Reflections of Love

> A Valentine's Day Anthology from

Dreamspinner Press

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Don't Shoot the Messenger by Sean Kennedy	1
The Second Time is the Charm by Maria Albert	25
Better Late Than Never by Ashlyn Kane	63
Indulge on Valentine's Day by S. Blaise	81
Hot Dr. Reindeer Antlers Kisses It Better by Bethany Brown	115
Milestones by Chrissy Munder	135
Under Protest by G.S. Wiley	167
A Year-Long Valentine by Jaxx Steele	191
Meant to Be by Zahra Owens	223
The Wild Side by Janey Chapel	245
Coming Home by Nicki Bennett & Ariel Tachna	



Sean Kennedy

DAVE was running late, just as he always did. He had slept through the alarm, even though in some deep recess of his brain he had been aware of its incessant blaring and *knew* that he should have gotten up, but ignored it anyway.

So now he was forced to run from the subway as soon as his train had pulled in to the platform. Flying up the stairs, his heart pounded and his lungs burned, but he pushed himself anyway. Any few seconds saved now would in turn probably save his ass just a little bit more when he finally got into the office, even though by all rights, it was his day off. It was Valentine's Day!

As he ran, he snatched some flowers from a decorative pot in front of an office building, hoping that they might buy him something, not that he was actually celebrating the holiday in any way. After all, you would have to be going out with someone in order to do that. But just because he was single didn't mean that he wanted to work today. His part-time job was a horror on any holiday, because the work always substantially increased around that period and the customers' moods were usually heightened in conjunction with them as well.

He was twenty minutes late by the time he got to the building and into the elevator, pushing the button for his floor.

Patty, the receptionist, was already glaring at him through the glass doors of the office when he ran out of the elevator and pushed them open.

"You're late, David!" she chided him. And she always called him *David*, no matter how many times he told her he hated it.

He reached within the pocket of his jacket and handed her one of the slightly-crushed flowers he had filched during his mad dash, surprised that they were coming in handy already. "For you, *ma chérie*." Patty actually blushed as she accepted it. "Oh, get away with you."

"Don't deny our love, Pattmeister," he said cheerily as he continued on into the office.

Ashleigh looked up as Dave entered, and she pointedly mimed looking at her watch.

Dave struggled out of his coat and scarf, and threw them over his chair. "I know, I know. But don't forget I wasn't scheduled for today—"

"You're not supposed to be here, I know!" Ashleigh said unsympathetically. "I've already heard it this morning from people louder and whinier than you." Ashleigh had called last night in desperation. She was calling in all of her favors, and for those who hadn't needed any from her before, she was offering *them* favors. Dave, however, was not so lucky, because a month ago she had caught him in the lobby during a performance of *Hairspray* when he had called in sick only a few hours before. He hadn't meant to skip work, but when a friend called with tickets that were only available for that night, what was he supposed to do?

It was probably that guilt that made Dave reach down to pull another flower from his jacket, which he handed to her across the top of the shared wall of their cubicles. "Happy Valentine's Day, Ash."

She looked at the flower, smiling slightly even though it was wilting and the head was practically decapitated. "Thank you."

He looked at her pointedly, and she got the hint. "Oh!" She scrabbled around on her desk and came up with a battered box of candy. "Have a chocolate."

Dave studied it with a grimace. "Only the nuts are left."

Ashleigh shook it, biting her lip. "Really?"

"Yeah. And everyone hates the nuts. So really, you're just trying to palm off the chocolates that nobody wants."

Offended, Ashleigh threw the box down on her desk. "I wouldn't do that!"

He just kept staring at her, waiting for her to break.

"Fine!" Ashleigh snapped. She bent down and unlocked the bottom drawer of her desk, scooped up a handful of chocolates that people would actually like, and threw them at him. "Happy Valentine's Day!"

"I knew you were holding out on me!" he crowed, as he disappeared from her sight in order to pick them up.

"Don't forget; I'm your boss," she said unhappily.

"I don't, Boss." His reply was little more than a mumble, as he still hadn't come up yet although she could hear the crinkle of chocolate wrappers.

Ashleigh ran her hand through her hair and sighed dramatically, then realized the gesture was wasted on Dave as he couldn't see it. "So, busy day, today."

Dave finally popped back up, his mouth full of chocolate. "Caramel," he murmured near-unintelligibly through a set of teeth that were in danger of sticking together.

"Caramel?" she asked, frowning. "I wasted caramels on you?"

"You know," he replied, unfazed, "you might want to be nicer to me, especially as you're probably going to try and give me the shittier jobs today."

"Only because you're the best at them," she admitted.

He sized her up, wondering if she was telling him the truth or just trying to stay on his good side so he would take the bad jobs without complaint. Well, without much complaint, anyway. "Yeah, right. What have you got for me?"

She gave him her best smile, and then shuffled some papers on her desk. "You have a choice. Marriage proposal, or secret love?"

Dave made a face. "Definitely *not* the marriage proposal. I'm still feeling bitter that I can't get married."

"You're single, anyway," Ashleigh said dismissively.

"That's not the point," he said, glaring at her for her lack of tact or feeling.

She recognized her faux pas. "Uh, yeah. Sorry. So, secret love?"

"Lay the poor sap's wishes on me."

Ashleigh frowned. "I hope that attitude isn't on display when you deliver these."

"I am nothing but sweetness and light the moment I leave this office," he told her. "Unless, of course, I have to break up with someone."

"You're supposed to be understanding, or at least neutral in that situation!"

"That was what I was about to say," Dave said quickly.

She regarded him suspiciously. "Right."

He took the slip of paper off her, glanced cursorily at the address, and reached for his coat again. He really shouldn't have bothered taking it off in the first place.

"Have fun!" Ashleigh called after him.

Dave ignored her, and on his way out of the office he nodded to Patty. "Don't go getting a boyfriend while I'm gone, darlin'."

Patty snorted to herself and handed him the props he would need for the job. "As long as you don't."

He waved at her as the elevator doors closed and slung the prop upon his back. "Fat chance."

WORKING for a singing telegram company, even though the notion of a *telegram* had been killed off decades ago with advancing technology, wasn't the most auspicious of employment choices, and most people usually laughed and thought Dave was joking whenever he told them. But it was an easy job to get when you were a theater major, especially if you could actually sing; the money was also better than working for any fast-food joint or bar. The only bad part of being a singing telegram were the jobs that the workers called "the mean ones"; the company also specialized in so-called *truth telegrams*, in which you could supply your own personalized message and have it delivered to someone on your behalf.

The good thing about doing a secret love telegram was that you didn't have to wear a costume; props would do. Dave was used to the looks he got as he hopped on the train with a quiver full of arrows on his

back. At least it was Valentine's Day, and his accessories would be selfexplanatory, rather than the normal days where passengers watched him nervously as if he was about to start spearing them.

The recipient of the secret love-gram was a girl with large glasses who stared dumbfoundedly through them as he raised an arrow to shoot at her heart. She opened her mouth to scream, but he jumped in hurriedly, yelling, "I'm Cupid!"

"Oh," she said, pushing her glasses back onto her nose, composing herself. "You could have introduced yourself first."

She had a point, and he made a mental note. "Paula, right?"

She nodded.

"Well, Paula, it's your lucky day. For someone is in love with you, a someone with a heart so true...." Dave tried not to gag as he read out the cheesy lines. This was the problem when people wrote their own messages instead of going traditional and letting actual talented writers such as Shakespeare or Elizabeth Barrett Browning speak their heart's desires instead. "But because he's scared you will say no, he swears that you will never know." He presented her the arrow, which had the message attached, with a flourish.

Paula's face fell. "What?"

Dave gestured with the arrow again, and she finally took it.

"What do you mean, I'll never know?"

"Cupid just delivers the message," Dave said, his friendly smile now beginning to hurt with the strain. "Cupid doesn't know the sender."

"Well, what fucking good is Cupid?" Paula demanded.

"Hey!" Dave protested. "It's called a secret admirer for a reason."

"This is the first Valentine's Day I've ever been sent something, so I want to know!"

He wanted to fire back with *then you're fucking lucky you got something this year, Miss Congeniality*, but he figured the grief he would get from Ashleigh afterward wouldn't be worth it. "Like Cupid said, he doesn't know. Call the office. The number's on the back."

Sean Kennedy

"Hey!" Paula yelled after him as he slung the quiver on his back and moved away. "I'm *talking* to you!"

That guy has his work cut out for him, Cupid mused as he skipped down the stairs and back out into the real world.

"WHAT did you do to the client?" Ashleigh demanded before Dave had even gotten the opportunity to fling his quiver upon his desk.

Dave rolled his eyes. "Has she called in already?"

"She was upset!"

"She's high maintenance. That guy should run while he still can. Because before he knows it, he'll be James Caan to her Kathy Bates, and she'll be hobbling him while calling him *dirty bird*."

The reference was lost on Ashleigh. She let it slide off her, like many of the things that Dave said.

"I just told her I couldn't give her the guy's name, that it was a privacy issue."

"It doesn't sound like you did it nicely, that's all."

"Seeing as part of my job description calls on me to *not* be nice to customers, I don't get what the problem is," Dave argued.

"Some of the customers," Ashleigh pointed out. "Only when the client calls for it. And this was a secret admirer, not a breakup. And even with a breakup, you should still be nice."

Dave threw himself into his chair and put his feet up on the desk; Ashleigh had to follow him around the cubicle so she could continue talking to him directly.

"That makes no sense," Dave said off-handedly.

"Tell that to your paycheck."

Her phone rang, and Dave was mercifully saved from continued browbeating. As he fired up his computer to start playing Hearts to kill time, his colleague Jill leaned over the wall that separated their cubicles and hissed, "I don't know how you keep this job." Dave swung lazily around in his chair and grinned at her. "Ash and I have worked together too long. We bite at each other, but never draw blood."

Jill shook her head. "God, I hope I don't work here long enough to end up like that."

He was momentarily stunned as she disappeared back behind her wall. Jill, quite obviously, was equally capable of drawing blood.

But until another job came in, Hearts was calling his name. He fired up the application, musing over the irony of the game's name being played on this particular holiday. He wasn't that far into his first game when a klaxon sounded, and he groaned.

"Eighty-six!" Ashleigh yelled, slamming down her phone. "Eighty-six!"

Dave could hear the muttering of his colleagues behind him as they threw themselves into a flurry of activity, trying to look like they were unavailable for the most unpopular job that could be distributed. Some even ran off to the toilets, in the hope that somebody else would end up with the slip before they returned.

He knew it was going to be him. He just knew it.

Slowly, he peeked up from beneath his eyelashes.

Ashleigh was standing right in front of him, her imperfectlymanicured nails clawing over the top of the partition between his desk and her own. Impaled on one of the talons was a job slip.

"No," he said fruitlessly. "I've broken up with more people as someone's proxy than I ever have in my own personal life. I hate doing them."

"Sorry," she said.

"Isn't there anybody who wants to give their boss the finger?" Dave asked hopelessly. Those were his favorites, although clients didn't tend to be as original in their sentiments, and Dave normally just had to sing "Take This Job and Shove It" with the client's name inserted into the chorus. At least the job was never boring; plus you usually got to wear a costume, which was always fun unless it was summer.

"You've been eighty-sixed."

The cutesy term never made it seem better and he could have sworn that Ashleigh was gloating. Knowing there was nothing else he could do, he sighed and snatched the slip away from her. "Whose heart am I breaking?"

"Mitchell Annen. He lives on West 84th."

Dave studied the telegram's details and made a face. "Let me guess: the client wrote this himself?"

"You can tell?" Ashleigh asked, even though it was blindingly obvious.

"I'm seriously expected to sing this?"

"That is definitely in your job description, yes."

Shrugging back into his jacket, Dave said, "If I get my nose busted, I'm covered by insurance, right?"

Ashleigh ignored his question. "I wouldn't bother getting into that if I were you," she said, referring to his jacket.

Dave glared at her. "It doesn't say costume on this order."

"Did I forget to add that?"

Bitch! he mouthed.

She ignored that as well. "He wants you to break it gently with a teddy bear."

Dave threw his jacket onto his desk with a melodramatic flourish. "Yeah, nothing eases the pain of a breakup quite like a stranger in a moldy bear costume offering you a hug."

"You hug them?" Ashleigh asked, genuinely interested.

"I've found that it reduces the numbers of them actually crying."

"I'll make a note of that, and bring it up at the next employee meeting."

"Yeah, do that," Dave sulked, and headed off to the costume room.

"And, hey!" Ashleigh yelled after him. "The costumes *aren't* moldy! They get dry-cleaned every three months!"

But truthfully, she wouldn't want to wear them either.

IT didn't matter what holiday it was. A six-foot bear riding the subway draws attention to itself, even in the city where a naked cowboy with a guitar was a regular sight in Times Square. Dave could hear the snickers aimed in his direction from other passengers as he valiantly tried to hang onto one of the poles in the middle of the car with an oversized felt hand.

He was sweating inside the costume, even though it was freezing outside. The only good thing about this suit was that if somebody tried to knife you on public transport they had quite a few layers to hack through before skin would be reached.

Getting off at the 86th Street station, he cut down Broadway to get to 84th Street and marveled at how rich you would have to be to live in Manhattan itself. Was the client stupidly cutting off a sugar daddy with this telegram? If so, it seemed even the promise of money couldn't buy you sense.

Man, this day made him cynical.

He was thankful that the building had an elevator; stomping up flights of stairs in the heavy bear footies would have been interminable. He had to share the elevator with one other man, who was staring at him without any sense of societal propriety. Dave wondered if he was a furry. Then Dave wondered if the man thought *he* was a furry.

"Gross," he muttered to himself; the sound was too muffled to reach the outside world.

"So," the man said finally. "Are you busy tonight?"

Dave practically had to yell so the man could hear him. "Goldilocks is waiting at home in the bed that's just right."

"Shit, you're a guy!" the other man spluttered.

"The bear suit didn't give it away?"

"It's just that... it's usually girls in costumes."

"You'd be surprised." Dave shrugged, although the action could barely be noticed thanks to the excess of material covering his shoulders. "It's a unisex job."

The man got off on the fourth floor and didn't look back. Dave got to ride the last three floors in peace. When the doors opened once more he made his way to apartment 704, where his hapless victim awaited.

He knocked on the door and hoped that Mitchell Annen wasn't home.

No such luck. He could hear the peephole being opened and someone asking through the door, "Yes?"

Dave was surprised the voice didn't sound more hesitant, especially as its owner was peering out at a six-foot bear. "Mitchell Annen?"

"Mitch," the voice corrected him. "And you?"

Dave would have laughed, but it would have probably been inappropriate. "Telegram." He wondered what would have happened if he had answered *Winnie*, or *Paddington*.

The door opened, and the man in question emerged. He was tall, and his hair was mussed as if he had just gotten out of bed. His T-shirt was pretty ratty, and he was wearing a pair of sweatpants that had also seen better days. His bare feet were pale. Not exactly the epitome of sugar daddy. "Technically, telegrams don't exist anymore thanks to electronic mail."

IT nerd, Dave thought dismissively. "Well, it came over the phone, anyway."

He felt a bit off-kilter. Normally people just stood in shock while he performed, and eventually only found speech once he handed over the flowers or balloons or whatever cheesy gift came with the message.

"Who sent it?" Mitch asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Back on home turf, Dave checked the slip again. "Trey." He made a face that Mitch obviously couldn't see. *Trey? Honestly*.

"Trey sent me a telegram?" Mitch asked, confused.

Here goes nothing.

Dave cleared his throat so he could get into range. "*Mitch*," he began, and swung into the awful words he was meant to sing to this poor unsuspecting soul.

"You were such an awful lay

I wanted to break up with you every day—"

Mitch's eyes widened at this assault upon his prowess.

Don't Shoot the Messenger

Dave began to dance, hoping to soften the blow. He didn't think he was succeeding.

"But whenever I tried to, I couldn't speak And I hated myself for being so weak—"

Mitch remained a closed book, although his knuckles seemed to be going white from where he was clutching himself.

Time for the big finish, and then to get out of there before things got even messier.

"And my mouth closed up like a clam So to speak for me, I send this telegram!"

So to speak for me, i sena this telegram!

Wow, these lyrics were bad. And to make it worse, here was the kicker.

Dave fell to his knees and gave his best jazz hands. "WE'RE THROUGH! Oh, and please don't call. Love, Trey."

If that wasn't a kick to the groin when Mitch had already been punched in the stomach, Dave didn't know what was.

Mitch stared blankly down at him. Still doing the jazz hands, Dave wondered how long he would have to keep doing them before the man said something.

These floors were hard. Was the carpet only half an inch thick?

"So," Mitch said slowly. "Is that it?"

"You wanted more?" Dave asked, his voice still muffled by the head.

"No, that pretty much summed up everything I needed to know."

"You're taking it well."

"It's not like I didn't see the signs."

Dave finally saw the other man's mask slip, but instead of the expected reaction, he gave a short laugh that was surprisingly free of bitterness.

"I just didn't expect it to come in the form of a giant teddy bear," Mitch continued.

"As signs go, it's pretty unique," Dave agreed. "Do you mind if I get up now?"

"Of course." Mitch offered a hand, and Dave gratefully accepted it, as the suit could be cumbersome and tended to make you overbalance when trying to get back upright.

"Thanks," he said gruffly. "You don't seem so bad. Why did he break up with you?"

Mitch shrugged. "I don't think I was exciting enough for him."

"His name was Trey," Dave pointed out. "What did you expect?"

"What's his name got to do with anything?" Mitch asked.

"Trey," Dave said pointedly, as if talking to a rather dense child.

"And?"

"It's the kind of name given to vacuous disco bunnies."

"Really?"

"Yep. So, was he?"

"Was he what?" Mitch asked, leaning against his door frame.

"A vacuous disco bunny."

"Oh." Mitch considered it for a moment. "Yeah, I guess he was."

"Told you," Dave said with satisfaction. "You're better off without him."

"You can tell that just by his name?"

By now Dave should have gone. But he was finding Mitch easy to talk to, and, let's face it, the guy was screaming out for help. Or at least for someone to talk to him for a few minutes. "His name's Trey. You said he was a disco bunny. And he decided to break up with you by singing telegram. Plus, he made it clear you're not even to call him to find out the reasons why or get some sense of closure."

"Well, when you put it like that...."

"You know what?" Dave was pretty sure the guy hadn't asked him for his opinion, but he was happy to give it anyway. "You seem pretty laid-back to me. And that's not a bad thing. Just, you've got to find the right kind of guy. Trey the Disco Bunny obviously wasn't Mr. Right."

Don't Shoot the Messenger

"Isn't laid-back the same as boring?" Mitch asked earnestly.

Dave shook his head. "Not at all. Laid-back is good. I like laid-back."

"Right."

Dave couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

A moment of tension hovered between them, yet neither of them made a move to end it.

"Anyway," Dave drawled finally, thinking he should go. Ashleigh was probably expecting him back already. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Do you normally have to offer counseling afterward?"

"Sometimes."

Mitch suddenly changed tack. "So what do you look like under that head?"

Dave grinned, although the giant bear face remained static. "You know, normal human head."

"You have the advantage. You know what I look like. So take the head off."

"That's against company policy."

"Why? Are you scared that if your real face gets seen, some disgruntled client might run into you on the street one day and take out their frustration on you?"

"We do live in New York."

"Do I look like the type who would do that?" Mitch asked.

"Most types who don't look like they would, usually are the ones who do." But Dave found himself removing the head. He needed the air anyway.

Mitch offered his hand. "Pleased to meet you...?"

What the hell. "Dave."

"You want a drink?"

Despite the cold weather, the suit was warm, and Dave's hair was plastered down with sweat. A drink would be good, especially as he still had the subway ride back to work ahead of him. "Is this how you'll get me, by poisoning me?"

"If I was offering you city tap water, maybe," Mitch said affably. "But I have a filter. Come in."

"Hey, NYC water isn't that bad if you've lived in California." Tucking his head under his arm, Dave followed him in and tried not to let his paranoia run rampant at the sound of the door shutting behind them. At least Ashleigh knew where he was so the police could eventually find his body and ship the pieces back to his mother.

But wow, what an apartment! The view looked over Central Park... well, part of Central Park, as there were a couple of buildings in the way. But it was far better than Dave's view of the next building's fire escape. He forgot to restrain himself and asked, "What is it you do?"

"Can't you tell by the way I'm dressed?" Mitch pulled a water jug out of the refrigerator and began pouring them glasses. "I work from home. IT."

Ha! I was right.

"Perfectly nerdy, I know."

Dave gestured with his large felt hands to the rest of the misshapen body. "You're talking to a guy dressed as a bear. My next job I may have to be a drag Alice in Wonderland. I'm not judging anybody's job choices."

"A drag Alice in Wonderland?" Mitch handed him one of the glasses. "Really?"

"New York," Dave reminded him, pulling one of his paws off so he could handle the glass properly.

"Of course." Mitch paused. "Do you like it?"

Dave shrugged. "It's not bad for a part-time job. Between this and the student loans I may be able to finish and get my degree while still surviving in the city."

"I remember those days," Mitch agreed. "I was a hot dog cart vendor."

Dave couldn't help but laugh. "You're a long way from there now," he said as he crossed to the window and looked down upon the view below.

"I got into IT at the right time," Mitch said modestly. "What's your major?"

It was a clichéd question, but Dave didn't mind it. "Liberal arts."

Now it was Mitch's turn to laugh. "I thought you said that you wanted a job at the end of it all?"

Normally this attitude made Dave's hackles rise, but Mitch said it so good-naturedly he could only give a resigned smile. "Yeah, I know. But I'll probably end up doing another degree on top of it and, I don't know, do law or something."

"That's an odd mix." Mitch came over to take Dave's empty glass from him, and couldn't resist running his fingers along the mottled fur of his arm. "Maybe you could keep this and use it in court. It would help break the tension when the verdict comes down."

"I'll keep it in mind." Aware that time was continuing to tick on, Dave gave an exaggerated smile and said, "I better go."

"More hearts to break, huh?"

Dave stopped in his tracks, and tried to read Mitch's expression. The other man avoided his gaze, however, and continued on to put the glasses in the sink. "Maybe. Is your heart broken?"

Mitch stood, hovering over the sink, and it was a couple of moments before he answered. "I'm not sure if it's my heart, or my pride."

Dave didn't know what to say.

"I'm leaning toward the latter," Mitch continued, turning back.

"You'll bounce back," Dave said encouragingly.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You're cute, reasonably funny. Trey's a jackass."

Mitch peered over the top of his glasses. "You think I'm cute?"

Dave flushed. "Well, yeah, kinda." He felt uncomfortable, although not in the bad way. He did feel slightly put on the spot, but he also didn't mind telling the truth, whereas with other customers he had just told them what they wanted to hear in order to make them feel better.

"Well, yeah, kinda?" Mitch asked. "That doesn't exactly convince me."

"I don't think it's part of my job description to flirt with the clients."

Mitch moved closer to him. Dave stood his ground. Which was slightly embarrassing, as his feet were presently bright yellow and furry.

"Are you flirting with me?" Mitch asked.

Dave tried to form a sentence, but it came out halfway between a grunt and a groan.

"Besides," Mitch pointed out, "I'm not your client. I didn't arrange for the job."

It seemed that his tongue was finally working again. "That's just semantics. You're still a client, of sorts."

"Well, I could say that you're just using semantics as well."

Maybe he was. But that didn't mean this was a bad idea all around. "Are you looking for a rebound guy already?"

He had tried to keep his tone light, but judging from the look on Mitch's face he hadn't been very successful at it.

"Sorry," he said quickly, while Mitch was obviously still grasping for some sort of response. "Don't listen to anything I say. It's not like I'm some kind of relationship guru."

"Which is ironic," Mitch said dryly, "given your profession."

Dave nodded slowly. "You could say that," he conceded.

"Are you single?"

Man, were the tables really being turned on him.

"Simple question," Mitch prodded.

Dave shrugged. "Okay. Yes, I am."

"Is that why you're working today?"

Dave scratched at his nose. "Couples get priority."

"So you're not free later on?"

"Are you asking me out?"

"You have to stop thinking a question is an answer," Mitch teased. "See how my voice isn't raising at the end of my responses to you? That's called a *statement*."

Dave grinned at him. "The way you started that last sentence technically suggests that it could have been a question."

"Fucking Arts majors," Mitch said under his breath. He looked back up at Dave. "Shouldn't you be getting back to the office?"

"Oh," Dave said, taken back. He had been enjoying himself, and he thought Mitch had as well. Obviously his flirting technique just led to annoyance. *This* had to be why he was still single. "Okay."

Mitch led him toward the door although Dave didn't need a map, nor a tour guide, to find his way out.

"You know," he said desperately, trying to gain some ground back as he juggled the bear head under his arm while putting the paw back on. "You still didn't answer *my* question."

"Which one?" Mitch held open the apartment door for him. "There were so many."

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Would you like to go out on a date?"

Dave threw his paws in the air. "Now *you're* the one answering questions with questions!"

Mitch grinned evilly. "Annoying, isn't it?"

Screw himself being single, Dave thought. He could now see why Mitch was! Determined to get that smirk off the other man's face, Dave quickly reached up and grasped Mitch's cheeks in both felt paws and brought him down for a kiss. The teddy bear head he had been holding dropped noisily to the ground.

Mitch's hands scrabbled at Dave's hips, or what were currently subbing for Dave's hips, as the bulky costume hid everything from sight.

The kiss was tentative at first. Mitch squirmed against him, but Dave's lips parted and his tongue brushed against Mitch's hesitant

Sean Kennedy

mouth. Mitch moaned as Dave's inquisitive tongue ran over his lips, trying to push their way through the resistant barrier.

Dave felt the other man relent. Mitch sagged against him, and his lips parted. Their tongues met coyly, moving against each other. Dave could taste the faint aroma of mouthwash, and it only made him hope that his own mouth didn't smell like a bear's after the long time that had passed between now and his leaving home earlier in the day. But Mitch didn't seem to mind; his pace in the kissing department was definitely picking up, and he finally found a grip on the bear costume to bring Dave in closer to him.

Dave, however, slowly pulled away before things could get more heated, and ran his right paw along Mitch's jawline. God, he hoped this man wasn't a furry who would expect the costume to make repeated visits. That would just be weird. Or weirder, considering this situation they were in at the moment was strange enough.

"Was that a yes or a no?" Mitch breathed heavily.

Dave pulled away from him. "You figure it out."

He turned and walked away, down the hall, back to the elevator. He was smiling to himself, and hoped Mitch would eventually draw the right conclusion.

IT didn't appear that he had. The jobs he was assigned after he got back to work, and Ashleigh reaming him out for taking so long, all blurred into one another. Only after the fact did he realize that the reason he had stayed with Mitch so long was because of the spark that flared between them. All the other clients he had since were perfunctorily dealt with.

Conflicting thoughts about the whole Mitch situation battled for supremacy in his head.

I should have left him my number. While it may have been a great movie moment to walk away when I did, the reason why they're movie moments is because they don't happen in real life. Or at least they don't give you the real cool resolution before the credits roll. Shut up!, another voice piped in. You don't even know anything about this guy. He was probably dumped for a reason. Maybe Trey the disco bunny was right to do it.

He knew he was in danger when he started taking advice from Trey the disco bunny.

Still, it wouldn't have hurt.

He's probably a serial killer. Previous singing telegrams are probably Tupperwared in the freezer, along with Trey.

But why hasn't he called here looking for me?

All of his thoughts were ridiculous. He knew the guy for about twenty minutes, altogether.

It was just that Dave would have liked the chance to get to know Mitch a little better.

Even his footsteps sounded grumpy as he trudged back into the office, exhausted after his eighth client for the day. It was time to go home, stop off at the Panda Lounge for some noodles and eat them while trying to avoid all the Valentine-themed programming on cable.

Ashleigh was waving a slip at him.

Dave put up his hands. "No. I'm going home."

"You have to," she told him. "It's a follow-up."

Dave wanted to stamp his feet like he was five and able to have a full-blown tantrum again. *Which client was it? The one who thought he probably wasn't trying hard enough when playing Tigger to his fiancée?*

"*He* should try being bouncerific after climbing eight flights," he grumbled to himself.

"What?" Ashleigh asked.

"Nothing." He took the slip off her, and his eyes widened as he read the address. "*This* guy?"

"Yeah, why?" Her eyes narrowed. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing!" he squawked in protest. *Maybe it was what I didn't do to him.*

"That's an awful lot of nothings," Ashleigh said suspiciously, not liking the guilty expression coming over his face. "Why would he want you to come back?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Dave replied honestly.

"He specifically asked for you without a costume."

"Oh. Well, that's good, then. It means I can go straight home afterward."

"You call me as soon as you finish, okay?"

Dave folded up the slip and stuffed it back in his pocket. "Aww, Ash, are you worried about me?"

"I just don't want you to be my first employee getting stabbed because of the job."

He blanched slightly. "You're all heart."

Ashleigh yawned and sat back behind her desk. "I try to be."

He thought he detected an amused glint in her eye, but he decided not to push it. On his way out, he swooped in and surprised Patty with a kiss. "Let your man treat you well tonight, Pattmeister." He reached down to her desk and pulled out a single mini-arrow from her drawer.

She waved at him as he got into the elevator. "You too, David."

Maybe, just maybe.

He smiled inanely at every passerby on the street, and all those who were untouched by Cupid's arrow wondered what his problem was.

It took him no time at all to get back to Mitch's building. At least, it seemed like no time at all. Dave pushed the button for the elevator and fidgeted nervously. It was taking forever; the lights slowly flashed as they made the countdown to ground level. Even though logic dictated it would take him even longer, he couldn't stand still, so he ran to the stairwell and took the steps two at a time until he reached Mitch's floor. Out of breath, he stumbled along the hallway but took a moment to compose himself before he knocked sharply on the door to Mitch's apartment. His fist was still in midair when the door opened, and Mitch was standing there grinning at him.

Don't Shoot the Messenger

"Hi," Mitch said. Without preamble he asked, "Do you want to go out with me sometime?"

Dave had to make sure he didn't answer with a question, so he played it safe. "Yes."

Mitch leaned in to kiss him, more chaste than the one they had shared before, but just as good.

Dave decided he could ask a question after that response. "How about now?"

He was rewarded with another kiss. "Sure. Let me get my jacket."

As he went to do so, Dave scrambled around in his messenger bag and produced the arrow for Mitch when he returned. At Mitch's questioning look, Dave said, "Less cheesy than a rose. I'm starving; let's do dinner."

Heading back down the hallway, Dave decided to bite the bullet and take Mitch's hand. At the elevator door, Mitch looked down at their entwined hands, and then up at Dave, and smiled.

Impatient to get the night started, Dave grinned back and pulled Mitch to the stairway where once again he took two steps at a time in order to reach the outside world. He pushed through the lobby doors with Mitch in tow, and Cupid's arrow now in Mitch's back pocket. SEAN KENNEDY lives in the second-most isolated city in the world, so it's just as well he has his imagination for company when real-life friends are otherwise occupied. He has far too many ideas and wishes he had the power to feed them directly from his brain into the laptop so they won't get lost in the ether.

Visit Sean's website at http://kennsea.livejournal.com



Maria Albert

"HEARTS and Flowers, how may I help you?" Sean Wycliff asked, hands poised over the keyboard, ready to type a new order or revise an existing one.

"Sean? Hi, this is Rick, Rick McFarlan," a familiar deep voice said over the Bluetooth.

Sean smiled warmly as he bit back a wistful sigh. "So, what can I do for my favorite police detective?" Rick was gorgeous, an absolute sweetheart, and taken with a capital "T." It was ironic that the first bouquet Sean had ever made for Rick had helped launch his romance.

"That's just it. I'm not quite sure," Rick said, his normally confident voice tinged with hesitation and frustration.

"Uh-oh. Is everything OK? Um... are we talking make-up bouquet?" Sean asked in genuine concern. Was there trouble in Paradise? Had Rick and Jeremy had a fight?

"No! No, nothing like that. It's just, Valentine's Day is coming up, and I want to get Jeremy something extra special. I would anyway, but lately I keep feeling like something's bothering him, but he won't admit anything is. And I've been giving him a dozen roses every month on our anniversary, although they were only red that first time, then yellow, pink, those weird lavender ones, peach or salmon or... damn it! I mean...." Rick trailed off, flustered.

Sean laughed in relief. Just because he'd openly admired the man from the moment he'd first seen him and envied his boyfriend didn't mean he wanted Rick to break up with Jeremy. He loved seeing happy couples. That was a good part of why he'd become a florist, to help people express their love for one another. "Ah, now I see. Well, that's not a problem at all. You haven't come by the shop in months, you've been doing everything by phone, and you probably haven't looked at our

Maria Albert

Web site since you asked not to be on our e-mail list, so I doubt you've seen our special Valentine's arrangements. Although your sister Cat has a copy, both of the e-mail and our flier. We have seven new arrangements, ranging from \$75 to \$250. Cat's getting Dana 'Passion's Promise', but I think our 'Eternal Devotion' would be just the thing for Jeremy. It's very masculine. It's in a tuxedo vase: limited edition, handmade, numbered, signed, tall and quite narrow, very elegant, black with a silver band with a tiny silver bow around the neck. It's the same sort of look that velvet box had, the one you purchased for the Cody Marlin CDs you gave Jeremy along with the dozen roses for your make-up date, except the bow's metallic silver, not red velvet," Sean said, describing it in terms Rick could relate to and visualize.

"Wow! You actually remember the CDs and what the box looked like? It was eight months ago!" Rick said, amazed.

"I remember all my customers' preferences. That's why everyone loves me," Sean said cockily, grinning. "Anyway, inside the tuxedo vase is an arrangement of two dozen long-stemmed roses, a dozen Irish Reds and a dozen Jamal's Black Beauty. They're both extremely rare. There's only a single grower in the world that has cultivated those two colors. We're one of only two dozen stores that carry them. It's really quite a stunning arrangement. I'm sure Jeremy will love it. It's \$200 plus tax, but as you're part of our Frequent Buyer program, you get your usual ten percent discount, so it comes to just a little under \$200 with tax. Should I write you up? Or do you want to take a look at our flier or Web site and get back to me?"

"No!" Rick said, his voice rising in panic. "No, I trust your judgment. You haven't steered me wrong yet. Jeremy even loved those lavender ones. Although... are they really black? I mean, aren't those a bit too grim? You know, like for a funeral?"

"No, they're not funereal at all. On their own, the Jamal's could be rather overwhelming, but matched with the Irish Reds they're perfect," Sean said confidently, grinning again at the thought of the man who'd inspired the former. Jamal was definitely overwhelming. Shame was *so* lucky. "In fact, they're one of our best sellers this year, for our male clients. I already have over six dozen orders for them." Which was pretty amazing, in this economy, despite the reasonable price. Fortunately, one luxury item many people apparently refused to do without was fresh flowers.

Of course, as Valentine's Day approached, the price of an ordinary bouquet of a dozen red roses quadrupled and most florists couldn't dream of selling an arrangement this elaborate this time of year for such a good price. But fortunately, Sean was the next best thing to in bed with the supplier. His cousin Shame was the grower; he owned the nursery and the greenhouses and shipped directly to Sean, which eliminated a middleman, increasing both their profits while enabling Sean to give his customers a discount. And Shame's mother Colleen was his ceramicist; she made the vases and sold them to him at a deep discount.

"Okay. Then yeah, that would be great. Um, and for the card, this time I want it to read, 'Jeremy, You are my heart and my soul, my day and my night, the love of my life. Yours forever, Rick'." His voice had gotten gruff with emotion.

Sean knew it was difficult for Rick to express himself like that. Jeremy was one of the lucky ones. Sean bit back another sigh. "Got it. That's beautiful, Rick. Should I deliver them to his office or to your home this time?"

"Home, definitely. He got the day off, and so did I. Um, could you give me a window? You know, so I know what time the delivery guy's coming?" Rick asked hopefully.

Sean grinned again. Ah, love! He could imagine how the two of them would be occupied and not want to be disturbed the rest of the day. "I can give you a two-hour window. Our courier will have them there between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Does that work?" he asked.

"That's great," Rick said, his voice warm with relief.

"Should I charge to the usual credit card?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Rick said.

"Great. Then you're all set. Take care, Rick," Sean said.

"Yeah, you too, Sean. Thanks," Rick said and hung up.

Sean queued the order and then answered another call. He was glad he was so busy. He loved making people happy and it kept him

Maria Albert

from getting too down, bemoaning the sorry state of his own personal life. Christmas had been hard, but this time of year was even worse. Valentine's Day was all about couples and he didn't have a significant other. No special someone. He hadn't for more than three years now, not since he'd finally pried himself out from under Jason's heel. He shuddered. No, he hadn't had someone for five years. Those last two years they were together couldn't be described as love by the farthest stretch of the most warped imagination. Thank God it was over. He still didn't understand how their love could have mutated like it had, how a taste for the exotic on Jason's part had turned into such repellant fantasies, how Sean had gone from being a willing partner to someone coerced and manipulated and finally forced into doing every sick perversion Jason had demanded.

He shivered, remembering. They'd been together eleven years, since they were eighteen. It had taken Sean the first two years of freedom just to find himself again, to rebuild his shattered ego, to become a distinct person, instead of the shadow he'd become. He'd subsumed his entire personality to Jason, catering to his every need, bending to his every twisted desire until there was almost nothing left. This past year he'd been in sort of a holding pattern, engaging in some low-level playful flirting, just enough to get his toes wet, not even his feet. Sliding his business card with his home phone number written on it to Rick that day he'd ordered Jeremy's first bouquet eight months ago was the riskiest thing he'd tried. He'd managed to pull it off well, too, with a laugh and smile; he was sure Rick had no idea how traumatic it had been for him to do it. But Rick had slid the card back, certain Jeremy was perfect for him, and he'd been right. Jeremy had turned out to be Rick's soul mate.

Sean sighed again. Now here he was, thirty-two with no prospects. Maybe it was partly the fault of his new chosen profession. A gay florist was about as stereotypical as a ballet dancer or hairdresser, wasn't it? But he'd always wanted to work with flowers. Jason had kept him from doing so before. Sean realized now it was all part of controlling him, making sure he had no income, no interests, no friends of his own, nothing to detract from his devotion to Jason, no one to see what was happening, to warn him, help him. But one night Jason had finally pushed Sean too far past his limits. He'd stood staring out their sixth-floor window, a blanket wrapped around him, like a traumatized child, looking in longing at the street below, vividly imagining himself opening the window, stepping out, freeing himself. He'd actually opened the latch and the window, before a sharp gust of frigid wind had slammed it shut. And it was like he woke up and suddenly saw what a nightmare his life had become. He dressed frantically, stuffed a single change of clothes into his backpack, stole the \$300 they kept in small bills as emergency earthquake money, and then he ran. He had escaped from San Francisco without leaving a trace. He was sure Jason must have searched SF and maybe even LA for him. That's why he'd picked Hilldale, a big city safely in between the two. Shame lived there too, but he wasn't even sure Shame would want to speak to him, after he'd cut himself off from him for so long. He'd been such a fool. Shame and his mom, Colleen, had welcomed him back into their lives with open arms. Jamal, too. They'd all been so wonderful.

The bell rang as the glass door to the mall opened and Sean snapped back to the present. At the sight of one of his other favorite customers, Sean's dark thoughts vanished. Tim had been one of his very first customers. Half his business those first few months had been thanks to Tim telling all his friends about him. "Tim! Hi!" Sean said, circling around the counter and greeting the small, slender blond with a warm hug.

"Sean! It's so good to see you!" Tim bubbled. "You must be super busy, with Valentine's Day only two weeks away."

"I am. I love it," Sean said, a smile blossoming on his face, thrilled to see Tim bouncing again. For a while after the bashing, he was afraid Tim and his partner Kevin might never recover, emotionally or physically. It was thanks to Rick's Jeremy that they'd had the chance. Jeremy had risked his own life to save theirs, even though they'd been strangers at the time. Sean had never met Jeremy, but he'd give him a big hug too, just for that, when he finally did. "How are you and Kevin?" Sean asked, though he could see the answer in Tim's shining eyes.

"We're doing great," Tim said, but then his face fell. "But everyone's not as lucky as we are. I need to get an arrangement, a 'cheerup' bouquet. Something that says, 'I'm sorry he's such a jerk, but you're too good for him anyway'. A friend of mine was just dumped, one of the other nurses at the hospital," Tim said. "Oh, that is *so* harsh. Right before Valentine's Day. Some men have no class," Sean said.

"I know. And she's the sweetest woman in the world, too. What is *wrong* with straight men? Well, most of them. Some of them. Oh, I don't know," Tim said.

Sean enjoyed chatting with Tim, catching up, while Tim spent a good ten minutes picking out just the right arrangement. Sean was relieved to see Tim had cheered up again. Tim was one of those people that were just born with a smile on their face, the kind that just made you want to smile too when you were with them. Tim's visit made the rest of the day pass more quickly. Before Sean knew it, it was time to close up.

Sean locked up the store and made his way toward the lower level of the mall. He'd need to skirt the usual huge crowd waiting for tables at Texas Style. He hated walking past there. Some of the waiters had Texas accents like Jason's. God, he hated how he was suddenly obsessing over Jason again. What was wrong with him? He had to stop associating him with Valentine's Day, stop staining something so beautiful with someone so mean and ugly.

Sean glanced at the service tunnel entrance discreetly set into the wall three stores away from the restaurant. Store employees or even owners weren't supposed to use those tunnels—they were only for the maintenance crew and mall security—but he knew from the one time he'd gone exploring with the friend who'd taught him the security code that this tunnel led directly to the employee parking lot. He'd be able to bypass the restaurant and also cut a good ten minutes off the walk to his car.

Sean bit his lip, glanced around guiltily, and headed for the door. He typed in the code he'd used last time and released his held breath but also shook his head as the light went to green. Honestly, it was a wonder the mall wasn't robbed blind. Those same security codes had probably been used since the keypads were first installed four years ago.

Relieved to be out of the noisy walkway, he headed down the remarkably clean, starkly lit corridor. A half-hour drive and then he'd finally be home. He'd have the leftover meatloaf and potatoes for dinner; he could microwave it in minutes. He didn't have the energy to cook tonight. Sean stiffened in surprise as he heard a muffled voice coming from one of the side tunnels up ahead. Uh-oh. What if it wasn't the maintenance crew? What if it was security guards? He really wasn't supposed to be in here. He looked back the way he'd come and then down the corridor in front of him again. Maybe he could sneak past unnoticed? No, better to act like he had every right to be here. If he looked guilty, he would be sure to attract the guards' notice, but if he acted like he belonged there, the guards might just ignore him. He started moving again, but he couldn't help walking more slowly. The voice was more audible now; he could make out a few scattered words that made his blood run cold.

"...That's it, struggle.... Can't get away.... Feisty little... make you scream...," a deep voice said, in a Texas accent.

Sean froze. He could hear other muffled sounds, soft thuds, whimpers and moans. Oh God. Jason? Was that really Jason's voice? Sean felt his heart seizing up. Who was he hurting this time? Someone else who thought he was loved? Or had he gotten tired of abusing his partners and sunk to raping strangers in abandoned corridors? Police. He should call the police. Only Sean's hands were locked tightly around his own shoulders; he was hugging himself so hard he wanted to scream from the pain he was inflicting on himself, but he couldn't move, couldn't make a sound. He never could when he tried to hide from Jason. It was when Jason inevitably found him that he started screaming. Jason liked it when he screamed. It fit so well into those sick fantasies Jason had come to crave like a drug, toward the end. Only by the end too many of them weren't fantasies anymore.

That thought finally got him moving. He pulled out his cell and cursed soundlessly. No signal. Damn it! Too much steel and concrete, blocking the cell's signal. By the time he ran for help, it could be too late. Sean plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out the can of pepper spray he'd gotten for protection just after he'd arrived in Hilldale. He hadn't had to use it until now. Half out of his mind with terror, he hurried silently toward Jason and his victim.

He could see them now. Or one of them, at least: a huge, hulking, denim-clad figure, with a blond buzz cut and bulging biceps. Jason. Oh God, it really was Jason. He'd found him somehow, come after him. Sean couldn't see his face, but he didn't want to. It was enough that he saw two small hands clutched tightly in Jason's huge left hand raised high overhead, pressed against the concrete wall, delicate fingers clawing the air in helpless panic. The victim's toes were barely brushing the ground. He was powerless to defend himself, as Jason's other hand tore at his pants.

Sean surged forward, holding the pepper spray out in front of him like Van Helsing holding his crucifix to ward off Dracula. "Get away from him, you sick fuck!" Sean screamed, his voice wild and screeching and unrecognizable.

"What the hell?!" Jason roared, dropping his victim, spinning around, his right hand darting into his denim jacket, as Sean's wild eyes took in the little curly-haired brunet with terror-filled green eyes. Jesus, he was just a kid!

Sean depressed the trigger on the slender can the second Jason's face became visible. "Quick, run! Get behind me!" Sean yelled to the kid.

"Angel, look out!" the little brunet cried simultaneously, trying to leap in front of Jason.

"Police. Freeze!" Jason yelled, a gun appearing in his hand, even as the first of the mist hit his face and he bellowed in agony.

A gun! Jason had... only... oh God. It *wasn't* Jason. And he'd said "Police." But he'd been attacking the kid, hadn't he?

The big blond's eyes had squeezed shut instantly; he'd begun wheezing and gasping and coughing as soon as the mist hit, as he inhaled a lungful of the noxious chemical. His left hand was clawing at his face as the right held the gun. "Dillon...! Gun!" he gasped out between coughs, thrusting his arm behind him blindly, even as he forced his left hand away from his face and began waving it wildly in front of him, trying to defend them from further attack as the kid fumbled for the gun.

The gun—a rapist wouldn't give his victim a gun—and they knew each other's names and.... Oh God! "Don't shoot!" Sean said, dropping the pepper spray to the ground and raising his hands in the air. "I'm sorry! I thought he was attacking you. I work in the mall and I...."

"Stay there! Don't come any closer! What did you do to him?!" the kid cried shrilly, his voice panic-filled.

"It's only pepper spray. It hurts like hell but he'll be fine unless.... Oh, God, he doesn't have asthma, does he?" Sean asked. "It doesn't matter. We need to call an ambulance, so they can treat him, but my cell didn't work and...."

The kid was wild-eyed and shaking, and the gun was shaking too. Sean couldn't take his eyes off it. It was a miracle he hadn't shot him already.

The big blond was leaning over, hands on his knees, fighting to breathe. His eyes were still squeezed shut, streaming with tears. The kid had his phone out now, and he was dialing it even as he kept the gun trained on Sean. Sean was amazed when the kid suddenly seemed too calm, as he took charge. "He's right, Gabe. I can't get a signal. He threw down the pepper spray and his hands are in the air. Gabe, take my hand. I'm going to lead you out of here. You, walk in front of us, and don't try anything," he said, his voice becoming more firm as he spoke to Sean.

"I won't. I'm really, really sorry. I thought he was someone else and I thought he was attacking you. By the time I saw his face and he said 'Police' I'd already pushed the button. I.... Oh God, I just attacked a police officer," Sean said, horrified as all the implications hit. He was going to be arrested. He was going to go to jail. And he'd hurt a police officer. They'd put him in jail forever for that.

"Can't... walk," Gabe gasped. He had to fight for every breath and his eyes and the skin of his face were on fire. He knew he wasn't really dying, that he'd be all right if he didn't try to overexert by doing something strenuous, like walking. He'd been sprayed once before, as part of his police training, but not such a heavy hit, and there he'd had access to first aid within the first couple of minutes.

Dillon bit his lip. "Okay. You, you're coming with me. Gabe, we'll go outside, call 911, and wait for the ambulance, lead them to you," he said.

Gabe shook his head. "Mall... infirmary... saline... wheelchair... oxygen... then call...," Gabe wheezed out between wracking coughs.

"Okay. Okay, that's what I'll do. And I'll be back as soon as I can. I love you. Come on; let's go," Dillon said, his voice going from tender to steel in a heartbeat.

Maria Albert

"Wait... wallet... ID... read to me...," Gabe forced out.

"I'm Sean Wycliff. I own Hearts and Flowers. My wallet is in my pocket," Sean volunteered. "Do you want me to...?" Sean asked.

"Reach for it slowly and toss it to me," Dillon commanded.

Sean did so, impressed that Dillon dexterously caught it with his other hand while still pointing the gun at him. He opened it with his gun hand, carefully flicking his eyes from driver's license to his face. "The picture is him and that's who it says he is," Dillon confirmed, pressing the wallet into Gabe's hand.

Gabe nodded. Now he knew who to come kill if he hurt Dillon. He hated being helpless like this, being unable to protect the kid.

Sean and Dillon started down the corridor. The walk seemed endless, despite how fast they were going. "I'm so sorry," Sean said again. "I've never hurt anyone in my life. I swear he'll be okay, but if you walk into the mall with that gun out, you're going to start a panic. And it's packed around Texas Style. People could get trampled, and some of the mall guards are armed. They might shoot you," Sean reasoned. He couldn't let this poor guy or anyone else get hurt because of his stupid mistake.

Dillon was surprised by the genuine concern he heard in Sean's voice. He'd wanted to kill him for hurting Gabe, but it really did seem like a terrible misunderstanding. He'd thumbed the safety back onto the gun as soon as he'd seen the man was cooperating. Thank God Gabe had taught him how to use his gun. Still, he'd been terrified he'd shoot Sean by mistake, he was so upset; his hands had been shaking like crazy.

"Do you work here? I mean, how did you get into the tunnel? It's locked with a keypad," Sean asked.

"I used to work here and Gabe was undercover back in December as a mall guard. That's how he knew the code. We'd just had an early two-month anniversary dinner at Texas Style, and we decided to take a shortcut to the parking lot," Dillon said, his voice laced with misery. The place had been packed, so they hadn't been able to fool around in the restaurant bathroom like they had on their first date. They thought they could replay their first time in the tunnels instead, to take the edge off before going home and celebrating properly. And now they'd be spending the rest of the night in the hospital instead and maybe at the precinct, too.

Dillon pocketed the gun before exiting the tunnels. Sean was right. It was too dangerous. And he was safe now, with so many people around. But Sean didn't try anything. The second they were out of the tunnels, Sean pulled out his cell and dialed 911. "Thank God!" Sean said. He began explaining to the emergency dispatcher what had happened. "I can't give the phone to the officer. He's still in the tunnel and he can barely talk," he said.

"Here, let me talk to them," Dillon said, still heading for the mall office. "Hello. I'm Dillon Gosling. The detective's name is Gabriel D'Angelo. No, I don't know his badge number, but he works out of the Northside precinct. He's my partner. No, I don't have a badge number. I'm not a police officer. I meant domestic partner. We live together," Dillon explained, his face flushing. They were at the door to the mall office now, Dillon saw in relief. "He's thirty-six. No, no history of asthma or any other respiratory problems."

A few minutes later the two of them, three security guards, and the mall manager were heading to the tunnels with a wheelchair, oxygen mask, and emergency eye wash kits. Dillon had never been so relieved as when he saw Gabe, still in agony, still gasping, but alive, breathing, safe.

One of the guards who'd had first aid training put the breather on Gabe and began flushing his eyes. Another put on latex gloves and picked up the pepper spray, carefully putting it in a clear plastic bag, while the third watched Sean suspiciously. When the second was going to leave to lead the ambulance to them, Gabe suggested they wheel him to the parking lot to make it easier. The manager was willing to do anything to accommodate them; he was obviously extremely upset by the entire incident.

Within minutes the parking lot was swarming with vehicles in response to the report of an officer being assaulted and injured: seven police cruisers, two ambulances, and four unmarked police cars. Sean almost moaned in relief when to his surprise he saw a familiar face. "Rick! Thank God!" he all but sobbed. He wanted to burst into tears and run into his arms. "Sean! What are you doing here? Are you all right? What the hell happened, Angel? Shit, you're a mess," Rick McFarlan said in sympathy, watching in concern as the EMTs started to treat his friend. His partner, an agile-looking African American, peeled away and headed for the EMTs.

"You know him?" Dillon asked Rick in surprise.

"Yeah. Sean runs Hearts and Flowers. I get all Jeremy's flowers from there," Rick said. "Are you okay, Dillon? You didn't get hurt too?"

"No, I'm fine," Dillon said.

"I'm so sorry," Sean said repentantly. "I thought the detective was Jason, my ex-partner, that he was attacking Dillon. He looked just like him from behind, he sounded just like him, he's the reason I carry the pepper spray...."

"Hold it," Rick said, holding up his hand and cutting him off. "Are you trying to tell me *you're* the one who assaulted Angel? You *sprayed* him?" he asked in amazement, his eyes flicking from the slender five-foot-eight man to the broad-shouldered goliath nearly a foot taller and a foot wider at the shoulders. To Sean's utter astonishment, he began to laugh. "Oh, God save us all from well-meaning civilian hero wannabes!" he roared with merriment.

"Very funny," Gabe gasped, realizing as did the rest of the officers present that a good half of Rick's laughter was from sheer relief that he wasn't really injured. Whenever they got an officer-injured or officer-down call, it hit them all really hard, and when it turned out to be a false alarm or something minor, the tension release could be pretty wild. Gabe was breathing a little easier now, with the oxygen. "Just wait until I... tell Jeremy you said so.... You're the one who partnered up... with the original Good Samaritan."

"I know! That's what I meant! These guys are going to be the death of us," Rick said, wiping his eyes. "Or at least of the bad guys."

Gabe forced the mask off his face again as the EMTs strapped him onto the gurney, squinting through swollen lids, forcing out his message between coughs. "Look, don't arrest... the guy. I'm off duty... not pressing charges. He didn't know... I'm a cop. Dillon and I... were roughhousing.... Honest mistake," Gabe said. He realized the guy had no time to react between him yelling "Police" and pushing the button down, it had all happened so fast, and it probably had looked like he was forcing the kid. Shit, Dillon was only eighteen and so little and he was thirty-six and a big guy, and the way he had Dillon pinned to the wall, the way Dillon was writhing and whimpering in need, it must have looked and sounded all kinds of wrong, like Dillon was being forced instead of loving it. It had taken guts for that little guy Sean to stand up to him, to try to save Dillon from him. Sean wasn't much bigger than Dillon was. Thank God that's all it was—one of the good guys—not a bad guy who got the drop on them when his guard was down. Jesus. He needed to watch his back, and more importantly Dillon's, better than that. He didn't want to even think about ever losing Dillon.

Dillon got into the ambulance with Gabe and it headed off.

"Am I really free to go?" Sean asked in shock.

"Looks like it," Rick said. "But we'd better drive you home. I don't think you're up to it right now," Rick said.

"Um... all right," Sean agreed numbly. He wasn't going to be arrested? He wasn't going to jail? Sean followed Rick and his partner obediently to their car. He climbed into the back, while Rick took the front passenger seat and his partner took the wheel.

Rick turned around and said, "We have to see that you get home safe. After all, it's in my best interests. Jeremy would never forgive me if he didn't get flowers for Valentine's Day, and Katie, hell, you know her, she'd probably skin me if I blew it for Dana," he said, laughing, though not nearly as wildly as before; the adrenaline had burned off. Christ, when he'd heard Angel had been assaulted he'd imagined the worst. Thank God he was okay.

Sean was confused for a moment. Who was Katie? Then he remembered Rick mentioning he was the only one who called his sister Cat that, back when he'd told him to call him Rick instead of Richie like Cat did. Sean was still a bit dazed, still trying to come to terms with everything that had happened. He wasn't going to jail. Thank you, God, thank you!

"So, where do you live? Where am I going?" Rick's partner asked. It was the first he'd spoken. The most wonderful feeling ran up

Sean's spine at the sound of his deep, mellow voice. It took him a moment to process the questions.

"1497 D'Angelo Boulevard," Sean answered distractedly.

There was a rich, warm laugh, which poured over him like honey. "D'Angelo?! Now that, as my Grandma used to say, is serendipity. Angel, he's Gabriel D'Angelo. That's some coincidence. Too bad for you he's already taken," he said mildly.

Sean looked at the other man in surprise. He seemed perfectly at ease with both Angel and Rick being gay. He'd always thought police weren't supposed to handle fellow gay cops too well. Oh goodness. Did that mean that maybe the detective driving might be gay too?

"Um, yeah. Some coincidence. I'm Sean Wycliff, by the way," he said, eyeing the detective's reflection in the rearview mirror, hoping he would reciprocate.

"Jefferson Jeffries. Folks call me Jeff, because hey, who else could I be with a name like that, right?"

Sean's breath hitched. Jeff had the most wonderful smile, and his eyes were so warm and liquid and brown, with specks of amber, they all but glowed, like molasses and honey mixed together and painted onto glass—warm and wet, bright and wonderful.

"Thanks for driving me home, Jeff," Sean said. "And I'm really, really sorry for all the chaos."

"Hey, don't sweat it. Shit happens. If it had to go down, if it was time for one of us to take some kind of hit, this was the best way it could have happened: no guns, no knives, not even a car accident. Nothing bad, nothing permanent. The universe is like that, give and take, good and bad, yin and yang, it's all part of life. Sometimes you can roll with the punches, sometimes they take you down. It sucks going down," he said seriously.

"No more talk about sucking and going down, Jeff. Not with three horny gay men in the car," Rick teased wickedly.

Sean's eyes widened but Jeff laughed.

"You're going to get one of us brought up on sexual harassment charges, buddy, and I'm not taking a fall for you," Jeff said, shaking his head. He looked at Sean carefully through the reflection in the rearview mirror. "Of course, maybe you don't mind me saying something like that, Sean. You know, if I'd been saying it the way Rick made it sound like I was."

Sean blinked. Had he really heard that right? Had the detective just made a pass at him?

"Um, I wouldn't mind inviting you in... I mean, just to talk. Rick, you too, of course," Sean stuttered nervously.

Rick grinned. "Seeing as how we only have the one car, that sounds like a plan to me. But I can't stay out too late, or Jeremy will turn me into a pumpkin."

"We can't have that, Rick. You look terrible in orange. Me, I look good, but then, I look good in everything. Or out of it," Jeff said with a suggestive look and that wonderful low chuckle again.

Sean's mouth went dry and his heart started thumping wildly. Oh God. Jeff was definitely flirting.

Rick grinned, looking from one to the other. "On second thought, drop me at the station so I can pick up my car, Jeff. We're already off the clock and I'm definitely feeling like a third wheel."

"No!" Sean said, blushing furiously when he heard the desperation in his voice. "I mean, I know you, Rick, but... I don't usually.... Couldn't we all talk? Get to know each other?" he asked plaintively. He didn't want to miss out on a chance to get to know Jeff better, but he didn't know anything about him. He couldn't risk having a complete stranger in his apartment. He wouldn't.

"Of course. Or we can just drop you off and not come in. It's your call, Sean. No pressure, all right?" Jeff said, obviously seeing how conflicted Sean was.

"No, I want you to. Really," Sean said. He hadn't been this attracted to someone since he'd first met Rick. But this was better: Jeff definitely didn't sound like he was already taken. At least, he hoped he wasn't. If he was flirting like this and was.... Well, he'd have to trust that Rick wouldn't go along with something like that.

TWO hours later, Sean stared wistfully out the window, watching Jeff and Rick pull away. Once they drove out of sight, he looked down at the card in his hand: Jeff's card, with his cell phone and home number written on it. He grinned like a schoolboy with his first crush. He'd wanted them to stay longer, but they had work tomorrow and so did he, and Rick needed to get home to Jeremy. Sean stretched. Bed sounded like a good idea, but first, he needed a shower to help him calm down. His mind was still racing.

He headed for the bathroom and stripped off his clothes, his cock hardening as the cool air kissed it. He'd been half-hard all night. He got the water temperature just right and slipped in. Instantly an image sprang to mind of a dark, smooth-muscled torso pressing up against his own pale skin. Just picturing the contrast in skin tone made his hard cock bob and begin to leak. God, Jeff would look like Jamal, that time he and Shame and Jamal went skinny-dipping together, when they were teens. The first time Shame and Jamal had gone down on each other. Sean had come out of the water to find where the other two had disappeared to, and had found them, watched them. He'd almost joined them, but Shame was his cousin, and that was one Golden Rule he wasn't willing to break.

But the memory brought to mind wide, soft lips closing around his shaft, slow, rhythmic thrusts met by a skilled tongue and an eager throat. Sean moaned as he stroked his cock, imagining it was the warm heat of Jeff's mouth around him instead of his own hand. Jeff seemed so gentle, strong without having to prove it by making someone else feel weak. Sean was certain he'd be a tender, giving lover. He was moaning continuously now. Sean stopped stroking his cock, instead gripping it in his right hand, leaving only the tip exposed. Then he took the palm of his left hand and rubbed it in a circular motion over the seeping tip again and again, until he stiffened and came, calling out Jeff's name.

RICK smiled, seeing the lights were still on. Jeremy always waited up for him, no matter how late he came home; Jeremy needed to know he was safe. That was part of why he never stayed out late. That and he couldn't wait to come home to Jeremy. But this time Jeremy didn't greet him at the door the way he usually did. Maybe he'd dozed off while waiting. When he did, he insisted Rick wake him. When Rick entered the bedroom, Rick immediately saw that something was wrong. Jeremy was awake, sitting up stiff-backed in the bed. His expressive blue eyes were nearly black with emotion, but worse, they were red-rimmed and his face was tear-stained and the look he was giving him now.... "Jeremy? Jeremy, what's wrong?" Rick asked in concern, heading for him. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Because you were on duty, right? I can't call you when you're on duty," Jeremy accused, his eyes riveted to Rick's face.

Rick felt his face flush and he winced with guilt. Shit. He'd lied to Jeremy about that; he'd called and told him he was working late when they got the injured-officer call. Jeremy had thought he couldn't call him, and he'd needed him. "Um... right. But I'm here now. What's wrong?"

"That's twice," Jeremy said cryptically. "Who was it?"

"What? What are you talking about?" Rick asked.

"The officer who was injured. The one you went to see. Who was it?"

Rick squirmed. Shit. Jeremy had heard somehow. How had he known? "It was Angel. But he's okay. It was only pepper spray, a misunderstanding. He'll be fine. Oh, baby, I'm sorry if you were worried about...."

"You lied to me. Twice. Looking me right in the eye, just now, you lied to me. How many other times have you lied to me, Rick?" Jeremy accused.

What? Where was this coming from? "I never... I mean, I don't... Jeremy, come on! You should understand. I just didn't want you to worry, before I knew how bad it was," Rick reasoned. Jeremy was so empathic, so sensitive, he hadn't wanted to upset him, and now he'd hurt him worse by lying. "I'm sorry."

"Sure. Of course you are. And I'm just supposed to forgive you, right? Just smile and tell you it's all right and welcome you into my bed? Well, tonight you can sleep on the fucking sofa," Jeremy said, his eyes brimming with fresh tears that he angrily wiped away.

Uh-oh. Jeremy almost never cursed; it was one of the things Rick loved about him. And he'd never kept him out of bed before. Rick felt

himself tense up the way he usually did before a big bust. He'd never felt like that, facing Jeremy before. "Jeremy, please...."

"NO! I don't want to hear it! If you can't tell me the truth, then don't even talk to me! Now get out!" Jeremy yelled.

Rick swallowed; he felt panic rising. Shit. Shit, shit! "Okay. I'm going. But I swear, I'm really, truly sorry. Good night," he whispered, heading for the living room, head hanging in defeat. He just hoped Jeremy would calm down by morning. Maybe he'd enlist Katie's aid, or Tim and Kevin, have them find out what else was bothering Jeremy, whatever it was that he wouldn't talk about before. Something was definitely wrong. He had to fix this. He couldn't bear seeing Jeremy cry, seeing him miserable. Knowing it was at least partially his fault was killing him.

THE next morning Sean was humming to himself as he opened the shop, even though he'd had to take a cab to get to work and was twenty minutes late because of it. Thank God Jeff had given him his wallet back the night before. Fortunately Gabe had handed it to Jeff before the ambulance left, or he wouldn't have been able to pay the fare.

Sean had never opened late before. There were ten messages. He began listening to them and frowned in concern. The fourth one was from Rick, at 9 a.m. on the dot, and he sounded terrible. "Sean, call me as soon as you get this, okay? I really screwed up. I need something special, a make-up bouquet. Call me. You have my number."

Sean pulled up Rick's vCard on Outlook and dialed. "Hi Rick, honey, it's me. I'm sorry; I just got in. I called the second I got your message," Sean said, as soon as the phone picked up.

"Me who?" a scratchy-sounding voice asked suspiciously.

"What do you mean...? Shit." He looked at the caller ID in disbelief. He'd been so distracted and flustered he'd called Rick's home number by mistake. This must be Jeremy. He sounded like he might be home sick. "Uh, sorry. Wrong number," he said and hung up quickly, glad he had caller ID blocked on his line here and at home. Then Sean flinched. Uh-oh. Had he mentioned Rick's name? He wasn't sure. He called Rick on his cell. "Detective McFarlan," Rick said, his voice gruff and professional.

"Rick, sweetie, it's..." Sean began, but Rick cut him off before he could finish.

"Sean! Thank God. Did you get my message?" Rick asked desperately.

"That's why I called, honey. Don't worry, Rick, I'll whip something up really quick. I can have it delivered by eleven," Sean assured him. "To home?" he asked.

"No, to his office. Jeremy's working today from nine to five. You're a lifesaver. On the card, I want to say, 'Jeremy, I never meant to hurt you and I swear I won't ever lie to you again. Please just give me a chance to make it up to you. Yours forever, Rick'."

"Got it. Rick, what did you do?" Sean asked.

"That's the problem. I don't know what's bothering him. Well, most of it. I... oh shit, I've gotta go," Rick said, and hung up.

Sean bit his lip. He'd wanted to tell Rick about his goof, calling his home by mistake. But maybe that wasn't Jeremy; maybe they had company staying with them. It was almost 9:30. Jeremy would have left for work ages ago, and Rick would know if he'd called in sick, right? That must have been someone else. Whew, that was close.

JEREMY stared at the phone in dull shock and abject misery. It was true. Everything he'd been afraid of was true. It was happening all over again. Rick was just like Doug. He was cheating on him, lying to him, sneaking around behind his back seeing someone else, just pretending he was still in love. That strange man had called Rick "honey" and Rick was leaving him messages. They were probably planning their next secret lovers' tryst. Oh, God, he felt sick.

Jeremy called Tim and asked if he could stay with him and Kevin for a couple of days. Ten minutes later, he was out the door, overnight bag in hand. He'd shower and shave at their place. This wouldn't be the worst they'd ever seen him look; after all, they were the one's who'd been there when he woke up from his coma, the last time his life ended.

Maria Albert

He fought against a new bout of tears. There'd be plenty of time for more tears later, and two pairs of shoulders to cry on.

IT was nearly noon by the time Sean could pause to take a breather. He groaned as the phone rang, debating letting voice mail get it, when he recognized the number. "Shame! How's my favorite cousin?"

Seamus laughed. "Shameful as always. And how are ye doing this fine winter morning, Sin, laddie?" he asked in an affected Irish brogue.

Sean grinned. "Actually, pretty sinfully," he said. Shame's mother Colleen was the one who had unintentionally christened the two men with their nicknames for one another, the time she'd caught them having a jerk-off contest in her barn when they were fourteen.

"Oh my God? Really? And you didn't call to tell me about him?!" Seamus demanded.

"Hey! Down, boy. I only just met him last night. It's not like we've done anything. But we talked for two hours, and he gave me his home number, and he wants to meet for dinner tonight, just the two of us, and... well... he's a friend of Rick's," Sean explained.

"You mean 'The World's Most Yummy Police Detective'? That Rick?" Seamus teased.

"Um, yeah. Except, there's a new challenger to the title. His name is Jeff, Jefferson Jeffries. He's tall, dark and handsome. Really dark. You know, Jamal dark," Sean admitted.

Seamus laughed. "Sin! You naughty little devil, you! Oh, this is just too perfect. We're adopting another one into the ranks of the Black Irish," Seamus teased. They'd tried to convince his mother that Jamal was one of the Black Irish when they were teens. Back then they hadn't had a clue that the term referred to Irishmen with brunet hair. "Oh, this is just *too* delicious for words. You know what this means, right? If this works out, the two of you get to star in my own personal ultimate fantasy. You know, the Oreo Double Stuf one: two delicious chocolate cookies around twice the creamy filling center." "Bad Shame!!!" Sean said, as if scolding a dog. "You're my cousin, you perv! Aunt Colleen may have forgiven us both for being gay, and accepted Jamal with open arms, but there is no *way* she is going to allow your Oreo fantasy to happen."

"Come on. A man can dream, can't he?" Seamus asked.

"So, did you just call to inquire about my sex life, or are you going to confirm my Valentine's shipment and tell me who you're sending to help me in the store? I wish they were starting today. It's been a crazy morning. Can they start tomorrow?" Sean asked.

"Mom said she'd do it again. Business is slow at the studio. She has way more pieces than she's been able to sell piling up there and at the gallery, and she said she'd like some time away from it all. So you've got one new assistant, no training required," Seamus said. "And Jamal and I will help you two on Valentine's Day, like last year, so you're all set."

"I love you, Shame. I'd have your baby, if incest wasn't a sin, if I weren't a man, and if Jamal wouldn't kill me for touching you," Sean said, laughing.

"I love you too, Sin. And I still say it's a cruel twist of fate that neither one of us gets the chance to boff the other silly," Seamus said. "All kidding aside, I can't tell you how happy I am to hear you have a new paramour waiting in the wings, Cuz-Mine. I'll tell Mom to head out to see you as soon as she can. Which of course means Jamal and I get to scream really loud while she's gone, so feel free to keep her on staff permanently. Don't forget to keep me posted on your own new craving for dark chocolate. All the dirty details, of course. Like particularly if he measures up to a certain well-known stereotype," Seamus said lecherously.

Sean blushed darkly at the mental image that invoked. "Don't worry; you'll be the second to know."

Seamus moaned. "Damn it, Sin! Mom's still here and now all this Oreo and chocolate talk has given me the world's biggest boner."

"Poor baby. So go have Jamal eat you for dessert. I love you, Shame. See you soon," Sean said.

"Love you too, Sin," Seamus said and hung up.

"HE said *what*?" Rick asked in disbelief.

"That your boyfriend called the house, looking for you," Kevin said again, scowling at Rick accusingly.

"But I don't *have* a boyfriend! I have a partner. I don't understand any of this! Yesterday I'm buying his Valentine's Day present, last night I'm lying awake tossing and turning on the couch, this morning I order a make-up gift, and now I hear Jeremy played hooky from work and has moved out of our house?! What the hell's going on?" Rick asked plaintively.

Kevin sighed. "I don't think most of it is really about you at all, Rick. I think this is all his old partner Doug's fault. Doug really did a number on Jeremy, cheating on him and then abandoning him like he did. They'd been together about seven months when Doug's infidelity started, though poor Jeremy didn't find out about it for months after that. That's the problem. You and Jeremy have been together about eight months now. I think Jeremy's unconsciously been waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for history to repeat itself. Look, maybe he'll talk to you if Tim and I were there to mediate, maybe with Cat and Dana too, so you don't feel like you're being ganged up on."

Rick laughed mirthlessly. "Right. Like Katie would be on *my* side," he scoffed. "She might be my sister, but she's like a mother tiger defending her cub when it comes to Jeremy." He winced. "Only please, don't ever tell him I said that." Jeremy didn't need anyone to fight his battles, but he still sometimes felt inadequate. "But I'll do whatever it takes to get him to come home. I sent the apology bouquet to his office today; I didn't realize he'd be calling in sick. Could you pick it up on the way home? And make sure he reads the card, that he knows I sent it first thing this morning? Remind him I tried to talk last night. And for God's sake, find out who the hell called my house, claiming to be my boyfriend! That part's really driving me crazy."

"Okay. You'll be there tonight, at seven?" Kevin asked.

"I'll be there," Rick promised.

"SEAN," Rick said in relief to Jeremy six hours later, the final mystery solved. "It must have been Sean. He's the florist at Hearts and Flowers, the shop I get all your flowers from. I called him this morning in a panic because of last night. I hadn't realized he'd called here. I wish he'd told me."

"Sean! Oh, Jeremy, that explains it," Cat said. "He calls everyone honey or sweetie. He must have panicked when he realized he was talking to you instead of Rick, so he hung up on you. Sean's a sweetheart. He's thrilled you two are together. He'd never intentionally do anything to mess that up," Cat assured him.

Jeremy looked again at the beautiful bouquet Rick had sent that Kevin had brought to him, once more reading the card. Yours forever. He felt like such a fool. Rick wasn't going to hurt him; he wouldn't ever leave him. He looked up at Rick with pain-filled eyes and saw matching pain there. "I'm sorry, Rick. I never should have thought such terrible things about you. Can you forgive me?"

Rick exhaled in relief. "Forgive you? Yes, definitely. Can you forgive me for lying? I swear I won't do it again. I shouldn't have tried to hide the injured-officer call from you. It's just, I knew something was already upsetting you and I didn't want to add to that. I know how worried you get sometimes."

"I try not to. I try to be supportive and not clingy," Jeremy said.

"You've never been clingy. I don't care what that jerk Doug called you. Jeremy, I know it's hard. No one ever said it was easy, loving a cop. People say we've got a tough job. But being a cop's spouse, that's the toughest job on the planet," Rick said, holding his arms open.

"It is. But I wouldn't trade it for anything," Jeremy said, stepping forward, melting into his embrace.

"Well, I think our work here is done," Cat said with a relieved grin. "Time to go, Dana."

"Us too," Tim said, beaming. "We love you both. Good night, guys."

"Good night, Cat, Dana, Tim, Kevin. And thanks. We have to get together again soon just for fun," Jeremy said. He and Rick walked them to the door. Once they were gone, Jeremy turned to Rick. "The flowers are so sweet, Rick, but not nearly as sweet as you. I'm so lucky."

"I'm the lucky one," Rick said, leading him into the bedroom. They undressed each other slowly, lovingly, each exposed bit of skin getting the attention it deserved from hands, mouths, bodies.

"I want to love you, feel your love all around me," Jeremy said, reaching for the lube.

Rick reached for a condom, surprised when Jeremy stopped him.

"No. I know you've wanted... and I have too. I don't want to wear one. I've been holding back, Rick, trying to keep that last little bit safe. But I trust you. You'd never hurt me, cheat on me, endanger me like that. We've both been tested. There's no reason not to do it when it's what we both want," Jeremy said.

"Jeremy, are you sure?" Rick asked, unable to believe it, not wanting Jeremy to feel he had to do something like that as an apology. "I don't want you to regret it later."

Jeremy kissed him lovingly. "No more doubts, no more fear. I know you'll never give me any reason to regret one minute I'm with you. You're mine forever too, Rick. I love you. Let me show you how much. I want you to feel my love inside you, to leave part of myself inside you."

Rick nodded, enjoying the ecstasy of Jeremy's long, slender fingers as they prepared him, the warm heat as they slid inside him, stretched him. And then Jeremy's cock was there, naked, slick with precum, pressing against him and then sliding inside so easily, so deeply. "Oh my God. You're so warm, so soft and hard and... agh!" Rick moaned in ecstasy as Jeremy brushed against his gland.

"It's so different. It's better, so much better. Oh, Rick, I want to feel this too. I want to feel you inside me too," Jeremy said.

"Jeremy, oh babe, I love you, I... no, not yet, I can't... Jeremy!" Rick cried out as he came. Nothing was sexier for Jeremy than when Rick came without him ever touching his cock. He came too, as soon as he felt Rick's orgasm start, the warm heat of Rick's clenching passage on his naked cock triggering the most intense orgasm he'd ever had. He felt his come shooting deep inside his lover and then their lips found each other in a kiss just as hot and wet and wonderful. "Yours forever," Jeremy whispered, nuzzling against him, in Rick's arms, warm and safe and more loved than he could have ever imagined.

"Yours forever," Rick agreed.

SEAN shivered as he stood in the doorway of Jeff's house, partly from the cold wind that was blowing in from outside, but more from a combination of anticipation and fear. He couldn't believe he was even thinking about doing this. Dinner had been wonderful. They'd met at the restaurant. He hadn't let Jeff come pick him up, although it was silly, really. Jeff already knew the address. If he wanted to stalk him or something he could do it anyway. But still, this way Sean had his car, he could cut and run if something felt wrong, crash at Shame's if he needed to. No one could ever get past Shame and Jamal to hurt him. But Jeff had been the perfect gentleman. The perfect date. It could have ended there, but Sean had accepted the invitation to come home with him, although he'd followed in his own car, again needing that avenue of escape.

"Hey, like my dad always said, 'What are you trying to do? Heat the whole neighborhood?' Are you coming in, Sean? You're looking all cold and shivery. I was hoping you might want to let me warm you up a little," Jeff crooned in that wonderful, sexy voice.

Want to. Let him. Those were good words. Good actions. Jeff wasn't grabbing him, yanking him into the room, locking him in, slamming him into the wall, forcing him. Or coercing. He was asking. Inviting. Sean stepped into the house and turned around to close the door, automatically sliding the deadbolt lock and chain home. He nearly jumped out of his skin when hot, velvety lips caressed the nape of his neck. He clawed frantically at the lock.

"Hey, hey now. Shhh. It's okay. I'm all the way back here now," Jeff said from what sounded to be ten feet away. Sean spun around, wide-eyed. Jeff really was no longer in touching range. Jesus, he could move fast; soundlessly, like a panther. The thought sent a shiver of fear and lust through Sean.

"Look, Sean, I'm sorry if I misunderstood. If you just want to sit and talk, or watch a movie together, or if you've changed your mind completely about me, it's okay," Jeff said, his hands out at his sides in supplication. "There's no way I want you doing anything you're not comfortable with. The ball's in your court. Should I say good night from here, do I get to walk you to your car, or do you want to maybe stay and hang out a while? You know, just to talk. I won't so much as kiss you unless you want me to. I make a mean pot of coffee. But the coffee is the only mean thing about me," Jeff encouraged.

Sean was afraid to stay, but he didn't want to go. He forced his gaze up from Jeff's hands to his face, fighting years of conditioning for subservience that had brought his eyes automatically down. Jeff's eyes. He had to see Jeff's eyes. Sean exhaled a long, shuddery breath. There was no anger there, no malice, no hidden depths, just warmth, compassion, and open, genuine concern. "I... coffee might help. Could we maybe talk a little?" Sean said, echoing Jeff's suggestion timidly, his whole body tensing, waiting for retaliation.

"Oh yeah. Coffee is good. And we're definitely going to talk. We're going to talk as long as you want, as much as you want, as many times as you want, because probably not tonight, or even a few weeks from now, but someday I'm going to find out all that Jason McAllister did to hurt you, make sure it's something I can send him to prison for and find the evidence I need to put him there," Jeff said, his voice cold and hard now, like steel.

Sean paled. "How did you...?" His eyes dropped again, a textbook Pavlovian response, but he forced them to stop at Jeff's mouth.

Jeff shrugged. "I'm a detective. You mentioned his first name at the mall, said he was your ex-partner, the reason you carried the pepper spray. You told me your full name, so I ran your driver's license, found your previous address in San Francisco. Ran a DMV search for other people at that address. Got McAllister's full name. Ran you both through the system. You both came up clean, mostly. I found a couple of domestic disturbance complaints your neighbors had filed. Two police reports of suspected domestic partner abuse. No charges filed. Medical assistance refused."

Sean forced his gaze back to Jeff's eyes, expecting to see condemnation, disgust, maybe even pity. But there was only that warm concern. "I know you must wonder why I stayed, how I could live with someone like that," Sean said. "But he wasn't always that way. Nothing like that at first, although he was always self-centered, selfish, that part I should have seen. But the rest... he changed. It was so gradual. I never realized what was happening, I just fell deeper and deeper into this well, until I was neck-deep in slime, fighting to breathe, while he tried to push me under," Sean whispered. "Then one night, I just sort of woke up. I realized I had two choices for what my future could be. So I left. I hid here, in Hilldale. I kept my same name; I just went where I didn't think he'd expect me to come. I hadn't seen Shame-Seamus, my cousin-in years. We were like brothers growing up, but I didn't even dare speak to him anymore, Jason was so jealous. They took me in: Shame and Colleen, his mom, and Jamal, Shame's partner. Helped me heal. The physical part was easy. The rest.... It's been a long road. It was three years ago that I left. This past year, I've finally been thinking I might be ready. I felt like me again. And you're as different from Jason as night and day," Sean said, then winced and bit his lip.

"God, I didn't mean that the way it probably sounded; that wasn't a racial reference at all. I meant physically, but skin's got nothing to do with it. He's this huge hulking monster. You're strong, but gentle too. You smile and laugh. You're so confident. Bullies never are, are they? You help people for a living; that's what cops do. The two of you are like light and dark, but you're the one who's light and he's dark," Sean said. He'd been slowly approaching Jeff the whole time they talked. Now he was only inches away, and trembling like a newborn fawn. "Do you still want me?" he asked, forcing his eyes to Jeff's.

Jeff tilted his head and leaned toward him, Jeff's lips brushing his as light as a butterfly's wing. And miraculously, the trembling stopped. Sean reached out a steady hand and gently caressed Jeff's face. "Make love to me? Please?" Sean whispered.

Jeff responded with a kiss, a lover's kiss, deep and slow and sweet. Sean moaned in need, his hand circling Jeff's waist. Hard but soft, warm, good, so good. Then Jeff's hands were on his back, his touch so gentle, guiding him toward the bedroom. He wasn't forcing him, just encouraging him, helping him. The room was beautiful: all dark woods, nothing noticeably ethnic, no African décor like Jamal's. Just masculine. The bed was an ocean of blue and green, calming, soothing. "I want you to be sure, Sean," Jeff said, kissing the back of his neck again, like he had before, maybe to test him.

This time Sean reacted differently. He pressed back against him. "I'm sure. I want this. I want you. No matter what you... if after you... I...." Oh God. He was falling for Jeff, hard. What if this was all Jeff wanted? One or two nights with him, some fun, and then he'd be gone?

Jeff didn't try to turn him around to look at him. He stepped back and walked around him instead, looking him in the eye appraisingly. "Yeah, you do want me, but you don't want this. You're still afraid I'm going to hurt you. Come on. I'll brew us some coffee. We need to get to know one another better. You don't need to say much; you can just listen. I'll tell you about me, who I am, where I've been, where I'm going, what I'm looking for. That way, you can see if I'm the one you've been hoping to find, without baring your soul to me. Feel free to ask Rick all about me. I've got nothing to hide, and we've gotten pretty close since we partnered up last year."

TWO weeks later, 11:01 a.m. Valentine's Day, Rick headed for the front door, pulling Jeremy along with him. The doorbell had just rung. Jeremy was pouting, not quite digging his heels into the carpet in protest, but almost. "You promised me the whole day alone," Jeremy said.

"And I keep my promises. This will only take a minute, and trust me, I don't think you'll mind," Rick said, kissing him.

Jeremy let himself be pulled the rest of the way to the door. Rick peeked through the peephole and opened the door with a grin. Jeremy blinked. The most striking African-American man he'd ever seen was standing in the doorway, a vase of flowers in his arms that was half as tall as he was. His eyes were laughing and he was grinning. "Oh, I do love Valentine's Day," he said, eying both robed men in open appreciation. "Jeremy Masterson and Rick McFarlan, I presume? I have two deliveries here for you. This one is for you, Jeremy," he said, handing the tall black vase filled with two dozen red and black roses to Jeremy. "And this is for both of you, Rick," he said with a grin, handing Rick a very familiar black box, wrapped in a red velvet ribbon. Rick was surprised for a minute, then realized Katie must have sent the second present. But how had the man known who was who? "Happy Valentine's Day, gentlemen. Carry on," he said, giving them both a mock military salute, and turning to head out to the distinctive Hearts and Flowers delivery van parked in front of their house.

"Wait," Rick said, holding out a twenty-dollar tip. "This is for you," he said.

The smiling man turned back. "Nope, no need. I already got my bonus on this delivery. You just take good care of my roses and that special man of yours," he said with a wink.

"Your roses?" Rick asked, confused. Weren't these the ones he'd ordered for Jeremy? It looked exactly like Sean had described.

"Yup. The Jamal's Black Beauties. I'm Jamal. Sean's cousin Seamus is Sean's grower. He's my partner; he named them after me. The Irish Reds are him. We look damn fine together, don't you think? Now don't waste any more time on me. You've got someone waiting for you, and I've got over a hundred more deliveries to make. Happy Valentine's Day!" he said, running down to the van with a wave.

Rick waved back, closing the door.

Jeremy was standing there holding the vase, his face buried in the fragrant blossoms. "Oh, Rick. They're beautiful," he said. Jeremy put them down on the coffee table next to the box Rick set down. Pulling out the card, he eagerly read it aloud, his eyes tearing with love. "Jeremy, You are my heart and my soul, my day and my night, the love of my life. Yours forever, Rick'. Ohhh!" he embraced Rick. Rick hugged him back and they kissed.

"Your present's in the bedroom," Jeremy said.

Rick grinned. "No, he's right here," Rick disagreed.

Jeremy laughed, tugging on the collar of his robe. "No, silly. I mean your Valentine's Day gift. But first.... Can I open the box?"

"Of course. Only this one's not from me. The delivery guy said it was for both of us. I guess it must be from Katie," Rick said.

"Oh, Cat's so sweet!" Jeremy said, opening it. Inside the box was a single CD, with a florist's card taped to it. There were two men singing to each other on the cover. "*Yours Forever*, twenty hit love songs by artists Matthew and Connor Daniels'," Jeremy read. Then he turned over

Maria Albert

the CD. "Oh, Rick. They're married, they're Canadian, they're from Calgary. It's country and western love songs." Jeremy opened the card, Rick peering over his shoulder curiously. It wasn't from Cat.

"Dear Rick and Jeremy: Sorry for my part in your troubles. Glad to hear everything's okay. Hope you like the CD. Have a wonderful Valentine's Day. Love (in a strictly platonic way), Sean."

"Oh, that's so sweet of him. And you," Jeremy said, setting down the box, looking again at the roses, breathing deeply, savoring the scent. "Let's bring them into the bedroom, so I can enjoy them while I'm enjoying you. And I have your present, too."

"I already have my present," Rick said, kissing him.

"I know. Me too. But I still want you to have it," Jeremy said, leading Rick into the bedroom.

Jeremy pulled a fist-sized black box with a red velvet bow out from his sock drawer. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Rick looked at the box, intrigued. Too big to be a ring box, which was good; he'd want to pick out rings together. A new watch band, maybe? His had broken, and he'd been relying on his cell. He opened the box eagerly, his eyes widening in astonishment. "Oh wow. Oh, Jeremy." It wasn't a watch band; it was a Rolex. He eyed it appreciatively and noticed the inscription. It was simple and perfect: *Rick, Always time for our love. Yours forever, Jeremy.*

"It's perfect, Jeremy. Just like you," Rick said, kissing him. Then he put it on and admired it. The two men embraced, eager to spend the rest of the day, the rest of their lives together.

SEAN looked at his watch again. "How can it only be 2:15?" he asked forlornly. Today had almost been a disaster. Both his delivery men had called in sick, leaving him with nearly three hundred deliveries to make and no drivers. He couldn't leave the store himself, because he was being overrun with the usual crowd of "Oh no, I forgot" men, desperate for bouquets for their sweethearts. Colleen always did a thriving business in the specialty vases she brought by the caseload each year, as did Seamus, with his dozens of prearranged emergency bouquets of mixed blossoms. Thank God for Jamal. He'd volunteered to drive the store's van and had bribed one of his friends with a cargo van into being the second driver with a free "Bouquet of the Month" subscription.

"Because it was only 2:11 the last time you checked," Seamus teased. "Stop sulking. You loved all this chaos last year."

"I know. But last year I was alone. We stay open until midnight today," Sean said forlornly. Thank God Jeff had understood. He said maybe he'd switch shifts with Angel, so they could have a day later in the week. Sean was so disappointed. He'd planned something special, but it would just have to wait.

"Mom and I could...." Seamus said.

"No. It's too much for two people to handle. I'm just being silly. I should be thrilled business is so good. I'll be fine, really," Sean insisted.

But ten minutes later, when he heard the bell over the door for the hundredth time that afternoon, he was ready to scream, until he saw who it was. "Tim, Kevin! What are you doing here? Didn't you get the delivery?" he asked in concern. He'd made sure Jamal knew it was one of the first three he needed to deliver on that run; they should have gotten it hours ago.

Tim looked lovingly at Kevin. "Of course I got them. They were just perfect. We're not here for us; we're here for you," Tim said. "We met Jamal and he mentioned he was filling in because your drivers didn't show, that he was supposed to be helping out in the store today, because you had special plans. So we came to help out. Kevin and I are going to do his deliveries, so he can work in the store. And we came with someone else who wants to help too; he'll be here in just a minute."

As if on cue the door opened. Sean's eyes widened. Oh no. It was Dillon Gosling, from his fumbled rescue. Why was he here?

"Dillon, I hear you already met Sean. Sean, Dillon's going to cover the cash register and go on food runs and make coffee, whatever you need him for," Tim said.

"But don't you have plans?" Sean asked him, surprised.

"No, actually. Angel, I mean Gabe, was supposed to be working today anyway. We'd made our plans for next weekend instead. Then when Gabe heard Jeff's plans were being scuttled, we decided I could come here, he could work his shift instead of Jeff taking it, and that way the two of you could spend Valentine's Day together. I've worked retail before and Tim and Kevin can vouch for me. We want Jeff to have a Happy Valentine's Day. He's a real sweetie and we think you're pretty special too, Sean. We want to make sure you get a chance at the happiness we all have."

"Oh wow. You guys are amazing. Shame, Aunt Colleen?" he asked, making sure it was all right with them but also wanting a second opinion on whether he should let them help.

Seamus was grinning. "I think it's a great idea. Quick, get out of here, Sean, before the next wave of panicked boyfriends hits. We've got it more than covered, now. Mom and I are old pros at this; we'll make sure the new recruits are broken in."

"Oh wow. This is so terrific. Thanks!" Sean said, heading for the door.

"Jeff said he'll be home by 2:30. Have a wonderful day," Dillon said sincerely.

"Thanks again," Sean said. He called Jeff as soon as he got outside, making sure it was okay to come over. He checked the glove compartment, made sure his present was there, both the small black gift box and the little plastic bag. His heart started beating faster. This was it. Today was the day.

He drove to Jeff's and tried not to clutch the gifts too tightly. Jeff greeted him warmly, the welcoming smile on his face turning Sean's insides into goo. "Happy Valentine's Day, Jeff," Sean said breathlessly, holding out the box.

Jeff accepted the box and reached over to his mail table. "Happy Valentine's Day," he said, handing a large red box to Sean.

A present. Jeff had gotten him a present. "You first," they both said simultaneously and laughed, breaking the tension Sean had been feeling. "Okay. I'll open mine first," Sean said. He kind of suspected he wouldn't have a chance to open his gift once Jeff opened his box.

"Oh, wow." Inside the gift box was a five-pound box of his favorite Belgian dark chocolate. He'd shared the last of his Christmas box with Jeff just the week before. He'd mentioned it was his one vice, harmless except for the price. The chocolates were notoriously hard to find and sinfully expensive. Jeff had put thought into his gift, as well as money.

"Sweets for the sweet. Plus, I've got to do all I can to encourage your dark chocolate addiction, don't I?" Jeff asked, his voice warm and devilish.

Sean laughed nervously. "Okay. Now it's your turn. Close your eyes, look down, and then open your gift without looking up until I say so," Sean said.

"Ooh. A mystery gift. I like it already," Jeff said, closing his eyes.

Sean took the red satin bow out of the plastic bag and pulled off the backing, sticking the adhesive part directly over his heart and pressing down. "Your gift is very fragile, but I know you'll be careful with it. I trust you won't ever break it," he said. "Open your eyes and look in the box, then you can look up," Sean said.

Jeff obediently opened his eyes and then the box. He looked surprised and then he looked like a cat whisker-deep in cream. He pulled the bottle of cherry vanilla edible massage oil and lubricant out of the box and then looked up. There was Sean, a big red bow over his heart. "Oh, baby. I know your heart's fragile, and you're right, I'll never hurt it, never break it," he said, going over to Sean and giving him a gentle kiss.

They'd worked up to kissing and then petting after the first few days, but now Sean was ready for more. "I want to make love with you," he said.

"And I want to make love with you, too," Jeff said. "But only if you're ready. I can wait as long as you need me to."

"I don't want to wait anymore," Sean said, taking Jeff's hand, gently tugging him toward the bedroom. The same cool, soothing blues and greens greeted him. But this time he walked to the bed without hesitation.

Jeff tenderly peeled the red bow off, sticking it to the top of his nightstand. Then he gradually undressed Sean, touching and petting and kissing the whole time. Sean reciprocated, his heart thrumming like a hummingbird's. Sean's eyes widened in appreciation. Jeff was beautiful, his dark, satiny skin so soft, so supple, his muscles rippling. Sean's eyes flicked down. Shame would definitely approve, he thought, and then blushed.

"Hey, are you okay?" Jeff asked.

Sean nodded. "Better than okay. You're beautiful," he said, his fingertips tracing along Jeff's pecs, his stomach, tangling in the tight, black curls nested around his very erect, very impressive cock.

"You're beautiful too. Like that song, *Evergreen*. A rose under the April snow, just waiting to bloom," Jeff said, his hand caressing Sean's cheek.

Sean looked at him, eyes wide. *Evergreen* was a love song. The rose was love. It was a song about the perfect love, with all kinds of botanical references, roses and morning glories and evergreens. "Morning glory and midnight sun—me and you? Does that mean *Evergreen* is going to be our song?" Sean asked. Oh God. Our. Our song.

"It already is," Jeff said, kissing him gently, sweetly. Their tongues met and danced against each other as the kiss deepened, as their bodies pressed against one another. Jeff pulled back slightly, looking Sean in the eye. "I love you, Sean."

Sean's eyes widened. Jeff loved him? And he said it like it was the easiest thing in the world to do. Sean felt a wonderful heat, like the sun, warming him. Safe and warm and loved. He was loved again. By someone who knew what love really was. Patience and tenderness, gentleness, giving instead of taking. "I love you too, Jeff," Sean said, feeling it, his heart lifting with it, throbbing with it, every inch of him knowing it. The look in Jeff's eyes, the smile on his face.... Sean was the luckiest man alive. "I want to feel you inside me. I want you to fill my body the way you've filled my heart."

"That sounds incredible. But I think you want something else, too. You know cherry vanilla is my favorite flavor, and you got me that special present. What do you want, Sean?" Jeff asked.

Sean swallowed. He desperately wanted Jeff to suck him. But he wanted him on his knees in front of him, not sixty-nining on the bed. But what if Jeff thought that was demeaning, what if...?

"Just tell me, lover. What's your fantasy? There's nothing wrong with acting out fantasies, as long as both people want to, as long as they're both into it, both enjoy it. Tell me. The worst that can happen is I'll suggest a variation on it, or something different, if it's not something I'm willing to do."

"I...." Sean swallowed and tried again, his mouth dry. "I want you to suck me. But on your knees, in front of me. That first day I met you, in the shower, I had this fantasy of your lips wrapping around my cock and... I've had it a lot since then, too," Sean said, biting his lip at the admission. "Is... um... do you think...?" he trailed off, shyly, nervously.

Jeff chuckled, warm and deep, like melted chocolate. "That's it? That's what has you so worried? Oh, baby! That's my favorite fantasy, too. Almost exactly. I mean, you even got the cherry vanilla flavor part right. But in my fantasy about you, I decorate your pretty cock with whipped cream and put a maraschino cherry on it, then lick you clean until you come. I even took the liberty of buying some. It's in the refrigerator right now. I figured we'd probably just end up making ice cream sundaes with it for dessert, or putting it on the pecan pie I baked, but a man can dream, right? It's your call. Do you want the extra window dressing or just the massage oil? It's your fantasy as much as mine; I don't want to spoil it for you," Jeff said, his voice a deep purr.

Jeff's mouth around his cock, with cream all over his lips? Sean couldn't believe how lucky he was. "Both is good. We can do both," Sean said.

"And then I'll fill you up, just like you asked me to. And then whatever you want, babe, I want it to be good for you," Jeff said.

"It will be. Everything you do will be. I know that now. It won't all be hearts and flowers—love never is—but I can't imagine a more perfect partner, Jeff. I love you," Sean said.

"I love you too, Sean. Happy Valentine's Day, baby," Jeff said, kissing him slow and sweet.

Macia Albect

MARIA ALBERT lives in the California Bay Area with her two daughters and several dozen friends, most of the latter of whom are still confined in binders on her bookshelves. She looks forward to releasing many more of them in the coming months. Meanwhile, if you'd like to read more about the policemen and firemen of Hilldale, CA and the men who love them, Maria's additional Dreamspinner publications include:

~ "Score Two for the Good Guys" Dreamspinner's Anthology *Make Me a Match, Volume Two* Jeremy Masterson's and Rick McFarlan's story

~ "Christmas Angel" (electronic story) Dreamspinner's *December 08 Advent Calendar*, Day 26 Dillon Gosling's and Gabriel (Angel) D'Angelo's story Better Late Chan Never



Ashlyn Kane

"I STILL can't believe that guy let you in here."

"It's Valentine's Day, Cam. People are coming in and out dressed as Cupid, for God's sake!"

"No offense, but no one who knows you would mistake you for Cupid. You're not exactly the cherub type."

"What? I'm not that scary. The tattoos are all covered! Besides, the memo says *deliver in person*. I need a signature!"

"Whatever, Patrick. That guy *knew* you. Admit it; you slept with him."

"There was no sleeping involved, that much I'll swear to." The footsteps and the slightly muffled voices stopped right outside his door. "This looks like the place. Anybody home?"

Julian turned his chair toward the door as it swung open, hugging the receiver to his shoulder. Two young men were standing there, one with his arms folded, the other with something in his hands. "Special delivery!" the taller one said with a grin.

"Um, hi?" Julian said cautiously. "Should you be in here?" In theory, one needed ID to access this part of on-campus residence.

"Sorry, man. The note says 'to be delivered in person.' Your phone was busy." He handed the package to his companion, then dug around in his wallet for a minute. "Look; here's my card. I promise we're not here to rob you or anything."

Julian took it. It was the identification carried by most couriers, with the company logo, a photo, and a name. The photograph didn't match. He handed it back, wary. "This isn't you."

"I know. Sam's not walking so well right now. I volunteered to take his shift for him, seeing as it was my fault."

The other man snickered.

Julian had no idea what to say to that. His body was less confused, and he could feel himself blushing. "Just one second." He picked up the phone again, cradling it to his ear. "Hey, Roz. It's me."

"Duh," she said. He could hear her smile over the line and missed her more than ever. Being apart from his family year-round wasn't easy, but he missed his younger sister the most. "Is it there?"

"Yes," he said, rolling his eyes. "Hand-delivered, even. You're spoiling me."

"That's what I'm here for," his sister confirmed. "I'll let you go enjoy. Call me later."

"I will. Love you."

"Love you, too. Bye, Beanstalk."

Julian hung up the phone, suddenly aware of the way the other two men were watching him. "Sorry. Long distance," he explained. He was a long way from home, and though he was gradually getting used to it, that didn't always make it easy. "I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"Patrick Hawkins. This is my sidekick, Cam." He indicated the shorter man, who gave Julian a long-suffering look and mouthed the word "egomaniac."

"Julian Piet," he replied automatically. "But I'm guessing you already knew that, seeing as you're standing in my room. Um, can I have my present now?"

Patrick shrugged. "Sure thing. I just need you to sign here." He handed over an electronic pad and stylus.

Julian signed, then traded for the brown paper package. "Thanks."

Sidekick Cam made a break for the door, but Patrick wasn't going anywhere.

"You can leave now," he suggested, blushing again. Someday he was going to train himself out of that, he resolved. He couldn't go

around his whole life blushing in the presence of cute guys. He'd die of embarrassment.

"I want to see what you got!" Patrick protested, dropping into Julian's beanbag chair. "Come on. The suspense is killing me."

Julian stared at him, then turned to Cam.

"Yes," Cam said before he could ask, "he is always like this. We're not sure why." He pulled up a spot of floor next to his friend and leaned against the wall. "Honestly, you're better off just satisfying his curiosity if you want to see the back of him tonight."

"If you want to see the back of me, all you have to do is ask." Patrick flashed a smile.

Julian flushed so hard he thought his hair might turn red. He had never been the focus of this much attention before—at least, not from another guy. Not only could he not stop picturing Patrick naked, now everyone knew he was doing it. "Um."

"Patrick! For God's sake, behave yourself, you slut. You just admitted to fucking someone so hard he couldn't walk and now you're hitting on yet another poor defenseless student."

"I'm not *defenseless*," Julian protested.

"You're young, you're male, you're pretty; he's practically a sexual predator and you're the next step down on the food chain. Defenseless." Cam shrugged. "Are you going to open that, or what?"

"I... okay." Clearly, there was no point in arguing; Patrick and his friend weren't going anywhere until the gift had been opened. Julian slid his thumb under the tape on the package and started to peel back the packing paper. Whatever was underneath, it was in a pink, shiny box. "It's from my sister," he explained inanely as the paper fell to the floor. "In Alberta. For my birth—"

He stopped and looked down at the unwrapped package in his hands. It got worse after "pink" and "shiny." "Oh my God." He dropped it on the floor so he could bury his face in his hands, hiding his red cheeks.

"Hey, Cam," Patrick said, "don't you have that in blue?"

Julian blushed even harder. Great. He'd finally met someone interesting and now *this*. "I'm going to *kill* her." He put his head down on the desk. "Can you leave now so I can die of shame in peace?"

"Aren't you going to use it first? At least you could go out with a bang." There was a slight pause. "If you need a demonstration—"

"I kind of hate you right now," Julian said without raising his head. His words were muffled by the arms he had drawn around his face.

"Cam, get the door, would you?"

There was a soft click as the door latched shut. Something hooked around the bottom of Julian's wheeled desk chair and yanked him away from the table. "Hey, birthday boy. Who are you hiding from? We're all horny here."

Julian looked up, too-long hair falling in his eyes. Damn, he really needed a haircut. "I'm not exactly—I mean, I haven't—I've never—" *Fuck!* This embarrassment thing had to stop. He jerked his gaze away again, the back of his neck tingling.

"AW, Patrick, leave him alone. You're making him uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry." Patrick felt bad for the guy, he really did. He was obviously upset, and it was Patrick's fault for not being able to keep his damn mouth shut. It was just that Julian was completely adorable when he blushed like that. Patrick found that it was impossible to stop himself from trying to get a rise out of him. Literally. "I don't know when to shut up sometimes. Listen, if it's your birthday, why aren't you out somewhere celebrating?"

If possible, the guy looked even more squirmy. "I'm not old enough."

"So?" Neither were Patrick and Cam, but celebrating didn't necessitate alcohol. Patrick had the feeling that maybe Julian just didn't know a lot of people, so he didn't push.

"I need to study!"

Patrick eyed the gigantic stack of books on the desk. They probably weighed more than Julian did. "Good grief, are you taking the MCAT or something? That pile is huge!"

"Um." Another beautiful blush. God, he really *was* taking the MCAT. That was so cute. "Actually, I took it in September. That was just the suggested reading for next semester's courses."

"You're not even old enough to drink and you're in charge of other people's health?!"

"Wait," Cam broke in. "Did you say *was* the suggested reading? As in, you've already done it?"

"It wasn't really that much," Julian protested.

"Well, if you're done, you can join us for coffee," Patrick told him. In no way did he want to imply that Julian had a choice in the matter. "There may even be a slice of cake involved." He was tempted to add that they could do a demonstration of the dildo as well, but he didn't want Julian to think he was only interested in sex.

Which was weird, since Patrick definitely *was* interested in sex, about as often as he could get it, and that was usually as far as it went.

"Thanks, but, I mean, I don't want to intrude. You obviously already have plans. I mean, it's Valentine's Day, so really the whole city is full of disgustingly happy couples engaged in public displays of affection or whiny losers complaining about how they're not going to get laid tonight." Julian's fair skin burned red again when he said the words *get laid*, and Cam shot Patrick a gloating look. "And to be honest with you I don't fall into either category, so I'll be better off just staying here. Besides, I'm not hungry."

A loud grumble from the direction of Julian's stomach proved otherwise. Cam snorted. Patrick raised his eyebrows. "First of all, I resent the assumption that I'm sleeping with Cam just because I slept with Sam and your buddy at the front desk. I'm not that big of a slut."

"He is," Cam interjected, gleefully. Patrick shot him a betrayed look.

"Are you sleeping together?" Julian asked directly.

"Occasionally, but that is beside the point." Deciding that Cam was not likely to be any help at all, Patrick took Julian by both hands and pulled him up. "The point is, it's your birthday, it's Valentine's Day, it's time to be social and celebrate being alive and take bets on how long before the disgustingly happy couples reach critical mass and have a messy breakup."

"I don't know." Julian really did want to go, Patrick could tell. He kept looking back and forth between Patrick and the books, a little longingly. He just needed a little push.

"Cam will come along to chaperone," Patrick volunteered. "He can sit in the middle. Well, not really. I mean, if we're all sitting at a table we're going to be beside each other. But I promise not to violate your virginity."

Julian flushed right up to the roots of his adorably curly hair.

"Not tonight, anyway," Patrick amended. He just couldn't help himself. "After that I make no promises."

"Maybe just one slice of cake," Julian gave in, looking anywhere but at Patrick.

"And coffee," Patrick prompted. "You like coffee, right?"

"Coffee," Julian sighed. "Coffee and I have a love/hate relationship." The expression on his face made Patrick want to screw him into the wall. God, if the mere *prospect* of coffee had him looking like that, Patrick wanted to know what the real thing would do. "Okay, you convinced me. Let's go."

"...SINCE the dawn of medicine, the question of medical euthanasia has been a hotly contested subject. In ancient Greece...."

Julian did his best to stifle a yawn, rubbing at his eyes. He'd slept in too late to have time to grab a coffee before class, and now he was wishing he had just skipped it entirely. Ethics. What a bore. Julian wasn't sure how what was right for someone was supposed to be right for everyone, which made ethics pretty sticky territory. It would have been fine, maybe even interesting, except that the professor was useless, more or less reciting verbatim from the textbook. Perfect memory recall meant Julian *really* didn't need to be told things twice.

Unfortunately, he needed to complete the course in order to go to med school, and the professor took attendance at the beginning of every class. At least Julian was smart enough to have the luxury of being lazy. He stretched a little, then leaned back in his chair. If he just laid his head to one side for a moment and closed his eyes, he might be able to make up for the sleep he hadn't managed last night.

He, Patrick, and Cam had stayed at the local coffee shop until the owner had more or less kicked them out, just talking. Well, Patrick and Cam had talked, and Julian had listened, smiling and nodding, more than happy to be along for the ride. They seemed to have known each other forever, and delighted in sharing tales of each other's wild exploits. Patrick was a terrible flirt, and Cam had insisted on snapping photographs all night. Julian didn't know what they saw in a shy, boring medical student, but for the first time since he'd come to university at the tender young age of sixteen, he'd had fun—fit in, even—with someone other than the players on his hockey team.

He wondered if he'd ever see them again. It didn't matter much, really. It wasn't like he had a lot of spare time, between his courses, homework, hockey games and practices. But semester break was in a week's time, and for the first time, he wouldn't be going home. Instead, his little sister Roz was coming for a visit, and he didn't want her to think he was a total loser.

"Pssst."

Julian jerked his head upright, wiping at his eyes. God, the professor was so lost in listening to the sound of her own voice that he probably could have slipped out without her even noticing. Had he just heard a noise? No; nobody would bother in a class like this. There was no point in attempting to add to the lecture. Besides, if they let her just talk herself out, she sometimes let them out early—

"Pssst."

This time, Julian looked around, scanning the crowd around him. A couple of the less gifted, more dedicated students were starting to look annoyed. He figured it wasn't his problem, until his gaze swept over the door at the back of the room.

The room was more elevated at the back than the front, with almost stadium-type seating, so the door was actually a good six feet lower than the highest tier of desks. It was partially open, showing a young man's head and shoulders peering into the lecture hall. A heavenly aroma was wafting in, turning heads. Julian did a double-take when he recognized Patrick.

Glancing around quickly, Julian gathered that he could safely leave the room while his professor was copying bulleted points from the textbook onto the blackboard. Grabbing his backpack, he scooted over to the railing and slid under it, dropping down a few feet and pulling his bag down after him. Without a second thought, Julian shouldered his backpack and slipped out the door, closing it behind him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Busting you out of the most boring class in the history of the world." Patrick held up a tall paper cup and wiggled it enticingly. "Brought you something."

Coffee. That was what Julian had smelled. French vanilla, even. His mouth started to water. "I'm not selling you my body for coffee. I just thought I'd throw that out there before I accept."

"I got up at an absurd hour this morning and bought you coffee, then spent half an hour figuring out which classroom you were in to give it to you. I think I can hold off molesting you for one more day."

Julian took the coffee, inhaling deeply. "Just so we're clear." He took a sip, savoring the flavor. It was from his favorite coffee shop—he didn't even want to know how Patrick had known where to go—and just the right temperature. The warmth of it washed over his bones, wiping away February's chill. "So, now that you've rescued me from certain boredom, what's your plan?"

"Plan?" Patrick shrugged easily, and Julian fell into step beside him, wondering where they were going. "Well, seduction's out, so I guess I'll wing it."

Julian shook his head, a slight smile tugging at his lips despite his misgivings. "People don't normally turn you down, do they?"

"Nope." Patrick glanced sidelong at him as they came to a small study area. "You really enjoy doing it, don't you?"

Blushing, Julian managed a response over the lid of his coffee. "It's a way to pass the time." And he would continue to enjoy it as long as Patrick continued to give him the opportunity. Julian had never thought of himself as the coy type before, but he supposed there was a first time for everything.

"I know a couple of better ones." Patrick slouched into one of the uncomfortable chairs, grinning unrepentantly. "Sorry. It's a bad habit. I'll try to behave myself."

"I could have a boyfriend, for all you know," Julian said. He popped off the plastic coffee lid and threw it in the garbage.

"You don't have a boyfriend." Patrick's tone was completely confident. Julian envied that. "Or if you do, he's not a very good one."

Julian gulped down the last couple of sips, wanting to avoid drinking the dregs cold. "How do you figure?"

"Dildo."

Coughing, Julian wiped tears from his eyes as Patrick pounded him on the back. "Right. Stupid question. I suppose it's too much to ask you to believe I have a boyfriend with a very small... a very small penis?"

"You can hardly even say the word," Patrick pointed out, seeming to take great delight in that fact, "and not only do you *have* one, you are going into med school. I cannot wait to see how that turns out, believe me." He put his hands behind his head and his feet up on the chair beside him. "Besides, the dildo's not that big, either."

"Oh, God." How was he sitting here, in the medical sciences building, blushing his face off and talking to a complete stranger about penises? Maybe he was still sleeping. That would explain a lot. "I should have stayed in bed this morning."

"I did check there first," Patrick confirmed. "Your neighbor told me you never skip class."

He seemed a little bit smug about that. Julian realized why when he remembered that he was skipping class right now to hang out with Patrick. He let himself wonder for a moment what would have happened if Patrick had shown up at his door this morning, when he was still in bed, then decided if he wanted to be able to have an actual conversation, it didn't bear thinking about. "Why do you like me?" he blurted, flushing automatically. *Why* did he have to say everything that came into his head? "I mean, you do like me, right?" Patrick looked at him levelly. "Yeah, I like you. I don't know if you've looked in the mirror lately, but you probably break hearts just walking down the street. You're obviously smart, which is always a turnon. You're funny, and I mean that in both senses of the word. You're... interesting."

"Oh." Julian thought Patrick was pretty interesting, too, but he couldn't say it, because Patrick had said it first and it would sound completely lame. Besides, he was busy being flattered and mortified all at the same time. "Thanks." He tossed his coffee cup in the recycling bin and mustered the beginnings of a smile. "But I'm still not going to sleep with you."

Patrick actually laughed like he had said something funny. "Relax. I told you, seduction's off the menu. I want to get to know you. Tell me about yourself. Tell me about your little sister. Tell me about your rock collection. Tell me anything."

"I don't have a rock collection," Julian protested. He wasn't *that* boring.

"Well, now I know something about you I didn't before." Patrick grinned, plopping his feet back on the ground and leaning forward with his elbows on the tiny little table. "What else don't you have?"

"A tattoo," Julian supplied, smiling a little, remembering the conversation he'd overheard the previous day. He continued automatically. "Time to actually get to know people. A car. A roommate. Parents."

Something flashed across Patrick's face. He reached across the table, as if to take Julian's hand, then seemed to think better of it. "Sorry. What happened?"

Julian swallowed. He didn't like to talk about his parents much, because it made people uncomfortable and he was good enough at that all by himself; he didn't need any help. But he couldn't seem to stop the words from spilling out. He always thought about them more around this time of year because they had died shortly after his eighth birthday. "They were going down to Cancun to celebrate their ten-year anniversary, and I was staying with my aunt and uncle. An oil tanker overturned on the highway and they died in the crash." "Shit." Patrick didn't seem to know what to say to that. Not that many people did. "How old were you?"

"Eight. My aunt and uncle adopted me," Julian explained. "They raised me as their own. Roz isn't really my sister; she's my cousin."

"You must miss them."

"Yeah," Julian said, examining the tabletop. "Yeah. I don't get it. I'm sorry. I don't want your sympathy or anything. I can't believe I'm telling you this. I don't even know you."

"Do you want to?"

When Julian didn't answer, Patrick went on. "I... don't have any parents, either."

Julian looked up. Patrick seemed every bit as uncomfortable as he felt, but for different reasons. "Oh. Um, do you want to, uh, tell me about it?"

Patrick didn't directly answer his question. "When I was fifteen I figured out that I was gay, and I wasn't about to hide it." He raised his eyes to Julian's, as if in a challenge. "I stupidly told my parents, thinking it would be okay." He laughed—a hollow sound. Goosebumps formed on the back of Julian's neck. "My dad threw me out the front window. It took twenty-seven stitches to close the wound. My mother wouldn't spit on me if I were on fire. So, I don't have any parents."

That wasn't the same thing, Julian thought, but he didn't know which was worse. His stomach was twisting uncomfortably. Loss, he could deal with. Rejection, he didn't know about. "Your dad's an asshole," he offered weakly. "And your mom doesn't really sound like a peach, either."

Patrick gave him a small smile. "Yeah, no kidding." He seemed to shake it off. "What about your aunt and uncle? Do they know you're gay?"

Julian shook his head. "I don't know how to tell them from all the way over here. I just figured it out for myself, really." He blushed a little, not wanting to give too much away to Patrick. His aunt and uncle—he thought of them as his mother and father, but not as his *parents*—would handle it well, he figured. They were pretty easygoing when it came to everything but his grades, and they'd only pushed him so hard because

he'd wanted so badly to be a doctor. "Slow learner, I guess. My sister knows, obviously."

Patrick grinned. "Obviously." He'd rolled his eyes a bit at the slow learner thing.

The door to one of the classrooms slammed open, and students began filing back into the hallway. Julian checked his watch, shocked to discover how much time had gone by. "Shit. I've got to get to class—a less boring class," he amended. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Patrick said, standing with him. "I'll walk you, if you want."

Julian didn't want to give him the wrong idea. "No, that's—it's better if you don't," he said.

"Can I see you again?"

Julian still didn't know why Patrick was being so persistent, but it was kind of... nice... to feel so sought-after. "I'm still not going to sleep with you. So, as long as you don't expect me to be naked...."

"That's okay. You're pretty good-looking with your clothes on, too." Patrick took out a pen from his back pocket and reached forward, uncapping it with his teeth as he took Julian's hand. He scrawled something on Julian's palm, which tickled, then recapped the pen and put it away. "That's my number. Call me anytime. If you want."

Julian's stomach attempted a flip-flop, which he ruthlessly quashed. "Um."

Patrick waved. "See you around, Julian."

Julian blinked, watching him go, then turned in the direction of his next class. Now that he had some coffee in him, he thought he might actually be able to concentrate on what the professor was saying. Then again.... He looked down at his palm, at the numbers scrawled in blue ballpoint.

Then again, maybe not.

Making a split-second decision, he pivoted, searching the growing crowd. Surely Patrick couldn't be gone already, not unless he was a figment of Julian's admittedly overworked imagination. But no, he definitely hadn't imagined that coffee, and the ink on his hand was real.

Picking up his pace, Julian fought his way back through the throng of people, standing on tiptoe when he needed to see, even jumping a little, hoping to catch a glimpse of the young man who had turned his world upside-down in less than a day.

He didn't see anything.

Cursing mentally, Julian pushed his way past the bottleneck in the hallway and out into the open air, shivering as the winter cold bit at his skin. There—just past the benches, he thought—maybe if he was quick—

There was no way he could catch up like this. "Patrick!"

It felt like everyone around him stopped to look, but for once, Julian ignored the color he could feel rising in his cheeks and pressed forward until the crowd around him parted.

"Shouldn't you be in class?"

At the sight of Patrick standing in the snow, leaning casually against the lamppost, Julian's heart beat double-time. Despite the cold, his palms began to sweat. "There are probably half a dozen other places I ought to be."

"Yet, here you are."

Here I am, Julian agreed mentally: *Now what*? He shoved his hands into his pockets, trying to keep from shivering.

"Come over here, closer," Patrick said, his tone so different from his usual casual flirtation that Julian found himself obeying without thinking about it. He stopped when they were less than a foot apart and looked down at his feet, feeling awkward.

Patrick settled his hands on Julian's hips. "Tell me when you get uncomfortable."

Julian froze. "You're kidding, right?" He suppressed a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold. "I've been *uncomfortable* for the past twenty minutes. I just can't seem to make myself move." Closer *or* away—he seemed to be stuck in orbit around Patrick like some kind of malfunctioning satellite.

"That explains the deer-in-the-headlights look." A gloved hand tipped Julian's chin up and forced him to meet Patrick's green eyes,

which were about as serious as Julian had ever seen them. "Look, Bambi. We don't have to do this."

"I think you might be wrong about that." Julian swallowed thickly. "Listen, I think we've already established that I have no idea what I'm doing, so if you could just kiss me now and put my mind at ease, I'd really appreciate it."

Patrick's eyes crinkled up in the corners as he smiled. "I was under the impression that first kisses were supposed to be spontaneous."

"Yeah, well." With a great deal of difficulty, Julian managed to maintain eye contact. "See, I'm not very good at spontaneous."

"Believe it or not, I had that much figured out," Patrick teased.

Julian huffed, frustrated. "So what's the problem, then?"

"I'm not convinced you won't hit me if I slip you some tongue."

Julian's mouth dropped open. He could hardly believe Patrick had just said that. Not that he didn't have a point, of course.

Patrick tugged with both hands, knocking Julian off-balance, sending him stumbling forward until he had to wrap his arms around Patrick's waist to keep himself from falling. Once he was steady, Patrick's hands moved away from his hips and settled on his face, long fingers tickling in Julian's hair.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. Julian took a deep breath, heart thudding in his chest, as Patrick leaned in closer, bumping their noses together gently before brushing his lips over Julian's. That first contact was electric. Julian felt the buzz from his cerebellum to his L5 vertebra and plenty of other places besides. The cold of February dissipated, leaving behind the warmth of Patrick's hands and body and mouth.

Then Julian felt the flicker of Patrick's tongue over his lips and suddenly it wasn't just *warm*. He fisted his hands in the back of Patrick's jacket and hung on as Patrick kissed him, ears burning at the few scattered catcalls but enjoying himself too much to stop. If he had had any remaining doubts about his sexuality, they had evaporated under Patrick's onslaught. There was no mistaking this kiss as anything other than what it was. Some length of time later, Patrick pulled away, giving one last tug on an errant lock of Julian's hair. Surprisingly, he looked as utterly flummoxed as Julian felt.

"Instant replay?" Patrick suggested into the suddenly heavy silence.

Julian grinned and kissed him again, longer and slower and more adventurously. He knew he was blushing the whole time, but he just couldn't bring himself to care.

Then Patrick pinched his ass.

They broke apart, laughing a little nervously. Julian said, "Just so we're clear, I'm still not going to sleep with you." At least, not right away, but he opted to keep that part to himself. Just *thinking* about having sex with someone tied him in all kinds of uncomfortable knots—knots he had a feeling he was going to be spending a lot of alone time untying before he let anyone else try it.

Patrick shrugged easily. "No hurry."

That was good to know. Julian relaxed a little. "In that case, happy Valentine's Day," he smiled, squeezing Patrick's hand. "Sorry it's a bit late."

"Nah, don't worry about it," Patrick replied, squeezing back. "Better late than never." ASHLYN KANE is a 23-year-old supergeek who graduated cum laude from the University of Windsor with an honours degree in English Language and Literature. When she's not writing, she moonlights as an education student, and is somewhat baffled by the idea that someday someone will put her in charge of a group of children. She is addicted to classic rock, science fiction, and TV on DVD.

In the event that her professors go on strike, Ash can usually be found lounging around in Bethany's basement, making inappropriate sexual comments about any given male character on TV, especially if he's in the Air Force and has stupid hair.

She has a fiancé, a little brother and a bitchy cat.



S. Blaise

HE opened the box, the heavenly scent drifting up to invade his nostrils and tempt him. He was supposed to be taking the new stock out to the front of the store, as they were running low. He eyed the round domes lined up in their neat rows, their creamy white chocolate shells offset by a curving drizzle of dark. And inside was caramel, which oozed out, sliding smoothly over his tongue once it had been released to be rolled around his mouth and merged with the melting chocolate. His fingers crept toward one piece, nestled innocently in its paper bed. He would have just one. They'd never miss one little one, would they? That one there was obviously a bit squashed and crooked; they couldn't serve that to customers....

> "Glyn!" "Gah!"

The sharp voice from the doorway made him shoot up from his furtive crouch so he was practically at attention, every muscle tense. He turned to his co-worker Narinda, who was glaring at him, hands on her hips.

"You're supposed to be bringing those through for the customers, not scarfing them yourself."

"I wasn't!" he protested.

She said nothing, just gave him an "Uh-huh, sure you weren't" look before relenting, walking toward him. "Honestly, Glyn, you can't keep sneaking sweets all the time. One of these days someone's going to notice and you'll get in big trouble," she reprimanded him softly. "You'll need to be extra careful today too; the boss is here to check up on things." She grabbed the box he was supposed to be bringing out and nodded to another on the floor. "You grab that one; we're running low on them too. And no eating any!"

He nodded, knowing she was right, and followed her out to the front of the store. He considered himself lucky to be working in the small gournet chocolate shop called Indulge. He'd liked the name as soon as he'd seen it; it was tempting, different, with a touch of the risqué. When he'd seen the ad for part-time sales staff, he'd jumped at the chance to apply even with a full course load of work from university, and when he'd gotten the job he was over the moon. Glyn Bateman freely admitted he was a chocoholic. He wasn't sure why, but for as long as he could remember he'd always loved any and all kinds of chocolate, even the coffee- and orange-filled ones that most people wouldn't touch. Working at Indulge was his idea of heaven *and* hell.

He took his place back behind the counter with Narinda, refilling the empty trays with more bite-sized goodies. He snuck a glance at his work mate, wishing he could look as neat and professional as she did. Her black hair was sleeked back into a bun, her neat black polo shirt tucked into crisp black trousers, the name of the store embroidered over her left breast in cursive red thread. Whereas his shirt had come half untucked again, and his shoes were scuffed. He didn't even want to think about his hair. He pressed at the mess again, to no avail. Thick and spiky, no matter how much he wetted it, combed it, gelled it, kept on trying to flatten it, his hair always rebelled, going in all directions and making him look like he'd just rolled out of bed. He'd been tempted more than once to simply shave it all off and keep it that way, except he knew he'd look stupid. His hair was a boring color too, somewhere between dark blond and light brown. His eyes couldn't seem to decide to be a definitive color either, instead opting toward a sort of muddy brownish-green that he supposed could be called hazel. The one thing he had going for him, that he could see, was his metabolism. He was one of those incredibly annoying people who could eat like a horse and never gain weight, so he could eat all the chocolate he wanted without worrying about getting fat. Most of his female friends despised him.

Glyn tried to look inconspicuous as their manager walked out of the area in the back, where the small office was, with the owner of the store. The two men seemed to behave in a familiar yet formal way, which made sense if the observer knew that Indulge was a family-owned and run operation, and the manager was in fact the owner's son. Glyn stared enviously as the smartly dressed, suave Maxwell Black showed his father out the door, looking away quickly as the manager crossed the store again, giving them both a tight smile and nod.

"Glad that's over," Narinda muttered to Glyn. The gossip was that father and son did not get along; everyone knew it.

Glyn nodded as he stepped out from behind the counter to help a woman get one of the boxes down from a high shelf. He stretched up, standing on his tiptoes to hook his fingers around the edge of the box. He felt his shirt rise up, the draft of cool air hitting the skin of his midriff as he eased the box down, hastily tucking his shirt back in as the woman thanked him. On his way back to the counter he noticed the door to the back was just closing and he tugged at his clothes self-consciously. Had Maxwell been watching him? Had his manager noticed what a scruff he was? His shirt was getting too small, he knew that, but they had to buy the shirts themselves and with Christmas just past he couldn't afford new ones yet.

Maxwell "call me Max" Black was another one who always looked well-turned-out, always coming to work in a suit even though he spent most of his time hidden away in his office. His milk-chocolate brown hair was neatly combed with every strand in place. Even his nails were perfect. Glyn studied his own fingertips. Well, he always made sure to keep his hands clean, no matter how the rest of him looked.

He had to consider himself damn lucky, really, that Max hadn't caught him helping himself to a chocolate or two (it wasn't *stealing*; he always made sure to pay for them later) considering the proximity of the office to the storeroom. And if his boss, Max's father, had caught him earlier instead of Narinda.... He swallowed. That didn't bear thinking about. Okay, so he would lay off the chocolates for a while, though that didn't mean he had to stop thinking about Max. He had such an impossible crush on the manager. Even though he knew he had no chance of his feelings being returned, he could at least enjoy his fantasies. A small part of him wished that Max would catch him with the chocolates in the storeroom. Of course if it really happened Max would be pissed, he'd be mortified, and Max would promptly fire him. But that was reality; in his own mind he was free from worrying about such an inconsequential thing. Free to do what he pleased, and have anyone act just the way he wanted.

"What are you doing?"

He jumped at the sound of the voice behind him. He was in the storeroom again, and had just put a cappuccino truffle in his mouth. The rich, bitter flavors of the coffee and chocolate were still sitting heavy on his tongue. He slowly turned to face the doorway. Max was standing there, his eyes wide. There had been anger in his voice, but an edge of something else as well, something that was making him feel bold. Keeping his eyes locked with the other man's, he took his time licking the tips of his fingers, sliding them in and out between his pursed lips.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said slowly. "The chocolate's so good, so tempting; I just can't help it." He even sounded different in his fantasies. His voice was lower, sexier, and he definitely didn't sound like he came from Cardiff.

Max, for a moment, looked even more shocked. But then his eyes narrowed, and he stalked forward. Glyn felt a vague thrill of fear until he saw Max's face as he got closer. His eyes had darkened with desire, until they were a deep melted cocoa, he was so close now, the scent of chocolate all around them nearly overpowering.

"You tempt me, Glyn. You tempt me to—"

Ugh. God no. Way too cheesy.

"The only tempting thing I see in here is you."

He resisted the urge to grimace and shake his head or he'd start getting funny looks again. He looked at the money in the woman's hand as if he'd never seen it before and then, remembering again where he was, took it, making sure to give her the correct change. He really had to think up better lines for his fantasies, but it wasn't easy when he was supposed to be working, not drifting off into dreamland. Finally there was a quiet moment in the store when Narinda had gone to do a stock check, not trusting him with it. He sank back easily into the events unfolding in his mind. Stockroom, him, Max a half-inch away from him, and press play.

"You find the chocolate too tempting to resist?" Glyn nodded dumbly. Max's hand came up, brushing against his cheek, as a soft smile played over his lips. "I suppose I can't blame you for that. I've been wanting to sample you for weeks now. I've been trying to resist, but I don't want to anymore."

Again, ugh. Well, it would do, for now. The hardest part was trying to think how Max would taste when they kissed. Maybe coffee, or those bottled fruit drinks he seemed to like, but the only way to get the indefinable, unique taste of the man himself was straight from the real life source. And that was about as likely to happen as him being given the keys to a chocolate factory and told to help himself. Ah well, he'd just have to make do.

Max was leaning closer, murmuring his name. "Glyn, Glyn...." "Glyn!"

The hand shaking his shoulder brought him out of his mesmerizing thoughts with a thump. "Gah!" He found himself yelling and jumping for the second time that day.

He turned, expecting to see Narinda again, and froze when he found himself looking into the very eyes he'd just been fantasizing about.

"Are you all right? You looked a little dazed there."

Max seemed very close; his voice was warm with concern, his hand a molten weight on Glyn's shoulder.

He swiftly moved back. "Fine. Sorry; I'm fine." His eyes darted away to sweep around the store, which was empty.

"I was trying to tell you we're closing now. You can go home." Max's voice was colored with amusement, making Glyn feel even more embarrassed.

"Right. Brilliant. Thanks." He eased around Max and scurried for the back and his coat, eager to make a quick getaway. The other man followed him, standing there as he bundled himself into warmer clothes, winding his scarf around his neck.

Narinda emerged from the stockroom. "I'm nearly finished in here."

"Great," Max told her. "I could use a little help, though, clearing up out front." He looked expectantly at Glyn. Oh shit. He hoped he didn't look as panicked as he felt. Being alone with Max and all that chocolate after the thoughts he'd been having?

"That's all right. I can do it," Narinda offered. "You've got that essay to finish, right, Glyn?"

He could have kissed her, but instead concentrated on trying not to look too relieved. "Yeah. Got an essay due for uni; really have to finish it. I'll help close up another time, if that's okay?"

"Sure. That's fine," Max replied, though his expression said otherwise. Glyn was too busy still trying to make his escape to notice.

"Great. I'll see you later then."

Max followed him out to the front of the store. "So, what will you be doing tonight?"

"Uni work. That's about it, really. I've got reading to catch up on and that essay to finish."

"Oh. Yeah, that is important." Glyn was at the door, nearly home free. He grabbed the handle, ready to pull the door open. "Glyn." He turned his head, trying not to panic. It was probably him imagining things in his own nervous state, but it almost looked like Max's usual composure was faltering. "I was—I mean—um." He waited, resisting the urge to simply run for it, but Max sighed, shaking his head. "Nothing. Never mind. Uh, when's your next shift?"

"Oh. Wednesday, in the afternoon."

"Good. Okay, I'll see you then."

"Yeah, see you," Glyn replied, glad to finally be able to get out, the cold evening air stinging his cheeks. Well, that had been a little odd. But he'd escaped unscathed, and that was the main thing.

IT was the week before Valentine's Day, and they were all kept busy serving people buying sweet treats for loved ones. It didn't help Glyn's mood any. Another Valentine's Day alone seemed to be his fate. At least he could spend the day inside and have all the chocolates to himself, and he'd get a staff discount for them. He felt Narinda bump his shoulder during one of their few lulls in business. "Cheer up, before you start scaring the customers away," she told him with a grin.

He managed to find a weak smile for her. "Sorry. Thinking about Valentine's isn't so fun when you're single."

"Aww. No one you got your eye on, then?"

"Sort of," he said carefully, not wanting to admit who it was. "I don't know if they'd be interested, though."

"And by 'they' you wouldn't happen to mean 'him', would you?" She laughed lightly at his expression. "It's fairly obvious you're into blokes, Glyn. At least to me anyway. All the girls that come in here wearing little short skirts, bending over to reach the bottom shelves, and you don't give them a second glance."

He felt his face reddening. Had he really been that transparent? "What about Max? You don't think he's noticed, do you?"

"I don't know; don't think so. What, you think he'd be bothered by it?"

"I don't know. I hope not." He really, really hoped not.

"He doesn't seem like the type to me. So, what about this one you fancy?" she asked, smiling in a conspiratorial way. "You could try flirting with him a little, work in a few subtle hints maybe?"

"I, well, I don't really talk to him that much, to be honest. Never get a chance. Like I said, I just don't know."

"Well, get up the nerve and ask him, you pillock," she told him with a backhanded swat to his arm. "Like I said, you can be subtle about it. Or at least give him a Valentine or something. You never know what might happen."

Even the thought of giving Max a Valentine was sending his stomach into knots. What if Max recognized his handwriting? What Narinda was saying sounded easy, but it was his job on the line as well, not just his feelings. And he really, really liked his job. No, he just wasn't brave enough. He would need a big sign that Max might be interested before he even thought about making a move.

He barely had time to think about it the next day. He didn't have any classes, so he'd agreed to work the morning and afternoon shifts to help out the two others already working there. He was looking forward to taking a break when *she* entered the store: tall and slender, with expensive-looking, well-cut clothes. Her black patent-heeled boots tapped across the floor as she brushed back the honey-blonde hair that fell in gentle waves around her face.

"Phew!" she exclaimed with a laugh, her blue eyes dancing. "I thought I'd never get in here. The wind seemed to be trying to blow me down the street!"

Glyn couldn't help smiling in return. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, thanks. Can you tell me if Max is here?"

He felt like icy cold water was trickling into his stomach. He swallowed, trying to keep his composure. "He's in the office. Who should I say is asking for him?"

"Oh, tell him his girlfriend is here to see him." She laughed merrily again. "He'll know who you mean."

"R-right." His fears were confirmed and then made worse as she peeled off her pastel-striped gloves to reveal a sparkling rock on her left ring finger. He almost stumbled through the staff door, stopping before the office, willing himself to knock, but his body seemed unwilling to cooperate. It seemed like ages passed, and he probably would have kept standing there, immobile, but Max looked up and saw him through the half-open doorway.

"Glyn? Something wrong?"

"Your—your, um—your...." Your girlfriend's here. It was a simple enough thing to say, but every time he tried the words kept getting stuck in his throat. He heard the door behind him open.

"Helloo-ooo! They just let me come back here; I think I was holding up traffic. You there, Max?"

Her voice sounded sickeningly upbeat to Glyn now, the high pitch grating on his nerves. He moved quickly aside as Max stood, not able to bear the look of surprised pleasure on the man's face.

"Sonia? I thought you were still in France!"

"I was, but we came back here for Mum's birthday, and I thought I'd surprise you."

Indulge on Valentine's Day

They hugged, but he could be thankful at least that they didn't kiss in front of him. He wanted to escape back to the front of the store but they were now blocking the narrow hallway.

"Um, I'll just go then," he muttered, trying to squeeze past them.

"Right. Sorry. You all right, Glyn? You look a bit pale."

He froze, almost losing the tight control he'd gained over his emotions as Max crowded him in the narrow space, putting a hand on his brow. He swiftly stepped back, practically shoving the hand away. "I'm fine; it's nothing."

"Are you sure? If you're not feeling well...."

He looked at anything but Max, unable to bear seeing those dark eyes, gentle with concern. "No. I mean, yeah, I do feel a bit sick actually. It might be that flu bug that's been going around." He coughed pathetically into his hand a couple of times. "And I don't want to risk anyone catching it, see, so maybe I should just go home."

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Yeah, definitely. Don't want everyone getting sick because of me, do we? Especially not so close to Valentine's Day. I'll make up the time, I promise."

"Okay. Maybe someone should make sure you get home all right. I have my car—"

"No! I mean, I'll be fine, really, and you're busy. I'll see you later."

He couldn't get out of there fast enough. He sped off, his coat still undone, barely pausing until he reached home. He felt bad lying and ducking out of work when he was supposed to be helping, but they'd manage without him, and he needed to get away. And it hadn't been a complete lie anyway. Seeing Max with his gorgeous girlfriend had definitely made him want to throw up. He knew there was no way he could have stayed there, acting like nothing was wrong, after that.

He flopped down onto his bed, reaching automatically for the bar of chocolate sitting on his dresser. The house he shared with three others was blessedly empty, his housemates being away at lectures for most of the day. He dashed angrily at the tears that were threatening to spill. The

S. Blaise

chocolate, his usual comfort food, didn't seem to be helping. There was just one other thing that could cheer him up. Drastic times called for drastic measures. He pulled out his mobile phone to send a text message.

GLYN opened the door, smiling warmly at his visitor. "Hey, Wes. Come in."

"Hey, you sounded pretty down in your text. What happened?"

Glyn led Wes into his ground-floor bedroom, gesturing for him to take a seat. Wes sprawled on the bed, putting the plastic carrier bag he had with him on the floor, while Glyn settled on his desk chair, sitting sideways. He began his whole sorry tale. Wes already knew a bit about Max, but listened in sympathy anyway as Glyn poured out earlier events.

The two had met in the university library, when Glyn was still a wide-eyed freshman trying to find his way around and Wes was in his second year. Wes was blond, gorgeous, and bisexual, friendly self-confidence practically leaking out of his pores. Ever since the day they'd started talking in the library, they'd kept up a casual friendship, with Wes trying to convince Glyn to be more outgoing and to just relax and have fun every now and then. It hadn't really worked, but it had led to some good fooling around. They'd both agreed, though, that that's all it would be. Neither of them wanted to ruin the friendship by trying to date seriously. But Glyn knew he could count on Wes to take his mind off things when he needed it.

"I'm sorry, mate," Wes said sympathetically when he'd finished. "Man's obviously a prick if he'd choose some girl over what he's got right in front of him."

"Yeah, says the one who can have any man or woman he wants," Glyn said back, his voice shuddering. He swallowed hard.

"So could you, you dumb arse, if you just had a bit more confidence in yourself," Wes told him gently, getting off the bed and wrapping him in a hug. "Never mind. It's his loss. You'll find someone soon enough."

Glyn sighed, leaning against Wes's chest and letting himself be comforted. It was easy for Wes to say, but he hadn't found anyone yet, had he? And he'd liked Max so much; he couldn't just shrug it off like it was nothing.

Wes released him after dropping a soft kiss on his hair, sitting back on the bed. He patted the spot beside him. "Come on. Take a seat." They both got comfortable, leaning back against the wall the bed was set against. Wes spread his legs out flat while Glyn bent his knees, planting his feet. "Brought you a little present; figured you could use this," Wes said with a grin, handing him the bag.

It rustled in his hands as he opened it and pulled out a small box of Lindor chocolates. He resisted the stupid, irrational urge to start crying again. "Thanks, Wes," he whispered, grinning at his friend. "I love these." Perhaps even a little too much; the commercial for it had, more than once, almost made him hard.

He offered the box to Wes before taking one for himself, divested it of its crackling red wrapping. He held it, examining it, the slick, shining surface slippery smooth, almost melting between his fingers. He nibbled a little, savoring it, lapping at the thick sweetness within. His tongue plunged into the opening he'd created in the round shell, scooping out more of its dark, sticky core. The outer layer was melting; no matter how delicately he tried to hold it, its surface starting to coat his fingertips. With reluctance he popped the whole of it into his mouth, rolling it, breaking it down bit by bit until he swallowed the last morsel with an eye-fluttering moan. He cleaned his fingers thoroughly and turned his head to see Wes studying him.

"What?"

Wes shook his head. "I still can't believe how much you love chocolate. Other people just eat it; you practically have sex with it."

"I—I do not!" Glyn protested, feeling self-conscious.

"It's nothing to be sorry for, believe me." He grinned. "You could probably make a porn film out of it. It's fucking hot."

Glyn just felt more embarrassed, remembering some of the fantasies he'd had. When asked what was wrong he hesitantly told Wes about a few of them, knowing it was practically impossible to shock the other man when it came to sex. When he'd finished Wes was grinning again, but was also looking at him as if he was—impressed. That was definitely new.

"Wow. Under that shy exterior you've actually got a pretty dirty mind, don't you?"

"Yeah, lot of good it does me," Glyn sighed.

Wes curved an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close for a sideways hug. "Come on; none of that. Don't go getting all depressed on me again."

Glyn rubbed his cheek against the strong shoulder, tilting his face up to see the kind eyes looking at him. He needed more comfort than chocolate right now. He needed to feel wanted, desired. He grasped Wes's cheek and stretched up, pulling him closer for a kiss. Wes looked uncertain for a brief moment.

"Glyn," he tried to protest.

"Please, Wes," Glyn pleaded, bringing their lips together.

Wes had always been brilliant at kissing, like it was the thing he most enjoyed in the world and could do all day, taking his time over it and drawing Glyn in until nothing else mattered. Wes moved them so they were lying full-length on the bed side by side and could kiss and touch each other properly. He was adding soft strokes to Glyn's hair and skin to intensify the already deep kisses. The chocolates sat on the dresser, momentarily forgotten.

"Mmh," Glyn sighed happily to himself as they broke apart for a moment, both of them breathing heavily. Desire was starting to curl warmly in his gut and he was fairly sure Wes felt the same.

Wes reached over him to grab the Lindor box, waggling it in front of Glyn's face. "So, how about we try out some of those fantasies of yours?"

"Really?"

"Sure. They were hot. I was getting hard just listening to them."

Glyn grinned in delight, getting onto his knees and taking the box. "Let me just lock my door."

It wasn't long until they were both naked, smears of chocolate decorating their skin. Glyn straddled Wes's hips, smiling triumphantly at

his captive, who was gazing up at him. Glyn wasn't worried about stains on the sheets; he'd long ago learned the best way to get chocolate out, and a few marks on his bedding would be well worth it if this was what he was getting in return. He ran his fingers over the rising and falling chest before taking a chocolate from the rapidly depleting store in the box. He shifted lower so he was over Wes's knees, making sure that their groins didn't touch. Carefully he bit away part of the shell, pouring the liquid center over the stiff cherry peaks of Wes's nipples; trailing a little more of it down the furrow of his muscled abdomen. He placed the remains of the hard outer orb in the dip of Wes's belly button and lowered his head to begin his feast, tasting the sweetness of the confection mixed with the salty warmth of Wes's skin as he licked and nipped, Wes hissing and gasping in reaction to his movements.

He swiftly popped another chocolate in his mouth as well as scooping up the last bits of the previous one, letting them melt easily in the wet heat before moving on to his main target. He fitted his lips over the blushing head with its drop of cream on the tip, plunging downward. The bitter salt flavor was stronger, the contrasting sticky sweetness and the slickness of his saliva all mixing together as he moved faster. The heady scents of sex and chocolate were intoxicating, spurring him on along with Wes tensing and twitching beneath him, letting out muted cries, his fingers roughly carding and gripping Glyn's hair.

He could feel Wes getting close, just about to explode, when suddenly a series of reports, sounding as loud as firecrackers going off, was heard. Glyn lifted his mouth off Wes with a shocked gasp. The sound came again. He realized someone was knocking at the front door and prayed that if they just stayed quiet the person would go away; but his hand, which had been working Wes's cock, tightened automatically at the unexpected sound, tipping the other man over the edge.

"Ah God, Glyn!" Wes shouted, unable to help himself.

"Shut up, shut up!" Glyn hissed, panicking. "Oh shit!"

"Sorry," Wes whispered, breathlessly. "But maybe they didn't hear it. Or if they did they'll take the hint and just bugger off."

The knocking had stopped. Glyn held his breath, hoping whoever it was had gone. But then it came again, more hesitantly. Glyn crawled over to his window, twitching the curtain aside to see who was being so persistent.

"Oh shit!" he gasped. Max was right there, standing on his front step. As he stared, frozen, Max glanced at the window, looking right at him. He dropped the curtain, panicking. "It's Max!" he practically squeaked. "What do I do?"

"Maybe he'll go away."

"Does it sound like he's going away?! Besides, he's seen me!"

"What if I answer the door then?"

Glyn glanced at him, covered in glistening, contrasting streaks of chocolate and semen. "You're in no state to answer anything. Besides, it'll probably just make things worse. No, I'll go. Better to get this over with. I'm co—uh, be there in a minute!" he shouted loudly, grimacing at what he'd almost said while Wes looked like he was fighting the urge to laugh.

He quickly wiped off what he could and threw on his terrycloth robe, tightening it as much as possible, and went to the door, feeling like he was going to throw up. He gritted his teeth and flung it open. Max seemed to loom over him, gazing at him slack-jawed and then giving him a once-over with a certain look of—something—in his eyes before they hardened, turning cold and severe.

"Nice to see you're feeling better," Max told him stiffly.

"I—"

Max thrust something toward him, one of the books for his course he'd borrowed that morning from the library. He reached for it, realized his hand was covered in chocolate, and extended the other one to take the book, Max's eyes boring into him the whole time. "You left this at the shop. I thought I'd return it to you in case it was important." Glyn tried to speak again, to explain, though he wasn't sure exactly what he'd say. But Max steamrollered right over him. "If you want to mess around with your boyfriend, do it on your own time; don't lie and bunk off in the middle of work for it. I'll be expecting you first thing on the fourteenth to make up the hours missed."

"I understand," he said in a hoarse whisper. He'd never seen the other man look so impersonal, the cold, harsh words shooting into him like knives. There was no explanation he could give, nothing that wouldn't make the man hate him any less. He would just end up looking even more pathetic.

Max nodded brusquely, turning without another word. Glyn closed the door with a soft click and shuffled back to his room. Wes had cleaned up somewhat with tissues and was sitting up on the edge of his bed.

"Sorry. Hope you can understand when I say I'm not really in the mood anymore," Glyn told him with a wry smile, tears stinging his eyes again. He absently put the book on his desk.

"That's not fair! I heard what he said; it wasn't like that."

"I'm not gonna tell him the truth, am I? 'Yeah, sorry I ran out of work; I couldn't stand the sight of you and your gorgeous girlfriend because I've fancied you for ages so I left and called someone to come comfort me. But I'm not dating him or anything; we just shag now and then." Wes lowered his head. "Sorry," Glyn added, feeling bad for lashing out.

"It's all right," Wes said, looking back at him. "Still, he can't make you work Valentine's Day."

Glyn shrugged. "Why not? Not like I had anything planned. Well, I was maybe going to ask if you weren't busy."

Wes looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Yeah, I have plans."

"Figured you would." Glyn gave him a wry smile again, but Wes wasn't meeting his eyes.

"There was actually something I wanted to talk to you about," he said slowly. "I don't think I can do—this sort of thing—with you anymore." He rushed on. "I've been seeing someone, a really great girl, and it's been, well, getting pretty serious. I haven't been seeing anyone but her for a few months now and we've been talking about after we graduate. What we'll do, you know, stuff like that." His voice trailed off, still addressing the wall.

Glyn dredged up a smile from somewhere deep inside him and pasted it on his face. "Really. Wow, never thought I'd see the day," he said with a cheerfulness that sounded fragile and false in his own ears. "Well, that's great. I mean, really, that's—really great." "Really?" Wes was finally looking at him, his eyes cautiously hopeful.

"Yeah, really, I'm happy for you. Seriously."

"Well... wow. Thanks!" he said with a relieved grin. "I know it's kind of shitty telling you this now, but I thought you should know. I did try and tell you earlier. I wanted to, but you looked so down and everything started happening—"

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. We can still be friends, right?"

"Right, sure, 'course we can," Wes replied, a little too quickly. "I'll still see you around, and we can keep in touch after I graduate."

Which would only be in a few months, Glyn realized. Maybe that was for the best. "So, you'll probably want to get cleaned up, especially before my housemates come home."

"Right, good point." He grabbed his clothes, looking down the hall. "Bathroom's that way, yeah?"

"Yeah, straight through there. I'll get you a towel."

Glyn was lying on his bed, still in his robe, when Wes returned. He was fully dressed, smelling fresh and clean.

"Hey. All done." He started to put on his socks and shoes. "I just left the towel on the radiator."

"That's fine. Thanks." Now he was the one not looking at Wes.

"So, do I get a hug goodbye?"

"I don't want to get you all messy again. Besides, I'll see you around, right?"

"Sure. Right. Well, I'll see you later, then."

He only nodded, listening to Wes's footsteps retreating, the front door closing. He wondered why people always said that—"See you later"—when they had no intention of seeing the other person again if they could help it. A way of being kind, he supposed. Well, at least he hadn't said sorry. Hadn't made it sound as though everything they'd done with each other had been nothing but a mistake. GLYN slowed his pace as he reached Indulge, the cold air burning his lungs as he tried to return his breathing to normal. He hadn't been sleeping well since the whole miserable incident with Max, and had ignored his buzzing alarm until he'd realized if he didn't get a move on he'd be late, and Max would be even angrier with him. He'd raced to the shop, skipping breakfast, and needed a moment to try to recover a little. The closed sign was still up but the door opened when he tried it. He walked in, gulping nervously when he saw Max behind the counter. He nodded to the man, who barely spared him a glance, and went to the back to remove his coat. He steeled himself and went back out to the store, waiting expectantly.

"You'll be working the tills, for both shifts," Max told him, not looking up from his task at the cash register. "It's a Saturday so I know you won't have classes to go to. Just make sure you don't feel *ill* again."

Glyn bit back his irritation. "Fine. Who am I working with?"

"Everyone else has the day off."

"That's not fair!" Glyn shouted before he could stop himself. "I can't be expected to work the front all day by myself!"

"I didn't say you'd be by yourself," Max told him. "*I'm* working with you. Any problem with that?"

"No," he muttered. He started setting up, seething inwardly.

It still wasn't fair. He might have said he'd work all day the other day but he was only helping out; there had been two other employees there. He'd mostly been shifting stock, tidying up and replenishing whatever was needed when necessary. And now he was expected to work alone, all day, with the manager. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. At least his addiction to chocolate seemed to be cured. He'd only had to look at the stuff over the past few days and he felt queasiness in his stomach. He was feeling it now, but at least it was overriding the grumbles of hunger. His stomach was not happy about not getting fed and was intent on letting him know it.

As it was a weekend and Valentine's Day they were kept fairly busy, only speaking to each other when necessary. Glyn was starting to feel homicidal with all the happy couples parading through the shop. He wanted to tear down the displays and decorations, smash the hearts festooned everywhere, which ranged from sweet candy pink to passionate red, and grind them under his feet. At least it wasn't like Christmas, with special-themed music for the season. Of course there were more than enough love songs anyway on the local radio station they played in the store. He kept his mind off it by singing any rock or metal song he could remember in his head. Even he had to admit, though, that the abysmal day did have a few bright spots in it.

"I want to buy chocolates for my mummy," one earnest boy, who couldn't have been older than nine or ten, told him. "She doesn't have a boyfriend to buy her anything this year."

"No problem," Glyn said, smiling. "But doesn't your daddy buy her chocolates?" he foolishly asked.

The boy shook his head. "Mummy and Daddy don't live together anymore. And Daddy has a new girlfriend now, who's a man-stealing bitch."

"Right. Okay," Glyn replied faintly, taking the box and turning around to bag it so the boy wouldn't see his barely silent laughter. He had to bite his hand, hard, to make himself stop. "You might not want to say that to your dad anytime soon, all right?" he managed to say as he handed over the bag. The boy nodded again, his wide eyes completely ingenuous, before he raced with childish eagerness to the door.

"Kids, eh?" Max remarked, grinning, having obviously overheard.

"Yeah," Glyn chuckled. "Reminds me of my younger cousins arguing over whether I'd get married or not. I told them yes, men can get married now, so the younger one, Hailey, asks 'But who would wear the dress?""

Max laughed easily with him as he remembered it, especially the look on his aunt's face. "Was your boyfriend annoyed when you told him you'd be working today?" Max asked him, looking uncomfortable.

And just like that the fragile moment of ease between them was over. "Oh, no, he's not actually—I mean, we're not, um." *Great. If I tell him the truth he'll think I'm a slut. If I keep quiet he'll think I'm seeing someone when I'm not. But what does it matter if I am single or not?* He *isn't.* But Glyn still didn't want Max continuing to believe something that wasn't true. "It doesn't matter really," he murmured clumsily instead.

"You didn't break up, did you?" Max's eyes seemed to hold genuine concern. He put a hand on Glyn's shoulder.

"No, not exactly." *Since we were never together to begin with.* He focused on the trays of chocolates, feeling more and more awkward. Max said his name gently; the hand that he'd dislodged from his shoulder touched his arm. Glyn shook it off. "Look, I said it doesn't matter. It's not really any of your business anyway, is it?" Max stepped back as if he'd been stung. "Some shelves need refilling," he muttered, slinking away.

This was horrible, and the hunger pangs weren't helping. His stomach had stopped its discontented growling and now there was just that feeling of emptiness, like it was a deep hole waiting to be filled. He was starting to feel a bit lightheaded. He couldn't even eat a few chocolates and sneak the money for them into the till later like he usually did, with Max there all the time. And he didn't dare ask for a break, although he was supposed to have one. It was early afternoon; he still had hours to go before closing. Well, he'd just have to manage. Not eating for one day wouldn't kill him. He'd just have to get a big meal when he finally got home.

He let his annoyance distract him from his hunger as he replaced whatever they were running low on out front. Why was Max asking such a thing anyway? What about him? Wouldn't his girlfriend be annoyed about him working? Although it was possible Max's father had made him work today. He was their only manager, after all, although there was talk about the store opening another branch. Besides, what would it have mattered if the one Max assumed was Glyn's boyfriend had been upset anyway? It was Max who had put him in that position and there was nothing they could do about it now. Had Max been feeling guilty about it? What had he expected Glyn to say? "Yes, he was annoyed and I'll be on the sofa tonight even though it's your fault, thanks very much"? Or to say it was no big deal even though that would obviously be a lie? After all, who wouldn't be annoyed that the person they were dating was working on such a special day? Not that it mattered, of course. He was gay and single, Max straight and taken. That was all there was to it.

Max was in the back, leaving Glyn to fend for himself behind the counter for a while. The door chimed as a group of five laughing, cheerful girls entered. They were in their late teens, wearing miniskirts and little tops or short dresses with thin jackets, preferring freezing and looking good to dressing sensibly and keeping warm. They all looked different, but each girl wore a white baseball cap with "The Sexy Singletons" on the front in glittering red and dotted haphazardly with Xs. The Xs were all a different shade for each girl, from a dark purplish red to a frosted peach pink, matching the lipstick they wore. Some had more than others. Their group consisted of a tall, slim brunette; two blondes, one with hair a bit darker and figure a bit fuller than the other, who was shorter than all of them; a short-haired redhead and a girl with dyed black hair and piercings in her lip and eyebrow, dressed all in black. Glyn wondered how her friends had managed to talk her into-whatever they were all up to—but she seemed to be enjoying it, grinning with the rest of them. They were all loaded down with bags from clothes shops and the local supermarket, the sound of glass clinking together coming from the supermarket bag. Glyn was willing to bet there was alcohol in that one. The girls scattered, browsing the various goodies the shop had to offer.

"Oh wow, we even get a cute guy to serve us in here!" the redhead, who sounded American, said.

"Ooh, is he single?" the shorter blonde asked.

"Sorry. I'm, uh, not interested in girls," he managed to say, feeling himself blushing.

A resounding, disappointed "aaawwww!" came from all of them, making him blush harder, but smile.

"Oh my God. He sounds just like that one from Torchwood!" the brunette cried, her "Liva-pewl" accent as thick as a girder. "Where you from?"

"Cardiff, actually," he admitted, grinning.

"Yer wha'? Cardiff as well! And he's bent!"

"Do you have a Jack Harkness hidden somewhere too?" the other blonde asked him with a sly smile.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I wish," he snorted.

"You're single?" He nodded. "I'd say we've found our honorary Singleton Boy, girls!" the redhead proclaimed, making them all cheer.

"Uh, is that something to do with your hats?" he asked nervously. The Goth-looking girl explained.

"We're celebrating Singles Awareness Day, not Valentine's Day."

"Though I still say we should've waited 'til tomorrow; then the chocolate would be on sale," the shorter blonde cut in. Her friend shot her a withering look and continued.

"We got these hats made and we've been getting kisses from other single people who agree with us. For every kiss we get we put a kiss on our hats with our lipstick," she pointed to her cap with its scattering of little Xs, or kisses, in the dark shade that also covered her lips.

"We've been giving out chocolates too," the blonde added, "to anyone who didn't get anything this year. And these." She showed him a roll of stickers that had a pink heart with a red circle and diagonal bar across it and the words "I'm a Sexy Singleton, so there!" in black over both. He couldn't help but laugh.

"The one with the most kisses gets to wear a sash out tonight that says 'Sexiest Singleton'," the girl with black hair continued. "And the one with the least kisses gets—who's got the bear?" she asked the blonde.

"Oh, Fi! Show him the bear!" she turned and called to the redhead.

"Okay; hang on." The girl dug into one of her bags, pulling out a brown stuffed bear holding a laminated card that said "I think, therefore I'm single."

"Cute. But what if there's a tie?" he asked.

"Then we're fucked," Fi told him cheerfully. "I dunno; we'll work something out. It's just for fun anyway, so it's all good."

He rang up all their various purchases, listening to their stories of what had happened so far that day and some of their past Valentine's Day disasters. He was thankful that Max seemed to be taking his time, for whatever reason.

"So, do we each get a kiss off you, or wha'?" the brunette asked.

He felt himself blushing again. "Um, yeah, okay."

They all cheered as he came out from behind the counter, kissing each of them on the cheek and putting a kiss on their caps with lipstick. The redhead was last. As he leaned toward her cheek she turned her head, kissing him on the mouth.

"Gah! Yuck!" he yelled, jumping back as he felt her tongue swipe against his lips. The girls screamed with laughter.

"Come on. At least it's a kiss for Valentine's Day," Fi said through her laughter.

"From a girl. You wouldn't want to get kissed by a girl, would you?"

"Actually, I'd love to, considering I'm a lesbian," she grinned, winking at him. "Sorry; blame them. They dared me to kiss a guy today." She licked her lips. "Hmm, wasn't too bad."

"Now come on, we gorra give him his prize," the brunette spoke up. "We pronounce you—what's your name, luv?"

"Glyn."

"That's a fab name, that is. We pronounce you, Glyn, our Sexiest Single Boy of Singles Awareness Day!"

The others clapped and cheered as she put a medal around his neck, which turned out to be a large badge pinned to some ribbon. Its plastic surface glimmered under the light in a variety of rainbow hues. It had the words "Voted Sexiest Singleton Boy" in large, colorful block letters on a blue background. He admired it, feeling better than he had all day, despite the hunger still gnawing at him. Each girl gave him a kiss on the cheek, the darker-haired blonde waiting 'til last. When it was her turn, she leaned in, shoving something into his pocket.

"Here's another prize for you; hope you can find someone to use them with," she whispered, giggling.

Glyn glanced down to see what it was, quickly shoving it back in his pocket once he realized it was a box of chocolate-flavored condoms. The girls said their goodbyes, blowing him kisses as he waved them off, still laughing.

"Let's gerra cuppa; it's freezing!" he heard the Scouser brunette say as they walked out the door.

He'd been so busy with them he hadn't heard the staff door open and close. "What was that all about?" Max's voice asked behind him, sounding cross.

He quickly pulled off his "medal" and tried to wipe away the lipstick he knew was on his cheek. "Nothing. Just a bit of fun, see?"

"You're meant to be working."

"I was working. I thought I should play along since they spent nearly sixty quid between them. Where were you the whole time?"

"I had a phone call," Max told him stiffly. "What did that girl give you?"

Glyn was trying to get to the back area to hide the badge, and the condoms. "Nothing." He squeezed through the door, but Max followed him.

"It wasn't nothing. I saw her put something in your pocket. What was it? We can't have customers giving things to the staff—"

Glyn spun around, at the end of his rope. He was starving and tired and he didn't care anymore. Max could fire him if he wanted to; Glyn didn't think he'd be able to work there with the man anymore anyway. "It was these, all right?" he yelled, yanking out the box and all but throwing it at Max's chest. "It was just a joke, that's all! She said she hoped I could find someone to use them with, like that'll happen. You can keep them; you'll get more use out of them than me anyway, with your girlfriend."

It was a little satisfying to see Max's cheeks redden as he saw just what it was. He looked back at Glyn, confused. "My—girlfriend?"

"Fine. Fiancée, whatever." He waved a hand, feeling drained, as if his little outburst had sucked the energy from him. The floor suddenly seemed to be swaying beneath him and he was panting. He leaned against a wall. "What are you talking-? Glyn? Glyn, what is it? What's wrong?"

Max's arms were around him, supporting him. He tried to shrug them off, but couldn't. "I'm fine, jus' a little tired. Haven't eaten."

He found himself in the office, lying on the floor with a wet paper towel on his forehead. He really hoped he hadn't fainted like a girl. Max's face came into his field of vision, hovering over him.

"Are you all right? Do you need a doctor?"

He sat up quickly, his head still spinning. "No. Really, it's nothing to get worked up over. I have a high metabolism so my body uses up a lot of energy. I just need to get something to eat. I skipped breakfast earlier."

"You haven't eaten *anything* today? Why didn't you say something?" Glyn was about to protest that he couldn't with Max so mad at him, but the man continued, answering himself. "No, forget I said that; I'm the manager. I'm supposed to make sure you have enough breaks. I'm *sorry*, Glyn."

Glyn wasn't sure what Max was getting so upset over, but maybe that was just the light-headedness talking. "It's okay. I won't tell your dad or anything."

"Never mind my dad! I've been such a prick over—over everything. But you need food. There's a bakery across the street; what would you like?"

"I don't know. Sausage rolls? Anything, really." He reached for his wallet but Max waved it off. "What about the shop? Someone'll need to watch the till."

"We can close early. I don't care. I'll be back soon."

He returned with a feast of sausage rolls, pasties, and sandwiches, dropping the bag at Glyn's feet and pressing a chilled bottle of a sugarladen soft drink into his hands. Glyn was soon ravenously devouring the piping-hot food. He looked up at Max still standing over him, looking awkward, and offered the bag. "You should eat something too," he said, swallowing his mouthful of food. "I might be starving but there's no way I can finish all this by myself."

Max moved the office chair, joining him on the cramped floor space. He chose a sandwich, picking at it. "What did you mean?" he asked quietly. "When you said I had a girlfriend?"

He did *not* want to be talking about this. "Are you sure it's okay to close early like that? Won't your dad be angry?"

"If he is I'll take the blame for it. Answer my question, please."

"It means...." He shrugged. "What do you think it means? I'm sorry I said that stuff, all right? But I know you've got a girlfriend. She—she seems nice."

"Any chance of you explaining just what you're going on about? 'Cause if I have a girlfriend, this is the first I've heard of it."

Glyn sighed, getting annoyed again. "The blonde, from the other day. She said, when I met her, that she was your girlfriend."

"Sonia?" To Glyn's surprise, he started laughing. "We've been friends since we were kids. Our mums always hoped we'd start dating each other and get married, all that business. It became a joke between us when we got older and realized it was never going to happen."

"And that ring she was wearing? Was that a joke too?"

"She may have a ring on her finger but I didn't put it there. In fact, right now Sonia is back in France, with her fiancé. Think about it, would you? If we really were engaged, wouldn't Sonia have said she was my fiancée, not my girlfriend? I understand women are fussy about these things."

"I suppose," Glyn said quietly, feeling like a moron.

"You can get off home, if you like. Still salvage the rest of the day with the one you're seeing."

Glyn shook his head. "It's not like that."

"I saw you the other day, remember? It was pretty obvious what you'd been doing."

S. Blaise

"Yeah, but.... Look, I can't really explain it and that's not really the point anyway. The point is I'm not seeing anyone. I haven't been for a while now."

"You're single?"

Glyn nodded, holding up his "prize." "Got a badge that says so and everything," he said with a one-sided smile.

"Sexiest Singleton Boy'. Can't argue with that," Max sighed softly. Glyn was sure his ears weren't working, but Max continued. "I saw you once; you were eating chocolates in the stockroom. I was going to talk to you about it but then I saw you'd paid for them when I was cashing up, so I left it. I wasn't able to get the image out of my mind, though. You'd looked like you were in heaven, getting so much pleasure out of such a simple thing. It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. I wanted to see that look on your face again, but because I'd put it there. I thought about asking you out, almost got up the nerve a few times, but kept bottling it at the last minute. I didn't think you'd be interested. And then I found out you would have been interested, when I went to your house, but that it was too late."

Glyn listened to the confession in shocked silence. He remembered the look in Max's eyes when he'd opened the door, all the brief touches, the times Max had been watching him. He'd thought Max had been suspicious and trying to keep an eye on him. Had he really been so monumentally thick?

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got so angry, saying that you had to come in and work all day today. I was jealous; my only thought was if I couldn't have you personally I could at least spend time with you at work, have you to myself for the whole day. And now *this* happened, and it's my fault. You probably hate me even more now."

"What? I don't hate you."

Max shook his head. "You don't like me either. Every time I try and talk to you, you always act like you're itching to get away. Even just trying to touch you makes you act like I've got some sort of disease. I know I'm your manager but I'm not that bad, am I?"

Glyn felt like kicking himself. Realizing how his behavior had looked made him want to beat the crap out of himself. He really was a

complete idiot. "That wasn't... because I hated you," he muttered reluctantly. "It *really* wasn't."

Max's breath hitched as he stared back at Glyn. He crawled over, closing the space between them. "So, if you don't hate me...." He got to his knees, tilting Glyn's head back and kissing him.

He tasted of the food he'd had, Glyn noticed, as a tiny moan escaped him. And, underneath that, he tasted of chocolate, dark and sweet, with a hint of bitterness. He clutched at Max's shirt as if afraid he would disappear.

"No. Wait. I'm sorry. This just doesn't happen to me," he said, his breath short, when the kiss finished.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean—look at me."

Max studied him silently. "And? I see a gorgeous man, with hair I've been itching to stroke, and amazing eyes, and a sexy accent," he trailed kisses down Glyn's neck with every word.

"Right, now I know you're taking the piss." He fought the urge to moan. "My accent's *Welsh*. That's, like, unsexiest accent ever."

Max smiled against his skin. "Don't care; to me it's sexy. Could listen to you all day, especially if you were moaning my name." Glyn couldn't fight the urge any longer. Max's smile widened. "Yeah, just like that."

"God, better than fantasy," he gasped quietly.

"What?"

"N-nothing."

Max looked at him, his eyes like deep pools of chocolate, but Glyn was the one who was melting. "Tell me."

"Well, you know, working here, and liking you for so long, since I met you pretty much, I started thinking—a few things...."

"Oh? Like what?" He started pushing Glyn's too-short shirt up.

"Like you, and me, and a stockroom of chocolate." He was trying to keep his swiftly scattering brain together long enough to remember. And then he realized he now had a chance for those fantasies to come true, almost making his brain break again.

The warmth disappeared as Max got up, tugging Glyn to his feet as well. "I think that's definitely doable. Come on, my crazy Welshman."

"What? I'll give you crazy Welshman."

Max grinned, pressing against him as they crossed the short distance between the rooms. "I certainly hope so; and that's a euphemism for something."

"Wha—mmh." Glyn couldn't say anything more as Max kissed him again, not that he minded too much.

Shirts were soon gotten rid of, with trousers following swiftly after. Glyn shivered in the chilly room, but he could lean into Max for warmth, so he wasn't complaining. They squashed down empty cardboard boxes to make an impromptu bed on the hard, cold concrete floor. Max pressed Glyn onto it, covering the smaller body with his own. One part of their bodies was definitely warm, practically burning, as they rubbed against each other while they kissed, enjoying the friction created.

"Ah, God," Glyn gasped, Max panting above him, his normally neat hair in disarray.

Max reached out blindly, snagging a chocolate from one of the open boxes, and putting it in his mouth before lowering his lips to Glyn's again. Glyn's mouth opened in welcome and Max thrust the morsel inside, letting it be tumbled and rolled between them as their tongues battled sensually. The thin, sweet shell of white chocolate soon broke under the onslaught, releasing slick strawberry crème filling to coat everything until they had to break apart and swallow the gooey mess between them.

"I wish we could take longer with this," Max said, his voice husky, "but I need you right now."

Glyn nodded, unable to speak, and waited impatiently as Max fetched a bottle from the bathroom and a certain box from earlier. Glyn sat up, taking the box from him. "Let me," he breathed, hooking his fingers in the waistband of Max's boxers and pulling. He got out one of the condoms, putting it in his mouth and fitting it over the bulbous tip, using his fingers and lips to roll it down. He took his time, sliding his tongue around the now-covered surface, Max's fingers tightening in his hair.

"Mmmh," he purred as he finally released the erect member, nuzzling against the wiry hairs above it. "Did you know chocolate is one of the scents that increases blood flow to the penis? I'd say it's worked, wouldn't you?" He looked up at Max, making sure to slowly lick his lips, and then grinned like a fiend, stroking a lazy hand up and down the sheathed cock.

Max dove at him, pushing him back down to the cardboard and devouring him in a kiss. "I don't know about you, but I like chocolate with lots of *cream* in it," he growled. Glyn shivered, not strictly from the cold. He saw Max reach for the bottle he'd brought, pouring some of the contents into his hand. He caught Glyn looking and grinned. "Chocolate may taste nice but it doesn't work so well as lube. I had to improvise." He held up the hand cream from the tiny staff bathroom. Glyn didn't care what they used as long as it meant Max would be in him soon.

He felt one finger, then two at his entrance, pushing in slowly but steadily. His breath was short. He was melting, drowning, getting lost in a fragrant, sensuous sea of chocolate. He didn't hear Max's voice, barely noticed his legs being lifted higher as Max positioned himself. He bucked up at the first thrust, felt every movement after that as a series of sparks shooting up his spine. Their voices ricocheted off the bare walls and ceiling of the enclosed space, echoing in their ears and sending them spinning higher. He felt as if they were creating enough body heat between them to turn everything in the room into sticky, liquid goo and he wouldn't care. The sudden image of Max covered head to toe in chocolate, waiting to be licked clean, and the touch of the sure hand circling his cock was just what he needed to push him over the edge. He squeezed down on the scorching length thrusting into him, dragging Max over with him.

GLYN awoke, shivering and stiff, blinking his eyes open and closed a few times. He was still in the storeroom, the light burning above him like a miniature sun. He looked around. Max was nowhere to be seen. Any

trace of what they had been doing was gone, he noticed, when he swept his eyes up his still-naked body. But the scent of sex and chocolate still hung in the air. He was starting to shiver uncontrollably, the cold seeping into his bare skin. He wasn't sure what to do. The door, which had been half-closed, started to open. Max stood there, fully dressed.

"Oh, good. You're awake," he said. "Sorry; thought I'd tidy up a bit. Come on; hurry up and get dressed. You must be freezing."

Glyn stood, hissing as his bare feet touched the floor, walking forward uncertainly. Max grabbed him when he got close enough, pulling Glyn against his body, wrapping the other man in his arms and kissing him with all the hungry passion he'd shown earlier.

"Earlier was fun, but let's get out of here, go somewhere warmer and more comfortable where I can really take my time with you."

The low, promising purr in his voice was taking Glyn's breath away. "Sounds like a plan," he managed to say, his voice hoarse as it emerged from his raw throat. "I think this has been the best Valentine's Day ever."

Max smiled at him tenderly. "Mine too. I hope you don't have any plans for Easter, 'cause I could get used to this."

Glyn groaned, looking forward to it already, while Max kissed him again. If this was what being a chocolate addict could get him, he never wanted to recover. S. BLAISE'S life has been split up like chapters in a book: born in Glasgow, spending her early years in the Middle East, her childhood in the Cayman Islands and then studying in a boarding school in Edinburgh, before eventually completing a BA in Media Studies at the University of Teesside in Middlesbrough. She has crossed the Atlantic more times than she cares to think about and is hoping to discover more of Europe and the Eastern half of the world in the future.

She has loved reading and creating stories for as long as she can remember, but first got into the "male romance" genre through fanfiction. She found slash and yaoi quite by accident (honest!) and began voraciously reading stories online in many fandoms before finally getting up the courage to have a go at writing. This led to writing original stories, so she now has characters of her own, as well as those created by others, in her head, distracting her constantly. Her pen-name is a contraction of her username, or, as she calls it, her online persona name, Silverblaise. She finds it infinitely more interesting and a more suitable *nom de plume* than her real one.

She loves sci-fi/fantasy, murder mysteries, comic books, anime and yaoi manga, which she spends far too much money on while still having so much more to get. She's a creature of nocturnal habits but really wishes story ideas would stop jumping around in her mind at three in the morning when she is trying to sleep.

Visit S. Blaise's website at http://sblaise-08.livejournal.com

S. Blaise

Hot Dr. Reindeer Antlers Kisses It Better Bethany Brown

Bethany Brown

SETH managed to grab the last two good-looking containers of strawberries before the woman who had been eyeing them made it over to the aisle. He grinned at the dirty look she sent in his direction. *Sorry, lady; you snooze, you lose.*

Setting the coveted strawberries in his cart, Seth headed farther into the grocery store. He had an entire list of things he needed to pick up for the Valentine's dinner he had planned for Noah and Brady. He wanted their first Valentine's Day together to be something special, and the menu he had planned was going to test the limits of his cooking skills. If he managed to pull it off, it would be worth it.

Seth and Noah had been dating since Christmas and everything was going great. Seth still smiled every time he remembered seeing Noah at the hospital for the first time. He had looked so adorable that Christmas Eve with the reindeer antlers on his head that Seth had called him 'Hot Dr. Reindeer Antlers'. Seth hadn't expected the attractive doctor to ask him out, but having Noah and his son in his life was the best thing that had ever happened to him. They had private date time at least twice a week and spent time with Brady as well. Seth was coming to realize that he really enjoyed having a family. Every moment he spent with Noah and Brady made the feelings he had for them deepen. While Seth was fairly certain it was too early in the relationship for deep feelings, he knew he loved Noah. That knowledge both delighted and frightened him. It was one of the reasons he wanted Valentine's Day to be perfect. He didn't want to lose Noah.

The relationship he had with Noah was different from every other relationship he had been in. With Noah, he felt not only like an equal, but also that he was cared for. It was a new feeling for him, and Seth was terrified that he would lose it. He had a lot of emotional baggage that he had yet to mention to Noah. Seth wasn't sure if he was ready for the

Bethany Brown

stable, older man to know just how much of a mess he really was. His numerous insecurities had him fearing that Noah would leave him just like everyone else had, and Seth wasn't ready to risk that yet.

Seth was attempting to choose between several different types of bread when he felt someone watching him. He looked up into a pair of mocking brown eyes and felt his stomach drop. He swallowed nervously as his hands started to sweat. "Andrew."

"Seth. What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like?"

"Well, it looks like you're buying groceries, but you can't possibly eat all of that yourself." There was a smug look on Andrew's moderately attractive face.

"I'm making dinner for my boyfriend," Seth replied. He could feel his hackles rising. He didn't like being near Andrew. Seeing him brought back all the memories of the time when they had been together, and they weren't very good memories. In fact, of all the men that Seth had dated, Andrew had made him feel the worst, telling Seth that he was worthless and that his carpentry would never amount to anything. Even though Andrew had been proven wrong, every time that Seth saw him he felt himself reverting back to the insecure young man he had been while they were together.

"Boyfriend? I thought Jonathan left you." An evil looked filled Andrew's eyes. "Are you seeing someone else already?"

Seth gritted his teeth. "Yes, I'm seeing someone else." He grabbed both loaves of bread he'd been considering and shoved them into his cart. "Did you want something?"

"Can't I just say 'hi' to my old lover?" There was a rather convincing pout on Andrew's face. Well, it was convincing to those who didn't know him. Seth had firsthand knowledge that the pout was simply Andrew's first step in getting what he wanted.

"No, you can't." Seth tried to push his cart past the other man, but Andrew grabbed the handle and stopped him.

"I heard about you dating the good doctor, and I thought, since I'm an old friend and I do care, that I should tell you that I saw him getting into the elevator with an attractive younger man at the Thompson Hotel."

Seth froze. The Thompson Hotel was the most expensive hotel in town. Why would Noah be there with someone else? *No.* Seth mentally shook his head to clear the thoughts. He would not think about Noah like that. Noah would never cheat on him. "Noah would never cheat on me."

"But sweetie, we all cheated on you," Andrew replied. His tone was so bland that he could have been talking to a child who just didn't understand what he was trying to say. "I mean, come on, after having sex with you more than once, we just needed to find someone new. You're so fucking needy."

With those words ringing in his head, all of Seth's insecurities came roaring to the surface. To his horror, he could feel his eyes tearing up. "Get out of my way, Andrew."

"Oh, I didn't upset you, did I?"

"Move," Seth snarled. Well, more like attempted to snarl. He could hear the suspiciously wet sound to his voice. The last thing he wanted to do was to break down in the middle of a grocery store in front of Andrew.

"Well, think of it this way. At least the doctor waited longer to cheat on you than Jonathan did." The malicious glint in Andrew's eyes and the evil smile on his face broke through Seth's paralysis. With a small spark of anger, he shoved the cart into Andrew's stomach. Andrew let out a grunt of surprise and doubled over slightly as the cart pushed him out of the way. Seth took the opportunity to push past him.

Ignoring the small gasps for breath coming from behind him, Seth forced his mind back to his planned shopping list. He still had a few items he needed to grab before he left. He wasn't going to let Andrew's hurtful words drive him from the store before he had finished his shopping. The Valentine's dinner he had planned for Noah was going to be perfect.

And Noah would never cheat on him.

Never.

Then why was he at a hotel? Seth ruthlessly pushed the small flame of doubt back down. There was no way to know if Andrew was

Bethany Brown

even telling the truth without confronting Noah, which was the last thing Seth was going to do. Confronting Noah about a rumor would only lead to a fight and Seth *did not* want to start a fight on Valentine's Day. He was going to finish his shopping and then go home and cook an amazing dinner for the man he loved.

> He trusted Noah. He *loved* Noah

Noah would never cheat on him.

DINNER preparations were on schedule. Seth was chopping vegetables at the kitchen counter with Dusty curled at his feet. The moment he had stepped through the door, insecurities still at the surface, Dusty had glued himself to his side and refused to leave. Seth reached down to give the dog's head a scratch before he started in on the green peppers. Green peppers were Noah's favorite and Seth had made a very nice dip to go with the vegetable tray he was preparing.

Setting the green pepper on the cutting board, Seth took a moment to wipe at his eyes. He'd been fighting tears since he arrived home from the grocery store. He knew in his heart that Noah would never be unfaithful, but after the talk with Andrew, his head was having trouble believing that.

Turning his head to one side, he spotted the small table in the corner with the chess set on it. It wasn't the set he had given Brady for Christmas—the boy had taken that one home. It was one that Seth had made for when Brady was at his house. Brady and Noah would sit at that table and play chess while Seth made dinner, just like they had at Christmas, except for the times when they insisted on helping Seth with the food. Seth loved to cook, and he was starting to notice that Brady was picking up on his love of cooking as well.

Brady. The ten-year-old was an amazing kid and Seth loved spending time with him. Seth had always wanted a family of his own and he was beginning to think that Brady and Noah were going to be that family. Brady was one of the reasons that Seth didn't believe Noah would cheat on him. If Noah didn't want their relationship to work, he wouldn't keep bringing Brady over. Right? Noah wouldn't let him get attached to the kid and then take him away.

"Damn it!" Seth dropped the knife to wipe at his eyes again. "I have got to get myself under control."

Seth gave his head a shake and looked over at the clock. Noah and Brady would be there soon and he wanted to at least have the vegetable tray done by the time they got there. It would give them something to eat while he finished the rest of the meal. Picking up the knife once again, he moved the pepper to the middle of the cutting board and started to slice. He felt a sharp pinch and looked down.

Shit.

He was going to need another pepper.

NOAH laughed as Brady was out the door almost before the car stopped moving. "We'd better move if we're going to catch him."

"You sure Seth won't be too upset? I mean, the first time I meet him and I'm taking off with Brady."

"Don't worry about it, Chris. He won't be mad." Noah smiled at his younger brother as he climbed out of the car. Chris was fussing with his shirt as Noah led him to the door.

Noah had received a call from a rather distraught Chris earlier in the day and had driven over to meet him at the Thompson Hotel. Apparently Chris's current boyfriend had turned out to be an ass and Chris had kicked him out on Valentine's Day. The good thing about the entire situation was that Chris was going to take Brady for the night so Noah could spend the evening alone with Seth.

"You sure he won't be mad? If he likes Brady half as much as Brady likes him, he might be mad."

"Just calm down. It'll be fine."

"Dad, Uncle Chris, hurry up!"

"We're coming," Noah laughed. They caught up with Brady at the porch and Noah knocked lightly before opening the door. He held it open as Brady dashed inside with Chris swallowing nervously before

Bethany Brown

following. Noah shook his head as he brought up the rear. He had no idea why his brother was so nervous. Seth wasn't scary.

Noah could hear Brady running into the kitchen, already babbling in excitement, as he closed the door behind them. He was in the process of taking off his coat when he realized he hadn't heard Seth's slightly accented voice respond to Brady.

"Dad! Get in here!"

Noah dropped his coat and ran into the kitchen, Chris close on his heels. He almost tripped over Dusty as the dog was suddenly in front of him. The first thing he noticed was the blood-coated green pepper. Heart jumping to his throat, he scanned the room until he spotted Seth. His lover was sitting at the kitchen table holding a blood-dampened towel to his hand. Seth's face was pale and there were beads of sweat on his forehead.

Noah dropped to his knees in front of Seth's chair. "Baby, what happened?"

"I cut my hand." Seth's voice was shaky.

"How did you do that?"

"I was cutting the pepper and I think the knife slipped."

Noah could see dried tear tracks on his lover's face, but he wasn't going to ask about them in front of Brady and Chris. "Let me see." Noah gently pulled the wrapped hand closer and peeled back the towel. He hissed in displeasure as the still-bleeding wound was uncovered. "Shit, baby. This is bad. You need stitches."

"But dinner isn't ready yet."

Noah reached up and cupped Seth's cheek with one hand. "Seth, dinner can wait. We need to get you to the hospital so I can stitch you up."

"What about Brady?"

"Brady's going to spend the night with my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Hi, I'm Chris." A hand came into view over Noah's shoulder, but was quickly taken away again. "Um, maybe I should wait until you're not bleeding before I shake your hand."

A small smile appeared on Seth's face. "That might be a good idea."

"Dad, is Seth going to be okay?"

"He's going to be fine. Why don't you put Dusty in the yard so I can take Seth to the hospital?"

"Sure." Brady gave a soft whistle. Dusty whined, but moved closer to Brady. "Come on, Dusty. Time to go outside."

"I'll give him a hand," Chris announced. Noah watched them go, then turned his attention back to his lover. Seth was still pale, but his eyes looked a tad happier.

"Baby, what am I going to do with you? Can't you go one holiday without hurting yourself?"

"I didn't hurt myself on New Year's."

"You fell down the stairs, Seth."

A smile appeared. "But it didn't hurt."

"Only because you'd consumed half a bottle of champagne." Noah grinned and got to his feet. "Think you can stand?"

"You might have to help me," Seth replied.

Noah reached down and gently pulled the smaller man to his feet. Once Seth was standing, he pulled him into a loose embrace and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry." Seth tucked his head under Noah's chin and his uninjured hand came to rest on the small of his back. "I don't mean to be this much of a problem."

"You're not a problem, baby." Noah looped his arm around Seth's waist and started walking toward the door. The carpenter's steps were shaky, but he managed to stay on his feet. By the time they reached the door, Brady was holding it open and Chris had the car running. Noah and Chris settled Seth in the car while Brady locked up the house. Once

Bethany Brown

he had Seth strapped into the passenger seat, Noah turned his attention back to his brother and his son. "The two of you going to be okay?"

"Yeah. I called a cab. We'll be fine. You just take care of your man."

"Happy Valentine's Day, Dad." Brady threw his arms around Noah's waist and gave him a squeeze. "Take good care of Seth."

"I will."

"Can Uncle Chris and I come for breakfast in the morning?"

"Sure. Just call first this time."

Brady laughed. "I'll try and remember."

"I'll call," Chris replied. Any further comments were cut off by the arrival of the cab Chris had called. Noah watched his son and brother crawl into the cab before he got behind the wheel of his own car. Smiling at his lover, Noah put the car in drive and headed to the hospital.

NOAH was sitting on the couch in front of the fire with Seth curled in his arms. They were enjoying just being in each other's arms while they digested the wonderful meal Seth had organized. Thankfully, Seth had done most of the preparations before he cut himself, so all Noah had to do was follow Seth's instructions on how to cook everything. He'd put six stitches in Seth's hand at the hospital and had refused to let him do any more of the cooking when they made it back to the house. While he was a fairly decent cook, Noah had been worried that he would destroy the dinner Seth had planned. Thankfully, everything turned out perfectly.

Looking down at the man in his arms, Noah felt filled to the brim with contentment. The last time he had felt so happy with his life was the first time he held his son in his arms. His eyes landed on the white bandage on Seth's hand and Noah sighed. He didn't want to ruin Valentine's Day with serious conversation, but he needed to know what had caused Seth to accidentally slice into his hand while making dinner.

"Baby, you still awake?"

"Hmm?" Seth stretched a bit, but only succeeded in cuddling himself further into Noah's arms.

"Can you tell me what happened today?"

Seth went still in his arms. "What do you mean?"

"You cut your hand making dinner. Plus, it looked like you had been crying." Noah shifted around on the couch until he was lying on it with Seth sprawled across his chest. "Come on. Spill."

Seth sighed and tucked his head under Noah's chin. "I ran into one of my exes at the grocery store."

"And?"

"He said that he saw you at the Thompson Hotel with another man." Seth glanced up at him briefly. "It was Chris he saw you with, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Is this what was bothering you? Seth, you didn't think I was cheating on you, did you?" Noah felt sick at the thought.

"No! I know in my heart you would never do that to me. It's just, talking to Andrew always makes me feel like I can never do anything right."

"Andrew?"

"My ex."

"You're not talking about Andrew Castle, are you?"

"Yes. Why? Do you know him?"

Noah gave a soft laugh. "He was dating my brother. Chris just dumped him."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah." Noah chuckled as he ran his hands over Seth's back. "So, is that it? He just tried to use my brother to make you think I was cheating on you?"

"No. There's a little more."

"Tell me the rest."

"Do you find me needy in bed?" Seth's voice was small and he was nervously clutching at Noah's shirt with his good hand.

"What?" Noah paused to consider the question. Visions of Seth writhing beneath him, begging for his touch, flashed through his mind.

He could see the way Seth craved his every touch. He could hear the noises Seth made. He could almost feel the way Seth's skin begged for attention. "No, baby. I don't find you needy in bed. In fact, I love being in bed with you. What did this bastard say to you?"

"Just pointed out that every single guy I've ever dated has cheated on me and then dumped me. And then he brought up how much of a chore sleeping with me is, and brought up every insecurity I've ever had in my life and it just got so much worse because, unlike everyone else, I actually love you and the thought of you leaving me has me completely terrified beyond all reason."

Noah froze. *Seth loves me?* The sudden stillness of the man in his arms let Noah know when Seth realized what he had said. Noah slid his hand under Seth's chin and gently tilted his head up. "I love you too, baby, and I'm not going anywhere."

The green eyes he loved lit up with joy. "Really?"

"Really." Noah pulled Seth into a gentle kiss. "I love you, Seth McAllister."

"I love you too, Noah Hunter." Noah's kiss was returned. "You don't think it's too soon?"

"For some people, maybe. But not for us. We were meant for this, baby. You and me, together."

"Happy Valentine's Day."

"Happy Valentine's Day," Noah repeated. He pulled Seth up his chest and claimed his mouth. Forcing his way past Seth's lips, he twined his tongue around his lover's, hunting out Seth's taste beneath the remains of dinner. He slid his hands down the carpenter's strong back until they rested against his waist, his fingers digging in slightly as he nibbled at Seth's mouth.

When he started to run out of air, Noah pulled away from the kiss, giving a final lick to Seth's lips. He pulled back far enough that he was able to stare into lust-dazed green eyes. Forcing the fingers of one hand to release Seth's hip, he raised that hand to caress the carpenter's cheek. He could feel the love he had for the younger man bubbling up in his chest. Noah ran his thumb over Seth's bottom lip and smiled. "You are so beautiful."

A blush colored Seth's cheeks as he ducked his head. "No, I'm not."

"You are to me." Noah ran his hand through the strawberry-blond hair. "The most beautiful thing in the world."

"I can't even express how happy you make me." Seth leaned into his touch with a smile. "Take me to bed?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Noah replied. He spotted a brief flash of uncertainty in the green eyes looking down on him, but it was swiftly swallowed by love. Noah knew the love he felt for Seth was shining brightly in his own eyes. He removed his hands from the tempting form of his lover as Seth climbed to his feet. When Seth reached down with his uninjured hand, Noah allowed the shorter man to pull him to his feet. With a small tug, Seth started them in the direction of the bedroom.

As they walked through the house, Noah realized how at home he felt. He and Brady spent so much time at Seth's that the spare room was actually starting to resemble Brady's room at home. Seth had fit into their lives so easily that Noah was having trouble remembering a time when he wasn't there. He didn't even want to imagine life without him. What he wanted to do was wrap him up in his arms, keep him safe from the world, and remove the doubts others had placed in his head. He'd start by correcting the foolish notion that Seth was selfish in bed.

Noah pushed Seth into the bedroom and pulled the door closed behind him. Once he had the door closed, he led Seth over to the bed. Noah placed a gentle kiss to Seth's lips, then backed away from him. He pulled the sheets down and turned on the lamp next to the bed, filling the room with a soft glow. Turning back to face Seth, Noah had to smother a gasp at how beautiful the muted light made him look. Allowing his eyes to meet the slightly bashful green ones, Noah let all the desire and love he was feeling fill his gaze. He wanted Seth to be able to see in his eyes how beautiful he thought he was. A soft smile crossed his face when Seth's eyes widened in surprise.

"Really? You really see me like that?"

"Always," Noah replied. He pulled Seth into his arms and into a ravenous kiss. He let his arms slide down Seth's back to rest on the swell of his ass. Grasping the firm cheeks in both hands, Noah pulled him

Bethany Brown

close until their bodies were flush against each other. He ground his erection against the one he could feel growing beneath Seth's pants. Seth pulled away from him with a moan that was music to Noah's ears. He loved the sounds Seth made.

Noah pivoted until he had Seth's back facing the bed. He ran his hands up Seth's strong chest to cradle his face. After placing a quick kiss to his lips, Noah began to undo the buttons on Seth's shirt. He kissed his way down Seth's chest as the warm flesh was revealed to his sight. Noah dropped to his knees when he reached Seth's waist and slowly pulled the fabric free of his lover's pants. He could feel Seth's fingers clenching and unclenching on his shoulders. Kissing the bared skin just above the waistband, Noah glanced up his lover's toned body. Seth's head was thrown back in pleasure, exposing the long line of his throat.

Nipping the skin of Seth's stomach, Noah popped the button on his lover's pants. The sound seemed unusually loud in the quiet of the room. Seth's head snapped down and his eyes locked on Noah's. Seeing the green orbs nearly swallowed by the black of his expanded pupils, Noah felt a fresh surge of lust. He wrapped his arms around Seth's waist and knocked the smaller man back onto the bed. Seth gasped as his back hit the mattress. Noah grabbed the unfastened pants, and the waistband of the underwear beneath them, and pulled both articles of clothing from his lover's body. Once he had his lover naked, Noah climbed to his feet to survey the feast spread out beneath him.

The muted light of the lamp added a mysterious sheen to Seth's skin. Noah's hands were practically itching to run over all that smoothness. With Seth watching him with hooded eyes, Noah quickly stripped off his clothes and crawled onto the bed. He hovered over Seth's prone form, shivering when Seth's hands began to run over his naked back. Leaning down, he licked a path along Seth's neck, smiling when the younger man moaned. He bit down on the pulse point and sucked a mark to life. Seth writhed beneath him, fingers digging into his back. Noah was fairly certain Seth's fingers were leaving marks of their own and that knowledge only made him increase the pressure on the tempting neck.

"Oh, God, Noah. Keep doing that."

Noah pulled away with one last lick, despite the moan of disapproval from Seth. "If I keep doing that I'll end up eating you."

"I don't think I'd mind."

"I would. I like having you in one piece. It's more fun to kiss you that way."

"I like kissing you," Seth repeated. His fingers slid up Noah's back until they buried themselves in his hair. Noah allowed him to pull him into the kiss.

As he licked and nibbled at Seth's lips, Noah let his body drop fully onto the smaller man's. He broke away with a gasp at the delicious feel of his skin rubbing against the skin of the man beneath him. He shifted slightly so their erections were lined up, then dove back into the kiss. He dug his fingers into thick strawberry-blond hair and angled Seth's head so he could take the kiss deeper.

Seth was squirming beneath him when Noah broke the kiss to breathe. He smiled at his lover before he began to kiss his way down the strong chest, leaving small love bites in his wake. When he reached one of Seth's nipples, he sealed his lips around it and worried it gently with his teeth while his fingers teased the other one. Seth started to moan and thrash on the bed. Noah felt the scratch of the bandage against his face as Seth pressed him closer to his chest. He grinned around the nipple before giving it one last lick.

Noah wanted nothing more than to take his time, but the trembles in his lover's body told him that waiting would not be easy for Seth. After everything Seth had been through earlier in the day, drawing out the sex, no matter how great it would be, would only make him feel more nervous about being needy in bed. Placing a kiss to the middle of his chest, Noah reached into the nightstand to grab the lube and a condom. Tossing both items on the bed, he once again returned to Seth's mouth.

Kissing Seth was something Noah would never get tired of. Seth kissed with everything he had. He didn't hold back, and that was one of the things that made kissing him so addictive. Noah also loved the way Seth tasted. He could happily spend hours just kissing him—in fact, he had—but the erection poking him in the stomach was begging for release and Noah would never keep Seth wanting.

Coating the fingers of one hand, Noah ran the other along Seth's hip until he had his full attention. "Ready?"

"Please."

"I love you." Noah pressed forward with one lubed finger and Seth threw his head back with a moan. A moan of his own escaped Noah as Seth's hole seemed to suck him inside. He quickly added another finger. With the amount of time they had been spending in bed together, Seth loosened up much faster than he had the first time they had shared a bed.

By the time he hit three fingers, Seth was pushing back against him, his head thrashing on the pillow. Noah removed his fingers and quickly pulled on a condom, wiping the remaining lube on his painfully hard cock. He settled Seth's legs on his shoulders as he lined himself up with the stretched opening. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to last longer than thirty seconds, Noah pressed inside.

"Yes," Seth hissed. His legs slid from Noah's shoulders to wrap around his waist and pull him closer. Noah grunted as he was suddenly buried to the hilt inside his lover. He had to lock his hands on Seth's hips to keep the other man from moving while he regained some semblance of control. Once he thought he had a chance of making Seth come before he did, Noah started to move.

Long, slow thrusts into Seth had Noah moaning in pleasure instantly. He'd never felt so connected to someone during sex until Seth. Being inside him felt like coming home, and it was even more profound now that he knew Seth loved him. Grasping Seth's hips, Noah tilted them slightly so he could get a better angle. He was rewarded with a hoarse shout as he nailed Seth's prostate. Keeping that position, Noah increased the speed of his thrusts.

Seth's fingers locked onto his shoulders, digging in with enough force that Noah knew there were going to be marks in the morning. He didn't care. He loved that he was the one to make Seth lose control. Releasing his hold on Seth's hips with one hand, he wrapped that hand around his lover's leaking erection. Seth shouted for him and began to rock up into his hand and slam down to meet his thrusts.

Noah was rapidly approaching the point of no return, but he wanted to get Seth there first. Throwing a twist to the end of his stroke,

he began to move his hand faster over Seth's erection. Spine bowing beneath him, Seth threw back his head and screamed as he came. With Seth's channel tightening around him, Noah let out his own shout as his lover's body wrung his orgasm from him. He had just enough control left to fall to one side instead of landing on Seth.

Noah groaned softly as he slipped out of Seth. Rolling to his feet he stepped into the bathroom and made quick work of the condom and washing up. Wetting a cloth, he brought it back to the bed in time to see Seth coming around. Green eyes blinked at him as he cleaned the evidence of their lovemaking from Seth's chest.

"Hey, baby. You okay?"

"More than." Seth weakly lifted his arm to touch Noah's cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Noah settled himself in the bed and pulled the covers up. "Get some sleep, love. You've had a long day."

"Hold me?"

"Always." Noah pulled Seth into his arms and they spent a few moments rolling around until they were both settled. Once he had Seth comfortable in his arms, Noah pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "Happy Valentine's Day."

The only response from Seth was a sleepy murmur. Laughing softly, Noah followed his lover into slumber.

SETH woke to a throbbing pain is his left hand. The painkillers they'd given him at the emergency room must have worn off while he was sleeping. He shifted slightly, trying to ease the pressure.

"What's wrong?" Noah's sleepy voice came from somewhere above him.

"Hand hurts."

"Roll over." The instruction was followed by a soft nudge from Noah. Seth rolled onto his right side and Noah spooned up behind him. "Better?"

Bethany Brown

"Uh-huh." Seth sighed happily and snuggled back into Noah's arms. He loved waking up in Noah's arms. "Mmm. I wish you'd move in with me so we could wake up like this every morning."

Noah stiffened behind him. "What?"

Oh shit. "Did I just say that out loud?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Shit."

"Did you not mean it?" There was a small, hurt tone to Noah's voice that Seth really didn't like.

"No!" Seth rolled back over so he could see Noah's face. "I meant every word of it. I'm just worried that it's too soon."

"It might be a bit too soon, but I like the idea."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Noah rolled onto his back and pulled Seth on top of him. "How about we start small?"

Seth propped himself up on Noah's chest and smiled down at him. He slowly ran the fingers of his sore hand along Noah's collarbone. "What do you mean by start small?"

"Well, how about Brady and I start spending weekends here and then maybe you could come to Florida with us during March break?"

"You're going to take me to Disney World?" Seth grinned at his lover before leaning down to give him a light kiss, followed by a nip to his nose.

"Only if you want to go."

"I'd really like that."

"Good. So, we're going to start small?"

"We are." Seth tucked his head under Noah's chin and settled himself against his lover's chest. "I love you."

"I love you too, baby. Now go back to sleep. We've only got a few more hours until Chris brings Brady back."

"And you want to spend them sleeping?" Seth let his fingers trail along Noah's ribs as he nibbled on his collarbone. He grinned as Noah's chuckle made him shake slightly.

"Well, round three really took a lot out of me. I was thinking a nap followed by a shower."

"I guess that sounds like a good idea." Seth placed one more kiss to Noah's chest, then rolled back onto his side. He sighed in contentment as Noah's strong arms wrapped around him. Secure in the arms of his lover, Seth drifted back to sleep. BETHANY BROWN is a 27 year old with a BA in English, Language and Literature, and a bit too much time on her hands. Hopefully, her new barista job will keep her occupied enough that her mind doesn't wander too far. Unfortunately, that most likely won't be possible. Her mind is too full of stories.

Having been interested in writing since her first trip to the Young Authors Conference in the fourth grade, Bethany finally gave in to the voices in her head and wrote them a story. Since all that accomplished was to make the voices louder, she's looking forward to continuing the *Lost Boys and Love Letters* Series with Ashlyn.

Bethany spends her free time reading, and watching TV and movies while pairing up her favorite male characters. She is always looking for something new to get Ashlyn hooked on. She also spends a great deal of time trying to convince Patrick, who lives in her head, that just because he won't leave doesn't mean he gets to be in all of the stories. Unfortunately, it's not working very well.

Bethany would like to take this opportunity to address the administrators who wouldn't let her into the Creative Writing Program at the University of Windsor. I have a writing career! Choke on that, suckers!

Find Bethany's first story featuring Seth and Noah, "Christmas Luck," at <u>http://dreamspinnerpress.com/advent.htm#Christmas_Luck_</u>.

Milestones



Chrissy Munder

Milestones

I

"YOU aren't going to leave a message?"

The entire ambience of the hotel bar was on this side of being too much. Too much color, too much distraction, and the canned music was turned just a little too loud for Devon's tastes and the way his head felt. But he was still able to hear the smooth voice of the tall blond who had walked up beside him.

"You know what they say," Devon replied as he stared at the blank blue screen of his cell phone in disgust. Jeff hadn't answered; he was probably working late again and left his cell in his jacket. Nothing unusual there.

What was unusual was that this time Devon didn't know what he would say if he did leave a message. Usually Devon made it a point to say something loving at least once a day when he was away on business, either to Jeff or Jeff's phone, as happened far too often lately.

"If you can't manage to say anything nice...." Devon let his voice trail off before he finished the saying. That was the thing about old adages: the damn things were usually right when you thought about it.

"...Then don't say anything at all." The blond tipped his beer toward Devon in a mocking salute as he finished Devon's sentence. "My name is Hector. Hector Ruiz." He gestured politely to the empty seat beside Devon. "May I?"

"Uh... sure." Devon wondered what he was doing even as he nodded his agreement for the jeans-clad stranger to join him at his table. "I'm Devon Barnett." He extended his hand and watched as it was enveloped in the large, warm hand of the man now sitting across from him. This was not a good idea, especially when he was feeling down. He wasn't usually susceptible to the advances of tall blonds in hotel bars. "Ruiz?" Devon questioned for something to fill the sudden silence between them. "Doesn't exactly go with the hair." He winced. That was a shitty thing to say even if it did go along with his mood.

"So much hair dye, so little time." Hector just smiled and ignored the implied insult. "Are you here on business?"

"Does it show?" Devon finally put his cell phone down on the table. There was a time when that cell phone had been his lifeline, his connection to Jeff and a source of constant comfort at being far away from home. They used to spend the nights he was away on business talking, laughing, having phone sex.

Not anymore.

"Well, you are sitting here in the hotel bar, all by your lonesome." Hector leaned back in his chair, his T-shirt pulled tight across his chest. Devon couldn't help but sigh as he compared the lean muscles to Jeff's slightly chubbier frame. He loved the way Jeff's belly curved under his hand. "I'm sensing there's a story here."

Amused despite himself, Devon laughed. His other options for the evening were sitting in his room and reviewing the client's latest irrational demands or heading for the hotel exercise facility to work off his frustrations. Based on the fact he was in the best shape of his life, Devon might have to admit he had a lot of frustrations. "Are you offering a sympathetic ear?"

Hector's eyes were brown, Devon thought absently. A warm brown. They reminded him of Jeff's eyes when they had started dating and Jeff actually used to look at him. Now it seemed like Jeff was always busy with work, or busy thinking about work or just busy being at work. When Devon really thought about it, work seemed to be all Jeff had time for over the past couple of years.

"I could be offering all kinds of things." Hector's voice had lowered and Devon blinked at the implications left hanging in the air. "The question is: are you interested?"

Devon knew his mouth was hanging open but, man, it had been a long time since anyone had looked at him with that kind of warmth in his gaze. He wasn't sure how to respond. It was just as well as his body was apparently still loyal to Jeff no matter how lonely and tired Devon was

Milestones

feeling, and decided to interrupt what could have been the perfect proposition with a humongous sneeze.

Great. Devon wiped at his face with one of the little white napkins left on the table. No wonder his head hurt. He was probably getting a cold. He hated getting colds, especially when he was on a business trip. His nose either stayed running or stopped up and no matter what he tried it always ended up in his chest. The last time he had flown with a sinus infection he had almost ruptured his eardrum.

"Are you okay?" It seemed that in addition to being a genuine hunk Hector was a nice guy. Any other time, Devon probably would have liked to get to know him. But tonight, when he was feeling hurt and angry and all he wanted to hear was something other than "Leave a message and I'll get back at ya," wasn't a good night.

"Looks like I'm coming down with something," Devon replied. He was confident the blond would move on to a better prospect. Nothing dissolved a moment of sexual tension better than involuntary body reactions.

"Would you like me to see if they have any aspirin behind the bar?" Devon was impressed despite himself. Hector was definitely in the running for the nice guy of the night award.

"Nah. Thanks, though. I probably have some up in my travel bag." But that would mean heading back to his too quiet and too lonely hotel room and that's what Devon was doing in the bar tonight to begin with. He didn't want to go back to his room and stare at the hotel comforter and the strange mix of color and pattern that was always the same no matter what hotel chain he stayed at.

"Let me at least get you something warm to drink and then you can tell me what's put that sad look on your face." Hector made a motion with his hand and surprisingly enough the bored bartender came out to their table, where Hector ordered them something Devon didn't recognize.

"We've established you're here on business and that you're alone." Hector smiled across the table at Devon again. "Why don't you tell me a little bit about what has brought you here to the bar?" Devon allowed himself to relax as the bartender brought them both tall mugs of something that smelled absolutely wonderful and tasted even better. If there was alcohol in it Devon couldn't taste it; just the smooth warming taste of heaven.

"Where to start." Devon laughed and took another sip. "Wow, that's fantastic. I started out the trip by fighting with my partner." Better get that out in the open, Devon thought. "Hell, I can't even remember what this one was about. Then I missed my connecting flight and since the new travel planner at the office didn't guarantee late arrival along with my reservation, I had to deal with that instead of prepping for my meeting the next morning."

"That's all certainly drink-worthy," Hector agreed as he moved his chair a little closer to Devon's.

"Now my client is being a total pain and to top it all off, apparently I'm getting a cold." Devon finished his mug and didn't protest when Hector quickly ordered them another. "Oh, yeah, and based on all the advertising I'm surrounded by, Valentine's Day is coming up."

"You mentioned a partner." Hector placed a warm hand on top of Devon's. "You guys fight a lot?"

"Not really." Devon sighed. He knew he should pull his hand away but the feeling of Hector's hand on his was comforting. Devon picked up his mug in his free hand and took another drink. "It's just, he's opening up a new store and he's all stressed and, I don't know. We don't really celebrate holidays and stuff, but just once I'd like him to pay me as much attention as he does that damn business."

"You travel. He's distracted." The sound of Hector's voice was as soothing as the touch of his hand. "It sounds difficult."

"You have no idea." Devon rested his chin in his hand and looked over at Hector. "I appreciate the time and commitment he puts into his work, and I don't want to add to his pressures, but sometimes I wish he would just sell off the store and go back into the corporate world. Maybe then we'd have more time together."

"It doesn't sound very fair to you." Hector seemed to know just what to say in order to keep Devon talking.

"I know part of the problem is that I always give in to Jeff and don't really express myself. That's what Darlene says." Devon could feel the warmth of the drink start to creep over him. He was going to have to remember to ask Hector just what they were drinking.

"Darlene?" Hector pushed another mug in front of him and Devon nodded solemnly as he wrapped his rather numb fingers around the handle.

"A friend of mine. She works for Jeff, has for a long time. It's just, Jeff's the smartest guy I ever met. It makes sense to go along with him. I mean, as long I know he loves me it doesn't really matter."

"But you don't sound happy." Hector's voice seemed to be coming from a farther distance.

"Well, I guess it does matter and I worry. Maybe Jeff's focus on his business is a sign that I've failed to keep his interest over the years, you know?" Devon blinked and wondered for a quick minute just where Hector had gone. Oh, there he was. Devon smiled. "You know, it's all his fault I'm even talking to you."

"Is it?"

"Uh-huh." Devon leaned even closer to Hector as he confided, "A few years ago I wouldn't have even noticed you. Even though you are hot."

"Thanks, I think," Hector said in dry reply.

Devon fumbled for his cell phone and pushed at the buttons until he came across a picture of him and Jeff together to show his new friend. "Just look at him. Isn't he just the cutest? We were so happy in the beginning." Devon pulled his cell phone back from where he had shoved it in front of Hector's face and stared longingly at the picture. "Now it seems like things are just slipping away, buried beneath the demands of our lives." That was funny. Now he even sounded like one of the greeting cards in Jeff's store.

"Well, maybe I could offer something...."

Devon's cell phone rang and Devon held up one hand, cutting off whatever Hector was saying. "Excuse me for a minute." He really hoped this was Jeff.

Chrissy Munder

"Hi." Devon answered his phone cheerfully while Hector sat there with his mouth open during the one-sided conversation. Apparently he wasn't used to having his moves put on hold. "What are you doing? Oh, me? I'm just having a drink with Hector. What? I don't know. I just met him. He knows some great drinks. Can you remind me to ask him what they are?" Devon nodded his head and smiled over at Hector. "It's my friend, Darlene. She wants to talk to you."

"Uh, sure." Hector looked uncertain as he took the cell phone from Devon. "Hello?"

Devon took another deep swallow from his mug and looked at the table. Wow, had they really had that many drinks? No wonder he was feeling so much better. Except, now that Hector was talking to Darlene, he looked a little weird.

"...Yes, I am rather attached to those. Uh-huh. Well, you certainly know how to get your point across. Of course. No, I wouldn't want you to come find me either." Hector handed the phone back to Devon and abruptly stood up.

"I'm so sorry, but I forgot I'm supposed to meet some friends this evening." Hector pulled out his wallet and placed some bills onto the table. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Devon. Perhaps we'll meet again when you don't have your phone with you."

Devon watched in surprise as Hector strode away before he could fumble for a reply. What was that all about? Hector had left so quickly Devon didn't even get to thank him for the drinks. Oh well. Devon quickly dismissed the blond from his mind as he concentrated on his phone call with Darlene and his favorite subject. "How was Jeff doing today? Did he miss me? Did he say anything about Valentine's Day?"

"No, sweetie." Darlene had the nicest voice, even when she was giving him bad news, and it was just as well Hector had left as it was so much easier to talk to her when they were the only ones there, Devon thought. "You know Jeff. He was all about the new window display and making sure we had enough stock.

"Yeah. I know." Devon shredded the napkin on the table in front of him and pushed a couple of the empty mugs out of the way. Suddenly the sweet smell of the drinks Hector had ordered seemed sickening. "I just keep hoping that we could do something special this year."

"And I keep telling you that you have to let him know." Darlene was getting exasperated with him. Devon could hear it in her voice.

"Easy for you to say," Devon muttered. His head was hurting again and without Hector there smiling at him Devon felt tired and alone. He had tried to broach the subject before he left for this trip but Jeff was oblivious to his hints. Devon hated to admit it but it would seem that when it came to the relationship thing, maybe he needed some help.

"Maybe you could talk to him." Devon said. "I mean, see what he thinks." He held his breath as he waited for Darlene's reply.

"I have to admit I've had enough of watching you two be such men when it comes to..." Darlene was still talking but all of a sudden Devon was really sleepy and it was hard to listen to what she was saying and stop the chair he was sitting on from moving too. "...And I really think you should let me handle it."

"Maybe you're right." Devon yawned, the events of the past few days catching up to him. Darlene was always right. What had she said? Something about talking to Jeff for him? "Just remember, he always does better when he thinks something is his idea. Uh-huh." Devon nodded. "That would be nice."

Devon nodded again, forgetting that Darlene couldn't see him. Maybe she could make Jeff listen. He yawned again and his eyes closed as his head came to rest on the table that had started circling in the opposite direction from his chair. That wasn't good. Devon pulled his cell phone closer to his ear. "Darlene? I don't feel so good. Is it okay if I just go to bed now?" Π

"LOVE is in the air. Dum de dum dee dee dee dum." Jeff Logan couldn't help but sing the lyrics to the canned music currently echoing through the empty corridors of the big mall. It didn't matter how hard he tried to fight it; that stuff wormed its way into his brain.

For all Jeff knew it was probably dissolving a few of his muchneeded brain cells along the way as well. Hadn't he read somewhere that the U.S. Army had experimented with using music as a form of crowd control? Oh wait: maybe that was torture.

Jeff stood outside the glass window to his new store, Logan's Greetings. He pushed his tangles of dark hair back away from his face (he'd forgotten to get a haircut again—Devon usually called to remind him) and squinted a dark brown eye toward the main display he was struggling to arrange. With one of the biggest shopping holidays for his business only a week away, he wanted it to look better than good; he wanted it to be perfect.

He gestured to his right and rolled his eyes as Brian, his nephew and part-time sales associate on the other side of the glass, instead moved the empty bottle of wine in the display to the left. He appreciated the kid coming in before his morning classes, but a little attention to what he was doing wouldn't hurt.

"The right," Jeff said in a voice of long-suffering patience, even though it was obvious from the blond crew cut bobbing in time to something other than the mall music that Brian wasn't listening to him.

"The right," he repeated loudly and waited in agitated frustration as Brian adjusted the ear buds to his MP3 player before managing to move the bottle a little more to the left, all the while ignoring Jeff's frantic gestures. "Your other right."

Maybe the kid could read lips or maybe Jeff's pantomimed semaphore finally registered, because after three tries the wine bottle was shoved in the correct direction. Okay. That wasn't so bad. Certainly the arrangement in the window was colorful enough to catch the passing eye.

The display was meant to show the different phases of a relationship all the way from the first tentative beginnings to the more settled, and the gifts from Logan's Greetings that would be welcomed at each stage. It was kind of a "something for everyone" arrangement meant to pull shoppers desperate for gift ideas into his store.

If it was also a display of just what he might like to currently experience in his own relationship, well, that was something between him and the God of Wishful Thinking, now wasn't it? He and his partner, Devon, had agreed years ago that the so-called calendar holidays weren't for them. Jeff found it particularly ironic now when he considered that his store's success or failure depended on those who did celebrate.

The early morning trio of mall-walkers was coming up behind him again. Jeff could hear the squeak of their athletic shoes on the waxed and shining tile floor as well as their constant chatter. These old gals had better lungs than he did, based on the way they could walk and talk at their hurried pace. This had to be their third lap around the mall.

There was still a lot to get used to, being located inside the big mall instead of in one of the smaller retail strips on the outskirts where Jeff's store had been for the past several years. The way the mall opened up the interior to the local hospital's Healthy Heart Club was one of them.

Why in the world would anyone want to be up and active at that hour? Jeff pulled his T-shirt down a little farther and determinedly ignored the way his own belly was starting to protrude over the top of his jeans.

Just like everything else in his life over the past several years, Jeff's fitness program had fallen by the wayside as the demands of running his own business had grown more prevalent. Once again, he promised himself he'd start working out on a more regular basis, as soon as he got things settled here at the store. It was the week before Valentine's Day and Jeff was feeling more than the usual pressure. The sales from this next week could make or break him. He knew it was a big risk, moving his business location right before a holiday, but with the unexpected opening of the large chain store a block away from his old storefront, it was a necessary one.

Within two weeks after the opening of the new mega-store, his sales had dropped sharply as shoppers stopped at the new store to experience the joy of one-stop shopping instead of choosing to drive farther down the street to visit the smaller and more individualized stores. As much as Jeff hated to leave the cheaper location, it was a move he had been considering for some time.

While all the sales projections had indicated the change of location would result in the desired increase in foot traffic, Jeff had to admit that being in the mall was different from what he was used to. He missed the more intimate atmosphere of the old store. He could only hope that Devon was wrong and he wouldn't end up regretting his decision.

Jeff forced himself to push the thoughts of Devon and their argument to the side, and to smile as the three red-faced and white-haired old women stopped in front of his display to drink from their water bottles. "What do you think?" he asked with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"Not bad," one of them panted. "But you need to move that wine bottle a little more to the left."

JEFF stared over the register at the line of bodies that stood in front of him and blocked his view of the store. Business was booming. On one hand that was good. Hell, even great. On the other it meant it was going to be another late night when all was said and done.

Not that he had anyone waiting at home. Jeff could tell from the call log on his cell phone that Devon had called last night, but once again he hadn't left any message. Did Devon simply have nothing to say to him, or did that mean they were still fighting? And just when did this one start? Before Devon had left for this business trip, or during their first phone call after when Jeff had been complaining about the stress involved in the new store opening?

He loved Devon—he had from the first night they met—and Devon said he loved Jeff, but sometimes Jeff felt a distance between them. He knew Devon thought he should just sell the store and get back into a job with regular hours and more certain benefits.

After all, in the almost five years they had been together, Devon had been promoted all the way to Regional Sales Manager for the firm he worked for. Jeff still didn't quite understand everything Devon did, something about converting corporate phone systems from analog to digital and something called "voice-over IP." He just knew that despite the uncertain risks, he liked the challenge involved in running his own business, and Devon used to be able to understand that.

Jeff glanced impatiently at his watch. Darlene, the sales associate working today, should have been back from her break ten minutes ago. That was an unforeseen problem with his store's new location inside the mall. There was simply too much temptation for Darlene. She had been friends with Devon and then worked for Jeff ever since he opened his first storefront, and as much as Jeff liked her, he hated the way she took advantage of their long-standing relationship.

He could see the stock in the floor displays was getting low and while Brian was trying, the kid couldn't keep up with both helping the customers filling the store and stocking too. Maybe he should think about hiring a couple of new part-timers if the sales stayed steady?

"Sorry. Sorry." Darlene skidded up beside him, her long brown hair flying out behind her and breathless apologies spilling over as she closed her cell phone and dropped it in her pocket, retying the strings of the colorful apron that all the staff of Logan's Greetings wore. That is, if he, Brian, Darlene, and Jennifer, the new hire who covered the evening shift, were numerous enough to qualify for such a weighty title as "staff."

"There was a huge line at the Taco Delight and then I saw the cutest window display at the lingerie store. We should think about carrying some of that smelly stuff." Darlene caught the annoyed glance of the older woman who was next in line and grimaced, her bright red lips twisting and leaving a smear of color on her front teeth. "I guess I'll tell you about it later." Jeff grunted agreement and moved over to the next register, splitting the line up and ringing the customers through until the line thinned. He needed to hurry this up and make sure the displays were restocked before the next rush.

"I can't believe how busy we are today!" Darlene exclaimed. Once no one was at the register, she was able to come over and help him rearrange an assortment of furry stuffed animals bearing multicolored hearts with romantic sayings clasped in their paws. "This is crazy."

"We were never this busy at the old store," Brian agreed as he brought out another box of coffee mugs. The new shipment and their sarcastic themes had been bigger sellers than Jeff had anticipated for what was supposed to be such a sweet and romantic holiday.

"Well, you know what they say." Darlene smiled brightly as the two men chimed in unison.

"Location, location, "They laughed together, giddy in that silly way that came from being too rushed to think straight, and then broke apart as the doormat chime announced the entrance of another customer and hopefully the next wave of eager shoppers.

III

"So what are you doing for the big V?" Darlene asked once the customer had been rung up and was happily on her way out, bearing a brightly colored bag with the store's name and logo blazoned across it. "Any romantic and smutty plans for you and Devon?"

Jeff grunted as "fighting like usual" was the first thing that sprang into his mind. Darlene might be more friend than employee, but he wasn't sure he wanted to get into this with her. Perhaps the favored male tools of misdirection and evasion would work. "Devon and I decided ages ago that we weren't going to celebrate something just because it was a date on the calendar. How about you?"

"Wow." Darlene leaned her elbows on the glass display case and Jeff reached over the counter for the bottle of glass cleaner and the roll of paper towels he had stashed there. "So you guys have never had a romantic Valentine's Day together?" Jeff had forgotten how laser-like her focus could be.

"Well, the first year we were together we did all that stuff," Jeff admitted. He smiled at the memory as he wiped at some mysterious smudges on the front of the display case. Based on the child-high height, he didn't want to know what had caused them.

It was apparent all his good intentions of keeping his work and home life separate were flying out the window at the first hint of a sympathetic ear. "But after that, it was just easier to ignore things like that. You know it's our busiest time here at the store."

"Devon actually agreed to that?" Darlene asked in surprise. "He always seemed like such a die-hard romantic."

"Well, yeah, he agreed," Jeff said defensively, remembering how in order to get himself off the hook for his own forgetfulness he had pushed Devon into agreeing that holidays like Valentine's Day were just arbitrary days chosen by a deluded public. Deep down he supposed it didn't make sense that he now resented Devon's lack of attention on those very same days. "Kinda."

"Besides, it never works out." Jeff shook his head as he put the cleaning supplies back behind the counter and tried to justify his decision. "Devon always complains that I'm too focused on work to want to make any plans, and then something always happens on his end even if we do try to make any."

"Like what?" Darlene fiddled with the chocolate roses in the vase by the register and Jeff found himself amazed again at how the nail technician had painted the tiny white hearts onto her glossy long red nails. She had told him they were decals, but Jeff couldn't see what decorations for the model cars he had made as a kid had to do with fingernails. "What could be more important than the two of you spending a little time focusing on your relationship?"

"Like...." Jeff looked at Darlene with mild suspicion at her sudden interest—had Devon been confiding in her again?—before he stopped re-filing cards (why people insisted on putting them back in the wrong place, he would never understand) and actually thought about it. "We had a big fight the second year we were together over me having to work, and then when I hired some temporary workers to fill in, Devon broke his leg skiing and ended up in the hospital anyway."

Darlene wrinkled her nose. "That sucks. How about the year after?"

"Well, that year he was sure I was going to work so he agreed to go on a business trip over the holiday so his boss could stay home with his wife." Jeff brought out the mess of wrapping tissue from behind the counter and he and Darlene began to straighten it so it would lay flat in the dispenser once again. "It's probably what got him that early promotion."

"That wouldn't have been too bad," Darlene said as she patted the tissue encouragingly. "I mean, you could have gone with him and had raunchy make-up sex in the hotel."

"Yeah, that was the idea, but then my temporary help didn't show and I ended up having to work anyway and he went to Aspen without me." Jeff didn't want to mention that while he and Devon had the

fighting thing down pat, lately the make-up sex part seemed to escape them.

"How about last year?" Darlene tried again to find something that would fit into her rose-colored view of just how the holiday should be celebrated.

"You know, I can't even remember," Jeff said. At least, he had totally done his best to forget.

"Sure you do," Darlene relentlessly prodded. "Go on; you can tell me."

Jeff sighed and his hands stilled on the delicate tissue. "I didn't have the extra cash to hire any coverage for the store and Devon got mad, so I made us dinner reservations for the night before to try and make up for it."

"That sounds like a good idea." She nodded her head with enthusiasm.

"Except Devon's allergic to mangos and they were dipped in chocolate and next thing I knew he was all swelled up and we ended up in the emergency room." Jeff shrugged. "He was all upset that after four years together I didn't know that about him, and then I still had to work the next day."

"I'm sensing a reoccurring theme here." Darlene held one hand to her forehead and paused dramatically.

Jeff ignored her and walked over to see if he could help the young mother standing in front of the porcelain figurines make a decision before her bored toddler took out the entire display.

"Seriously." Darlene continued the conversation as if it had never been interrupted when he returned. "What's Devon's biggest complaint about your relationship?"

"That I work too much," Jeff muttered. "What do you care?"

It was Darlene's turn to shrug, although it seemed a little too casual to Jeff. "You've been acting kind of funny and Devon doesn't stop by the store the way he used to and we've noticed you don't talk about him anymore."

Chrissy Munder

"We?" Jeff said, his suspicions rising once again. "Just who are 'we'?"

"Come on, Jeff. Me and Brian." Jeff couldn't believe it but Darlene rolled her eyes at him. "You know he told me that you and Devon hardly talked to each other at his birthday party. I just want to make sure you guys are okay."

"I guess," Jeff said sulkily, sounding more like twelve to his own ears than thirty-two. Had he actually hoped that Devon was pumping Darlene for info on how he felt? "But honestly, what does he expect of me? This is what happens when you own your own business, especially this type of business. It's demanding."

"Stop whining." Darlene whacked Jeff's closest arm with one of the red and silver back-scratchers from the gag gift display. "What Devon's really saying is that he feels he always comes second in your life after the store, and that he wants to know he comes first."

"Ow! How do you know that? And why doesn't he just say so?" Jeff rubbed at his arm and glared at the kid hovering by the shoe charms. Teenage male with a couple of ear and facial piercings, baggy coat and some video game advertised on his T-shirt. Ten to one the little punk was planning to shoplift.

"And it's only one day out of the year. What difference does it make?" Jeff wondered if he was trying to convince Darlene or himself.

Darlene shrugged. "He doesn't say anything because he wants you to know without him having to say anything. Don't you *know* anything? Besides, are you telling me your relationship is fine the rest of the year?"

Jeff glared even harder at the kid across the store. It was easier than looking at Darlene. Since when did Dr. Phil start wearing lipstick and nail polish? "Excuse me for not wearing my mind-reading hat."

"Don't be such a guy." Darlene tapped one red nail against her lips. Even Jeff could tell it was a perfect match to her lipstick. How did women get that nail and lip stuff to match anyway?

"Earth to Darlene: I am a guy." Jeff started walking in the direction of the teenager who was just standing in front of one of the displays, surreptitiously looking around. Jeff was sure it was

surreptitious and there was something off about that big, baggy coat. Never mind it was February and snowing.

"You know what I mean." Darlene sniffed as she followed him out from behind the counter. "Okay then. What's your biggest complaint about your relationship?"

"Right now I'd have to say it's friends asking me annoying questions." Jeff grunted as suddenly the kid looked up. Blue eyes streaked with dark eyeliner widened as they registered Jeff's approach. With a squeak the teenager dropped the stuffed gorilla he was pretending to look at and turned to run out of the store.

"Damn." Jeff swore as the kid made it out the door, whatever he was carrying under the jacket setting off the scanners at the entrance before Jeff could catch up to him. Who said profiling didn't work?

Jeff told himself it was the designer athletic shoes that had given the punk the advantage and not the lack of stamina on his part. "I think I'm going to have to hire some undercover security for the holidays."

"Stop ignoring me and answer the question," Darlene grumbled as she reset the scanner.

"Fine." Jeff threw his hands up in exasperation. "I just don't understand. When did everything become such work? I mean, we were fine. Things were fine and then Devon has to get all distant and all of a sudden I want things I never did before. Why can't everything just be the way it used to be?" JEFF slumped farther down on the leather couch and tried not to look at the picture of him and Devon taken their first year together; the two of them caught and framed—frozen forever in that singular moment of happiness—on the end table.

He clutched his half-empty beer tighter in his hand and tried to focus on the figures running up and down the miniature basketball court on the television in front of him, instead of the photo album that had somehow been left laying on the couch instead of in the bookcase where it belonged.

Why did Darlene have to go on about all this relationship stuff anyway? Jeff was perfectly happy ignoring the problems he and Devon were having. It was easier than trying to do anything about them. Certainly every time he tried to bring it up he only seemed to make things worse.

He couldn't even point out a specific time where he could say things had actually changed. Jeff closed his eyes and let his head fall against the back of the couch, ignoring the album open beside him. It just seemed that all of a sudden they were too busy to see each other and too busy to have sex. Any nights they might be home at the same time were spent with Devon on his computer working and Jeff right here on the couch, beer in hand and whatever sport he could find on the television.

It wasn't like that in the beginning of their relationship. The problem then had been keeping their hands off each other. Jeff opened his eyes and slid farther down the couch, the forgotten beer resting between his spread thighs as he reached out to the album beside his leg and traced the curve of Devon's cheek in the photo of the two of them hiking. He could remember a time in their relationship when Devon

would happily lay with him on the couch, his feet resting in Jeff's lap or moving seductively against his calf.

Jeff used to spend hours just looking at him, admiring the length of neck exposed as Devon's head fell back against the armrest or the hint of chest hair that peeked from the open buttons of Devon's shirt. Even Devon's feet had been fascinating; with long toes and high arches that Jeff would rub until Devon closed his gray eyes and shivered with pleasure.

He couldn't seem to stop touching Devon back then either. Maybe a hug when he passed him in the kitchen, a kiss on the back of the neck when Devon was working at his computer. Simple, pleasurable touches to express the overflowing of love he felt.

Now it seemed like there was a wall between them and every time he reached out for the lover he remembered, Jeff was faced with a stranger. Was Darlene right? Did Devon feel he came second now in Jeff's life and his lack of response was the outward sign of his unhappiness?

Jeff knew he had a tendency to be obsessive and he was the first to admit he had lost track of things as he focused on starting his own business. Vast chunks of time had passed without his realizing it and suddenly it was a couple of years later and he was older, more tired, and more than a few pounds heavier.

At first Devon had been understanding and interested in the new business startup. With Devon traveling more and more with each new promotion, it didn't seem to matter as much that Jeff was working late every night and they didn't have time to work out or go for walks together or to the movies like they used to.

They just did what every couple did when this stuff came up: they adjusted. They compromised. If Devon was traveling it meant nightly phone calls and phone sex instead of snuggly couch time. That had been kind of hot and interesting for a while. Then his business had taken a downturn and Jeff was working even later and Devon was asleep (and alone, Jeff hoped but never asked) in his hotel bed before Jeff ever got back to their apartment.

They had both assumed it was all only temporary, or so they had told each other, but once business picked back up the habit of only

talking once a week or so when Devon was out of town had become ingrained. Jeff took a long swallow of his beer. It all seemed so pathetic when he stopped and took a look at it.

The distance between the two of them had grown because they had allowed it. Hell, he had even encouraged it in some ways. Was this why people made such a big deal about celebrating those calendar holidays? Could those little milestones in life that he had been so sure didn't matter, and had convinced Devon had no meaning, honestly make that much difference in keeping them connected?

Jeff didn't want to think about that tonight. Instead, he wanted to remember the way things used to be and the lover he used to have. Jeff closed his eyes even tighter, refusing to let them focus on the lonely emptiness of their apartment.

If he just concentrated he could imagine Devon was here with him, his head a dark and heavy weight in Jeff's lap, just like it had been the very first night they had gotten together. They had met through mutual friends, a dinner out and an evening that neither man had wanted to end.

Jeff had liked Devon's quick wit and ready laughter as well as his tight and rounded ass and the flat plane of his stomach that had begged for the touch of Jeff's hand. He still wasn't sure what it was about himself that had caught Devon's attention, although Devon had always told Jeff he was the smartest man he'd ever met. Jeff had to admit that he had certainly been in better shape back then, before the twin demons of stress and work had taken their toll.

They had ended up back at Devon's apartment that first night. A few beers later and they had been on this very same couch, close enough to feel the heat given off by each other's skin but not close enough to touch. Not yet.

Jeff couldn't remember the name of the movie they had watched, though he knew Devon probably could. It was something playing late that night on the cable science fiction channel. Devon, it seemed, was a connoisseur of what he called bad science fiction, and his humorous commentary had flowed easily over Jeff's head.

All Jeff remembered was the breathless thrill of anticipation, the electricity of the moment when Devon had swung his legs up on the

couch and let his head find a resting spot on Jeff's thigh and how utterly right that had felt.

Jeff had let his fingers stroke slowly through Devon's short dark hair. It had been softer than any he could remember touching, warm and curling around his fingers in welcome while Devon had just kept on talking as if nothing was happening.

His hand had moved down to Devon's throat, the skin warmer under his palm, soft and slightly rough with shadowy stubble. Jeff had felt dizzy, dazed by the sound of Devon's voice in his ear and the feel of his skin under his hand. Devon's head had shifted, the weight moving closer to Jeff's fly and the suddenly aching cock that stiffened beneath it.

It had been a short distance from the warmth of Devon's neck to the open neck of his shirt, short strokes of Jeff's hand tracing the beating pulse of Devon's heart down into the rougher hair on his chest. Jeff could still feel the excitement that had shot through him as he felt Devon's nipple hardening beneath his furtive caress.

The pad of his thumb had moved in smaller circles, brushing again and again over the small, tightening nub as the flow of words finally stopped and Devon's eyes met his, glistening in the flickering light of the television screen.

Jeff had held his breath at the first tentative touch of Devon's lips on his jaw. The sensation at first had been so delicate that Jeff thought he imagined it. His back had arched in response and Jeff had let his head drop lower, falling closer to Devon's slightly chapped lips. The better to feel the soft butterfly kisses that traced their way across his neck, each caress warmer and more confident, a welcome tease against the frantic, pulsing vein under his ear.

He had finally exhaled when Devon's hand had reached up and tangled in his hair, pulling free with a tug of pain Jeff barely noticed as the fingers traced the curve of his ear before pulling Jeff's head even closer. His tongue had licked slowly at Jeff's lower lip and Jeff had felt the heat, the fire in his gut burning even hotter at the bite of Devon's teeth.

The rest was a blur of sensation as Jeff's body had collapsed down onto the couch. Devon's strong hands had caressed the skin under the back of his shirt, one reaching up to the back of Jeff's neck, the other curving over his ass, the fingers biting in his firm flesh and molding his willing body even closer against Devon.

Jeff trembled as he recalled the press of Devon's hard cock through the fabric of his jeans, the thick ridge pulsing against the jut of his own when Devon's legs splayed open in welcome. He had been unable to disguise the shudder that had traveled through him at that first touch, running from his neck to his tailbone, thrusting him closer, rubbing him against Devon even while he had gasped at the intensity of need that filled him.

"I want you," Devon had rumbled, the words indistinct as he rubbed his open mouth against Jeff's shoulder, lips moving the neck of Jeff's T-shirt out of the way so he could lick and suck at the exposed collarbone. Jeff's world had spun, his guts clenching as Devon moved them, twisting up and over until Jeff lay pinned beneath his weight.

Snaps had unsnapped, the shining teeth of zippers falling open as they had fumbled through the confining layers, panting and breathless and laughing until at the first touch of heated flesh upon heated flesh they had groaned instead. Jeff remembered how he couldn't help but trail his hand over the paleness of Devon's hip, the skin soft, the firm buttock flexing beneath the grasp of his fingers.

The rest had been fevered madness as their lips had met for the first time. Devon had demanded possession of Jeff's mouth, his kiss searching and deep and so damn hot Jeff had thought he was going to dissolve beneath it. They had moaned and murmured incoherently, words muffled, lips pressed back against teeth as their hands met and joined their straining cocks into one slick and throbbing unit.

Their hips had flexed, hands moving up and down in unison until the pressure built and their bodies had arched together and hot liquid spilled between them, coating their hands and clothing, and Devon had buried his face in Jeff's neck.

"Hell." Jeff opened his eyes and stared down at his lap. The spilled beer was cold and sticky as it seeped through his jeans and dribbled over the photo album, which fell with a dull thud against the floor as Jeff left his memories behind and faced the empty reality before him. He didn't know why they had let things go so wrong between that

night and now, but he was afraid he was going to have to find a way to change or risk losing Devon forever.

V

THE fresh covering of snow crunched under his feet as Jeff trudged from the outside mailbox back to the door of their apartment. More snow had fallen while he had been at work. The fresh covering hid the tracks he had made earlier that morning and left behind a fresh and undisturbed surface that sparkled in the streetlights.

Jeff fumbled with his glove; he couldn't manage to find the right key with the bulky covering and finally pushed open the apartment door. It was dark inside and quiet. Devon still wasn't home, then, despite the messages Jeff had left on his phone. Jeff sighed. Darlene had warned him it might be an uphill battle but he hadn't wanted to believe her.

He'd faced the fact that things hadn't been the best between them lately, but Jeff had still hoped that Devon would make it home in time for Valentine's Day. It was, after all, the most important day in any relationship if he believed all the advertising he displayed so prominently. He had even made an effort, no matter how hectic things had been at the store, to leave Devon a message every day letting him know how much he missed him. Kind of like what Devon used to do for him.

Jeff sighed again as he thought of the tickets to the Mexican resort he had carefully left displayed on the kitchen table. Looked like they were going to go to waste and his attempt to salvage their relationship was a bust. He didn't know what to do next.

He had spent hours in between customers asking Darlene for advice, fighting against the distance that had developed between him and Devon with his attempts to reach out and show Devon how much it meant to have him in his life. It had meant growing up and pushing away his own feelings to focus instead on what he could do to make Devon feel loved. As Darlene had told him, he had to give love to receive love.

By the time he had managed to get his coat and boots off and tossed over the nearest chair in the kitchen, Jeff had to wonder if there was even much of a relationship left to salvage. Or was it all just memories at this point? Moments of time that had no meaning beyond the photos he had e-mailed Devon in an effort to remind him of the way things had been, the way things could be again if they only tried?

For all Devon's complaints about Jeff's workaholic tendencies (part of owning your own business, Jeff still justified to himself), it appeared that business was more important to Devon this year than Jeff was. Devon hadn't even responded to his voice mails or e-mails. Jeff felt an icy core of fear inside him. Was this was how Devon had felt over the years when Jeff had failed to respond to his efforts? Why then had he stayed?

Jeff stared disconsolately into the chilly interior of the refrigerator. Not much there but some half-empty takeout containers. He hadn't bothered to cook, what with the hours he had worked training the temporary staff in preparation to take the next week off. It didn't matter, as nothing looked good. There was nothing there he wanted.

To be honest, the only thing Jeff wanted was the one thing it appeared he wasn't going to get. An understanding hug and a smile from the Devon he used to know would have made his whole sorry week just a little better.

Of course, Jeff couldn't ignore how deep down he had been counting on coming home to a romantic and candlelit apartment. Maybe an open bottle or two of wine, and best of all a naked Devon, eager to greet him as a result of Jeff's outpouring of emotion over the phone and e-mail.

Somehow Jeff had managed to convince himself that Devon was as eager to reconcile their differences as he was; or at least, if Jeff were honest, more susceptible to a few romantic efforts. But since nothing he had wished for was waiting for him, he might as well just go to bed. Jeff let the refrigerator door shut with a bang and went into the bedroom, turning on the light switch before stripping his long-sleeved tee off over his head. "What?" The query was followed by a hacking cough and Jeff fell back against the wall, stumbling over the pair of shoes that had been left in the middle of the floor, his head trapped in the cotton of his shirt.

"Devon?" Jeff said, afraid to hope. He peeled the rest of the shirt away from his face and stared at the bed.

Instead of a lover seductively displayed against the sheets, there was a huddled lump under the blankets. Tufts of dark hair were all that were visible before the mass of covers shifted and Jeff could see flushed cheeks, glassy eyes, and the unmistakable sight of a white tissue—the ends of which were shoved up Devon's red and peeling nose and left to dangle down over his face.

Jeff's nose twitched as the heavy, eucalyptus scent of mentholated rub came billowing up from the nest of blankets. He had hated that smell ever since his mother covered him with it when he was a kid, but Devon swore it was the only thing that helped him breathe when he was sick. It wasn't even close to the romantic candle scent Jeff had been looking for. "Are you okay?"

"I'bm sibck." At least, that's what Jeff thought Devon said beneath the covering of tissue. It was hard to tell, as rough and nasal as the voice that issued from the mentholated depths sounded. Another round of deep coughs followed and Devon fell back against the pillows and groaned. "Sinus infebshon and my chesb hurbs."

"You don't sound so good," Jeff had to agree.

"B'is sucks. I was hobing I'd be bebber and you'b been so sweeb and lefb me all thobe messages." Devon coughed again and dragged the tissue from his nose, using it to try and blow out the congestion as Jeff climbed up on the bed. "I didn'b wanb youb to see me like thib."

"I was worried when you didn't call me back." Jeff pushed the sweaty hanks of hair away from Devon's face, feeling the unmistakable heat of a high fever under his hands. His poor baby was in a bad way.

"Trying to finib early and geb a flib back." Devon grabbed another tissue from the box on the bed beside him and sneezed into it, wiping his face before pressing his aching forehead against Jeff's hand. "I missed you so mub."

"I missed you too," Jeff murmured as he looked down at Devon's flushed complexion. "For a lot longer than just this past week." He was amazed at how little it seemed to matter that Devon was all congested and sick; that wasn't what he saw when he looked down at the figure pitifully huddled under the blankets.

What Jeff saw was once again the attractive, humorous, and caring man he fell in love with years ago. Devon was here in their bed where he belonged and that was all that mattered to Jeff in light of his new revelations. "I'm so sorry I've been a jerk lately and took what we had for granted."

"Youb nob been a jerb." Devon blew his nose again, his words momentarily easier to understand. "Youb been so romantic."

"I have, haven't I?" Jeff pulled Devon up against him, resting the tousled head against his shoulder and enjoying the feeling of holding his lover close against him until Devon jabbed him in the stomach with his elbow. "Hey, what was that for?"

"Thab was for before bis weeb." Devon's garbled words were followed by another cough, the sound rough and jagged, his flat stomach jerking beneath Jeff's caressing hands. "When youb were a jerb."

"And what about you?" Jeff couldn't help but ask. "It takes two, you know."

"I dibn thinb you lobed me anymobe." Devon turned his face into Jeff's armpit, the heat from his skin causing Jeff to start sweating. "You dibn thinb aboub anybing but the store."

"Things just got lost." Jeff ran his hand down the side of Devon's face before he picked up the jar of rub and opened it, smearing the hated and greasy substance over his fingers and massaging it carefully into Devon's hair-roughened chest and neck. "I'm sorry."

He could feel the tension in Devon's body release as he pressed gently into the tight muscles. "I'll try to do better. I'll make a point to remind you how much I love you on every single one of those little holidays I used to ignore. Hell, I'll even make up some more just for us."

"Be toob," Devon sighed, his words tired and drowsy and congested as his eyes closed and he gave in to his exhaustion and the

comforting feeling of Jeff's cool hands on his fevered skin. "Thab feebs so goob."

"Get some sleep," Jeff said, resting his hand on Devon's throat and feeling the warm pulse beneath his fingers. He silently promised to remember this moment. He felt so lucky that Devon had come home to him. How could he have lost track of how complete loving Devon made him feel? "We need you to get better. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"kay." Devon smiled drowsily. While this wasn't how he had imagined their reunion, it was almost worth being sick to have Jeff take care of him like this. He felt safe and loved for what seemed like the first time in ages as Jeff held him close and whispered how much he had missed him. The steamy make-up sex could come later.

He rubbed his aching head against Jeff, happier than he might have thought it possible to hear his lover's strong heartbeat beneath his ear and know it beat steadily for him. Devon pressed his lips against Jeff's chest and vowed to come up with a special way to thank Darlene for all her help once he could actually manage to think again.

Devon could only bless her for being such a willing coconspirator. It had all worked beautifully and Jeff was positive that his change of heart was all his own idea. Devon tightened his grip around Jeff's waist and sneezed loudly, comforted by the touch of Jeff's hand against his forehead. Darlene had been right. Jeff still loved him; he had just needed help remembering that it was the littlest milestones in life that needed to be celebrated, not just the big ones.

The joke in Chrissy Munder's family is that she was born with a book in her hand. Even now, you'll never find her without a book or seven scattered about. Forced to become a practicing realist in an effort to combat her tendency to dream, her many years of travel and a diverse assortment of careers have taken her across most of the U.S. and shown her that there are two things you can never have enough of: love and laughter.

Visit Chrissy's website at http://www.chrissymunder.com

Chrissy Munder

Under Protest



G.S. Wiley

Under Protest

FEBRUARY was cold in New York City.

It was even colder in a big, open Greenwich Village loft where no one had paid the heating bill in at least two months. As Bobby stepped out of bed, the frigid air hit him like a slap to the face, not to mention other, even more sensitive parts of his body. Shivering, he pulled one of the big old patchwork quilts off the bed. It was stained yellow with nicotine, sweat, and other things Bobby didn't want to think about and smelled of human bodies and weed. He wrapped it around himself and dragged it along the dirty floor to the other side of the apartment.

Someone he didn't recognize was sitting at the card table in the kitchen, a curtain of blond hair over her, or possibly his, face. From the lumps on the person's chest beneath its tie-dyed T-shirt, Bobby assumed it was a woman, and when he reached for the door of their icebox, she said, "The milk is bad," in a relatively high-pitched voice.

"Thanks." Bobby could smell it from there. He took out the milk bottle, trying not to gag as he looked at the bluish milk inside. He emptied it into the sink, washing a couple of cockroaches down with it, and looked around for something to eat. There was nothing, so he asked, "Have you seen Mike?"

The woman pushed her hair aside, giving Bobby a brief glimpse of her face. He vaguely remembered passing a reefer to her the night before, as he and Mike and the usual group of disciples who clustered in the loft sat talking politics.

"He's in the war room," the woman said. Why Mike, the fiercest anti-Vietnam war protestor Bobby had ever known—and in Greenwich Village, that was no mean feat—called his center of anti-war operations the War Room had always escaped Bobby. But Mike was nothing if not dedicated to his cause, and when Bobby went into the small, windowless bedroom, scattering cockroaches in his wake, he saw Mike hunched over a table with Nat Wilkens and a couple of his Black Panther friends, including the white, wild-eyed Carl.

"Good morning."

"Hey, Bobby." Mike barely glanced over his shoulder. Bobby never went into the war room, and Mike never expected him to. "You're coming to the protest this afternoon, right?"

"Sure." Bobby always went. Mike's protests were harmless enough: Mike got himself all riled up yelling into a megaphone, hippies cheered and police dogs barked, and then they would all go home. Later, he and Mike would have truly mind-blowing sex, because nothing turned Mike on like a successful protest. Bobby wasn't sure what they were going to do when the war finally ended, but he assumed Mike would easily find something else to rail against. He was that kind of guy.

Bobby wasn't a socially conscious left-wing radical like Mike, an angry Black Panther fighting for Martin Luther King Junior's dream like Nat, or a blissful, guitar-playing hippie like Sasha or Jasmine or the others who cycled through the apartment on a regular basis, leaving a handful of coins or a beaded shawl or an intricately carved piece of California driftwood as a contribution to the rent. Bobby was a writer, and living with Mike and his assortment of friends gave him a look into humanity he knew he would never have had if he'd stayed home with his mother in Brooklyn.

Bobby had an old typewriter set up in the bedroom, next to the mattress where he slept with Mike, if Mike didn't stay up all night printing fliers or writing speeches or brushing up on his Marx, as he often did. There were always a million things Mike wanted to do, and at least a thousand he felt like he had to. He was constantly besieged by admirers, male and female, but Bobby never worried Mike would cheat on him; he just didn't have the time.

Bobby sat in front of the typewriter for a while, willing inspiration to come. He'd published a poem in *The Village Voice* and an "allegorical political story" called "Dick and the Beanstalk" in a little magazine typeset and mimeographed by one of Mike's friends, but his true ambition was to write a novel.

He had twelve pages so far. The main character was a writer living in a Greenwich Village loft with his leftist radical girlfriend, but that was as far as he'd gotten. Bobby gazed out the window, typed a couple of words, immediately crossed them out with a temperamental ballpoint pen, and went to take a shower.

The bathroom was down the hall from the loft and shared by all the tenants on the floor. Bobby waited, his slightly damp towel in his hand, deciphering the graffiti scratched around the pay phone, until the door opened and Mrs. Thomas emerged. She was an elderly woman who claimed to be an ex-Broadway star and wore stiletto heels that left stab marks in the worn-down wooden floors. At the moment, she had her hair wrapped up in a flowered towel, and after she'd simpered at Bobby a little, she teetered into her apartment and he went into the bathroom.

The shower had all the water pressure of a dribbling elephant. Bobby stood beneath the tepid, rust-colored water until he was somewhat clean, then he looked at himself in the dented mirror. His dark hair had grown out and hung shaggily, almost touching his shoulders. He knew his family would disapprove if they could see him now. His mother would never come out and say anything directly—she wasn't that kind of person—but the last time he'd gone to see her in Brooklyn, she'd said, "Last time you were here, Mrs. DiFranco next door asked me if I had a niece visiting, Robert," and looked at him meaningfully.

Bobby combed his hair out of his eyes and ran his bristly toothbrush over his teeth. He'd learned to keep it, and his soap, washcloth, and anything else he didn't want to become communal property next to his bed, and he returned it there when he was finished, stashing the bag in the plastic carton that served as shelving beside the mattress. He was about to sit down at the typewriter again, hopefully get a good start on the two thousand words per day he'd set as a personal goal, when he heard Mike call "Let's go, Bobby!"

THERE was something claustrophobic about a march, about being surrounded on all sides by people whipped up into a passionate political frenzy. Mike liked it. "That's the beauty of the march, Bobby," he'd said once. "Everyone coming together for a common purpose." He didn't understand the uneasiness Bobby sometimes felt when he looked around and found himself in the middle of a sea of faceless humanity, all surging in the same direction.

This march was a big one. Mike had been hoping a thousand protestors or more would descend on Times Square to remind everyone of the senseless, ceaseless war in Vietnam, and it looked like he was going to get his wish. As usually, Bobby was in the middle of it all. He'd started the march beside Mike, but Mike had been swept to the front of the pack. Bobby could hear him now, chanting taunts at LBJ from his megaphone a quarter of a mile in front of them.

Bobby himself was stuck between two dreadlock-sporting teenagers, both of whom smelled strongly of reefer and too much time spent without a shower. They were laughing and enjoying themselves. Bobby glanced past them and saw a line of helmeted police officers and dogs lining the street, the officers staring from behind riot masks and the dogs straining on the ends of their leashes. Mike would be happy, he thought. If a march was big enough to get the cops into their riot gear, he reasoned, then it was big enough to attract attention from the right people and maybe make a difference.

Bobby was considering how he might be able to work a scene like this into the first chapter of his novel when a short sharp shot split the air. He didn't know what it was, at first, and it was almost immediately followed by a scream from the teenagers beside him. He turned to look at them, and, just like that, the people behind him began to surge forward.

Bobby's little brother Jack had always been a fan of nature documentaries. Bobby remembered spending many nights sitting in front of the television in their living room, watching scenes of stalking cheetahs or stampeding wildebeest with Jack. In an instant, the march turned from peaceful protest to wildebeest stampede. There were more cracks and bangs, which, belatedly, Bobby realized were gunfire. Mike's voice abruptly disappeared from the megaphone and people began to run in every direction. The girl beside him tripped against the curb, and as Bobby bent to help her up, he came face-to-face with a cop.

It was chaos. Amid the screams and the running, someone had set off a canister of gas. As Bobby began to cough, he realized exactly who was standing in front of him, half-invisible in the gray cloud of smoke and hidden behind a cop's mask.

"Jim?" Bobby asked, choking.

"Bobby?" The cop's eyes grew wide above the gas mask, and Bobby's eyes blurred with stinging tears.

BOBBY had been to the police station before, usually when he had to go and bail out Mike. He never enjoyed that, and it was even worse, he found, to be on the other side of the bars, especially in this state. The police had halfheartedly washed out his eyes, but they still felt like they were on fire, and Bobby's throat burned painfully every time he swallowed.

After they'd rinsed off the tear gas, Bobby had been fingerprinted and photographed. He was pretty sure that wasn't a photo he'd want to see on the back of his book jackets when he was a famous author. They led him into a cell with about thirty other people, and the door slammed shut behind him. "Where's Mike?" Bobby asked the harassed-looking young guy in uniform who sometimes rushed by the bars. "The leader. Michael Burgess."

"You'll get your phone call when we have time," was the cop's inevitable response, and eventually Bobby stopped asking.

Slowly, the cell began to empty. Every few minutes, a cop would come and unlock the door, call a name and escort the grubby hippie or the scowling Black Panther out. Finally, just as Bobby was wondering how he was going to work this particular experience into his novel, Jim appeared on the other side of the bars.

Bobby hadn't seen him in ten years, but, despite the uniform, he was still easily recognizable. He smiled a little, the same half-smile Jim had always had, and said, "Robert Abraham Katz?" like he didn't know who he was looking for.

"That's me." Bobby stood up. He could tell from the look in Jim's eyes that he knew exactly who he was, but he didn't say anything. Jim unlocked the cell, and said, "If you would kindly follow me, sir." Bobby walked with Jim through the station and out the back door, into a parking lot full of squad cars. Jim went over to one and held the back door open for Bobby. Jim shut the door behind him and got into the driver's seat.

They drove in silence for what seemed like hours. Bobby began to feel a knot of nerves forming in the pit of his stomach. It was Jim, he was sure of that, but he was also a cop. Bobby had never thought much about cops one way or the other until he met Mike, but Mike had dozens of anecdotes exemplifying the brutish, mindless violence of the "pigs," and he was more than happy to share them at every opportunity.

Bobby remembered the tear gas—he could hardly forget, since he was probably going to be tasting it for the rest of his life—and the sound of the gunshots at the protest when Jim suddenly stopped the car. He backed up into an abandoned lot, between two run-down buildings and sealed off with a high chain-link fence. Just the kind of place, Bobby thought, where you could easily dump a body. His heart pounded while Jim got out of the car and walked around to his side. He opened the door next to Bobby and bent down, so he was at eye-level with Bobby. Bobby held his breath until Jim's face broke into a grin and he gathered Bobby into a tight, warm hug.

"You son of a bitch, Bobby," Jim said, when he pulled away. He grinned and, at once, Bobby felt like he was back in high school again. "What the hell are you doing with this bunch of idiots?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Bobby said, but he couldn't help himself. He hugged Jim again.

BOBBY'S father, Abraham Katz, was a Reform rabbi at the Beth Israel synagogue in Brooklyn. He died of pancreatic cancer on Labor Day, 1962, which just happened to be the day before Bobby started his senior year at Roosevelt High. His friends knew, of course, and so did anyone who went to Beth Israel, but Bobby tried not to make his father's death common knowledge at school.

The principal, Mr. Westermeyer, knew. He'd been at the funeral. When Bobby and his little brother Jack started school a week after everyone else, they were called out of class to sit in Mr. Westermeyer's office and hear about what a "great man your father was" and how "the entire staff is ready to give you and your family a supportive shoulder at this very difficult time in your lives."

These bland condolences meant less than nothing to Bobby, who only wanted to get back to Mrs. Mifflin's English class and catch up on *The Grapes of Wrath*. Jack, on the other hand, nodded thoughtfully. Over the course of the school year, he and Mr. Westermeyer had developed a close relationship based on their mutual love of large African animals. They still kept in touch, even now that Jack was doing his PhD in zoology at Stanford, and Bobby knew Mr. Westermeyer had helped Jack a lot that first year without their father.

He hadn't helped Bobby. Nothing had, really. He spent his days studying and his evenings writing bad teenage poetry, listening to Elvis and mouthing off to his mother. Then, one day a week or so before the Thanksgiving break, a guy Bobby barely knew approached him at his locker.

Bobby had seen Jim Darnell around before. They had a couple of classes together, chemistry this term and wood shop last, but they didn't speak to each other. Bobby hung around with the kids in the creative writing club, the freaks, and the beatniks. Jim was friends with the athletes and the cheerleaders in the pink poodle skirts. So when Jim came over between third and fourth periods and said "Hi," Bobby was surprised he was even speaking to him.

"Hi," Bobby said, wondering what this was leading up to.

Jim looked around. The hallway was packed; on the other side of Bobby's locker, two girls were giggling over someone's Elvis poster. "Listen, can we talk?"

"What about?"

Jim looked uncomfortable. "Meet me at the library after school, okay? Please?"

For a moment, Bobby wondered if Jim planned to beat him up, which would have been unusual for him, personally, but not unusual for guys like him. But Bobby was curious, and anyway, he thought, it was the library. There wasn't much that could happen there. When Bobby got there after school, the elderly librarian gave him a smile and he headed over to the study carrels in the corner.

Fifteen minutes, he decided. He would wait for fifteen minutes, and then he would leave. He even used the time wisely, taking out his algebra textbook and staring blankly at the Xs and Ys in an alphabet soup of an equation until Jim came in and sat down beside him.

He was wearing a varsity basketball letter jacket and jeans and, while Bobby would never have admitted it to anyone, he couldn't deny Jim was handsome. Bobby had been noticing handsome boys for as long as he could remember, and for equally long, he'd known that wasn't the kind of thing you mentioned. Instead, he joined his friends in admiring the black turtleneck-wearing girls of the school, and he didn't admire his friends at all.

"I heard your dad died," Jim said, as he took a seat.

Bobby blinked at him. "In September." More than two months ago, although his mother still laid a place for him at dinner every night.

"I lost my mom three weeks ago."

"I'm sorry." Bobby meant it. This wasn't something he'd wish on his worst enemy, and Jim Darnell was far from that. Even after two months without his dad, Bobby was still seized by incredible grief, often at the strangest of times. He missed his father most, he found, when his mother let him skip going to the synagogue on a Friday, which Dad would have never allowed, and when Jack wanted him to play catch the way Dad had.

Jim shrugged and looked away, fixing his eyes on the *Encyclopedia Americana* in the reference section. "So I thought maybe we could hang out sometime."

Bobby wasn't sure what to say. "All right," seemed the most polite response, so he went with that, even though he couldn't see what he and Jim could possibly have in common beyond a dead parent.

"You want to go to the football game on Friday night?" Jim asked.

If his father had been alive, that would have been an unequivocal no. Friday was synagogue night, and it always had been. But his father wasn't around anymore, and, a little unsurely, Bobby said, "Okay." Jim nodded, stood up, and left the library.

Bobby had never been to a football game before. As soon as he got there and saw the herds of people huddling in their blankets on the stands, the marching band warming up and the cheerleaders stamping their feet, he thought about turning around and going home again. Then he saw Jim, sitting by himself halfway up the stands. He was surrounded by people Bobby recognized from the hallways at school, but he wasn't talking to any of them. When he saw Bobby, he waved, and Bobby headed over to him.

Bobby knew nothing about sports. In Little League, he'd been the kid who stood in the outfield picking dandelions even when his team was up to bat. When he hit high school, he became the one who kept his head down, avoided eye contact, and tried not to get injured while the more athletic kids lobbed dodge balls and whacked tennis rackets around dangerously.

Still, Bobby listened while Jim tried to explain the endless whistling, stopping, and occasional running taking place on the field below. "You really don't know football?" He asked, disbelieving.

"It's not really my thing."

Jim looked at him. "So what's your thing, then?"

"Writing." Bobby didn't talk about it much, outside the creative writing club and his circle of like-minded friends. He half-expected Jim to laugh at him; instead, he looked interested.

"Like books and stuff?"

"Short stories. Poetry." He felt awkward admitting it.

"You had anything published?"

Bobby shook his head. "Not yet. Unless you count the Rosh Hashanah acrostic poem they printed in the synagogue newsletter when I was twelve."

"I would," Jim said, seemingly serious. "That's swell." He didn't sound sarcastic.

They watched the game, and Jim tried to explain what was going on. All the while, Bobby waited for the other shoe to drop, for Jim to abandon him for his usual friends, or laugh at him, or something more in line with what his kind of people usually did. Jim didn't do anything. When the game was over and a perky blonde bobbysoxer asked, "Hey, are you coming to the soda fountain?" Jim shook his head and walked with Bobby through the freezing dark streets of Brooklyn to his house.

When they got there, the light was still on in Jack's bedroom. Bobby could picture his little brother hiding under his covers, reading up on the mating habits of the lesser-spotted owl or something, when Jim said, "If I wrote something sometime, do you think you could take a look at it?"

"Sure." Bobby hoped Jim wouldn't be insulted by the surprise in his voice. "If you want me to, I guess."

Jim smiled a full-on, orthodontist's dream of straight white teeth. "Thanks, Bobby." He clapped Bobby on the shoulder, a manly slap that left Bobby's shoulder sore, but not unpleasantly so. Then he left. When he'd disappeared around the corner, Bobby let himself into the house, paused briefly when he heard his mother sniffling behind her closed bedroom door, then went into his room and shut his door.

NOW, ten years later, Jim looked different, but the smile was the same.

"What have you been up to lately?" Bobby asked, although he could take a pretty good guess from the uniform. The uniform that, Bobby had to admit, didn't look half-bad on Jim.

Jim laughed. "Rounding up hippies like you. You still writing?"

Bobby nodded. "I had a poem published in *The Village Voice*." That was nearly two years ago, but he doubted Jim was a regular subscriber. "I'm working on a novel at the moment," Bobby added.

Still, Jim looked impressed. "That's swell," he said and, for a moment, Bobby was transported back to the night in 1962 when Jim had walked him home from the football game.

There was a long, awkward pause. A dog barked hysterically in one of the nearby buildings, and Bobby glanced up as a cluster of laughing children raced past the alley on rusty bicycles.

"Can I take you back to Brooklyn?" Jim finally asked.

Bobby shook his head. "I live in the Village now."

"Oh." Jim seemed like he wanted to say more, but he didn't.

Bobby pressed on. "Do you know what happened to Mike?"

"Mike?" Jim looked blank.

"Michael Burgess. He was marching at the front of the protest. Probably the guy with the megaphone."

Jim frowned. "The son of a bitch who threw the Molotov cocktail?"

Bobby blinked. "I don't think so." That didn't sound like Mike. He believed in peaceful demonstrations; Mahatma Gandhi was his hero.

Jim shrugged. "We made over a dozen arrests, but I could check into it for you," he offered. He took a card out of his pocket and scribbled a number on the back, then handed it to Bobby.

Bobby took it. "Thanks."

Jim smiled, and reached out again. This time, his hand landed on Bobby's shoulder; it felt warm and strong, even through Bobby's thick winter coat. "It's great seeing you again, Bobby."

Bobby smiled. "You, too." He was surprised at how sincerely he meant it.

Jim dropped Bobby off a few blocks from his apartment. It was full of people, strangers and people Bobby recognized as friends of Mike's, weeping, swearing, or doing both at once.

"God damn fucking pigs," wailed the woman who'd shared Bobby's reefer the night before and his breakfast table this morning.

"We need to show them what we can do," added Carl, another friend of Mike's who always wore a chest full of army medals he'd bought at a pawn shop in Chelsea, as Bobby came into the apartment. "We need to take action!"

"What do you mean?" Bobby asked. He was worried about Mike, of course, but Mike had been locked up a dozen times before. He was sure that in an hour or two, Jim or another officer would phone and Bobby would go down and bail him out again.

G.S. Wiley

"It's time we show them we won't stand for their oppression!" Carl replied, a zealousness Bobby hadn't seen before coming to his eyes.

"I don't think...."

"Weren't you there today?"

"Of course I was." Bobby could still feel the sting of the gas at the back of his throat to prove it.

"Then you should agree with me. They need to know we won't take this lying down." Carl reached into his khaki-colored army surplus jacket and pulled out a revolver.

Bobby stared at it, shining black metal in Carl's slightly shaking hand. He had never actually seen a gun before, and he felt a bubble of panic rising in his gut. "What happened to peaceful protest? Mike wouldn't have wanted this."

"Mike," Carl said, "knew the time has come for action. If you're not with us, you're against us."

Bobby shook his head. "That's completely spurious reasoning."

Carl stared at him for a minute, then turned away. "If you're serious about change," he addressed everyone else, "then you'll stand with me now. If not, there are plenty of other cowards in this country you can join."

Bobby rolled his eyes, but no one else seemed to think this was hyper-dramatic or overblown. The woman from the breakfast table joined in, raising her fist and bellowing "To arms!" Bobby laughed, but he was alone. Carl and his sidekick left the apartment, and the crowd of Mike's supporters trailed out after them.

Bobby had lived at the apartment for about two months, since he'd met Mike by chance in Central Park. He'd been speaking about the war at the time; of course, it was all Mike ever spoke about, but he'd been so eloquent and poetic about it Bobby had felt compelled to go up and talk to him afterward. There had been a crowd of admirers around him, mostly in dirty caftans and beaded headbands. When he reached Mike, Bobby looked into his big brown eyes and said "You're a really great speaker." It sounded a little less intellectual out loud than it had in Bobby's head. Still, Mike smiled and shook his hand. "Thanks, man. We all have to do our part to end this fucking war."

Bobby hadn't done much up to that point, he had to admit, beyond putting a few coins into the begging bowl of a legless man in an army uniform he'd seen on Broadway. Still, he went to a coffee shop afterward with Mike and some friends, the kind of place that had pictures of Che Guevara and Karl Marx on the walls and the worst coffee Bobby had ever tasted. He admired Mike's conviction and his belief in his cause. Later, he admired a few less cerebral things about Mike, and, by the time they'd known each other a week, it seemed natural for Bobby to leave the crowded Lower East Side tenement he shared with eight other would-be writers and take up residence with the ever-changing crowd at the Greenwich Village loft.

In the past two months, Bobby had never spent any time in the war room. It didn't interest him. Now, alone in the apartment, Bobby went into the war room and looked around.

There was a table in the middle of the room, covered in papers. Most of them were anti-war fliers and posters Mike had nailed to every lamppost and bulletin board in the city, but beneath a pile of "LBJ Is A Murderer" and "Bring Our Boys Home Now" advertisements, Bobby found a stack of hand-drawn plans.

They were detailed, showing shapes and chemical equations and other things Bobby didn't begin to understand. On the bottom of the plans, however, were neatly printed words even Bobby couldn't ignore: "Pipe Bomb—police? White House?"

Still, Bobby thought, it didn't prove anything. Every organization had its share of radicals; Mike knew that, and he worked hard to keep them under control. He certainly would never have had anything to do with this. Bobby put the plans back on the table, and walked around to the chest beneath the window.

It was an ancient steamer trunk, scarred and covered in stickers from places like Miami and Tijuana. It wasn't locked and, with a sense of uneasiness, Bobby lifted the lid.

The uneasiness turned into dread as he saw half a dozen curved Coca-Cola bottles inside the trunk, their necks stuffed with rags and a

G.S. Wiley

gallon jug of turpentine beside them. "The son of a bitch who threw the Molotov cocktail," Jim had said, when Bobby had asked about Mike.

He hadn't believed it then, but the evidence was here, laid out in front of him, and there didn't seem to be any way Bobby could deny it. Mike was a leader; there was no way anyone, even Carl, would have been able to get all this in here without him knowing about it.

Sighing, Bobby shut the trunk and went out into the hallway outside the loft. He picked up the pay phone and, when the operator asked him for the number, he read what Jim had written on the back of the card.

EVEN after the football game, Bobby expected never to hear from Jim again. But Jim kept coming around, meeting Bobby at his locker between classes and sitting at his table in the cafeteria. Bobby's other friends, the turtleneck-wearing beatniks and the aspiring Ginsbergs, started to notice, and one of them, a girl named Jean who wore a black beret and ironed her long hair flat every morning, asked him, "Are you sure Jim's our kind of person, Bobby?"

Bobby felt a sudden, stirring need to defend him. "I don't know about you, Jean," he said, with as much contempt as he could muster, "but I don't limit myself to one kind of friend." His haughty retreat would have been haughtier, Bobby had to admit, if he hadn't tripped over a garbage can and caused two nearby freshmen, as well as the usually humorless Jean, to double over in laughter as he left.

But it was true. Jim was different from Jean and their other friends, but Bobby liked him. When Jim shared the poem he'd written about his mother, a four-stanza schmaltz-fest that could have come out of a Hallmark greeting card, Bobby listened supportively and gave what he hoped was constructive advice. When Jim told him he didn't know how he was going to face Christmas without his mother, Bobby invited him over for one of the nights of Hanukkah.

Having a guest there meant that his mother couldn't descend too far into maudlin grief, like she had the previous nights. She plastered on a smile as she lit the menorah, and when Bobby said, "Golly, Mrs. Katz, these are the best latkes I've ever had," she actually laughed, a sound Bobby hadn't heard since his father went into the hospital for the last time. Suddenly grateful to Jim, Bobby smiled at him over the menorah. Jim smiled back and Bobby felt a sudden flip in his stomach.

Bobby couldn't say that he wasn't attracted to Jim. Jim was good-looking, good-hearted, and smarter than he seemed. He didn't think for a moment that his attraction would be shared in any way, until Valentine's Day.

The Valentine's Formal was one of the highlights of the social season at Roosevelt High. It was the kind of dance where everybody, even those who liked to think they were above such petty teenage trivialities, tried to find a date by the end of January. This year was no different.

Bobby had gone the previous year with a girl from his English class called Deborah Feinstein who was known, cruelly, as "Little Debbie" by some of the meaner cliques of girls because she weighed close to two hundred pounds. She was a good person, though, and a great dancer. At the end of the night, when the bubble machine was being put away and they'd finished swaying to "Love Me Tender," Bobby had to work very hard to convince her it was his fault, and not hers, that he didn't want to kiss her.

Debbie had another date this year, and that meant Bobby had no plans to go to the dance himself. If he'd thought about it at all, he would have assumed Jim was going with one of the cheerleaders, or maybe one of the girls on the Social Committee that organized the dance, spending weeks putting up posters and selling tickets and reminding everyone about it with a kind of manic cheerfulness. Bobby was surprised when, at lunchtime on Valentine's Day, Jim said, "So, you got any plans for tonight?" Bobby shook his head. It was a Thursday; he was probably going to go home and watch nature shows with Jack. "Want to come over to my place?"

Bobby blinked. "You're not going to the Formal?"

Jim shook his head. He didn't offer any further explanation, and Bobby, not sure what else to say, said "Okay."

Bobby knew where Jim lived, but he'd never been inside the house before. It was a dark brick place a few blocks from Bobby's house, and when he got there, Jim was alone. "My dad works all the time," he explained. "He's the dispatcher at a cab company in Manhattan." Jim's only sibling, an older sister named Helen, was away at college in Connecticut.

They went to the basement, which Jim called the "rumpus room."

"My dad spent years working on it," he said, looking around at the wood-paneled walls, the pool table and the bar. There was a television in a corner, underneath a big pair of mounted deer antlers.

Bobby, who had been taught that it was impolite to show up at someone's house empty-handed, had brought a bag of pretzels with him. Jim, like a real host, went behind the bar and brought out a couple of little wooden bowls to put them in. They watched the television and ate pretzels for a while. When a commercial for Maidenform bras came on, Jim went back to the bar and said "Can I get you a drink?"

Bobby had drunk before, of course; a covert beer at a cousin's wedding, a half-glass of bitter red wine at his grandmother's at Passover. Trying to sound cool and suave, he said, "Sure. What do you have?"

Jim disappeared, then popped up with a bottle of amber liquid. "It's scotch," he said.

"I knew that," Bobby lied. "Just give me a small one, okay?"

The glass Jim brought back for him held barely an inch of scotch. That seemed like taking "a small one" to the extreme, until Bobby took a sip and immediately began to cough.

"It's a little strong," Jim said, smirking into his glass. "If you want something lighter, I think there's Coca-Cola in the fridge upstairs."

"I can handle it." Bobby said, straightening his shoulders and taking another sip. It was a little easier than the first, and he choked back the rest of the scotch slowly.

Jim was drinking a lot faster, and by the time he finished his second glass, he was looking a little bleary-eyed. He put his head in his hands, and Bobby moved over until he was right beside him on the couch, their legs pressing awkwardly together.

"Are you okay?" Bobby asked. Jim didn't move. Bobby wondered, for a terrible moment, whether he was going to pass out, throw up, or both, when Jim lifted his head and turned to look at him. "Why aren't you at the dance, Bobby?"

"Because Debbie found another date." It wasn't the whole truth, not by a long shot, and from the look in Jim's eyes, Bobby knew he knew it, too.

Jim didn't say anything, but he kept looking at Bobby. As much as he wanted to, Bobby couldn't bring himself to look away. The moment stretched on for what seemed like forever before Jim closed the space between them and kissed him.

It was like a dream, but at the same time it was better than any dream Bobby had ever had. Jim's lips were soft and dry, and when he opened his mouth, Bobby's heart pounded like it was about to give out.

Jim tasted like scotch and pretzels. They kissed for a long time— Bobby couldn't begin to guess how long—and when he pulled away, it was getting hard to ignore his erection.

Judging from the bulge in the front of Jim's pants, he was in a similar state. He looked at Bobby and this time it was Bobby who moved first, sliding his hand against the hardness in Jim's groin. Jim gasped and Bobby, encouraged, unfastened his button-fly. For once, Bobby really didn't want to think. He just let it happen. He worked his hand past Jim's white BVDs and squeezed. Jim's dick jumped in his hand. Slowly, Bobby began to stroke, his eyes locked on Jim's.

Bobby had done this to himself many times, certainly more often than the evangelical Sex Ed teacher Mr. Dekens taught them was prudent, but this was much better. Listening to Jim's gasps, to his moans and quiet grunts, was nearly enough to finish Bobby. When Jim had come, spurting hot and sticky into Bobby's hand, he returned the favor, pressing his fingers against Bobby's dick. Bobby lasted only seconds, but he had never felt so satisfied in his life.

They lay on the couch for a while afterward. The television was still on, but Bobby wasn't paying attention to it, and he doubted Jim was, either. He rested his head against Jim's chest, content, until Jim suddenly stood up.

"Wait here," he said, and he disappeared upstairs.

Once he was alone, reality began to set in with remarkable speed. Immediately embarrassed, Bobby fastened his pants and straightened his clothes. He waited for Jim to come back, to tell him it had been a mistake or a moment of drunken madness, which it clearly was. He sat, trying to think of a suitably cool and suave response, until Jim returned.

"Here." Jim pressed something into his hand, and Bobby looked down.

"What's this?" He asked, although he knew perfectly well what it was: a class of 1963 ring, with a big red stone in the middle and the words "Roosevelt High, Brooklyn, NY" in tiny script around it. He didn't know why Jim was giving it to him.

"I want you to have it."

Bobby shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not?" Because this was the kind of thing Jim should be giving to a girlfriend, to one of those cheerleaders or dance organizers who were, at this moment, probably fox-trotting between the soap bubbles in the school gym. "I like you," Jim went on, smiling. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me. You're the only reason I'm getting over my mom dying."

"That doesn't mean...." Bobby trailed off. It didn't mean they could date. It didn't mean they could hold hands in the cafeteria, or get detention for kissing in the hallways. It didn't even mean they could make a regular habit of this; those things just didn't happen, even among the artists and the poets and the would-be Ginsbergs at Roosevelt High.

"I know what it doesn't mean," Jim said. "And I'm not expecting you to wear it on a chain around your neck or anything. Just keep it. It's the least I can do for you." Jim kissed him again, softly and chastely this time. Bobby put his arms around him and, as Jim hugged him back, there was a noise from upstairs.

"Shit." Immediately, Jim let go and Bobby stood up. "My dad's home."

Bobby had never met Jim's father before, but he didn't really want to meet him now. "Come on." Jim went upstairs and Bobby followed.

"Hey." A grizzled-looking man, a head shorter than Jim with thinning blond hair and a potbelly, was standing in the kitchen doorway.

Under Protest

"You boys been at my booze?" he snapped, but there was a smile on his face.

"That shit?" Jim asked. "I wouldn't waste my time." His father's laugh turned into a raspy smoker's cough. "Come on, Bobby. I'll see you out." Jim took Bobby's coat out of the closet and followed him outside.

It was cold. There was a thin layer of snow on the brown lawn in front of the house, and a patch of ice on the sidewalk shone in the reflected light of the streetlamp.

"Happy Valentine's Day," Jim said. For a moment, Bobby thought he might take total leave of his senses and hug him, but he didn't. Bobby nodded and headed home, the ring a comfortable weight in his pocket.

WHEN Jim the NYPD officer came back to the Greenwich Village apartment, he was in plainclothes; tight beige pants and a matching jacket, along with a checkered brown shirt.

"Are you off duty?" Bobby asked. When Jim nodded, he said "Sorry to bother you," but Jim shook his head like it was nothing. Bobby let him in and took him to Mike's war room.

"Shit," Jim said, looking at the trunk of Molotov cocktails in the making. Without feeling the slightest hint of guilt, Bobby also showed him the plans for the bomb he'd found on the table. Jim shook his head. "And you're friends with this guy?"

Bobby shrugged. "I thought I was." He'd thought he'd known Mike, but obviously he'd been wrong.

He hadn't been wrong about Jim, though. After that Valentine's Day, they'd spent nearly every Saturday evening together, and it wasn't just about the sex. At school, of course, things stayed the same, but when they were alone, Bobby found himself talking to Jim about his father, about his plans and his hopes for the future in a way he'd never talked to anyone else. Jim did the same, telling Bobby about his dream to join the New York Police Department.

After graduation, they grew apart. Bobby was accepted into the Bachelor of Arts program at Brown, and he went to Rhode Island. He

and Jim kept in touch for a while, sending letters and seeing each other at holidays, but eventually that had petered out, and Bobby stopped coming home. He hadn't seen Jim in years, and he'd hardly thought about him in all that time. Now, looking at Jim gazing at the box of half-made bombs in front of him, Bobby felt like they'd never been apart.

"Wait here a second," Bobby said, although Jim didn't look like he was about to go anywhere. He went into his bedroom and rifled around in his battered brown suitcase, the only thing, apart from the massive typewriter, he'd brought to the apartment. He dug around in the front pocket until he felt a familiar-shaped lump.

The graduation ring looked pretty much exactly the same as it had ten years earlier. It was a little more dusty and a little less shiny after being carried around in the suitcase for months, but Bobby rubbed it on his shirt and took it back to the war room.

Jim held out his hand, and Bobby put the ring on his palm. Jim turned it over, like he'd never seen it before, and after a moment, he said, "You still have this?"

Bobby nodded. He would never get rid of it, and he hadn't wanted to leave it at his mother's place in Brooklyn. She'd remarried and once Bobby and Jack had left home, her new husband turned Bobby's old bedroom into a study. There was no room for any of his stuff anymore.

Standing in the dirty Village apartment, listening to the roaches in the walls and looking at the radical paraphernalia around them, Bobby suddenly remembered exactly how he'd felt ten years ago, in the rumpus room at Jim's father's place in Brooklyn. His stomach flipped and, not moving his eyes from Bobby's, Jim took a step forward.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Jim." Bobby closed his hand over the ring, enjoying the feel of the cool metal against his palm, as Jim leaned forward and kissed him.

Maybe, Bobby thought, as he let his eyes slide closed, he should make a few changes to the plot of his novel. Instead of a radical leftist girlfriend, he decided, it would be better for his writer-protagonist to end up with a member of the Women's Police Bureau. And instead of a philosophical literary novel, maybe it would be a simple love story. Those, Bobby thought, were the best kinds of stories anyway. G.S. WILEY is a writer, reader, sometime painter and semi-avid scrapbooker who lives in Canada.

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G.S. Wiley

A Year-Long Valentine



A Year-Long Valentine

STEPHAN parked in the back of the Sound of Soul nightclub and rushed inside the back door. Moving through the kitchen, he spoke pleasantly to everyone he passed. One of the cooks handed him a small plate of nachos.

"I love you, Stella," Stephan said, kissing her cheek.

The older woman blushed as she shooed him out of the kitchen. Stephan continued down the hall and turned into his dressing room. The rectangle-shaped room held a dresser with a large mirror, a small closet, one well-worn chair and its matching worn out love seat. With the furniture in the room, there was hardly any space to maneuver around. Stephan looked at his watch and nodded, then he dropped his bag and sat at the dresser to eat his nachos.

A short while later as Stephan flipped through his clothes in the closet a knock came at the door.

"Yeah!"

"Stephan, are you decent?" the male voice on the other side of the door asked.

Stephan chuckled. "If I say no, will that make you go away?"

"No, it would make me come in faster," the voice answered and then laughed.

"Well, then come on in, Drew, but I warn you, I'm dressed."

Drew poked his head in. "Damn, you are dressed. I thought maybe you were just teasing me."

"Never mind that, Drew. You're too young. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Drew closed the door behind him and sat. "Why do you keep throwing my age back at me, man? I'm not a minor, you know. You can't go to jail for fucking me."

Stephan chose a shirt and looked over his shoulder at him. "Nineteen may be legal age, but it is still young, too young for me. So you won't be getting fucked by me."

Drew sighed and his shoulders slumped. "How long will you make me wait, Stephan? I really like you."

Stephan continued flipping through the closet as he spoke. "Here's an idea: Why not get with someone closer to your own age?"

Drew let out a disappointed groan and walked up behind Stephan. "I don't want to be with anyone else. I want to be with you, a real man."

Drew slipped his arms around Stephan's narrow waist. They were of equal size, both just over six foot. Where Drew was slender and wiry, made like a boy on his way to becoming a man, Stephan was wide with a muscular torso and broad shoulders. He had the body of a man. Drew rested his head on his Stephan's shoulders and pulled him into his embrace.

"How can I want someone else? You are gifted and handsome with the body of Adonis himself dipped in chocolate, and one day you will be a star. Who else could compare to that?"

"Drew...," Stephan said in a warning tone and lowered the pants he just took from the closet.

Drew ignored the warning and pulled Stephan closer, moving his hands over his chest and grinding against his ass. He placed a soft kiss on his neck and whispered in his ear.

"Can't you feel how bad I want you, Stephan? See how hard my cock gets just holding you like this? Can't you imagine how good my cock would feel sliding in and out of this tight ass of yours, bringing us both an amazing orgasm? Let me make love to you just once and I promise I won't bother you again, but you may want to bother me after that."

All of that sounded really good to Stephan. Drew's hard cock rubbing against his ass was making him hard as a rock and horny as hell. The urge to bust a nut was almost overwhelming, especially since he

A Year-Long Valentine

hadn't jerked off yet today. It had been so long since he had taken a lover. He'd had a few booty calls over the past year or two, but once the sex was done, he was still alone. He was tired of all of that. He wanted something real, something lasting, a real relationship that wasn't rooted in sex. But not from Drew. He and the boy had that in common. Stephan wanted a man in his life, too, and Drew was still a boy. Stephan wanted someone who was doing something with his life so that together they would be better. This boy wasn't doing any of that yet. With a sigh, he hung his clothes on the closet door and slowly pulled Drew's hands away from his chest, and although this boy's cock felt good pressing into his ass, he stepped away from it.

"Drew, I can't keep doing this with you." He spun around to face him and held Drew's hands up to his chin. "All I can offer you is my friendship. You must accept that or nothing at all. I'm sorry, but that's how it has to be. Do you understand that?"

Drew's shoulders drooped again and he looked away with a sigh. When he turned back, his eyes shone with unshed tears.

"I understand."

Drew managed a smile when Stephan kissed his hands. He returned to his chair at the dresser when Stephan released them.

"You know, Stephan, I won't always be this young."

Stephan reached for his clothes and turned back to him, closing the closet door. "Yes, I know. And in about six years when you're my age, you will truly be a force to be reckoned with."

"So what are you saying? Come back when I'm twenty-five and you'll give me some play?" he asked with a large grin.

Stephan laughed. "Okay, I'll give you that, Drew. If I am still single when you are twenty-five, look me up and we will definitely go out. Now get out of here so I can get dressed. My first set is about to start."

"All right. I'm working tonight so if you need something or you change your mind, just give me a holla," he added and gave him a wink.

Stephan chuckled. "Yeah, I'll keep that in mind. Now out!"

"HELLO, gentlemen. Can I take your order?" Drew asked the men who had just seated themselves at his table.

All of the men turned to the dark-haired young man closest to Drew. He looked like the youngest of them all, but they sat quietly waiting for him to order.

"Take their orders first, thank you," he finally said, turning his attention to the man walking to the stage.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the Sound of Soul Jazz and Blues Lounge!" He nodded and waited for the roar of clapping to cease before he continued. "If this is your first time here, we welcome you, and if it isn't we welcome you back. Because it is Valentine's Day, our resident songbirds will be singing the most beautiful love songs ever written. So, please put your hands together for Stephan!"

The applause was deafening and the people in the lounge stood to their feet almost all at once. The dark-haired man looked through the crowd to see who deserved such praise and a standing ovation. Stephan walked to the stage and took a bow. He wore a long-sleeved, black satiny button-down shirt with bronze stripes. It fit smoothly over his wide muscular torso. When he extended his hand to indicate his band, the audience got an excellent view of his tight bottom in his black slacks.

The man reached up and pulled at Drew's arm. "Who is that on the stage?"

"That's Stephan Jeffries. He's a singer here, our headliner and the most wonderful man alive," he said dreamily.

The man looked the waiter over with a smirk. "You sound like you have yourself a little man-crush going on there, boy. I bet you think he is handsome, too."

Drew scoffed. "Stephan is much more than handsome, Mister," he said as if everyone knew that. "He's like a god, he's so fine. Just this evening I told him he was like a chocolate Adonis."

The man laughed. "That's very clever. I like that description for him." He looked at Stephan again and felt a twinge in his pants. "It fits him very well," he said in a lower voice and then addressed Drew again. "You'd better hope he's not gay, boy. You may end up getting in over your head." The waiter twisted his lips. "Fat chance of that. I have been trying for the longest time to get with Stephan. He turns me down flat every time. He says I'm too young for him," he added sadly.

The man's eyes went back to the stage and he smiled, watching Stephan as he pulled up a stool and adjusted the mic.

"Did he now? That's very interesting."

Mmm, the way he's gripping that mic.

"Tell me, boy—"

"My name is Drew... sir."

He looked back at Drew and smiled. "Of course. Please accept my apologies... Drew. Tell me, what else do you know of Stephan Jeffries?"

Drew looked at the man with a raised eyebrow. "I don't know if I should be telling you anything else about Stephan, you being a stranger and all. You could be some crazed maniac stalker or a fan-freak who may be trying to kill him or something to get a piece of his hair."

"He's none of that, *Drew*," another man at the table said. "He's Julio de la Cruz and he's your damn boss now, so show him some respect."

The new boss held up his hand to calm the man at the table. "Now, there is no need for all of that, Gavan. Drew is just being protective of his crush. There is nothing wrong with that. Now Drew, listen. I was just asking, just making some small talk, okay? Besides, he doesn't have enough hair for me to do any real voodoo with, now does he?"

Drew's eyes widened, but before he could say another word, Julio held his hand up and laughed.

"Relax, Drew. I'm kidding."

Drew's eyes darted to Gavan then back to Julio and he relaxed. "Well, okay. Do you want a drink, Mr. de la Cruz?"

"Sure. Bring me a vodka and cranberry juice, Belvedere if you have it. Thanks, Drew."

Drew nodded and went off for the drinks.

"Gavan, you don't have to be in overprotective bodyguard mode all the time, do you?"

"Mr. de la Cruz, it is my job to keep you safe. Your father left me in charge of that."

"That boy was no threat to me and, for future reference, I don't want everyone knowing I own this club."

"Why not? You do own it."

Julio rolled his eyes and turned his attention to the stage. "Shh. I want to hear him sing."

Stephan was halfway through *My Funny Valentine*. Julio had never heard a man sing the song before and Stephan's rendition was beautiful. Stephan looked out into the crowd as if he sang the song for each member of it. With the bright lights shining on the stage, Julio knew Stephan couldn't see his audience, but you couldn't tell by the audience's reaction to him. They looked entranced by him, as if he really was singing to each of them personally. When the song was over, the lights over the audience brightened just enough for Stephan to see everyone was on their feet again, clapping loudly. Drew returned with the drinks.

"Drew, you were right. He is an extraordinary singer," Julio said.

"Yes," he said proudly, looking more relaxed around his new boss. "It's his dream to get a recording contract one day."

"I see. So what stops him?"

"You know how it is. Everyone in this town is either here to sing, model, or become a Broadway star, but Stephan is truly gifted. He has the talent, but not the opportunity." Drew shrugged, then added, "That's every singer's problem, isn't it? No money to make a demo or to go around to different places to sing and be discovered because you have to make a living."

"I see. You two must be close friends. You seem to know a lot about him."

"Yes, we are," Drew answered, smiling as his chest swelled. "He says when I'm old enough he will give me a date. That is, if he's still single."

"My next song will be *I've Got You Under My Skin*," Stephan said in the background.

Julio looked at the stage and murmured, "So, he's single, huh?"

"That will be twenty-two fifty, Mr. de la Cruz."

"We'll be here for a while, Drew, so run us a tab, will you?"

"Sure. Will you need a food menu, too?"

Julio looked around his table. Everyone shook their heads negatively. "No, Drew. We're fine on food, but keep an eye on us. When our drinks start to get low come on back with another round."

Drew nodded and left. Julio turned his attention to the stage again and this time Stephan was on his feet, slowly walking the stage as he sang the soulful, romantic song. He looked out into the crowd and Julio felt like he looked right into his eyes. Stephan's hypnotic spell caught him along with everyone else. Stephan wove his sensual web around Julio and pulled him right to him. Julio sipped his drink, but his eyes never left Stephan's seductive form until he finished his song. The emcee returned to the stage as Stephan made his bow and left.

"Isn't he great, ladies and gentlemen? Another round of applause for Stephan!"

Julio clapped and stood along with everyone else.

"Now for your listening pleasure, give it up for Alisa!" the emcee said and the clapping rose again, although it wasn't as enthusiastic as it had been for Stephan.

Alisa sang two songs as well, and then the band played as most of the audience made their way to the small dance floor. Drew returned to the table with round two.

"So tell me, Drew, is it always this crowded on a Wednesday night or is it like this because it's Valentine's Day? There isn't an empty table in the building," Julio asked, taking his drink.

"Oh no, it's always like this. The Sound of Soul stays full most nights. Tonight we had to put out extra tables and chairs because of the holiday; that's why the dance floor is so small. I think our slowest night is Monday night, but we do well then, too."

Julio sipped his drink and stood. "Can you take me to your manager, Drew?"

Drew's eyes widened as he put the last drink on the table.

Julio chuckled. "Don't worry, Drew, you're not in any trouble. It is just time we spoke business. That's why I am here."

Drew led Julio away to find the manager. Julio was gone for less than an hour and when he returned to his table Stephan had returned to the stage. He walked up behind one of his men and whispered in his ear.

"Yes, Mr. de la Cruz," he said with a nod and left the club.

Julio sat at the table and enjoyed the rest of the show. When Stephan left the stage the second time, Julio was on his feet again. He remained at his table as everyone filed out of the building at the end of the evening. Julio's man returned with a bottle, a long white box, and two champagne glasses, handing them to him.

Julio took them and handed him an envelope in return. "Thank you, Richard. Now would you please give this to someone in the band and then I'd like all of you to wait in the car."

"But, Mr. de la Cruz—"

"Please, Gavan, I'll be fine," he said with a frustrated edge to his voice. "Can I just get a few minutes alone?"

Gavan looked around the emptying club and reluctantly agreed. He nodded toward the other two men and they left the building. Richard followed shortly after. Julio waited at the table with his knee jumping wildly beneath it for a few more minutes, and then he snatched one of the glasses off the table and left the club. Like a peeping Tom, he stood outside and looked through the window. Luckily for him, he did not have to wait long in the cold.

Stephan appeared in the doorway. Now that Julio could see him up close with all the lights on, he was astounded. He *was* a chocolate Adonis; just looking at the man made his cock jump. Stephan looked around, saw the table with the bottle and box and walked to them. Julio could see how chiseled his body was under the T-shirt and black jeans he now wore. Stephan's movements reminded Julio of a panther as he approached the table. He was power and grace combined, and full of sensuality. Julio could see why Drew had such a crush on this beautiful man.

Stephan sat at the table and opened the box. A coat settled over Julio's shivering shoulders. He turned his head and nodded.

"Thank you, Gavan."

"Why not just go in and talk to him, sir?"

Julio watched Stephan through the window as he poured himself a glass of champagne. He opened the box and pulled out the chocolate rose Richard had delivered to Julio earlier. The beautiful smile that lit up his face gave Julio a warm feeling inside.

Julio continued to watch as Stephan licked at the chocolate rose and sipped his champagne. His cock twitched again; it was the first time he ever wanted to be a chocolate rose. Stephan grabbed the bottle and stood up.

Damn, that man has a nice grip!

Stephan put the nibbled-at rose back in its box and carried the items back with him, returning to the door that he had come from. Julio stood up with a satisfied sigh and turned to Gavan.

"No, Gavan. I have a better idea."

RING! Ring!

A long arm slid out from underneath a black, brown, and white plaid cotton blanket. It reached over to the nightstand and pulled the phone back under the covers.

"This better be important," a sleepy voice warned the person on the phone.

"Where the hell are you, Stephan? It sounds like you're in a tunnel," the voice on the phone replied.

"Vicki? Why are you calling me so early? I'm asleep. Call back after twelve o'clock."

"It is twelve, Stephan. Don't hang up. I have some really good news."

"Is it going to take you forever to tell me?" he asked with a yawn.

"Come down to the club. It's a show-and-tell kind of thing, but you have to come now because you have to leave in a few hours."

"Leave? What does that mean? Hello?" He heard the long beep of a dial tone and made a frustrated noise as he put the phone back in its cradle. Swinging the covers back, he sat up and stretched. "This had better be worth getting out of my bed for."

An hour later, Stephan walked into the Sound of Soul heavily garbed for the elements. A black hood came out of his long brown trench coat. It was held in place with a brown and white scarf that wrapped high on his face. The harsh winter wind of New York City could cut through any amount of layering, which was why most people looked like relocated Eskimos. You wanted to make sure everything was covered so as not to be left to the elements' mercy. He shuffled across the room gripping a large cup from Starbucks with brown fingertips coming out of his cut-off black biker gloves. He spotted Vicki stocking the bar and went to her.

Stephan pushed his scarf down as he sat and sipped his coffee. "It's a million degrees below zero out there, Vicki. What's so important that it couldn't wait until I came to work tonight?"

"You're not coming to work tonight."

"Yes, I am. I'm on the schedule," he said, sipping from his cup.

"No you're not; not anymore."

He stopped drinking his coffee and raised an eyebrow. "Am I fired?"

Vicki chuckled. "No, it's more like a promotion."

Stephan took a longer sip. "Don't speak in riddles, Vicki. My brain is frozen."

Vicki laughed and tossed an envelope across the bar to him. "This came early this morning by FedEx."

Stephan opened the envelope and checked out its contents. "I don't understand," he said, looking back at her.

She shrugged and went back to her stocking. "Where's the confusion? The letter is clear. The new owner wants his best singer to headline the other clubs he owns to build up their clientele. He specifically names you as that singer. The tickets and your itinerary are included and further instructions will be at your hotel room."

"I don't know about this, Vicki. Who is this new boss? When did he hear me sing?" Stephan shook his head. "This makes me nervous."

"Come on, Stephan," she said with her hand on her hip. "This is the shot you have always been waiting for. You are young, single, and free of obligations. You pay your rent month to month in that little bitty studio above the meat market, so there is nothing really holding you here. This might be your big shot, and even if it's not, when will you ever get another chance to travel like this? That letter says he owns five clubs in five different cities. You'll be going to three of them."

He looked at the letter again. "Yeah, that does sound exciting."

"Yes, so do it. Or you're fired."

Stephan's eyes widened. "Say what?"

"You heard me: you're fired. I'm the manager. I can do that," she said, throwing her nose in the air.

"Damn, fired or whirlwind adventure. Gee, tough choice," he said, using his hands as scales.

Vicki eyed him and her hands went back to her hips.

Stephan laughed. "Okay, you're right. This could be my big break. I'll do it!"

"Good. Now get out of here. Your plane leaves at three o'clock and I better get a postcard from everywhere you go."

"You will. I promise," he said as he hugged her.

III

STEPHAN had been in Miami for the past three months and it was incredible. Now he knew what the attraction was for the old folks that traveled to Florida every year. This was the best place to spend the winter months. Just as Vicki had predicted, he found instructions telling him where he was going and what he was to do.

He was put up at a hotel with no out-of-pocket money expected from him. He was paid every week, way more than he made back in New York. His schedule was a piece of cake: he sang every night except Tuesday and Wednesday in the lounge in the lobby, and had plenty of time to sightsee and relax. He was living the life!

That morning, he had received a letter from the front desk that told him he would be picked up the next morning for an early flight, but he was not upset. He was getting dressed to go out to a nightclub, to have a drink and say a final farewell to Miami. He hated to leave, but he would with no regrets. He slipped on the white linen shirt and tucked his black tank top into the white pants he wore. With a last check in the mirror, he grabbed his room key and left the hotel.

Walking down the street, he spotted a crowd outside Hombre Atractivo, the hottest gay bar in Miami, or so their fliers said. It claimed they had the best music, the best booze, and the hottest men in Miami. He usually worked on Friday nights, so he'd never had the chance to check it out for himself until now.

He walked in and the place was alive with loud salsa music. He could feel the music all over his body as he moved to the bar to see if the flier was right about its second claim.

"Hey, sexy. What can I getcha?" the bartender asked with a flirtatious grin.

"I don't know. I'm visiting Miami. What do you suggest?"

"Well, you can't leave Miami without trying our signature drink, *Venido Cójame*. It's tradition."

"Well, who am I to break tradition? Give me one of those."

"You got it."

The bartender turned away from him to make the drink and Stephan looked over the dance floor. The room was a decent size and dark accept for the bright red, yellow, blue, and green lights that danced around the floor from the ceiling. The men out on the floor were dancing to the fast-paced music seductively in couples, and he noticed the flier was right about the third claim too. The men at Hombre Atractivo were extremely attractive. They represented all sizes and all shades. Stephan smiled and turned toward the thump of the glass the bartender put before him.

"There you go, sexy. Enjoy."

"Thanks," Stephan said, lifting the drink to sniff the dark brown liquid. It smelled sweet as he swirled the ice around in the glass. He smiled and tilted the glass to take his first sip.

"Don't you think it is appropriate to make a toast before you drink?"

Stephan's hand stopped in midair and he turned to look behind him. The voice was deep with a smooth sultry accent, and the man it belonged to was amazingly handsome. He was just shorter than Stephan. His dark hair was combed back away from his face and in his left ear was a small diamond earring. His eyes were almond-shaped and dark with long sweeping lashes and his lips were full and succulent. Stephan wanted to pull that bottom lip into his mouth and suck on it. He lowered his glass and smiled.

"Are you offering to make the toast?"

The man leaned on the bar. "Sure, I can do that. Bartender, give me a *Venido Cójame*, too." The bartender nodded and slid a glass to him as well.

Stephan leaned closer to his new friend. "Do you know what we're drinking? I don't speak Spanish. Do you know what it means?"

He chuckled. "Of course I do. I'm Spanish."

"Well then, what does it mean?"

"Venido Cójame means 'come fuck me'."

The intense look the man gave him as he spoke the words made Stephan's cock jump within the thin material of his pants. "Well, that is something to drink to, isn't it?"

"It sure is. Let's toast to that and new friends." He clicked his glass to Stephan's and took a long sip. "So, do you like it?"

Stephan took a first sip for the toast and then another. "Yeah, it's good. I think I will have to add this to my new favorites list."

"Mmm. Can I be one of your new favorites, as well?"

"Oh, well, I'm not here to stay. I'm just visiting. In fact, I'm leaving tomorrow. This is my farewell drink to Miami." He toasted the air and took another sip.

The man nodded. "I see, but what if you *were* staying? Would you be interested, then?"

Stephan stepped back and openly looked the man over. The white tank and black cargo shorts he wore fit his body nicely. The shirt showed off his lean muscular torso and the dark hair beneath it.

"Should I turn around so you can get a better look?" his new friend asked.

Stephan looked back into the man's clean-shaven face and smiled. He could tell by his tone that he was joking. He leaned on the bar casually with a smirk. "Yeah, why don't you go ahead and do that."

The man laughed and slowly spun around with his arms opened wide. "Is that good for you?"

"Yes, that was very good for me. How was it for you?"

"I've had better," his new friend said with a shrug. Stephan laughed and he laughed with him and then offered his hand. "My name is Julio."

"I am Stephan, and yes, to answer your question. I would definitely be interested if I were here to stay."

"Well, tomorrow is not promised to any of us, Stephan. Let's have our fun tonight as if you were staying."

"Is that your motto, Julio? Live for the day?"

Julio shrugged again. "Something like that. So?"

I wasn't really looking for a booty call, but it has been a long time since I've been with someone.

Stephan looked the handsome man over again and made up his mind. He finished his drink and offered Julio his arm. "Let's do it."

Stephan led him to the dance floor. Julio moved fluidly to the slower salsa beat that played now. Moving seductively and suggestively, Julio slid his hands over Stephan's body, barely touching him. He reached out, holding on to Stephan's hips and moving them from side to side in sync with his own.

"You have a beautiful body, Stephan; you have to move it as though you know it." Julio moved around him, pressing his fingers into his hips to guide him. "Rotate your hips to the beat of the drums. Dancing the salsa is almost like fucking," he murmured in Stephan's ear, rotating his own hips behind him.

"Mmm, is this the salsa dancing part or the fucking?" Stephan asked, pressing back into him.

Julio chuckled, his voice sultry and hot in Stephan's ear. "No, my sweet. This is the dancing. Later I will show you the fucking."

Julio's hands slid up and down Stephan's hips and then up to grip his chest as they moved in unison round and round. With each rotation, Stephan reached behind Julio, grabbing handfuls of his pants to pull him closer, pressing his ass into Julio's hard crotch. Julio let out a low growl in Stephan's ear.

"Damn, you smell good, and you are so fucking sexy," Julio whispered and nipped at his ear. Julio nibbled at Stephan's neck as his fingers purposely brushed across his nipples.

"I can't wait to take you to my bed, *mi dios oscuro dulce*. I'm going to do wonderful things to this beautiful body of yours."

Julio's lust-filled voice sent a delicious shiver down Stephan's back.

"Mmm."

I don't understand half of what he said, but it sure sounded good.

A Year-Long Valentine

Julio's hands continued to explore Stephan's body as he ground his hard cock into Stephan's ass. Julio flicked and teased Stephan's nipples until they stood at attention beneath his tank top, and then his fingers pressed into the firm muscles of his abdomen on their way to his crotch. Boldly he grasped the blatant bulge in Stephan's pants. The music changed and Julio changed their tempo, moving a little faster, not missing a beat. Stephan moaned loudly, but only Julio could hear him over the music.

"Stephan, your moans are like music to my ears. I cannot wait to hear my name riding on your moans as you release your orgasm into my mouth."

Another shiver went down Stephan's back at Julio's seductive words.

Oh man! This is what I'm talking about! Why can't I find this at home? This is what I need.

Julio's skilled hand groped Stephan's cock until he felt as though he would explode right there on the dance floor. His breathing was out of control. His cock was throbbing hard with need. Stephan wanted to be fucked by this man desperately, but he felt overwhelmed and grabbed Julio's hand.

"Wait, wait. I can't do this, Julio." He turned around and held onto his shoulders. "It's been too long since—"

Julio stopped his explanation with an all-consuming kiss. He ate hungrily at Stephan's mouth, grinding his cock against him.

"Tomorrow is not promised to us, *mi amigo*," Julio repeated, nipping at Stephan's lips. "Take me back to your room and I will make today memorable for you."

Stephan's whole body cried out saying yes, and the message finally made it to his brain, making his mouth comply.

"Yes."

THEY reached Stephan's room and before they could get in the door, they tore at each other's clothes. Yanking, pulling, tugging, and then they were free, standing naked before each other. Slowly they touched

each other. Julio's hands glided over the bulging muscles of Stephan's chest. Stephan ran his fingers through the silky curls on Julio's chest. Their eyes met and they leaned in for a kiss.

Julio pulled Stephan down to a sitting position and then pushed him back onto the bed. He rolled over on top of him and his kisses grew more urgent. His hands and lips seemed to be everywhere on Stephan at once: his neck, his nipples, his stomach, his cock. Julio restarted the fire he set in Stephan's body quickly and moved to make it burn brighter.

"Stephan, I must taste you, please. I will die if I cannot," Julio pleaded desperately in his ear.

"Yes, yes, do it!" Stephan said, panting harshly.

Julio's lips immediately left a searing trail of kisses down his body. Stephan's cock throbbed, alert to Julio's closeness, as it lay on his stomach hard and ready. When Julio's lips reached Stephan's cock, he engulfed it with no hesitation, covering it all the way to its base.

A stuttering moan left Stephan's mouth. "Oh, God, yes!" he hissed loudly.

Julio sucked his cock almost lovingly with long luxurious draws and languishing licks. Each time his mouth left Stephan's cock he quickly took it back into his mouth with lustful moans.

"Tell me what you want, Stephan. If you want me to suck this magnificent cock of yours until you explode then I will make it so," Julio said, licking his way around the tight skin of Stephan's swollen head.

"But, if you want me to fuck you as I stroke your beautiful cock you must say so. I would be happy to do that for you as well. You tell me what you want and it's yours."

Julio moved down. His hand took the place of his mouth working Stephan's cock as he kissed and licked his hanging sac. Stephan moaned loudly again.

I can't even think. How can I possibly—

"Stephan," Julio urged.

"I—I…"

"Tell me, Stephan," Julio said again more aggressively. "I will do anything you want, but you must tell me. Tell me!" Another shiver went down Stephan's back. "Fuck me, Julio! I want you to fuck me."

Julio gripped Stephan's hips and turned him over. Stephan pushed himself up on his hands and knees and offered his ass. Without hesitation, Julio positioned his face between Stephan's legs. He grasped Stephan's firm cheeks and spread them wide before working his tongue between them in search of the tiny puckered hole within.

The unexpected pleasure slammed into Stephan's body. "Oh, shit! Julio!"

Julio moaned against Stephan's ass at the sound of his name as he licked and lapped at the hole he was about to invade. When he deemed the hole wet and teased enough, he sat up, reaching for his cock. Pressing it between Stephan's cheeks, he pushed forward until it sheathed his cock completely.

Stephan let out another moan and Julio leaned forward, placing butterfly kisses across his back.

"Are you okay?" The room was silent except for Stephan's heavy breathing. "Stephan, talk to me. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Go slow at first."

"You tell me what you want and I'll do it."

Stephan nodded. The pain and pleasure mix was almost overwhelming. It had been well over two years since someone had been inside him. The pleasure was incredible, but the pressure almost dulled it.

Julio was clearly skilled. He moved back and forth with just enough thrust to ignite the fires within Stephan again. He pressed forward repeatedly with long, deep strokes. As Stephan's ass opened to him, he dug deeper into it, grinding, dipping, and rolling his body against him. Stephan gripped the sheets on the bed and pushed back, meeting each delicious thrust Julio gave him.

"Harder, Julio," Stephan panted.

"Yes," Julio hissed. "Tell me what you want, baby."

"Smack my ass," he said with a groan.

A loud smack rang out in the room. Julio's fingers pressed into Stephan's hips as he moved faster.

"Yes! Smack it again."

Another smack rang out in the room. Stephan continued to meet each enthusiastic thrust. Soon Julio was pounding into Stephan's ass, alternating a sharp smack on his left and right cheeks. Stephan's moans were coming in loud, clipped puffs as he and Julio rocked the bed beneath them. Suddenly Julio leaned forward and gripped Stephan's shoulder, pushing deeper into him as he reached beneath him to grab his bobbing cock.

"Ahh, ahh, ahhh!"

Stephan's body locked in place as his orgasm reached its peak. He let out a long drawn-out wail and shot his load onto Julio's hand. Julio pumped his cock as he came until his body relaxed. Stephan's body collapsed and pulled free of Julio's as he fell onto the bed. His breathing was harsh and rapid as Julio lay beside him.

"Julio, I'm sorry you didn't-"

"Shh. No, no, sweetheart. Do not worry about me, *mi dios oscuro hermoso*. I am more satisfied than you know." He pulled Stephan up to the head of the bed and into his arms. "Go to sleep, Stephan. You have a plane to catch tomorrow," he said and kissed the top of his head. "This will not be our last time together," he whispered as Stephan drifted to sleep.

A Year-Long Valentine

IV

STEPHAN dressed quickly for the party. It had started hours ago, but he could not go until his last set was over. Halloween was his favorite holiday. He loved dressing up in costume and this year he was particularly proud of the one he'd picked. He tied his mask onto his face and then grabbed his hat before he headed out the door. His experience in San Francisco turned out to be the best of his life. He loved everything about the city, the food, the weather, the people.... He would definitely have to come back for a visit when this whole adventure was over. Although he was sad to be leaving the city by the bay in two weeks, he was even happier to see what lay ahead for him at his next destination.

He walked down the street quickly, seeing all kinds of getups: pregnant nuns, sailors, movie stars, and many performers—Diana Ross, Liza Minnelli, and too many Chers to count. Laughing, he entered the hotel not too far from his and headed straight to the large banquet hall. The dimly lit room had only clear blinking Christmas lights along the ceiling and black lights in the hanging chandeliers for its lighting. The music was loud and the room was full of people partying and having a good time. Stephan put on his hat and danced his way across the room to the pirate at bar.

"Greetings, Robin Hood. It's an open bar for another hour still. What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

"I'll just have a beer," Stephan answered over the music.

The bartender handed him a bottle and moved on to the next person. Bobbing his head to the beat, Stephan scanned the room. He tilted his beer to his mouth when his eye was caught by a handsome prince. His costume was indeed that of a prince, complete with gaudy hanging jewels around his neck, tight knickerbockers, ruffled shirt, and long velvet cape. The knickers left little to the imagination as the prince

Jaxx Steele

moved from one person to the next. They were snug and molded his crotch into an enticing lump that made Stephan's own crotch start to lift.

Stephan continued to watch the prince as he talked to other people, but when the prince turned his gaze onto him, he felt like he had burst into flames. His cock throbbed in harmony with his heartbeat. Stephan could not help but stare back at him. His eyes locked onto those of the prince as though he were hypnotized. The prince turned toward him with the grace of a stalking cat. Stephan's brain told him to put the beer down and turn away, but he could not move. The prince had him in his sights and he held him in place, not letting him go.

"Hello."

Stephan let out a breath and lowered his beer. He had not realized that he had stopped breathing until then. He put the beer on the bar and took a few deep awkward breaths.

"Hi," he finally said.

"Robin Hood, right?"

Stephan was confused at first, but then he hit his chest and laughed. "My costume, right! Yes, I am Robin Hood," Stephan said and extended his hand.

The prince's grip was firm as he took Stephan's hand and pulled him closer. "I must say you are the most handsome Robin Hood I have ever seen. All of these earth-tone colors look really good against your beautiful dark skin."

The touch of the prince's hand sent an electric surge though Stephan's body, and his words amplified it. Stephan gasped as the man pulled him closer. They were face-to-face. His breath smelled sweet and his eyes were dark sparkling pools behind his mask. They drew him in, calling him, and they looked vaguely familiar.

"Th-thank you," he finally stammered.

"Dance with me," the prince said, tugging his hand.

The prince's request pulled Stephan from his daze. "Wait. Umm, I just wanted to—"

The prince looked over his shoulder at him. "Are you afraid to dance with me?" he teased.

A Year-Long Valentine

Stephan chuckled. "Of course not. I just—"

The prince stepped back into Stephan's personal space. His lips almost brushed across Stephan's as he spoke.

"What are you afraid of, my handsome Robin Hood? Live for the day."

Stephan chuckled. "The last time I heard words similar to that, I had the best night of my life."

"I think that's a good omen. Come."

The prince pulled Stephan to the dance floor and this time Stephan let him. The next song the band played was a slow one. The prince moved fluidly to the music. His body was lithe and sultry as he moved to the beat close to Stephan's body. He slipped his hand around Stephan's waist and guided him across the floor.

The prince's cologne wafted up around Stephan's face, intoxicating him.

"Mmm," Stephan pressed his head against the prince's, careful not to dislodge his large-brimmed hat.

The prince's hand tightened against his back and brought him even closer. Stephan gasped, feeling his cock press against his own. His cock throbbed almost violently, wanted to be touched. They were chestto-chest and the warmth of his body made Stephan's nipples tingle.

Stephan stopped dancing and stepped back to look at him. The prince returned his gaze without blinking. Something in the prince's eyes called to him. The flames of lust burned as clearly, but there was something else. This was different, Stephen knew it. He could feel it. His body reacted to the closeness of this man and it wanted this man. *He* wanted him. The mask covered his face completely except for his eyes and mouth. The full sensual lips called to him and he lowered his head to boldly answer that call.

The prince hungrily returned his kiss, moaning pleasurably into his mouth. Stephan's arms slipped around his neck effortlessly, enjoying each nuance that he offered him. The music stopped and the crowd clapped around them, and then a crescendo of simultaneous "oooh"s filled the room. Stephan and the prince ended their kiss and laughed along with the crowd. "Well, it would seem that we have the approval of our peers," the prince said with a smile.

"Yes, and you most certainly have my approval. Come with me to my room," Stephan offered, still breathing hard.

The prince smiled and took Stephan's hands in his, lifting them to his mouth. Each kiss he placed on Stephan's fingers made him want the prince even more. Every time he slid one of Stephan's fingers into his mouth to suck on them, Stephan's heart beat faster and faster.

"I cannot come to you tonight," the prince finally said, breaking through the sensual fog that he had wrapped around Stephan.

"What? Why? I thought—"

The prince pulled Stephan back into his arms and moved him once again to the music. "Do you believe in destiny?"

"Destiny?"

"Yes. Do you believe that some things were meant to be and no matter what, they will come to pass?"

"I—I don't know. I never—"

"Well, I do." The prince stopped their dance again and took Stephan's face in his hands. He brought his lips up to Stephan's in a fiery, soul-burning kiss that left its mark on Stephan's heart. When the prince released his hold on Stephan, he was breathless.

"I have to go, but we will meet again and at that time nothing will part us again."

Stephan stared into his eyes and saw no mocking or malice. The truth of his words was there and so much more. There was something so familiar in his eyes that Stephan had no choice but to believe him. With a final peck on his lips, the prince turned on his heels and left Stephan standing on the dance floor.

A Year-Long Valentine

V

STEPHAN lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling with a satisfied sigh. He was home and had come full circle. When he left San Francisco in October, he flew to Hawaii where he spent Christmas and New Year's. The audiences in the club there were extremely receptive to him and he even met a producer who was on vacation. He had given Stephan his card so that he could get in touch when he got home. Stephan remembered the producer, of course, and could only hope that the producer remembered him so many months later.

He also remembered the man who left a lasting impression on him when he was in San Francisco. They had only spent a short time together, but he would never forget him. The past year had been the best of his life. The travel, the exposure, the food, the fun: it was all great. Nothing would ever compare.

The intricate detail of the hotel's ceiling still held his attention as he sighed. He had arrived back in New York late last night, just in time for Valentine's Day. All day he had taken advantage of the hotel's amenities: the spa, the pool, and the hot tub. He had the best massage of his life and was relaxed and ready to do his gig at the Sound of Soul

He had called Vicki as soon as he woke up and she had put him on the schedule for that evening. What he would do after he finished his set was still a blur. The hotel room was only booked for two days and he did not know what he would do after that. When he left last year on his whirlwind adventure, he had given up his apartment. He confessed his worries to Vicki, and, ever the optimist, she told him to take advantage of the Waldorf-Astoria and then get his butt to work on time. He laughed again as he remembered her words and pulled himself out of bed.

Jaxx Steele

The cab ride was short and he arrived to work an hour before he was to appear on stage. He entered through the back door as he always did to cheers and clapping.

"Aww, you people act like you missed me or something," he said, laughing as people rushed to hug and kiss him.

"You know we did."

"How was your trip, Stephan?"

"Was it fun, Stephan?"

"Yes, yes, it was great. I'll tell you all about it later, but I have to get ready for my set so let me go."

Stephan had barely made his way to his dressing room when a knock sounded at his door.

"Yes, come in!"

"So, you're back."

Stephan turned to the familiar voice and his mouth dropped opened. "Drew? Is that you? Wow, what a difference a year makes."

Drew's smile was ear to ear as he closed the door behind him. "I told you I wouldn't be young forever. I grew up some while you were gallivanting off around the United States," he said with a chuckle as he approached with open arms. "Can I get a hug?"

"Of course."

Drew walked over to Stephan and closed his arms around him

Whoa! Drew did do some growing over the past year.

He had grown at least another inch and had filled out considerably. Stephan's hands moved slowly along the solid muscles of his back as he hugged him. Drew's grip on Stephan's waist seemed firmer as he pulled him closer, pressing his pelvis to Stephan's. Drew nuzzled Stephan's neck and sniffed deeply.

"Damn, you always smell so good, Stephan."

"And you have definitely changed over the past year, Drew. You look great," Stephan commented, pushing away from him.

"Great enough for you to give me a chance now?" he asked hopefully.

"Drew," Stephan said, rolling his eyes.

"All right, all right, just checking," Drew said, throwing his hands in the air. "I'll be on the floor tonight if you need anything, okay?" he added, holding the door open.

Stephan shook his head. "Thanks, Drew."

Drew pulled the door closed behind him and then popped his head back in. "Stephan?"

"Yeah," he answered over his shoulder.

"I missed you, man. Welcome home."

He pulled the door closed before Stephan could reply. Stephan continued to dress and headed out to the main club just in time to hear the emcee announce him. He sang his songs along with Alisa and the singer the club had hired to replace him. At the end of the evening, they took their bows and everyone received a standing ovation.

Stephan was changing clothes after the show when one of the musicians tapped on his door.

"Hey, Stephan, great set tonight, man. Someone asked me to give this to you."

"Thanks, Rob." Stephan took the envelope and the other man backed out of the door.

He read the note inside with wrinkled brows. Throwing his coat over his arm, he grabbed his bag and headed back to the main club. He pushed open the door and stopped short with a sharp gasp of surprise. The room was dim, the only light coming from a table with long tapered candles, a bottle of champagne sitting in an ice bucket, and a long white box. Just behind the table was a man. The light illuminated him, giving him a seductive glow. Stephan's head tilted slightly as he took in the beautiful scene.

"Julio?"

Julio smiled and pulled out the chair in front of him, offering his hand. Stephan walked silently to the table and sat down. Julio poured

Jaxx Steele

them each a glass of champagne. He looked at Stephan's confused expression and chuckled.

"Okay, so you're probably wondering what is going on."

"Well, yeah. What are you doing here? How did you even know where here is?"

"I am the boss who sent you away last year."

Stephan blinked blankly a few times. "What?"

"I am the club's owner. I came here last year on Valentine's Day. I saw you, I heard you sing, and knew right then that I wanted you in my life."

"So you sent me away?"

"Yes. I sent you away so that you could be closer to me."

"How was that bringing me closer to you? Well, except when I was in Miami—"

"I am not only the man who you gave a most incredible night to in Miami, but I am also the man you met in San Francisco and Hawaii."

Stephan's eyes grew wide with comprehension. He remembered the games that were played on singles night at the resort where he had performed. He had pulled a mystery card. He decided that night that he would definitely visit Hawaii again. "You were my mystery lover after the luau? The one who blindfolded me?"

Julio closed his eyes at the memory and smiled. "Mmm, oh yes, that was me. I go to sleep at night with that memory of you in Oahu."

Stephan nodded. He sat quietly, going over the past year's memories, and then a smile touched his lips and he lifted the glass of champagne in front of him.

"So, what's going on here, Julio? Why did you do all of this?"

"Isn't it obvious? I wanted to wine and dine my way into your heart. I could not be with you the way I wanted to over this past year. I had just inherited the clubs and had to put in a lot of time and work. I sent you to those places so that I could be near you."

"Thank you for that. I think it did wonders for my career. I got lots of exposure."

A Year-Long Valentine

Julio waved away his thanks. "Believe me, it was purely selfish on my part. I wanted you with me, but I must confess that I was afraid you would not accept me."

Stephan chuckled and took another sip from his glass. "Oh, I don't think you have that problem now. In fact, had you just approached me, you probably wouldn't have had that issue then."

Julio smiled and reached across the table to cover Stephan's hand with his own. "I want you to be with me, Stephan. I want to roll up all the experiences that we shared over the past year and combine them into a lifetime with you. Will you be my Valentine today and every day after this?"

Stephan remembered every kiss, every touch, every sensation, and every shiver that Julio had given him each time they were together. Not knowing who he was at the time but still missing him terribly was the only down side to the incredible year. To find out that his mystery man was the handsome Julio he had left behind in Miami was beyond conceivable, and it filled him with immense joy.

Julio was indeed everything he could ask for in a man. He had a life, an attractive face, and money of his own, and he wanted to be with him. The smile that spread across Stephan's face could have lit the entire room. He reached across the table to cup Julio's face and brought his smiling lips to his own in a welcoming kiss.

"Absolutely. How can I say no to a man who has been romancing me for a year?"

Julio laughed. "I'm glad you appreciate the time I put in."

Stephan chuckled and raised his glass again. "I think it is an appropriate time to make a toast."

Julio's smile widened. "Does that mean you're offering to make the toast?"

Stephan pretended to think. "Let's toast to a year-long valentine. May it last for many years to come."

Julio touched his glass to Stephan's and nodded. "You can count on it," he said and took a sip, sealing the deal.

Jaxx Steele

Jaxx Steele was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, but is hiding out in Indiana to stay out of trouble. Reading and writing were his first loves and continue to be first in his heart. He spends his time working a nine to five and travelling when he can. With room in his heart for Hou and their cat Judo, Jaxx has a full and happy life.

Visit Jaxx's website at http://www.freewebs.com/jaxxsteele

Meant to Be



Zahca Owens

HE couldn't be late. Not today. Not after all the planning he'd done.

There was only one Valentine's Day. No second chances. They'd missed too many of them already.

Kai kept stretching his back, trying to look farther than he really could as his cab was caught in the gridlock of midweek city traffic. He knew he should have left earlier, but he'd had a last-minute client to contend with and being an independent travel agent meant every client was sacred.

He could hear himself tell every single one of his customers to leave early enough if they needed to go to the airport. With his broadest smile he always lectured them that traffic was notoriously bad in the evening and they could always get a cup of coffee in the terminal, but that airplanes didn't wait for people caught in gridlock. Now he was stuck himself. His window of opportunity was closing with every passing minute.

Could he blow his surprise? Should he call Toby and wish him a happy Valentine's Day? He looked to the road ahead to gauge how much longer it was going to take before they reached the exit to the airport and, after checking his watch for the fifteenth time in the past ten minutes, fished his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed Toby's number.

"Pick up, Toby," Kai impatiently urged his lover. Voice mail answered the call almost immediately, though, telling Kai that Toby hadn't switched his phone on yet. He smiled when he listened to his lover's recorded message, as he so often did when he felt lonely, but halfway through the message, his battery gave out. "Damn!" Kai swore loudly, making the cab driver look at him.

"Sorry," Kai apologized, taking a deep breath and deciding to be patient a little while longer. Fate would lend them a helping hand—she had so many times before—and then he and Toby would be reunited. At least for a few hours.

FIVE Valentine's Days ago, Kai was waiting for a connecting flight when the announcement came that all departing flights were delayed because of a blizzard. Within no time, all the hotel rooms were booked, so Kai settled in for the night in a corner of the departure lounge. An avid backpacker, he was used to much rougher conditions, but he was on his way home after a long trip and was eager to hang up his backpack and start his work life. Fate dealt him a different card, though, and during that evening in the packed airport, he wondered if the powers that be were telling him that he should continue traveling a bit longer.

In the middle of the night, unable to sleep on the cold floor, Kai decided he wanted a warm drink so he set out to find a working coffee machine. After encountering two broken ones, he found a good-looking man in a fancy suit staring at a third one. He was bent at the waist, hands resting on his knees as he tried to look up at the empty cup holder.

"Trying to will it to give you coffee?" Kai asked the stranger with a smile.

The man looked up at him and Kai was struck by his sparkling blue eyes and chiseled chin. "The guy before me put in some money and got a nice warm cup. I did the same and it won't give me anything."

Kai flicked the little switch in an attempt to get the machine to return the man's coins, but it refused.

"Tried that," the man said. "Think it would help if I kicked it?"

Kai gave the man a once-over and smiled slightly. He didn't seem the sort to kick inanimate objects for a few coins, but then he knew from experience that appearances could be deceiving. "Maybe," he answered teasingly.

Almost without transition, the man dealt the machine a short, sharp blow with his fist. A cup fell into the cup holder and started filling up with hot liquid.

"Whoo!" Kai shouted. "Great action!"

The man had clearly hurt himself, since he was shaking his hand,

but he was smiling as well. As soon as he took the full cup out, another dropped and started filling up, so he handed his cup to Kai and took the second one, after which a third one promptly fell in its place. They both ended up with two cups of piping hot coffee.

"Just how much money did you put in there?" Kai asked after raising his cup toward the man in salute and taking a sip.

"After it didn't work the first time, I added another dollar. That's all. I think I got my money's worth."

The man winked at Kai and Kai mentally wolf-whistled. He couldn't believe himself. He was actually getting the hots for a man in a suit. A man he'd met at a coffee machine in an international airport. He was going to have to get laid as soon as he got home because all this traveling had made him horny.

"I'm Toby, by the way. I'd shake your hand, but they're rather occupied." $% \mathcal{A}^{(n)}$

"Kai," Kai answered. He looked sideways and gestured toward a deserted waiting area that had seats and small tables. "We can put them down there."

"So where are you off to?" Toby asked after they settled at opposite sides of a table.

"Seattle," Kai answered. "Seattle's where I live. At least if my roommate hasn't kicked my furniture out to the curb yet."

"You've been traveling long, then?"

Kai nodded, surprised to still burn his tongue after several sips of coffee. He wasn't really paying attention to anything other than his companion. "Been backpacking across Asia. Started in India, then Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Burma and Thailand. Left Bangkok yesterday and now I'm here."

"Didn't it make more sense to fly the other way around?" Toby remarked. "Seems you took the long way."

"Surprisingly enough, it was cheaper that way, and I'm sort of on a budget," Kai admitted, rubbing his hot hand on his rather ragged heavy metal T-shirt. "Hopefully that will change one day, but until then, I make it a sport to fly as cheaply as possible." "It's not always easy to find the cheap seats," Toby agreed.

Kai didn't think Toby looked like he was dressed for the cattle compartment, but he didn't want to say anything, because he felt that Toby was charming him. "I'm pretty good at it."

The silence that fell was a little uncomfortable, so after taking another sip of the free coffee, Kai tried to keep the conversation going. "So you travel for work?"

Toby nodded. "I work for an NGO—a UN non-governmental organization. Headquarters are based in Seattle, but if I make it there once a year I'm lucky. They pretty much ship me around from one place to the next."

"I see," Kai nodded. "And does your wife approve?" Kai didn't see a wedding band, but then he knew a lot of men didn't wear one and he just had to know.

"Wife?" Toby choked on his coffee. "Lord, no. No wife for me, thank you. I don't even rent an apartment anymore."

Things were definitely looking up, Kai realized. Didn't mean the man was gay, though, although Kai knew when a man was flirting with him. Toby only fleetingly looked him in the eye and he was smiling a lot. He seemed to find everything Kai said funny.

"No boyfriend either, then?" Kai heard himself say. Now it was his turn to avert his gaze away from Toby. He didn't look away completely, aware that asking this question to the average straight man could get him a fist in the eye.

Toby just smiled again. "Is it that obvious?"

Kai shook his head. "Takes one to know one."

"Good," Toby answered enigmatically.

Kai felt more comfortable looking at Toby now. "So whereabouts do you travel? Meet any cute guys there?"

Toby laughed one of those hearty laughs that hit Kai right in his groin. "Not really. The Thai toy boys aren't my style and most of the gay guys in Brazil have tits." Toby curled an eyebrow to show he didn't really approve of that. "I kind of like ordinary guys. Average height and weight, brown hair, brown eyes." Now Kai was sure Toby was flirting with him, since he was describing him. "I like guys in suits," Kai rebutted.

"This is my traveling suit. The NGO only pays for the cheapest tickets they can find, so any chance to get bumped up to business is a chance to get a better seat, some more leg room, better food, and a possible chance to sleep comfortably. Those things are worth a lot when you travel all the time. Looking like a businessman helps. I don't usually wear a suit in the field. You're more likely to see me in a T-shirt and shorts or cargo pants."

"So what exactly do you do?" Kai asked, trying to ignore the tightness in his pants and the sweaty palms this man was giving him. He couldn't prevent himself from rubbing them over his thighs, just in case Toby made a move to touch him.

"I coordinate logistics for mobile operating theaters. Find a suitable location, make sure we have diesel for a generator, clean water, tents, food for the doctors and nurses. We have a team of facial surgeons who mostly operate on children with cleft lips and palates."

"Wow," was all Kai managed to say. He felt selfish all of a sudden for having spent the last year indulging in leisurely travel.

"I'm a problem solver, that's all," Toby shrugged. "I get paid for what I do. The real heroes are the doctors and nurses who volunteer their time and talent."

"Yeah, but you make sure they can do their job!" The lust Kai was feeling for this man was turning into ceaseless admiration. What he did for a living was so much more than Kai ever imagined himself doing. Toby was living a life in service to others and his own comfort was of secondary importance. Could he love this man more?

"So what do you do? Besides backpacking through Asia?"

Kai woke from his reverie. "I was a holiday rep for a while in Mexico and just recently in Thailand. Anything to pay the bills, I guess, but now I'm on my way to work for a travel agent in Seattle. Want to start my own business one day, though."

"Sounds interesting," Toby remarked, but he didn't sound altogether convinced.

"It's okay," Kai shrugged. "I worked at a travel agency in college.

The biggest perk is that you get the best deals on airline tickets."

Toby laughed and Kai looked around to see if he could find a deserted space to drag Toby to because he desperately wanted to kiss that mouth.

"All this coffee went right through me. I'll be right back." Toby gestured toward the men's room as he got up.

Kai waited only a few moments and then followed. Once he'd entered the enclosure, Toby turned around and Kai could tell Toby knew what he was thinking.

Toby smiled enigmatically and started checking the cubicles for inhabitants. At the moment, they were all empty.

No more words were exchanged. Kai took Toby's head between his hands and kissed him, pushing him against the wall. His kiss was returned immediately and Kai could feel Toby's arousal right through the layers of coarse jeans and fine linen.

Toby broke the intense kiss, gasping for air. "Do you have...?"

"Condoms?" Kai finished the sentence. "No, sorry. Not here. They're in my backpack and I checked that in. Didn't expect to get... lucky waiting for my plane."

Toby smiled and looked around the men's room. "There's no dispenser like in some of the European airports."

Kai didn't care. He launched himself at Toby again and they continued kissing while Kai fumbled to unzip Toby's dress trousers. His instincts took over and he started grinding his bulge against Toby's hip, desperate for friction. As Toby sucked in his already flat stomach, Kai's hand slipped underneath the band of Toby's trousers and closed around a decidedly excited cock.

Toby hissed and Kai almost let go. "Fuck no. Don't stop. Please," Toby pleaded. "It's been so long." He sighed. They were close together, nuzzling each other as the heat died down slightly. "Didn't mean to sound so desperate."

Kai smiled as he slowly started stroking his companion. "I don't mind taking care of you." In fact, Kai liked the power he felt right then. Toby was panting even though Kai was keeping the pace slow and

Meant to Be

although he was incredibly desperate for some sort of release, Kai enjoyed the giving as well, especially because Toby turned out to be quite a responsive lover. He was hard and heavy in Kai's hand and barely seemed to be able to focus on kissing, which was exactly how Kai liked it.

Just as Toby started moaning, a voice came over the intercom. "Boarding for all westbound flights will resume shortly. All passengers on westbound flights are requested to return to their gates for more information."

Kai sped up his movements, knowing it wouldn't take much to make Toby come. He was lucid enough to realize that if he wanted some sort of release of his own, he'd miss his boarding call, but he didn't want to leave his companion unsatisfied, so he ran his thumb over the sensitive head of Toby's cock and felt the other man reflexively thrust into his fist. The warm flood over Kai's hand combined with the deep moan coming from Toby's chest made Kai smile with pride even though he was afraid the encounter was too short-lived to leave a lasting impression on the older man.

Toby was panting hard, his head resting against the cold tile of airport men's room and his arm wrapped possessively around Kai's shoulders. "Did you...?"

Kai shook his head. "It's okay. They just called for my flight. I'd better get going."

Toby let go of Kai and opened his eyes. "We'd better get going."

"You're westbound as well?" Kai looked toward Toby as he started washing his hands.

Toby nodded. "My annual trip to Headquarters, remember?"

Kai felt his heart leap. "Seattle! The headquarters are in Seattle! We're on the same flight?"

Toby calmly smiled. "Looks like it, yeah."

"We could ask if they can switch our seats around so we can sit together. Maybe? If you want to, of course." Kai realized he was rambling, but he couldn't help himself. The chance to spend another couple of hours with Toby and the idea they'd be in the same city after the flight was making him curiously giddy. "We could give it a try," Toby agreed calmly.

Together they ran to their gate, surprised they'd wandered off so far, and they were both out of breath when they arrived.

"I really need to exercise more," Toby panted. He looked toward the busy gate attendant. "Why don't you let me try and charm this guy? Give me your boarding card?"

Kai handed Toby the paper slip and watched him get in line. He was amused to see Toby flirt with the check-in guy but realized he was also feeling jealous, which wasn't like him at all. He was Mister Casual, never looking for anything long-lasting, and although he still wasn't now, he really wanted to get to know this guy better.

"Look at this," Toby said smugly as he walked back toward Kai. "Two boarding passes, seats next to each other."

Kai took them from Toby and looked at the row numbers. "These seats are way up front. Did you get us bumped up to business?"

Toby smiled broadly and nodded.

"You sly fox!"

"I hope you brought a jacket or something?" Toby's face suddenly turned serious, which made Kai panic.

"Well.... I've been backpacking, Toby. Do I look like I'm hiding a fancy coat somewhere?"

Toby grabbed his bag and extracted something that looked like a bundled-up tarp. After shaking it fairly violently, some of the creases came out and Kai could tell it was a classic raincoat. "It usually looks better but I had to roll it up when it was still wet. It'll do, though. Just put it on and button up the front." Toby checked him out after Kai followed the instruction. "You'll pass," he said with a wink.

An hour later they were in the last row of business class, sipping on glasses of champagne, when the plane started taxiing toward the runway. During takeoff Toby held Kai's hand underneath the raincoat that Kai had to take off to sit down and once they were at cruising altitude, they were served the kind of dinner Kai had never had on an airplane, and not often on the ground either for that matter.

It wasn't until after that, when the cabin lights were turned down,

that Toby slipped his hand underneath the coat and palmed Kai's groin through his jeans. He leaned a little closer and whispered, "I owe you one."

Kai looked around the cabin to see if anyone was taking any notice, but the hand felt good, even like this, so he adjusted his seat and slipped his own hand underneath to unzip himself. "Toby, I'm not sure about this."

"It's not really the Mile High Club, but it's close enough," Toby teased, slipping his hand inside Kai's jeans. "Just try not to moan too much."

Toby was very casual about it and only stopped moving for a moment when one of the flight attendants passed by their seats on her way to economy. At first Kai was afraid they'd get caught, but soon enough Toby was making all the right moves to banish any rational thought from Kai's mind. His thoughts were just starting to drift to fantasies of a hotel room with a king-size bed for the two of them, when Toby kissed him. "You're moaning," he whispered against Kai's mouth.

Kai could only swallow and when Toby kissed him again, this time wet and with an open mouth, Kai felt his whole body contract as he came in what was possibly his most powerful orgasm in months.

"Ssh," Toby shushed him. "Come here." Toby casually wiped his hand on a napkin and took Kai in his arms.

"They'll see us," Kai panted, burying his face against Toby's neck nevertheless.

"What will they do to us? Throw us out?" Toby quipped, wiping a stray hair from Kai's forehead.

Kai chuckled, feeling curiously relaxed in Toby's embrace. "I guess not." He looked around quickly and then, when he realized no one was paying them any attention, kissed Toby again.

"How long will you be in Seattle?" Kai asked Toby after a long and surprisingly comfortable silence.

"A week," Toby said quietly. "Then I'm off to Honduras and Guatemala."

"And do you have to be at headquarters all week?" Kai asked

hopefully.

Toby shook his head. "Just the last two days before I leave."

Kai looked away from Toby. "So what are your plans for the first five, then?"

Toby cocked his head. "Well, I thought since I have this nice hotel room at my disposal, with two large, king-size beds, and it's not like I've never been to the city.... Visiting that place on my own for the past ten years means I've pretty much seen all the sights. And since you don't know whether you still have a place to live, I figured you could use one of the beds for a while."

"Oh," Kai answered. He didn't know what to say after hearing Toby's answer. In fact, Toby's words and his body language told Kai that Toby was willing to put up with him for a few days, as if he was doing Kai a favor, nothing more. And Kai definitely wanted more.

"Hey?" Toby tried to make Kai look at him again. "I sort of fancy not leaving the hotel room for at least four days."

Kai exhaled audibly and then chuckled at being so transparent.

"What did you think?"

Kai shook his head. "Never mind what I thought. After four days, we'll probably need to leave the room to stock up on supplies again."

"Exactly my thought," Toby smiled smugly.

AFTER their plane touched down, Kai and Toby couldn't get to the hotel quickly enough. Kai was happy that Toby signed for the room because his own hands were sweaty and shaking with anticipation.

Once inside the room, they were already ripping each other's clothes off before they realized they still needed to close the door. After their first round of lovemaking they were still half-dressed, and after their second round they shared a shower, slipping effortlessly into round three. They were both exhausted from their long journey, but couldn't stop looking at each other, touching, kissing, licking and nibbling. Every so often, they'd fall asleep, always close together, wrapped in each other's arms as if they were afraid of losing each other in the middle of the night. Neither was used to sleeping with someone else, but they

seemed to fall into the habit with ease.

Somewhere during the second night—not that they noticed the change, since they didn't see any daylight—their lust-filled actions became more loving, more caring, more geared toward giving the other pleasure than to finding release or satisfaction of their own.

Kai started realizing how well they fit together and how amazing it was to meet, for the first time in his life, a man who was as versatile as he was. Toby could be very controlling and rather dominant, but at other times, he relinquished control so completely that Kai was overwhelmed by it, making him pause to look at Toby's blissful face.

At first, they didn't talk very much, and entirely forgot to eat, but when hunger and lack of energy commanded they take a break, it was like opening the flood gates. They talked about their families, how Toby grew up all around the world with parents who were globetrotters and who wanted to show their children as many different cultures as they could manage. Kai, in turn, had only started traveling when he was in college. His parents had barely left their hometown and Kai wanted to broaden his horizons, urged on by his thirst for knowledge and mutual understanding.

They continued their discussion about politics and religion and which world cuisine was the finest in between short bursts of lovemaking, usually followed by the obligatory nap.

Somewhere during the third day, Kai started despairing that their time together was quickly coming to an end and he wasn't ready yet. For the first time in his life, something that started out like so many of his one-night stands was turning into something much more powerful, and the man it happened with was going to go away again all too soon.

"Is there any way you don't need to leave tomorrow?" Kai asked Toby after they'd made love slowly and tenderly.

Toby bit his lips. "The plans are all made months in advance, Kai." He pulled Kai closer, hugging him tightly. "I'll be back, though."

"Yeah. Next year." Kai sighed, feeling defeated.

"No," Toby soothed him. "There was never anything for me to come back for. The jobs are always a few weeks to two or three months. I used to stay in whatever country I was in, to travel and see the landscape and meet the people, but I'd much rather come home now. That is, if you'll have me back."

Kai looked at him hopefully and nodded decidedly. "I was going to look for an apartment of my own as soon as I got my first paycheck anyway. You can come home to that?"

"Long-distance relationships aren't easy, Kai."

"I know," Kai answered, realizing Toby was right. Being crazy in love, like they were now, was one thing, but how would he feel after being apart for weeks? Would he still remember what Toby felt like? Smelled like? Tasted like? Or would it all fade as quickly as it had come?

"I like the idea of you setting up a home for the two of us, though." Toby squeezed Kai even tighter. "I like the idea of having a place to come home to."

Saying goodbye was hard. They tried when Toby had to go see his boss to be debriefed about his last mission, then again the next day when he was to receive his instructions for his next one. It wasn't until Toby was getting ready to go back to the airport that they managed to say what needed to be said.

"We'll take this one step at a time, okay?" Toby suggested. "We can stay in touch while I'm away. I need to go into town regularly and there's usually a phone I can get to, so I'll call you."

"And when you come back, you'll switch your cell phone on as soon as you touch down?"

"From the moment those airplane doors open, I'll switch it on and I'll tell you I'm coming home."

Kai nodded fervently, more to keep himself from crying than out of conviction.

TOBY took his bag out of the overhead compartment and went straight for the side pocket where he kept his cell phone. This stop was only a layover. He had to wait for four hours to catch a connecting flight, so he would miss seeing his lover, but he knew Kai was expecting him to call and even though it would be another week before they'd see each other in the flesh, Toby knew they'd spend the next three hours talking on the

Meant to Be

phone. After all, they had two things to celebrate; it wasn't just Valentine's Day, but also their fifth anniversary.

As soon as he switched it on, the phone bleeped to say he'd missed Kai's call, so he immediately hit redial. To his surprise, he was instantly redirected to Kai's voice mail, and that worried him somewhat. Kai knew exactly when his plane would touch down and although they'd been delayed by about ten minutes, it was strange to think Kai had turned his cell phone off. He knew he had to get a hold of his man. They'd never missed an opportunity to talk, not once in the past five years, and he wasn't about to start today, on their anniversary.

Toby quickly grabbed his belongings and willed the line of people leaving the airplane to hurry up. He made his way past all the slow tourists and into the arrivals lounge where he tried to call again, to no avail.

What could possibly have happened? They'd always been so good at making plans. It was what had kept them together for all these years.

As Toby had predicted, their long-distance love affair wasn't easy, for either of them. Despite the doubts they'd both had in the beginning, they were drawn to each other like magnets. Every goodbye was excruciating, every reunion a reason to celebrate. Deep down, Toby knew it was all artificial; the relationship they had wasn't really based in reality. Although they shared a lot of things with each other, spending much of their time together telling the stories of what had happened while they were apart, real life happened while they were at different sides of the world.

Toby could barely believe it, but it was getting to him. He wanted to truly share things with his lover. He wanted to have mutual friends and go to family gatherings and share the everyday things in life, the common things like doing laundry and going food shopping. Right now, Kai made sure none of these trivial things needed to be done by the time he arrived so they could spend as much time together as possible.

Toby had always been the carefree spirit who didn't care for birthdays or holidays, but as he grew older, the fact that they'd never been together to celebrate either his or Kai's birthday was becoming an issue. He realized he wanted a life with Kai. Toby blamed events of

recent months for his change of heart. First his sister-in-law was killed in a car accident. Toby was in the middle of a project in Laos and by the time he got back home, the funeral was over. Kai had taken his place on the day, but his absence was felt nevertheless, and Toby felt guilty for not being there to support his brother and nieces. Then Toby's dad started to become a bit frail. The once strong, eloquent man became forgetful and Toby's mom had her hands full with him. Although Toby wasn't their only child, he was the oldest and felt responsible for helping his parents. Toby's near miss with a big tree that almost fell on his Jeep during a storm hadn't helped either, and he hadn't dared to tell Kai about it, afraid he'd make him worry. In short, Toby felt like he was wasting his time being away from his lover for most of the year, so he'd made a decision and was on his way to headquarters to ask for a leave of absence to find a job closer to home. With pain in his heart, he'd have to leave the job he'd adored for the past fifteen years, but he had made up his mind and wasn't about to change it.

Picking up his cell phone again, Toby dialed Kai's number with his eyes closed. He clicked it shut as soon as he recognized Kai's recorded message and sat down on one of the seats with a deep sigh. He was tired and weary from his long flight and after the anticipation of a long conversation with his lover died down, he felt deflated.

Then a cold female voice came over the intercom. "Due to an unexpected drop in outside temperature, all flights will suffer delays. Please consult the departure boards for information on your flight."

Toby couldn't help but smile. Five years ago, a blizzard brought him and Kai together. It was an unexpected stroke of good luck and he'd thanked his lucky stars every night since then.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Toby looked up at a teenage girl with a backpack slung over her shoulder. He didn't recognize her, but she looked sweet and a little unsure, so he smiled.

"The lady at the desk there is gesturing at you."

He looked in the direction the girl's finger was pointing and spotted a smiling redhead standing behind a drinks counter. She was waving at him. Again, he didn't know this woman, but he was intrigued enough to check it out. "Thank you," he told the girl as he got up and walked toward the woman.

"You were waving at me?"

She nodded courteously. "Yes, sir. I was told to give you this and ask you to find a space to sit at the back there." She gestured toward the rear of the café and then placed a tray with four cups of steaming hot liquid in front of Toby.

Toby didn't know quite what to think, but flung his travel bag over his shoulder and took the tray. The café was quite busy, especially now that no flights were leaving and people had settled themselves in for a long wait. Toby walked toward the back and was looking around for an empty place when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Toby?"

Toby almost dropped his drinks when he realized Kai was right there.

Luckily, Kai had the presence of mind to take the tray from his lover and set it on the table before flinging himself at Toby.

"What are you doing here?" Toby asked after being thoroughly kissed. He looked around to see how much attention they'd caught from the other patrons, but Kai took his head between his hands and made him look straight at him.

"Celebrating Valentine's Day. And our anniversary, of course," Kai answered confidently.

"But this is a secure area. You can't get in here without a...." Kai stopped him mid-sentence by kissing him again.

"I'm a travel agent, Toby. I bought the cheapest ticket I could find, just so I could spend a few hours here with you."

Toby felt his emotions rise and pulled Kai into his arms, this time without checking if people were watching. It felt so good to hold his lover; he didn't care about what they might think of them. After standing together like that for a while, Kai pulled him to the side.

"Let's sit before anyone else wants my seat," Kai suggested.

"I have news for you," Toby announced once they'd settled down. He was nervous to tell Kai, since they'd never really discussed him leaving his job before and he wasn't entirely sure how Kai felt about possibly having him around all the time. He had to get it over with, though. He had to let his heart speak.

""I have news too," Kai replied.

"You first," Toby decided, putting off the inevitable for a little while longer.

"I'm pregnant," Kai deadpanned.

Toby realized his mouth must have fallen open, because he had to close it. He chuckled. "Nutcase."

"Yeah, but I'm your nutcase." Kai snuggled closer to Toby and Toby put his arm around Kai. "So what did you want to tell me?"

"What would you say if I said I wasn't going to be traveling anymore?"

Kai sat up straight and looked at Toby as if he wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. "What do you mean?"

Toby felt his nerves fray, especially because Kai didn't seem to be totally ecstatic about the news. "I'm on my way to Seattle, right?"

Kai nodded quickly. "Headquarters. Yes, I know. And then you're going to be home for a week, maybe?"

Toby inhaled deeply and then spoke. "I'm going to ask them for a leave of absence. I want to come home, Kai. I'm sick and tired of being on the other side of the world when Dad gets sick or.... When Carol died, I knew I had to be here and not out there; no matter how badly those unfortunate people needed me, my family needed me more!" He knew he was rambling, but there was so much he needed to tell Kai, it all came flooding out at once. Toby could tell that Kai was listening, but his usually very emotional lover was unusually quiet. "And I'm sick and tired of being away from you all the time as well, Kai. After Carol's death I had nightmares for days. All I could think of was what if it'd been you? I wouldn't even have made it back in time for your funeral. And you've made such a great home for us. I want to have time to enjoy it. Don't you want me to come home?"

Kai nodded, swallowing hard. "Will they let you leave?"

Toby shrugged. "I think so. We've talked about it before, but I never felt ready. Also, I'm their star employee. Nobody's ever lasted this

long."

"Well, you're very good at your job," Kai replied softly. "What if you miss it? Tobe, you've never lived in the same place for an entire year."

"I know," Toby conceded. "I'll need a job, because my savings won't last long and we can't live off what you make, but I'll find something."

"Well, that was my news actually," Kai said hesitantly. "Remember the shelter we volunteered for at Christmas?"

Toby nodded.

"They're looking for a manager. They have a soup kitchen and a free clinic as well and they need someone to whip the whole lot into shape. They actually offered me the job, but I asked them to extend their search for a week, so I could maybe persuade you to go talk to them."

"I will," Toby interrupted. "Sounds exactly like the kind of job that would suit me."

"Seriously?" Kai asked and Toby saw him light up.

"If you think you can stand living with me full-time?"

"Fuck, Toby, I've been waiting for this for five years!"

Toby giggled, both from nerves and from the fact that a huge weight was lifted off his shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Kai's eyes grew big. "How would you feel if I turned out to be this clingy guy? You like me because I'm independent and I don't nag you."

"True," Toby agreed.

"I just didn't want to be the one to tie you down. I figured that one day you would want to settle down. I thought about giving you an ultimatum a few times, but I was always afraid you'd leave, and I love you, Toby. It would have killed me if you'd left and I'd much rather have you a few weeks a year, than not at all. But I'll admit that after five years, I didn't expect it to happen anymore."

Toby's heart was so full of emotion it wanted to leap out and into Kai's chest. Instead, he pulled Kai close and kissed him again. "Come to

Seattle with me?" he asked eventually.

"Can't," Kai said regretfully.

"Where is your ticket for?"

"Boston," Kai answered.

"So let's go to Boston then?" Toby suggested. "We can get married there!"

Kai laughed and Toby was glad to see him relax a bit. "Neither of us lives there, so it wouldn't be very practical."

"Damn," Toby cursed. "I don't want to leave you again so soon! Exchange your ticket for one to Seattle?" he tried.

"We can't afford it," Kai quipped. "Me not working for a week and you out of a job, means we don't eat for a week either."

Toby could tell Kai wasn't completely serious, but he knew his lover was telling the truth. They didn't have a lot of money set aside since Toby's job didn't exactly pay much and Kai had gone into business for himself just a year earlier. Moving to New York had also caused a dent in their savings, even though it was easier with all the traveling Toby did, but Toby had to be realistic, and knew that wanting Kai to join him was extravagant.

After all, they had a lifetime to make up for it.

Kai got up from his seat. "Maybe we should check to see if there's any news on your flight?"

"You want me out of here already?" Toby asked, only half-serious.

"Of course! Give me time to get used to having you around all the time!"

Seeing Kai joke with him made Toby relax. They would be okay; he knew that now.

They walked back toward the concourse and read on the large panels that all flights were delayed at least until morning. Just like five years ago, all hotels were booked by the time they'd decided to get a room, so they settled into a corner of the departure hall, between other people's bags.

Meant to Be

At least this way, Toby got to hold Kai for one more night before leaving to quit his job. As he dozed off, he was dreaming of their next Valentine's Day, when instead of spending it on the phone with Kai, he could actually wake up with his lover in his arms. In that respect, he knew that every day would be Valentine's Day and next year February fourteenth would just be their anniversary.

Toby couldn't wait to finally start the rest of their lives.

Zahra Owens was born in Europe, just before Woodstock and the moon landing, and given a much less pronounceable name by her non-English speaking parents. Being an Aquarian meant she would never quite conform and people learned to expect the unexpected.

She started writing fairy tales in first grade; the same year she came into contact with her first group of English speaking friends, a group which would eventually grow to include people from all over the world. On the outside she was a typical only child, accustomed to being with adults most of the time. On the inside, she sought ways to channel her wild imagination.

Becoming an Intensive Care Nurse only kept her interested for so long, the same was true for being a Computer Specialist. According to her mother, her hobby is collecting college degrees, but it wasn't until she was in her thirties that she realized what life was all about. By then she was making a decent living during the day and honing her writing craft at night. She wrote in English of course, which was also her preferred reading language. The final piece in the jigsaw of her writing career was provided when she met her editor, something she felt was essential for a non-English speaker.

The fact that the Internet has made the world a lot smaller, gave her access to readers from all over the world. And she couldn't be happier.

Visit Zahra's website at http://www.zahraowens.com

The Wild Side



Janey Chapel

"RYAN? Hey, Ryan!"

Ryan froze with his dick halfway in the cute lacrosse player's mouth. "Oh, no." Christ. Bloodhounds had nothing on Cheyenne. She could probably track him with a head cold through six feet of blinding snow.

The lacrosse player pulled back and peered up at him. The Club kept the back room dark for good reason. Ryan rubbed his hands across the top of the guy's short bristle of hair, reassuring him. What was his name? Dustin? Or maybe Justin?

"Not you," Ryan said softly, patting his head. Austin? Could be Austin. He looked like an Austin. He could put a rubber on in the dark and he had a great, wide mouth. Ryan felt him nod and lean forward, taking Ryan in again with no hesitation at all, sucking him way down into his throat. God, it felt *awesome*.

"Ryan!"

Fuck. Cheyenne had many good qualities: she had great instincts, she didn't bullshit, and whether or not he wanted to hear what she had to say, she never sugarcoated. But she also had consistently bad timing. Terrible timing. *Epically* bad timing. So of course she couldn't have come while Ryan was paying for one more round of Heinekens and learning more about lacrosse than he'd ever really wanted to know. Or even when the dude had his hand way up on Ryan's thigh, high enough for Ryan to get that, yeah, this was a done deal, they just needed to find some place marginally less public. Oh, no, Cheyenne showed up when the awkwardness of who's doing what had been ironed out and all Ryan had to do was lean back against the wall in a nice dark corner while a hot goalie got down on his knees, unzipped him, and opened wide.

Janey Chapel

"Shit, that's it. That's good right there," Ryan whispered, tilting Austin's head. The hot tug of Austin's mouth reduced Cheyenne's voice to an annoying buzz. Maybe if he ignored her, she'd go away.

"Yo. Ryan."

Or maybe not.

"I know you're in there, Ry Ry," Cheyenne said in a singsong voice.

"Kind of busy here," Ryan bit out as he started to thrust, gently at first, then a little harder when Austin moaned encouraging noises around him.

"Listen: I need a favor," she said.

Austin pulled off, using his hand to work Ryan's cock, twisting a little harder than Ryan usually liked, but whatever; nobody nailed it the first try.

From near his hip, he heard Austin say, "If he's doing favors, I guarantee you're in line behind me."

Ryan laughed under his breath. "You got that right."

Cheyenne sighed noisily, just in case he couldn't tell she was annoyed.

"Give me half an hour, Chey," he said, his voice cracking a little bit at the end when Austin leaned back in and popped the head of Ryan's dick into his mouth.

"Oh, please. The average male lasts three and a half minutes," Cheyenne said with a sniff. "I'll be at the bar turning gay guys straight. Come find me when you're done choking that boy."

Ryan tried not to laugh; no point in encouraging her. Cheyenne was a piece of work, no question about it, but he loved her. She'd stuck to him like glue when other friends hadn't; she was a real thick-and-thin kind of friend. So if she needed a favor, he'd do his best to oblige, but at that particular moment, he had more pressing needs, namely keeping Austin's tongue right there, right on the cut, where it sent electricity sizzling through Ryan's entire body. Austin, and his hot, tight mouth, deserved his full and undivided attention. Ryan joined Cheyenne at the bar twenty minutes later. He'd clocked it: nine minutes for him, thank you very much, and five for the goalie. Ryan chalked the difference up to his superior hand job technique. The remaining six minutes went toward obligatory chit-chat and an exchange of cell phone numbers. Turned out the guy's *last* name was Austin. His first name was Dan. Or Dave. Something like that. Whoops.

"Was he good?" Cheyenne asked as Ryan slid onto the stool next to her. She pushed a bottle of beer toward him.

"It's a blow job," Ryan said, shrugging. "Hard to go wrong there."

Cheyenne shook her head, the beads in her multitude of braids chattering against her shoulder. "You're in a rut. You know that, right? All these pretty boys, they're all the same."

He'd gotten laid and he had a nice cold beer, so he felt mellow enough to let Cheyenne pick apart his sex life, one of her perennial favorite topics.

"I know, I know: jarheads and jocks, jocks and jarheads," he said.

She sighed. "We ought to just get you a mirror and let you fuck yourself."

Ryan laughed. "At least I know I'd have a good time."

"I'm serious," she said, huffing a breath. "One of these days, you're going to meet someone you want to screw more than once, and then what will you do?"

Ryan caught the bartender's eye and ordered another beer. "I'm sure you'll tell me."

"What I'm telling you is that you've got a type, and it ain't a type you're gonna be happy with in the long run."

Ryan took a long pull on his beer. God, Chey could be such a *girl* sometimes.

"What long run? I'm twenty-two and I'm making up for lost time," he said. "Sex is fun. Why complicate it?"

"Spending time with someone isn't complicated," she said. "Learning someone's name before you fuck them isn't *complicated*."

Ryan shook his head, draining the last of his beer. "I don't see what the big deal is. He had fun, I had fun, I don't have to worry about getting court-martialed...."

"There. That's just it," Cheyenne said, poking him in the chest with her finger. "You still divide the world into Navy and Not Navy. You're not Navy anymore, babe."

Ryan rolled the empty bottle in his hand. "I know."

Cheyenne raised one eyebrow.

"I know."

Cheyenne's mouth turned down, a sure sign that she was revving herself up.

Time to change the topic. "What's the favor?"

Cheyenne spun on her barstool until she faced him. "Don't think I don't see what you just did, but okay, here goes: Come out to the shore with me this weekend and work at The Wild Side. Mike's expecting big crowds for Valentine's Day and he's short-staffed. I already checked with Nick and he's got room for both of us."

The Wild Side paid Cheyenne's tuition; she made so much in tips over the summer that she didn't need to work during the school year. Mike, a man Cheyenne had once described as the gay Bruce Willis, was the owner. Nick must be the waiter Cheyenne rented a room from during the summer. Ryan hadn't ever made the two-hour drive to see the place firsthand, but he knew the restaurant had a prime beachfront location straddling the boardwalk, and that it catered to an older, primarily gay crowd. Chey came by her faghagginess honestly.

Ryan thought about it. He didn't have any plans for the weekend; it wasn't like he had to give a guy flowers and chocolate before he'd get any action, and Cheyenne rarely asked him for anything.

"I have to be honest: it's combat duty without combat pay," she said. "The year-round residents are all about a hundred years old and they pay shit for tips. But if Mike likes you, you've got the inside track on a great summer job."

The Wild Side

He must have looked like he was wavering, because she moved in for the kill: "I can pretty much guarantee you'll get laid. They've got the best-looking wait staff on the beach."

Oh, like he could say no to that.

As usual, Cheyenne hadn't been blowing smoke. When Ryan's new boss, Mike, gathered the wait staff together in the entry of The Wild Side half an hour before the Valentine's Day rush, it looked like Hunkmania had decided to slum it at the shore. Ryan caught Cheyenne's eye and nodded, giving her a surreptitious thumbs-up, which she answered with a massive eye-roll. Fine, forget Cheyenne. While Mike frothed at the mouth in a way that reminded Ryan fondly of his former drill instructor, referring to the coming weekend as "Armageddon, *only worse*," Ryan checked out his fellow soldiers. A big blond with an improbable tan met Ryan's eyes and smiled. Nice. Very nice. Older than the guys Ryan usually met, but he looked willing and available, Ryan's typical requirements. Next to him, a lanky redhead narrowed his eyes when he saw the blond checking Ryan out. Could be jealous, could just have something in his eye; no way to know.

Another man came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron, and sauntered over to the group, sliding in next to the blond and nodding at Mike. Ryan glanced at him, went on to the next waiter, then found his eyes going right back. Something about him.... His stillness while the other waiters fidgeted, or maybe the confidence he showed in the way he stood with one hand tucked in his pocket and one hip cocked, like no matter how crazy things got, this guy had it covered. He wasn't at all Ryan's type: he looked to be a couple of inches shorter than Ryan, built along slimmer lines, and he had a riot of dark curls, when Ryan usually went for crew cuts and fades. Hey, he'd imprinted early and never recovered. But Ryan didn't look away from him until Cheyenne finally kicked his foot with hers.

"That's Nick," she whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

At Ryan's questioning look, she said, "Nick. The guy whose house we're staying in?"

Oh, *Nick*. Cheyenne's buddy, and Ryan's host for the weekend. He hadn't been home when they dropped off their stuff, but he'd left a note welcoming them, saying he'd meet them at the restaurant.

Ryan looked from Cheyenne back to Nick, and found Nick looking at him. He gave off none of the signs Ryan had learned to watch for. He didn't smile, or wink, or look Ryan over like he might be imagining him naked, but there was something there, something... interesting... in the direct way he met Ryan's eyes. Ryan had no idea what to read into that calm, steady gaze, but he knew exactly how to categorize the low burn of excitement it provoked inside him: his type or not, Nick totally turned him on.

CHEYENNE had joked that with Ryan's ROTC experience, a few days of waiting tables ought to be a walk in the park, but nothing could have prepared him for the onslaught of crabby senior citizens wanting their marsala sauce on the side, their coffee decaf, and their pecan pie served with sugar-free, reduced-fat vanilla ice cream, and oh, doll, is that kosher?

"I'll check," he said, prying his sleeve out of the tiny talons that had snagged him as he passed by Table Six with an armful of food for Table Nine. The little bird lady at Table Six had already scarfed down half a chicken, a side of macaroni salad, and two pieces of garlic bread, so he wasn't sure where she planned to put that pecan pie, but hey, if you can't splurge on Valentine's Day, when can you?

Ryan served the couple at Table Nine their veal piccata with baked potato ("Butter on the side! Double sour cream!") and the everpopular chicken marsala, refilled water glasses ("No ice!") for Table Fourteen, then pushed the kitchen door open with his hip, trading the noisy dining room for the moist heat of an even noisier kitchen.

"Anybody know if the ice cream is kosher?" he asked.

"Yeah, it is," a muffled voice said from behind the door to the walk-in refrigerator.

Ryan walked over and looked around the edge of the door. "Even the sugar-free?"

Okay, wow, nice view: the waiter who stood bent at the waist rummaging around on one of the lower shelves had lean hips, a great ass, and straight, narrow shoulders. All the waiters looked the same in their uniform of black pants, white aprons, and white shirts, but only one had a head of dark curls, so that meant that perfect ass belonged to Nick. The surge of arousal Ryan had felt with Nick's eyes on him during Mike's pep talk returned tenfold. If the summer job came complete with *that*, Ryan might have found his calling. Maybe listening to his dick wasn't the best way to make a career move, but he didn't have any better plan: he had three months to go until graduation, and then... He could get that far, but no further.

Ryan rubbed his hand across his short brown hair, the last remaining vestige of what might have been an illustrious career in the military if he hadn't finally figured out, after two years in ROTC, that his lifelong fascination with the Navy had a lot more to do with the men in uniform than the mission. It's not just a job; it's hundreds of beautiful, toned bodies in communal showers. "Don't ask, don't tell" seemed like a really dumb way to live his life, so he quit ROTC, joined GLBT, and tried not to look back. Easier said than done. He'd had to hunt down financial aid to make up the difference in the ROTC scholarship. He'd had to explain to his drinking buddies that yes, he was queer, and no, he didn't want to bone them. Some of them took the news better than others. He told his dad, who had to readjust a few dreams of his own, and his mom, who hugged him and told him she just wanted him to be happy. She still looked sad when she thought he wasn't looking, but they'd raised him to live what he believed, and he didn't believe in regret.

His life, which had revolved with military precision around classes and training, now stretched indefinitely forward, his once-sure path twisted beyond recognition while he plugged away at an engineering degree he could no longer generate any excitement about. He'd been out (and out of ROTC) for eighteen months, but when he tried to envision the future, he still saw what he'd dreamed about since he toured an aircraft carrier at age ten: tours of duty, dress whites, gray decks, blue skies, and choppy seas. Cheyenne had told him he needed a change—a big one. He tried explaining that he'd just been through a really big fucking change, but she'd just nodded like she knew something he didn't and said, "One step at a time."

One step had led him here, to a walk-in refrigerator and a really good-looking waiter with a stellar ass. Hell, he could bounce a quarter off that ass. Even during the busiest part of the dinner rush, Ryan had found himself glancing around as he moved from the floor to the kitchen and back, watching Nick work. He had warm dark eyes and a great, slow smile, and Ryan liked the way he talked to the customers, his quiet steadiness and his patience.

A real one-eighty from jocks and jarheads.

Maybe Chey had been right all along: Time to try something new.

As Nick straightened up, having successfully ferreted a bowl of something green out of the bowels of the refrigerator, he turned and grinned briefly at Ryan. "You doing all right?" he asked.

"Great," said Ryan, wondering if Nick had any idea how long Ryan had been standing there staring at his ass. "I can't wait to go tell Table Six the ice cream is kosher."

Nick shook his head. "That's Marge Mastriano. She's fucking with you. She's Catholic as the Pope, but she loves to grill the new staff."

Ryan raised his eyebrows. "And she does this... why?"

Nick put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it and sending an electric jolt racing all the way down to Ryan's groin. He stood still, hoping Nick wouldn't notice that he'd just given Ryan a boner right there in the busy kitchen.

"It's a long winter out here," Nick said. "We have to amuse ourselves somehow."

He gave Ryan another smile, then patted his shoulder and stepped around him, calling out to the chef that he'd found the spinach, now could he please make the salad before Mrs. Maravich popped a vein?

Ryan slipped his hand under his apron and adjusted himself. "Down, boy," he murmured. The crowd that wanted to be home in time for *Ghost Whisperer* had begun to leave, but the slightly younger folks, the ones who knew how to program a DVR, had started a steady second wave. He glanced up at the clock. Three more hours—four, tops—then he'd be walking the three short blocks to Nick's house. The thought of all the different ways he might be able to amuse Nick on a long winter night carried Ryan through a dispute over Table Nine's bill ("When did you start charging for extra sour cream?"), the couple that came in tanked and proceeded to order a liquid dinner, and the ritualistic eight percent tip he got off virtually every table.

"Are they passing around *The Idiot's Guide to Tipping*?" he whispered to Cheyenne as he pocketed a \$3.75 tip on a \$47.00 bill.

"They've memorized the menu. They know exactly how much the bill will be when they walk in the door," she whispered back. "I'm telling you, they have way too much time on their hands."

They closed at midnight, then the entire wait and bus staff set to work prepping for the following day. Ryan chose salt duty, mostly because he saw Nick grabbing the pepper shakers. He slid into a booth across from Nick, lined up the salt shakers, and started pouring. He overfilled the first shaker, distracted by a dip he'd just noticed in Nick's lower lip. Ryan could easily imagine tracing that intriguing little dent with his tongue, then slipping past it into Nick's generous mouth. Ryan had felt instant physical attraction before, but the strength of the pull Nick exerted surprised him.

"So, will tomorrow be as nuts as tonight?" Ryan asked, tossing a pinch of spilled salt over his shoulder and swiping the remainder onto the carpet for the vacuum cleaner to pick up later.

Nick looked up and shrugged. "Yeah, but in different ways."

"How so?"

"Tonight we had, well, I don't need to tell you," Nick said. "You'll probably be hearing 'on the side!' in your dreams."

Ryan laughed. "So tomorrow, I can slather a baked potato with butter and sour cream and no one will smack my hand?"

"Only if you ask them to," Nick said. "They're more likely to cop a feel, frankly."

Ryan knocked over one of the salt shakers. Fortunately, an empty one. "So The Wild Side gets wilder than tonight?"

"Oh, yeah," Nick said. "It started as a gay bar, and that's where most of the action is in the summer. But my grandma and her friends

wanted one of the restaurants on the boardwalk to stay open all winter, so they'd have some place to go besides McDonald's."

"And they chose the gay bar?"

"My grandmother was friends with Mike's mother, so I think maybe she twisted his arm," Nick said. "It makes sense financially. He gets to stay open year-round, and even with all their bitching, the customers are loyal to a fault."

Ryan digested all that while he finished one shaker and reached for another. "Do they ever cross paths? The gays and the geriatric set?"

Nick covered the top of an open shaker as he sneezed into his sleeve. "Excuse me. Pepper went right up my nose. Not really. For the most part, they've worked out an uneasy truce. In the winter the locals get the weeknights and the gay boys take the weekends. In the summer, Mike does a buffet that ends at nine, and no self-respecting gay man heads out before eleven, so it works out."

Ryan nodded as he tightened another lid.

"But to get back to your question about tomorrow, the locals know better than to come out on SAD night."

"Sad?" Ryan asked. "Why? Because Valentine's Day is over?"

"Hardly. SAD stands for Singles Awareness Day, also known as Anti-Valentine's Day," Nick said, reaching for another shaker, blinking rapidly when more pepper apparently drifted up toward his face. "It'll be all singles; no couples allowed. Mike runs drink specials for anybody who comes alone."

"I never heard of that," Ryan said. "It sounds like every night at State."

That brought out one of Nick's slow smiles, which Ryan felt like a touch all over his body. He decided then and there that if he ever got Nick stretched naked underneath him, he'd make him laugh, just to feel that sensation again.

"It can feel a little more, um, desperate than that," Nick said. "A lot of people get wasted, hook up. People who come alone don't leave alone."

"Unless you're 'No-Dick Nick'," a voice said from behind Ryan. He looked up. Two of the other waiters stood behind the booth: the redhead, who Ryan thought might be named Rowdy, and the tall blond who'd looked Ryan over with such obvious interest earlier. What was his name? Ken? Keith? Kevin. That was it. He looked a little older than Nick, probably around thirty. Ryan looked back at Nick, trying to gauge how friendly the two men were.

Kevin leaned his elbows on the booth behind Ryan's head and said, "Nick, here, could care less about parties. No one-night stands for our boy." Then he touched the back of Ryan's neck with the tip of his finger and said, "Now, I, on the other hand, love a good party."

The touch of Kevin's finger raised the little hairs on the back of Ryan's neck, in a not unpleasant way. Already primed from his attraction to Nick, his body responded, his cock swelling abruptly. He looked down at the table, concentrating on keeping the fine tremble in his hands from showing.

Nick set down the pepper shaker he'd just filled and brushed his hands together. "Just because I don't suck every random cock that unzips itself in my general direction...."

"You tell him, sweetie!" Cheyenne swept into view, knocking her hip against Kevin's hard enough to push him off balance. "You have your idea of fun, Kev, and Nick has his."

"Yes, but my fun includes getting my rocks off, and Nick's includes *Monk* marathons."

"Don't diss my man Monk," Cheyenne said, leaning her shoulder against Kevin's, "and don't diss my man Nick." She gave Kevin a pointed look.

"I'm just messing with you, man," Kevin said to Nick, then added, "but it wouldn't kill you to get out more."

That made Nick look up. Something unspoken passed between Kevin and Nick, something that seemed to go beyond tonight's conversation. The strange vibe between them made Ryan wonder whether they had history together. Ryan looked down at his row of salt shakers, lined up straight like little soldiers. He matched them up with Nick's filled pepper shakers, then slid out of the booth and started

delivering pairs to each empty table while behind him, Kevin and Rowdy continued to work on Nick, encouraging him to go out with them. It didn't sound like they made any progress.

Okay, so much for getting Nick naked. Nick didn't party, or do one-night stands. Odds seemed good, then, that a weekend fling would be off the table, too. It sounded like instead of going back to the house and finding places to get horizontal and sweaty with Nick, Ryan would have plenty of time for girl talk with Cheyenne about why Nick and Kevin were weird about each other.

Too bad; Ryan definitely felt a spark, and remembering Nick's warm hand on his shoulder, he didn't think it was entirely one-sided, but he could respect the guy's position. Nick probably had at least five years on Ryan; maybe in that time, weekend flings lost some of their appeal. He turned the idea over in his head, but couldn't quite get it to gel. Who wouldn't want to have a good time? As long as everybody used a rubber and nobody brought out the whips and chains? Maybe Ryan had just gotten lucky when he got lucky... and maybe Nick hadn't.

Once they'd finished all the prep work, Mike lined the staff up again. Ryan braced for a repeat of the pre-shift harangue, but instead, Mike handed each of them a Valentine's bonus: a \$20 bill and a heartshaped lollipop as big as his hand. Looking down at the ridiculous candy, Ryan switched Mike in his mental roster from "intimidating and a little scary" to "big old flaming softie."

"Go home and get some sleep," Mike said. When Kevin made protesting noises, Mike looked at him and said, "Fine. Go out, get laid, *then* go home and get some sleep."

Over the ensuing jeers, Kevin put his hands up and said, "Admit it; you're all jealous."

Cheyenne scoffed. "Just remember to wash your hands."

As Kevin headed out the door, he detoured by Ryan and said, "How about you? Can I convince you to go out for a drink?"

Kevin's voice said "drink," but the look on his face said "fuck." Ordinarily, Ryan wouldn't have hesitated—if it feels good, do it—but tonight, it just didn't feel right.

"No, thanks," Ryan said. "I'm beat."

He didn't know what gave him away, since he deliberately turned away from Nick as he said it, but Kevin caught something. He draped his arm across Ryan's shoulder, tugged him closer, and said softly in his ear, "Never gonna happen."

Ryan shrugged him off. "Yeah, well, I don't think this is gonna happen, either."

With a grin, Kevin slapped him on the back. "I'm in Unit Two, corner of Elm and Oak, right around the corner from the Nickster." He looked Ryan up and down, then licked his lips. "If you change your mind, you know where to find me." He blew a kiss as he and Rowdy left, cursing the cold that swirled in when they opened the door.

Ryan looked around as he left the restaurant with Nick and Cheyenne and headed down the boardwalk, hunching his shoulders against the cold night air. To his right lay the vast, empty beach, rumbling waves breaking quietly in the distance. Their footsteps echoed on the wooden walkway as they passed shops that had been boarded up for the season. Behind the row of shops, darkened arcade rides rose silent and still toward the night sky. A ferris wheel stretched impossibly high, its cradles rocking in the stiff breeze. Hard to imagine how different it would be in summer heat and crowds—bright lights and cotton candy, girls in bikinis and boys in board shorts making out under the boardwalk. Wearing its winter coat like a secret, the boardwalk felt like another world. Ryan walked a little faster, putting himself between Nick and Cheyenne. He wasn't spooked, exactly; just very aware that they were the only living things around, three warm little creatures in a space clearly meant for so many more.

The short walk to Nick's house cleared Ryan's head a little. He wasn't about to put the moves on some guy who wouldn't welcome them, even if he did get a little thrill every time Nick's arm brushed against his. His incipient erection defied the cold wind, throbbing low and insistent the closer they got to Nick's house, no matter how often Ryan reminded himself what Kevin had said: *Never gonna happen. Never gonna happen.*

Ryan hadn't had time to do more than drop his duffel in the living room before heading out to work, so he took a minute as they stepped inside to look the house over. Probably built in the 1940s, it

looked like a little old lady's house with its shelves of knick-knacks, over-stuffed furniture, and window dressing of sheer flowered curtains.

"How long have you lived here?" he asked as Nick took him upstairs and showed him his room. The room sat under the eaves along the front of the house, so if he leaned just right as he looked out the gabled window, he could see the dark hulk of the boardwalk and the blinking "The Wild Side" sign a little farther down.

"A couple of years," Nick said. "My grandmother died in 2006, and I moved in a few months later."

Ryan turned away from the window and looked at him. There had to be more to that story; he'd bet on it. But Nick didn't offer anything more, so Ryan let it go, thanking him for the use of the room.

"Any friend of Cheyenne's," Nick said. "We definitely needed the help, so thanks for coming out."

"No problem."

"Sleep well," Nick said.

Not likely, not given the way Ryan's body was putting together the two and two of Nick and a nearby bed. Ryan took a step back so he wouldn't do something really stupid, like commit an accidental blow job. "You, too."

After Nick left, Ryan stripped down to his boxers and pulled on a beat-up State T-shirt. He stepped into the bathroom he shared with Cheyenne, raising his eyebrows at the size of the claw-foot tub—definitely big enough for two. Cheyenne stood at the sink brushing her teeth, wearing a T-shirt that came to her knees, her braids loose around her face. She caught his eye in the mirror.

"Don't you fuck him up," she said around her toothbrush.

Ryan didn't need to ask who she meant. "I just met him."

"Yeah, well, that's your MO," she said, spitting into the sink. "The last thing he needs is you sniffing around, then moving on to whatever fucker offers you a hand job next. You want to be a hound dog, that's your business, but don't drag Nick into it." Ryan sighed and reached for his own toothbrush, taking Cheyenne's toothpaste out of her bag and spreading a little on his brush. "I get it, okay? God. I've never met so many cock-blockers in my life."

"He's a good guy," Cheyenne said, "and so are you. So don't fuck him up."

She left Ryan staring at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. There was definitely more to Nick's story than he'd heard so far, and, if he had to guess, none of it good. See, this was why he'd rather just hook up: nothing complicated about that, nothing messy. He went back to his room under the eaves, turned off the light, and tried to fall asleep. He tossed and turned for almost an hour, his unruly cock restless, demanding, and, eventually, impossible to ignore.

Fuck it. He rolled out of bed and tugged on jeans and a sweatshirt. He had an open offer from Kevin; might as well take him up on it. He picked up his shoes and carried them downstairs, not wanting to wake Cheyenne, but stopped at the foot of the steps when he heard a noise coming from the kitchen.

Nick didn't seem surprised to see Ryan round the corner. A plate with half a bagel on it sat in front of him on a small corner table, the light over the stove drawing a warm circle encompassing the table and the two chairs snugged up to it.

"Can't sleep?" Nick asked.

Ryan shook his head, loitering just inside the door. Now what? Telling Nick that his desire for sleep had been overruled by his wide-awake dick was out of the question.

Nick pushed the other chair out from the table with his bare foot. "Have a seat. Want a drink? Or something to eat?"

Neither. Ryan didn't think he'd find what he wanted in Nick's kitchen.

As he hesitated, Nick looked up. He looked tired, fine lines drawn at the corners of his mouth that Ryan hadn't seen at the restaurant. He'd seemed so on top of everything, dealing with the difficult customers, keeping things rolling. But sitting there in a pair of sweatpants and a ratty T-shirt, hair mussed and feet bare, Nick looked... lonely.

With Cheyenne's warning echoing in his head, Ryan ticked off his choices. He could keep his distance—bow out now and head back up to his room. No harm, no foul. Or he could put on his shoes, walk around the corner to Kevin's apartment, and get his ashes hauled like any other Friday night. Instead, he dropped his sneakers in the doorway, stepped into the kitchen, and went over to the table, lowering himself into the chair Nick had offered.

"No, I'm good, thanks," he said. Surprisingly enough, he thought that might even be true.

The low light picked out little red glints in Nick's wavy hair. It made Ryan want to reach over and bury his hands in it, see if it felt as soft as it looked. After all this time seeking out big guys with short hair, the appeal of Nick, with his headful of curls and his narrow frame, was something of a revelation.

Time for a change. Time for something new.

Never gonna happen. Don't fuck him up.

Ryan looked around the kitchen, cozy with its gray linoleum floor and red-and-white-checked curtains at the windows. It looked exactly the way a grandmother's kitchen should look.

"I'm guessing you haven't redecorated."

A smile tilted the corner of Nick's mouth, but he looked down at the plate, fingering some bagel crumbs. "Good guess. I keep thinking I'll know when it's time. I spent a lot of time here growing up. Lots of good memories."

"You miss her a lot," Ryan said.

Nick nodded. "This place has always been my refuge."

Ryan leaned back and crossed his feet at the ankles. "How so?"

Nick pushed aside his plate. "Did you know Valentine's Day is the biggest breakup day of the year?"

"No way," Ryan said. "Wow. So much for truth in advertising."

Nick smiled, but he still looked sad. Except for the low hum of the refrigerator, the house seemed hushed, like it was waiting for something, holding its breath. At the look on Nick's face, Ryan leaned forward and said softly, "What happened?" Nick cleared his throat. "It's kind of a soap opera. If you'd rather not—"

"No, I want to know," Ryan said.

Nick took a breath and blew it out. "I was living in Boston when Massachusetts approved gay marriage," he said. "It was... amazing. I'd been out of college for a few years, working my ass off in marketing, tired of the bar scene. It had all started to feel—" Nick waved his hands in the air. "The same. Like, I'd done it all already. I was looking for something real, and here the government of the state was willing to give me—us—this incredible validation."

Ryan nodded. He understood objectively, even if the idea of marriage didn't resonate any more with him in his gay incarnation than it had in his straight one. Talk about complicated. As an institution, he figured he probably had a better chance of getting into Annapolis.

"Long story short," Nick said, "I met a guy named James at a gallery opening on a Friday night, spent the weekend with him, and then, like idiots, we rolled out of bed on Monday morning and rode a stupid, misguided wave of legal and sexual euphoria to the courthouse and got ourselves hitched."

Ryan raised his eyebrows. He looked at Nick's left hand. No ring. No mark of a recent ring.

"It didn't work out?" Ryan asked.

"I'm sure it's worked for lots of people," Nick said. "But it didn't work for us. We didn't know anything about each other. We were compatible in bed, and that was about it. We fought, and not over stupid stuff, either. We wanted radically different things out of life. He finally told me over dinner on Valentine's Day that he wanted a divorce."

"So what did you do?"

"I threw my linguine at him."

Ryan shook his head. "Not what I meant."

"We stuck it out for another year while the paperwork went through. I wanted to move, but in order to get divorced, we had to maintain residence in Massachusetts, and at the time we couldn't afford two places." Nick's expression went dark. "Things got worse the longer it dragged on."

Ryan hitched his chair closer. "That sucks."

"Right after we got the final paperwork, my grandmother died," Nick said, his voice hollow. "When I found out she'd left the house to me, it felt like... fate."

"Like she knew you needed it," Ryan said.

Nick looked up, his eyes bright. "Yeah." He went back to mangling bagel crumbs. "I never talk about this."

"I'm honored," Ryan said. "Unless you're figuring you'll never see me again after tomorrow, so I'm a safe bet."

That idea seemed to startle Nick, which Ryan found gratifying.

"I think it's pretty cool that you knew what you wanted, and went for it," Ryan said. "I admire that."

Nick twisted his mouth. "I've been hibernating here since then. I'm not sure that's particularly admirable."

Ryan shrugged. "I don't know. When you met someone you thought was special, you dove right in. I've never done that. Shit, I never see the same guy twice."

Nick got up, taking his plate to the sink and running water over it. "At least you recognize that. I didn't. I confused sex with love. I got all caught up in the rush and made a huge mistake."

"That's not a crime," Ryan said, watching as Nick pressed his hands hard against the counter. "No-Dick Nick" made a lot more sense now. "And how do you know it was a mistake?"

Nick turned his head, sending him a questioning look over his shoulder. Ryan stood and took a couple of steps toward him, feeling his body react as he got closer. Obviously, his cock didn't give a shit about love or marriage or shattered dreams. He stopped abruptly. Not the time; really, not the time, not after Nick opened up about all the reasons he didn't just jump into the sack with every Tom, Dick, or Ryan who came along.

Ryan hadn't ever had to exercise a lot of self-control when it came to sex: If he met someone who wanted to fuck, they fucked. End of

story. A good time had by all, with nothing more expected. Now, though, in light of what Nick had told him, he stood still, struggling against the instinct to reach for Nick and offer... something. He'd like to think comfort, but he didn't kid himself. He wanted Nick, wanted to do a lot more than comfort him. Nick turned and leaned back against the counter. It helped that Nick didn't look immune, either: Ryan could see his chest rise and fall, color sweeping up into his cheeks.

"Did Cheyenne tell you I spent two years in Navy ROTC?" Ryan asked, crossing his arms over his chest to keep from reaching for Nick, his body still arguing for touch.

Nick shook his head.

"All I wanted, since I was a little kid, was to join the Navy," Ryan said. "I never imagined doing anything else. So I went and got myself an ROTC scholarship, joined up, and it didn't occur to me until I started getting erections in the shower, and during drills, and during combat training, that I didn't just have a hard-on for the Navy, I had a hard-on for Navy men."

"Ouch," Nick said. Ryan nodded. "So I quit." "Just like that?"

"Pretty much. 'Don't ask, don't tell' doesn't work for me. I am what I am, and I'm not going to lie about it. But I'm not sorry I joined, either. I learned a lot in those two years."

Nick ducked his chin. They stood close enough that Ryan could feel warmth radiating from him.

"You're smarter than I was at your age," Nick said.

"I'm not that smart. I just think regret is a waste of time and energy."

"So if you're not going to join the Navy, what are you going to do?" Nick asked.

"I have no fucking idea," Ryan said with a shrug. "Maybe I'll move out here and make sure Marge Mastriano gets her kosher ice cream every Friday."

Nick looked up at that and quirked up a corner of his mouth. Better than nothing, but nowhere near enough. Again, Ryan felt an overwhelming urge to reach for Nick, to put his hands on Nick's narrow hips and drag him close, to lick the sad out of that smile. He swayed forward, saw Nick's eyes widen, and heard him draw in a quick breath. Ryan closed his eyes, fighting for control, and managed to take a step back. He felt Nick brush by him, smelled cinnamon and soap, and bit down on the inside of his cheek. Nobody should smell that good; no room without a bed in it should feel this inviting; no night should come with this much temptation.

"Better see what tomorrow brings before you decide on that," Nick said from the doorway. Ryan had to struggle to remember what they'd been talking about.

By the time he opened his eyes, Nick was gone.

Ryan picked up his shoes and went back upstairs. As he passed Cheyenne's room, the door cracked open and Cheyenne squinted out at him.

"What did you do?" she whispered.

"Nothing. I didn't do anything," he whispered back. "We just talked."

Cheyenne blinked at him.

Ryan leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Go to sleep, Chey. Nothing happened."

She made a *hmmph* sound and closed the door.

Nothing happened, not the way Cheyenne's dirty little mind probably imagined. But something *had* happened. The more he talked to Nick, the more Ryan liked him, and the more he liked him, the more he wanted him.

Back in his room, Ryan stripped down to his boxer shorts and climbed back into bed. He lay with one arm across his eyes, listening to the sound of Nick getting ready for bed in the room directly beneath him. He heard water run in the bathroom, then a door closed and the house went quiet. Ryan sighed and slipped his hand inside his shorts, closing his fist around his cock, relief giving way quickly to urgency.

Aware of Cheyenne on the other side of the wall, of Nick in the room beneath him, Ryan stifled a moan as he ran his fingers up the swollen shaft, reminded of nights before he left ROTC, jerking off in the dorm shower, feeling vaguely guilty and barely satisfied, scratching an itch he'd just started to figure out. He pumped once, his body more eager than his mind to get on with it. No need to rush things; this was as good as he'd get tonight, might as well make the most of it. He squeezed gently, rubbing his thumb around the head, shivering when his cock pulsed hard, swelling tight in his hand. He fell back into the familiar rhythm easily enough, thrusting lazily into his circling fist, nudging his other thumb up under his balls, pressing in. Pleasure streaked through him, making him even harder, and he gasped, his hips lifting as he tightened his grip. Better, better, yes. An image of Nick standing at the counter, his cheeks flushed, flashed through Ryan's mind. He sped up the motion of his hand-squeeze, stroke, release-and let his mind take him back to the kitchen. Only this time, he pictured reaching for Nick, palming him through his shorts, pictured the look on Nick's face when Ryan made him come, pictured burying his face in Nick's neck and licking the smooth skin under his ear, there, right there, oh, yeah, that worked. Ryan came hard, biting his lip to keep from crying out. He lay sprawled for minutes with his heart pounding, his hand a sticky mess in his shorts. Damn. He'd needed that. He hoped Nick wouldn't mind his prominent place in Ryan's fantasy life.

He felt both better and worse, after. He was pretty sure he'd sleep now, his body more sated than it had felt for awhile, relaxed and content. But what did it say that jacking off to a fantasy felt more fulfilling than sticking his cock down that guy Austin's throat? Just how fucked up was it that he'd rather *imagine* being with Nick than actually go to the trouble of finding Kevin and getting the real thing?

Ryan slipped off his messy shorts, swiped them across his groin and wiped his hand on them, then dropped them over the side of the bed. Somehow, sleeping naked felt almost as decadent and satisfying as jerking off to the look Ryan felt certain he could put on Nick's face, given the chance—a chance Nick's friends seemed just as certain he'd never get.

As Nick predicted, SAD made the crotchety old farts from Valentine's Day look like dream customers. Ordinarily, Ryan might have considered a bar full of gay men to be a target-rich environment, but the only target he could drum up any interest in wore a white apron and didn't smile much.

Kevin approached him before they got too busy. He ran his hand down Ryan's back and said he'd left the light on for him, full of mock reproach. "We're driving up to Atlantic City after closing," he said, adding that he wouldn't take no for an answer this time. "Trust me; after tonight, you'll need it."

The good news was that tips were better; the bad news was that they tended to come attached to wayward hands. By midnight, Ryan swore the next person who groped him would pull back a bleeding stump. Early on, he'd good-naturedly pointed heavy tippers in Kevin's direction, but some of the clientele were more persistent than others, and as the night wore on, Ryan decided that the next time Cheyenne asked him to do something—*anything*—she'd hear his resounding "NO" ringing in her ears for days.

He'd been to his fair share of bars, and, to tell the truth, he'd hooked up at most of them. But the places he went, and the people he met, seemed like a morning in church compared to this crowd. These folks weren't messing around: they'd come to get drunk, get high if they could swing it without anyone noticing, and get laid, not necessarily in that order. They weren't as old as the Early Bird crew, but they weren't college kids out for a night of fun, either. In fact, far as Ryan could tell, the only person having any fun at all was Mike, who had to be happy about the night's receipts, and who had spent most of the evening flirting with a dark-haired man with a neat beard at the bar.

Ryan's mood went from bad to worse when Cheyenne came up behind him as he served a dude who might have been good-looking once, but had definitely slid over the edge into middle age. The guy had been hitting and missing all night, including asking Ryan—twice—if he wanted to meet up later. Cheyenne poked Ryan and muttered in his ear, "Like looking in a mirror, Ry. That could be you in twenty years."

Ryan pressed his lips together to keep from telling Cheyenne to fuck off and mind her own business. She'd made Ryan her business

The Wild Side

during Freshman Orientation and been there for him ever since, and though she might make him crazy sometimes, she hadn't often been *wrong*.

As Ryan steered the last grabby asshole out the door at the end of the night, he caught Nick's eye. Nick gave him a worried look, so Ryan tucked his order pad in his apron and walked over to him.

"Long night," Nick said.

Ryan nodded. Nick's dark hair was rumpled, and he had dark circles under his eyes, like maybe he hadn't slept well. Maybe he hadn't tried the jack-off remedy that had worked so well for Ryan.

"Please tell me it's not always like this."

"It's not," Nick said. "I think Valentine's Day brings out the worst in people."

Man. That was just... sad.

Kevin bounded over, slapping Nick's ass with the apron he'd just taken off. "Nicky, I'm taking Chey, Rowdy, and Ry Ry here up to AC. Slots and strippers for all. Come on; come with us. A change of scenery would do you good."

Nick shook his head. "That's not a change of scenery; that's my idea of hell on earth. Besides, I told Mike I'd close for him. He went off with that guy from Philly."

"No way," Kevin said. "The piano player?"

Nick nodded. "He finally showed."

"Huh. Well, good for him," Kevin said. "Come on, Ryan. Get your shit. Tick tock."

Nick turned and looked at him, and Ryan heard himself say, "I think I'll help Nick close up."

Kevin looked from Ryan to Nick and back, his eyes narrowed. "Yeah? You sure?"

Ryan waited for Nick to protest that he didn't need any help, to go on with Kev, have a good time, but Nick just moved to the nearest table and started gathering up flatware.

Kevin cocked his head toward Ryan, motioning him into the kitchen. Before he could start on the lecture, though, Ryan raised his hand and stopped him.

"I'm not going to fuck him up," Ryan said.

Kevin glared at him, then spun on his heel and said as he pushed through the swinging kitchen door, "You'd better not."

Ryan decided he preferred The Wild Side on the tame side. The blur of fatigue made the empty restaurant seem inviting in a way the boisterous crowd hadn't managed. With two of them working, it didn't take long to prep for the next day. After he'd finished the last of his tasks, Ryan untied his apron and went into the kitchen. He wadded the apron into a ball and tossed it in the laundry hamper, then untucked his shirt, stretching. Nick followed him in, moving around the kitchen turning off lights, sliding drawers closed, checking the burners and oven to make sure they were off. After he'd made a circuit of the room, he flicked off the fluorescent overhead lights, leaving them standing in the dim glow of orange security lights in each corner.

"It's not too late," Nick said, hesitating near the door. "You could still drive up to AC and meet up with them."

Ryan waited until Nick turned and looked at him, then said, "I'd rather hang out with you." He was a little surprised at how true it was.

Nick tilted his head and studied him for a minute. "You would?"

Ryan nodded.

"Even if...." Nick stopped and shook his head.

Yeah. Of course. It seemed so simple now, clear as his face in a mirror.

"Even if," Ryan said.

He stood still and waited as Nick came closer, then even closer. Nick finally stopped close enough for Ryan to see him swallow, to hear his breathing quicken. Ryan's cock stiffened abruptly, stretching achingly hard against the zipper of his pants. He shifted, grateful that his untucked shirttails hid his instinctive reaction. He tucked his hands in his pockets to keep from yanking Nick even closer. It suddenly seemed critical that Nick understand just how much he meant it. "I'd rather sit at your kitchen table and talk than party with Whatshisname," he said.

As Ryan watched, Nick's chin came up and he smiled. Not the tilt of his mouth that Ryan had already learned to watch for, but a full-bore, dimple-inducing, eye-crinkling grin.

"Kevin. His name is Kevin."

"Whatever," Ryan said with a shrug. "Not interested."

Then Nick pounced.

One minute Ryan stood with his feet planted and his hands throttled from mischief, determined to ride out the latest wave of excruciating attraction without Nick being any the wiser, and the next, Nick had him backed up against the stainless-steel prep area, warm hands sliding up Ryan's back under his shirt, his hips crowding Ryan. Against the back of his hands, still strangled in his pants pockets, Ryan felt Nick's dick stir and harden.

Whoa, wait.... What?

Ryan fumbled his hands out of his pockets and put them on Nick's shoulders, intending to push him back, or hold him off, or something like that, but the message never reached his hands, and instead, he hauled Nick closer, wrapping his arms around Nick's back and aligning Nick's lean hips with his until their erections lined up sideby-side, perfect, just perfect. Nick murmured something as he lifted his head, then he leaned in, slicked his tongue along Ryan's lower lip, and kissed him.

Ryan's knees buckled.

Nick's mouth.... Jesus. Ryan had kissed girls and he'd kissed boys, but no one had ever kissed him like this, like Nick. The world narrowed to the pressure of the counter at Ryan's back, the heated press of Nick's groin at his hips, and Nick's agile, talented mouth taking command. Ryan kissed him back, cupping the back of Nick's head and holding him there with one hand wrapped in Nick's wealth of fine, dark curls.

When he finally pulled back to take a breath, Ryan said, "I thought you didn't do this."

"I don't," Nick said, leaning his head back, letting Ryan take the weight of it in his hands. "This doesn't feel like that."

Ryan leaned forward, pressing his mouth along the length of Nick's exposed throat. "Good. It doesn't feel like that to me, either."

Nick rolled his head in Ryan's hand, giving Ryan better access, moaning when Ryan licked the base of his throat. Nick reached for Ryan, cupping his chin, bringing Ryan's mouth back to his, and that was pretty much all it took for Ryan to get that all systems were go. He surged forward, flipping their positions so Nick was the one with his back to the counter. Ryan slid one hand down the front of Nick's trousers, testing the weight and heft of his hard-on as Nick groaned, thrusting against Ryan's hand.

"Oh, my God," Nick breathed. "Let's go back to the house. I don't want to rush this. It's... it's been a while."

Ryan hummed his protest. "Later. Right now, I want to do this."

He slipped the button on Nick's pants open, then slid the zipper down carefully, freeing Nick's hard, leaking cock. It was... gorgeous. Long, cut, bigger than Nick's lean frame might have suggested. Nick ducked his chin, and Ryan's heart kicked when he realized Nick was watching Ryan's hand on him. *Fuck*, that was hot.

"How long's it been?" he whispered as he learned from Nick's sighs and stuttered breaths what rhythm he liked best.

"Three years," Nick said, his breath hitching when Ryan circled the head of Nick's cock with his thumb.

Three *years*? Three years.... Three years ago Ryan still had sunburn on the sides of his head from his new ROTC haircut, still couldn't figure out why screwing Lisa Shelby in her freshman dorm left him so cold, still didn't get why Cheyenne kept steering him away from his Navy buddies and toward her motley crew of misfit friends. He couldn't imagine going without for three weeks; three years felt like a *lifetime*. The thought made Ryan want to do right by Nick, make this good for him.

Ryan dropped to his knees. He looked up to make sure Nick was watching—he seemed to like that—then took Nick's cock in his mouth.

It took a minute to adjust to the intrusion; he didn't do this often. Nick bent from the waist, his hands heavy on Ryan's head.

"I'm clean," Nick whispered.

Right. He'd completely forgotten about condoms.

Ryan drew back, met Nick's gaze, and said, "I'm careful."

Nick touched Ryan's cheeks as he began to suck. He could feel himself there, Ryan realized, and his own cock lurched in response.

Nick straightened up again, his hips restless, moving in microthrusts as Ryan tested him with his tongue, gauging Nick's responses.

Make it good, make it good.

Ryan repeated the mantra as he put every bit of experience he had learned to good use, until he finally found a rocking rhythm that reduced Nick to shivers and bitten-off moans. Nick's cock swelled so large that Ryan had to pull back to just the head so he wouldn't choke, concentrating on searching out Nick's sweet spot with his tongue. He knew he'd found it when Nick forgot to be quiet, forgot to be gentle, and thrust wildly, pistoning his hips as he held Ryan's head still, pressing his cock back into Ryan's throat as he started to come. Swallowing became the only option, so Ryan rolled with it, milking him with his hand as Nick spurted repeatedly into his mouth. When he glanced up, he found Nick still watching him, his eyes glassy, his mouth slack with pleasure.

Ryan pulled off and grinned up at him, reaching down to adjust his cock to a more comfortable position. "Okay. Now we can go back to the house."

Nick blinked at him, his cock still twitching as it softened in Ryan's hand. "I can, um...."

Ryan stood up and put Nick back together, zipping him and buttoning his trousers. He leaned in and kissed Nick again, holding him still when he seemed to startle at the taste of himself on Ryan.

"I can wait," Ryan said, licking his lips. "I want to take my time."

The walk back to Nick's house passed in a blur of cold air and warm, wandering hands. Once there, Nick didn't even bother turning on any lights; he just led Ryan through the dark living room, past the kitchen, and into his small suite. Moonlight striped the bed, the only thing visible in the room. Ryan wrestled off his own clothes and stripped Nick down to his smooth, warm skin, nudging him onto his back on the bed. Nick started to sit up, but Ryan pushed him back down, saying, "I told you: we're taking this slow."

He started at Nick's head and worked his way down. He learned that teeth on Nick's collarbones made him writhe. He learned that Nick had incredibly sensitive nipples—just blowing on one got him hard again. He learned the hard way that tickling Nick's ribs earned him a knee-jerk to the groin. He learned the length of Nick's long thigh, running his fingers along muscles tense with effort as Nick did his best to lie still. When Ryan used his head to push Nick's legs open, Nick grabbed fistfuls of sheet, spread his legs wide and moaned, lifting his hips. The trust implied in the gesture sent a bolt of shocked lust through Ryan, along with something even stronger, something more tender.

"I've got you. You're doing good," Ryan said softly, nudging Nick's balls with his nose, pressing underneath and breathing him in. Nick smelled great, clean and male, the scent uniquely his. Nick relaxed, his hands releasing their grip on the bedclothes and returning to their favored spot on Ryan's head. Ryan lost track of time as he feasted on Nick's body. He'd never taken the time to learn anyone like this; he'd never wanted to. Honestly, sex sometimes seemed like something he fit in between dinner and Monday Night Football, but not this time, not with Nick. He wanted... more.

He turned his head and pressed his mouth to Nick's hip bone. "I want to fuck you," he said, licking along the bone. "Can I fuck you?"

Against Ryan's cheek, Nick's cock jumped. Ryan smiled into Nick's hip as Nick scrabbled in the bedside table, then pressed a familiar square into his hand along with a small bottle.

Ryan's hands shook as he tried to get the condom on, and he swore under his breath. Nick reached for him in the dark, brushing his hands aside and finishing the job for him.

"You okay?" Nick asked, running his hands down Ryan's sides, soothing and exciting him at the same time.

"Just... nervous, I guess," Ryan blurted. "I want to get it right."

Nick raised himself up on one elbow, his legs cradling Ryan's hips.

"You've got nothing to worry about. Trust me."

Ryan blew out a breath, willing his hands to steady.

Nick lifted himself a little higher, tugging Ryan in for another of those amazing deep, slow kisses. By the time he let Ryan go, the only thing Ryan could think about was getting inside Nick. Now. Right the fuck now.

Nerves surrendered to urgent need as Nick's body opened to Ryan's slicked fingers. Nick's low sounds of pleasure told Ryan when he'd been primed enough; by then, Ryan felt like he'd explode, his cock surging inside the tight latex of the condom.

He positioned his body between Nick's spread thighs, pressing in. Nick hitched his breath and opened wider, relaxing, his head falling back as Ryan pushed inexorably in. He went as slowly as he could, but the heated clasp of Nick's body drove out any thought of taking his time. With one strong surge of his hips, Ryan seated himself fully. Christ almighty, he had no idea anything could feel that good. He drew back then slid forward as Nick moaned his approval beneath him. Good. God, it felt *good*. He reared up, putting his hand on Nick's shoulder.

"Watch," he said, pulling back again, then rocking back in.

Nick lifted his head and looked down between their joined hips. He made a sound that went straight to Ryan's cock, then reached down to grab his own cock, stroking furiously.

"Ry—" Nick's voice rasped, the sound snaking down Ryan's spine like fire. Ryan snapped his hips forward again, then again, and again. Each time Nick said his name, heat spiraled higher and he thrust harder, driving into Nick, melting into him with none of the distance he usually maintained. He had no distance here, and no desire for it. Ryan let go, grabbing for the pleasure Nick offered, sharing it, shaping it. When Nick came, Ryan *felt* it, both in the hot, wet splash that hit his chest, and in the muscles that clenched around his cock deep inside. The combination hurtled Ryan over the edge, and he came so hard he saw stars. His hand slipped off Nick's shoulder and he dropped down on him, driving a huff of breath from Nick in the process. Nick wrapped his hand

around the back of Ryan's neck, holding him there, where Ryan could feel Nick's heart pounding in his chest. After a minute, Ryan pulled out and tied off the condom, dropping it onto the carpeted floor, then settled again on Nick's chest, his head finding a natural spot between Nick's shoulder and collarbone.

"Nick," Ryan said.

"Yeah?"

Ryan lifted his chin and rubbed his face in the damp hair that curled along Nick's neck.

"Nothing."

Nick stroked his thumb along Ryan's neck. "Okay."

RYAN had no idea how long he slept, but when he woke up, sunlight streamed through the cracks in the blinds. He blinked and stretched, then froze and looked around Nick's room in disbelief. With the exception of the gray sheets he was lying between, everything in the room was pink. *Everything*. Not just pink, but virulent pink, Pepto pink, from the shag carpet to the skirted vanity and chair to the walls; even the ceiling looked pink, but maybe that was just the reflection off those pink, pink walls. He wondered for a brief, confused moment whether the body-thundering orgasm earlier had knocked something loose and from this point forward everything he saw would look pink. Damn, that would suck.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

Beside him, Nick stirred sleepily.

"Dude," Ryan said, poking him. "You're way gayer than you look."

Nick's eyes popped open. "What was your first clue? When I let you blow me?"

"Ha ha," Ryan said, digging his knuckle into Nick's ribs until Nick rolled on top of him and retaliated. "Look at this place. It's like Strawberry Shortcake threw up a Pop-Tart."

Nick laughed. "Strawberry what? And you think *I'm* gay?"

Ryan relaxed, letting Nick settle on top of him. "Okay, so what's the deal with all the pink?"

"You know," Nick said. "I told you I haven't done any redecorating."

Ah, yes. The mythic grandmother. "I'm not sure I believe you," Ryan said.

Nick bounced off the bed, went to a shelf, and came back with an old blue photo album. On the cover, a gold "1972" had started flaking off. Nick flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for, then handed the album to Nick and pointed. The page held four pictures, faded now, but they definitely showed the pink room where Ryan now lay. A note written in ballpoint pen read, "The Pink Room, April 1972." In the pictures, a middle-aged woman stood arm in arm with a man about the same age. He had on a white button-down shirt. She, of course, wore pink.

"My mom swears this room turned me gay," Nick said.

"I'm not sure it works like that."

"Me, either, but if it did, this room could certainly do it."

Ryan handed the book back to Nick. "Your grandfather must have loved her a lot."

Nick smiled. "He did. He thought she hung the moon."

Ryan felt his throat tighten. He got it now, why Nick couldn't bring himself to re-decorate. The room, hell, the whole house, still held that feeling.

"No wonder you're picky," Ryan said, striving for a lightness he didn't really feel. Nick had seen what love could be, but he also knew what happened when it didn't work. Ryan couldn't blame him for wanting to get it right.

Ryan watched Nick look down at the pages, then straighten a photo that looked off-kilter. When Nick looked up, he gave Ryan a slow, sweet smile.

"I'm picky as hell."

The look on Nick's face sent a wave of heat over Ryan. Maybe Nick was picky because he'd been burned so badly, but maybe he just hadn't met the right people.

"I think I've figured out what you've been doing wrong," Ryan said.

"Is that a generalization or are you talking about last night?" Nick asked, arching one eyebrow.

Ryan grinned. "Oh, you do that just fine."

"Good to know. So what am I doing wrong?"

Ryan leaned in a little closer, enjoying the rush of arousal that washed through him when Nick automatically lifted his head, putting his mouth at kissing height.

"You've been hanging out with the wrong guys."

Nick looked him in the eye. "That's not entirely true."

Okay, no way that didn't deserve a kiss. Ryan tugged the photo album out of Nick's hand and dropped it gently onto the floor beside the bed, then slid his hand along Nick's jaw, pulled him in, and laid one on him, pressing Nick back down to the bed and opening his mouth with his tongue. Nick opened up and let him, reaching up to brush his palms against Ryan's short hair.

Ryan stretched alongside Nick, sliding his hands across Nick's chest and shoulders, down his smooth belly, enjoying the lazy morning. The house seemed really quiet, and Ryan realized he'd never heard Cheyenne come in. He looped his arm around Nick's neck and tugged him closer. "I don't think Cheyenne came home last night."

"She doesn't usually go along on Kevin's AC trips," Nick said. "My guess is she was getting out of the way."

"Why would she do that? She specifically warned me not to fuck you up," Ryan said, running his hand down Nick's back.

"And she told me you're a perpetually horny tomcat who can't keep his pants zipped for more than half an hour."

"Jesus Christ," Ryan said, feeling his cheeks flush.

Nick arched into Ryan's hand. "But then she told me you're a good guy."

"Yeah, she said the same thing about you."

Nick nodded. "She's devious, that Cheyenne."

Ryan murmured his agreement. "So...," he said after a minute, "I really don't want to fuck you up."

With a small sigh, Nick settled more firmly against Ryan's side, sliding his arm around Ryan's back.

"Look, you said it yourself: you are who you are. I knew what I was doing. You told me the other night you never see the same guy twice."

"So this is just, what, a one-time thing?"

"You tell me," Nick said.

Ryan thought about it, trying to imagine what it might be like to wake up beside Nick the next day, and the day after that. He expected his mind to reject the idea, but despite the god-awful pink room, he found he liked the thought. He could even imagine the window air conditioner churning out cold air in the summertime, salty ocean smell clinging to the sheets, bright pink covers tossed on the floor.

Maybe it wasn't a six-month cruise on an aircraft carrier, but it was something good, something real. Something to look forward to.

One step at a time.

Ryan trailed his fingers along the curve of Nick's hip. "I think there's more to it than that." He paused. "I'd like to find out if there's more. I think I might apply for a summer position. You okay with that?"

Nick took so long to answer that Ryan finally nudged his shoulder.

"I don't want you to feel like you're... I don't know... obligated or whatever," Nick said.

"I don't feel like that," Ryan said. "I think the hardest part will be waiting around for summer break."

Nick pulled back and looked at him for a minute with that same steady, direct gaze that had drawn Ryan to him in the first place.

"You know, Saint Patrick's Day can get really busy," Nick said. "And there's Easter. We're usually swamped at Easter."

"Don't forget Passover," Ryan said, sliding his hands back into Nick's hair, feeling the curls wrap around his fingers as if now that they had him, they weren't inclined to let him go.

Nick's quicksilver grin looked brand new.

Ryan smiled back at him. "I bet Mother's Day is a madhouse."

JANEY CHAPEL found a paperback romance in her grandmother's bookcase at the age of eleven, inhaled it in one sitting, and then proceeded to devour thousands of romance novels in a variety of genres over the course of several decades. Eventually, her husband said, "Stop reading! Start writing!" After a lifetime in the South, Janey now lives in the Midwest with her husband and daughter, where she volunteers with the PTO, struggles to adapt to actual winter, and writes fiction in her spare time.

Visit Janey's website at http://janeychapel.livejournal.com

Coming Home



Nicki Bennett & Aciel Cachna

"I MISS you already." Tate's voice was deep and husky over the phone, soft enough that Mason had to strain to hear him. "It's only been a week since I saw you, but that's six days too long. How can I miss you this much?"

"Not any more than I miss you," Mason confirmed, shifting in his office chair. Tate's voice always had an immediate effect on him, from the first time he'd heard it. He still couldn't believe it had only been six weeks ago that Tate had come to his rescue when he'd driven off the road in a heavy December blizzard. Pushing back slightly from his desk, he stretched his legs, feeling a pang of guilt at knowing Tate couldn't do the same. "Where are you now, anyway?"

"The back end of nowhere, New Mexico," Tate replied with a sigh. "I've got another couple of hours in me tonight before I start searching for a place to stop for the night. I'm due in El Paso by noon day after tomorrow. Hopefully, I'll be able to find some decent food there, but tonight it'll be fast food and the side of the road."

"When you get home, I'll cook you a real dinner." Mason winced as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Tate's home, or as close as he had to one, was a tiny studio apartment in Cleveland. He didn't need much, he'd told Mason, since he spent most of his time on the road anyway. Even though he'd never fallen for anyone so hard and so fast, Mason knew it was much too soon for him to be thinking about them making a home together. They'd only managed to see each other a handful of times in the weeks since they'd met, and while the sex had been explosive every time, Tate hadn't shown any signs that he was looking for something more permanent.

"God, that sounds like heaven," Tate replied, the longing in his voice palpable. "A real bed, a real dinner, and more than just a few

stolen hours with you. I just wish I knew when I'd be back that way. The routes they've got me driving at the moment are crazy."

Suppressing a sigh, Mason rubbed his neck, making a mental note to pick up one of the wireless headsets Tate used so he wouldn't have to hunch his shoulder to hold the phone to his ear. Tate had made it clear from the start that he had to go where the trucking jobs took him, and Mason didn't want to make him feel guilty about that. It didn't mean he had to like it, though. "Any chance you can make it back here by the fourteenth?" Valentine's Day was one of Mason's favorite holidays. His brothers teased him for being such a romantic, but now that he had someone to celebrate with, he wanted to do it right.

There was a long pause before Tate replied. "I don't know. I can try, but I don't want to promise since I don't know for sure where I'll be that week. I am heading on east after El Paso, though, so there's a chance I'll be close enough to make a detour."

"I'd make it worth your time." Mason hoped the disappointment wasn't obvious in his voice. Still, Tate said he'd try, so he wasn't giving up hope. "I might be persuaded to put out more than just a great dinner."

Tate's laughter rang out across the phone lines. "Baby, you've been putting out more than just dinner since the first night I met you, although those cookies alone were definitely worth saving you for." His voice grew more serious. "I'll do my best. I can't promise I'll be there, but I can promise I'll try."

"I guess that's all I can ask." Tate's laughter eased a little of the weight from Mason's heart, imagining the warmth of his lover's smile. He'd just have to find another way to keep that smile on his face. "So how much longer before you can stop for the night? I have some really interesting ideas for the next time we're together I'd like to tell you about, and I wouldn't want to distract you from your driving."

"I can stop now if I want, and then just get up a little earlier tomorrow," Tate replied. "That's one of those nice things about trucking. I get to decide when I drive. Give me a few minutes to find a likely exit and I'll get settled. I'd love to hear those ideas. They'll make my empty bunk much more appealing than usual."

"That's one of the perks of editing too." Mason shut down his computer and moved to the couch in the spare room he used as his home

Coming Home

office, the phone cord stretching to its limit. Yeah, he was definitely going to have to invest in a hands-free headset! Stretching out on the soft leather, he let his hand drift down to cup the growing bulge at his crotch. He didn't want to get too far ahead of Tate until his lover was parked somewhere safe for the night. "As long as I get the book finished before the deadline, I can pretty much work whenever I want. Or not work," he added in a suggestive tone.

Tate chuckled. "I'm not quite that flexible. There are regs governing how many hours I can drive in a day, that sort of thing, for safety, but I can still choose which hours to drive." Mason could hear the truck noise in the background decrease. "Okay, I've pulled off. So tell me about these ideas."

"Are you somewhere safe?" Mason knew Tate had been caring for himself long before they met, but he couldn't help but worry just a little. "Once I'm finished with you, you won't be able to get your ignition started again until morning."

"Yeah," Tate replied. "I found a twenty-four-hour gas station that has some truck parking in the back. I don't think they'll mind if I crash here. There's another truck here already, so I'm good. I'm all spread out on my bunk, just waiting for you. You comfortable, too?"

"Be more comfortable if I was curled up there with you." Closing his eyes, Mason pictured the small sleeping area in the back of the truck's cab, imagining Tate lying back against the cushions the way he had that first night, the heater keeping them warm against the storm howling outside. "That bunk's so small, I'd have to wrap myself around you."

"It would be better if you were here," Tate agreed, "but all I have to do is close my eyes and I can still see you next to me, just like that first night. I couldn't believe my luck when I realized you were gay, too. And even more so when I realized you returned my interest." Mason could hear the rustle of fabric. "I can still feel you touching me, playing with my nipples, just the way I like."

"Mmnnn," Mason hummed in empathy, his own nipples tightening at the memory. "I'd unbutton that plaid shirt you always wear," he continued, matching the actions on his own cotton denim, "and run my hands over that beautiful, toned chest." His fingers reaching his nipples, he ghosted over them lightly, rubbing the tips with his thumbs before giving them a gentle tug. "They're already hard for me, before I even touch them. You're so responsive, so hard, I'd just have to taste them." He brought a thumb to his lips and swiped his tongue over it, wetting it before returning to tease himself, imagining Tate's mouth in its place.

"So hard it hurts," Tate admitted, "and you've hardly even touched me yet. All you have to do is look at me and I'm ready to go. But you know that already. I'd be more interested in making sure you're as hard as I am. I'd open your slacks—or are you wearing shorts?—and peel them down, just enough that I could get your cock out, stroking it to make sure you felt as good as you make me feel."

"Chinos," Mason answered, sliding down the zipper with his free hand. He'd wanted to take his time, make this last, but just like Tate, all it took was a look, a touch, a word, and he already felt near ready to explode. "Take off your jeans," he rasped. "Spread your legs, so I can crawl between them and lick my way up and down those long thighs of yours." He wrapped a hand around his cock and squeezed, trying to stave off his climax until he'd brought Tate undone.

Tate moaned, the desperate edge to it assuring Mason he was making progress. "They're off," the trucker husked. "I'm lying here naked for you, legs open wide, cock hard and leaking and just begging for you to come suck on it for awhile before I split you open with it. Do you want that, baby? A little sixty-nine until we're both so desperate that we come the moment I get inside you?"

The mental picture Tate's words conjured was enough to start Mason leaking. He caught the pearl of fluid on his index finger and raised it to his lips, groaning when the saltiness hit his taste buds. "Wanna taste you." His fist started a slow tug up his cock, but the friction was too harsh. He dragged his tongue over his palm, imagining the muskiness he smelled was Tate, and resumed stroking. "Lick up and down your shaft, kiss my way all around the head of your cock, suck on your balls until they're ready to burst—just for me."

"Only... for you," Tate agreed, his voice unsteady. "You taste so good on my tongue as I suck you. But I wouldn't stop there. I know we aren't going to have any patience later, so while I've got your cock in my mouth, I'm getting my fingers wet, too, and sliding them into your ass, opening you up for me. You're so tight, so hot, just waiting for me. I stretch you slowly, taking my time and always avoiding your sweet spot. As much as I love the way you taste, I don't want you to come in my mouth this time. I want to feel you come apart around me, and I won't be able to wait for you to get hard again. Can you feel my fingers, lover?"

"Oh, fuck!" Mason's cock surged in his palm, and he bit his lip hard to keep from coming on the spot. Shoving his slacks down clumsily with his free hand, he sucked two fingers until they were dripping and opened himself roughly, too desperate for any finesse. "Ah, fuck, babe, you feel so good. Want you in me—so hard, so full—feel me squeezing you, taking you...."

The shout that came back through the phone was one of lust in its purest form. The ensuing mutters and curses and hoarse cries of Mason's name made it perfectly clear that Tate had no problem imagining what it felt like to be inside his lover again. "Come... for me," he gasped. "Now."

"Together," Mason insisted, a twist of his fingers and a tug of his fist enough to send his release shuddering through him. Only the long answering groan on the other end of the line made up for the fact that it wasn't really Tate making love to him. Panting roughly, he wiped his hands on his wrinkled pants legs and caught the phone before it fell to the floor. "Damn," he husked when he'd caught his breath enough to speak. "What you make me feel, when you aren't even here." *Just imagine how much better it would be if you were*, he thought, refusing to say the words and spoil the moment.

"Yeah," Tate said breathlessly. "As good as the phone sex is, though, I still miss you. I think I miss snuggling up with you as I fall asleep more than anything else."

"I'm here now. I'll stay with you until you're ready to fall asleep," Mason promised. He was too keyed up himself to sleep now anyway. Once Tate was asleep, he'd get some more work done on his latest project. Anything to keep his mind off how much he missed his lover. "It won't take long," Tate replied with a yawn. "You wore me out in the best possible way. Tell me about the book you're working on. Send me to sleep with a bedtime story."

"That will definitely put you to sleep," Mason chuckled. "It's pretty boring stuff—a technical manual for software troubleshooting. Want me to read you the list of possible error codes?" They talked quietly until Tate's yawns became nearly continuous. "I'd better let you go before you start snoring in my ear," Mason said. "Call me when you know what your route looks like for the rest of the week—or any time you want to talk." A nearly inaudible mumble that might have been "G'night" was Tate's only response. "Hang up now, babe, before you run down your battery. I'll talk to you soon." As soon as he heard the click of the line disconnecting, he whispered, "Love you, Tate."

MASON kept himself busy the next few days, finishing the edits on the software manual and sending it back to the publisher ahead of schedule. His diligence was rewarded with an even thicker electronic manuscript, a medical reference textbook that would have him looking up terminology every other sentence. Since the deadline was nearly a month away, he decided to reward himself with a day off. Tate still hadn't been able to pin down his schedule, but Mason decided to go shopping anyway. Valentine's Day was tomorrow, but if Tate couldn't make it by then, well, he could always hold on to whatever he bought until the next time they were together. After all, it wasn't the day that mattered, it was the thought that counted. Right? That's what he kept telling himself, anyway.

He'd just come back to his apartment with an armful of bags and packages when his phone started ringing. Hoping it might be Tate, he dropped everything on the kitchen table and lunged for the receiver. "Hello?" he answered eagerly, trying not to let his disappointment show when he recognized the voice on the other end of the line. "Oh, hi, Mom."

"Well, don't sound so excited, darling," his mother scolded gently. "Or am I not the person you wanted to hear?"

It was useless trying to hide anything from his mother. She was a human lie detector. "I was hoping it might be Tate." "Oh, good, you're still talking to him," she said. He could hear the smile in her voice. "Are you going to see him again soon?"

His cheeks reddening as he remembered the last phone conversation with Tate, Mason could only be grateful his mother couldn't see *him* or he'd really be in for a grilling. "I want to be together for Valentine's Day, but I'm not sure he'll be able to make it." Mason sighed, able to admit to his mother some of the uncertainty he'd kept from Tate. "Maybe I'm getting too far ahead of myself. After New Year's, I thought Tate felt as much for me as I do for him, but since then, I've hardly seen him. He's been on jobs almost nonstop, and even when he has to take downtime, it's never anywhere near here. We talk nearly every day, but it's not the same."

"No, I imagine it's not," his mother sympathized. "Long-distance relationships are never easy. I remember thinking the year your father was away in medical school before I could join him would never end, and that was for a finite period of time with easily scheduled visits scattered throughout the year. You said Tate was in the process of buying his truck, so this isn't a career he's likely to give up. I know you care about him, but you have to ask yourself if you can handle him being gone all the time. And it's a question you need to ask sooner rather than later, because the longer things go on, the more it will hurt to end them, if it comes to that."

The mere thought of ending what he'd just found with Tate sent a spike of pain through Mason's heart, but he knew his mother was right. "I have a lot of flexibility with my job. I could travel with him, work from the road, at least sometimes. We could find a way to make it work." He swallowed, forcing himself to be honest. "If that's what he wanted. I'm just not sure it is. When we're together, it's wonderful, and he talks about missing me, but it doesn't seem to bother him to be apart the way it does me. I guess he's used to being alone. I'm not sure he wants the same things I do."

Mason's mother sighed. Her son was an unusually sensitive man, but he was still a man. "Have you asked him what he wants?" she inquired. "Have you talked to him about the possibility of going with him to see if he might want it? Have you gotten beyond just jumping in bed with him the moment you see him?" No matter that he was a successful book editor in his thirties, Mason's mother could still make him feel like a naughty six-year-old. "We talk," Mason protested, grateful again that his mother hadn't heard some of those conversations. "It's just.... It seems to make Tate uncomfortable when I talk about my feelings." He'd gotten his share of teasing from his siblings for wearing his heart on his sleeve, but when he'd tried to tell Tate what he was starting to feel for him when they'd met again on New Year's Eve, Tate had silenced him with a kiss that had turned into more passionate lovemaking. It was why he'd never managed to actually admit to Tate that he'd fallen in love with him. He was afraid he'd scare the other man off for good.

"He's a man," Mrs. Cooper said, laughing. "And like all members of that illustrious gender, he doesn't know what to do with what's in his heart. So tell me this.... When you're together or when you talk, is he interested in what you have to say? Does he ask questions and pay attention? Does he do little things for you? Bring you little gifts as a surprise? Anything like that?"

Mason suspected that extra-large packs of lube and condoms weren't the kind of gifts his mother had in mind. "He asks about my work. He really does seem interested in what I do."

"Your gift is words. It always has been," his mother explained. "But not everyone has that gift. Your father tells me he loves me in words once a year, if I'm lucky. But he shows me he loves me every day in other ways. I know you and Tate aren't together every day, but think about it. His emotions could well be there in smaller gestures that you might mistake for something else if you aren't paying attention."

"I hope you're right, Mom." Over the past few weeks, Mason had realized that he wanted the same kind of loving relationship his parents shared. He wanted it with Tate. He just had to be sure Tate felt the same. "I promise, the next time we're together, we'll talk." And he'd make all those little gestures to be sure Tate didn't have the slightest doubt how much he was loved.

"You do that, darling, and call me if you need me. I just want you to be happy, however that looks. So tell me what you have planned for him should he make it there tomorrow."

"Am I that transparent?" Mason sighed.

"I'm your mother, dear. Of course you're transparent."

"I promised him a really good dinner the next time he was in town. I was thinking glazed scallops in balsamic vinaigrette reduction, fresh green beans almondine, and a couscous pilaf." They were all dishes he could prepare quickly, leaving them more time to be together—and he could always toss the scallops in the freezer if Tate didn't show up. Pushing that possibility aside, Mason continued, "I thought after a simple meal I could do a killer dessert. I have everything ready to make a dark chocolate fondue. Dark chocolate's his favorite."

"I'm glad one of my children inherited my love of cooking," she teased. "It sounds like a lovely meal, and something a traveling man would surely appreciate. If he makes it, he'll be swept away, I'm sure."

"Again, I hope you're right." He didn't mention the gifts. They weren't perishables like flowers that wouldn't last if Tate didn't show up, but things he knew Tate needed or would appreciate, like a new headset for his cell phone, a selection of audio books since Tate liked to listen to them while driving, or the big band CDs because Tate mentioned his parents listening to them when he was little, one of the only times he'd mentioned his family.

"Of course I'm right, dear. I'm your mother. I'm always right."

THIRTY-SIX hours later, Mason wasn't so sure. He'd started some work on the new book that afternoon, hoping to hear from Tate before he went to sleep, but he was nodding over the keyboard at two in the morning when he finally gave up and crawled into bed. He spent Valentine's Day morning cleaning the apartment, putting fresh sheets on the bed in a burst of optimism. In the afternoon he prepped everything for dinner, arranging a tray of strawberries and pineapple and pound cake for dipping, putting a bottle of champagne in the refrigerator to chill, all the while hoping for a call from Tate that never came. His hopes fell with the sun, and by ten o'clock, the green beans were wilting and he was debating whether to toss the scallops in the freezer or throw them out.

A knock on the door startled him out of his impending depression. He told himself not to get his hopes up, but who else would come calling at ten o'clock on Valentine's Day night? He opened the door to the most welcome of possible sights. Tate stood there, looking freshly scrubbed, with a bouquet of roses in his hand. "I'm sorry it's so late. If you'd rather I leave, just say so. I can sleep in the truck."

Mason pulled Tate inside, the flowers falling to the floor as he pushed his lover against the closed door and kissed him with all the emotion that had built up inside him over the past days. His hands bracketed Tate's head, holding him in place while he plundered his mouth, love and need and relief driving him.

Tate returned the kiss with the same desperate fervor, his mouth opening in a rare show of submission, letting Mason control the kiss, his hands tangling in the bigger man's dark hair as he arched against the hard body. God, he had missed this! Mason's lips were soft, not chapped like his own, and they mated with his with infinite care, licking and nibbling like he was the finest of all delicacies, the rarest of all treats. Finally, needing to breathe, Tate broke away, pressing butterfly kisses down Mason's jaw. "I guess I'm welcome after all."

"I wasn't sure you'd come." Mason couldn't help but chuckle at his choice of words. That had never been a problem for either of them. "Well, I'm pretty sure you'll come; I just wasn't sure it would be today."

"I had some things to take care of before I could get free, and then I had to get here from Jackson. It's a six-hour drive on a good day, and today wasn't. I left there at two, hoping to be here by eight, but there was a bad accident near Meridian and construction all in and around Birmingham," Tate explained apologetically. "But I've got a few days off now. I was hoping.... Well, I was hoping we could spend them together."

"That sounds perfect to me." Mason leaned in again for another kiss, this one slower and more languid now that the frantic edge had been taken off his need. "Have you eaten? I can throw some dinner together in just a few minutes."

"I haven't eaten," Tate said. "I didn't want any more delays, and the thought of fast food when you'd promised me a real meal.... Don't feel like you have to impress me tonight, though. I know it's late. Just a sandwich would be enough. We can celebrate for real tomorrow."

"Everything's prepped. It will only take a few minutes to warm it up." Mason pushed away from the door, picking up the roses and taking

Coming Home

Tate's hand to lead him into the kitchen. Reaching for a vase from the window ledge over the sink, he filled it with water for the flowers, inhaling their rich fragrance. "Just sit there and stretch your legs and relax and let me pamper you for once. You didn't tell me you'd be able to get here." He turned from lighting the burner under the scallops. "I don't mean that to sound like a complaint. I'm really glad you made it."

"I didn't want to call until I was sure it was going to work out," Tate explained, taking a seat at the big, wooden kitchen table. "I was going to call when I made it to Birmingham, but then I hit that first accident and wasn't sure I'd get here in time. I'd have called when I stopped for the night to tell you I was on my way if I hadn't been able to get here. Are you sure it isn't too much trouble to make dinner?"

"It's not, but even if it were, you're worth it." Mason bent to drop another kiss on Tate's lips before taking two plates out of the cabinet. A quiver of nervousness threatened, wondering if Tate would think he'd gone overboard, but he forced it away. "I—you mean a lot to me, and I wanted to show you just how much."

Tate smiled in relief, his own plans bringing a nervous churning to his belly. "I'm glad to hear it. I've got a couple of things for you, too, but they'll go down better after a good meal. And maybe a beer? Or wine?"

"How about champagne?" Mason retrieved the bottle from the fridge with a sheepish grin. "Open that and I'll get some glasses," he suggested, retrieving a pair of flutes from another cupboard. He turned the scallops, relieved to see them browning nicely, and tasted a bean before sprinkling the almonds on top. "Almost done. We should have time for a toast before we eat."

Tate smiled and popped the cork on the champagne, pouring the bubbly liquid into the flutes and laughing as the escaping carbonation tickled his nose. Sticking his fork in the couscous, he tasted it, his eyes closing at the light, toasty flavor. "This is wonderful, Mason. Thank you," he said gratefully. "I never get this kind of food on the road."

Plating up their dinners, Mason set them on the table before taking the glass Tate offered him. "Here's to more time together, then," he said, clinking their flutes together. "There's no one I'd rather spend it with." "Me either," Tate agreed, sipping his champagne. He took a bite of the scallops, his eyes closing in delight. "Oh, man, this is good."

"You like that, just wait until it's time for dessert," Mason grinned.

Tate groaned. "You're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

"Definitely not. I have plans for you after dessert."

Tate groaned again, a low, lustful sound this time. "I want that. I want you. For more than just tonight."

Mason pushed a scallop around the vinaigrette on his plate, Tate's admission giving him hope. Want wasn't love, but it was a start. "I've been thinking about that. What if you...." He took a deep breath and continued, rather quickly before he could lose his nerve. "What if you gave up your apartment in Cleveland and moved your things here? We could be together whenever you're off the road."

Tate was caught completely off guard. "Really?" he asked. "I mean, it's already nothing more than a place to leave the stuff I got from my grandparents that I don't have the heart to give up. My truck's the closest thing I have to a real home these days. If you don't mind some old photo albums and a couple of antiques cluttering up your place, I'd love to have that extra excuse to come see you. I can just pay you what I've been paying in rent." He took a breath and another sip of champagne. "Actually, I've been thinking a lot, too. I know you set your own hours as long as you meet your deadlines. Would you like to come with me some time? On the road?"

"Will they let you do that?" Mason asked, his eyes lighting up. "I'd love to come with you sometimes. I do most of my work on my laptop anyway. As long as I can get a cell phone signal and an internet connection once in a while to check e-mail, I can work just about anywhere." A little of the sparkle left his eyes. "And you don't have to pay me rent. You'll hardly be here most of the time anyway."

"The company I was with when we met wouldn't have let you come along," Tate replied, "but that's what I was doing today. I took extra runs the last six weeks so I could make the last payment on my truck early and quit as a full-time employee. Now that I own the truck, I can work as a contractor and have a lot more control over where I go and

Coming Home

with whom. You can come with me whenever it suits us, and I can be here when I want. Well, I still have to work, obviously, but no more missing holidays because the company wants to send me to hell and back again."

"You did that for me?" Mason pushed back his chair and circled the table to Tate's side, running his hand through his lover's hair, needing the touch to reassure himself he wasn't dreaming. "So we could be together? I was afraid you were staying away because I was getting too intense."

"No!" Tate exclaimed. "Not at all. Leaving you got harder each time, and I couldn't imagine it going on like that indefinitely. It broke my heart not to be able to promise I'd be here tonight. I'm not good with words. It's easier for me to let my actions speak for me."

"I make my living with words, but that doesn't mean I'm any better," Mason confessed. "I get insecure at times, and start to imagine things instead of just asking where I stand." He shrugged and waved a hand around the kitchen. "That's part of why I maybe went a bit overboard with everything tonight. I wanted to show you how much you mean to me and maybe convince you that I'm worth hanging on to."

Tate smiled and pulled Mason down onto his lap. "You don't have to convince me of that. I'd realized it by the time we got your car pulled out of the snow. You have shown me, though. I don't think I've ever been so nicely wined and dined in my life. I could get used to this, knowing I have a place—a person—to come home to. It's been so long since I had anyone in my life."

"You'll have me in your life as long as you want me," Mason promised, sealing his words with a kiss. "But you haven't seen anything yet." He rubbed his ass against Tate's lap, grinning when he felt a swell of arousal. "Keep that warm for me while I get dessert ready."

Standing reluctantly, he refilled Tate's champagne flute, adding a splash to the chocolate warming on the back burner before pulling the tray of fruit and cake from the refrigerator. Deciding they could manage without plates, he lit the flame in the warmer at the center of the table, then carried over the fondue. Setting the pot in place on the warmer, he settled back on Tate's lap. "Not too heavy for you, am I?" he asked.

"Not at all," Tate replied, his arms closing around Mason's waist. "I like you right where you are."

"Good." Mason smiled, dipping a strawberry and holding it to his lover's lips. "Dessert," he said simply.

Tate hummed at the delightful flavor of the dark chocolate over sweet fruit as he bit into the juicy treat. Grabbing Mason's hand, he sucked at the sticky fingers, lapping all the sweetness and chocolate from the long digits. "Delicious," he purred, reaching for a piece of pound cake and dipping it in the liquid delight. "Here, you taste now."

Lips opening around the delectable morsel, Mason hummed in approval before twisting to press his lips to Tate's, sharing the rich flavor. The kiss soon turned heated, lasting long after the traces of cake and chocolate were gone, the taste of Tate's mouth every bit as sweet.

Wanting another taste of chocolate as well as of Mason, Tate pulled away for a moment to snag a piece of pineapple. "Is this good?" he asked, never having combined the two. Everything Mason had ever served him had been amazing, though, so he was willing to try it, dipping the fruit in the chocolate before lifting it to his lover's lips.

"It's actually my favorite," Mason admitted, taking a bite and guiding the rest to Tate's mouth. "Just tart enough to counter the chocolate's sweetness."

Tate parted his lips willingly, letting Mason feed him the other half of the morsel. His lover was right. It was a perfect combination. "I think I have a new favorite," he said after he swallowed. Then Mason leaned over and kissed him and he changed his mind again. When they separated, he grinned. "Actually, *that's* my new favorite. Pineapple-andchocolate-flavored Mason."

"That's giving me ideas." Mason dipped a finger in the warm fondue and traced Tate's lips before cleaning them with moist, openmouthed kisses. "I can think of all sorts of places that would taste wonderful coated in chocolate."

"God, I'm glad you can cook," Tate groaned as visions of smearing all sorts of sweet treats over Mason's body filled his head. "I'm hopeless in the kitchen. My mother was never much of a cook, so I didn't learn either." "Having Suzy Homemaker to come home to is sounding better all the time, isn't it?" Mason grinned.

"Definitely. I haven't had a real home since my mother kicked me out of the house for being gay," Tate confessed.

"Your parents kicked you out because you're gay?" Mason was honestly shocked. He'd taken his parents' and siblings' easy acceptance for granted. He knew everyone's experience wasn't as positive as his, of course, but he couldn't imagine a parent disowning their own child. "I knew you never talked about them much, but...."

"My father died before I came out," Tate said softly, "so I don't know if he would have reacted the same way my mother did or if he'd have tried to understand. But after his death, she became bitter and cold, and she found comfort in a fundamentalism that had no place for homosexuality. I didn't tell her for a long time, but one day I couldn't take her ranting anymore, so I asked her if she'd still feel the same way if someone she cared about was gay. She replied that any homosexual was dead to her. 'Even me?' I asked. She said yes, turned away, and has refused to take my calls ever since. I stopped trying after a few years, to tell the truth. It was easier just to let it go than to be hurt all over again."

"Oh, babe," Mason said quietly, resting his forehead against Tate's. "I'm so sorry. But it's her loss, not yours. And besides," he said, blinking back tears of anger for Tate's pain, "I have more than enough family to share. You're welcome to a few of my brothers and both my sisters, at least."

"Do you think they'd have me?" Tate asked. "An uncouth trucker with only a high school education?"

"They love you already," Mason assured him. "My mother's ready to adopt you as a long-lost son. And don't put yourself down. You may not have gone to college, but you're smart enough to be ready to go into business for yourself in your early thirties. Lots of people struggle their whole lives and never accomplish that." He met Tate's eyes, his last doubts forgotten. "I love you, exactly as you are."

"Then maybe," Tate said hesitantly, shifting enough to reach in his pocket, "maybe you'd be willing to wear this, make it... official?" He pulled out a simple silver band with subtle engraving on it. "It was my father's, one of the few things of his I still have."

Nicki Bennett & Aciel Cachna

"I... I...." Mason swallowed. "I'm supposed to be good with words, and I can't think of anything to say but, yes! God, yes!" He wrapped his arms around Tate's shoulders and kissed him, long and lovingly. "I wish I had something as meaningful to give you in return. I'd like knowing you're wearing a ring for me, too."

Tate flushed a little. "Maybe we could go pick one out together. Just the fact that you gave it to me would make it more than special enough. It doesn't have to be an antique or anything. It's just... well, it seemed like a way to hold on to my dad, to the belief that he'd have reacted differently than my mom did. Whenever I let myself imagine a life with someone permanent in it, I knew I'd want him to have this ring."

"Tomorrow," Mason promised. "As soon as the stores open. But right now," he smiled as Tate slid the ring onto his finger, "we have a celebration to finish." Turning, he dropped a strawberry into Tate's champagne flute and held it out to him. "To the rest of our lives together."

Tate clinked his flute against Mason's, took a sip, then set the glass down, his hands running over the planes of his lover's chest. "I know the perfect way to celebrate."

"Oh?" Mason feigned innocence. "Does it involve chocolate?"

"Only if you have plastic sheets on your bed," Tate retorted. "It does, however, involve you and me naked."

"The sheets will wash," Mason assured him. "Naked I can definitely manage." His fingers flew to the buttons of Tate's shirt, popping them open and baring his lover's chest, nuzzling at the warm skin as it was revealed.

Tate shrugged. "They're your sheets." His words trailed off into a gasp as Mason's lips closed around his nipple. "God, I've been dreaming about you doing that since that night in New Mexico!"

Smiling widely, Mason dipped another berry in chocolate and smeared it over the paler brown nipples, coating them before offering the juicy tidbit to Tate. Leaning forward, he lapped at the cooling chocolate, nipping and licking until both sides were pebbled and Tate's moans were making his own groin tighten. "You taste so good. Want more," he murmured, nuzzling his way down to the tip of a brightly inked wing that peeped from the low-slung waist of Tate's jeans. "You never did tell me what this stands for," he added as he worked at Tate's belt, though by now he thought he could guess.

"I got it when I bought the truck," Tate gasped, lifting his hips to help Mason remove his jeans. "The phoenix rising from the ashes—me rising from the ruins of my past." Not wanting to talk about that anymore, not when he finally had his future within reach, he leaned forward and captured Mason's lips with his, pulling them both to their feet. "Let's take this to bed. I spend too much time in cramped quarters to want to do this any way but the right one."

"Any way with you is right with me," Mason assured him, stripping off his own clothes as fast as he could while leading Tate into the bedroom. "A little more room than the truck," he added, pulling Tate down beside him on the queen-size bed. "But I still want to feel you pressed against me."

"All night long," Tate promised, shrugging off his shirt as he lay down next to Mason, immediately bringing their bodies into full contact. "God, I've missed you. It's like everything's all gray when you're not there, and the moments when we're together are in full Technicolor." He slid his hands down Mason's back, cupping his ass and pulling them together tightly. "So, lover, what do you want tonight?"

"I want to taste you the way we talked about." As wonderful as it felt to be wrapped in Tate's arms, he wanted to see if the reality of his fantasy was as vivid as his imagination. "Spread your legs for me, lover."

Tate rolled to his back, his thighs splayed wide as he opened himself to Mason in a way he'd done for only a few men in his life. He trusted Mason like no other, though, perhaps even enough to bottom for him someday. Probably not tonight, he admitted silently, but some day. "Taste all you want."

Recognizing the intimacy of Tate's position, Mason ran his hands gently up the long legs as he knelt between them. Bracing a hand on each knee, he licked and kissed his way up each thigh, the fine hairs tickling his lips. Tate smelled of clean soap, but as he worked his way higher Mason's senses were teased with the scent of his growing arousal. Reaching the apex of thighs and hips, he traced the crease with his tongue down one side and up the other, sliding his hands up the damp skin to cup Tate's hip bones. "You taste even better than I remember."

Tate shivered in delight, his hips lifting into the teasing caress. "I'm freshly showered this time," he quipped. "Last time, you didn't let me clean up before you jumped me."

"I hadn't seen you in two weeks," Mason protested. "I wasn't about to wait a minute more than I had to." Nuzzling the dark curls, he swiped his tongue up the hard shaft until he reached the ridge defining the head. Covering the silky skin with kisses, he licked at the slit, coaxing a drop of creamy fluid onto his tongue. He moaned, the vibration against the sensitive skin making Tate shiver. Kissing his way down again until he reached the lightly furred sac, he carefully drew the balls into his mouth, suckling gently and humming his pleasure.

"Turn around and let me taste you, too," Tate requested, his voice breaking as Mason laved his balls. "Just like we talked about last week. Until we're so desperate we can't wait a second longer."

Already hard from his attentions to Tate, Mason twisted until he could move his knees around Tate's hips, straddling him and setting his cock bobbing in Tate's face. At the first swipe of Tate's tongue, he gasped, his fingers digging into Tate's thigh muscles. Dropping his head, he let his lips wander, over the smooth skin behind Tate's sac and into the beckoning muskiness of his crease.

Tate concentrated on taking Mason's cock down his throat and ignoring the instinctive desire to close his legs. He could lie back and let Mason rim him, then take control back later. He could relax and enjoy this and revel in just feeling for once instead of having to always be the one in charge. Reaching into the drawer beside the bed where he remembered Mason kept supplies, he fumbled for the lube, pulling out the well-used tube and squirting some onto his fingers. He'd have to remember to get the tube out of his truck before they made love too many times or they'd come up short. Redoubling his efforts to drive Mason wild with his mouth, he slid his fingers between his lover's cheeks, playing around his hole with teasing fingertips.

Mason's hips bucked instinctively when Tate's fingers penetrated him, pushing down to seek more of the delicious fullness. Soon, he'd have to turn around so that he could feel Tate's cock, not just his fingers, but until then he was going to drive his lover as far as he could take him. Spreading Tate's cheeks, he delved deeper, his tongue mirroring the push and pull of Tate's digits inside him.

Tate cried out around the heavy shaft in his mouth when he felt Mason's tongue enter him. His hips bucked up wildly, his eyes closing as he fought not to come on the spot. Quickly, he added a third finger, stretching Mason wide enough to take his cock. Pulling his hand out, he slapped his lover's ass lightly to tell him to move as he reached for a condom.

Turning around at Tate's bidding, Mason caught his lover's arm before he could open the packet. "Maybe we can do without those now?" he asked quietly. "I know the DOT requires you to get regular physicals, and I haven't been with anyone but you since my last test came back clean."

Tate's breath caught. He *always* used a condom. Even when he'd been in a relationship before, he'd never been confident enough to do without. The light from the lamp caught the ring on Mason's hand and the condom fell from Tate's fingers. "I love you," he whispered, all the hopes and fears and possibilities of their life before them there in his voice as he slicked his cock with the remaining lube. "Do you want to ride me? Or would you rather turn over?"

The words he'd longed to hear made Mason's heart catch in his chest. Leaning forward, he met Tate's lips in a kiss filled with passion and promise. "I love you, and I would *love* to ride you," he answered, his fingers joining Tate's around the slickened shaft. Together, they guided the cock between his cheeks, the head sliding tantalizingly along his crease before Mason settled, taking a deep breath and relaxing to let the thick rod pierce him. Exhaling slowly, he spread his knees, sinking down until he had taken all of Tate inside him. "Love you—love this," he repeated, reaching forward to trace the curve of Tate's cheek.

Tate nodded, chocolate eyes wide and glazed as Mason's body engulfed his cock, deeper and deeper until his ass met the top of Tate's thighs. "Love everything about you," he gasped as he felt the slick heat of a lover's body for the first time unimpeded by a shield of latex. "And I can't wait to discover everything I don't already know." His hands slid over muscled abs to splay across strong pecs. He kneaded the muscle firmly, watching Mason carefully for every reaction, wanting to make the other man feel as good as he felt. Then Mason shifted atop him, his internal muscles gripping Tate's length tightly. "Not gonna last," he told his lover. "Not when you're this hot and tight around me."

"Don't try," Mason rasped, leaning back on his heels. The change in angle nudged the head of Tate's cock directly against his prostate, and he gasped for breath, internal muscles clenching as he slowly lifted up and then slid down the thick shaft. "Just... touch me. Take me with you."

Tate closed his hand around Mason's cock, the other one continuing its exploration of his lover's chest. He planted his feet on the bed, thrusting up each time Mason pushed down, meeting him in the middle until their bodies pounded together frantically. "Now," Tate begged, feeling the tingles of his release begin low and deep in his belly. "Come with me now."

It had never felt like this before, Mason realized as he shuddered around Tate, the warmth of his lover's release filling him. Maybe it was the extra thrill of making love without a condom to dull the sensation, or maybe it was the ring glinting on his finger, visible reminder of the love they shared, uniting more than just their bodies. Easing forward, he rested against Tate's heaving chest, his cock wet and slack between them. "That was... like nothing I've ever felt."

"Me either," Tate replied, his arms closing around Mason's shoulders, keeping him close. "It gets better every time we make love."

"And we have the rest of our lives to keep practicing," Mason added, turning his head to kiss the side of Tate's throat. "I'm not sure how much better I can stand."

Tate chuckled. "I bet I can convince you to stand it." His head tilted back as his fingers stroked up and down Mason's spine. "How long will that chocolate stay good?" he asked after a few moments. "I don't think I can move now, but I'd hate for all your work to go to waste. After all, we should celebrate Valentine's Day, don't you think?"

"A little later," Mason murmured, muscles melting under the gentle touch. "I have some presents for you too, but you'll have to wait for them. You've worn me out." Wrapping an arm under Tate's shoulder,

Coming Home

he pillowed his head and let his eyelids flutter closed. "I still have plans for that chocolate."

Growing up in Chicago, NICKI BENNETT spent every Saturday at the central library, losing herself in the world of books. A voracious reader, she eventually found it hard to find enough of the kind of stories she liked to read... and decided she needed to start writing them herself.

ARIEL TACHNA lives in southwestern Ohio with her husband, her daughter and son, and their cat. A native of the region, she has nonetheless lived all over the world, having fallen in love with both France, where she found her career and her husband, and India, where she dreams of retiring some day. She started writing when she was 12 and hasn't looked back since. A connoisseur of wine and horses, she's as comfortable on a farm as she is in the big cities of the world.

Visit Ariel's website at http://www.arieltachna.com

Find the first story featuring Mason and Tate, "Weathering the Storm," at http://dreamspinnerpress.com/advent.htm#Weathering_the_Storm_.

