

“You said it always hurts at first.”

“Yes.” Noble skated his palms down to cover Tolliver’s hips, the splay of his fingers long enough and Tolliver’s hips lean enough to engulf him. “Everything that’s worth anything hurts some. But then, it’s good. You forget the pain. I promise.”

Tolliver hesitated, hating himself for it.

"No. Stop thinking." Noble cupped Tolliver's ass and squeezed. "No more thinking now."

"This from the man who --" Tolliver gasped.

"There's a time," Noble said, the tip of one finger just penetrating the cleft of Tolliver's ass and sliding down, "and there's a place, and it's not here. Not now. You're so tight in here," he whispered, resting his forehead on Tolliver's. "Tangled and snarled. So many knots. You need to go where this'll take you."

"You see that?"

"I do. So let it go, Tolliver. Let it all go."

Tolliver pressed his lips to Noble's and withdrew, licking them, tasting Noble's flavor. His voice shook but he said the words and meant them. "Do it. Me."

"Bed," Noble insisted and kissed him quick and hard. "Walk in front. To be seen. Lie on top of the covers and welcome me."

"Noble, I --"

"Don't be afraid. You want to." Noble nipped his lower lip and pulled, just sharp enough for the sting to jolt Tolliver with a thrill, low heat curling in his belly. "You know you do. So do I." He brought Tolliver's hand to his zipper and guided it down, letting his cock spill out into Tolliver's palm. "Feel how much I do."

Tolliver shuddered. Noble's cock, pulsing in time with his heart, sticky trails marking his wrist, filled his hand as they're been made to match. This was right. Had to be right.

And Noble was right. He *wanted*.

"Bed," he said, his lips tingling. "Now."

* * * * *

Tolliver found his place on the bed, the cool smoothness once again contrasting with the heat and the need crawling beneath his skin. Though he shook as if freezing, sweat dampened him, and the searing length of his cock nearly burned his belly, where the head almost rested.

He watched Noble through half-lidded eyes, his throat working with nervous jerks.

Noble filled the doorway, sealing off the rest of the world. Nothing else mattered anyway. He should have looked ridiculous in his worn jeans, strings trailing over his bare feet, his erect cock protruding through the opened fly, but he didn't. Tolliver's cock jerked, trailing stickiness between it and his groin, and his mouth watered.

"Take them off?"

"You only had to ask." Noble slid the jeans down and stepped out of them. Their strings trailed behind him as he moved.

Tolliver stayed still and let him come. Watched him.

The bed shifted with Noble's weight, Noble easing himself atop Tolliver. He rested his weight there and breathed. Tolliver found his way to Noble's biceps, gripping them too hard, he knew.

"Like iron," Noble murmured. "Still shaking." He feathered a kiss at Tolliver's ear. "I can calm you down, if you'll let me."

Tolliver made himself nod. "Sure. Okay."

"Don't," Noble cautioned; Tolliver knew he'd seen his shame at being this inexperienced. "You're all I want."

The truth of that struck deep. Tolliver shuddered. "What do I do?"

"Turn over. Lie on your stomach."

Tolliver's throat convulsed, but he obeyed. With his face pressed to the pillows, he couldn't see Noble. Vague expectations made him listen for the click of a bottle of lube opening, or the tearing of a condom packet.

When Noble gently eased his cheeks apart, Tolliver stiffened, knowing he'd been right.

"Shh," Noble soothed. "Not yet. This first."

"What are you -- oh, God, oh!" Tolliver pressed his face almost too tightly to the pillows to breathe at the first wet, slithering-agile swipe over his exposed hole. "*You* --"

Noble gentled him with slow caresses, fingertips dancing over Tolliver's hips. Tolliver could feel the point of Noble's nose, but not as much as the hot wetness trailing over and over him.

Groaning, his toes curled, Tolliver knotted the covers in both fists and tried not to thrust back. He pushed forward instead, grinding into the bed, his cock aching with the need for more.

He didn't notice the wrong tension leaving him, ebbing away in waves, before Noble's tongue pushed inside him and with it the tip of a finger gliding on saliva. It stung and burned, but Noble's tongue soothed away the small pain.

Tolliver panted, his head a fog of dissipating thoughts only half formed to at the start. He heard someone begging for more, and only after wondering why it didn't sound like Noble's voice did he realize that was him, pleading for Noble not to stop.

"Not going to," Noble whispered, breath hot in Tolliver's ass. He slid his finger deeper, thrusting his tongue alongside. Moved, and --

"Oh, *God*." Tolliver gritted his teeth, fighting not to come.

Noble chuckled lowly. "Sure you don't want the edge off?"

"*No*. More, please, more."

One long, wet lick and Noble withdrew his tongue. When Tolliver heard the *snick* of a bottle cap opening, he flinched only once and bore down on Noble's finger, still inside him.

So much better than he'd imagined it would be, he did it again, wondering if this was what women felt like.

"Nothing like this," Noble whispered, tracing a wet pattern on the small of Tolliver's back.

Oh. He'd said that aloud.

"Believe me. You're all man."

"Shouldn't it be --" Tolliver tried to think straight. "Harder? Rougher?"

"Doesn't have to be." Slick coolness dripped over his hole and Noble's finger. "Breathe for me," Noble told him. A second finger joined the first, both coated in fresh cooling gel.

That hurt more, and Tolliver had to breathe through waiting for the sting to the fade.

"Rough later," Noble said, deep and raw around the edges. "I want it this way now. So do you."

Tolliver gritted his teeth and pushed back, taking Noble's fingers deeper. He moved faster than he'd meant to, and --

Noble pressed down on Tolliver's back, letting him ride the wave of blinding, white-hot sensation. His cock hitched, precum escaping him, coming only a breath behind. "Too much," he heard himself say, begging.

"Hold still for me," Noble said, drizzling more lube over the small penetration. "Breathe, relax." His words hitched. "God, I'm so close. You don't know how good you look spread out for me."

Tolliver squeezed his eyes shut, seeing stars. The shakes began again, racking his limbs. "Noble --"

"I know. Shh. I know. Breathe and let me in." Noble slid his third finger inside and *God*, if this was what only three fingers were like... Noble had huge hands but they were still smaller than his cock...

He breathed, not letting himself think. The burn didn't fade this time, but it...changed, became better, a sharp ache that made him rut against the bed to ease the fullness of his cock.

"See?" Noble murmured, twisting his fingers, opening them wide. Opening him. "You. *You*, Tolliver, oh God --" He smothered a groan against Tolliver's back, thrusting deeper and faster.

There was the rough, and it was *good*. Tolliver rocked, taking all Noble could give.

Noble bit him, desperation in the sharpness, and shuddered. "I have to. Please."

"Yeah," Tolliver breathed. He tried to open his legs wider, but they didn't want to obey him and he only lay there, fighting for control and losing.

"Stay where you are. Just like that. For me." Noble's fingers slipped away, leaving Tolliver feeling open, exposed, empty.

He whimpered, reaching backward to bring Noble to him again, needing the hollow space filled to be the way it should.

Yet when the blunt, wet solidness of Noble's cock, as much bigger than his fingers as Tolliver had thought it would be, pressed within him, he stilled and stifled a cry in the pillow.

"Ride it," Noble urged. Tolliver could *feel* the effort it took him to go slow, pushing his way inside. "Don't fight. Let me in."

Tolliver wanted to fight. Too much, too big, too harsh a burn. Noble would tear him open inside. "Stop," he begged, his limbs rigid. "I can't do this."

"Yes. You can." Noble's kisses over his shoulders left him sore, starting bruises that would be dark as grapes by morning. The smaller hurts made Tolliver gasp and lift, shoulder and hips.

Noble slid within him. He blanketed Tolliver, moving slowly and smoothly but never stopping, the power and grace in him taking control. Tolliver felt Noble's balls come to rest against him and knew this was it, as deep as it got.

"All right?" Noble asked, sliding up to take Tolliver's hands. Tendons stood out in his wrists, his veins raised and his words harsh, as if spoken through clenched teeth. "Tolliver?"

Tolliver kept still and didn't answer, not at first. It took almost too long -- almost -- before he could nod and grunt.

Noble slid out, the drag and burn harsh, then *in*, and it turned good. It turned Tolliver nearly inside out with the blue heat and the hard stroke over that sweet spot. More lube cooled his abused flesh and made the passage slicker.

He lifted his hips to meet Noble on purpose this time, rocking up and back. Noble's groan was the hottest thing he'd ever known, and he bore down to see if he could make it happen again.

One large hand came to rest on his back. "More?"

"God, yes." Tolliver's head hung low, too heavy to lift. He squeezed Noble from the inside. "I want."

Nothing could be better than the sharp stroke in, except the friction of the draw out, and again, and again. Sweat dripped over Tolliver's closed eyelids; he caught it, salty tasting, on his tongue and his lips, dry from panting. Over him, around him, in him, the power of Noble's body and his carnal force drove Tolliver mad. He heard himself pleading, incoherent, not knowing what he was asking for. He understood when Noble swore and wrapped his fingers around his cock and jerked him off with hard, fast strokes.

"Come for me," Noble licked away Tolliver's sweat and faltered in his rhythm. He was losing it right in time with Tolliver, the *too much* demanding that final shove over the edge. "Come on, Tolliver." He thumbed the head of Tolliver's swollen cock, his thumbnail scraping. "Give it to me."

The rush, God, there were no words for it. It blazed through Tolliver and left nothing of his soul behind, carrying all that he was out of him in pulses that striped and splashed the bedding, dripping over Noble's fingers.

He couldn't control his body and writhed on Noble's cock. Noble shouted and buried his face in Tolliver's shoulder, shuddering violently. Tolliver could *feel* the heat inside of Noble filling him with his cum.

I want this to last forever, Tolliver thought, dizzied and lightheaded, letting the bliss wash over him in what he wanted to be never-ending waves, his cock jerking and his body on fire.

Forever, I want forever. I want it like this for always...

Chapter Sixteen

Noble turned to lie on his side, nuzzling Tolliver's shoulder as he moved. He slotted their bodies together, his knees to the backs of Tolliver's knees, Tolliver's shoulder blades to his chest, and Tolliver's head under his chin. Their legs and feet tangled together, and his arm rested across Tolliver's waist.

They were quiet, Tolliver because he didn't have the words, and Noble -- he didn't know why. Nothing bad, he thought; the slow, lazy sweeps of Noble's fingers over the slight stickiness of cum left on his belly couldn't have spelled regret.

He shifted, the strange sensation of Noble's cum trickling out of him not bad, but different enough to capture his focus.

Noble's hand stilled. "Oh."

Tolliver didn't get what he meant at first, or why he'd stopped. He let his mind wander, and when it found the right path, he sighed.

"I'm sorry," Noble said, holding back from touching him the way Tolliver wanted. "I couldn't think. Didn't. Tolliver --"

"It's okay." Tolliver reached for him.

"It shouldn't be." Noble held firm.

"You know I'm clean," Tolliver tried to lighten the mood by teasing.

Noble brought it crashing down. "But you don't know that I am."

Tolliver lay very, very still. "Aren't you?"

"Yes. But you didn't *know* that, and I didn't stop to --"

"Stop *now*." Though Tolliver hated to relinquish the body contact, he turned in Noble's arms to put them face-to-face, nearly eye to troubled eye, their lashes almost tangling. He shook Noble firmly. "Don't ruin this. Please?"

Noble still looked troubled even as he gave in and laid his hand on Tolliver again, smoothing down the line of his back.

"What is it?"

"It'd been a while," Noble said quietly. "A long time. Longer since it was anyone I cared about."

Tolliver bit his lip, unsure if he *wanted* to hear the answer to the question that wanted out. "Who was that?"

"They're gone." Noble's arm tightened, almost too roughly. He exhaled through his nose. "Long gone. Don't ask me anymore."

"You can't tell me?"

Noble was silent.

Tolliver pressed closer. "Why?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to."

"But --"

"Not now. Later, I will, but now..." Noble pulled Tolliver to him so that Tolliver lay with his ear over Noble's heart. "Now I'm with you."

Is that what you said to him?

Tolliver didn't know where that thought had come from, and he didn't like it. It needled at him even as he pushed it away. "You're with me," he repeated, as if agreeing aloud would make it permanent.

He wondered. "Noble, can you still... 'see'?"

Noble shook his head, chin rubbing Tolliver's scalp. "No. It's all gone dark again."

"Then I'll see it for you," Tolliver told him steadily. He let the steady beating of Noble's heart ground him. "There's a time and a place, and there's now, and we're us."

"That's not looking into the future."

"No. And it's not looking into the past," Tolliver said.

Noble sighed.

"I'm not trying to make you talk, I'm just -- let the future take care of itself for once?" Tolliver asked, counting Noble's heartbeats. "You said 'now' is what matters. Let now be *now*. Because I'm asking you to. Okay?"

"You shouldn't want it." Noble sounded odd. "You should ask me about who it was before. Shouldn't take no for an answer."

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid for you and what you'd do if -- I told you, Tolliver. I'm not a good man."

"I don't believe that."

"It's still true. And I won't risk losing you. I can't."

"You won't."

Noble's sigh was anything but satisfied, and no, it was too much after everything else. Tolliver twisted at the necessary awkward angle to bite Noble's nipple.

"Hey!" Noble's unhappiness dissolved in his startled yelp, followed by a real laugh. They parted far enough for Tolliver to see the brightness of Noble's surprised smile. "Watch the teeth. What was that for?"

"I'm learning myself, the way you said to. And I don't like my afterglow spoiled."

"Even if you should."

Tolliver covered Noble's mouth with his. "Quiet."

"You're still the student here," Noble said, drawing his fingertip down Tolliver's nose. He yawned reluctantly. "I shouldn't, but it's always... Do you think you sleep in the afterglow, too?"

Tolliver studied Noble's anxiousness mixed with his exhaustion. So this was what "fucked out" looked like. He wanted to see it every day, every night.

Yet, something darker than compassion colored his answer against his will, Noble's wariness seeping under his skin. "I think so."

"Good." Noble's hold on him softened. "I like you this way," he murmured sleepily. "Even if I can't see inside, I know your mind."

"I am who I am."

"Good." Noble kissed him, slow and lazy. His breathing was already evening out, carrying him toward sleep.

Tolliver stroked Noble's arm, his hip, the line of his side and his cheek, gentling him down. Noble's breathing eased, became regular and deep, and the satiated flush of his complexion smoothed out in sleep. He looked innocent.

He looked like all Tolliver ever wanted and hadn't known he could dream of before he'd come around.

I want this to go on forever, Tolliver remembered thinking as Noble came inside him. Two people couldn't get closer, and he'd known for sure this was how he wanted to live. Noble inside him, in every way he could get him.

Forever was a long time, though.

And there was Sarah.

And...

Tolliver carefully smoothed a stray tangle of hair off Noble's face, watching the last of the afternoon light turn him nearly to gold. He was so remarkable he made Tolliver's heart hurt. No one could be this good. No one real.

But if I let myself think that, then what do I believe?

Stop it, Tolliver ordered his mind.

He couldn't.

"Who was it, the last person you cared about?" Half-formed memories came to him, sentences bitten off and spoken thoughts pushed away. Noble not wanting to talk about anything before this place. "Did you lose them?"

There was something he couldn't fit the pieces of together. Sarah and the store and cooking and the way he took charge; travel and never settling down; street fairs and tarot and so much else he didn't know.

"I *want* you to be a good man," Tolliver told him savagely. In his sleep, Noble didn't react. "Don't let me find out different. Don't let that happen."

It didn't work. The curl of some nameless dread tightened around his chest, the headiness of sex and musk suddenly dense enough to make breathing hard. Tolliver sat up, carefully peeling away from Noble's sleep-slackened hold.

The muted ringing of his cell phone, still in the pocket of his jeans by Noble's front door, came as a relief. Tolliver swung naked out of the bed and went to answer the call.

Caller ID said Old Curiosity. Curious, Tolliver flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Tolliver," Sarah said, subdued and almost childlike. "Hi."

"Hi," Tolliver said, sitting down before he could lose his balance.

Sarah was quiet. "Are you at Noble's?"

No lying. "Yes. I am."

"I guess we need to talk."

Tolliver steadied himself. "I guess we do."

She's jealous. She's scared you're dumping her. Talk to her.

"Did you make up?"

"Yeah, we did. He and I, we're together now." Tolliver waited to see how she'd respond, preparing himself for the anger or the accusations or even the tears.

It was disheartening to discover just how much he didn't know about his sister. He'd been there all along, watching her grow up, but he hadn't paid attention.

From what Joey had said, Tolliver was starting to get the idea that he hardly noticed anything around him -- the forest for the trees, the real life he'd been immersed in for drowning in the details.

And then there was Noble.

Tolliver steeled himself for Sarah's response.

"Oh," she said, and nothing else.

He wondered if the phone had disconnected, or if she'd ended the call when all he heard was silence. "Sarah?"

"I'm still here," she said. She cleared her throat. This time, listening for it, Tolliver caught the too-bright, false cheer in her voice when she said, "I thought you might be, since the store's closed. Taking a day off?"

"Sarah, it's not like that."

"Then how is it?"

Tolliver hesitated. "Okay. You're right. I'm sorry. That is how it is."

"Really?" Sarah sounded surprised. "Oh."

"Is that all right with you?" Tolliver asked, careful of his tone. If she read it as an accusation, things would only go downhill.

She seemed to be thinking. "I guess."

"Really?"

He could almost see her shoulders slumping. "I don't know."

"Okay." Tolliver's hands were tingling, his grip on the phone slipping. He wedged it between his ear and shoulder. "Sarah, hold on. Noble's asleep. I'm going to shut the bedroom -- the door so he won't wake up."

"I didn't figure he'd be asleep on the couch," Sarah said. Was that a hint of a giggle?

Tolliver padded as silently as he could to the bedroom door and peeked in. Noble lay half on his chest and half on his side, one arm diagonally across him with his hand in Tolliver's cooling warm spot. His lips were turned up and his breathing deep and even.

Quietly, Tolliver shut the door, careful not to let the latch catch, and tried to walk on soundless cat's feet in mimicry of Noble's walk on his way back to the den. At the same time, he tried to think of what to say next. They *did* need to talk.

He just didn't know how to begin.

"Are you there?" Sarah asked.

"I'm here. Trying to figure out where to sit."

"Do you need to sit for this?" Sarah asked, tiny voiced again.

"Not sure. Maybe?" Everything in this room had associated memories Tolliver wasn't too comfortable remembering while talking with his baby sister. The couch where Noble had wrapped his lips around -- and...the rugs...the hearth...

Sarah sighed, the sound resigned and depressed. "How much trouble am I in?"

"What? Sarah, no, it's not about that." Tolliver chose the hearth as the least distracting and eased down, the roughness of the bricks and the shock of their cold clearing his head. "Should it be?"

"Could we do that part later?"

Tolliver rubbed the back of his head, thinking. "As long as you understand that later'll come soon."

“Okay.” In the pause, Tolliver imagined Sarah fiddling with her glasses. “So. You’re at Noble’s. Are you staying there?”

She thinks you’re dumping her.

“Only for now. I’ll be home tonight.”

“You scared me, you know?” she said abruptly. “I went there after school like you told me to -- Principal Masters sent one of the seniors to chaperone me all the way there, Missy Jacobs, she’s crazy strict since she went to Catholic school most of her life and she wants to be a nun --”

“Sarah.”

“I got to Old Curiosity and the doors were locked. The sign said Closed, and when I asked Joey, he said he hadn’t seen you in there all day.”

And Joey could damn well see the bench where Tolliver had been sitting from inside his bakery. He could have told Sarah where he’d gone.

Tolliver thought briefly about being angry over that and then decided as far as he went, it was fair payback. Sort of. Joey shouldn’t have done that to Sarah, though.

“Then he told me he’d seen you go off with Noble,” Sarah admitted. “But I was still scared.”

Tolliver exhaled. Okay. He didn’t need to pummel Joey. Not that he ever had been in a fight since high school, and wasn’t sure how to start, but for her sake he *would* have.

Tell her that.

“I’d have kicked his ass if he hadn’t fessed up,” Tolliver tried.

She giggled. “No you wouldn’t have. You’re a pacifist.”

“I’m oblivious,” Tolliver said honestly.

“That too.”

Too restless to sit still, Tolliver stood and dusted a faint layer of ashes off his track pants. “I owe you about six years’ worth of apologies, don’t I?”

“For what?” She sounded surprised.

“For not paying attention.”

Silence.

“Sarah, I’m trying here. This isn’t easy for me.”

“I know.”

Tolliver couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“So you and Noble really are...” She trailed off.

He could fill in the blanks, and wow, this was a part of the conversation he hadn’t wanted to have. Still, it was fair, and she wasn’t a kid. She’d *had* a kid. She knew how it all worked.

Talk to her.

"We are," he said.

"Since the beginning?"

"Not the very beginning. Soon after."

"You sound embarrassed." *She* sounded curious. "Why?"

Tolliver laughed shortly. "This isn't the kind of thing it's easy to talk to you about."

"Is anything?"

"Now you sound like him," Tolliver told her.

"He is kinda that way all the time, isn't he?"

"And then some."

"Does it make you crazy?"

"Less now than it did before." Tolliver rolled a crick out of his neck and did an about-face, studying the mantelpiece over Noble's hearth. The green glass bottle full of seawater from foreign shores. A conch shell. Some coins he thought might be from the United Kingdom and France, and others he didn't recognize at all, maybe Chinese.

"The guy's still a mystery to me," he said, fingering one of the Chinese coins with a square hole through the middle.

"Tolliver, can I ask you something?"

Though wary, he said, "Sure."

"Why don't you want to talk to me about you and Noble?"

"I thought that's what we were --"

"Not like *that*. Ordinary stuff is ordinary. I mean, you know, the other."

She thinks you'll like the sex better than you like taking care of her.

Tolliver couldn't find the right words to answer her.

Sarah spoke them first. "Is it because you're my brother, or because for about as far back as I can really remember, you've mostly been my dad?"

He had to sit down again. "Maybe both."

"Okay. That's --"

Standing once more because he *couldn't* sit still, Tolliver interrupted her. He paced toward a tall bookcase set kitty-corner to the far wall, still careful to be quiet with his tread. "I've sucked at both roles lately. I know that. I wasn't there for you and I didn't tell you what I needed to."

"Tolliver --"

"Let me finish," he overrode her. If he was "Dad," then he'd make it count. "I haven't forgotten about you, and I'm not going to. You're still the main priority. I'm still your family."

"And Noble?"

Tolliver bit his lip. "Maybe Noble'll be family too."

"Oh." Silence.

"Would that be so bad?"

He waited for her to think about it. "I guess not," she said, sounding doubtful.

"Be straight with me, Sarah. You're the one who started this whole thing rolling. I'd never have looked twice at him if you hadn't maneuvered us together."

"I know. You just...you lit up when he smiled at you. I hadn't ever seen you do that with anyone, not even me, and I got scared." She half laughed. "You never even noticed Joey crushing on you for months."

"But you did?" Tolliver blinked. "I really am oblivious."

"Totally."

Tolliver sighed. He balanced the phone on his shoulder, plucked a book out of the case, and paged through it to give his hands something to do. "Tell you what, sis... Want to start fresh?"

"Can we?"

"I can try."

"Okay." She sniffled, but Tolliver didn't get the feeling that she was sad. More...relieved, like he was. "I can try, too. If you promise you won't --"

"I swear. I promise. I'll do a blood oath if you want, but believe me. I'm your guardian. I take that seriously."

"Did you..." She hesitated. "I guess that was going to be a dumb question. You did give up your whole life so I could have a good one, the way Noble said. Maybe I'm oblivious too."

"We all are, in our ways."

"Now *you* sound like Noble."

"He's got a way of rubbing off on a guy," Tolliver admitted, then blushed hot when Sarah shrieked her giggles. "Jeez, Sarah."

"You walked right into that one," she informed him.

"I know, I know." Tolliver tried to brush it off. This was going to be part of it from now on. She was old enough to know, and if she was better enough to see a joke, he wasn't going to stop her.

He reshelved Noble's book and reached for another. "Descartes," he murmured. "Why am I not surprised?"

"What are you doing?"

"Looking through Noble's hardbacks."

"Should you do that?" she asked dubiously. "That's his personal stuff."

Tolliver stopped halfway through putting the book back. "I'm so used to this at the store. I didn't think."

"Oblivious," she teased. "I think I'm going to start calling you that. Captain Oblivious."

"Very funny." Tolliver drummed his fingers along the half-shelved book's spine. "Hey, Sarah? Are we back to good now?"

"I think so. At least we're starting. And..." The silence was like a mental shrug. "You're talking to me. You never really did. I never really did. You think maybe that's where we went wrong?"

"I think you're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for, if you can say things like that."

"Book smart. Descartes. Plato."

"You know I'm proud of you for that." In the absence of words that followed, Tolliver frowned. "Sarah? You do know how proud of you I am, don't you?"

"You never said that either," she said, and he knew she was crying this time.

"Hey, hey, don't, shh." He tried to soothe her. "Guys don't know how to cope with tears."

She giggled, though it was snuffly. "You really are proud?"

"One hundred percent. Tell you what. If you're okay with it, I'll bring Noble home with me tonight. We can all just, I don't know, work it all out."

"You promise he *is* going to be around for a while?"

"I think so. I hope so."

"But you don't *know* so?"

"Noble's the one who *knows* things, I don't."

"Tolliver." Sarah sounded more worried, less tearful.

"I don't want to jinx it," Tolliver tried to explain, the dark curl of uncertainty twining around him once more, hungry like a striking snake, now he'd answered her previous question. *Forever's a long time*, his memory chimed.

Impatient and trying to shove the inner voice away, Tolliver jostled the book and stubbed its edge against the shelf. It slipped from his hands and hit the floor with a jarring thump, pages fanning open.

A photograph, tucked near the back, fluttered out and came to rest at Tolliver's feet. He made a *tch* noise and crouched to gather book and picture back together.

He looked at the photograph, and stopped. Stopped everything.

"Oh," he said, the picture drowning out the world as Noble's presence always did.

"Tolliver, what's wrong?" Sarah asked, sounding anxious now.

He cleared his throat carefully. "I think I broke it."

"Was that the book I heard falling?"

"Yes."

"Can you fix it?"

"I don't know," Tolliver said, carefully handling the photograph by its edges. "I need to take care of this. See what Noble says."

"Okay," she said, dubious. "You'll be home before dark?"

"Maybe afterward. Before you go to bed."

"Promise?"

"Swear."

"Love you, Tolliver," she said, almost shy. "See you soon."

"Soon," he echoed, knowing in the back of his head that he'd screwed up the honesty already, but he couldn't tell her about this. Not when he didn't even know what it meant.

Absently, Tolliver disconnected the call and slipped the cell into his hip pocket. He studied the picture with all his focus.

A picture of Noble standing by an oak tree. A tall woman, supple as a willow with long, sleek hair the color of a sunset, resting her head on his chest. Tolliver wasn't sure, but he thought he saw an engagement ring on her finger, and a plainer gold band beside it.

Noble wore one too.

And balanced on Noble's hip, he held a girl -- four, maybe five years old -- with hair as dark as Sarah's, tiny glasses balanced halfway down her nose. Her smile was brighter than starlight.

The woman, the red-haired woman, was pregnant.

The picture didn't look old. Noble hadn't aged much since it was taken. Tolliver turned the photograph over in search of a date, but found none.

He didn't hear Noble's footsteps behind him until Noble spoke. "I told you I wasn't a good man, Tolliver," he said. "That's the one thing you didn't believe. And I guess now you do."

Tolliver turned to look at him.

Chapter Seventeen

Noble stood in the doorway, halfway in and halfway out of the bedroom, leaning on the frame. He was rumpled from sleep, his eyes drowsy and his hair tousled, his chest and feet both bare, his jeans on and zipped but unbuttoned.

For all that he looked half-asleep still, he met Tolliver's gaze openly. No lying, no prevarication. This was what it was, and Noble wasn't running.

Not anymore.

"I knew this would happen," Noble said when Tolliver didn't speak. "I didn't see it would be this soon, though."

Tolliver couldn't make himself stand or let go of the picture. "Who is she?"

"My wife."

The floor tilted, or seemed to. Tolliver sat heavily on the rug. He couldn't think. Couldn't speak. He thought he might throw up. *God*.

Noble came three steps closer and sank into a crouch. "Tolliver, listen to me, please."

Tolliver shook his head.

"I don't know what you're thinking right now. I can only guess, and it scares the hell out of me. Tolliver --" Noble reached for him.

Tolliver couldn't reach back. He didn't think he would have.

Noble withdrew his hand. "I should have told you before. Shouldn't I? I saw that I should have, back when I could see, but I couldn't see the time being right yet. Maybe I was wrong." His laugh was bitter. "Or maybe I was exactly right, because it's now, and this is how it was going to be all along."

"Your wife," Tolliver said, the word ringing in his ears. "Is this your daughter? And your..."

"My son."

"God," Tolliver whispered, dropping the picture. He leaned forward, head hanging heavy. "You *should* have told me."

"It's not what I think you're thinking," Noble was almost painfully earnest. "I'm not cheating on her. I'm not that man."

"Sure looks like you are to me." Tolliver let the picture fall. He couldn't look back at Noble. The tangle in his chest and head couldn't be identified, nothing more than a writhing knot of *lie* and *betrayed* and *why*?

"That picture's three years old," Noble said. "Sarah reminded me of my daughter. I told the truth, that I came here looking for something I'd seen but didn't understand. When I saw Sarah, I knew it had to do with her."

"Did you leave them behind to come here?"

"Tolliver, *no*. I told you I wasn't cheating on her. I couldn't."

"She gave her permission?" Tolliver tried to force his hands to stop shaking. "Does she believe you, about all the things you see?"

"She did. And she didn't give her permission, no."

"Then how is that not cheating?" Tolliver's temper began to warn, anger licking like tongues of flame along his thoughts.

"Because she wasn't there to ask."

Tolliver nodded. He had too many words now and had to pick carefully among them. "Then where are they now? Your family? Do they know where you are?"

"No. They don't. Tolliver, you're hearing me, but you're not *listening*," Noble dropped to his knees and crawled forward until he could take Tolliver's hand.

He tried to jerk away from Noble's touch.

Noble was too strong for him. "I can't... I'm trying, Tolliver. *Listen* to me."

Tolliver shook his head, but he didn't get up to leave the way he wanted to. The way he knew he should.

"I can't even see a step ahead now," Noble said, low and dismayed. "It's all in the moment. I don't know what you're thinking when it's more important than ever, and you don't believe me now, when I need you to most." He nodded at the picture lying on the floor between them. "That's how it was with her. At the end."

His words sounded strange. "The end?"

"Michelle's dead," Noble said, his voice barren of anything, flat and empty. He watched Tolliver fixedly. "She died a month after the picture was taken. So did my daughter Lucy, and my son. They were on their way home from the hospital. A car wreck. He didn't even have a name yet. She'd wanted Tobias, and I'd wanted Joshua."

"What happened?" Tolliver asked, his lips numb. He wanted to believe. That Noble's family was dead. God, what kind of a sick fuck did that make him?

Too much, it was all too much again, and he couldn't *handle* this.

"I was at work. Too busy for them," Noble said plainly. Tolliver thought he understood now that Noble's lack of emotion was a facade. He still missed them. Mourned them. They were his family. How could he not?

Tolliver wondered if Noble thought about Michelle when he and Noble's bodies were locked together. A knot of shame burned a hole in his belly. He squeezed his eyes shut and wished he could block his ears the same way.

"I can't do this," he said, finding the strength to stand.

"Can't do what?" Noble followed him, not letting go. "Can't listen to the truth? Tolliver, I told you I wandered the world. I did. Looking for a home. I found one here. With you."

And a family, ready-made to replace his own. I thought he acted fatherly with Sarah, and I never did get it.

"I..." Tolliver stopped. "Why me?"

"Because I *saw* you, when I looked at you, and because you believed me. Michelle --"

Tolliver flinched. He couldn't help it.

Noble went on regardless, as if he couldn't stop. "She was the only one who'd believed me before --"

"And she was beautiful."

Noble stopped abruptly. "Tolliver, no."

"I'm ordinary. Plain. I'm not like you, larger than life and with everyone watching you wherever you go. Why would you want to be with me," Tolliver swallowed. "If it was only for me? I'm not even a woman."

"I know that. I knew that. Your gender doesn't matter. *You* do."

Tolliver felt as if he was breaking open under the dual assault of confusion and hurt. "You should have told me about that, too. With all your talk about me learning to know what I wanted."

"My sexuality didn't make a difference when it came to you."

"That's one thing you saw wrong, then."

"No. I wouldn't have ever wanted a woman again as long as you were with me. And I wanted to stay. Still want to. This is home, now. Do you know what that's like, when you wander the way I have?"

"So you'd have stayed gay for the rest of your life and never told me you liked women too, after showing me how different I am? Never would have told me any of this?" Tolliver

asked, bitter as lye and ash, the words stinging his lips as they left him. He hated the loathing in his tone but couldn't make himself stop.

Noble sighed and dropped his head. "I was wrong. Maybe I couldn't see everything even back then."

"Or maybe you should have used some sense." Tolliver clenched his fists. "I have to go."

"Tolliver, no. Don't. Please stay. You know in your heart -- I think -- that I do love you the way I said. I'm sorry."

"I can't listen to this." Tolliver managed to break free of Noble's hold and made for the door, stopping only to scoop up his hoodie along the way. It was almost dark outside, and the night would be cold. He needed shoes. Where were his shoes?

"Tolliver." Noble's warmth and solidity closed in on him from behind. "I love you. I know I do."

Tolliver's resolve wavered. The words sank beneath the surface of his skin, soothing an ache in his bones. He didn't want this to end. God, he didn't. "Why should I believe you?" he had to ask all the same.

"Because love is blind." Noble kissed Tolliver's nape as faintly as a brush of wings.

It was more than Tolliver could take, the last frayed edge of his nerves unraveling. He jumped away, fumbling with the doorknob. "Stop it. I can't. I have to go."

"Because I told you the truth?" Noble didn't try to stop him.

Tolliver looked over his shoulder, feeling like Lot's wife, knowing he'd be turned into a pillar of salt, but he could no more have stopped himself than he could have ceased to breathe -- and that was the way it would always be around Noble.

"Every word of what I've said is true," Noble went on, watching Tolliver. "I can see you more clearly now, you know? And if love's blind, your loving me made it double blind. I can see through the shadows."

Tolliver swallowed down a cold lump. "And?"

"And I see that nothing I do or say is going to stop you from walking out the door. I see that you believe I love you. And that you want to love me, but you're as afraid as you were before we met. I see that it'll all have been for nothing. If you let it be that way. If you close your mind and believe in a lie."

"Stop it."

"Do you want to know how my family died, Tolliver?"

"*Stop.*"

"Because I saw that my newborn son was in danger. And my daughter."

"*Stop.*" Tolliver couldn't get the grip he needed on the door, fingers slipping on the metal.

“And Michelle.” Noble moved into Tolliver’s space, nearly breathing the same breath as he. “But I was almost blind. I told her I knew something bad was coming. She had always believed me before, *always*, but this time she didn’t want to. She was scared I was right, and she closed her ears to what I was trying to say. Didn’t want to think of anything bad coming their way. She called me an asshole and hung up on me.”

“Noble, don’t. I can’t hear this.”

“Because it makes you doubt yourself. I *see* that.” Searching his eyes, Noble cupped Tolliver’s face. “I can see again when something’s about to end. I was working, halfway through putting together a goddamn investment portfolio, when I *saw* the van heading for Michelle’s car. She was crying because I wasn’t there, because she was afraid I was right, and she wasn’t watching the road. I *saw*, as clear as life, maybe half a minute before they collided. Too late to do anything about it. Tolliver, I see you so clearly now.” He drew his thumb over Tolliver’s cheekbone. “Don’t let that happen again. I don’t want to be alone again.”

Tolliver made himself meet Noble’s eyes. “But you already see that you will be.”

Noble shuddered. “Don’t go.”

“I’m sorry. I have to.”

“You don’t even understand why. You’re running scared, like a deer.”

“Maybe so, but I can’t do this and live my life. There’s a world of things I don’t know, and I can’t go every day like this, wondering what next. If you go blind to me again, I --” Tolliver stopped, shaking his head. He pulled his hoodie on.

Noble dropped his hand and stood back. “I didn’t want to see this,” he said. “I still don’t.”

Tolliver parted his lips to say something -- anything -- but could think of nothing. He unlocked the door and stepped outside, the cold lashing at skin warmed from exertion and turmoil. “Noble, I’m sorry,” he said, not knowing if Noble could hear him. “If I was a better man, I’d stay.”

“You are better than this, but you don’t want to believe it.”

“Then I’m a coward. Is that what you’re saying?”

Noble said nothing.

Tolliver put his head down and walked away, into the wind driving hard against him.

He waited for Noble to call him back. To say something that’d change his mind. To ask again, one more time, because maybe if he did, it’d be enough to --

Noble said nothing. The door closed behind Tolliver, shutting Noble out.

Tolliver stopped and turned, looking through the window. In the barest light left, he could see Noble sitting on the couch, his head in his hands. His shoulders shook.

Tolliver forced himself to ignore the stinging in his eyes, told himself it was just the wind, and turned away.

He needed to go home now. Sarah was waiting for him.

Chapter Eighteen

Dusk had given way to full night by the time Tolliver reached home. The cloud cover thickened as he walked, reflecting the streetlamps and turning the light was a strange, hazy purple that enveloped everything. A light fog began to rise.

He unlocked the door carefully, neither with a jerk nor with too much obvious caution, trying his best for casual. Like he didn't have a care in the world.

Inside, the darkness was more absolute. No lamps on in the den or kitchen, the only source of light the steady glow of a study lamp from Sarah's room, where her door stood a few inches ajar.

Tolliver tossed his keys on the counter and stretched, working out the kinks in his back. His muscles were starting to protest, though he refused to let himself dwell on how he'd worked them sore and let them go stiff.

"Sarah?" he called, pretending idleness. "I'm home."

She peeked out the crack of her door, so quickly he knew she'd been lying in wait. "You're earlier than I thought you'd be." Looking past him, she frowned. "Where's Noble?"

"He's back at his place." Tolliver rolled his shoulders. "Shouldn't you be asleep by now?"

"No. It's not even eight thirty yet." Sarah kept scanning the space behind him as if she expected Noble to pop up with a "Fooled you!" "Why didn't Noble come like you said?"

"Because he didn't," Tolliver snapped, more sharply than he'd intended. He reached for his center and hoped to find steadiness. "Sarah, it's not a big deal. Go back to your homework. Big day tomorrow?"

"Not really," she replied, obviously only paying a fraction of attention to him, the rest of her head fixated elsewhere. "Tolliver --"

"Sarah, just get back to your work, okay?"

"Okay, okay." She shut her door, the light that had been spilling out disappearing and leaving Tolliver in the dark.

He thought about what a cliché it'd be to sit by himself without any lights, brooding over what had happened and where it'd all gone wrong, how he could have done things differently to make a better end -- maybe how he could have avoided the end.

It'd be trite to sit by himself and mourn like a Victorian lady spurned.

He did it anyway, but with a beer. Even if he didn't drink any of it before it went warm and flat.

* * * * *

Sarah held her peace through the morning, letting Tolliver pretend he'd slept more than the odd thirty minutes' worth of catnapping or so he'd managed. She let him have the first shower, saying the weird green goop she'd smeared on her face needed a chance to dry and there was no sense in his waiting around for her.

He'd never seen Sarah in a facial mask before and thought it smelled strangely like tzatziki dip, but he let it slide.

When he stumbled out of their bathroom in a cloud of steam, his carefully buttoned shirt and khakis rumpled and clinging to his still-damp skin, droplets of water from his wet hair rolling down his neck, he found she'd started breakfast.

Two paper bowls of instant oatmeal circling in the microwave. Still, breakfast. She'd dragged out a cutting board and was slicing apples.

"Morning," she said, barely looking up.

Tolliver wondered if he sounded like that when *he* was trying to be nonchalant and had an uncomfortable feeling that it was.

He didn't push her, and she didn't push him. Much.

Neatly chopping the apples into cubes, dunking them in lemon juice, and rolling them in sugar, Sarah said offhandedly, "Is Noble coming by the store today?"

"Probably not, no." Tolliver turned to take the oatmeal out before it cooked into rubber cement. "Why don't you like bananas in cereal like other kids?"

"Because I'm a unique and beautiful snowflake," Sarah said dryly, surprising Tolliver into a laugh. "Here." She pushed half the sugary apples to him.

He'd just taken a bite, his mouth full -- it wasn't half bad -- when, sprinkling cinnamon over her bowl, she asked, "Did you two have another fight?"

Her timing was off, and Tolliver couldn't have said he was sorry. Though he *knew* he should talk to her about this -- God, just the night before they'd had their big heart-to-heart about honesty and here he was already breaking the rules -- he couldn't, somehow.

“Mmf,” he said, pointing at his bulging cheeks.

Sarah looked at him over the rims of her thick black eyeglass frames. “Hmm,” she said, taking a bite of apple. “I have an algebra exam today. Do you remember enough to help quiz me?”

“I can give it a try.”

They let the Noble part of the conversation drop there, even if it did stand like a white elephant poised on tiptoe between them. *Thank God.*

* * * * *

Ten thirty came and went. Tolliver drummed his pencil on the old cash register, tapping its carefully oiled buttons and repainted numbers. He pulled the lever to hear the *ka-ching*.

The smell of baked goods wafting from next door was overwhelming, or so it seemed to Tolliver that day. Cinnamon and honey, cherry pie, chocolate and caramel.

Tolliver looked back and forth between the register and the calling table he’d always let Joey -- *let, jeez* -- put his offerings on, bare even of crumbs.

Pride warred with a sense of his own stupidity until the clock ticked over to eleven before Tolliver groaned, winged his pencil at the empty table, and slid off his high stool behind the register.

As he locked the door of Old Curiosity, its BE BACK IN TEN MINUTES sign still swinging on the other side of the glass, Tolliver sensed a presence behind him. He turned automatically, not thinking but only acting.

Noble was walking behind him, along the path that circled the park. He’d put on a light jacket and his sandals were replaced by boots. He slowed, lifting one large hand in a cautious wave.

Tolliver nodded in return, struggling to keep his expression blank.

Noble’s hesitant smile died. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked on without saying a word.

Wait. Stop, Tolliver wanted to say.

But he didn’t. His hands in his own pockets, he took the five parallel strides that carried him to the door of Joey’s bakery and shouldered it open.

Joey, in the middle of transporting a still-steaming latticed cherry pie to a new display case, glanced up at him and said nothing.

Tolliver stopped in front of the register and tried to think of what to say. “Missed my morning snack,” he said at last, knowing how lame that was. “Figured it was time I started buying.” God, that hadn’t come out right either. “I meant --”

"It's okay. I get it." Joey centered the pie and dusted off his hands. He watched Tolliver halfway the whole time.

He was starting to wonder if everyone looked at him that way, or if Noble was the catalyst.

"Joey, I'm..." He trailed off and shrugged. "I treated you like crap. For months. I'm sorry."

"You didn't know." Joey mirrored his shrug. "I never said."

"I should've known," Tolliver insisted.

"You didn't. Can't undo what's been done."

"But I --"

"Tolliver, stop." Joey leaned on the display case, arms crossed and his chin tucked on top of them. "Did something happen with you and Noble?"

Tolliver bit his tongue.

After a moment of silence, Joey nodded. "But you're not trying a rebound thing."

"God, no!" Tolliver blurted, horrified. "I wouldn't, not to you. Not to anyone. I'm not that guy."

I'm not that guy, Noble had said. The words echoed in Tolliver's ears.

He tried to blot them out by asking, "Can I get a dozen sugar cookies and a dozen chocolate-chip? Customers like them."

"You do too," Joey was already reaching for the box with sheets of wax paper. "Want some phyllo for Sarah?"

"Yes. Um. Thanks. Listen, Joey, I'm sorry--"

"It's in the past, Tolliver. Leave it there." Wrapping and counting, Joey said, too offhandedly to be honestly casual, "You know, a guy like him -- like you -- only comes along once in a lifetime, Tolliver. Don't screw it up if you can help it."

"It's not like that."

"Why not?" Joey passed him the cookies, still warm. "No charge."

Tolliver didn't take them. "Fair trade from now on, or no trade at all."

Joey studied him thoughtfully. "Five ninety-five for a baker's dozen. Lucky thirteen."

Tolliver nodded and reached for his wallet instead of the cookies.

"I meant what I said." Joey pushed the cookies toward him. "Whatever happened, don't give up this fast. What'll happen will happen, I get that, but at least try."

The advice made Tolliver want to prickle and to snap at Joey.

I'm not that kind of guy. Noble's promise reverberated in his memory. *Tolliver, please listen. I didn't mean to hurt you.*

He took the cookies and passed Joey his money in silence, answering Noble in his head.
I know. But I...

But what?

I don't know.

Then think about that.

* * * * *

Seven days.

He'd only seen Noble once, the first morning after, when he'd walked along the path in front of the storefronts.

More than once, Tolliver had picked up the phone. He'd even gotten through dialing five of the digits. Once, all he'd had to do was hit the Call button...and he couldn't do it.

Knowing he was being an idiot and doing something about it were two different things, and Tolliver didn't know if he could cross that gap. If anything would be *enough* to push him over.

With every day that passed, it got harder. Soon, it'd be impossible.

But he couldn't make himself do it, and he almost didn't know why anymore. Wasn't like Noble had a monopoly on things left unsaid and definitely not on uncertainty, jeez, but something as huge as a family? Tolliver couldn't stop seeing pretty Michelle, cute little Lucy, and the swell of his unborn son.

How was he supposed to compare to that, anyway?

Understanding that that was what bothered him most was what kept Tolliver from pushing Call.

* * * * *

"Tolliver?"

"Mm-hmm?" He'd settled himself on the couch with a sudoku book. He'd tanked on helping Sarah with the algebra and figured a refresher for his head wouldn't hurt. Not that he understood more than the basic concept, or that the numbers and boxes weren't swimming together in an impenetrable mess.

"Tolliver." Sarah plucked the book out of his hands.

He blinked at her, not having heard her drop her homework. Blinked again at the way she'd changed.

The hair that normally hid her face was pulled atop her head in a knot that looked messy but from what little he knew of women probably took half an hour to fix, and while she still wore her glasses, she'd put on some kind of eye makeup goop. She didn't look like

the kid sister he'd been used to, nor like the painted lady he'd caught in the bar. Not even somewhere in between. Different.

"This has got to stop," Sarah said, flopping down on the couch beside him. She nudged his shin with the toe of her shoe, some kind of ballet flat.

"Don't know what you mean," Tolliver lied, making a grab for his book.

"Uh-uh." Sarah held it out of reach. "Not until you talk to me. Jeez, Tolliver. You don't let me get away with acting like a fucktard --"

"Hey, language!"

"Acting like a bitch --"

"Sarah, you're not too old for me to send you to your room," Tolliver snapped. "Give me the book and quit fooling around."

"No." She tossed it over her shoulder. "Acting like a *brat*. Does that one work for you?"

Tolliver resigned himself to the loss of his sudoku and drew his feet up on the couch. "It's not an unfair assessment. You scared me for a while there."

"I'm better now."

"I think you are," Tolliver said, studying her the way Noble often looked at him, only realizing what he was doing when he'd already understood the changes in her. She wasn't trying to grow up too fast. She *was* growing up. She looked less like a kid and more like a young woman.

Sarah waited for him to finish, then said, "But you're not better. You're worse. And if you can boss me around, then you have to listen to me talk. We agreed."

"That's different."

She huffed, blowing a wayward strand of hair off her forehead. "In what universe is it 'different'? I messed up; you messed up."

"You don't have any room to talk, Sarah." Tolliver didn't want to say it, but if it'd make her stop... "This isn't like what you were dealing with."

"Are you even listening to yourself? It has everything to do with it. With *Noble*."

Tolliver flinched.

"I was jealous of him, and I was scared, I know that. You know I know that." Sarah scooted closer, waving her hands as she grew more animated. "I'm better about that now, I swear. Look me in the eye and tell me you can't tell I've dealt."

He couldn't deny it.

"You were good together. That was part of what freaked me out, you know?" Lacking hair in her face to play with, Sarah tugged her ear. "It's like people aren't meant to be that happy. It throws the universe out of whack."

"So I should get back to making the planet spin off its axis?"

"That's not what I meant." She swatted him and sighed. "What happened, Tolliver? Please tell me. I have to know."

"It wasn't you," he said, too abruptly for her to believe him. "There were other reasons."

"Like *what*? What's so big a deal that you'd dump him?"

"I didn't --"

"*You* were the one who came here alone that night when you'd told me you'd bring Noble home."

Tolliver fell silent.

"Tell me," Sarah insisted. "You don't get to do this, you know. Push me to deal and then stop dealing yourself. It doesn't work that way. What *happened*?"

Tolliver didn't mean for the words to come out. They emerged before he could stop them or think better of it, his voice cracking. "I broke us."

Not *we broke up*. Tolliver knew the difference, and Sarah did too.

She sobered. "Why?"

"Because I freaked out."

"Over what?"

Tolliver wished he had something to keep his hands busy. "I didn't ask him to explain something I wasn't expecting but I should have *seen* a long time ago."

She didn't ask what he'd found out, specifically, and for that he was glad. "Idiot. Right after we had it all out on the phone?"

"Captain Oblivious. I know." Tolliver threaded his fingers together and pressed his thumbs one against the other. "This honest communication thing has its drawbacks."

"Sorry. Or not." This time, Sarah balled up her fist when she punched him. "It's not my fault, but it is. I have to make amends. Do you get that?"

"Sarah, just leave it be." Tolliver was too tired for this. "It's done."

"No. He walks by the store every day."

Tolliver raised his head. "He does?"

"When you're in the middle of pricing stock. I think he has it timed so he can see you but you don't have to face him."

God.

"He misses you," Sarah said more gently, just as earnestly. "Like you do him. I know it's true, Tolliver. You miss Noble so much it hurts."

"I can't just... It's not that easy. Life's not simple."

"You know the story of how I met him?" she asked abruptly, apropos of nothing. "At the street fair, he *looked* at me. Not just *at* me...into me. Like he knew me in a second." She

snapped her fingers. "He's special, isn't he? Not just more than ordinary, I mean. He's something different." She fiddled with a strand of her hair, looking sideways at him. "Is he?"

Tolliver nodded.

So did she. "That's how I knew he was for you. Because I saw him, too, and I saw that he was as lonely as you are. Not the way he sees things. It was only with my eyes. But I know lonely --"

"Sarah --"

"It's 'cause I see it in you every day," she finished.

Tolliver rubbed his forehead. "Sarah..."

Sarah stood and rested her palm on the top of his head, reminding him oddly of the Madonna giving a blessing. "Whatever he did, whatever you did, if you put it behind you and *say* so, to him, he'll take you back. He wants you back; he just thinks you won't go to him."

Tolliver bit the inside of his cheek. It was true. He'd known that all along, hadn't he?

"Don't let him go."

Tolliver fought between the urges to say *yes* and *no*.

Finally, he gave in, resting his head on his arms and exhaling a heavy breath that Sarah interpreted correctly. She flicked the tip of his left ear. "Good. Now go."

"It's nine on a school night."

Though his face was hidden, he could all but see her roll her eyes. "Do you trust me to be okay on my own?"

Do you trust me? Noble asked in his memory.

Tolliver unfolded his legs and stood, his muscles moving fluidly without any of the soreness he'd grown accustomed to when he and Noble were together. He guessed some pain wasn't a bad thing. He didn't feel alive without it.

"Don't wait up," he told her, stuffing his keys in his pants pocket and finding his jacket. On second thought, he left it hanging on its hook. "I'll call --"

"Better not." Sarah had reached over the couch for his sudoku book. "If I see you before morning, I'll be pis -- mad. Okay?"

Tolliver couldn't help grinning at her as he stepped out the door. "Okay."

When the door shut, he sobered. He believed Sarah, he did, but he still didn't know if he could do this, and with nothing but the soundless night around him, the doubts rushed back in.

Screw you, he told them, and started walking, hunched over against the cold.

Chapter Nineteen

Five steps away from Noble's door, Tolliver stopped. He already knew this walkway like the back of his hand, but he'd never been *here* before. What did you say at a time like this? "I'm sorry" wasn't enough.

Was it?

He lingered, watching the golden gleam of light filtering through Noble's closed window. Wondering what Noble was doing. If he could see anything.

See me, Tolliver pleaded. *I need you to know me*.

A silhouette rose from beneath the window and formed the shape of a tall, strong man standing. Noble. He tilted his head as if listening and then moved, heading for the entryway.

Tolliver's legs wouldn't move. His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Noble opened the door and stood in the light, saying nothing. Only looking at him. With the lamplight behind him, it wasn't possible to tell what he was thinking or how his mouth was set.

It *wasn't* enough, but Tolliver said it anyway. "I'm sorry."

Noble inclined his head. He leaned against the door frame and was quiet.

Tolliver made himself take three steps forward. Not one and then two back again. He could see Noble now and could see that there was a carefully guarded nothing on his face.

God, he wanted to touch him.

"Can I come in?"

"No," Noble said.

Tolliver's heart sank like a stone. Okay. He deserved that.

He turned to leave. Noble caught his arm, closing the two steps between them. "You didn't let me finish," Noble said, his grip as tight as a steel band. "You need to hear something before I say a final yes or no."

Tolliver waited, frozen, caught by Noble's intensity.

"I miss them," Noble said. "Michelle and Lucy and my son. There's a hole in my heart where they used to be, and every day I wake up knowing that if they'd believed me, they'd still be alive."

Tolliver wanted to reach for him and would have if Noble hadn't held him back.

"I wasn't replacing them with you."

"I understand," Tolliver stammered.

Noble shook him. "You don't, not yet. I wasn't with you as a substitute. You're you. You're Tolliver, and when I said I loved you, I damn well meant it. I said you were all I wanted, and I meant that too."

"I know," Tolliver said, his throat tight. "I -- you --"

"Say it," Noble warned him. "There's two different ways this could go."

"You can see again?"

"More than I could before. It's the shadowlands again now, heading for sun's rise or sun's set. Two paths, and what you say is going to be the choice between one or the other, because you owe me that."

"I know. But I don't get what the choices are, Noble. I can't walk blind."

"Love is blind," Noble said. "I can't tell you. Won't. Either you know it in here --" he touched Tolliver's chest, a too-light, too-quickly-gone pressure -- "or you should go home."

"I can't. I *am* home," Tolliver said, meaning it. "I love you, Noble, I do. You're my home. You're all I ever wanted too. I didn't know it then. Now I do."

Noble shivered. Tolliver thought it'd been the wrong answer --

"Come inside." Noble's grasp eased, his hand sliding down Tolliver's arm to take his hand. "You're with me."

* * * * *

"I told you I wasn't a good man," Noble said, pushing Tolliver to the door. He descended upon him before Tolliver could answer, not asking but *taking*, his tongue gliding over Tolliver's and swallowing both breath and words.

Tolliver tried to shake his head. *Yes, you are. Doesn't matter, though.*

"It does matter," Noble rasped, moving from Tolliver's lips to his jaw, Noble's shadowed stubble rasping his cheek. "I'm just a man."

More than. Forcing his limbs to work, Tolliver tried to show Noble what he meant, how he meant it. He widened his stance to let Noble come in and found a handhold on Noble's biceps. Tilting his head back, his neck curved in a bow, he gave Noble everything he could.

"Say it for me," Noble demanded, working his way down that arc, the scent of his hair and his musk headier than any spice.

"You're mine," Tolliver said instead, bucking to meet the sudden firm pressure of Noble's hand molded over his rising cock. "*God.* Mine, my man."

"Yours," Noble said, grazing Tolliver's collarbone with the sharp edge of his teeth, the sting intoxicating.

Tolliver pushed into the touch, fumbling his fingers through Noble's hair to bind him close. "Mine."

Noble laid his lips over the slight hollow at the base of Tolliver's throat and sucked hard. "*Mine.*"

"Yeah." Tolliver tried to moisten his lips. He couldn't open his eyes to look at Noble, not because he didn't want to, but because his body wouldn't obey him. Noble's hands were everywhere on him, slipping buttons free of their holes and smoothing down his torso, opening his fly and *God*, taking his cock in hand.

"Noble," he breathed, dragging the word into a groan.

"Ask me for it," Noble said, heated puffs of air over the tangled nest of curls around Tolliver's cock; when he'd gone to his knees, Tolliver didn't know. "Need to hear you say it."

"Fuck me," Tolliver said, fingers flexing in Noble's hair.

"No. Not that. Though I will, when you say it." Noble licked the slimmest line possible up the side of Tolliver's cock, urgently straining now toward him.

Tolliver understood him then. "*Love me.*"

"You mean it?" Noble ran his tongue around the crown of Tolliver's cock, holding his hips steady so he couldn't thrust.

"Love you," Tolliver ground, unable to get any air. Meaning the words. "You see it's true."

"I do." Noble sucked Tolliver's cock between his lips too fast, too soon over, letting go. He surged to his feet and found Tolliver's mouth with his own, sharing the bitter, salty tang of precum from tongue to tongue.

Tolliver let go, let Noble devour him. He sensed the change from light to dark, Noble turning the lamp off, cool blue night enveloping them.

Too much was too good, and Tolliver let it happen. Let himself drown and become the passion that burned hot within him. The rest of it -- thought, wonder, self -- could go for now.

He didn't wait for Noble to guide him, fumbling his way to Noble's cock and rubbing the stiffened length through his jeans. "Want you in me again," he said on a hard squeeze. "No waiting. Been too long already."

Noble hissed. He rocked on his heels and had to slam one palm to the wall to keep from falling over.

Tolliver took him by the belt loop and pulled. He wanted Noble to crash into him. "Have to," he said and traced his tongue over the salty taste of Noble's skin. Noble's heart hammered too fast, *too good*, so good.

"Have to." Noble laughed. Tolliver knew he remembered that from before. He pulled away from Tolliver and pulled him along. "Bed. Go."

Tolliver stumbled forward, shirt open and zipper undone. He looked over his shoulder to see Noble pulling his shirt off, long, firm chest clearly visible in the night's dim light. The breath caught in his throat.

Noble's lips curved. He prowled to Tolliver, lithe as a cat, a stalking cat that had caught the scent of his prey. Without saying anything, he pushed the opened shirt off Tolliver's shoulders and let it fall to the floor. He slid the jeans off Tolliver's hips and held him steady while Tolliver toed out of his sneakers, no socks. Noble's feet were already bare.

"Now you," Noble ordered in a low throatiness made of sex, bringing Tolliver's hands to his waist.

"Yeah." Tolliver did as Noble had done with him, taking his time about it, gliding over the tautness of Noble's ass and the smooth, smooth skin while muscles flexed and tightened under his touch.

Noble's cock jerked, bumping his. Warm stickiness trailed in his wake.

Some quirk of he-didn't-know-what provoked Tolliver to draw his finger over the small bead of moisture and to slip the finger in his mouth, sucking.

"God, *you*." Noble groaned. He pushed Tolliver away, shoved him forward, caught him two steps back to wrench him around and crush their mouths together. Tolliver let it happen, undulating to bring their cocks sliding one against the other. His slickness blended with Noble's, no way to tell which belonged to who. Noble held his hip tightly enough to leave bruises.

"Harder," Tolliver breathed over Noble's lips. "Have to remember you were here."

"Not going anywhere." Noble took hold of his other hip and dug his fingers in, five flares of pain on each side that made Tolliver dizzy with *want*.

"I know." Tolliver covered Noble's hands with his own and bore down. "Except the bed."

Noble let him go, hissing raggedly. "Hurry."

* * * * *

Tolliver hit the bed on his back. The mattress pitched and rolled with the force of his landing.

Noble followed half a second later, coming to lie half on top of him and half off, one long leg between Tolliver's and one flanking him. He turned Tolliver's head, seeking his mouth and thrusting his cock through the sweat-slickened groove of Tolliver's hip.

"Like this?" Tolliver found enough of himself to ask between presses of Noble's mouth. He began to turn farther on his side, changed his mind, and fell back again, pulling Noble to him instead.

Noble nosed at the crux of Tolliver's arm, licking him. "Like how?"

"On my back. Want to see you," he tried to explain. "Can we, like this --"

"Don't want to hurt you --"

"*Want* you to." Tolliver worked to pull Noble over him. "Want to see your face, too."

"God." Noble pressed his forehead to Tolliver's chest, over his heart. "I should say no."

"Don't."

"*Yes*. Tolliver, you..." Noble shook his head. He bit and worried at Tolliver's chest, catching one nipple between his teeth and pulling. At the same time Noble stretched out. A moment later, Tolliver heard the rattle of Noble pulling open his bedside table drawer and rummaging around. He knew what Noble was looking for, and the knowledge drove him wild with eagerness and hunger. He writhed beneath Noble, needing more, more, *more*, not able to wait another second.

"Shh." Noble soothed him, rocking their bodies together. He pulled back when Tolliver found his rigid cock, and shifting, tried to guide Noble to him. "Not before you're ready. Have to, won't hurt you that much."

"Then let me help." By luck more than skill, Tolliver found his way to the end of Noble's arm and took the lube from his unresisting hand. He flipped open the cap, amazed that his hands were steady -- then not surprised at all -- that this was how it should be.

Noble stared at him, stunned into immobility.

Tolliver could have laughed, but chose instead to arch far enough off the bed to kiss Noble instead, jarring his teeth.

Lube drizzled easily out of the tube, puddling in his palm. He dropped it and wrapped his hand around Noble's, wetting Noble's fingers. This time, when he pulled Noble to him, Noble came, slipping one finger inside and crooking it to make Tolliver see stars.

Though he couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't sense anything else, Tolliver wanted to do this. He released Noble's hand, used it as a guide, and pushed his own forefinger inside himself, stretching himself wider.

Noble growled, feral and animalistic. "Stop. Too much."

Tolliver *did* laugh. "I know." He lifted, taking Noble deeper. "Ready now."

"Not yet."

"I am." Tolliver coaxed Noble's fingers free of the fist they'd curled into and guided them inside. *Oh, God.* Impossibly full and open. He chose sucking at Noble's lower lip over breathing and rocked, wanting more.

Noble tore away. "What you make me want," he said, before ravaging Tolliver's mouth.

He let Tolliver take his cock in hand and guide it to where their joined fingers and Tolliver's body, opening for him, met. When they slid free, Tolliver breathed out and let it happen.

This time, the slide home was smooth and easy. Noble shuddered a breath that sounded as if he was dying; Tolliver heard himself gasp the same way.

They held their place, as closely joined as anyone could get. Tolliver could feel Noble throbbing inside him and his own stretched flesh pulsing around him. Noble shook with the effort of holding back.

"No," Tolliver said, setting his hand at the dip of Noble's back. "Move."

Noble stretched Tolliver's arms over his head and held him by the wrists, and moved. Filling him, opening him wide, leaving him empty, coming back again.

More. Tolliver parted his lips to catch the salty slick on Noble's throat. He tried to spread his legs farther apart to get Noble deeper inside and found it was easy to raise his knees. To hook them at Noble's heaving sides -- to lock his ankles --

Noble's stroke went deeper than he'd thought it ever could, grinding the spot inside him that made Tolliver's vision go white.

"Just like that," Noble grunted, pounding him hard, as he and Tolliver locked together. "All of me."

"All of everything," Tolliver said, nuzzling Noble blindly, wanting his mouth. He broke away from the hands holding him down and clutched Noble's shoulders to leave his own bruises.

"Fall apart," Noble begged, rocking strong and deep, adrenaline shaking him. Tolliver strove to rise higher, to lock on tighter. "Want to see you lose it."

Tolliver tried to work his hand between them, the friction of his cock against Noble's belly almost enough, but not quite --

Noble knocked his hand out of the way and took Tolliver's cock in his own, jerking ruthlessly. "For me," he urged. "Cover me." He squeezed the swollen crown -- a jolt of pain, then spreading wonder. Tolliver's back arched, clearing the bed, bending him what seemed almost in half as the climax raged through him. Warm drops of wetness struck his throat, tracing lines down his chest.

"*You*," Noble said, shocked awe in his voice. He fisted Tolliver's hair and jerked painfully tight, thrusting in spasms.

"Now for me," Tolliver said, his throat wrecked and so wonderfully raw. He clamped his thighs around Noble and urged him on. "My turn."

"Tolliver --"

"I love you."

Noble slammed home. His cock swelled impossibly harder and pulsed when he froze, drawing blood with his bite.

Tolliver's mouth fell open on a shudder of satisfaction, almost a sob, at the sensation of heat filling him so deeply.

It seemed like years passed, and yet not long enough at all, when Noble's limbs gave out and he fell hard atop Tolliver. With, their chests heaving in sync, he nuzzled the top of Noble's head, lips moving meaninglessly more than kissing, and held it close to him.

He'd said he'd come home. He knew now, as he had before, that it was true. And what came next... Tolliver didn't know. Only that it would be better than anything ever had been before.

He ruffled Noble's wet hair, laughing under his breath at the small growl that provoked. "Noble? Can you see me?"

Noble thrust lazily, his cock still partially hard inside Tolliver. "Feel you, more."

His body protested, and Tolliver loved it, for his mind was empty of worries. He'd found someplace white and free of anything but the lazy, spreading after burn.

All he wanted was to know. "Noble. Do you see me? Us?"

"Mmm." Noble rested his cheek on Tolliver's chest before looking up at him, hair tangled over his eyes but his smile languid, wide and warm. "I can."

Tolliver rubbed his thumb along Noble's cheekbone. "And?"

"And this is us," Noble said, sliding his hand beneath Tolliver's neck to lift him for a worn-out, fucked-out, true lover's kiss. "Better than I'd dreamed. You?"

"Never knew how to dream," Tolliver said. "Now I do."

"And?"

"And I don't ever want to wake up." Tolliver wrapped his arms around Noble's neck and pulled him in.

Noble was his, and he was Noble's. He knew that more surely than his own name.

Anything else they had to say could wait.

Epilogue

The silver bells hanging over Old Curiosity's door clamored. Sarah rushed in to their tune -- no, more like staggered, bowed to one side under the weight of her school knapsack.

Tolliver had looked up at the sound of the bells, a cookie he'd just bitten into still between his lips. "Mmf?"

Noble snagged the treat, leaving half in Tolliver's mouth. He waved the second half teasingly in front of him before munching it.

"Mine. Get your own," Tolliver said, jabbing his elbow at Noble and missing on purpose. He chewed and swallowed while Sarah hefted her knapsack and let it thud to the counter, jangling the register. "What did you bring home, rocks?"

Noble kissed his temple, teasing him with a flick of the tongue.

"Get a room," Sarah griped, though her grin belied her words and betrayed the pretense of her protest.

"What's gotten into you today?" Tolliver made a mock effort at batting Noble away, glad to be subdued with Noble's arms around him instead.

"Just the usual. That, and I like seeing you happy," Noble said, emphasis on *see*. "And I like the way 'home' sounds."

"Good, 'cause we're not letting you go," Sarah informed him as she struggled with the zipper on her knapsack. "C'mon, c'mon! You have to check it out."

"Never letting you go," Tolliver said for Noble's ears alone. He tried to sneak a quick kiss that lingered, soft and warm and unashamed, until Sarah cleared her throat pointedly.

They parted without haste, Noble slinging his arm around Tolliver's waist. He oh-so-casually brushed a fresh set of bruises he'd left the night before, their first night spent in Noble's roomier home. Their home now, belonging to all three of them.

Sarah's eyes sparkled, and her attempts to look otherwise severe failed. "Seriously, look!" She dug through her knapsack and drew out block after block of what looked like playing cards to Tolliver.

Noble obviously saw what Tolliver didn't, hauling him forward in his rush to snatch up first one pack and then another. "Where did you get these?"

"What are they?" Tolliver tried to read the label on a box upside down.

"Tarot cards," Noble said, bumping their hips. He stroked one with a reverence Tolliver usually only saw in bed.

He'd be jealous, but he'd see that look meant for him later tonight, maybe even this afternoon, so he didn't mind. "And?"

"And some of them are limited edition. Some old, some rare, some that should be under glass, for Pete's sake." Noble carefully brushed a layer of dust off a box.

"Principal Masters," Sarah explained, pushing her glasses up her nose and smudging her cheek. "They used to belong to her great aunt, but she's more into spirit writing now. She had this whole collection that Masters asked me if I wanted."

"Sarah, these are worth a couple thousand dollars, even in bad shape," Noble protested.

"I know. I *told* her, and she said they were still mine anyway, if I wanted them. For the shop," Sarah went on. She took one deck from the bottom -- Tolliver caught a glimpse of gilt and silver, sun and moon and stars and turning wheels -- and held it to her chest. "I want to keep this one. The rest we can sell."

Noble's amazement at the treasure trove softened, as did his tight hold on Tolliver's waist. Tolliver laid his head on Noble's shoulder, the taste of sugar and vanilla rich on his tongue and dust sharp in his nose, content with letting them geek out over the cards.

"The deck called to you, huh?" Noble asked, the fatherly note Tolliver no longer minded -- that he recognized and appreciated, now -- warming and rounding his tone.

Sarah nodded. "They feel right in my hand. Can you teach me, now? How to read them?"

"As soon as the shop closes," Noble promised. "Get your work done first."

She lit up, almost bouncing like the girl she'd been before everything went south and the woman she'd be. A surge of pride nearly knocked Tolliver off his feet, and he knew his grin had to be the goofiest on the planet from the way she laughed at him.

"Calm him down, would you?" she cheekily asked Noble, pushing the rest of the cards at him and tucking the one box in her pocket. "I'll be in the back room if you need me!"

Tolliver turned with Noble to watch her go, easy in his moves so that he could match them to Noble's without faltering. Noble rested his chin atop Tolliver's head, the firmness comforting. "She'll be okay," he murmured.

Tolliver knew it to be true. "Better than."

“Thank you,” Noble said, lips brushing Tolliver’s head as he bent to kiss the side.

He knew what the thanks were for and found Noble’s hand to stroke the back, lazily enjoying the affection.

“Hey,” Noble said, his breath tickling Tolliver’s ear. “Do you want me to read your fortune later?”

Tolliver laughed and closed his eyes, letting the richness of the store and the all-encompassing presence of Noble swallow him whole. He let it all wash over and drown him with peace.

“Don’t need you to,” he said, listening to Noble’s heart beating. “I already know it’s good.”

“How good?” Noble teased him.

“As good as this.”

And nothing could ever be better. This was it -- *his* happy ending.

Tolliver could *see* it.

 THE END 

Willa Okati

I can most often be found muttering to myself over a keyboard, plugged into my iPod, and breaking between paragraphs to play air drums. I'm teaching myself to play the pennywhistle and mixing up the summer's batches of henna. I have forty-plus separate tattoos and yearn for a full body suit of ink. I tend to walk around in a haze of story ideas, dreaming of tales yet to be told, and I drink an alarming amount of coffee for someone generally perceived to be mellow.