

The book cover features a high-contrast, black and white photograph of a person's back and shoulder, partially obscured by a dark, grid-like pattern resembling prison bars. The person's skin is pale, and their hair is dark. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

THE

CELLMATE

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For the folks at the comm
who knew a crazy idea when they heard it
but kept reading anyway.

Chapter 1

ANDY lay still on his thin mattress, staring into the darkness. It was cold in the cell, and the worn old blanket he'd been given wasn't helping much. But that wasn't why he couldn't sleep. He couldn't believe his life had come to this. A stupid mistake, an out-of-control night of drinking, a monumentally bad decision to get behind the wheel. And then there were screeching brakes and breaking glass and a lot of other, much worse sounds. Sounds that hadn't left his head in the ten months that had passed since, months of subpoenas and lawyers and hearings and judgment. And now here he was, a convict, lying in the tiny cell that would be his home for a very, very long time. He was an awfully long way from the luxurious home he'd grown up in back in Altoona, and not just in terms of miles.

He heard his cellmate shifting on his own mattress and closed his eyes, turning toward the wall. Cohen was tall, intimidating, downright terrifying. Black hair and strong features with eyes that weren't just blue, but ice-blue, like glaciers. Nothing like Andy's eyes, which were so dark they hardly seemed blue at all unless he was laughing. That's what his mother used to say, anyway, that they got lighter when he laughed. But she wasn't to be trusted—she also referred to Andy's hair as “strawberry blond” when it had only ever been Howdy Doody red.

Anyway, Cohen wasn't like that at all. Or maybe he was. Maybe his eyes changed color when he laughed, too, but Andy sure wouldn't have any way of knowing it. Cohen's face had shown no emotion when they'd been introduced early that morning, and he'd barely looked at Andy since. Andy had no idea what the guy was in for, but he thought maybe it was better he didn't. He would just stay away from Cohen, and Cohen would stay away from him.

Andy had decided months ago that it was better to face things on his own. It was why he'd broken up with Dean, why he had stopped returning his friends' calls, why he didn't really talk to his parents anymore. Not really. Not like he used to. He had let everybody down, and he couldn't bear to cause anyone any more pain. So he was alone. It was better that way. But now that he was really alone, sleeping in a tiny, dark cell for the first of many, many nights to come, he suddenly felt lonely. For the first time in a long time, he wanted someone to hold him, to touch him, to take care of him. He felt so small.

Suddenly, he heard a soft noise behind him and felt a body crawl onto his mattress. Eyes flying open, he tried to sit up, turn around, but a strong hand held him in place.

"Cohen... what...?"

"Shh."

One hand was on Andy's hip while another slid under his shirt, stroking the skin of his back, surprisingly gentle. Andy's breath caught in his throat. Is this how it went in prison? Did you just get taken, grabbed? Smaller man belonging to bigger man? Only that's not how this felt. This wasn't the touch of someone preparing to take advantage of him, to rape him. This was the touch of a lover.

Cohen's hand slid around to Andy's stomach now, still touching so softly, caressing. He felt a mouth at the spot where his neck met his shoulder, kissing, biting. Andy's breathing grew faster. His cock was beginning to respond. But he stayed frozen, body tense, hands in fists, eyes wide open. When Cohen's hand sank a little lower, grazing his crotch over the pants of his prison uniform, he whimpered.

"Do you want this?" Cohen whispered, his mouth against Andy's ear. And Andy closed his eyes again. The truth was, he did want this. His relationship with Dean had never been that great, but he did miss being touched this way, feeling this closeness, holding another body against his own. He'd been alone for too long. He needed someone with him tonight.

"Yes," he whispered back, not turning his head. And Cohen's hands were moving faster now, lifting Andy's shirt off, throwing it on the floor with his own. Andy tried again to turn around, but Cohen held him in place, stroking his palm over Andy's back, sliding it down to tug Andy's pants and underwear down to his knees. The hand disappeared for a minute, and Andy heard a sucking sound and realized that Cohen was coating his fingers in saliva, getting ready. His cock grew harder. But when Cohen's fingers grazed his hole, he reached back suddenly, grabbing Cohen's wrist, looking over his shoulder. "Wait."

"What?" Cohen was looking down, his muscles tense. He refused to meet Andy's gaze.

"Cohen...." Andy's voice trailed off. He wasn't sure what he wanted to ask. He'd never done it like this, so impersonal, so meaningless. They hadn't even kissed, and somehow Andy knew better than to try. As he gazed at Cohen's

gorgeous features in the dark room, he decided he was okay with that. But he still needed... something. "I don't... I don't even know your first name."

"It's Jesse." Andy stared for another beat, trying to will Jesse's eyes to meet his own, but it wasn't happening. Gazing at him, he realized with a start that Jesse was just as young as he was: nineteen, maybe twenty. He looked just as scared as he was too. And God, he was gorgeous up close, and with his shirt off.... *God*. Maybe he was over-thinking this.

"Okay," he said, and he turned back around.

When the first finger pushed inside him, Andy gasped, tucking his head into his chest, closing his eyes tight. This was all that mattered tonight, this feeling. Jesse's finger pressed against his prostate, and Andy moaned low. "Jesse...."

"Shh." Another finger joined the first, pushing, stretching. Andy moved his hips, searching for more, trying to be quiet. Suddenly, the fingers withdrew and he heard the rustle of Jesse's clothing, then the tear of the condom wrapper. He heard Jesse slide it onto his dick, then spit into his palm, coating the latex with saliva. Andy clutched the mattress, preparing for what was to come.

And then there it was: Jesse's cock, thick and hard and pressing inside, filling him up. Andy moaned low, white-knuckling the mattress now. He had missed this so much.

When he was all the way in, Jesse paused, breathing hard against Andy's shoulder, his grip tight on Andy's hip. Then slowly, gently, he began to move. Andy moved with him, pushing his ass back to meet each thrust, his mind

clear of everything but this feeling, this fullness. There was no room for anything else.

Jesse grunted behind him with each thrust as he picked up his pace, his breath hot against Andy's skin. There were no kisses, no words of tenderness, no words at all. Andy leaned his head back, his mouth open on a moan, and Jesse's hand slid off his hip and grabbed his cock, beginning to stroke. He bit down on Andy's neck again as Andy reached behind him, searching for Jesse's back, pulling him in deeper. When his hand found Jesse's ass, Jesse grunted in approval and pushed a little harder.

"Yes....," Andy whispered. "Jesse...." Jesse's breath was coming even faster now, and Andy knew he was close. "A little more... just a little more... don't stop...." He felt the familiar tightening in his balls, and before he could get out a warning, it was over, he was coming, covering Jesse's hand. With three more quick thrusts and a strangled groan, Jesse came too, burying himself deep in Andy's ass, pressing him tight.

They lay that way for a few moments, breathing heavy, and then Jesse pulled out, pulled his pants back up, and quietly eased out of the bed. Andy stayed where he was, staring at the wall, not speaking. After a few minutes, he closed his eyes. And eventually, he fell asleep.

THE next day, they didn't talk about it, as Andy had pretty much figured they wouldn't. Jesse went about his day in stoic silence, barely speaking to anyone. He didn't sit with Andy at mealtimes. He hardly acknowledged Andy at all.

Andy was okay with that. He had enough to deal with, learning the rules of his new environment and figuring out who he could trust and who he couldn't. He was used to being alone by now. He wasn't looking for a friend.

But that night, when the lights were out, Andy lay on his mattress listening to Jesse breathing and found himself hoping Jesse would join him again. The sex had been good, Jesse's fingers expert, his touch exhilarating, his cock spectacular. But more than that, Andy wanted that closeness again, the intimacy of being with another person again. He rolled onto his side, facing the wall like he had the night before, and couldn't stop himself from smiling when he felt Jesse climb onto the mattress behind him. They did it just the same way as before, not facing each other, no kisses, no words. And it was so good, so good. Their bodies moved together as if they were made for this, made for each other. And when Andy came, Jesse moaned, as if feeling Andy's come shoot onto his hand was as erotic for him as any part of it. He came a few short thrusts later, and Andy clung to his ass, holding him inside, wanting to draw out this moment for as long as he possibly could.

AS THE weeks went by, Andy began to relax a little. He found a few guys he could talk to, and he and Jesse were even starting to become friends. The day he first got Jesse to smile, just a quick reaction to a stupid joke Andy made about mystery meat, Andy wanted to pump his fist in the air in victory. But he restrained himself. They still didn't talk about what went on at night. Every night. Andy told himself he was fine with that. He could have a fuck buddy without

falling in love. He was sure he could. And Jesse, God, gorgeous fucking Jesse—what fool would kick that man out of his bed, no matter what the circumstances? So he followed Jesse's unstated rules, never touched him outside the cell, never let on that they were anything more than cellmates. Which maybe they weren't. Maybe everybody did this at night. Andy didn't really want to know.

It did bother Andy that Jesse wouldn't kiss him, though. He had tried a few times, tried to turn around when Jesse got into his bed, tried to touch him, but Jesse would never allow it. With never anything more than a firm hand and a silent shake of his head, Jesse pushed him gently away. He never forced himself on Andy, and Andy knew that a single "no" from him would be enough to stop everything, but there were certain lines that would simply not be crossed. Andy wondered about that. But for now, he let it go.

The day the letter from Dean arrived, everything began to change. Andy knew Jesse saw his face when he was handed the envelope, and how he stuffed it into his pocket without opening it, but neither of them said anything. Only later, when they were standing side by side on KP duty, washing endless piles of dishes, did Jesse ask about it. "Are you going to read that letter?"

Andy bit his lip, not turning his head from his work. "No," he said quietly. They washed in silence for several more minutes, and Andy knew he could let it go at that and Jesse wouldn't press him on it. But Andy had always been a talker, and eventually the silence got to him. "It's just... it's from somebody I hurt. And I don't really want to hear what he has to say."

“Oh.” Jesse stared at the dishes in front of him, his hands going about their task mechanically. “So... who is it?”

“My ex-boyfriend. It didn’t end well, and I just—”

“Your *ex-boyfriend*?” Jesse turned to stare at him, clinging to an armful of plates, his mouth dropping open. “You—you’re gay?”

Andy stared back, puzzled. “Well, yeah. I mean, obviously. Didn’t you kind of figure that out from the—”

With a loud clatter, Jesse threw the entire pile of plates into the sink, his face filling with anger. “I’m not a fucking fag,” he said, and he stormed out. Andy stared after him. *What the hell just happened?*

Jesse avoided him for the rest of that day. Every time Andy approached him, Jesse turned away. When he tried to sit with him at dinner, Jesse picked up his tray and moved to a different table. Eventually, Andy stopped trying.

But at night, it was just the two of them in the cell. Andy lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. *I will not talk first. I will not talk first.*

Unfortunately, staying quiet had never been Andy’s strong suit. “What the fuck happened today?” he said, his voice echoing in the dark room. Jesse didn’t respond. *The silent treatment*, Andy thought, chuckling inwardly. *I don’t think so.*

Sitting up in a rush, he climbed out of bed and went to Jesse, who was lying flat on his back, his arms crossed over his chest. Without hesitating, Andy climbed on top of him, straddling his hips. “Hey!” Jesse protested, trying to push Andy away. “What the fuck?”

But Andy seized both of Jesse's hands and pinned them down to the mattress, fixing Jesse with an intense gaze. "You're going to talk to me," he said. Internally, he knew Jesse was stronger and could toss him off like a sack of potatoes if he wanted to. But he also knew enough about Jesse by now to know that the brooding, tough-guy exterior was nothing but an act, that Jesse wasn't capable of actually hurting anyone. At least, he hoped he was right about that.

Jesse glared at him, but he didn't pull his arms free. "Get off of me," he muttered.

"No."

"Andy—"

"What was that? Why did you get so mad?"

Jesse bit his lip, and Andy saw it again. That fear that he saw the first night. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to draw Jesse into his arms, comfort him, tell him everything would be all right. But he didn't. "I just—I didn't know you were gay," Jesse said finally. "I mean, you know... outside of here."

"And you're not."

"No!" The anger was back, and Jesse struggled with his wrists. But Andy pressed down a little harder, and the struggling stopped. "I—this is—I never did anything like this before I came here."

Andy paused, wondering how to respond. He knew there were plenty of guys at the prison who fucked guys only because there were no women around. But he was sure, absolutely sure, that Jesse was not one of those guys. The way he touched Andy's body, caressing it, worshipping it... the way he kissed his neck, so tenderly... the way Andy's

every moan seemed to turn him on even further.... No, Jesse was not one of those guys. But maybe that was a conversation for another time. There was something else going on here. "Okay," he said slowly. "But that doesn't really answer my question."

Jesse stared up at him, silently, defiantly, waiting. Shit. He had a stubborn streak a mile wide. Almost as wide as Andy's.

"Why did you get so mad when you found out I have an ex-boyfriend?" Jesse looked away, wincing almost imperceptibly at the word, and Andy suddenly got it. "Oh, my God," he said softly. "You're jealous."

Jesse whipped his head back around, his brow furrowing in anger, and this time he did pull his hands away, pushing Andy off him, scooting back to the other side of the mattress. "What the hell are you talking about? I am not."

"You are," Andy said, marveling at it.

"Bingham, why would I give a fuck how many guys have fucked my faggot-ass cellmate up the ass? Why would I give a *flying ass fuck*?"

That hurt, and Andy failed to hide it. "Fuck you," he said, his voice straining, and he stood up, climbing back into his own uncomfortable bed. But as the minutes passed and they lay listening to each other breathing, he found he couldn't leave it at that. "Because maybe I'm not just your cellmate anymore," he said.

There was no reply.

HOURS later, Andy awoke to a familiar hand on his hip, a familiar weight on the mattress behind him. “You have got to be kidding me,” he said, pulling away. But the hand returned, gently rolling him onto his back, and Jesse’s face was hovering over his.

“I’m sorry,” Jesse said quietly. He was stretched on his side, propped on an elbow, and his eyes searched Andy’s face, hopeful, sad. Tentatively, he reached out and placed a hand on Andy’s cheek, stroking it gently. Just as Andy’s brain caught up to the fact that Jesse was touching him while looking at him for the first time in the month and a half since he’d come to this godforsaken place, he noticed that Jesse’s gaze was shifting to his mouth, then to his eyes again. *Oh, my God*, he thought. But before he could formulate much more, it was happening, Jesse’s lips were on his, pressing gently, then pulling back, a soft, perfect kiss.

“You’re an asshole,” Andy whispered, but his hand was moving of its own accord, sliding up Jesse’s strong arm, finding its way to the back of Jesse’s neck. Jesse nodded, opening his mouth to speak again, but Andy covered it with his own, pulling Jesse’s body down on top of him. And Jesse kissed him back, sliding his tongue into Andy’s mouth, moaning into the kiss, and Andy’s hands covered Jesse’s back, pulling him in close, feeling Jesse’s cock harden against him as the kiss deepened. *Nope, definitely not one of those guys*, he thought, and he smiled. Jesse broke the kiss, smiling back at him, and Andy’s breath caught in his throat. *God, you’re beautiful*. But he knew better than to say it out loud.

Jesse kissed him again. And that night, they made love for the very first time.

Chapter 2

THE next morning, Andy woke up with a smile on his face for the first time in over a year. Since before the accident, before the drinking binges, before everything. He had been so low for so long that he almost didn't recognize this feeling, but he lay in bed, eyes still closed, replaying the previous night's lovemaking, and the smile turned into a grin.

THE kiss was like a breath of fresh air, something they'd both been desperate for without even realizing it was missing. Andy's hands were everywhere, in Jesse's hair, on his back, squeezing his ass. And Jesse was kissing him passionately, lying on top of him, each new touch bringing out another low moan.

When they finally began to undress, it was mutual this time, Andy sliding off Jesse's clothes as Jesse peeled off his. Jesse pushed against him more strongly when they were shirtless, and Andy clutched him tight, relishing the feeling of Jesse's naked chest finally pressed against his own. He slid his hand down into the front of Jesse's pants, and Jesse broke the kiss, freezing over him, panting, looking like he wanted to run for the hills and dive deeper into Andy all at the same time. But Andy stared deeply into his eyes, moving his hand slowly lower, not breaking the gaze as his fingers curled

around Jesse's cock and squeezed it. And Jesse closed his eyes, his mouth hanging open, and Andy grabbed the back of his head and kissed him again.

And then there was no more hesitation. Pants and underwear fell quickly to the floor, and Andy moaned as Jesse's wet fingers found their spot inside him. But it was Andy who opened the condom, Andy who slid it onto his lover's cock, Andy who raised his legs high on Jesse's waist and clutched his hips as he pressed inside. They kissed again as they moved together, Andy's hands on Jesse's ass, Jesse's hands everywhere at once. And it was tender, and heated, and strong, and amazing. "Come for me," Jesse whispered when Andy was close, the first time he'd said anything at all during sex, and Andy did. And when Jesse threw back his head and came, he moaned Andy's name.

Afterward, they lay together, Jesse curled around Andy's body, and they didn't talk. But they didn't need to. And Andy fell asleep in Jesse's arms.

ANDY opened his eyes, stretching, discovering that Jesse had left his bed sometime during the night. He was on the other side of the room, doing his morning pushups, his gaze fixed on the floor.

"Morning," Andy said, smiling.

"Hey," Jesse said shortly, not looking up.

"That was... last night was...."

But Jesse was getting up, turning his back to Andy, making his bed. "I don't want to talk about it."

In fact, Jesse apparently didn't want to talk at all, and he didn't say another word all morning. When the cell doors opened so they could head to breakfast, he bolted out of there, keeping his distance from Andy. He stayed away all day. And Andy's heart sank. His morning smile was gone.

The third time Andy saw Jesse walk out of a room the moment he entered it, he decided he had had enough. *To hell with this*, he thought. *I'm not going to chase after him*. From then on, Andy purposely kept his distance, too, staying as far away as he could, avoiding eye contact when they had to be in the same room, not speaking to him. He kept it up that night when they returned to their cell, getting quietly into bed and turning away without a word. Jesse stood in the center of the room for a moment, looking at him, and for a second Andy thought he would speak. But he didn't. He just went to his own bed, crawled in, and turned toward the wall. Andy shut his eyes tight, telling himself it didn't matter, he didn't care. Wishing they had never kissed. Because maybe then this wouldn't be so hard.

That night, for the first time in the six weeks Andy had been living in his cell, Jesse didn't come to his bed. Andy told himself he was glad.

It felt a little easier to believe the second night and even easier the night after that. By the time a week had passed, Andy had nothing but anger left in his gut, and he was sure that he would kick Jesse out of his bed if he ever tried to come back to it.

That night, he got his chance. He woke up to Jesse's hand on his shoulder, his touch gentle, the first physical contact they'd had in seven days. "Go away," Andy said, keeping his eyes shut tight.

“Andy—”

“Go *away*,” he repeated, shaking Jesse’s hand off his shoulder angrily.

But Jesse stayed, sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at him. Several minutes passed before he spoke again. “It wasn’t my first time,” he said suddenly, his voice small, shaking.

Andy stayed where he was. Half of him wanted to bodily push Jesse off the mattress, but the other half... “What?” he finally said, his eyes still closed.

“I told you that I’d never... that I hadn’t done anything, with guys, you know. Until I came here. That wasn’t... that wasn’t exactly true.”

Slowly, Andy sat up, pulling his knees to his chest, crossing his arms over them. He gazed at Jesse for a long moment before responding. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I—I don’t know. I’m trying to explain, I guess. Trying to apologize.” They stared at each other, the silence heavy in the room.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know,” Andy said finally, quietly. He watched the emotions wash over Jesse’s face as he looked down at his hands, and there might as well have been a cartoon thought bubble hanging over the boy’s head, with *yes, it is written in it*. “Hey.” He reached out, covering Jesse’s hand with his own. Jesse jumped slightly at the touch, looking up. “I mean it. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Now, Jesse laughed, standing, walking to the center of the small cell, and running both hands through his hair. “You don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get?”

Jesse stood with his back to him, arms crossed in front of his chest. “It wasn’t... it wasn’t my choice.”

Andy’s heart broke a little as the meaning of those words sunk in. “Oh, Jesse....”

“Look, it—it doesn’t matter now.”

“Yes, it does.” Jesse stood still, still facing away, not moving. *Shut up, Andy. Let him talk.* He bit his tongue, struggling to keep the words back, to give Jesse room to speak. Eventually, he did.

“It was my senior year in high school,” he said, slowly turning around. “It’s just been me and my dad my whole life, in our quiet little house, in our quiet little town, and he was strict, but I knew the rules, and it wasn’t so bad.” He swallowed, and Andy knew there was more to that story. But he kept quiet. “Senior year, though, we got some guests. An old football buddy of my dad’s had just moved to town, only the house he’d bought was being worked on, so he and his son Taylor stayed with us for a few weeks while they finished it.” He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was smaller. “One night, I woke up and Taylor was in my room. And he was....” Jesse’s voice trailed off, and he looked away, his jaw clenching. “He was stronger than me,” he said quietly.

Andy wanted to wrap his arms around Jesse, to hold him close, to tell him it would all be okay. But he knew this moment was fragile, knew he had to proceed with caution. Finally, he stood up, walked slowly to Jesse, and took his hand. “It wasn’t your fault,” he whispered.

Jesse shook his head. “You don’t understand.” His gaze was focused on his feet, his body tense. But he hadn’t pulled his hand away. “He kept coming to my room, every night. I could have stopped it, but I didn’t. I didn’t... I didn’t want to stop it.” He swallowed hard. “The first time, it hurt. A lot. But after that...” He paused, breathing. “I liked it,” he said, the words barely audible in the quiet room.

“Jesse. Listen to me.” Andy raised his hands to both sides of Jesse’s head, lifting his face until his gaze met his own. “You were a teenaged guy, and your body was responding to what he was doing. That doesn’t mean—”

But Jesse was pulling away, walking away again, standing at the edge of the cell, looking out into the hallway. Andy balled his hands into fists, trying to control the urge to fill the silence with words.

“Three weeks into it, his dad caught us.” Jesse’s voice was flat now, emotionless. He was still staring out into the hall. “Taylor told him I’d forced him. His dad believed it. So did mine.”

“Didn’t you tell them—?”

“I tried. But Taylor was on the football team, and he had a girlfriend, and everybody liked him. And I was this shy geek who likes comic books a lot and can’t catch a ball to save my life. And it didn’t matter, anyway. Taylor’s dad started yelling his head off when he caught us, and my dad came running in. And as soon as he saw us in bed together, he lost it. He screamed at me, called me names, said I wasn’t his son. And that was before he even found out what Taylor was accusing me of. Once he did, he called the police himself.”

Andy's jaw dropped open. "That's what you were convicted of?"

Jesse chuckled softly, but there was no humor in it. "That's what I pled guilty to."

If possible, Andy's jaw fell even further. "Jesse, why?"

"What would have been the point? A trial, testifying, the scandal. Telling the world, and my dad, how much I loved it when Taylor stuck his dick up my ass. Telling them how Taylor forced me at first but made me come afterwards, and I wanted him to do it again. Telling them that I'd had these sick fantasies about guys ever since I was a kid, and—"

"Jesse—"

"A man doesn't do that, Andy! A man doesn't... I can't..." He was shaking, and Andy crossed the room in two broad steps, wrapping his arms tightly around him, holding him close. "I can't be gay," he said. And Andy got it. *He thinks he deserves to be punished*, Andy thought. *Jesus*.

Andy held him tight, and Jesse clutched him back. And then all of a sudden, Jesse was kissing him, even more intensely than the first time, one hand at the back of Andy's neck while the other squeezed tight against his back, crushing their lips together, pushing his tongue forward desperately. Andy kissed him back, strongly, meeting his tongue with his own, pulling him even closer. He had no idea what was happening, but he wanted this kiss to go on forever.

Finally, the kiss broke, and Jesse leaned his forehead against Andy's, his eyes dark, his mouth open, panting. "That part is new," he whispered hoarsely.

"Wh-what?"

“The kissing. The... everything. The way we did it the last time. I’ve never done that. I’ve never....” He swallowed. “I’ve never felt like this. I don’t even know what ‘this’ is.”

Andy had a sudden feeling that he knew exactly what it was, but he squelched the thought immediately. That was a bad idea. Couldn’t be that. Couldn’t be love.

Jesse stroked Andy’s cheek with his thumb. “You’re being awfully quiet.”

Andy smiled sheepishly. “Doing my best.”

Jesse smiled back. *Wow*. “It’s okay for you to talk,” he said, kissing his lips gently. “I like it when you talk.”

“I like it when *you* talk. I’m... I’m glad you did.”

“I’m sorry. I—I’m just sorry. When I woke up in your bed that morning, I just—I freaked out. I couldn’t handle it. Ever since Taylor, I’ve been—I’ve tried really hard to... to be in control. You know? I made these rules.”

“No kissing.” Jesse nodded, looking down again. “And you touch the guy, but the guy doesn’t touch you.” He nodded again.

“But with you, I... I wanted you to touch me. I wanted to kiss you. And I’d never done that before.”

Andy furrowed his brow slightly, confused. “Wait. You’d never kissed a guy before?”

Jesse’s feet were apparently extremely interesting. He kept staring at them, swallowing again. “I’d never kissed anyone,” he said.

For once, Andy was at a loss for words. Was it possible that a human being this gorgeous had never been kissed?

Luckily, Jesse's gaze was still cemented downward, and he missed Andy's open-mouthed stare. "What we did that last time," he said, and then paused. "I really, really liked it. Like, a lot. Too much."

"Too much? What does that mean?"

"I was out of control."

Tenderly, Andy placed a hand under Jesse's chin, lifting his face, waiting until Jesse's gaze met his own. "Do you feel out of control now?" he asked, his voice low, husky. Jesse nodded slowly. So afraid. And Andy kissed him gently, softly. "Do you think...?" he said, stroking Jesse's face, breathing the words against his mouth, "Do you think maybe that's okay?" Jesse swallowed hard, then nodded again. And Jesse cupped Andy's face in both hands and kissed him back.

The kiss deepened gradually, and they made their way to Andy's bed, still kissing as they lay down on it together. Andy rolled on top of Jesse and gazed into his eyes. "I don't want you to freak out," he said softly, kissing his face. Jesse exhaled, not speaking. "I don't want to push you into anything. So I need you to talk to me. I need you to tell me when something is new, when something is too much, when you want me to stop." Jesse's jaw clenched, but he nodded. "Is this okay?" Andy asked, tracing his tongue along the clenched muscle. Jesse swallowed, his cock throbbing under Andy's hips as Andy moved above him.

"Yeah," he croaked.

Andy continued his kisses, pulling Jesse's shirt off, kissing his way lower. "What about this?" he whispered when his lips reached Jesse's waistband. "Have you done this before?" he asked, sliding the pants down and planting a feather-light kiss on Jesse's shaft.

Jesse gasped, his hips bucking. Eyes wide, he shook his head. Andy rose up slightly. “No you’ve never done this, or no you don’t want it?”

“Never—never done it. Want it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

With a smile, Andy lowered his head and seized Jesse’s cock firmly with his hand, sliding his lips over it. Jesse threw his head back as he began to suck. “Oh, God,” he moaned. “Andy... God....” Andy bobbed his head, sucking harder, moving his tongue. He relished every sound that came out of Jesse’s mouth, delighting in giving him such pleasure. When the sounds became more urgent, he slid his hand down, cradling Jesse’s balls, and hummed. And then, all of a sudden, Jesse’s hips lifted off the mattress and he was shooting hard into Andy’s mouth, coating his tongue with warm liquid, writhing and convulsing as Andy sucked down every drop.

When the last of the aftershocks subsided, he pulled Andy to him, kissing him wetly, still breathing heavy. Andy watched as he stared down at Andy’s raging erection, licking his lips tentatively. “You don’t have to,” Andy said, even though he was dying, *dying*, for Jesse to suck him off. “I didn’t do that to make you—I mean, I don’t want you to do anything that you’re not—”

“I want to,” Jesse said. Andy stared at him, unsure whether he could trust this. The last thing he wanted to do was push Jesse too far. He opened his mouth to speak again, but Jesse covered it with his own before he could get anything out. “I want to,” Jesse said again when the kiss broke. “I want this.” Andy nodded slowly, and without

preamble, Jesse leaned down and slid Andy's cock into his mouth.

Andy moaned louder than he meant to and covered his mouth with the back of his hand. Jesse was sucking him eagerly, greedily, like a man dying of thirst. He pushed too far, gagged, backed off, dove onto it again. One hand squeezed the base of the shaft while the other stroked Andy's stomach, his hips, his ass. In no time at all, he had brought Andy to the brink, and Andy barely had time to squeak out a warning. "Jesse, God, I'm coming," he gasped, and Jesse pulled off just in time, and Andy shot everywhere, his eyes rolling back in his head. If it was possible to die of pleasure, he thought he just might.

When he opened his eyes again, Jesse was lying on his side, tenderly cleaning Andy's body with the shirt Andy had torn off of him earlier. Andy caught his gaze, and they smiled, both at the same moment, and moved together for a kiss.

That night, they slept in Andy's bed together. And when Andy woke up in the morning, Jesse was still there.

Chapter 3

ANDY and Jesse quickly became inseparable. They were careful not to show affection outside of their cell, not wanting to risk sending up a red flag with the warden and getting reassigned. But everywhere Andy went, Jesse followed closely behind. They sat together for every meal. They worked side by side whenever they could. They walked through the prison yard together when they were let out for free time. And at night, in the quiet and the dark, Andy's bed became their own private sanctuary. They pretended they were all alone in their very own bedroom in their very own home, kissing, touching, breathing, moaning. But always quietly. So quietly. And Andy soon wondered how he had ever managed to sleep without Jesse's warm body against him, Jesse's strong arms encircling him, Jesse's broad chest a pillow for Andy's head.

The bed was small and uncomfortable, and it creaked and groaned under the weight of two grown men. But Andy didn't mind at all.

Then one day Andy and Jesse were hanging out in the TV room when a guard approached them and announced that Andy had a visitor. "I do?" he asked, puzzled. Andy's parents had been visiting as often as they could, but they always let him know ahead of time, and he never forgot. He looked forward to them too much. "Who?"

“I’m not your fucking social secretary, Bingham,” the guard said gruffly, turning away. Andy breathed deep. He still wasn’t used to the way things went here, wasn’t used to being treated this way. He’d been a child of privilege all his life, with a last name that everyone in Altoona responded to and the money to back it up. But that was then, this was now. He stood up, shrugged at Jesse, and followed the guard out to the visiting area.

He settled himself into the booth when he got there—nothing but a chair and a telephone receiver and a scratched pane of plexiglass, a familiar setting now—and he wondered what this was all about. But as he waited, he found his mind quickly wandering back to Jesse, as it always did. The taste of Jesse’s skin, the sound he made when Andy bit down on his neck, the smell of his sweat when he moved fast and deep. Andy closed his eyes, losing himself in it. But a loud rapping sound on the glass startled him out of it, and he looked up to find a familiar and not entirely welcome face staring back from the other side, holding the other receiver to his ear, looking at Andy like he’d lost his mind.

Dean. *Shit.*

ANDY walked straight back to his cell when the visit was over, finding Jesse already there, reading, waiting for him. “Hey,” Jesse said when Andy entered, closing his book. “So who was it?”

Andy stopped at the cell door, unable to talk. Jesse had told him so much. He owed him an explanation. But he couldn’t find the words. *How about that? For once in his life,*

Andy Bingham can't find the words. It struck him as funny, but he didn't laugh. He just folded his arms over his chest and looked away.

"Andy?" Jesse's voice was smaller now, tentative. He paused. But Andy still couldn't coax words out of his mouth. Finally, Jesse spoke again. "Look, you don't have to tell me," he said. "I didn't mean to—I mean, you don't owe me any—"

"Shit, Jesse, it was Dean." Andy was still looking away. He bit his lip.

"Your boyfriend," Jesse said slowly.

Now Andy did laugh. "My *ex*-boyfriend. Very, very *ex*, trust me."

"Oh."

Finally, with effort, Andy turned his head. Jesse was sitting on the edge of the bed now, looking up at him, waiting. Shit. He couldn't. "Look, you don't want to hear about it," Andy said in a rush, running his hand through his hair and walking toward his own bed.

"I don't—"

"I'm gonna grab a quick workout. Got to burn off some energy before bed."

"Oh. Okay."

Usually, of course, they worked out together. But Jesse didn't offer to come along, and Andy didn't invite him. He stole one more quick glance at Jesse, then spun around and walked quickly out the door.

IN THE dark, it was easier to talk. Jesse hadn't joined him yet; he always waited at least half an hour after lights out, to keep the rumors from the other inmates down. But Andy wasn't sure if Jesse would come to his bed at all tonight, knew Jesse wasn't sure if Andy wanted him there. So when twenty minutes had passed, and he couldn't bear the silence anymore, Andy just spoke into the darkness.

"I'm not in love with him, you know."

There was a long, long pause. Long enough that Andy started to wonder if Jesse had actually fallen asleep. But just as he lifted his head, straining to see in the darkness, Jesse's voice echoed back to him. "Okay."

"I mean, I never was."

Another pause. "Yeah."

Andy pressed his lips together, unsure how to proceed. He and Jesse hadn't defined what they were to each other. Did Jesse even care about this? Did he want to know? *Fuck, Bingham, just ask him.* "Do you want to hear about this?"

Jesse's voice was small, but Andy could hear him clearly. "Yes."

Andy closed his eyes, remembering. And he began to speak.

IT WAS the fall of Andy's freshman year when they met. Andy was so excited about college, about everything new that awaited him there, and especially about the prospect of finally finding a boyfriend. Philadelphia had a sizable gay population, nothing like Altoona, and Andy figured his chances had never been better. He showed up half an hour

early for the first meeting of the year of the university's LGBT student group, and Dean was already there, setting up. When Andy walked in, Dean's eyes flickered over his body quickly before he met Andy's gaze, so quickly it was almost imperceptible, but Andy caught it. And was thrilled down to his bones. He was checking me out, he thought. Holy shit.

Dean was cute and friendly, and he liked Andy, and at that moment, that was all Andy needed. They'd made a date before the meeting even began.

Dean was Andy's first everything. His first kiss, his first boyfriend, his first lover. He was only a year older, but Dean had been dating guys since high school, and he was eager to show Andy the ropes. Andy, eighteen, sexually frustrated for years and finally with someone who wanted him back, was more than eager to learn them.

It surprised Andy how it got so serious so quickly, but he didn't really know any different, so he didn't say anything. They met each other's families. Dean came back to Altoona with him for Thanksgiving. By the time the spring semester started, he was asking Andy to move in, but Andy came up with a million excuses. By now, he knew something was off. He was getting restless, feeling suffocated. But Dean was such a sweet guy, and he was familiar, and Andy was going through a lot at home, and he just didn't have the energy to go through a breakup. So he pretended everything was fine.

That summer, Andy took an internship in New York, one that involved getting an apartment and just coming home on occasional weekends. Dean wanted to join him there, but Andy said no, and they had their first real fight. Finally, after a lot of talking, they decided they would take a step back for

the summer, see other people, but remain boyfriends, and see how they felt when school started again.

It was a wild summer. Andy tried out the New York gay scene, had a handful of dates, a couple of hot one-night stands. But he found he didn't like the anonymity of it, the feeling that he was doing something dirty. When fall came, Dean was there, familiar, warm, and Andy fell right back in. It felt right. But it didn't.

The second time they slept together after reuniting, Dean told Andy he loved him. Cried it out, actually, when Andy was deep inside him, seconds before he came. Andy didn't know what to say. But he felt very warmly toward Dean, and he sure liked the sex, and he figured that comfortable feeling must mean something. So when they were lying together in the afterglow, he said he loved him too. Dean smiled bigger than Andy had ever seen, hugging him close, whispering more words of love in Andy's ear, and Andy knew immediately that he'd made a mistake. But how do you take that back?

ANDY'S voice trailed off, and he lay still, mentally kicking himself for being such a heel. It was about to get worse, and he wasn't sure he wanted Jesse to know these things about him. But suddenly there was a weight on the mattress next to him, and he couldn't keep from smiling as Jesse slid under the blanket and wrapped his body around him. "I'm listening," Jesse said quietly. "Keep talking."

Andy closed his eyes and snuggled deeper into Jesse's body. "It gets bad now," he said, figuring honesty was the best policy here. "I've done some really fucked-up things."

Jesse snorted, kissing Andy's hair. "Have we met?" Andy grinned. "Remember who you're talking to. You don't have to warn me. Just talk."

Caressing Jesse's arm, Andy breathed in deep. "Okay."

NOTHING was right. Andy had developed a taste for beer in the big city, and Dean wasn't too crazy about that, but Andy found some friends who were. Soon, he was going out four or five nights a week, kicking back, getting drunk. And then drunker, and then drunker. Drunk enough to get into a stupid fistfight at a frat party that he hadn't even been invited to and drunk enough to get himself kicked out for it. Dean followed him out, grabbing at him, talking to him, trying to understand, but Andy just pushed him away. He was so drunk he could barely stand, but he could still manage that.

And he could manage to get behind the wheel.

ANDY went silent again, but Jesse didn't say anything. He just held him, stroking his arm, waiting.

"I don't remember much about the accident," Andy said finally, his voice shaking. "I was so drunk. There's just these flashes. A small white car. A lot of broken glass. A lot of blood." He swallowed hard. "I ran a red light, apparently. I smashed right into this woman driving home to her kids. Put her in a wheelchair." He closed his eyes tight, seeing her sitting in that courtroom, looking so small and broken, staring at him with hatred in her eyes. "It was awful," he

whispered. "And it could have been worse. I could have killed her. I almost did."

"But you didn't," Jesse said softly, his lips against Andy's ear. Andy just breathed, his eyes still screwed shut. "Were you hurt? In the accident?"

"No. A few cuts and bruises. I was fine."

"You weren't fine."

"Well, you know. Physically."

"Yeah."

Andy let the silence stretch out as he waited for his breathing to return to normal. He hadn't cried in months, and he wasn't about to do it in front of Jesse. When he thought he could manage it, he continued. "So. Anyway. After that, I just didn't want to see anyone. I moved back to my parents' house and locked myself in my room while we waited for the trial. Some people called me, but I didn't call them back. I ignored Dean completely." He shook his head. "Over a year together, and I just dropped him without a word. I couldn't face him. I just couldn't deal with it. I'd been kicked out of school, I'd lost everything, I was headed to prison, everything was crashing down around me, and I just... I just couldn't. He called every day. He came by the house, but I refused to come out of my room. Then one day, I was on my way out to a meeting with my lawyer, and he was actually sitting outside the house waiting for me. He had been crying, and he told me he loved me, and that he knew I loved him, too, and that we could get through this together. And I just snapped. I called him a pathetic moron, said I'd never loved him, that he creeped me out and needed to quit following me around like some psycho stalker. I said a lot of other things too. I can't even remember it all. I was just

spewing anything I could think of, just trying whatever I could think of to get him to stay away. He started crying again, and he tried to put his arms around me, and I shoved him so hard he fell on his ass in the driveway. And we just stared at each other for a minute, and then I said, 'Leave me the fuck alone.' And I never spoke to him again."

"Until today."

"Yeah. Until today." And Andy was quiet again. He wasn't sure how to explain this next part. Didn't want to say too much. But he couldn't just stop there.

"So what did he want?"

"I don't know, really. Just to talk, I guess. He asked if I'd gotten his letters. I said I had, but I hadn't read them. I tried to apologize for that and for so many other things. He just kind of took it in. And then he thanked me for the apology, and he said I seemed better, like my old self again. He asked me what had put the sparkle back in my eyes." Andy laughed softly to himself. Dean really did have an awfully corny side. But the truth was, he knew exactly what he had meant by that, and he knew the answer too. It was curled up right next to him. "I just kind of dodged that, but we talked for a while, and it got better. Like we were becoming friends again. We even laughed a little. And I was sitting there thinking how nice this was, how it would have been so great if we could have just stayed friends from the beginning, and then I asked if he was seeing anyone. And that was a mistake. He got all quiet, and said he'd tried, and then he just suddenly started crying. And he said he never got over me, and he's still in love with me, and he knows he's still a pathetic moron, but he can't help it."

Jesse exhaled. "Wow," he said softly.

“Yeah. And I just didn’t know what the hell to say. I told him he wasn’t pathetic, and he wasn’t a moron, and that I was a total asshole for ever saying anything remotely like that, and that he deserved so much better than me. But he said he only wanted me, and that he would wait for me, and that all I had to do was ask. But I told him I couldn’t do that.” He swallowed. *Here goes nothing.* “Because there’s someone else.”

Jesse suddenly got very, very quiet. It almost seemed like his breathing stopped. “There is?” he whispered.

Andy rose up on his elbow, looking into Jesse’s eyes for the first time since he’d started talking. “Yeah,” he said softly, tracing his hand lightly down Jesse’s cheek. “Isn’t there?”

Jesse pressed his lips together in a thin line, then reached up slowly and covered Andy’s hand with his own. “Yeah,” he finally said. “There is.”

Relief washed through Andy, and he smiled, and Jesse did too. They kissed softly, deliciously, their lips moving together, tongues meeting gently in a tender dance. Jesse rolled on top of him, and Andy slid his hands over his back, pressing him closer, kissing him more. And the rest of the visit began to fade away. Dean’s tears, his accusations, his anger. He’d said Andy didn’t know what he wanted. Said he was obviously still self-destructing. Said, “You’re tossing aside someone who really cares about you, someone who loves you, so you can fuck some convict?” He didn’t understand that it was more than that. That somehow Andy and Jesse had found each other in the unlikeliest of places, but it was exactly as it was meant to be.

Andy slid Jesse's shirt off, kissing the bare skin of his shoulders, moaning softly as Jesse rubbed their erections together through the thin layers of cotton that separated them. Andy's shirt quickly joined Jesse's on the floor, and they kissed harder now, stronger, wetter. And then the boxers were gone, and they were skin to skin, breathing hard, hands everywhere, lost in each other.

Jesse rolled them over so Andy was on top, and Andy broke their kiss for a moment, his breath catching in his throat. Could it be? Would Jesse let Andy fuck him? He had wanted to for so long, but he knew Jesse hadn't done that since Taylor, more than two years earlier, and he knew how hard it would be for him. And he loved bottoming for Jesse; he loved it. It was ten times better than any sex he'd ever had. But Andy had always been more comfortable as a top, and he longed to be inside Jesse, to feel that tightness around him, to find his spot and thrust hard, make him scream, make him lose control. And he knew Jesse wanted it too. He loved it when Andy slid a finger inside during a blowjob, and the last time, he'd actually begged Andy to add a second one. He'd come close to asking Andy to fuck him a couple of times—Andy was sure of it—but he always stopped himself. Andy knew how scary it was for him, and he absolutely would not push it. Jesse had to be the one to make the first move.

Jesse was pulling at Andy's legs now, maneuvering him so he was straddling Jesse's hips. "Want you to ride me," he panted. And Andy was so turned on by the desperation in Jesse's voice, the rare words of passion (they had to keep so, so quiet), that he forgot any disappointment in an instant and crushed his mouth to Jesse's, devouring his lips,

swallowing the groans that began when his hand found Jesse's cock. He grabbed Jesse's hand, sucking on the fingers, swirling his tongue around them as Jesse panted underneath him. He knew Jesse loved to watch him do this, and he loved to put on a show.

After only a few seconds, though, Jesse yanked his hand away and grabbed the back of Andy's head with his other hand, pulling him into a passionate kiss as he reached behind Andy and eased the first wet finger inside. Andy moaned deep, shifting his hips to find just the right angle, and a second finger quickly joined the first, pushing, thrusting, perfect, *God*.

Andy sat up quickly, pulling a condom out from their stash under the mattress and tearing it open as Jesse withdrew his fingers and gripped Andy's hips instead. Looking over his shoulder to watch, Andy slid the condom on, then covered his palm in saliva and reached back to slick Jesse's cock. He slowly eased himself down onto Jesse's hardness, sinking gradually on to it, relishing that perfect fullness. Jesse's head was thrown back, his mouth wide open, as Andy began to move. He rode his lover slowly at first, easing into it, then faster, as he found the angle he was looking for, the way to push Jesse's cock right into that perfect spot. Jesse began to thrust with him, matching his rhythm, pushing upward, holding him tight. Andy began to jack himself fast, and Jesse lifted his head now, watching the motion of Andy's hand on his cock, his eyes so wide, his breathing ragged. Watching Jesse watch him was incredibly erotic, and Andy was suddenly ten steps closer to coming.

"Look at me," he panted, and Jesse's eyes snapped quickly upward, and they locked eyes, and it was over. Andy

watched as Jesse lost it, hips jerking upward as he shot deep inside, and the groan he let out was just.... So. Fucking. Good. It sent Andy right over the edge, shooting come onto Jesse's stomach and chest, and he panted in open-mouthed ecstasy for a moment before collapsing forward, spent. Jesse slipped out and wrapped his arms around Andy, holding him close, smearing the mess between their bodies, but Andy didn't care. He cuddled in closer, eyes closed, panting, glowing. He wanted to stay right here, like this, forever. And he suddenly understood what had been missing with Dean.

It was this.

It was love.

He bit his lip, closing his eyes tighter. *Shit*, he thought. *Now what?*

Chapter 4

JESSE'S lips were moving, but no sound was coming out. Andy gazed up at him, his mouth still full, wishing for the thousandth time that they didn't have to be so quiet. He would give anything to know what Jesse would say in the heat of passion if he could really let himself go.

Closing his eyes, Andy returned his attention to the task at hand, sucking a little harder, squeezing the base a little tighter, pushing his fingers a little deeper. Jesse was making little "ah" sounds now, short exhalations from deep in his throat, and Andy shifted his hips, wishing he had a third hand so he could give himself some relief. He loved, loved, loved doing this for Jesse, and he was so hard it was almost painful.

"More," Jesse whispered, pushing his ass strongly against Andy's hand, and Andy looked up again, confused. He already had three fingers buried inside, pushing in and out rhythmically as he sucked. Did Jesse want a fourth? But Jesse lifted his head off the pillow, grabbing both sides of Andy's face, trembling. "Fuck me," he croaked, his voice hoarse, his eyes desperate.

Oh my God. Andy pulled back, easing out his fingers, letting Jesse's cock slide wetly out of his mouth. He crawled hastily up Jesse's body, covering his mouth in a deep, wet kiss, but Jesse broke it quickly. He was already grabbing a

condom, slapping it into Andy's hand, whimpering against Andy's skin as Andy tore it open and slid it on. Andy covered it quickly in saliva and then lifted Jesse's legs onto his shoulders, positioning himself at his hole. He was going to ask if Jesse was sure, but God, *so hard so hard so hard need this need this need this so bad*, and he was pressing inside.

"Oh, God," Andy groaned as the tightness enveloped the head of his cock. "So good, baby, wanted this for so long...."

But Jesse was tensing, pushing against him, and everything suddenly changed. "Wait," Jesse panted. "Stop. Stop stop stop stop stop, oh God, Andy, I can't, I can't...."

Andy pulled out, rolling onto his back, so hard he thought he actually might die from it. He closed his eyes, wanting to comfort Jesse, trying to remember how to breathe first.

"Sorry," Jesse was saying, kissing his chest. "Sorry, God, so sorry, Andy." Andy opened his mouth to protest, to say there was no need to apologize, but suddenly Jesse was leaning over him, tearing off the condom and plunging his mouth over Andy's cock, sucking hard, and all Andy could do was cling to his hair and try not to scream. He came in seconds, shooting into Jesse's mouth while Jesse jacked himself frantically, following Andy over the edge a few moments later.

Eventually, they recovered enough to rearrange their bodies, and Andy wrapped his arms around Jesse, holding him tight. "I'm sorry," Jesse whispered again, and Andy furrowed his brow.

"Stop that," he said, kissing Jesse's hair. "You have absolutely nothing to apologize for. Especially after giving me a mind-blowing orgasm like that one."

“Yeah, but I couldn’t—”

“Shh.” Andy hugged him closer, stroking his back gently. “You never have to apologize for that. We never have to do that. We never have to do anything that you don’t want to do. I don’t *want* you to do anything that you don’t want to do.”

Jesse was quiet, and Andy knew why. He did want it. He just couldn’t handle it yet. It was too scary.

“I’m in no rush,” Andy said, kissing Jesse’s hair again. “It’s not like I’m going anywhere.” He felt Jesse’s smile against his skin and cuddled closer. *I love you*, he thought, as he always did now when they were dropping off to sleep. He hadn’t said it out loud yet.

They both had things they were scared of.

AS ANDY walked toward the laundry room the next morning, he found he was actually looking forward to his day. He hated that the warden kept changing everybody’s work shifts—some politician’s idea of a brilliant way to minimize gang activity by not allowing the same groups of people to work together for too long—but even though it did separate him from Jesse, it also meant working with Reynaldo again, and that was enough to make him smile. Reynaldo was a skinny queen from Atlanta, loudmouthed and hilarious, and one of the first friends Andy had made when he arrived in this place. They hadn’t seen each other much since Andy had started working in the kitchen, and he was happy to get the chance to hang out with him on a regular basis again.

Andy arrived in the laundry room just at the shift change and found the room was empty. He was heading for

his usual station when he heard it: a wolf-whistle, low and grotesque, coming from the hallway. Turning around, he saw one of the guys from the Aryan Brotherhood leaning against the doorframe. He was a new guy, and Andy didn't know his name—Morse, maybe? Morris?—but he was hard to miss: big, burly, hairy, and gross, with a thick black swastika tattooed proudly on his forearm. Morris stayed where he was, looking Andy slowly up and down, leering at him. Andy suddenly got nervous. This guy was much bigger than he was, and he didn't think he could fight him off. But just as Morris made a move to start walking into the laundry room, one of his brothers appeared beside him, nodding toward Andy, whispering in Morris's ear. Morris snorted in annoyance, giving Andy one last long look, but then turned and walked away with his friend.

Andy let go of the table he'd been clutching, exhaling in relief. *What the hell just happened?*

When Reynaldo arrived, Andy told him the story, expecting that he'd be just as confused by it as Andy was. But Reynaldo just laughed, looking at Andy like he'd lost his mind. "Well, of course, honey," he said. "Ain't nobody gonna mess with you. You know that."

"What?" Andy was more confused than ever. "Why not? I'm not in any of the gangs. I'm not under anybody's protection."

Reynaldo stared at him, letting the clothing in his hands fall back to the folding table. "You kidding? Do you really not know?" Andy just stared back, and finally Reynaldo continued. "It's your man, babycakes. Nobody wants to mess with Cohen."

“My—” Andy began but stopped himself, looking around. “How did you know?” he said in a hushed voice.

This time Reynaldo laughed big and hard. “Child, *please!*” he said when he could manage it. “Everybody within earshot of your cell knows what you two get up to every night. Did you think it was some big secret? Y’all ain’t exactly in a soundproof room up there.” He wiped tears from his eyes, still chuckling. “How did you know?” Shit. Just wish that cell was big enough for three, that’s all I can say.”

Andy focused his attention on his work, blushing furiously. “*Naldo*,” he scolded.

Reynaldo laughed again, shaking his head, and swatted Andy’s butt lovingly. “Shut your mouth,” he said. “Only teasing.” Andy grinned.

They folded in silence for a few moments before Andy spoke again. “But I still don’t understand. How does being with Jesse mean that nobody bothers me? He’s not a gang member either.”

“Doesn’t need to be,” Reynaldo said. “That child’s a one-man protection force.”

Andy looked at his friend again, puzzled. “What does that mean?”

Reynaldo exhaled, chewing on his bottom lip a little. “Well, okay,” he said at last. “I guess since everybody else knows, you damn sure oughta know too.”

“Know what?”

Reynaldo set his folding down, turning to look Andy squarely in the face. “It happened before my time,” he said. “So I don’t know the details. I only know what I’ve heard. But apparently somebody came at Cohen in the shower.”

“Came at, like...?”

“Like wanted to tap that ass and wasn’t gonna take no for an answer. Okay?” Andy swallowed, looking down. “Anyway, Cohen freaked the fuck out. Freaked with a capital F, know what I’m saying? Practically beat the man to death. Put him in the hospital for a month.” Reynaldo whistled, returning to his work. “After that, nobody messed with psycho boy. Your boyfriend’s got some *issues*, hon.”

Andy was quiet, thinking this over, trying to piece apart how much of this story was true and how much was prison bullshit. He’d been here long enough by now to know that the more a story was repeated around here, the more embellished it got. But Jesse must have done something to the guy or he wouldn’t have managed to get a reputation as a force to be reckoned with. “Okay,” he said slowly. “And people don’t bother me because they know about me and Jesse, and they figure he’ll get mad?”

“They don’t figure. They know. He spread the word that you were under his protection the first day you got here.”

Andy blinked, looking up. “The first day? Really? We didn’t even do anything until—”

“Until when?”

“Um... the first night.”

Reynaldo rolled his eyes. Andy pretended not to notice.

ANDY kept a lid on his curiosity the best he could, knowing he couldn’t ask Jesse about it in the cafeteria or anywhere else there were people around. But once they got back to

their cell for the night, before the doors even closed or the lights went out, he couldn't help himself.

"Jesse, can I ask you something?" he said, aiming for a casual tone.

"Hmm?" Jesse was pulling off his prison uniform, grabbing a clean T-shirt to sleep in. Andy tried not to be distracted by the yards of pale skin in front of him begging to be nibbled on.

"Um, I was talking to Reynaldo today. And he told me a story about you. And I figure most of it is probably bullshit, but some of it might not be."

Now Jesse turned around, intrigued. "What was the story?" he asked, sliding the T-shirt over his head. *Damn.*

Andy shook his head and refocused. "He said a long time ago, some guy tried to... tried to have his way with you, you know. In the shower. And you stopped him, and beat him up pretty bad."

Jesse's face was grim now, his jaw set. "Oh."

"Is it true?"

Jesse glanced over his shoulder into the hall, checking to see if anyone was listening. "Yeah," he said absently, still looking away.

Andy was stunned. "It *is*?"

Turning his head back around, Jesse placed a finger over his lips. "Yeah," he said again, but his eyes told a different story. Slowly, he moved the finger away. "Later," he whispered, just mouthing the word, and Andy understood. He nodded. The conversation would have to wait.

LATER, in Andy's bed, in the familiar dark, Jesse explained. "It happened on my fourth day here," he whispered, curled in Andy's arms, his fingers tracing a lazy pattern on Andy's chest. "I was scared of everything, everyone. I hadn't spoken a word to anybody yet. And I was in the shower, and this guy came up to me. He pushed me so I fell against the wall, and he made some comment about my ass, I don't even remember what, but it was clear what he was going to do. And I just wheeled around and punched him as hard as I could. It surprised him, and knocked him off balance, and his head hit the wall, and then he lost his footing and fell, and he tried to grab me to catch himself but I moved out of the way just in time, and he hit the floor face first, and it knocked him out. Then the guards came running in, and they put me in solitary for two weeks. When I got out, I found out that he'd ended up in the hospital and had all kinds of really serious injuries, like he'd had the crap beaten out of him. All I can figure is that one of those guards had a beef to settle with him and decided to seize the opportunity and let me take the fall for it. Which was fine with me, because I got this reputation as a total badass, and it's stuck ever since. And all I did was throw one punch."

Andy laughed, burying his face in Jesse's shoulder, trying to muffle the sound. It was too perfect. It made perfect sense. Jesse was shy, but with that story going around, the shyness could easily come off as brooding toughness. Jesse had found the perfect way to keep the bad guys away, and his only punishment had been two weeks in solitary, which he probably preferred to having a cellmate anyway, as terrified of the other inmates as he had been then. Andy relaxed back into the pillow, smiling. *Perfect.*

"I love it," Andy whispered. "You know they call you psycho boy?"

Now Jesse laughed, slapping a hand over his mouth to cover it. Andy grinned, squeezing him closer. And Jesse placed his palm back onto Andy's chest, and Andy sighed happily.

"Did you really tell people not to bother me starting on my first day here?" Andy asked, his fingers playing with Jesse's dark hair.

Jesse was quiet for a moment before he answered. "Yeah," he said softly.

"Why? You didn't even know me."

This time, the moment was even longer. "I don't know," Jesse finally said. "You just... you seemed so... I don't know. You're so beautiful." Andy's breathing stopped. Jesse had never called him beautiful before, never said anything like it. Not even close. "And you seemed so sad. I knew they would go after you, and I didn't want that to happen to you. I didn't want—"

"You didn't want me to go through what you went through."

"Yeah."

They lay together for a moment in silence, but finally Andy spoke. "Thank you," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Jesse didn't answer him. Instead, he rose up on an elbow and pressed his lips gently to Andy's, his hand stroking Andy's face, letting the kiss linger. Finally it broke, but Jesse stayed where he was, gazing into Andy's eyes. "Also," he finally said, "there was something else, although I didn't know it at the time."

“What?”

Jesse’s eyes didn’t look like glaciers anymore. They were full of heat and so dark they were almost black. “I wanted you for myself,” he whispered.

Andy kissed Jesse this time, opening his mouth, sliding his tongue forward, and Jesse eagerly responded. Andy pulled Jesse on top of him, yanking both their shirts up and off, running his hands all over Jesse’s naked back as their lips met again. As the kiss grew more passionate, he slid his hands lower, down inside Jesse’s boxers. Jesse let out a satisfied grunt when Andy grabbed his ass and squeezed, pulling him closer, rubbing their hard-ons together. Breaking the kiss for a moment, he gazed at Andy, breathing hard. “Will you put your fingers in me?” he whispered.

Trying his hardest not to come on the spot, Andy pulled one hand out of Jesse’s boxers and brought it to his face, quickly covering the fingers in saliva as he used the other hand to tug Jesse’s boxers down and off. Jesse relieved Andy of his own boxers and then settled back on top of him, kissing him deeply again, as Andy reached around behind him and eased his first finger in. Jesse moaned into his mouth and moved with him, pushing against his hand, rubbing his cock against Andy’s with every move of his hips. Andy slid a second finger in, and Jesse moaned again, pushing a little harder, and Andy squeezed his ass with his free hand and moved with him. “Do you want three?” Andy whispered, but Jesse shook his head. Andy froze. “No?”

“I want *you*,” Jesse said. “I want you inside me.”

God. Basketball. Point guard, shooting guard, power forward. Don’t come yet. “Are you sure?” His voice was trembling. He would give anything, *anything* to be inside that

tightness, but he didn't think he would survive it if he got halfway in and had to pull out again.

"Yes. God, yes." Jesse was panting now, still moving his hips, fucking himself on Andy's fingers. "Please, Andy."

Andy rolled them over, sliding his fingers out and grabbing a pillow to stuff under Jesse's ass. Jesse already had the condom out, had already torn it open, was already unrolling it on Andy's aching cock. He leaned forward, sliding his mouth over the latex to wet it, and Andy groaned and pushed him back as gently as he could manage. "Don't," he said. "Can't."

Jesse understood and lay back, smiling, and Andy leaned over him, kissing him tenderly as he lifted his legs up high on Andy's waist. One hand on his cock to guide it, Andy began to push in, not breaking the kiss, swallowing Jesse's low moan, pushing as slowly as he could. *Bulls. Pistons. Pacers. Cavaliers.* When he was finally, finally all the way inside, he stopped, looking at Jesse, searching his face for panic, for fear. There was none.

"Feels so good," Jesse gasped, clutching Andy tight. He began moving his hips, trying to draw Andy in deeper. "Please, Andy. Please."

With that, Andy's last tenuous grasp on control broke, and he thrust forward, pushing deep over and over and over again. Jesse's sounds grew louder, and he covered Jesse's mouth with his own, kissing him passionately, his hips continuing to pound out the rhythm that both men craved. Reaching between them, he grabbed hold of Jesse's cock and began to pump it, and Jesse threw his head back, gasping, squeezing him so tight. *Lakers. Clippers. Kings. Suns. Don't come yet. Not until he comes. Not yet, damn it, not yet. But*

the struggle was getting tougher, and Andy was on the verge of losing the battle, and then Jesse gasped once more on a “yessssss” and shot hard, covering Andy’s fist, and Andy exploded inside his lover, riding wave after wave of pleasure, then falling forward in an utterly satisfied heap.

They were still lying like that, panting, recovering, when Reynaldo’s voice floated up from the tier below. “Get it, girls!” he called, and Andy laughed, covering his face with his hands. Jesse shook with silent laughter beneath him, and Andy felt it everywhere. He gingerly pulled out, kissing Jesse tenderly as he winced with the pain of separation, and wrapped him in his arms.

“That was amazing,” Jesse whispered, snuggling in close.

“For me too,” Andy whispered back, burying his nose in Jesse’s hair. After a moment, he spoke again. “Hey, Jesse? What changed? I mean, why now?”

Jesse lay still for a long moment before he finally spoke. “I’ve wanted that since the first day I saw you,” he said at last. “I was just... I was just too afraid to let it happen.”

“And now?”

“You reminded me what a big, scary badass I am,” Jesse said, smiling. “What’s to be afraid of?”

Andy looked at him, tweaking his nose playfully. Jesse’s smile turned to a grin, and they kissed. But when it broke, Jesse turned more serious.

“No, really. I guess I just... I just wanted you so much, I couldn’t let anything stand in the way anymore.” He swallowed. “Not even me.”

“I love you,” Andy said suddenly, and Jesse’s eyes widened. *Shit. SHIT. Who said that? What the fuck, Bingham?*

You're going to scare him off, going to ruin it. Take it back, find a way to—

"I love you too," Jesse whispered, and Andy drew in a sharp breath.

"You do?"

Jesse nodded, his eyes still so wide. "I've been wanting to say it for... for a long time now. I just... I didn't want to... when Dean said it to you, you felt pressured to say it back, even though you didn't feel it, and I didn't want to—"

"I love you," Andy said, kissing him to cut off his words. "I've never felt this way, not about Dean, not about anybody, and it's scary. It's fucking terrifying, and it's so, so good." He paused, gazing at him. "I'm in love with you, Cohen. Have been for months."

Jesse opened and closed his mouth a few times, searching for words. "Same here," he finally said. Andy smiled, and kissed him again, and this time their mouths opened and their tongues found each other, and Andy found himself half-hard again already. "Now fuck me again, would you?" Jesse said when the kiss broke, his voice quiet, breathless. Half-hard was suddenly a distant memory as Andy reached for as many arcane basketball statistics as he could think of.

"You got it," he said, and he did.

Chapter 5

ANDY was happy to discover that he hadn't lost his talent for this. He learned quickly all the best ways to make Jesse's toes curl, from the long, slow strokes that drew out the pleasure like taffy to the fast, deep, hammering thrusts that made Jesse throw back his head and get so loud Andy had to find creative ways to cover his mouth. He loved watching Jesse's face as they made love, watching his eyes change, watching his face flush, watching his lips part and hang open. They tried to keep quiet, but Jesse still whispered the rare word, and it drove Andy crazy when he did. Words like "oh God," and "yes," and "God, right there," and "so good, so good." Sometimes, right after they had finished, when their bodies were still tangled together and sweaty, Jesse would turn to Andy with a grin on his face and whisper in his ear the best word of all: "Again."

As the months passed, it got better and better. And not just the sex but the rest of it too. They held each other at night and talked about everything, from their darkest secrets to their happiest memories and everything in between. Jesse tolerated Andy's brattiness and supported him through every sullen moment, and Andy forgave Jesse his stubbornness and even tried to learn a little about those comic books he talked about so much. They talked about their pasts, their present, their future. Jesse memorized Andy's complicated family tree, and after a while, started coming along when

Andy's parents came to visit. On Jesse's birthday, they sent him three brand-new graphic novels that three of his favorite artists had released since his incarceration. Jesse was touched beyond words and wrote them a nine-page thank-you note, and he and Andy's mom had been exchanging e-mails ever since.

Andy's gift was a little more X-rated in nature.

Prison life, meanwhile, sucked. The days were repetitive and mind-numbing, and the violence and cruelty were sometimes hard to take. Andy witnessed a stabbing in the prison yard, a brutal beating in the cafeteria, and so many confrontations and death threats he sometimes wanted to stay in his cell with his hands over his head and never come out. But Jesse was there with him through all of it, quietly supporting him, and somehow that made everything better. Every time Andy thought he just couldn't take one more day in this place, Jesse would smile at him, and Andy would remember why he could.

By now, it was clear that everyone knew about their relationship, including the guards. And while sex between inmates was technically against the rules, Andy and Jesse were model prisoners, so there was a silent understanding: as long as they didn't push the issue, as long as they kept it quiet, as long as they didn't get into trouble, the powers that be would look the other way. So they stuck to their don't ask, don't tell routine, acting like close friends during the day, coming together in the dark of night. And it was enough. Andy was happy.

So happy that he'd even started writing again. It had been a long, long time since he'd felt like doing that, but once he picked up the habit again, he found he couldn't

stop. He wrote little stories, some happy, some sad, all true. He'd spin short vignettes about the things that went on in prison or longer reflections about the people he'd hurt and how much he regretted the choices he'd made. Sometimes, he'd just write silly love poems about Jesse's shyness or his deep voice or the sounds he made in bed. He'd read them to Jesse at night, and Jesse would blush to the roots of his hair. And then they'd make love, and Jesse would give him some more material to write about.

Then, one day in July, they were standing in a row for mail call, and the guard shouted out Jesse's name. Jesse blinked and glanced at Andy for a moment before walking forward to take the envelope, and Andy just watched him, dumbfounded. It was the first time Jesse had received a letter in the eleven months that Andy had been in this place, and by the look on his face, Andy guessed that it was the first time Jesse had received a letter in the three years that *he* had been in this place. Jesse walked back to the line slowly, staring down at it, and when he looked up at Andy, his face was white. "It's from my father," he said. Andy put his hand on Jesse's shoulder, unsure what to say. But Jesse just walked away, still staring at the letter, and Andy let him go. He knew Jesse needed to be alone right now, and as much as it killed Andy to do it, he had to give him that space.

When he'd waited as long as he could bear (about ten minutes), Andy wandered back over to their cell, peeking his head in. Jesse was on his back on his bed, the pages of the letter fanned out on his chest, staring at the ceiling. "Jesse?" Andy said tentatively, going to him and sitting on the floor next to the bed. "You okay?" Jesse turned his head and

looked at him, then wordlessly handed him the letter. Andy tried to speak again, but Jesse stopped him before he could get a word out.

“Just read it.”

Andy paused, then looked down at the handwritten pages. “Okay,” he said. And he began to read.

DEAR Jesse,

I'm sure it must be a great surprise to hear from me. You probably think I'd forgotten I even have a son, and to be honest, I tried. I was revolted by what I saw that night in your bedroom, and by what I was told you did. I didn't want to listen when you swore to me it wasn't true. I had suspected that you had homosexual tendencies, and the idea of a fine young man like Taylor doing the things you said, instead of the other way around... well, it was just too much for me to believe.

But I was wrong.

Last week, I received word that Taylor has been arrested for the rape of a freshman in his college dorm. A male freshman. When the police searched Taylor's room after the arrest, they found a diary he had kept of all his “conquests,” including (but not beginning with) you. There had been several other victims at the college, but he had intimidated them all into not reporting it out of fear that they would not be believed. Just as you were not believed. The only reason he was caught this time is that the freshman's roommate walked in on the crime in progress.

Faced with the overwhelming evidence, Taylor has agreed to a plea bargain that includes a reduced sentence for multiple counts of rape. He will have to allocute to each count, which means he will have to testify in court as to exactly what he did to each victim. He has already made a written statement in preparation for that process in which he indicates that he forced you to have sex and that he lied when he said that you forced him.

I do not pretend to understand why you chose to plead guilty to a crime that you did not commit. I have already consulted with an attorney, who tells me that the court will need an answer for that in order to set aside your guilty plea. However, she is optimistic that with Taylor's statement and whatever additional facts are included in the allocution, she will be able to have your conviction overturned.

I have paid the attorney's retainer and arranged for her to visit you at the prison, but I want to come and see you myself first. I decided to write you this letter in advance so that my visit doesn't come as a complete shock.

Son, there are so many things I would do differently if I could. I never should have believed that a son of mine would willingly commit depraved sexual acts with another man. I should have believed you when you told me that Taylor was lying. I should never have turned my back on you.

I will be at the prison on the 26th. I look forward to seeing you, son. There is much we need to discuss.

Dad

“OH, MY God,” Andy said when he was finished, looking up at Jesse, who was staring up at the ceiling again. “This is... Jesse, this is....”

“Unbelievable. I think ‘unbelievable’ is the word you’re looking for.”

“Yeah.” Tossing the pages to the floor, he leaped on to the bed, crowing with laughter as he hugged Jesse tight. “Jesse, this is so great! This is—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jesse wriggled out of Andy’s grasp, standing up, walking away. “It’s not great. It’s completely fucked up. Ridiculously fucked up, that’s what it is.”

“Jesse, what is the matter with you?” Andy sat up, staring. “This means you can get out of here! It means you—”

“It doesn’t mean any of that.” Jesse was turned away, his arms crossed, his body tense. Andy hadn’t seen this posture from him in a long time. “He doesn’t know the details yet. He’s going to find out that it started out with Taylor forcing me, but it turned into something else. He’s going to find out that I was more than willing to commit those depraved sexual acts, and that I commit them with you every night.”

“Jesse—”

“He thinks I’m a faggot, Andy!” Jesse was spinning around now, angry. “He said so that night. ‘I always knew you were a faggot.’ He said it again in this letter. I mean, he didn’t use the word, but—”

“Jesse.”

“—but he’s still happy to tell me how revolting I am. Look at this letter! He was just as upset with the idea that I was a willing participant as he was with the idea that I was a rapist. You think he’s going to pay for this lawyer when he finds out the truth? I mean—”

“Jesse, fuck your father!” That shut him up. Jesse stared at Andy, silent. “It doesn’t matter. Even if he turns his back on you again, the statement from Taylor is still there. The allocution is still there. We’ll hire you a lawyer. Or we’ll contact the Innocence Project, or the fucking ACLU, Jesse, *Jesus!* We’re getting you out of here!”

“I don’t *want* to get out of here!”

For a moment, both men just stared at each other, Jesse’s words hanging heavy in the air. Finally, Andy spoke. “Don’t tell me you still think you deserve to be punished for being—”

“*No!*” Jesse shouted, shutting his eyes, bringing the heels of his hands to his temples as if he had a splitting headache. “My dad is an idiot,” he said quietly. “He taught me all kinds of stupid crap. Crap that was just dead, dead wrong.” Lowering his hands, he opened his eyes and looked at Andy again. “You know he never came to see me? Not once. They took me to jail the night I was arrested, but they set bail for me the next day, and Dad refused to pay it. He wouldn’t pay for a lawyer. He wouldn’t talk to me on the phone. He just exited my life. One day I had a father, and the next day I didn’t. No warning, just, poof! You’re on your own. And I had to go through all of this... *all* of this... the charges, the lawyers, the decisions, the adjustment to prison life, all of it... all alone. Nobody to talk to. Nobody to lean on. Just me.”

"I know," Andy said softly. He walked to Jesse and took his hand, squeezing it gently. "But you're not alone now."

Jesse stared at their joined hands, swallowing hard. "But if I do this," he said, "I will be." Andy just looked at him, confused, and finally Jesse met his gaze. "You have six years left before you're even eligible for parole," he said. "If I leave here...."

"Oh my God," Andy said, finally getting it. "You can't stay in *prison* because of *me*."

"I can't lose you," Jesse said, his voice straining. Andy saw, with shock, that Jesse's eyes were wet. He'd never seen him cry, not once, no matter what they'd been through. "Andy, I can't... I can't...."

Andy just grabbed Jesse, holding him tight, his eyes wide open, feeling Jesse clutch him back. But the moment was over quickly, when a large guard walked down the hallway and shouted for them to break it up. Jesse jumped back then ran out the door, and Andy just stood where he was, dumbfounded.

Jesse kept his distance for the rest of that day, and Andy stayed away too, unsure what to do. He ate dinner with Reynaldo and his friends then went and pretended to watch TV, his mind still reeling. How was this possible? What was he going to do? *What* was he going to *do*?

When he went back to his cell that night, Jesse was already in his bed, his eyes closed, his body a comma facing the wall. Somehow, Andy knew that Jesse was only pretending to sleep, but he was still going to respect the fact that he didn't want to talk. So he didn't try. He changed out of his uniform in silence and then crawled into his own bed.

Forty-five minutes after lights out, sleep was nowhere on the horizon. Andy threw off the covers and got up, then went to Jesse's bed and climbed in. Jesse didn't jump, didn't protest, didn't pretend to be sleeping. Andy spooned behind him, pulling him in close, and Jesse covered Andy's hand with his own and drew in closer. "I love you," Andy whispered.

"I love you too."

And Andy fell asleep.

SOME time later, Andy awoke to a very naked Jesse crouched on top of him, kissing his neck, pushing up his T-shirt to reveal the skin underneath. "Jesse—"

"Need you to fuck me," Jesse whispered, tugging the shirt off, sliding his hand into Andy's boxers to squeeze his cock. "Need you to. Please."

"Jesse, wait." And he meant it. Andy's brain was on board with the waiting plan. It knew that Jesse shouldn't be doing this right now, that they needed to talk first, that this was a bad idea. No one had yet gotten that message to Andy's cock.

"Need it," Jesse said. Andy's boxers were on the floor now, and Jesse was swallowing down Andy's dick, sucking it deep, taking it down his throat. Andy's eyelids fluttered as he groaned, and Jesse pulled off, grabbing Andy by his sides, rolling them both over so Jesse was on his back and Andy was on top.

"Wait," Andy said again, but his voice was breathless, his cock so hard. "We should t—"

“Andy, *please*,” Jesse whined, his voice more urgent now. “Need you in me *now*. Can we please, can we just, can we talk tomorrow? Please, I just....” He humped his hips up toward Andy, wrapping his legs around him. “I need this. Need you to fuck me blind, make the rest of the world go away. *Please*.”

God. Andy was harder than hell now, his usual response when Jesse talked dirty to him, but he opened his mouth, ready to protest, ready to explain why they shouldn’t do this tonight. But Jesse grabbed him, kissing him deep, and Andy forgot everything except whatever was going to get his dick inside his insanely hot boyfriend as soon as humanly possible. He fumbled for a condom, sliding it over his cock while Jesse prepared himself, and before he knew how it had happened, he was deep inside. Jesse let loose one of his deep, satisfied moans, and Andy began to thrust, running a hand up Jesse’s raised thigh, clutching at his beautiful ass.

“Harder,” Jesse whispered, and Andy thrust harder, moving faster, kissing him again. “Harder,” Jesse said again when the kiss broke, and Andy obliged, losing control of his own breathing as his hips moved with a life of their own. “Harder, baby, fuck me harder,” Jesse moaned, and Andy slammed in, making the bed creak with each thump of their hips, and now Jesse’s lips were curled into an open-mouthed smile, and he was moaning happily, and the non-fried portion of Andy’s brain understood that this was what Jesse wanted, a fucking so intense there was no room in his brain for anything else.

Andy was sweating now, driving in deep, unable to do anything except keep up his rhythm and focus on not coming too soon. If there was nothing else he could do for

Jesse tonight, at least he could give him the orgasm of his fucking life.

Jesse grabbed his own dick and pumped it, and not long after, he was coming with a muffled shout, burying his mouth in Andy's shoulder, clutching at Andy's ass with his free hand to pull him in as deep as he could go. Andy thrust four more times and came, collapsing on top of his lover, and they lay there limply, trying to catch their breath. Eventually, he pulled out and rolled off of Jesse's body, settling on his back next to him, his breathing gradually returning to normal. "Thank you," Jesse whispered, and that was so fucked up, and now they *had* to talk, and Andy lifted up to say so. But Jesse was already asleep.

Andy stared at him. *What are we going to do?* he thought again, no closer to an answer than he had been the last five hundred times he had asked that question that day.

For the first time in months, he felt afraid.

Chapter 6

ON THE 26th, Jesse's dad appeared as scheduled for his visit. And as expected, he shouted curses and insults when Jesse told him the whole truth about what happened with Taylor, words that made Jesse's face burn with anger and his hands clench into fists. But Jesse kept talking, and when he began to explain about his relationship with Andy, his dad just stood up and walked out. He hadn't contacted Jesse since.

"Called that one right," Jesse said to Andy later, and he wouldn't say any more. But Andy held him anyway, that night and a lot of nights afterward, and in the dark one night, in a whisper, Jesse confessed how hurt he was, how much his father's rejection bothered him, and how it bothered him that it bothered him. "I hate that he still has that power over me," he said. "I hate *him*." But his lip was trembling, and his eyes were turned away, and Andy knew the truth was more complicated than that.

"I love you," Andy whispered, because he didn't know what else to say. But once he started talking, it was easier to continue. He told Jesse that he was a good man, the best man Andy had ever known, and that his father was a fool. But he also said he understood that Jesse loved him anyway, that some part of him always would. "Not because he

deserves it,” he said, “but because he’s your father. And baby, that’s okay.”

Jesse didn’t say anything back, but he let Andy hold him. And in the morning, Jesse’s mood was a little better. It continued to improve each morning after. And Andy knew that Jesse would be okay.

The attorney that Jesse’s dad had promised never materialized, of course. When Andy first brought up contacting his family to hire a lawyer instead, Jesse told him not to. “I’m not leaving you,” he said, and Andy could see that he meant it.

“I’m not going to fight with you,” Andy said calmly, setting down the pen he was using to write the letter to his mother and looking Jesse straight in the eye. “But you are not staying in this place for one day longer than you have to. Not one day, not one hour, not one second. Not for me. Not for anything.”

“Andy—”

“Absolutely not. And if you say anything like that to me even one more time, I’ll never have sex with you again.” Jesse snorted out a laugh, and Andy grinned back at him. But their eyes stayed locked as the smiles eventually faded, and finally, Andy picked up the pen again.

“I love you,” Jesse said softly as Andy bent over the letter.

“I love you too,” Andy replied, not looking up. He squinted, hoping like hell it would keep the tears back until Jesse left the room. It did.

The lawyer worked quickly, and as the months passed, Andy knew his time with Jesse was growing short. He found

himself focusing on almost anything else just to take his mind off the idea, throwing himself into his writing, finishing a collection of stories that even he had to admit was pretty good. He wrote about his drinking, about his pain, about his regrets. Mostly, he wrote about Deborah Jefferson, the woman he hit that night. He wrote how he thought about her every day, how he wondered if she ever made it out of that wheelchair, how he thought about her kids and how they must have suffered. He wrote that he would do anything to turn back time and slug himself in the jaw as soon as he even thought about getting behind the wheel. That at the very least, he wished he could make it so that the only one who ended up in a wheelchair as a result of his stupidity was him.

Eventually, he realized that what he'd written was a book. Jesse read it and told him he'd never read anything like it, anything so moving and honest and raw and true. He encouraged Andy to send it to publishers, but Andy knew there was someone else who had to see it first. It took a week to write the letter that accompanied the manuscript, but as he wrote Ms. Jefferson's address on the heavy envelope and placed it in the outgoing mail, he knew that it was the right thing to do.

That night was Jesse's last night in prison, and Andy cried in his lover's arms. He cried about everything: the mistakes he'd made, the people he'd hurt, the fears he had for his future. But mostly, he cried over Jesse. It seemed cruel that they had found each other in this horrible place just to be torn apart—cruel and wrong and all kinds of impossible. He didn't put any of this into words. He just cried, and Jesse held him close, wrapping his arms around

him, soothing him the best he knew how. And they made love, and it was tender and gentle, and Andy never wanted to let him go. Jesse fell asleep, but Andy lay awake all night, his head on Jesse's chest, listening to him breathing, trying not to waste a single moment of the short time they had left.

In the morning, Andy walked out with him to the farthest point he was allowed. And when they had to separate, Jesse ignored all the guards around them and pulled Andy into his arms, crushing their mouths together in a deep, passionate kiss. The guards yelled at them to stop, and the inmates shouted out catcalls and jeers, but Andy was aware of nothing but Jesse, Jesse's lips strong and warm, Jesse's tongue dancing with his own, Jesse's arms wrapped around him, Jesse's body pressing tight. Only when the guards actually physically pulled them apart did they separate, and Andy stood with the guard's hand pressing bruises into his arm and watched as Jesse was led away.

Andy spent a night in solitary for the kiss, but it was just as well. He couldn't bear the thought of sleeping in his cell without Jesse there.

The next day, Andy knew he had to get about the practical matter of survival. He had been looking into his options, and as it turned out, you didn't have to depend on a "psycho boy" boyfriend for protection in prison; it could be had for a price. Reynaldo had a cousin in the Latin Kings, and he set up a meeting that afternoon. Andy was glad Reynaldo was there, too, because, damn, Pedro was scary: big, hulking, covered in tattoos, with an ugly scar on the side of his neck and a left earlobe that seemed to be missing a chunk. They settled on a dollar figure pretty quickly, but then Pedro brought up the matter of "a little somethin' extra

for me.” Andy just stared at him blankly, so Pedro clarified. “Not a lot, you know, just somethin’ for the time. Like one blowjob a month, maybe?”

Andy was too stunned to reply, but luckily Reynaldo didn’t have that problem. He shrieked at Pedro in rapid-fire Spanish until Pedro threw up his hands, shrinking down in his seat, clearly terrified of his tiny cousin, and Andy had to laugh. “Awright, awright!” Pedro said, shaking his head. “Jesus, ‘Naldo, tear my fuckin’ head off, why don’t you?” He shook Andy’s hand on the deal and wandered off, still muttering under his breath, Reynaldo still yelling at his back.

Eventually, Andy’s laughter died down enough to allow him to speak. “It’s been a long time since high school Spanish,” he said. “But did you just call his mother what I think you did?”

Reynaldo stayed where he was, still staring in the direction his cousin had gone, hands on his hips, one foot tapping the floor furiously. “Just cause the woman’s my auntie don’t mean she gets off the hook for raising a fool like that,” he said. Andy laughed again, and Reynaldo turned to him, his smile eventually returning. “Anyway, it’s done. Come on, honey, let’s go celebrate,” he said, and he linked his arm with Andy’s and led him out of the room.

PRISON life quickly faded to gray. Pedro was as good as his word, and nobody bothered Andy. He was assigned a new cellmate, a forty-year-old crack addict named Roscoe who looked twenty years older than his actual age and wasn’t

interested in anything except sleeping, eating, and getting his next fix. He and Andy stayed out of each other's way, and Andy slept alone facing the wall and dreamed of Jesse.

During the day, he went through the motions of his job, listening to Reynaldo chatter away during mealtimes and pouring his thoughts into his writing when he got any time alone. Jesse visited as much as the prison allowed, and the first time Andy saw him on the other side of the plexiglass, he had a sudden understanding of what Roscoe must feel like when looking at a vial of crack. He had a physical reaction, his body filling with joy, as well as an intense sensation of *needneedneedneednownownownow*, and he wanted to smash the glass with a sledgehammer and tackle Jesse to the ground. Jesse seemed to feel the same way, and they spent the full hour talking with a hand pressed against the glass, mirroring each other, striving to get as close to touching as they possibly could.

Jesse was living with Andy's parents now, an arrangement he had initially balked at, saying he didn't want to be a burden. But Andy's mom refused to hear it, and Andy pleaded with Jesse to accept her offer. It put his mind substantially at ease when Jesse said yes. Now, at least, he wouldn't have to worry that Jesse was spending too much time alone or not getting enough to eat. Jesse had taken a job at a comic book store and applied to the local community college, having finished his GED while still in prison. He seemed happy, and it warmed Andy's heart to see it.

And Andy missed him so much it hurt.

Sometimes, at night, he couldn't sleep at all. He would lie in a tight ball with his eyes shut and try to conjure a memory of his boyfriend, or he would turn to his side and

spoon a pillow, burying his face in the edge of the pillowcase and imagining Jesse's smell. But it was never the same, and it was never enough. Andy had never been a crier, but now he was crying a lot, every night, in fact. And all the writing in the world wasn't enough to fix it.

ONE Sunday about six weeks after Jesse left, Andy walked into the visitor area with a bit of trepidation. He'd been told he had a visitor but didn't know who it was, and he had no idea who to expect. He peered anxiously into the room on the other side of the plexiglass, his hands clenching and unclenching nervously, waiting.

When Deborah Jefferson entered the room, he just about fell out of his chair.

First of all, she was walking. Unsteadily and using a cane, but she was on her feet. Secondly, Jesse was with her, helping her to the chair facing Andy. *Jesse*. With *Deborah Jefferson*. How was that possible? Andy stood up, knocking his own chair over, his mouth open. He didn't know what to do. But the woman was sitting down, picking up the receiver, staring at him. Jesse raised his eyebrows at Andy and gestured at the phone, and Andy hastily pulled his own chair back upright and sat down, picking up his own receiver. "Ms. Jefferson," he rasped, then shook his head, cleared his throat, and tried again. "Ms. Jefferson. Hello."

"Hello, Andy." Her voice was neutral, not warm, not cold. She eyed him carefully then glanced at Jesse, who said something to her that Andy couldn't hear. She nodded, then handed Jesse the receiver.

"I'm going to leave you two alone to talk," Jesse said, staring straight into Andy's eyes.

"Jesse, what—?"

"I'll be back," he said, and he handed the phone back to her, then turned and walked out of the room.

Andy watched him go then turned his attention to Ms. Jefferson, who was still giving him that even stare. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, but he had no idea what to say. So he just stared. He'd never really looked at her during the trial—just enough to register a fortyish African American woman in an elegant suit who hated him. So far, it didn't look like any of that had changed.

Finally, she spoke. "I read your letter," she said. "And your book."

"You—you did?"

"Yes. I wasn't going to, at first. That envelope sat on my kitchen counter for the longest time. I was going to throw it away, but I couldn't bring myself to do that either. But I sure didn't intend on reading it."

Andy's mouth was dry. *Am I really having this conversation?* "What changed your mind?" he said at last.

"Your young man," she said, nodding her head back in the direction Jesse had gone. "He's quite persistent, that one."

"Jesse—he—"

"He came to see me. He explained who he was, and he talked about you. And I didn't want to hear it. But he kept coming back. Finally, I agreed to read the thing just to get rid of him."

Andy laughed in spite of himself. That sounded about right. Jesse could be stubborn when he wanted to be, and once he decided to do something, Lord help anyone who thought they could change his mind.

“Only it wasn’t what I was expecting,” she said, gazing at Andy thoughtfully. “You have a gift, you know. A way with words.”

Andy looked down. “Ms. Jefferson. I can’t—I wish I could tell you how deeply, deeply sorry I—”

“But you already have,” she said. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. You have told me. And quite beautifully.” Slowly, Andy lifted his head, meeting her gaze. “I’ve been angry at you for a long, long time,” she continued, her voice soft. “You did something that was very wrong, and you hurt me very badly. You stole from my children. That’s how I feel about it. You took part of their mother away.”

Andy swallowed hard. “I know,” he whispered.

“Except that’s not the whole story either. You’re not a monster. You’re just a kid who made a mistake. As Jesse kept coming back, I started seeing you through his eyes. And oh, my, does he love you.” Andy nodded, fighting back the tears. “You know that too.”

He nodded again. “I’m so lucky to have him,” he said.

“Yes, you are.” She paused, still gazing at him. “But when I read what you wrote, I started to think maybe he’s lucky to have you too.” Andy just stared, and they were quiet for a moment before she spoke again. “So I decided to come here today and meet you. See if maybe we could start to understand each other. Because this anger I’ve been carrying, it’s not doing me any good. It’s not doing you any

good, and it sure isn't doing my children any good. If you could help me set that aside, that would be a great gift to me."

Andy smiled, wiping a stray tear from his eye and clearing his throat. "To me too," he said.

Deborah smiled back. And they began to talk.

THEY were still deep in conversation when the guard came in an hour later and announced that their time was up. Andy had learned that Deborah was a single mom, that she'd worked through hours upon hours of physical therapy to make it to her feet again, that she'd refused to take a handout or any help from anyone because she wanted to prove to her kids that she could do it on her own. He learned that she'd had her own struggles with alcoholism years earlier, and that part of her thought that the accident was some kind of punishment from God for the times she'd driven drunk when she was Andy's age.

Andy talked to Deborah about everything. About his childhood, his life, his world in prison. Mostly, he talked about Jesse, because that's what made Deborah smile. She'd had a love like that once, and her oldest son was almost Andy's age, and she wanted that kind of love for him. By the end of the hour, they were laughing together like old friends, and Andy was genuinely sorry to see her go. When she asked if she could visit him again, he grinned big and said he would love that, and he meant it. Seeing her smile was like a weight lifted off Andy's shoulders, one he'd been carrying for almost two years without even realizing it.

Jesse came back into the room to help her out of it, but visiting time was up, and they couldn't speak. With his eyes, though, Andy told Jesse how much he loved him and how he couldn't believe he'd done this amazing thing for him. With *his* eyes, Jesse told Andy that he loved him too.

After that, Deborah became a regular visitor. Jesse had to start keeping a schedule so that he, Deborah, and Andy's parents all got enough time to see him, and Andy found himself looking forward to Sundays all week long. With Deborah's blessing, he sent the manuscript to a few publishers, and the second one he sent it to accepted it. For an inmate facing years behind bars, life didn't get much better.

Except it did. Six months later, a guard came and pulled Andy out of the cafeteria at lunchtime, saying there was an urgent call for him. He got on the phone and discovered that Deborah, Jesse, and Andy's lawyer were all on the line on a four-way call. "What's going on?" Andy asked.

They all tried to speak at once, but finally Andy's lawyer shouted the others down. "Andy, we've got some amazing news," she said. "You know how your mother instructed me to keep trying every avenue to get you out, no matter how far-fetched?"

"Yeah," Andy said. His parents were nothing if not persistent, and they certainly had the money to spend on the efforts. But his lawyer had warned him not to get his hopes up, as clemency and pardon petitions were hardly ever granted. They were only considered once a year, and they'd been rejected without commentary once already.

"Well, this time we had a secret weapon," she continued.

"What's that?"

“Me,” Deborah said quietly.

Andy’s jaw dropped. “Wh—what?”

“Deborah wrote a statement on your behalf,” the lawyer said. “And then she pestered the governor’s office with phone calls for weeks until one of his aides agreed to set up a face-to-face meeting.”

“But—but why?”

“I’ve let my anger go, Andy,” Deborah said. “You’ve been there long enough. And I think you can do a lot more good outside those walls than inside them.”

Andy clutched the phone, his knuckles turning white. “What are you saying?”

Now the lawyer took over. “Apparently, the governor’s a big reader,” she said. “He’s a great fan of your book. And he agreed that you have something to share that shouldn’t be locked up any longer. So, between the book, Deborah, and my masterfully drafted clemency petition, well....”

“You’re out, kid!” Deborah shouted.

Andy froze. “I’m what?”

“Your sentence has been commuted,” his lawyer explained. “Your remaining time will be converted into probation and community service—the governor wants you to tour colleges in the state and talk to kids about drunk driving.”

“I... I....”

“You’re coming home, Andy,” Jesse said, and as the women cheered and shouted, Andy closed his eyes and sank to the floor. *Home*, he thought. *I’m going home.*

THREE weeks later, nineteen people arrived at the prison to meet Andy on his release. His lawyer was there, and Deborah, and his parents, and assorted relatives from all over the family tree. And Andy hugged them all, loved them all, was happy to see them all. But in truth, the only one he really saw was Jesse. Andy grabbed him first and held him tight, wanting to do so much more, but unable to do what he really wanted with a roomful of family members as an audience.

Later, there was a welcome home party at the fanciest hotel in Altoona, with streamers and balloons and music and dancing, and by the time the last guest had headed out, it was past two in the morning. But when Andy's parents told him it was time to go home, he took Jesse's hand and told them to go ahead without him. He needed to be alone with Jesse tonight.

A quick slide of a credit card later, Andy and Jesse found themselves alone in a beautiful room with a big, comfortable bed, and they were all over each other from the moment the door closed. Jackets and ties and shoes and socks came off quickly as they stumbled toward the bed, kissing passionately, and when they landed on it together, Jesse moaned loud. Andy broke the kiss and grinned. "So that's it."

"What?" Jesse asked, panting.

"What you sound like when you can make as much noise as you want."

Jesse grinned big, rolling them over so that Andy was on top, wrapping his legs tight around his waist. “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.”

Andy kissed him hard, relishing the tangle of tongues that he hadn’t felt in eight months—eight months that felt like eighty years. He ripped off Jesse’s shirt and pressed him tight, wanting to crawl into his skin, wanting to hold him close and never let him go. And Jesse tore off his, clutching at his bare back, kissing him just as desperately, pulling him in so hard Andy felt his skin get hot from the pressure.

Belts, pants, and underwear were totally unnecessary items, and they had to go right *now*. Soon both men were utterly naked, rolling on the bed together, kissing as hard and deep as they ever had, covering every inch of the other’s skin with desperate, wanting hands. Jesse broke away only long enough to fish lube and condoms out of his pants, now discarded on the floor, and Andy lifted Jesse’s legs over his shoulders as he popped the top on the bottle, slicking his fingers in glassy liquid and then covering Jesse’s mouth in a kiss as he eased the first finger inside.

“More,” Jesse panted, breaking the kiss. “No teasing, Andy. Need you *now*.”

“Yes, sir,” Andy said, pushing a second finger in, working them in and out, moving, stretching. Jesse moaned beneath him, bucking his hips up off the mattress, moving with Andy’s hand. “God, you’re so fucking gorgeous,” Andy whispered, then stopped himself. “What am I doing? *You’re so fucking gorgeous!*” he yelled, and Jesse laughed, kissing him again.

“Want you in me,” he said when the kiss broke, and Andy stopped laughing, suddenly so hard he could barely breathe. “Make love to me, Andy.”

Andy could only nod breathlessly, pulling his fingers out as Jesse opened the condom and slid it on Andy’s cock. Andy coated the condom with lube and then moved forward, kissing Jesse tenderly once more as he lined up and pressed inside. “Oh, God, Jesse,” he moaned, not caring how loud he was.

Jesse didn’t seem to care either. “Andy,” he groaned, clutching both of Andy’s arms as he began to move, rocking his hips to move with him. “Yes, baby, just like that.”

“So tight, Jesse. So good.”

“Andy... God, I missed this.... I missed you.”

“I missed you so much.” Andy was still moving, still thrusting, and it was so perfect, so perfect. “I love you,” he whispered, and Jesse’s eyes opened.

“I love you too,” he said.

They kissed and kissed and kissed. And Jesse’s hands slid lower, pulling Andy deeper inside, and Andy’s hand found Jesse’s cock, so very hard, and stroked it once, twice, three times. They were beyond words now, panting and kissing and moaning and out of language and so in love, so in love. And when they came, they came together—Jesse crying out loud, Andy shuddering out a deep groan—and they collapsed together, breathing so deep, breathing each other in.

Eventually, Andy lifted up, trying to pull out, but Jesse stopped him. “No,” he said softly, pulling Andy back down on

top of him again. “Just stay. Just stay right there. I’ve wanted you here, like this, for....”

“Eight months?”

Jesse paused. “I think... my whole life.”

Andy smiled, closing his eyes, snuggling closer in. “Yeah,” he said. “Me too.”

IN THE morning, Andy woke up with Jesse’s naked body tangled around him. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was past ten a.m., the first time he’d slept this late in the two years since he’d first arrived in prison. Jesse opened his eyes sleepily and smiled at him, and Andy’s breath stopped the same way it had when he’d first seen Jesse’s smile what seemed like a very long time ago. *So beautiful*, he thought. Suddenly, he remembered that he didn’t have to keep it a secret anymore, and he grinned and touched Jesse’s face. “So beautiful,” he said.

Jesse pulled him close and kissed him. Their breath was morning-stale, and their skin was still sticky from the exertions of the night before, but Andy tumbled onto his lover and held him tight, kissing him deeply, smiling big. And it was perfect. He was home. He had Jesse. And it was a brand new day.

RACHEL WEST lives in the Virginia mountains, where she dotes on her loving partner and their two cats and works in a job that is much less exciting than writing about boys in love. When not wandering around in her characters' world, she loves to hike, play silly board games, and read everything she can get her hands on.

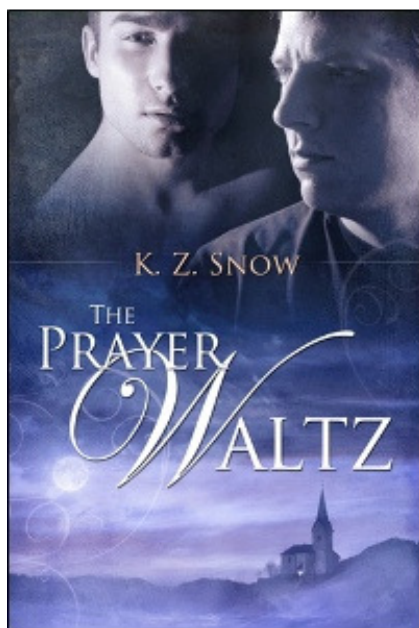
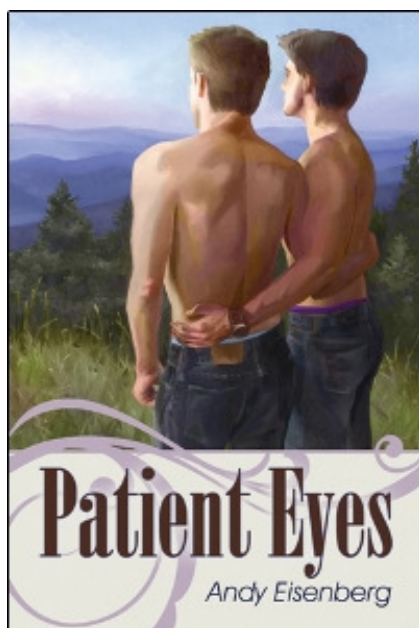
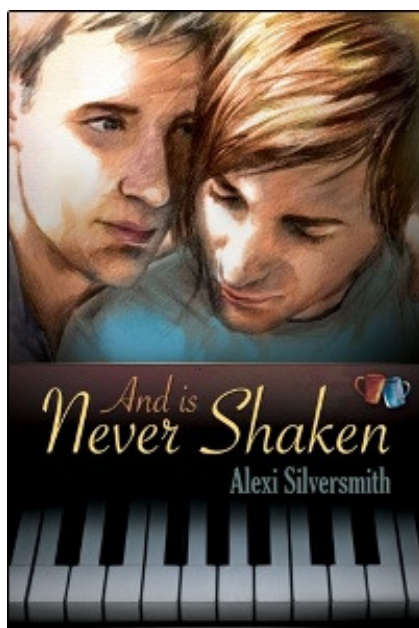
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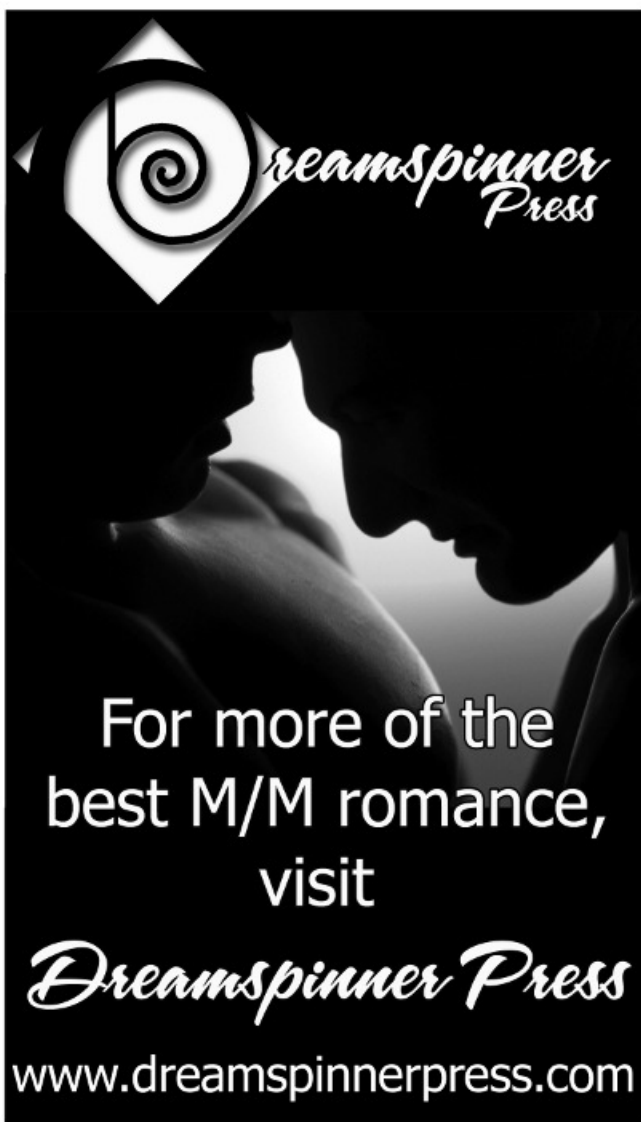


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