



Loose Id

WILLA  OKATI

BECAUSE IT'S TRUE

Because It's True

Willa Okati



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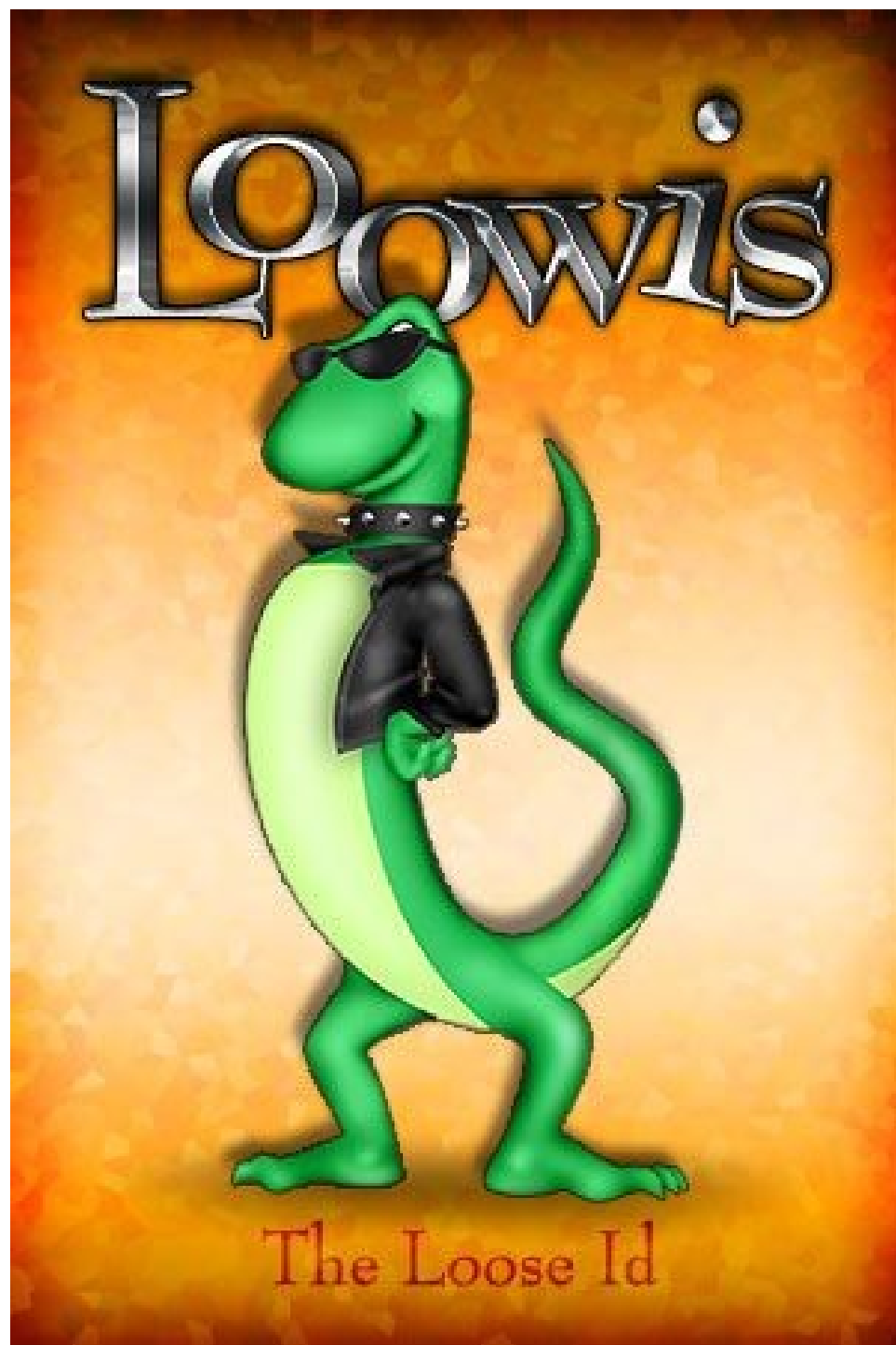
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Chapter One

“Something wonderful is going to happen today.”

“Were you talking to me?” A fun-sized blonde deliverywoman, no one Ford had met before, juggled her armload of Flowers Fast! boxes to pop out her iPod earbuds.

Ford grinned up at her from where he'd crouched to study the sidewalk perpendicular to the museum service elevator he, and presumably she, was waiting on. “Sorry, no. I wasn't talking to you. Not that I wouldn't. Everyone I've ever known swears you can't shut me up for love or money. They're usually right.”

The deliverywoman looked like she couldn't decide between *aww*, *cute* and running. “You're a little crazy, aren't you?”

“So I'm often told.” He'd bet this woman was one heck of a character herself. She'd made some, er, *interesting* fashion choices involving calf-length striped tights and patchouli hair wax. “I'm Ford.” He offered her a hand from below. “Come down here and check this out.”

“This isn't some kind of cheesy pick-up line, is it? I'd be flattered, but...okay, wow. From the look on your face, I can answer that one myself. *So* not a pick-up line. If you were any less into women, you'd be a gastropod.”

Ford laughed. “That's a new one on me.”

“If the shoe fits. I'm Kayla.”

“Ford.”

“Like the truck?” The deliverywoman crouched beside him. Good. Ford liked her, and her coming along for the ride was an excellent sign. Something wonderful *and* something unexpected were set to happen today. “You deliver for Rush Plus, right?”

“Packages where you want them to go as fast as you want 'em to get there. Or as fast as I can pedal.” Ford patted his heavy messenger bag.

“Pleased to meet you. I could use a pick-me-up. Delivering flowers is surprisingly thankless work. What's this good thing that's going to happen today?”

“I don't know yet.” Ford waved up from their spot on the sidewalk at the weird door to the external service elevator and the five floors of refurbished mill-cum-museum it had to sledge its way down at the speed of thick molasses. “It's complicated. If you're up for it, there's time for me to explain.”

“God, tell me about it.” Kayla scowled at the stubborn doors.

Ford had started to feel the burn of his crouch, the solid weight of his body not really best designed for sitting this way, but he could take it a little longer, and he had a good example right in front of him. A penny, less than a foot away on the sidewalk. “Do you believe in magic?”

“Wait, what? Do you mean stage magic? Illusions and that kind of thing?”

"Not exactly." Ford nudged the penny with the tip of his finger and waggled his eyebrows at her. He liked playing over the top. Made people less nervous of the giant with his crazy talk.

"Ohh, I get it. See a penny, pick it up, and all day long you'll have good luck?"

"Exactly." Ford levered the penny off the sidewalk.

"Ugh!"

"Hey, don't knock it just because it needs a little TLC." Ford balanced the penny in his palm, where it looked lost and tiny in the breadth and width of his hand. Or, depending on your point of view, safe. Protected. "It's heads up, even. Extra good luck."

"Yeah, but where's the proof?"

"You don't need proof if you believe. And I do. Because it's true. This penny means it's my lucky day." Ford shifted and winced. His knees had had enough of bearing all his weight. Time to stand. "I need to stand up. Don't freak out, okay?"

"Why would that tweak me?"

"You'll see." Ford stood slowly to give her time to adjust to his size. At six feet nine with a proportionate build that could only be described as *solid*, he liked to make sure people knew in advance he wasn't a threat.

Kayla's eyes widened. She took a step back, then forward, her chin up. "Holy cow. Sorry, just...wow, man. You're *huge*."

"And you're itty-bitty. I won't hurt you."

"A gentle giant, huh?" Kayla studied him with her head tilted to one side. "Okay. I believe you."

"You'd be surprised how many don't. Thank you. May I?" Ford took her hand to kiss the back of it.

"Touché, Mister." Kayla fiddled with a strand of her spiky hair. "So you really, really believe in luck? What about omens and good signs and that kind of thing?"

"Yes, yes, yes, and all of the above, yes. And you don't, right?"

When Kayla shook her head, a ladder of silver rings running along the outer shells of her ears jingled. All positive signs that pointed toward good fortune. Better and better. "Don't shun me or anything. I've just never seen any proof that all those old wives' tales are more than just stories."

Ford grinned broadly at her. He loved it when someone was willing to be convinced. "If it's proof you want, I can do proof. Prepare to be amazed."

The way Gavin saw the world was this: not all shy men were loners, and not all loners were shy. Most shy men and loners weren't hermits, though he'd have bet more would be if they could get away with it. But a man did have to make a living, and museums needed secretaries and office managers just like every other business. Gavin did fast, efficient work, kept his head down, and spent all his lunch hours and breaks he had out here.

An old terrace whose bricks still smelled of smoke after years of mill management sneaking one in where they could. A freak of architecture had left it stuck on after the remodeling of the place from mill to a museum of the strange, the unusual, and the old. No one ever went out there but Gavin. Ever.

He liked the stillness that came with being alone. Better still, the warmth of the sun streaming down and the brightness of the horizon through the city skyline. Peaceful. Quiet. Solitary.

Almost.

Voices carried more clearly to the old smokers' terrace than one would think. With fifteen minutes of his lunch break left on the clock, Gavin had two choices: leave or listen to those two below keep chattering like magpies.

Idle curiosity compelled. What could possibly be so interesting as to keep this pair rambling on at top volume for almost ten minutes? Gavin straddled the protective stone wall that fenced in the old terrace, braced himself on one hand, and craned his neck to look down.

He scanned and passed over the plump little blonde. Strange, enthusiastic little birds like her flew by the flock in artsy towns. But the man... Gavin leaned almost too far forward and caught himself just before he risked falling.

There was so much of this man to see. Tall, looming high above the blonde. The height and breadth of shoulders were matched by powerful legs, massive feet, and hands large enough that Gavin would bet they could fit fully around his own waist.

If he were to be honest with himself, the man's exuberance was only part of what caught Gavin and held him in thrall. Thick black hair too wild to be contained slipping free, strand by strand, from the rubber band that strained to keep it in check. His sweater, as blue as the night sky, rode up at the waist to bare a strip of skin when he whooped in excitement over...something...and punched the air.

Not just a man. A *man*. He could have stepped off the pages of a history book, larger-than-life and twice as vivid. More man than most could handle. Definitely too much for Gavin.

He looked a lot like—

Be damned if Gavin couldn't look away. In fact, Gavin leaned farther forward still, trying to catch every word. *What are they doing now?*

Ford clapped his hands together and rubbed them briskly. "Okay. See this elevator?"

"Only in my dreams, when I wait hours for it and it never shows."

The more they chatted, the more Ford liked Kayla. If he'd gone for women at all, she'd have been exactly his type with her zest for life and her obvious enjoyment of eccentricities. Two too many breasts and a sad lack of a penis were kind of deal breakers for him.

But she could be a friend.

Ford took Kayla by the hand and guided her closer to the stubbornly sealed elevator doors so she could trace for herself the deep gouge in the painted metal. "Feel this. What does the mark tell you?"

"That someone got fed up waiting and keyed it?"

"Maybe, but try to look beyond that." Ford guided her forefinger in a trace through the Y-shaped groove. "See how it forks? Any ride taken on this elevator is going to be one that changes your life. You step on or off with one destination in your mind, but really, it's two. You'll have a choice when you step off, and whichever path you choose will change your life."

"Uh-huh." Kayla's lips twitched, and her eyes danced with barely concealed amusement. She whistled the *Twilight Zone* theme.

Ford feigned a playful swat at her. Another thing he'd had to learn in the large life was to pull any physical punches. Yet another reason, though admittedly not the biggest one, why Ford didn't go for women. He'd squash them.

Kayla planted her hands on her hips. "C'mon, magic man. Is that all you've got?"

"No way. Anywhere you look, there's some kind of sign to be read." Ford wheeled about to face the lunchtime rush on the neighborhood streets. He scanned about, searching, searching—*Ah!* "Look," he told Kayla, pointing up at the sky and the crows flying past.

"All I'm seeing is birds."

"They aren't just birds. They're omens." Ford counted them. "Four ravens. One for sorrow, two for mirth, three for a wedding, and four for a birth. Four." He laughed at Kayla's abruptly white face and panicky retreat. "No one's going to go into labor out here. I'd see other signs for that. But look there..."

The four birds flew low and swift over a taxicab pulling up to the curb. Out of that taxi stepped a tired-looking brunette. Not the soul-weary exhaustion of a third-shift worker, but one who glowed with a sort of radiant happiness. From the backseat, she collected an infant carrier and bent to kiss the top of a tiny newborn's head.

"Gotcha," Ford exulted. Quietly, so he didn't wake the baby. When he turned to Kayla for her reaction, he liked what he saw. Maybe still a teeny bit of dubiousness, but mostly growing delight. "So what do you think? Still freaked-out?"

Kayla bounced on her heels. "Are you kidding? That...was...*awesome*. Can you do it again?"

"I should be able to. Though...I have to warn you we got lucky that time. In Chinese, the word for 'four' means two things, depending on how you say it."

"No kidding?"

"Mm-hmm. *Sz*. It can just mean 'four,' or it can mean 'death.'" Ford had learned to read the signs while sitting at the feet of his half-Irish, half-Chinese grandfather. If Ford ever missed a sign or read one wrong, Grandpa Xiao O'Shea would whack him over the head with whatever he had handy, hard enough to make sure he'd see things for hours. Such as exploding stars and little birdies.

Grandpa never had liked Ford's name. "*Too close to four for comfort*," he'd claimed. "*You'll ride close to the wire when you least want to.*"

Kayla crept closer to him. "Jesus."

"It's okay. This time, just four and nothing to be scared of."

"So it's not all sunshine and roses."

"Not always." Ford shook off a brief chill. "Anyway, don't sweat it. You wanted me to go again?"

Kayla crowded in close, shading her eyes to search. Ford still spotted one first. "Look over there, across the street. See that guy in the sharp suit, the one with the briefcase?" Weasel faced and impatient, the man seethed behind a slow-moving crowd of elderly female window-shoppers who blocked the sidewalk.

"I think I've got the hang of it. Signs indicate he's a total douche."

Ford stifled a laugh. No getting distracted now. “You're probably right. But watch. He's going to... Yes...see? He's skipping around the bottleneck and underneath that scaffolding, which is so incredibly stupid in the first place.”

“Walking under a ladder is bad.” Kayla nodded. “I really think I am getting the hang of this. What's going to happen to him? It doesn't always work right away, does it?”

“Not always, but right now? Wait for it... Wait for it...”

Impatient Tool strode past the shoppers. When he turned back to sneer at them, not watching his step—*Whammo!* Gopher holed in a patch of sidewalk that'd been jackhammered up to plant a tree.

“Oh my God.” Kayla might have a brighter grin than Ford in finest form. “This is better than going to see the wizard. Do it again?”

“How could I say no to that face?” He hmm'd and searched the area. As he did so, a gust of rogue wind almost whipped off Kayla's jangly necklace.

Perfect.

“May I?” Ford lifted the center pendant. *Aha.* A rough circle of green glass edged in gold. He took a quick, thorough scan of Kayla and saw the sign he'd known would be there. “Check your boot.”

“My what?” Kayla pulled a face.

Ford tested the weight of the pendant. It had a definite list, and a rough bubble on the right. “Your right boot. Have you been thinking you've got a pebble wedged in there or something?”

“Actually, yeah. For a block or so now.” Kayla tried to kick the boot off. She stumbled when she succeeded and hopped gracelessly on one striped-tights-clad foot, the boot in her hand flailing about.

There. A coin wedged into one of the decorative open chunks of her heavy boots shook free and rolled away. Ford caught the tarnished silver and handed it to her. “There. Good fortune blew your way.”

“A silver dollar? I've got to say it beats a lucky penny.” Kayla didn't protest the dirtiness of *this* money. She buffed it with her sleeve and squinted at the date. “Holy crap.” She squeaked like a mouse that'd gotten into the sugar. “Ford, my God, this is a 1928 silver dollar. This has got to be worth more than one hundred pennies.”

“And it's yours,” Ford said. He took a moment to enjoy the warm glow of a good job well done. “Now do you believe me?”

“When faced with the improbable, the impossible is your only choice.” Kayla tucked the coin in her pocket and, before Ford could take adequate warning from the abrupt impish sparkle in her eye, turned on him. “Now you. Fair's fair. Dig up some omens and tell your own fortune. If you can.”

Gavin knew he should have been back inside by now—five minutes ago, no less—ensconced behind his desk, working on updating archive databases.

Where was he, though? Still perched on the railing, straddled between one world and the next. Though not a man given to superstition—ever—Gavin had the strangest feeling that long after the messenger had carried out his business and ridden away, the sight of his wet-dream

body and the sound of his rumbling, barrel-deep voice would echo within his memory for days to come.

The thought didn't make him happy.

Enough. He had to get rid of them. He'd go down himself and collect their packages. As wound up in talking as they were, the elevator might have crawled up and down twice, and neither would have noticed.

Gavin was inside the elevator, prompt for once, and the doors were sliding shut before it occurred to him to second-guess and wonder why he hadn't just gone back inside to shut the two out. And why he hadn't taken the stairs like a sensible man.

Bah. At least it'd get the job done, get this far-too-compelling stranger on his way, and things could go back to how they should be. Quiet.

Hard hearts were safe hearts. Gavin hadn't spent this many years alone and on his guard just to throw all the effort away now, no matter how tempting...

Hmm. Reading the omens for oneself could be tricky. Better be really prepared to accept what one saw. But what the heck?

"I accept your challenge." Ford bowed to Kayla. "Let's see. I think you're lucky."

"Thank you, kind sir." Kayla could dish out "elegant lady" as well as Ford handed out "gentleman."

Ford laughed. "So let's take your luck and say it's going to be my lucky day."

"I'm flattered." Kayla tossed the silver dollar from hand to hand, catching his attention. There. Perfect place to start, the light from the silver a merry flash in the air.

"Luck, plus... Actually, may I?" Ford took the silver dollar from her. "First a lucky penny, and now one hundred times that much luck. Like I said, something wonderful is going to happen today." His grin widened. Good signs, all of them. "There's more, though. I can feel it. Now where..."

Aha. When Ford tossed the coin back to Kayla, he just happened to be facing the stoplight in the street beyond them. "Look, there. Green stands for go. All those cars and SUVs barreling through. That means something big is about to happen. Big *and* lucky."

On a roll now, Ford followed a streak of light to its ending shadow on the wall by the elevator. Kayla jogged along behind, one shoe off and one shoe on. *Hmm.* That might not be a great sign. Whatever this wonderful thing was, achieving it would be a struggle. "What else? What's it leading to?"

"Remember what I said before about this elevator bringing changes to your life?" Ford ran his fingertips over the door. He thought he could feel a mechanical rumbling deep inside, the sound of someone on their way down.

Ford kicked it up a notch and opened his senses to let anything and everything flood in. Made him dizzy, but it was always worth the effort. "We're facing... West? West for adventure. And the sky is bright." A convertible zoomed by, painted an eye-watering pink. "Candy pink. Candy hearts and valentines."

Kayla had hearts in *her* eyes, as well as mischief. "Talk about getting lucky."

Ford groaned and tweaked her nose. Gently. He looked up to check the avian forecast. Birds still swooped in arcs over disapproving pedestrians. He counted them aloud.

“One...two...three. Three for a wedding. A big adventure, lots of luck, love, and...whoa. Wait a second.”

Quick as a wink, Ford went over the omens once and again. No matter how he looked at them, they added up, and they never lied. He could feel the rightness of them in his bones. Oh...boy.

“What?” Kayla craned up to get a better look at Ford. “Yipe. That's what I call going pale. Are you okay?”

“I think so, yeah.” Ford took three careful steps back from the elevator and watched the lights *finally* sweep down from the top floor to the next one down. Traditionally speaking, numbers were assigned as male omens. Whew. At least that wouldn't be a problem. “The next person off that elevator is going to be the love of my life.” Ford had to take a deep breath and process the rest of what the signs predicted before he let it out. “And he's going to be the man I marry.”

The museum's service elevator was a mystery to everyone, and especially to Gavin. It behaved like an angel every year come inspection time, and otherwise like a devil straight from a snail's hell. Always stopped when you needed to be somewhere fast, and raced like a bullet from a banshee's gun when you wanted to slow down and get off.

What had he been thinking, giving in to the mad urge to meet the messenger? This wasn't him. He stood apart. He walked alone. Wanted no one. Needed no one.

Enough. Gavin reached to hammer on the Stop button.

It worked. For all of five seconds. Then, with a stubborn and sticky-sounding grind, the elevator started smugly back up. Slowed. Stopped. Started. Kept going.

“No way. Come *on*.” Gavin laid on the pressure. Anything to keep his mind from drifting inexorably back to a smile broad and bright enough to be seen five stories up. To wondering what it would be like to be kissed by a man so tall and powerful or wrapped up tight in his embrace.

The inner workings of the elevator loosed a mighty groan.

Gavin pounded the door with the flat of his fist and gave up.

Odd. What is that? Gavin tilted his head. Strange, but he'd never noticed that scratch on the inside of the elevator doors before. He traced it with his fingertip, a Y shape, and flinched back with a hiss when the touch of flesh to metal emitted an electrical spark that stung him.

Half a floor from ground zero, Gavin could hear the messenger talking almost clearly enough once more to be heard. He couldn't make out the exact words, but the tone—that wrapped around him as toastily as a fire-warmed blanket in winter and made him...made him...

“The man you *what*?” Kayla hooted. “Come *on*, Ford.”

Ford didn't let her reaction stop him. He touched the brushed steel of the doors, reverent and amazed. “I've got an extra ticket for a Tori Amos concert coming up soon. Won two in a radio contest. I should have known I'd have someone to take with me.”

“You're serious?” Kayla shook her head. “Of course you're serious. I've known you for all of five minutes, and I already know the answer to that one. You honestly accept this.”

“Because it's true.”

"I don't know, Ford." Kayla had fallen into a comfortable spot in Ford's life as if she'd always been there. Considering the circumstances, a positive omen for what lay ahead. Rather, what was about to step off the elevator. "The other stuff—that was...believable. Weird and awesome, yes, but believable. But this?"

"You've already seen for yourself how the signs work and that they *do*."

"Yeah, but marriage?" Kayla was apparently having a heck of a time wrapping her head around that one. "Doesn't this freak you out at all?"

"In a good way." Enthusiasm and a tiny bit of nervous energy wound Ford so tight—still in a good way—making him all but vibrate. Waiting for the elevator to slide down that last floor was better than counting the seconds until Christmas morning.

Although... "I can't even keep a plant alive for longer than a month. I'm going to have to step up my game."

Kayla gave up her apprehension to join in the anticipation. "What're you going to say to him?"

"Honestly? I don't have a clue. He's the love of my life. Something will come to me. I'm sure of it."

"Wait." Kayla frowned. "Not to burst your bubble, but if he's going to be the love of your life, I have to ask. Are you going to be the love of *his*?"

"Uh-oh. Good question. See? It's lucky that I met you. Hang on." Ford scanned fast for a sign.

There? Possibly. A tea spill on the pavement, comfortingly familiar tasseography spread out in soothing whorls. Ford read the signs with care. "Whew. Signs point to yes. I think." Not an easy yes, though, just like Kayla's half-booted stumbling. "Twists and turns," he said, tracing the spirals of tannin. "Ups and downs and roundabouts..."

Kayla squeaked and tugged Ford's sleeve. "Doors!"

"Sure picked its moment, didn't it?" Ford stood and rubbed his hands on his thighs, wishing the brushed-steel doors were shinier and more reflective. As it was, he could only crouch down and rely on a glance in a window at a diagonal angle to get a hinted suggestion of thick Black Irish hair, fair skin, and blue eyes. "Do I look okay?"

"Good enough to make me wish signs pointed to your marrying the first deliverywoman you met today, even if you do need to work on your approach." Kayla gave Ford a nicely platonic and appreciative once-over. "Whoever this is, he'd better know how lucky he is, or he'll have *me* to deal with."

"Okay," Ford said on a breath out. He cracked his knuckles and faced the doors. "Let's do this."

Chapter Two

Slowly, an inch at a time, as if they enjoyed the suspense, the elevator doors eased open. Slim but masculine hands decorated with a scattering of dark ink smudges shot out to grasp the reluctant edges and help them on their way.

Ford acted without thinking. "Here, let me help." Careful not to mash the poor guy's knuckles, he placed his hands above the man's and put his back into the push. Together, they got the door open.

Together, they stopped and stared. Ford didn't know exactly what the guy saw, but he was pretty sure it couldn't be as good as what *he* got to look at. The elevator's passenger blinked at Ford from behind round glasses that made him look adorably bookish and boyishly hot at the same time. The sexy geek of every dirty dream Ford had ever entertained. He *loved* smart men.

Didn't hurt that the rest of Sexy Geek was as appealing as early-summer strawberries. Pink, shading toward red, suffused his cheeks. Smooth, rich brown hair fell to chin length, no doubt all the better to hide behind if he bent his head as he did now, hiding tea brown eyes. *Tea. A drop of proof.*

Even better, Sexy Geek wore a green sweater. *Green for go.* The sweater's V-neck arrowed down over a black T-shirt beneath, both well fitting but covering enough to suggest modesty or even shyness. From this angle Ford didn't think the guy had a single thing to worry about, and he was close enough to know it was a sin to cover up any of that.

This was the man fate had decreed Ford was going to marry? He must have done something great in a past life.

Sexy Geek didn't move. His breathing quickened, and his pupils widened, his attention riveted so intently to Ford that Ford couldn't have moved either, not even if he'd wanted to.

"Hi," Ford said first, quieter than he usually spoke, soft and awed. He waited, holding his breath, eager to hear the first thing his future husband would say to him.

"You're staring at me."

Ford could have hoped for better. But they'd have time for second chances. This man would be the love of his life? Without a doubt.

If he believed in love at first sight, as Ford did, he'd know he'd already fallen.

Sexy Geek blinked, his surprise innocently sexy. "Do I have something on my face?" He touched his lips.

Not yet. Whoa, wait, better take it easy there, cowboy. Ford rustled up some control. Better to keep the X-rated thoughts under cover for now. Learning Sexy Geek's name first would be the civilized way to go.

Behaving like a gentleman came easy with this one. Ford stood aside to clear the path. Because the playfulness had worked so well with Kayla, Ford took a chance on upping the ante.

He extended an arm behind himself, and bowed with every last ounce of old-school charm he could muster up.

It didn't work as well as Ford had hoped. Sexy Geek's eyes widened and he took a step back. "Are you all right?" He took his time with each word. A stutterer, more than likely. Ford didn't mind. Everyone had their foibles.

"I'm great," Ford answered honestly. Who wouldn't be when they could enjoy the sight of Sexy Geek's plush pink lips parted in—Okay, the wariness in his expression wasn't great, but he did have a hot mouth made for doing naughty things. Ford would bet he'd be a kisser beyond compare.

"Uh-huh." Sexy Geek didn't exactly look soothed. He tried to scoot past Ford and failed. Not a good moment for that, as the elevator loosed an alarming screech and jolted down a quarter of a floor, leaving Sexy Geek at Ford's mercy, still holding his hands. Ford would have hated to find the love of his life only to have said love yanked away and sent plummeting past the basement and subbasement to his death minutes later.

Sexy Geek groaned. He muttered something to himself that Ford couldn't make out, took an unusually deep breath, and looked up at Ford. God, those were some gorgeous eyes. "Can you give me a hand?"

"Absolutely." *To have and to hold.* Ford scrambled, but awkwardly, not wanting to break eye contact. Sexy Geek proved to be heavier than he looked. He must have some nice tight muscles under that sweater, more than a casual—okay, not so casual—gander hinted at.

Once Ford had hauled Sexy Geek to safety, he hung on to one of the hands he'd taken in assistance and sandwiched it between both of his. "How about we start again?"

Sexy Geek's eyebrows drew together. "I don't understand."

"I'll show you. Like this. Hi," Ford said, still quiet, but unable to stop his smile from breaking out bright and warm.

He got a much better response the second time around. "Hi," Sexy Geek whispered without looking away. The pink in his cheeks deepened even as a hint of a likely unconscious smile flirted at the corners of his mouth. Ford couldn't have asked for a better omen than that.

"I think that's my cue." Kayla zipped past the two of them and into the elevator. The doors scrolled closed as smoothly as silk, shutting on the picture of her watching them with hearts in her eyes, delivery flowers clutched to her chest, and a happy sigh on her lips.

"Alone at last," Ford said, trying to get Sexy Geek to smile. Funny how he had a feeling that might be a challenge. "What's your name?"

"Gavin," he said, almost too quietly to be understood. "Gavin Yamea."

Ford liked the way that rolled off Gavin's tongue. Exotic, tempting, hard, and soft at the same time. "Gavin. Do you believe in fate?"

Gavin's lips parted. Gorgeous lips. Plush, soft, sweet, begging to be nibbled and sucked between Ford's teeth. "No," he said, taking his hand back, and not gently. "Not in the least."

Uh-oh. Not good. "What about luck?"

"Like rabbits' feet and pennies?"

Ford brightened. He could feel the lucky penny warm and snug in his pocket. "Yeah, exactly like—"

"No." Gavin crept slowly backward, his shoulders now almost pressed to the elevator doors.

Wait. Was he scared? *No no no*. Ford pushed through the space between them and tried his best to project kindness, not force. "Don't go. Let me explain. Besides, we're still not done saying hi, are we?"

Gavin stared at him, a *t-t-t* noise all he could push out. Stuttering, as Ford had thought. Pair that with obvious shyness, and Ford had to fight the urge to hug the stuffing out of Gavin. He liked hugs. So what if they were girly? At Ford's size, he could get away with ordering cocktails that came with sparklers if he felt like it, and no one would dare call him on wussiness.

Gavin swallowed hard. His fingers spread in Ford's grasp, as if trying to break free, then curled around Ford's, and the handshake eased from awkward to firm. His hand was as good to touch as it was to look at.

This close to Gavin, Ford could smell the freshness of shampoo and soap and laundry detergent. Gavin dressed so neatly and was so well put together from outfit to baby-smooth shave that he begged to be rumpled up. Loved hard and left with kiss marks somewhere that couldn't be hidden.

Unable to resist, Ford touched Gavin. Drew the backs of his knuckles down the angle of Gavin's jaw. He couldn't help treating Gavin gently, and with Gavin, the gentleness came easy. "You are so beautiful."

"Men aren't beautiful." Gavin licked those pretty lips, making Ford weak in the knees. Better still, a discreet—he hoped—glance down showed a promising stir in the zipper region and a contraction of Gavin's stomach muscles as his body tried to insist on having its way.

Tea stains and traffic lights weren't the only signs Ford knew how to read.

A small anomaly caught Ford's attention. He touched his fingertip to Gavin's left shoulder and came away with a hair. "You've got a little... Wow. Not little." He held the hair carefully. Fairer than Gavin's and coarser too. "What kind of animal did this come from? I'm saying animal because if it's from a boyfriend, I'll be really embarrassed."

Was that the hint of another shy smile? "Animal," Gavin said. "His name's Oscar."

Ford studied the fur with new fascination. "What's Oscar, a dog or a small pony?"

"He's an F1 cross."

"I have no idea what that means." Ford held out the hair balanced on his fingertip. "It's not an eyelash, but you can still make a wish."

"I told you, I don't believe in—"

"Humor me," Ford coaxed.

Gavin rolled his eyes, or Ford thought he did. Hard to tell when they were downcast and shaded by long, thick lashes. He did puff out his cheeks and blow. The pursing of his lips did highly intriguing things for Ford's libido, only to be topped when he pushed his glasses higher up on his nose.

"Thank you for...um...for the hand out." He colored deeply and looked down. "That came out wrong."

"It doesn't matter. I understood what you meant."

That didn't seem to please Gavin. Stiff and stubborn, wasn't he? "I should be going. I just came for the packages."

"No, wait." Ford didn't give up that easily and didn't let go of Gavin. "I'm Ford. Can I buy you a cup of tea? Morning's more of a coffee time, and normally I'm a soda guy, but I have a debt of thanks to repay to the patron saint of—" Ford checked the spill. "Does that look like oolong or Earl Grey to you?"

Gavin's eyes widened behind his glasses. "You...uh. I...um..."

Oh God, he was adorable. Ford wanted to wrap him up in a blanket and cuddle him. And then he'd crawl underneath the blanket to keep him company, and...

"You're staring at me again." Gavin cleared his throat. "I knew I shouldn't have," he muttered.

"Wait, what?"

"Never mind. Just...let me have the package. Please."

"Sure," Ford said, digging in his bag. He laughed when he saw the name on the address label. Looked like he had an ace up his sleeve. "As luck would have it...the package is for you anyway."

Gavin blushed as he signed for the letter, his handwriting lopsided and going completely screwy when he glanced up at Ford between first and last names.

Ford chanced it. "Can I change your mind about that tea?"

Gavin licked his lips. For a second, Ford was *sure* the answer would be yes.

"No," Gavin said, rushing the words out and backing away. "Thanks, but no. I've got to get back to work."

He kept his head ducked low as he tried to dodge past Ford. Surprise and basic good manners prompted Ford to move out of the way before he could stop to think. Holy cow, Gavin moved fast for a comparatively little guy.

"Wait," Ford called after him. "Okay, no tea now. What about dinner tonight? Maybe, if we're feeling really crazy, a movie." Ford was not too proud to attempt winsome begging. "Please?"

Gavin stopped with his palm pressed to the elevator door, and turned to look over his shoulder at Ford. An oddly sultry pose, a sort of pin-up-girl stance that did wonderful things for Gavin's profile. Then again, if you asked Ford, Gavin had Kayla beat hands down for prettiness, so there you had it.

Maybe he would have said yes. Maybe not. The world would never know, as at that precise moment, the elevator doors slid open with a bump and grind, and Kayla tumbled out. "Whoa, what a ride!"

"I think that's *my* cue," Gavin mumbled. "I'm sorry. Just...look, I'm sure you're a nice guy, but you're—"

"I'm what?"

"You remind me of someone," Ford *thought* he heard Gavin say, but in too low a whisper to be sure. "You remind me way too much of someone, and no thanks."

Ford yearned to approach him again, to ask what that was supposed to mean. He would have if Kayla hadn't discreetly kicked him in the ankle and shaken her head minutely. *Huh?*

Gavin was already inside the elevator. *Darn.* "It's great to meet you, Gavin," was all Ford could settle for. For now. "I deliver to this building all the time."

“And?”

“So I'll be seeing you,” Ford said. He gave Gavin a wink and his most guileless smile as the elevator doors creaked shut. He got a last glimpse of Gavin's deer-in-the-headlights wide eyes before he disappeared from sight.

* * *

No less than a second after the elevator doors closed, Ford wheeled to Kayla. “So? What did you think?”

Kayla made an obviously noble attempt not to giggle. Her lips twitched and gave her away.

Ford took it down a notch just in case the elevator had gotten stuck and Gavin could hear him bubbling over. “Seriously. What did you think of him?”

Kayla ruffled the spikes of her hair back, creating a new and interesting sort of faux-hawk effect. “Okay. Do you want the honest truth, or do you want what you'd like to hear?”

That didn't sound promising, but it was always better to know exactly where you stood. “The real truth. Lay it on me.”

“I think he's gorgeous,” Kayla said for starters.

“His name's Gavin, and I couldn't agree with you more. Did you see his eyes? That cute blush? And his chin and his lips and—”

“Easy, Romeo.” Kayla waved him quiet. “I have the floor.”

Ford mimed zipping his lips. He even tossed an imaginary key over his shoulder.

“Yeah, we'll see how long *that* lasts.” Since the insinuation was true, Ford let it pass. He nodded and gestured to encourage her to keep going.

“Gorgeous.” Kayla ticked that one off on her pointer finger. “And yes, I totally noticed all of the above. He's prettier than I am.”

Ford kept obediently, and for once wisely, quiet on that. Besides, in her way, Kayla was as adorable as a ladybug perched on a teddy bear's button nose. Just not the kind of beauty he looked for in a lover. A husband.

Ford's mind drifted a few clouds away over that one. *Husband*. Someone to come home to. Someone who knew him, loved him, whom he could go to sleep with and wake up beside, and—

Kayla snapped her fingers under Ford's nose. “Hello? Still in there?”

Ford dipped his head sheepishly, then nodded.

“Gorgeous.” Kayla started over again. Ford couldn't blame her. It bore repeating. Gavin was absolutely yummy. One hundred percent. She went on faster than Ford's imagination could waft him away and added a special dig to keep him anchored. “So gorgeous that I'd say he's way out of your league.”

“Hey!” Ford broke his temporary vow of silence to pout at Kayla. “I'm not that bad looking, am I?”

Kayla's eyebrows shot up. “Ford, have you ever looked in a mirror? No. You're not bad looking. But there's rough-and-tumble sexy, and then there's '*ohmyGod*, hide the virgins.' Know what I mean?”

Ford sighed. “True.”

"So weird," Kayla mused, giving Ford a once-over. "The body of a bear, and I don't mean teddy, and the heart of a true romantic. Life is funny." She shook her head. "Okay, moving on. He *would* be out of your league *if* you didn't have a ridiculously awesome 'in' with luck."

Ford brightened. He did have that going for him, no two ways about it, and the signs had never steered him wrong. "And?"

There, Kayla hesitated and nibbled her lip. "I think he's kind of... Not broken, at least not in a way that can't be fixed, but...somewhere inside him, he's damaged." She patted the patch of breast roughly over her heart. "Not too far from the surface. I could see it in his eyes."

Ford tipped his head to a side, weirdly fascinated. "Have you been holding out on me?"

Kayla's temporarily somber mood broke. She swatted at Ford. "No! Idiot."

"Then how are you seeing this, and I'm not?"

"Easy." There came the fingers again. "One? I know I'm not in the running, so I'm using my mental energy to observe instead of panting blindly over him. Two? I learn fast. And three? I'm a girl. Ever hear of feminine intuition?"

She had him there. Ford laughed. "Fair enough. Got any other pearls of wisdom for me?"

"Just one." Kayla sighed. She hugged Ford's arm in lieu of his shoulders. To reach those, she'd have needed a stepladder. Hmm. Gavin wasn't all that tall. Only a handful of inches on Kayla. What would that make him? Five-nine?

Ford had overcome greater obstacles.

"Pay attention," Kayla scolded.

Ford attempted to look winsome and properly respectful.

Kayla rolled her eyes and tried not to giggle. "I'm being serious here. Love at first sight or not, he's not going to be easy to win over."

Ford couldn't disagree with her there, but neither could he fight this feeling. He took a step back and tilted his head as far as it would go to stare down the building. "That's okay. No one ever claimed love was easy."

Kayla sniffled, her eyes suspiciously glossy. "You giant goofball. Here." She dug in her pocket for a Flowers Fast! card. "You're going to need this. Also, if you don't keep me in the loop on how this goes, I'll hunt you down and string you up by your thumbs."

"I don't doubt you could do it too. But I'd keep in touch anyway." Ford offered Kayla his hand. "Friends?"

Kayla beamed at him. So maybe she wasn't Gavin. All in all, Ford figured coming away from this with a new friend was a win. A mission, a partner in crime, and a prince in an ivory tower all ready for rescuing.

Now all he needed was a plan, and when Ford caught sight of a crumpled-up flyer rolling across the street, he thought he knew exactly where to start.

Chapter Three

There were certain things Gavin often found hard to get out of his head. A knock on the door in the middle of the night that'd sent him racing out of bed only to find his neighbor's boyfriend had come home sloshed drunk and hammering at the wrong apartment. The state of the stock market. Bad poetry.

Therefore, being unable to pry a certain bright-eyed, blinding-smiled bike messenger out of his thoughts for longer than five seconds made Gavin... "Irritated" might not be the right word. Testy. On edge. Gavin paused in his data entry to weigh and measure each choice, seeing which one fit best.

Ford...

Kind. Intensely sensual. Ford, who Gavin had promptly shown his worst side to, then fled from.

Gavin groaned. *No, stop. It's for the best.* A can of worms sealed before any could escape.

If he doubted that, even for a second, all Gavin had to do was look at the glossy, framed photo-shoot image he kept tucked in a desk drawer. Donny. His ex-fiancé. He could have been Ford's twin in looks if not in size, and definitely in madcap enthusiasm and lack of sense. And, most importantly, in his belief in luck. Donny took every crazy chance there was and almost always came out on top.

No matter who he squashed by climbing over them.

Gavin weighed the photo in his hands, stubbornly refusing to hide it away again yet. He needed a timely reminder of the man who'd ditched him at the altar and vanished into the world of traveling theater. Needed to remember exactly why he didn't let his heart get tangled up. Ever.

And why he was not a believer. In anything.

As his luck generally ran, the pause in Gavin's work coincided perfectly with the arrival of the person he least wanted to see. He swiveled his chair around to face down Roger, a fellow archivist and professional pain in the ass. The one upside to Roger's showing his face was that it at least pushed Ford out of center mental stage to allow room for annoyance to surge in as a replacement.

Roger. When would he give it up? He and Gavin had been at loggerheads since they'd been hired and offered a choice of work spaces.

Gavin hadn't *wanted* the corner office with its prominence and proximity to the main drag. He'd seen this poky little nook, barely larger than a remodeled janitor's closet, found the old smokers' terrace mere yards away, down a deliberately bleak service hallway, and settled in with a sigh of satisfaction.

Roger, on the other hand, was the sort of man who viewed Gavin's willing surrender of prime real estate with great suspicion and lived in anticipation of the day when Gavin "paid him back for winning." Idiot.

"I'm busy," Gavin said when it became apparent Roger had no other plans except lounging in the doorway and smirking at him all day long. Short and terse worked well enough for talks with this one. "Need something?"

"Who, me? Not really, no. Just passing the time of day."

"Pass it somewhere else."

"That'd mean gossiping about you behind your back, and I would never do such a thing."

"Uh-huh." Gavin tapped a pen against the edge of his desk. "Get on with it."

Roger rubbed his thumbs together, producing a strange and nerve-rasping scraping sound. "Word's gotten around that you had quite the interesting encounter with a bike messenger last week."

Oh honestly. "No one's got anything better to talk about?"

Roger struck a new lounging pose, though Gavin would not have thought it possible to appear any more indolent. "They do. Just not anything that interests me as much. What's the scoop, Gavin? Someone new in your life?" He cocked an eyebrow at Donny's picture. "Interesting."

"Not your business." Gavin swiveled his chair to turn his back on Roger. "Excuse me."

Roger stood up straight at last and straightened his cuffs, pulling them fussily neat. "If that's how you want to play it, then suit yourself. But if you really and truly don't give a damn about that giant ox of a black-haired, blue-eyed, obnoxiously cheerful bull in a china shop thundering about downstairs reading every directory sign he can come across, probably looking for your office, then be my guest."

Gavin thought they called this feeling "thunderstruck." He shook his head. Ford had come back? That didn't track. Men like him, as whimsical and as easy to whirl away as a leaf on the wind—men like Donny—didn't keep their promises.

Roger emitted waves of smug satisfaction. "He looked like the stubborn type. I'll bet he flounders his way in here any minute *if* he's bright enough not to trip over his own feet and knock himself out."

Indignation flared inside Gavin. *Excuse me?* Ford might be overenthusiastic and, yes, a little too large for workaday life, but how did that equal stupid?

Roger shoved his way into Gavin's personal space and flicked Donny's picture with finger and thumb, knocking it flat on its back. Donny, eager and handsome, black-haired and blue-eyed, grinned cheekily up at them. "Would you look at that? Uncanny, the resemblance between your old flame and your new torch. Funny how history repeats itself."

If Roger hadn't chosen those exact words, Gavin might have... He didn't know. One could never know what might have been. If that were possible, he'd have saved himself a hell of a lot of heartbreak in the past.

Gavin dropped the picture back into its drawer and shut said drawer firmly. "Get. Out."

"Not that I can fathom what either of them saw in you," Roger said, flicking imaginary lint off his shirt. He clicked his tongue at Donny's picture. "*Such* a resemblance."

Gavin didn't think he could be blamed for slamming the door of his office in Roger's face. And if he could, he didn't care.

* * *

When Gavin needed a moment to himself at work, there was only one place to go. Outside. Gavin closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the cool, clean air that washed over him when he pulled open the terrace door. There. He could breathe again. Peace. Quiet. Solitude.

Or so he thought. When he opened his eyes, surprise loosened his tongue. "Ford?"

Ford grinned brightly at him, without a care in the world. "I knew I'd find you here."

"Didn't I find you?" Gavin edged away from the door, quite certain it wasn't wise to move forward, but somehow sure there was no turning back now. He didn't like that feeling.

"How about we just say we found each other?"

Be damned if that smile of his wasn't as infectious as it was broad, tempting Gavin's lips into quirking up.

"You have an amazing smile. Did you know that?" Ford asked. "Hey, no, don't blush. Here." With a grace and delicacy of touch that surprised Gavin, Ford lifted a paper cup from a tray Gavin hadn't noticed and coaxed him toward it. "C'mon, take this and enjoy it while it's hot."

"What is it?" Gavin asked, then immediately blushed and wanted to kick himself smartly in the ass. A paper cup, sloshing liquid that Ford licked off the back of his hand. "Is this tea?"

"I asked you out for a cup the last time we met, remember?"

"You remembered that?"

"It was the highlight of my week."

"I turned you down." Nothing about this man made sense. So why wasn't Gavin already back in his office? He didn't understand.

"Still, it was the day I met you. I'll always remember that." Despite the rapid-fire nature of his chattering, Ford sat stiller than Gavin would have thought possible, and with more patience too. Letting Gavin take his time approaching, yet somehow, Gavin could tell, absolutely confident it'd happen.

Uneasy, Gavin came only close enough to take the cup and breathed in.

"Spicy," he said, surprised.

"Isn't it?" Ford smacked his lips, visibly savoring the cinnamon and nutmeg. "I love it. I had no idea what's good, so I figured maybe something a little fun, you know? I'm really not a tea person."

"Like you need the caffeine," Gavin said. *Oh God*. He buried his reaction in a cautious sip, amazed at the rich burst of flavor. "Chai?"

Ford snapped his fingers. "That's what the café woman called it."

"Barista."

Ford tilted his head to one side. "I thought they were called coffee bartenders."

Gavin stifled a laugh, then saw the twinkle in Ford's eye that told him that'd been Ford's intention all along. "Baristas," he repeated, still quiet, but the word slipped out as smoothly as the creamy chai went down his throat. "It's good."

“Well done, me.” Ford slurped his tea rather than sipping, but Gavin knew him well enough already to be sure Ford did nothing without absolute gusto unless he was careful to consciously rein it in. Quaff and guffaw, afraid of nothing.

Just like Donny. Damn it. Anything Gavin might have wanted to say dried up.

And he did. Want to say something. At least *thank you* or a quiet but firm *thank you*, *but this isn't a good idea*. That'd be the smartest choice.

Gavin had an odd feeling that the smart thing to do didn't often come to pass around Ford. The man had a way of making him crazy.

He cleared his throat, coughed, and tried to speak. “You...um. You d-don't—”

Ford turned his face toward Gavin and waited. Gavin's ears burned hot when, under the pressure, all he could come out with was a repeated *d-d-d-d* sound. God *damn* it. Any second now Ford would helpfully try to fill in the word for him. No one could leave well enough alone. That'd be Ford's style. Donny's too. Men like them had to fill in every single blank.

Only...Ford didn't. He laced his fingers loosely together around his cup and waited. The only help he tried to offer was a deep breath in and a kind word. “Hey. Hey, it's all right. Don't stress. I'm not going anywhere.”

Gavin would just bet he wasn't. Which reminded him...

“How did you...?” The words spilled out. Gavin swallowed. *Don't. Stop. Now*. “How did you find me?” he enunciated, shoulders sagging with relief when he'd gotten it all out. Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous for a man of nearly thirty to have this much trouble.

Much better to be alone for no more reason than this. Yet somehow, and all of a sudden, that seemed oddly cold. Lonely.

Ford grinned at Gavin. “I could tell you, but you wouldn't believe me.”

I wouldn't... What? Oh. Gavin rolled his eyes. “Signs.”

“See? Disbelief.” Ford bumped knees with Gavin, still warm, totally comfortable with being scoffed at. “Granted, today it was mostly street signs. I had a delivery to make, for starters.” He winked at Gavin.

“And then?” Gavin asked. How odd. The pressure in his throat seemed to be easing, as did the stiffness in his tongue. That never happened. What was Ford, some kind of wizard?

“And *then*,” Ford went on, his cup drained, “*then* that's where the hocus-pocus came in.” He made quote fingers at Gavin, any sting in the teasing nullified by the twinkle in his eyes.

Gavin studied Ford, more confused still. Such a strange dichotomy of a man. Once you got past that mix of Viking and roguish clown, there was a sort of gentle affection beneath. No, that wasn't right. Gavin didn't know the right word for it. Something that reminded him of a hound dog not yet finished growing, but absolutely loyal and utterly loving.

The half-finished cup of chai nearly slipped from his fingers. Ford caught it. “Easy there.”

Gavin shook his head and took himself out of reach. “Hocus. Explain.”

Ford stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankle. “Your office isn't listed on any directories. Not a problem. I looked around for a little of this, a little of that, and in the end I went with green.”

He looked so proud of himself that Gavin had to ask. “Green?”

"Absolutely! Green for go. Like your sweater last week." Ford's reach proved longer than Gavin might have thought, making it no strain at all to be too close. He tweaked a corner of the black sweater Gavin had worn today. "Mmm, soft." Ford actually lifted the hem to rub it against his cheek, making Gavin want to revise his opinion of the inner Ford to that of an adolescent bruin wallowing in honey.

Gavin tugged the sweater out of Ford's grip. "Green," he repeated, hoping the direct translation of *explain, please* came through.

"It'd be easier if I could show you."

Gavin shook his head.

Ford accepted that easily enough. "Let's see. First, there was a green light in a display on the first floor. Illumination on some necklaces, I think? Kayla would like those."

"Kayla?" Why was Gavin creeping closer, step-by-step? Was it the warmth of Ford that drew him? Moths to flame, he supposed.

Sitting beside Ford couldn't hurt. If all he did was sit.

Ford made room for him without a fuss. Gavin could almost wonder if he'd really noticed what he was doing. "The blonde I was with yesterday."

"Your girlfriend?"

"What? No, no." Ford sat up straight. Inadvertently or not, the move brought his and Gavin's legs into contact, pressed together. Gavin inhaled sharply. The solidness of Ford's muscles, encased in jeans instead of bike shorts this time, almost burned him before the heat eased to a tingling warmth.

Ford propped his chin on Gavin's shoulder. In Gavin's experience, no one ever got that close and cozy unless their next move was to try and get in his pants, and mostly then because they thought a socially incompetent stutterer would make for an easy lay. That he'd roll over for a fuck out of gratitude at being noticed.

Gavin tensed, but it didn't happen. The most he got out of Ford was a light bump of their heads together and Ford's amused murmur in his ear. "Kayla—she's a she. And me—I have a weakness for sexy geeks who blush like early strawberries and wear glasses that slide down their noses. Hey, hey, don't." He pulled Gavin's hand away from his face and didn't let go. "Should I take it easier on the compliments?"

Thank God. Relieved, Gavin nodded.

Ford brushed it aside, sitting back seemingly without any insult taken. "We're all who we are," he said easily. "So! Green."

It took Gavin a second to catch up. When he did, he nodded, mirroring Ford's interest and finding it came easier to him than usual. Almost...naturally. So strange.

"The green-light necklaces were arranged on a display stand in the first case I saw, angled to the left. That led to a staircase."

Gavin knew the one Ford meant, and it wasn't a staircase intended for public use. In fact, it had a giant, sternly worded sign about authorized personnel only being allowed behind it. He raised one eyebrow at Ford, who only grinned cheekily and went on.

"Up the staircase. On the second-floor landing, I see a sign halfway up the next flight. Painted in green."

Gavin hid his struggle between amusement and uneasiness in a sip of chai. *Come on, Ford.* His triumphant list was made up of coincidences, nothing more.

Yet here he is, something inside Gavin whispered to him. He found you.

"And where did that green lead me? Up to floor three, where I kind of got lost for a few minutes, but then there was a troop of Girl Scouts selling cookies. God, I love Thin Mints. I bought a box. We can share if you like." Ford paused. "Where was I?"

"Samoas," Gavin blurted. "Um. I like those. Not the mints." *Oh God.*

Ford shrugged. "More for me, then, and I'll remember Samoas for next time."

Now that Gavin's words had started, they didn't seem to want to stop. "You're assuming there'll be a next time."

There. Finally a reaction that wasn't all good cheer and sunshine. It wasn't what Gavin had anticipated, and immediately he thought—no, he knew—it wasn't what he wanted, not really. This was surprise and—oh no—hurt. Gavin couldn't live with that look of shocked woe. It felt far too much like stomping on a puppy. Given that it came from a man the size of a moose, the mental comparison was a little staggering, but still.

"Please don't say that. Not yet?" Ford asked, earnest as anyone Gavin had ever known. He took Gavin's hand in his. "And let me finish the story first? Usually I'm the one interrupting everyone else."

It had been a day of strange occurrences. Gavin was the one to obediently pipe down, though he wanted to laugh at the oddity of it all. How did Ford keep doing this to him?

"There's not much left to tell, promise. Except, and this is the fun part, when one of the Girl Scouts gave me my change. May I also point out their uniforms—green, and money—green. I dropped a penny and went after it."

Gavin frowned. Who chased down a penny?

Apparently Ford did. He brightened as he went on. "And where that penny came to a stop was near a green-topped trash can. And...um...maybe this isn't too flattering, but I saw a business card that'd fallen out of the trash. And it was one of yours. Led me right to your office." He beamed. "Ta-da."

Gavin shook his head, then nodded to the terrace in silent inquiry.

"*Oh.*" Ford slapped his forehead. "That was just guesswork. I knew the service elevator had to come out right about here, and you smelled like fresh air when I met you last week. Besides, I figured you were the kind of guy who liked to hang out in quiet places, and I don't know when I last saw a smoker in this part of town. Now. *There.*" Ford spread his hands, clearly waiting for Gavin to be impressed.

He was. In a way. Gavin thought carefully about what he wanted to say, in the least number of words. "It's a good story. But it's all fan...fan..." He swallowed. Ford waited. "Fantasy. Subconscious cues coming together."

Ford should have been offended. It'd been Gavin's intention. But was he?

No. On the contrary, Ford took Gavin's hand and raised the back of it to his lips. Over Gavin's small gasp, he pressed his mouth to Gavin's knuckles and looked up over them to murmur, "It doesn't matter if you believe. I do."

"Why?"

Ford's blazing smile returned in full force. No. Greater than. The zeal of a true prophet. "Because it's true."

Gavin almost wanted to nod and smile and go along with the craziness. Almost didn't make the cut. This was one thing he couldn't give on.

"I'm sorry," he said, focused on his now-almost-empty cup, from which he'd been drinking without noticing. His mouth tasted of sweet spice and smooth cream. "I don't—I...Ford, it's not..." He tried again. "All this stuff you make up as you go along—it's pretty, but it's not real."

Ford frowned for the first time. Sort of. Gavin didn't think Ford would be capable of a real frown—his face wasn't built on the right lines for anything but varying degrees of humor. But the look on his face was close enough to make Gavin wary of impending fallout.

He waited for the hammer to fall. The "screw you."

Instead, all Ford said was, "Why are you so set against believing me?"

Gavin shook his head, silent again.

Ford shifted position. Still frowning, ever so slightly, still not angry. More...concerned? As if a solid grasp of practical reality were a *bad* thing?

Minor irritation got Gavin's tongue working again. "I just don't like the idea of anything being out of our control."

"Our?"

"Humans'." Gavin lifted his chin in a nod out toward the city, the world, and all the people in it. "Me too. I guess."

"Guess?"

"Stop answering questions with questions," Gavin muttered.

Ford grinned without shame and relaxed, easing his legs out in a long, long stretch. "Hey, it's keeping you talking, isn't it?" He tapped the side of his nose. "Sorry. I'll be good now. Well, as good as I can be. But what I'm getting here is that you don't want to believe in anything that can't be measured, counted, weighed out. Like feelings."

Gavin wondered if it were actually possible for a man's face to catch on fire. He stared fiercely at the brickwork beneath his feet and kept his mouth shut. Ford made him want to talk. Made him want to confide in the man. Gavin didn't do that with anyone, not anymore. He wouldn't start again with Ford.

"Things are starting to make sense now." Ford scooted forward, following when Gavin drew back. Yet he was still gentle, and though Gavin's breath grew short, he didn't find himself afraid.

So strange.

Ford lifted one hand and touched the back of it ever so lightly, so carefully, to Gavin's cheek. Just as he had before, and it affected Gavin no less. Was it the same for Ford?

Not that Gavin could ask. All he could manage was to stare, deeply, into Ford's eyes, mesmerized by their depth this close-up.

"If you don't let yourself feel anything, then you don't get hurt," Ford said, studying Gavin with an intensity that made Gavin's hands shake. "But then you don't feel anything good either, do you? Don't you love anything, even that F1 cross of yours?"

Gavin was about to be kissed. For the first time in three years. He knew it. He didn't want to want it, but God help him, he couldn't tamp down the desire for Ford's lips on his.

"Oh no. Don't tell me you don't feel love," Ford said. His breath tickled Gavin's lips and chin. "Aw, Gavin. How can you live that way?"

Gavin stiffened. "Don't pity me." He tried to get up.

Ford caught him and pulled him back down, still easy, still careful of his strength. "That's the last thing I feel. Trust me on that." His touch lingered. With a jolt, Gavin thought he saw—so odd, so unexpected—the difference between superior pity and plain kindness. "Go out with me tonight. Give me a chance, Gavin."

Don't do this to me.

"I can't," Gavin said, knowing Ford wouldn't take no for an answer without a fight. Donny never had. Gavin hadn't thought about fighting him, and with Ford he didn't want to, and so he *knew* he should. "Stop asking me."

"Sh." Ford turned his hand to cup Gavin's cheek. "Look, if I'm scaring you—"

"It's not—"

"Gavin." Ford drew his thumb up Gavin's temple. "I'm not dumb, okay? I know I come on strong, and I know I'm kind of scary looking."

"You're not," Gavin blurted. He couldn't tell which of them was more surprised—Ford to hear it or himself to say it. But it was true. Ford was a bruiser to match all bruisers, but he had the heart of a marshmallow. Scary? Yes. But not in his looks. Gavin gathered his strength to finish. "That's not why."

Ford's caress grew hesitant. "Are you sure? I get enthusiastic sometimes. Especially when I'm happy—and I am, with you. But I promise I won't ever hurt you, not if I can help it."

Gavin had to say this. "Not wanting to doesn't mean you won't."

"No," Ford agreed. "Doesn't mean you won't hurt me either, you know."

Gavin blinked. He'd never thought of it that way. He licked his lips and could not help but notice how the movement drew Ford's attention back to his mouth.

"I could fall in love with you," Ford said, shocking Gavin's eyes open wide enough to take in every gleaming facet of Ford's smile. "Actually...I already have."

Gavin's mouth fell open, *not* in preparation for a kiss, but for the words that wanted to pour out. It wasn't the stutter or the shyness that stopped him this time. He pushed as far away from Ford as possible and pressed his back to the wall, shaking his head emphatically.

"Gavin—" Ford reached for him.

Anything could have happened then. If they'd been left alone. But as Gavin's luck ran, precisely then was when the terrace door was thrown brusquely open without a care for the old glass. Roger ambled as casually as he pleased out into the open air, bringing with him the sharp stink of new ink and old grudges.

Chapter Four

“What?” Roger asked, stretching elaborately. “You think you're the only one who can eat lunch out here?”

Good God, the playground mentality of that man. Nothing but nosiness. Roger didn't even have a sack lunch or a café bag with him to back up his lie.

Ford's arm went firmly around Gavin's shoulders. Gavin hated himself just a little for immediately feeling better, but not as much as he was grateful for the same.

Roger smirked at them. “How cozy is this? Lovebirds all snug in their nests. You're a big son of a bitch, aren't you?”

“Careful now,” Ford said. Rumbled. He didn't look like such a gentle giant now. “That's my mama you're talking about.”

“Come on. It's just an expression. No harm, no foul, right?” Oblivious or reckless? Hard to tell. Probably both. Roger took a seat across from Gavin and Ford where he could leer at them at his leisure. “I wonder how that works out when you fuck. Someone must be damn good in the saddle.”

Gavin resigned himself to Ford's jumping up and giving Roger precisely what he deserved—and frankly, what Gavin didn't think he'd mind watching—a solid punch in the nose. Given the size differential, one such blow would likely land Roger flat on his back.

Once again, Ford surprised him. Gavin thought perhaps he should learn to expect that. Ford stayed put, even cuddled Gavin closer, and chuckled. “Actually I prefer to bottom.”

Gavin's jaw dropped. Roger's eyes bulged. And Ford? Ford guffawed at Roger's reaction.

Roger puffed up indignantly. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Ford sighed. He patted Gavin's hand and stood. Up. Up some more. Gavin stared. Ford might have been stooping before, rounding his shoulders, because unless it was the angle as seen from below, he'd be damned surprised if Ford at full stretch didn't edge closer to seven feet than six. And wide? As broad across the shoulders as two of Gavin, with powerful legs. Not to mention biceps easily strong enough to tear a New York phone book in half.

“You were saying?” Ford asked mildly. “Oh, and you might not know me very well, since you're asking all these questions, but I know you.”

Roger had paled at the sight of Ford the Bear rising to his full mass, but to give the little weasel the small amount of credit he deserved, he had the guts not to cut and run. “How's that?”

Ford's grin grew a tad fiercer, giving Gavin a glimpse at the warrior he'd compared Ford to before they'd met. One buried deep, deep beneath his basic nature, but the one who compelled him to never, never, never give up or lay down arms without throwing his all into whatever task lay before him.

He moved in front of Gavin to protect him. Gavin leaned awkwardly to a side to see past. Whatever might be about to happen, he wanted to watch.

Roger's nostrils flared. "Don't stand there and try to impress me with your posing. Either tell me how you know me or fuck off."

"Stepped in any unexpected potholes lately?" Ford asked, as innocent as the halo around a painted saint. "Maybe after you cut in front of a line of women and then ducked under a scaffold? Maybe stepped in a little payback shaped like a pothole?" He turned to wink back at Gavin, who grinned—grinned!—despite himself.

Roger fumed, rendered speechless. There was a first.

"Bad karma, man," Ford said, clicking his tongue at Roger. "It'll get you in the end. Or in the shin."

Roger scoffed. "You're insane."

Gavin couldn't disagree. Yet, amazing himself, he didn't want to, and he had started to enjoy the absolute hell out of this.

But now Roger had begun to roll up his sleeves. For God's sake. Surely he wasn't stupid enough to try taking a swing at Ford? Without thinking, Gavin jumped to his feet and between them.

Roger sneered at him. "What do you think you're going to accomplish, pretty boy?"

Gavin's flush this time was not one of embarrassment but anger, backed up by an immense rush of pride he felt from Ford behind him. "You can try me and see. Or you can act like the professional you're so proud of being. Go back to work."

Maybe that hit home. More likely, a second's cooling down made Roger comprehend that if he went up against Gavin, then Ford would be there at his back, and if he got a taste of Ford, he'd be pounded into jelly.

Roger glared at Ford as if hoping looks could kill. "This isn't over."

"Suit yourself," Ford said amiably, sitting back down and pulling Gavin with him. He had a surprisingly—or perhaps not so much so—comfortable lap.

Roger snarled at him and departed just as he'd come, with a bang and a slam and a great flourish of diva drama.

Ford stayed quiet for three beats after Roger was gone before he cracked up. "Holy *cow*. I thought he was going to pop a vein." He jostled Gavin playfully.

Gavin found himself nibbling at the ragged edge of his thumbnail. "Would you have... If he'd thrown a punch, would you—"

"No." It was the first time Gavin had ever seen Ford without a single trace of humor in him. "I don't use my fists. Ever. The size of me? I might kill someone. I couldn't live with myself if that happened."

"You're the one talking about living in fear." Gavin regretted that the second it was out. They weren't the same thing at all, and even he knew it. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled-for."

"It's okay. Just so you understand how things are." Ford sighed. "Moving on." His lips came to rest just over Gavin's ear. "I promised I'd be good about the compliments, but can I say how hot you are right now? Because I really, really want to."

Gavin squirmed. Only a little. Abashed pleasure filled the space shy embarrassment usually ruled. He shook his head and was glad Ford couldn't see his face.

Thoughts unlike any he'd known in years raced through Gavin's head. He wondered... He wondered if...

He still didn't believe Ford's chattering about signs and omens and things that were meant to be. He had more than enough to make him wary and keep him there.

But...

When Ford's arms were around him, and Ford's chin nestled into the crook of his shoulder, it grew harder and harder to remember that. Ford smelled wonderful, a mix of fresh air and soap and warm skin. So warm all over, melting through Gavin and making him feel...he didn't know what.

Unfamiliar. Scared. But good somehow. He couldn't keep up.

Hesitantly, so hesitantly, Gavin let himself slide one hand over Ford's. Ford gave a small start, a rich chuckle, and hugged Gavin just that much closer. "You're amazing," he said, honest awe shining through.

A brief pause.

Ford pressed closer, his cheek to Gavin's, and began to move in a light swaying motion that made Gavin want to close his eyes and sink in deep. He thought he knew what Ford was about to do next.

For once, he was right. Ford toyed with Gavin's fingers, stroking them from nails to knuckles, his touch as light as a feather. Gavin had to smother a startled giggle as he visualized a gorilla balancing a teacup in its palm.

"I'm not going to break, you know."

"Doesn't mean I want to take the chance." Ford laced his fingers loosely with Gavin's and squeezed. "Is that better?"

It's a start, was what Gavin meant to say. Nothing came out. He settled for a sigh and leaned his head back, only for a moment, on Ford's shoulder.

"I'm going to ask you again," Ford said, enveloping Gavin with body heat and enthusiasm for life and something darker, something sensual that made Gavin catch his breath.

"Ask me...?"

"Go out with me," Ford coaxed. "One date. Tonight. Give me a chance."

Such a bad idea. So impossible to stop it.

Gavin bit his lip. One date couldn't hurt. Could it? Just a taste to satisfy the craving, and then he could be done with the lot. "I have issues," he blurted instead of a simple assent.

Ford's full-body chuckle vibrated through Gavin. "I noticed. And I'm still here. So what do you say?"

Now or never. *Okay. Just...once.* Gavin nodded, and though he'd grown rusty at giving this kind of answer, he hoped it'd come out right. He breathed in deep and let the word out on his exhale.

"Yes."

Ford's hug, unexpected even from where they were sitting, squeezed the rest of the breath out of Gavin, jarred loose a startled laugh. Ford let go immediately and guided—or was it allowed?—Gavin to turn around in his arms to face him. Mesmerize him.

So intently, the way Ford gazed at him. As if Gavin were already his whole world. Unreal. “Can I kiss you?”

Donny had never asked. Donny had only took. “Yes,” Gavin said and found it easier this time. Maybe too easy. *Careful. Watch yourself.*

Easier said than done when Ford's lips were on his.

Gavin would think later that a man who never stopped using his mouth might be counted upon to be a skilled kisser. At the time, he was caught and held beneath the surface of the tide of Ford's affection. Sensation after sensation. Gliding slickness of tongue, press of lips, and Ford's hands on his face, keeping him still and guiding him at the same time.

Gavin's toes curled in his shoes. Was that him whimpering and straining *en pointe* to drag Ford farther down into his hold? Maybe, because that was Ford rumbling in satisfaction and doing exactly as Gavin had hoped.

Gavin decided he was glad when Ford finally drew back—too soon. He held Gavin up by his arms until his knees steadied. What was he supposed to say now? Maybe nothing. Nothing needed to be said. And maybe that would spoil it. Pop this precious bubble of time that somehow rose above reality. This couldn't last. Gavin was sure of it.

He didn't believe in spells, or he'd have wondered if Ford had cast one over him. And no matter what, he *did not* believe in fate.

He wondered, though, if something might be said for serendipity...

Think about that one later. Too disturbing, and Gavin didn't want to tangle up his head again before he could help it. Besides, the pressure to speak couldn't be denied. So many changes, but after a kiss like that, the words poured out on their own, straight from the heart. “Ford?”

“Mm-hmm?” Ford asked, stroking Gavin's swollen-feeling lips with the pad of his forefinger.

“I was serious. Before. You can stop treating me like I'm...I'm made of glass.” After seeing Ford's perplexed look, Gavin explained, “You've been moving so slowly and so gently for so long that I'm afraid *you're* going to pop something.”

Ford threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, that's how it is? This is the thanks I get for trying to be a gentleman?” He kissed Gavin, and yes, that was more like what Gavin had thought an impromptu kiss from Ford would be like. Enthusiastic, maybe a little too hard, but so full of zest for the act that he infused Gavin with a shock of his own energy. This kiss made Gavin unsteady on his feet all over again for an entirely different reason and drove out altogether his ability to think.

He dared to touch Ford's arm, right over his bicep, amazed at how small his hand looked there. No words and no thanks, just...something he couldn't express otherwise, not without another kiss.

Though he should have known Ford wouldn't leave it there, especially now he'd been given permission. “Now what's that for?” Ford asked, gazing at Gavin with uncomfortably intense fondness. Ridiculous. Amazing. So strangely good.

Gavin shrugged, bashful again. "I wanted to."

If Gavin had thought Ford's grin was bright and broad before, that was like comparing the stars to the sun, and the same went for his exuberance. His whoop nearly deafened Gavin, and that was *before* he abruptly lifted Gavin and whirled him off his feet to be swung around in a giddy circle that ended in another deep, lingering kiss.

One night. Just one night, and he'd enjoy it while it lasted.

Because though everything Ford promised him was a pretty, pretty dream, that didn't change its being a bad, bad idea, and it didn't plaster over the cracks that ran deep and rough through Gavin's heart. And whether Ford looked like him or not, too much of Ford was still too much like most of Donny. Gavin did not plan to get his heart broken completely again when a leaf on the wind like Ford blew past.

But until the night's over...

Gavin tilted his head back to be kissed once more and once more after that and...

Chapter Five

Gavin's fingers shook on the buttons of his shirt, a rich, saturated green with white pinstripes, casual but not sloppy. Usually his favorite. Now, when he looked at himself in the mirror, the green seemed too strong against his pale skin. The freckles he'd gotten from sitting out in the terrace sun seemed to hover over his nose and cheeks instead of being part of his skin.

He was in no way ready for Ford's arrival; therefore, Gavin supposed he shouldn't have been surprised when a boisterously cheerful knock sounded at the door. *Oh God*. Gavin made one last desperate attempt to smooth down his static-filled hair and hurried out.

Gavin could hear Oscar, wherever he happened to be lurking at the moment. He hissed and slither-ran under one piece of furniture farther back in the apartment. "Sorry, boy," Gavin murmured, his hand on the knob. He hadn't thought about how the F1 cross would react to Ford. This could be...interesting.

And as he opened the door to find Ford there just as large as life and resplendent in a suit, Gavin realized that the "interesting" portion of the night had only just begun.

Gavin came to a standstill on the threshold, lips parted, amazed. Ford's suit, a gunmetal gray, wasn't tailored, but it still fit a body such as Ford's like a dream. Full enough to stretch across the absurd breadth of his shoulders, over his biceps without strain, and the cuffs reached all the way to his wrists.

My God. He'd thought Ford to be the sort who might dress up in a polo shirt and khakis if he were in a highfalutin sort of mood. This wasn't just a casual date for Ford. This was... Gavin didn't know.

At least he hadn't brought flowers or candy with him. Gavin wouldn't have put it past a man like Ford.

Gavin wasn't the only one who couldn't seem to look away. Ford gazed at him with the almost boyish delight that made Ford uniquely him and never stopped being a little disconcerting.

As he looked his fill, Ford's expression faded from delighted to almost reverent and made Gavin want to squirm. "Can I come in?"

What? Oh. Oh! Gavin's face warmed to a simmer. He ducked his head and stood aside. "I think I'm underdressed," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

When he glanced up, it was to see Ford's smile turning sheepish and just a touch abashed. "Yeah..." He drew that out. "That's my bad. I was so excited over getting the reservations that I forgot to call and tell you it was...not black-tie, but not too far off. Not that you need to change. You already shine." He reached for Gavin and ran a finger down his lapel, making Gavin shiver. "I'm sorry."

"Don't."

Ford misunderstood. He shouldn't have looked as—endearing?—as he did when sheepish. “Sometimes I leap before I look. I really should have texted at least. Come as you are. That's the only way I'd have you. And if they don't like it, then...”

Oddly enough, Ford's reassurance touched him more than the compliments. Not like Donny at all.

A strange, wild thought came to Gavin. *Tonight, pretend Donny never existed. Do that and make this a night to remember when Ford has gone from your life.*

“I'll change,” Gavin said in a rush, lest Ford guess what he'd been thinking. That was a story he truly didn't want to explain. Why drop the baggage on Ford's plate during the first night he planned to allow himself in...years? “Give me ten minutes.”

Ford surprised Gavin utterly by bending to kiss his cheek. “I meant what I said. You're beautiful.”

“Men aren't beautiful.” Gavin touched his cheek, still feeling the brush of Ford's lips. “I want to change.”

Ford grinned brightly. “Then I'll be right here.”

“Thanks. I...just—I'll—” *Forget it.* Gavin dropped it there and made his retreat. No laughter followed.

Instead of closing himself in, Gavin left his bedroom door open. Not far, just a crack, just enough to let him look out sideways and still see as well as sense Ford's expansive presence.

Feel the comfort he brought with him. Much better than chocolate or flowers any day.

* * *

As Gavin might have predicted if he'd thought to do so, he hadn't been out of Ford's sight longer than three minutes before Ford appeared to grow restless. “Mind if I look around?”

Gavin didn't recoil from the thought. Tonight everything was allowed to be new, and he could trust. Maybe that was stupid. Probably.

It still felt good. Amazing.

“Go ahead.” Gavin spoke much more softly than Ford had, but Gavin suddenly wondered if Ford didn't need someone quieter in his life. Anyone as loud and boisterous as Ford and they'd deafen each other.

Combine the two of them, and he and Ford made one surprisingly good man.

Gavin bit his lip hard and dug deeper into his closet. The search took all the longer for his keeping one eye on Ford, fascinated at the big man's approach to investigation. Gavin didn't keep anything breakable or anything that couldn't be cheaply replaced, but for all that it was like watching a lumberjack tiptoe his way through a glassblower's shop. Oddly cute.

And better than “cute.” From this angle, Gavin could enjoy the sight of the tight fit of the suit coat over Ford's shoulders and the flex of his legs as he stretched up to peer at this bit of bric-a-brac or crouched down to—

Oh no. Gavin stilled. “Ford, don't move.”

Ford froze in a way that would have been comical if he hadn't obviously been tempted to run to Gavin and make sure nothing had gone wrong. “What's the matter?”

“The couch you're in front of. Back away slowly.”

Ford looked baffled. "It's not an antique or anything, is it?"

Hardly. Gavin had owned the infinitely comfortable thing since college and softened its cushions with such a multiplicity of throws and blankets that they nearly drowned a man when he lay down for a rest.

"No," Gavin said, keeping a watchful eye out. "Oscar's under there."

"Can I look at him?"

"If he'll let you." Gavin crept closer to the open door to keep his own watch. "Be *careful*."

More gracefully than he should have been able to, and not in the least threateningly, Ford leaned on one arm, craned his neck, and peeked beneath the couch. "Holy cow. He's gorgeous."

That wasn't the usual reaction. Gavin blinked. "He's an F1 cross."

"So you said. I still have no idea what that is," Ford said in as low a hush as Gavin expected he could muster when he wanted to whoop in amazed delight. "Feline? God, what a big guy. Hi, handsome."

Gavin chuckled to himself. He couldn't help it. "Feline. Yes," he said, finally finding the one suit he owned. Hadn't worn it in at least a year, maybe more, at a museum charity function. Not Dolce&Gabbana, but not bad.

Glad he'd showered and shaved and that his hair had settled down, Gavin made quick work of dressing—as quick as possible while watching Ford restrain himself from reaching out to grab Oscar and haul him from under the couch for a better look.

"Gavin?" Ford queried, sounding amused. "I get the cat part, but not the rest of it. Tell me what an F1 cross is before curiosity kills me."

"A first-generation mix between a leopard and a domestic feline," Gavin said, making tracks into the den to keep a careful eye on Ford. "He's not tame. At all. I've never managed to pet him. I wouldn't ask him to submit to it."

Ford's jaw dropped. "He's a wild animal? In a city apartment? That can't be legal, can it?"

Gavin winced. "It's not legal, no." An awful pang of worry twisted in his belly. "You won't tell—"

"Me? No way. My hand to God."

Gavin wanted to believe Ford. He had no other choice now. *Stupid*. Distracted, he flipped open the small box he kept his cuff links in, the box dusty from lack of use. "I rescued him from some idiots who thought he was a cute little kitten and freaked out when he kept on growing. They wanted something manageable and cuddly. He's more than that, not just sizewise. He didn't ask to be what he is. So I took him home."

Silence from Ford. A hush that went on long enough for Gavin to risk a more direct peek around the corner. "What?"

Ford looked up at him, transmitting some warm message Gavin simply couldn't interpret. "You keep surprising me," he said, startling Gavin.

Gavin blushed. "Anyway. Like you said. He's a wild animal. He lives inside because that's all he's ever known, or I'd have released him into the wild."

"And because he's all you've got," Gavin *thought* he heard Ford murmur, though he couldn't be sure.

"Life was simpler before you came around," he muttered to himself, savagely poking through the box.

"What?"

"Nothing." *There.* He'd finally found them. The links he'd had been searching for, jade to go with the suit. Handily enough, the suit matched his favorite shirt. *Ha.* If he believed in signs and omens—which he still didn't—he'd have had to wonder about that...

Just...stop. If you're going to have your night, then damn well have your night and let the rest of it fade away.

Strange how that made him feel better.

Though he managed the right cuff link, he couldn't do the left. *Damn it.* Gavin resigned himself to the embarrassment and, cuff pinched carefully together, padded out to Ford in his stocking feet. "Could you..."

Ford rose to his feet in a fluid motion that brought his head bare inches from the ceiling.

"My God. Seriously. How tall *are* you?" Gavin blurted out, immediately mortified.

"Six-nine," Ford replied almost absently. "How tall are you?"

Gavin pressed his lips together. "Five-nine."

Of course Ford grinned at that too. "We're like stair steps," he said. And that was all. Regardless of banter, he hadn't stopped staring at Gavin since Gavin had emerged from his bedroom. Ford's eyes were wide and dark and contained a hunger Gavin recognized all too well.

And...restraint? Holding back? Why?

Ford swallowed so loudly, Gavin could hear the knot in his throat. "You look beautiful," he said. Reverent. Again.

Gavin could either flee or laugh, and there was no running from Ford. He was starting to get that. "We keep going over this. Men aren't beautiful."

"You are. And you're a man. Therefore, men can be beautiful. Do you need help?" Ford had Gavin's wrist in hand before Gavin could nod or explain, and fastened the tricky cuff link with the amazing delicacy of touch he could sometimes employ.

From there, it was a short journey from wrist up Gavin's body to his face, which Ford cupped to keep him from looking away while he gazed at Gavin in that particular way of his. He could...he could *pretend* he was that special to Ford. For tonight. Cinderella and midnight; that was how the story went, right?

Ford bent, careless of the strain against his suit, and kissed Gavin, just once, soft and sweet and quick. Light or not, it still left Gavin stunned and speechless once more.

"Sorry," Ford said, without a trace of regret but *with* a teasing wink.

"Liar." Gavin wanted to reach for Ford. Found himself beginning to do so.

"Either way, I couldn't resist." Ford met him halfway. "Do you blame me?"

Gavin knew that whether he did or didn't, he'd still be glad he'd gone. He rose on tiptoe to kiss Ford's cheek and hoped it conveyed everything he couldn't with words.

Chapter Six

Ford had indeed managed to surprise Gavin with his choice of restaurants. Not *too* much of a surprise. He hoped. The signs all indicated that this was just the kind of place Gavin would love, but...if he'd misread anything...

Gavin blinked and shielded his eyes, the city lights surprisingly softened and the moon just as surprisingly bright up here. Ford couldn't resist hugging Gavin from behind and, with Gavin softened in surprise, saw no reason why he shouldn't. He waited for Gavin to register the small, open-air dining area, the white linen cloths and crystal glasses, the cellist in a discreet corner. To smell the powerful and piquant food and the heady bouquet of wine.

But Gavin said nothing. Ford's worry kicked up a notch. Too much? Too fancy?

"Do you like it?" he asked, knowing he sounded like a little boy watching his favorite friend unwrap a Christmas present.

He hadn't known what to expect, but what he got was so much better than he could have imagined. When Gavin turned in his arms, Ford swore his eyes were sparkling like the stars above, and his smile—sweet Moses, that was the realest smile Ford had seen out of him yet.

"I love it," he said simply.

Ford whooshed out the breath he'd been holding; with it came the torrent of enthusiasm he'd been holding in check along with nervous anticipation. That equaled words and plenty of them. "I knew you liked open spaces, and this is a roof, and I'd guessed you wouldn't like a lot of people, and I didn't want you to be all tense and uneasy when I was trying to charm you and—"

Startling him once more, Gavin laid his fingertips over Ford's lips. "I said I love it," he said and, with a boldness Ford wouldn't have expected in a thousand years, stretched up to kiss him.

* * *

"Tremaine? Follow me, please." Their hostess, a graceful woman of perhaps forty, tapped two heavy, leather-bound menus smartly together and took a second look at Ford and Gavin ever so slightly behind him. She clearly approved of them, if her little "aww" face meant anything—and to a man like Ford, it most certainly did. Some signs didn't have to be written in the stars, but they sure as heck weren't any less fortuitous for all that.

Ford let Gavin take his time moving along the edge of the alfresco-enjoying patrons. As he walked, he seemed to be drinking it all in with a sort of amazed, not-quite-believing wonder that reminded Ford of a kid on Christmas morning who wasn't quite sure if that great big train set under the tree was *really* for him.

He wanted to hug the stuffing out of Gavin but figured that his shy guy probably wouldn't go for it in public. Later, Ford promised himself and took a good, long, appreciative draught of the atmosphere. Clear night, just a hint of crisp chill in the air, smells to die for wafting from the inner works of the restaurant, and Gavin beside him.

What could possibly go wrong? Ford sighed, content. It was going to be a perfect night and one to remember

As it turned out, he was half-right.

* * *

As they reached their table, Gavin frowned and looked up at Ford through his eyelashes. Ford wondered if Gavin knew exactly what that did to his heart, and decided probably not. The innocence of his bashful sexiness was at least 50 percent of its charm. “Your last name's Tremaine?”

Ford laughed. Okay, that was about the last question or comment he'd been expecting. Twenty-five percent of Gavin's charm was ingenuousness, though he was certain Gavin had no idea it was so. “As it happens to be, yes.” He moved to slide Gavin's chair out for him. “I don't think you're a girl. I just like to do this. Can I?”

Gavin ducked his head and murmured something. Ford's heart melted even as his ears strained.

“What was that?”

One of Gavin's real, no-limits-applied smiles, the kind that crinkled the corners of his eyes and made him look younger than he had to be surprised Ford nicely. Even better, Gavin brushed the back of his chair. “If it'll make you happy.”

“You betcha.” A face like Gavin's demanded to be kissed. Funny how often that happened. Luckily for Ford, he found the work to be absolute pleasure. Ford bent, aiming for Gavin's cheek.

Oops. Overbalanced. Ford caught him with one hand on either side. Lefty landed solidly, with an unfortunate rattle and clink of glasses, on the table.

Righty landed on Gavin's shoulder. On Gavin's startled *oof!* Ford somehow found the presence of mind to let go, but then he was back to the balance problem again.

Which was how he ended up with his chin mashed into Gavin's shoulder, one foot out behind him like a crazed French aristocrat, and good old Righty firmly groping Gavin's ass.

Gavin froze. Ford froze. Moving would have been an excellent idea, but if he tried it too fast, God knew what'd happen. He might end up pantsing Gavin.

He expected any number of reactions, but not the one he got—the hint of a smile, another *real* one, even if smaller and shier. More importantly, Gavin wasn't the one to pull away, even though there could be no possible way the pressure of Ford's hand on his ass had escaped him. He caught his breath and his lower lip between his teeth at the same time. “Need some help?”

Ford grinned, and suddenly it was easy to find his way to his feet again. If he took his time sliding his hand off Gavin's ass, despite Gavin's deepening blush, he didn't guess either of them minded, for Gavin's tiny smile never faded.

And wasn't that the best omen ever—again?

* * *

“Who was cruel enough to name me Ford?” Ford laughed. “Myself, that's who.”

Gavin frowned. “I don't under—Wait. Like River Phoenix chose his own name?”

“Exactly.”

Gavin cleared his throat. He took a neat bite of appetizer and asked, with his napkin over his mouth, "Who was it who didn't stop you?"

I could have fallen for this one even without signs to lead me to him. "Let me explain."

"Please do."

"Nothing in my family is conventional—zip, zero, zilch. You have to keep that in mind."

"I never would have guessed," Gavin murmured.

"My family tree could be a map of the world. To keep it simple, let's say I'm two-eighths Norwegian—"

"Viking," Gavin blurted. He coughed. "Oh God. Ignore me. Keep going."

Ford wanted to cuddle Gavin. He really did. He played it safe instead and trod on. "Two-eighths Norwegian, half Irish, one-eighth that no one's really sure about—the way I heard it, she never would tell my maternal grandfather—and one-eighth Chinese. Sort of."

"Sort of?" Gavin echoed.

"What it boils down to is I was raised by my grandfather, Xiao O'Shea."

Gavin's eyebrows climbed skyward. "I see."

"The way I figure it, I get the skills I use from the Irish half of me." Ford tapped the side of his head and refused to be put off by Gavin's small scoff. "I believe even if you don't. For the purposes of this discussion, bear with me, okay?"

Gavin sighed. He didn't say no, though.

Ford took heart and rolled along. "Grandpa taught me how to use that gift to read the world around me."

"Dubious" would have been a good way to describe Gavin right now. That and "wary."

They could work on that.

"Anyway, I was a small kid. I mean teeny tiny."

Gavin wrinkled his nose.

"Believe it or not. I've got pictures to prove it. Total shrimp until I hit sixth grade. Anyway," Ford went on, warming to his story, "I was four years old and already sick of being the smallest."

"I know the feeling," Gavin mumbled, once again behind his napkin.

"I hadn't picked a name yet. John Doe Tremaine. Believe me, it's true. I have the birth certificate. But okay, here I am, tiny and sick of it, and we're watching championship hockey—"

"Wait. Hockey?"

"I grew up in Canada. I didn't say?"

Gavin raised his eyes heavenward and said nothing.

"They break for commercials, and I see an ad for Ford trucks. 'Built Ford tough,' right? Huge beasts. I turned to Grandpa Xiao and said, 'that's my name.'"

"I see." Gavin was hooked despite himself; Ford could tell. "An interesting coincidence that genetics bore out eventually."

Ford chuckled. "You see it your way, I'll see it mine. Look at it this way. Grandpa Xiao *did* try and change my mind. In Chinese, the words for 'four'—which sounds like 'ford'—and 'death' are almost the same."

"Homonyms?"

"Yeah. But when I looked at the name, I saw myself. I'm built tough. I last."

"I see." Gavin bit at the edge of his thumbnail. Ford wasn't exactly sure what Gavin thought he saw, but he wasn't running or denying him three times.

It was a start.

* * *

Ford bit into the crispy edge of a mozzarella triangle sprinkled with basil and oregano and dipped in some kind of tomato sauce so good, it made him moan.

"Guess you like that?" Gavin asked as he broke off a corner of a crispy-crust breadstick and toyed with it.

"Are you kidding? This puts 'good' to shame. Here." Ford tore off an opposite corner and held it out to Gavin.

Impulse—and okay, curiosity—compelled him to bypass Gavin's outstretched hand and place the morsel at Gavin's lips. Ford held his breath. Would he...?

A startled pause and then Gavin opened his lips to let Ford slide the bite between them. He chewed thoughtfully, nothing given away by his expression, then closed his eyes and emitted the smallest of whimpers. "Oh God."

Adjusting oneself under the table could be a tricky maneuver.

Gavin frowned at him around a bite of appetizer. "Is something wrong?"

Ford sacrificed the rest of his sinfully tasty mozzarella triangle for the cause, breaking it in half and pressing the offering on Gavin to distract him. "I'm good."

Gavin pinched off a bite and placed it on the tip of his tongue. Deliberately so, if slowly and uncertainly, like he wasn't sure he was doing this right.

As with mystery gifts, it was the thought that counted, and good intentions were written in transparent, vulnerable letters across the backs of Gavin's hands, his delicate wrists, the shy glance at Ford.

"Something wonderful is going to happen," Ford said to himself. "One hundred percent."

"Excuse me?"

"Tell me, Gavin. Do you believe in love at first sight?"

The sip of wine Gavin had taken went down the wrong pipe. Ford cringed even as he patted Gavin's back. He guessed the answer to that one was a resounding no, then.

Still no problem. They had time, and Gavin was worth waiting for.

* * *

Ford crunched a crouton. "So tell me about your job," he asked, trying for a casual conversational gambit.

Gavin swallowed the first bite he'd taken since nearly choking and patted his lips with his napkin. "What's to tell that you don't already know?"

"Anything you want to tell me," Ford said.

"You actually want to know."

There, that look again, the one Ford knew meant Gavin thought he couldn't be for real and was trying to figure him out.

"I mean it. I know you work in a little hidey-hole near a terrace where you can get out as often as possible and see the sky. I know you work with or near a total *dick*."

Gavin smothered a laugh.

Ford beamed. Small victories; he'd take 'em. "You don't have to work around that jerk all day, do you?"

"Roger? God no." Gavin shuddered.

"So the rest of the museum staff is okay? Friendly?"

"I'm not sure." Gavin took refuge in a sip of the house red, ignored until now. "I don't know. I never..." He sighed. "I don't have a gift for making friends."

"Not so. You have me."

"You're not—You—" Gavin rubbed his forehead and shrugged helplessly. "You're different. A force of nature."

"Am I?" The signs were right, both those Ford saw around him, and more importantly, the ones he saw in Gavin.

Beneath the table, Ford's long arm easily reached Gavin's knee. Gavin flinched, then let his lips part on a soft, shuddery sigh when Ford skimmed his fingertips up. Only about halfway and then back down, but enough to get a reaction.

Ford liked what he saw. Brown eyes gone warm and dreamy and the best smile yet. "You say you have a gift," Gavin said, intent in his study of his napkin.

"I thought you didn't believe."

"I don't." Now Gavin was the one to catch Ford's hand and press their palms together. "I mean. I don't believe in gifts. But you..." He visibly searched for words and settled on, "You get to people, and somehow it's..."

Ford knew the word Gavin sought wasn't a bad one. He wanted to kiss Gavin again so much right then that he found Gavin's free hand and lifted it to his lips.

Gavin squeezed his hand. Just for a moment. But enough to keep hope alive. A good sign. Very good.

* * *

If anything, the dinner was better than the appetizers, though Ford didn't pay great attention to what he put in his mouth. He saved all his focus for Gavin. "I keep asking you things. Turnabout's fair play, you know."

Gavin blinked at him.

"If there's something you don't know about me, either you haven't asked or it hasn't come up. No secrets."

"I've noticed," Gavin murmured. He bit into a slice of fresh tomato on his pasta salad. That was his thinking face, not the bad version, but the one where he was wrestling over a knotty question and didn't know how to ask.

Ford nudged Gavin. "Hey. What's going on in your head?"

"I'm trying to figure out what kind of animal you are," Gavin said and immediately went redder than the tomato. "Oh God."

Ford managed—mostly—to stifle his explosion of laughter this time. Gavin still looked down, hangdog. "No, no, don't do that. It's okay." He stroked the back of Gavin's hand. "Actually, it's awesome. Most people just think 'bear,' and that's it. What were you choosing between?"

An incredulous look, shading to considering, then finally brave. "A horse," Gavin said. "Giraffe. Antelope."

"Not moose?" Ford teased, almost not sure what to do with the tender rush in his heart. These were big animals, but graceful and beautiful, and...if Gavin saw him that way already... "Not gorilla? Ooh-ooh-ooh."

Gavin shook his head. "Maybe a deer. A buck? Fifteen-point rack. Or something. I don't know much about deer." He dived into his food.

Under cover of the table, he—Ford assumed it was Gavin, anyway—slipped his foot out of his shoe and drew his toes up Ford's leg, his sock silken soft and the pressure just right.

"Got you." Ford covered Gavin's foot with his hand.

Ford didn't expect Gavin to bend his knee and draw his foot higher still, just to where it nudged the side of—

"Tell me something about yourself first," Ford coaxed. He used a touch, a drop of strength. Still just playing. "Anything, little or big."

Gavin remained still for a beat too long for Ford's comfort. Finally, he looked up, his gaze utterly clear and direct. "You ask too many questions."

Ford got the message: *don't push*. Step-by-step. Ford had known that, but a little reminder didn't hurt. And on the bright side, Gavin already cared enough and trusted him enough to dish a little back.

Good sign. Good, *good* sign. Ford lifted his wineglass to Gavin's and clinked them together. "You're pretty when you laugh."

"God, not again."

Ford would have relented. If he could have. This mattered too much to back down on. "Let me say these things. I mean every word, you know. Because to me it's all true."

A flash of light caught his eye. He dropped Gavin's hand to point at the sky above them, along with the other suddenly excited epicures. "Look!"

Chapter Seven

Ford scooted his chair around to Gavin's side of the table, comfortable in knowing he wasn't alone. The restaurant's patrons who'd had their backs turned to the night sky did the same. Silence and small "ohs" of delight echoed around them.

Fireworks. Seriously, could anyone ask for a better sign, ever? Ford settled in and, since it was perfectly natural and a lucky moment in time, put his arm around Gavin's shoulders.

"You didn't have anything to do with this, did you?"

"I'm good, but I'm not that good." Ford tweaked Gavin's nose, stifling a chuckle when Gavin sneezed.

"You'd be the kind of man who would do such a thing if he could."

"True." Ford kissed the side of Gavin's head, landing at the corner of his lips. *Mmm*. "The home team must have won a game."

Gavin sighed. He seemed to come to some inner decision and laid his head to rest on Ford's shoulder. Better still, he curled in to wrap his arm around Ford's waist.

"I thought they were shooting stars," Ford said, almost torn between watching the bursts of multicolored light overhead and solely enjoying Gavin in his arms. No contest; he chose Gavin right away. "I bet you could still make a wish."

Gavin snorted and butted his face harder into Ford's shoulder.

"Don't you want to see the show?"

Gavin shrugged. Concerned, Ford laid his hand on Gavin's back and moved it in slow circles. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." There, that sounded...well, not better, more like irritated, but at least Gavin sat upright again. Then again, that all but broke the cozy contact between them.

Win some, lose some? Ford tapped his foot under the table, mulling that one over and not liking the uneasy feeling squirming in his stomach. Not a good sign.

He tried stroking Gavin's hair. Soft, smooth to the touch, and sleek as silk beneath his fingers. "Ever thought about growing this out even longer?"

Gavin almost smiled. "No. I look girlie enough as it is."

"But it'd be amazing," Ford said, enthusing as he warmed to the growing mental image. "Like a curtain of silk. Especially when..." He went against his nature by hesitating, then figured odds were good Gavin knew exactly where he'd been going with that thought anyway.

He whispered it in Gavin's ear anyway, for him alone. "Especially when you were naked. Do you have freckles everywhere?"

Gavin licked his lips. "No. Just my face, my hands."

"I didn't think so. Always in the sun, but you never burn."

"I've been burned before," Gavin said, the grimness confusing Ford before Gavin—deliberately?—turned to press his lips to Ford's neck.

Distraction successful. "Um," Ford said, making Gavin's smile return and grow. "Is this the wine acting? Just have to be sure."

Gavin pointed to his glass, the first and only one he'd had, still a quarter full. "No," he said simply.

Ford believed him. And he had something better to think about anyway. He enfolded Gavin in his arms and nuzzled his jaw, from the firm end to the soft point of his chin. Gavin wriggled, though Ford thought it was in pleasure and not protest. "Imagine it," he teased, not at all done with the fantasy of Gavin with that beautiful hair grown out long enough to—how long?

"Do I want to know what you're thinking?"

"I was thinking about you with hair grown out so long I could sit behind you and brush it," Ford confessed. "Okay, maybe that's a little sappy."

Gavin moved a little closer. "Maybe not," he said in a small voice. Not a disapproving one.

Oh? *Oh*. Ford took courage. "Also thinking about it coming down over your ass." He caressed Gavin's hip. *Mmm, sweet*. He didn't want to stop. Hoping slow and easy would win the race, he kept his hand on the move. Over, and over still more, crawling but never stopping to hear the thrill of seeing Gavin's lips part and his eyelids grow heavy with what Ford *knew* had to be desire. "This one is my favorite," he murmured. "You lying on your side with the hair covering you like a veil, waiting to be brushed away."

He could feel Gavin's smirk against his neck. "I'd look like a tiny doll."

Ford slid his hand over the final inch and rested it over Gavin's groin. His groan mingled with Gavin's hiss beneath the *crash, bang, boom!* of the grand finale of fireworks overhead. "Not that tiny," Ford said and nipped at Gavin's ear. He pressed down. "Not tiny at all."

"Oh God," Gavin said, not in embarrassment this time. Ford liked the rise of color in him much better this way. He could feel the effort it took Gavin not to rise and press against his hand, seeking the friction.

"How long have you been hard?" Ford asked in wonder, letting himself stroke Gavin. Small touches, meant to entice but not to be cruel, and he hoped they wouldn't be taken as teasing. "It's just...I have you here, and I can't not enjoy," he explained aloud. "God, you feel good."

Gavin bit his lip, but that didn't stop the whimper from emerging. He leaned back in his chair and, whether he did it on purpose or not, slid his thighs farther apart to give Ford more room to work.

Sweet mercy, did Ford ever want to take advantage of that extra space. But—"Not here," he said with true regret. "If I'd rented a room, we'd so already be there. But the first time with you, I'm not too crazy about sharing it with fifty-odd other people."

Gavin giggled. Ford almost couldn't believe his ears. Forget rubbing him off—Ford wanted to hug him.

"I swear, you're a hard one to keep up with. If you're not careful, one of us is going to leave the other in the dust," Ford said. He meant well.

It wasn't received that way.

No time to think about it. Gavin pushed Ford away and was up and out of his chair before Ford knew what had hit him, and on his way toward the restaurant exit as quick as a deer from a hunter.

Oh no. Ford was on his feet a second later, digging bills out of his wallet without looking at them or really caring that he might just have overtipped by 100 percent, and went after his man.

* * *

Gavin might be surprisingly fast for a little guy, but Ford had the reach of longer strides to his advantage, regret motivating his turn of speed, and absolutely no shame when it came to hurtling his way through a confused crowd—or when it came to catching Gavin and putting him in a corner. He looked more like a frightened deer than ever, trapped and pale, his eyes huge.

Ford gentled his touch but did not let go. “I don’t like using my size this way,” he said, making sure each word came out clearly without broadcasting to everyone. “I can’t let you get away without knowing what I did wrong. What happened, and why so fast?”

Gavin had to lick his lips twice before he got out one small breath of a question. “You’re too—I can’t—”

“Don’t shut me out.” Ford slid his palm up Gavin’s shoulder to brush the back of his hand over Gavin’s cheek. He loved the shape of the man’s face at all times, but he liked it better when it was happier.

Gavin’s eyes fluttered shut, lashes long enough to reach the moon fanning out over his cheeks. Ford could see them even beneath his glasses.

“I...” Gavin’s teeth left white dents in his lip. “Why? *Why* do you care?”

A glint of yellow light spilling from the door to the kitchen, buttery and soft but still a clear sign. Yellow stood for caution. The *because I think I’m in love with you—no, I know I am* would have to go unspoken. For now. Ford went for the less bald but still true: “Because you’re in my heart.”

Gavin squeezed his eyes shut tighter and took a shaky breath. “Please don’t say things like that. Just...don’t.” He rubbed the side of his face Ford wasn’t touching. “And don’t ask me why. I won’t say. I told you. Issues.”

“And I told you, I’m not going anywhere.” Ford studied Gavin, searching for signs in him instead of the world around him. Making himself look past the beauty and the promise of the omens that had led him there to the man beneath. Past the surface tension and deep, deeper, deepest.

What Ford saw was what Kayla had warned him of: Gavin was broken. Shattered somewhere within himself. His heart. Trying so hard to glue it back together. The sweep of yellow light washed over Gavin again, illuminating his eyes, his nose, his lips.

I should have seen it long before now, Ford thought, dismayed. He didn’t know who’d broken Gavin’s heart in the past and stomped on it so hard as to leave it in this shape, but he blessed if he wouldn’t make it his personal mission in life to hunt the bastard down and hang him by his toes from the tallest tree he could find.

In the meantime, Ford understood what he had to do. He had to show Gavin it could be good again. That he didn’t have to spend the rest of his life hiding in the shadows, alone and so

lonely. He didn't think even Gavin knew how lonely he was, even if he sat out in the sun gathering freckles just trying to feel warm again.

Gavin hadn't been given to him by virtue of a sign. "It's the other way around, isn't it?"

"I don't understand."

"It's okay." Ford kissed him, meaning for it to be short and sweet, but somewhere along the middle changing from affectionate to yearning, wanting to pour out all the love he had and fill Gavin up like a cup until he overflowed.

Ford swallowed his sigh as well as Gavin's, Gavin's one of wistful yearning.

He could hear music. Now that the fireworks had ended, a cellist had begun to play something Ford didn't recognize and definitely not something meant to dance to, but Ford was nothing if not good at improvisation.

And Ford wanted a happy ending. He released Gavin, only to take him again by the hand and coax him toward an open space near the edge of the terrace. "Dance with me," he cajoled, hoping Gavin would follow after him.

At first Ford thought he wouldn't. But then...he did.

* * *

Ford led Gavin into the darker corner of the small space on the terrace *just* clear enough for a romantic-minded couple to sway slowly to the music. If they were really careful. And small.

Ford did the best he could, and the rest didn't matter. He had Gavin in his arms, and his size came in handy for turning his back to the crowd and shielding Gavin from curious eyes.

He hoped it'd be enough. That it'd loosen Gavin up enough to yield and let Ford take care of him.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Gavin uncurled his white-knuckled fists. His nails, trimmed short, had left faint red half-moons in his palms that Ford glimpsed when Gavin slid them up his chest to his lapels and smoothed over the fabric.

Ford thought he could chance tipping Gavin's chin up. Gavin's glasses had slid down his nose; Ford pushed them back up with his forefinger but wished he could take them off. He'd love to see Gavin's eyes without glass and stainless steel in the way.

Not that Gavin's eyes weren't almost luminous in the low light, his gaze roving over Ford, studying him intently. His lips parted to try and shape words that Ford couldn't guess at before they emerged.

They weren't what he expected. "Kiss me. If you don't, I'll kiss you. Your choice."

"You kiss me," Ford said, not thinking about it. He bent, not minding the stretch at all if it got him there. "You lead this time. I'll follow."

And so Gavin did. Nothing shy about him now. He nudged Ford's lips open and slipped the tip of his tongue inside Ford's mouth, beginning an almost lazy stroking over the top, a mimicry of sex whose intent no one, not even a blunderbuss like Ford, could mistake.

Maybe a little too intense. Ford had an uneasy feeling that he couldn't really focus on, not when Gavin moved just *so* to fit their lower bodies together.

Ford held Gavin steady with an arm around his waist to keep him close and look into Gavin's eyes. His expression was darker now. He looked stubborn, set on the course of action he'd chosen.

“You're sure?” Ford had to ask. Just to be positive. To make sure this wasn't Gavin trying to prove...whatever.

Gavin rose just high enough to bite the point of Ford's chin. “Don't ask. Not again. Just. Come home with me. Now.”

Chapter Eight

Ford wasn't the first man Gavin had brought home thinking *just this once*. Maybe not after Donny, but by God, Donny had started as a onetime thing, an impulse decision made after too many glasses of wine, after falling for the hungry promise in eyes so dark a blue, they verged toward the color of the midnight sky.

Donny had been on Gavin the second his apartment door shut, rushing him in a nearly ravenous passion. Demanding, assuming, dragging Gavin along in his wake. "*Laugh when I laugh! Run when I run! I love you. Gavin, let's run away together. Why not? Just you and me.*"

But Ford? Except for the hard swell in his slacks that betrayed him, once inside Gavin's apartment he seemed happy enough to take his time. Almost relaxed, comfortable in his skin, and...at home. Eager, yes, but content. Confident but not arrogant. He had to know Gavin was his for the asking tonight.

So why didn't he just take? Why wasn't he what Gavin had thought he'd be?

What really makes you different from any of the others? From Donny? Why can't I make up my mind about it?

"Here. Hey now, don't flinch like that." The light touch at his back was only Ford helping him off with his suit jacket. The impossible man actually brushed it straight and hung it over the back of a chair.

Enough. Gavin faced Ford, toe to toe, and reached for him. *Light this candle already*. He was the one who burned, unused to it, and he needed—what?

Ford drew the pad of his thumb over Gavin's lip. *Oh God*. He was about to be hugged again, wasn't he?

Or not. Movement drew Gavin's attention as well as Ford's. A glimpse of slinking fur and wary green-amber eyes that glinted in the light of the one lamp Gavin had turned on inside the door. Oscar, curious enough over this unexpected turn of events, had sneaked out of hiding to get a better look.

It figured, Gavin thought, that it would be a man like Ford who drew Oscar out of hiding. Ford dropped slowly to a kneel and extended his arm exactly as Gavin had warned him not to, his hand out for Oscar to sniff.

The sight made the something strange sharpen in Gavin's chest. Like two edges of an iceberg grinding together, he thought. It hurt, this breaking open.

Do something about it. Gavin moved away from Ford, soundless in his stocking feet, walking backward. "Ford," he said, no louder than a breath, but enough to bring Ford's gaze back to him.

Ford forgot Oscar. He stood, though carefully. Gavin's lips twitched. He wanted to think, *poor guy*. He probably regretted hunkering down with his zipper in a precarious position over such a generous hard-on.

Or maybe not. Gavin didn't think Ford would regret much of anything, even if it did hurt.

Enough. Gavin stopped in the doorway to his bedroom and...didn't know what to do next. As if he were a blushing virgin. Ridiculous.

There. Gavin saw it now. The hunger, barely restrained. Ford on the edge. Hanging on that edge. Curiosity nibbled at Gavin. Curiosity and...

Gavin reached for the first button on his shirt. Slipped it through its hole. Checked for Ford's reaction and saw the deepening of his hunger when the first bit of bare skin showed. Two buttons, three, leaving Gavin bare down to the top of his stomach now.

He didn't know why he stopped there, only that his fingers shook too much to get a proper grasp on the next button. Impatient, he jerked his shirt untucked and tried at the bottom. No luck.

Of course that was what got Ford on the move, easing into his space. His presence made Gavin shut his eyes and want to lean into it. One huge hand cupped the back of Gavin's head to guide him, and though his lashes still brushed his cheeks and he couldn't see, he knew he was about to be kissed.

No one kissed Gavin like Ford kissed him. As if he was something special, and as if Ford had *nothing* else on his mind but this moment, the here and now.

The one big hand not guiding Gavin, holding him, feather-stroked down the skin bared by Gavin's open shirt to the space where Gavin had stopped. Ford fingered the button, a tiny questioning noise passing from his mouth to Gavin's.

God. That he would *ask*. Gavin wanted to...something. Something to shake him up and get him playing rough.

"Let me," Ford said. He drew Gavin's lower lip between his and brushed their noses together. "Let me take care of you."

God help him. Gavin couldn't do this anymore, wonder and wait for the other shoe to drop. Gavin choked down the knot of fear, opened his eyes to see Ford's face and not remember Donny's—he had to—and nodded. Just once.

It was enough for Ford.

* * *

Gavin didn't turn on any lights in his bedroom as he led Ford inside, still walking backward. He didn't want to let go of Ford, and he only had the one anyway, a switch by the door that cued a stark ceiling light.

He kept his bedroom as clean as the rest of his apartment. No shoes to trip over or socks to get tangled up in as they moved toward the bed, barely able to stop kissing long enough to tug uselessly at one piece of clothing after another. Nothing to make them stumble but themselves.

"Stop thinking so hard," Ford said beneath Gavin's ear. He did that. Always to the side, making Gavin want more and need to surge through the millimeters dividing them and take Ford for himself.

"I—"

“Sh.” Ford must have had eyes like a cat to back Gavin up without a misstep in the dark, guiding him surely to the bed and easing him down. Like this, Ford stood at the perfect height for Gavin to—

But Ford stopped him seconds before Gavin would have had his mouth, his hands on Ford's rigid cock. He growled with frustration when Ford nudged him away.

“Give me a second?” At least Ford sounded as strained as he ought to, after playing the noble for so long. His laugh was shaky. “I thought I saw...”

Gavin heard Ford withdrawing, surprisingly light-footed for a man his size, to the dresser and the assorted neat bric-a-brac any man kept there. A dish for coins, a place where his key ring would go, a letter.

“*Aha*,” Ford said on a breath. Gavin knew what he'd found. A museum welcome gift he kept meaning to donate or stuff in a drawer where it could be properly forgotten. A small, fat pillar candle with gold leaf wound about it in strange, mesmerizing spirals. Oddly beautiful, though it shouldn't have been. Gavin had never had a reason to burn it. Leave it to Ford to zero in.

Gavin heard the *whoof-whoof* of Ford blowing dust off the pillar. “I don't have any matches,” he said. “Or a lighter.”

“I do.” A rustle in what Gavin guessed was Ford's pocket, the distinctive *crack* of a match struck on the strip across the back of a book, and a flare of light. The abrupt brightness in the dark room made Gavin squint and shade his eyes.

Ford touched the flame to the wick and blew on it to make sure it caught. He waved the book of matches at Gavin, his grin unashamed. “Got them from the restaurant,” he said. “A memento.”

Gavin covered his face with his hand, but he still heard Ford's quiet laughter. “Yes, I am that much of a romantic.” He paused. “I just want to see you. Please.”

Gavin didn't know what it was about Ford that kept making him want to say yes or unable to say no; he couldn't tell which was which, or perhaps it was both, and they'd blurred together. He nodded instead, unable to speak again.

So strange. With the light of the candle, Gavin could see how what he'd thought was neat tidiness and lack of clutter seemed somehow empty, almost barren with Ford in the room, so much larger than life and—oh God—so easy to love, if he let himself.

Gavin's pulse skittered. He scooted backward on the bed, running as best as he could without being on his feet. Then stopped. If he was going to have his night, he'd have his night. He centered himself and then let go, as much as he could. “Yes,” he said, dropping his head back to rest on the pillow. “Ford. Come here.”

And here was another way in which Ford was not like anyone Gavin could compare him to. He followed Gavin onto the bed, but not on top of him. Off to one side, only his leg eased carefully between Gavin's.

Not enough. Ford was doing it to Gavin again, making him the one to chase. Gavin grumbled and twisted, trying to pull the bulk of Ford atop him.

Might as well try to shift a boulder with his bare hands, made even more impossible when Ford resisted. Frustrating enough that Gavin pulled back from Ford's first attempt at a kiss in the bed already warming from their bodies.

Ford made a questioning noise.

"You're too far away," Gavin said, embarrassed at having to spell it out, though it helped that he didn't think Ford was deliberately playing games. There was something else here Gavin didn't understand. He tugged again. "Closer?"

Every time *he* managed to surprise Ford, Gavin wondered which of them was the more startled. Ford blinked, then reached to touch Gavin's bare shoulder. He swept from there down to Gavin's wrist and rested his fingertips over the pulse thumping away beneath the thin skin. "You want me on top?"

Gavin frowned, perplexed. "Yes." Memory struck. "Wait. What you said at the museum... You aren't really a bottom, are you?"

There. Gavin hadn't known how much he missed Ford's body-shaking, now bed-shaking, full-throated laugh until it had been silent for too long. "Not usually," he said when his mirth eased, though the smile remained laced through his words. "I do like it. I wish I could bottom more than I have in the past."

"I don't understand."

Ford sobered. "Usually..." He didn't look away, though Gavin suspected he might have wanted to. Was he embarrassed?

So strange.

"I'm too big for most guys to think I'm serious about wanting to bottom." A touch of uneasiness there. "And I don't want to crush you." He touched Gavin's face, unbearably tender. "The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

Stop saying that. Gavin bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. No more arguing. He pulled on Ford a third time, and this time Ford came, staring at him as if he were something wonderful and not quite to be believed. "You really don't mind?"

Honest frustration smoothed over the cracks in Gavin's nerve. "No, I don't *mind*. I want you like this."

Ford asked. Of course he did. At least he did so while on the move. "Why?"

Gavin didn't answer until he had Ford securely on top of him. Braced enough that Gavin could breathe, but broad and long enough to block out the rest of the world. These were words he would have had to force out usually, and he didn't know why now they spilled out on their own, truth that surprised him as it crossed his tongue. "With you over me, around me...it's shelter," he said. "Safe. Solid."

"Ah, Gavin." Ford kissed him, fitting their mouths together as if they'd been made to fit. He didn't stop there, moving from lips to chin to beneath Gavin's jaw and down his neck. "Let me make it good for you."

Gavin nodded. Rough, but he'd said all he could say.

He knew Ford understood.

And yet this was nothing like Gavin had expected. *Nothing.* Ford kept him not pinned but secure in place on the bed as he moved above Gavin. Taking his time.

The solid comfort of Ford above him was no less than what Gavin wanted. But Ford wouldn't let him give anything *back*. Whenever he tried to reach or grab, Ford slipped just out of range or moved so that he closed on empty air or only got enough of a touch to tantalize him.

Ford was quiet. Gavin wouldn't have bet on that either. Some men never shut up in bed; God knew Donny hadn't. Dirty talk and promises meant to drive him crazy, and they'd worked.

Only Gavin hadn't known what "crazy" really meant until now. Not before Ford glided down Gavin's body inch by inch, his lips soft and his hands firm. *Reverent*.

When Ford knelt up to undo Gavin's belt, Gavin managed to catch him by the forearms and dig in tight enough to get Ford's attention. He shook his head, shouting the questions as clearly as he could without making a sound. He couldn't. Ford had stolen his voice away.

Ford's grin looked slower, crooked but not cruel. Despite Gavin's grasp on his arms, he still had the reach and agility of touch to slide Gavin's belt out of its clasp and to draw down his zipper. To slip his hand inside.

Ford swallowed Gavin's sharp cry with a kiss, fallen from above too quickly to be tracked. He kept his hand inside Gavin's slacks, the roughness of his palm over Gavin's aching cock not firm enough until Gavin tangled his fingers in Ford's hair and pulled.

"Please," Gavin heard himself whisper. "More. Please, I need more."

"I'm trying to take it slow. Make it good. Like I said."

"Then let *me*." Gavin snugged his hands down the back of Ford's slacks and kneaded Ford's ass. The reward was worth the risk; Ford groaned and surged forward, maybe not on purpose, but the jolt sent him grinding into Gavin all the same.

Gavin's vision swam. "Off," he said, all pride cast to hell. He tugged at Ford's slacks. "Get these *off*."

Ford, that irritating man, kissed the tip of Gavin's nose. "You first. Then me."

Gavin did not want to wait. Couldn't. He threw his arm over his eyes and tried to calm his breathing while Ford slid his slacks down his legs and over his feet, tickling them. Socks too, and at last Gavin was naked in front of this temporary Prince Charming. Hard, burningly so, his cock a heavy weight against the oblique muscle that arched from gut to groin.

Ford said nothing and stayed silent long enough to drive a spike of worry through Gavin. Didn't he like what he saw? Gavin came out of hiding, arm over his head, and sought answers.

He met Ford's eyes, and what he saw there—God. Gavin couldn't look at that. Far too much like love, what he saw. He made himself focus lower instead.

"You promised," he said, his mouth too dry. "Now you."

Ford bent and kissed Gavin's knee. His *knee* of all the places. It almost didn't matter, though, because then Ford stood and finally, *finally* took care of his own clothes. Jacket, tie, shirt—all gone in a blink. He slid his slacks down his legs, giving Gavin only a glimpse of clinging dark cinnamon jockey shorts stretched to their limit over his cock, and then they were gone.

Oh God. Gavin stared. He'd figured Ford would be as big as the rest of him; he'd been right. He'd hoped, in the back of his head, that Ford would be as gorgeous as the rest of him; he'd been right about that too.

Even like this, straining for Gavin, he knew Ford would hold back until Gavin had looked his fill and the first shock, no matter how wanted, had passed. And he'd been right.

Gavin wasn't sure if he almost wanted to love or hate Ford for that. *Take. That's your job. Don't leave it up to me.*

But Ford did, even though his cock looked almost painfully swollen and dark, and his balls were drawn up, so full, so heavy. His chest heaved, shining with sweat in the candlelight.

If it's my choice, then I choose this, for tonight, as long as it lasts, Gavin thought. He lay back down, let his legs fall apart so Ford could see as much of him as he could see of Ford, and stretched his arms out as far as he could to either side of the bed. *I can't make it any clearer.*

No. He could. And this was what Ford waited for, wasn't it? "I want you," Gavin said, clearer than he could remember, the sound reverberating almost bell-like. "I need you."

"And you'll let me take care of you?" Ford lowered himself to the bed. Almost there, almost.

Gavin gave up the last of what he had to give. "Yes," he breathed and surrendered himself wholly to Ford's kiss, his body, the intensity of him that burned Gavin to cinders and shaped something—something new...

* * *

Once Ford started—threw himself into this—he didn't stop, and it couldn't have come a moment too soon. He was everywhere as Gavin had thought he'd be, only...not. Different.

Not taking—well, yes, taking, but giving back as much as he got. He seemed to forget his greater body mass but pushed both arms under Gavin to support him and keep him from being crushed. He kissed deeply and hungrily but didn't stop until he'd driven Gavin as mad with the need for more as Gavin could tell he was.

Gavin couldn't *think*. Couldn't tell what was coming next. Only that he didn't want this to end. If he could, if it were possible, he'd freeze this moment. This time that was too good for him, with Ford's chest tight to his so that they had to breathe in counterpoint to one another. Gavin only just managed the reach it took to wrap his arms and legs around the bulk of Ford's body to pull Ford in tighter, deeper, closer.

Gavin arched his back, a helpless moan slipping free when Ford's cock slid next to his and brought them into firm contact. *His* hands were free. He fought one between them and tried to wrap it around both their cocks, to hold them together, but Ford was too large, and Gavin's hands were small like the rest of him.

He didn't know he'd said that out loud until Ford chuckled, a warm vibration pressed to his shoulder, rocked forward to drag their cocks together, and murmured, "Not everything's small."

Ford let go of Gavin just far enough, and though even Ford's mighty muscles showed the strain of balancing on one arm, he got his hand between them and laced his fingers with Gavin's, using both their hands to press their cocks together and stroke as hard as Gavin needed it.

God, oh God. Gavin thrashed his head on the pillow, helpless and wanting more. He could feel Ford's cock dripping beads of slippery heat on his skin, and if he let go just long enough to reach...a little...lower...

Ford swore and ground his head to Gavin's shoulder when Gavin cupped his balls, amazed at the size and firmness of them. "How long have you been—" he asked, stunned. A man didn't build up a payload this heavy in just one night.

Ford's laugh was strained. "More or less since I pulled you out of the elevator."

Gavin surged up to kiss him. It wasn't enough, he knew it wasn't, but it was the best he could offer. That, and undulating as best as he could beneath Ford to show with his body what he

couldn't say aloud, even now. As he moved, he grew ever more frantic, needing more, almost wanting to climb inside Ford's skin.

This wildness wasn't like him. Hadn't ever been, not even with Donny.

But Ford is not Donny.

Somewhere between touch and kiss, Ford's hips began to roll forward. His cock thrust between their bellies, feeling too big to be measured, driving harder and faster. Too much and not enough. Gavin fought Ford back; it took all his strength to manage, but he won in the end when Ford let him.

Every other nerve in his body on sharp edge, he nodded at Ford. *Now, please now.*

Ford crushed him with one more kiss. And to Gavin's dismay, a hint of rueful regret. "I didn't bring anything with me," he admitted, still playfully hiding his face against the side of Gavin's neck. "I'd hoped. Every guy hopes. But I hadn't planned on this. I thought it'd take longer to get you here, but you..." Again with the touch, the so-gentle, too-gentle brush of his hand to Gavin's cheek that made Gavin want to scream.

"I'm clean, I swear," Gavin said. "It's been a couple of years." That came out without a pause. Clear. Dizziness swept over him. "I have lube. In the drawer."

Ford sagged in relief so intense, it cleared Gavin's head. "Been a while for me too," he said. "I've got test results somewhere."

Gavin caught at Ford, arrested by a sudden alarm. "Don't stop to go to back your place and get them!"

And there was Ford's full-body laugh again, muffled only by his lack of breath. "God no. You trust me? That much?"

"This is my night." Gavin kissed Ford before he could ask. *Please don't ask.* He stretched his legs open farther still despite the burn in his thigh muscles, drawing Ford as closely to him as he could. Good. "Lube. Hurry."

Chapter Nine

Gavin dug his teeth into his lips and waited through the interminable seconds of listening to rustling and crinkling in the bedside drawer. Ford grunted in satisfaction not a second too soon and came back with the bottle.

Ford stroked the insides of Gavin's thighs. "Hey, hey, it's all right." He'd mistaken the stretch of strained muscles for the shaking of nervousness. "I won't hurt you."

Gavin didn't try to explain. After going for so long without sex, he knew it would hurt him, just as he knew Ford would try to keep that from happening.

He'd have to be the one guiding Ford this time.

True to Gavin's thought, when Ford circled the tip of his lube-soaked finger around Gavin's hole, he hissed in time with Gavin. "You're too tight for me."

"I'm not. It's okay," Gavin said, not letting go, not now. "Don't stop."

"Gavin..." Ford pushed Gavin's hand around his cock, making sure he felt the length and girth. "It's not ego talking here. I said I wouldn't hurt you, and I meant it."

"You. Won't." Gavin punctuated the stubborn promise with a bite here and a nip there. He squeezed Ford's legs with his thighs. "Please, just start fucking me before I come."

"You're that close?"

Gavin's laugh sounded broken even to him. "Yes."

"Oh," he thought he heard Ford say, quiet as a church mouse. "Okay. Gavin. Breathe for me. Just breathe."

Gavin remembered how to do this, but it was so strange how sense memory altered with time. When Ford slid his thick finger inside, the sting made Gavin flinch and hiss. But before Ford could stop, Gavin clamped down to keep Ford inside.

Ford pressed his forehead to Gavin's. Drops of sweat in his hair fell across Gavin's head, rolled down his cheeks, tasting of salt where one brushed his lips. But he didn't stop.

Slow, though. God, did he take it slow, stopping for more lube so often, Gavin would have wanted to laugh if he hadn't felt for himself how good that was, the burn eased by cool gel. Ford's fingers were bigger than most of the cocks he'd had in him.

Gavin stilled for the first time. *Would* he be able to take Ford? *Yes*, he decided. *No going back. No regrets.*

Three fingers in, scissored wide apart, and Gavin couldn't stand it anymore. When Ford squeezed the three fingertips together and rubbed over his sweet spot, Gavin's cock jerked with a *thump* against Ford's groin, and though he wasn't much of a guy for precum, he felt a string of slippery heat escape him.

He headbutted Ford to make him stop teasing. "Now," he begged. "Please, now."

"You're sure?" Ford said. Gavin could tell he too fought the need to fuck and ride him hard. His hips had never stopped moving, humping the bed in an irregular rhythm that ebbed and flowed whenever he got too close. Every time, he bumped Gavin's balls with his cockhead and drove him all the crazier. "Okay. Okay."

Gavin expected that juicy cock to slide inside. Was he right? No. Ford tried to turn them again, to lift Gavin on top of him. *What?*

Gavin fought back, scraping his nails on Ford's arms this time and shaking his head. He couldn't say what he'd wanted to, could only shake his head and plead with his eyes.

"You don't want to be on the top that much?" Ford looked like he didn't understand. Gavin did, and with that comprehension came a pang of sympathy. Ford didn't expect people to take him as he was, did he? He'd bet few people smaller than Ford could cope with that mountain weighing them down in bed, so Ford must have adjusted to please his lovers until he didn't know any other way.

Gavin was the one who didn't want that. But how...? What could he do...?

An idea came to him. He didn't stop to think about that. He was done thinking. For now.

"Like this," he forced himself to whisper as he tried to guide Ford without spelling it out. It was slower going than walking through honey, or the dreams when he meant to run fast but could barely move, but Gavin refused to quit.

By some miracle or chance, Ford got the idea halfway there, and after that it was a rush of limbs and a choppy, still-somehow-so-delighted laugh as Ford guided them both into place. Gavin sitting up with his back to the wall. Ford on his knees in front of Gavin, keeping them face-to-face. Shielding him from the real world waiting too close outside.

Gavin's eyes flickered shut. He nodded on a long breath out. *Yes.*

Ford kissed him once, hard, lips pricking as they scraped over teeth. His strength worked for him, making it easy for him to lift Gavin onto his lap, and though their legs could have tangled together awkwardly, Ford made it work. He held Gavin up as if Gavin weighed no more than a luna moth, poised and ready.

Gavin copied Ford. Forehead to forehead and a kiss. *Yes. Now.*

Between the press of lips and the eager slide of tongue, Ford lowered Gavin slowly, slowly, shaking with the effort not to thrust in for all he was worth.

Gavin couldn't bite back a sharp cry. For all he'd wanted it, and still did, Ford's girth was even more than he'd thought, and he felt as if he were being sheared in two.

Ford stilled, utterly motionless. "Gavin? Hey. Gavin." He rubbed Gavin's back. Not soft, to baby him, but firm, to bring his mind back and charge his nerve, to make him breathe deep.

"Tell me to stop. I will." Ford's voice, deep as the bottom of an oak barrel, had become something almost primeval now.

"Don't. Stop." The burn had passed. Almost. Good enough that wanting Ford deeper was worth the flash of pain. Worth it to force himself open and to slide down the interminable length, and not to stop before he felt the tension of Ford's thighs firm against his ass.

When he looked up, almost proud, the way Ford stared at Gavin undid him all over again. "My God. You..."

Gavin was too full, but there was no more pain. He grasped Ford where he could, arm and shoulder, and kissed Ford on his rise up. Finally, finally here was the hard, the rough he craved, Ford splitting him open and going so deep, he thought he might black out.

"We fit together," Ford said between gulped breaths, his hands slipping on Gavin's sweat-drenched skin. He surged forward to brace himself on the wall; Gavin followed, only Ford's body and his legs locked around Ford's waist keeping him upright. "We fit."

"Don't talk. God, don't talk. Fuck me."

Ford groaned. Gavin was open now, all the way. He could feel it. The fit was still so snug, Gavin knew he would feel it for days. Good. Ford's thrusts were deep and smooth, though not even. Hard, shallow, long, and slick, shaking with the effort to make it good and slow enough to last forever.

Gavin couldn't last; he couldn't, and if this was his night, he wanted to finish his way. He bit Ford's shoulder in an effort to win his concentration and, when that didn't work, wrestled Ford's hand down to wrap it around his cock. The last thing he cared about was too much weight; he wanted that. Bruises to remember this by.

"What...?" Ford ground out, though he wasted no time taking firm hold where Gavin wanted him.

"Going to come," Gavin said with the last of the strength in him. "Want your hand when I do."

"Oh God," Ford said. He dropped forward, and Gavin truly couldn't breathe now, but it didn't matter, because Ford chanted over and over into his shoulder, "*Oh God oh God oh God*," in time with the pumping of his fist. The noises he made mingled with the moans Gavin couldn't help. Maybe those were what brought him to his peak.

No. That was a lie. What tipped the scales was a chance of fate when Gavin opened his eyes to find Ford had lifted his head and done the same. Close enough that their eyelashes tangled. Gavin looked so deep inside and saw nothing but the truth there. Ford meant what he'd said. Ford loved him.

Ford held Gavin through it, the spasms he couldn't help, the ones that he thought would tear him apart. They wrenched from his gut and out, sloppy and thick over Ford's hand.

Ford, so close, still managed to wait for Gavin to finish before he came back, driving deep and with a force that knocked the bed hard to the wall. Gavin couldn't make sense of what Ford was saying, noisy at the last, and didn't care because the words were spoken hot on his skin, and Ford's cock was iron hard within him, and Ford's massive body racked with shudders *because of him*.

This was something else he could give Ford. Gavin didn't think, just acted. "For me," he said, raw around the edges. "Give it to me. I want it."

"Oh...*fuck*," Ford said. Five points of pressure dug nearly bone-deep on Gavin's back. Gavin hung on and let Ford shudder and strain to thrust deeper until he stilled and groaned. He wanted it as much as Ford did. Maybe more.

Oh God, yes, there. He came at last, still somehow too soon, sloppy gushes hot and heavy enough for Gavin to feel on the inside.

Ford only seemed to have the strength left to do one thing, and it was the one thing so far Gavin had guessed right about him. He took Gavin shakily but gently by the nape and kissed

him, slow and clumsy and sweet, until the last shudder had passed and they slumped at peace together.

Fucked-out and with a kiss. He almost wanted to laugh.

"Here. Before I hurt you," Ford said. Confused at first, Gavin understood when Ford lifted him clumsily but carefully and guided his still-half-hard cock out of Gavin's body.

Gavin hissed at the dull ache, all the burn returning with the withdrawal, reminding him of the abuse he'd taken. But gladly. And if he could, if there were to be such a chance, he'd do it all over again.

Ford sh'd him through the sharp rise and ebb. He laid more messy kisses on Gavin's neck, his shoulder, his chest. Taking such care with him...

He eased Gavin down to the bed—Gavin's head on the one pillow, Ford at his ease on his side. Gavin's thighs burned too, that soreness not fading. He didn't want it to. Whenever he'd stand or stretch or sit or walk, he'd still be able to feel where Ford had been.

"You didn't hurt me," Gavin said. With more luck than skill, he palmed the back of Ford's head and ruffled through his sweat-damp hair.

Again, a kiss. "I know."

Gavin tweaked Ford's hair, wanting him to lie still. He needed to spin the lazy peace of this moment out just a little longer. Even with him gone, Gavin could still feel where Ford had been inside. *Open, you leave me so open.* Inside as well as out. Vulnerable. Gavin curled on his side, hoping Ford would take the hint and follow suit.

He supposed he didn't have to ask. Ford would be the sort of man who spooned. Ford certainly settled in with a deeply contented sigh and wrapped himself around Gavin without complaint, holding him tight.

They fit together.

Maybe I'm starting to understand a little, Gavin thought, pillowing his head on Ford's arm. For Donny, nothing had ever quite good enough, bright enough, exhilarating enough, and he'd run hell-bent for leather after the next mountain he saw. Always searching for happiness.

Ford lived his life as if he'd already found that good place.

Gavin pushed back against the comforting wall Ford made behind him and sighed. A night to remember, for certain. He didn't know if there was such a thing as perfection, but if it existed, this was close. Fucked, adored, appreciated, cuddled. Treated like he was something special.

The trouble with perfection, though, was that Gavin knew it to be as fragile as a rose spun out of glass. He lay very still, afraid to break it with a word or even a breath.

Ford tucked his chin over Gavin's shoulder. "Gotta ask," he said, so deliberately casual Gavin knew it had to be the warm-up to a joke. "Was it good for you too?"

Gavin couldn't help it. He laughed.

Ford couldn't stop wanting to *look*. So much of Gavin had been laid bare for him to see, to care for.

Gavin curled up tight against him, the tension he always carried between his shoulders relaxed and the loll of his head on Ford's arm almost boyish. Ford traced a line of sight down Gavin's slim neck, the graceful arch of his spine, and—*Oh, hello*. Granted, Ford had checked the

heck out of Gavin's ass before he had gotten up close and personal with it, but it hadn't sunk in until now that Gavin did have one gorgeous ba-donk-a-donk. Round and firm, a perfect bubble that Ford wanted to take a bite out of.

Ford hummed in appreciation. If Gavin was ever willing, Ford would love to take it from him just so he could rest his feet on Gavin's pretty ass, shaped *just so* by nature for that exact purpose.

Gavin stirred in his arms. "What?"

Ford pulled Gavin around, willing to bet his grumbling was just for show, then sure of it when Gavin lay fully on the side facing him. His eyes were still languid and dreamy, the roses in his cheeks from good old-fashioned exertion instead of shyness, and his smile...

Ford traced the Cupid's bow of Gavin's lips. Gavin watched him indulgently. "What?"

"You never did answer, but I guess it was good for you after all, hmm?"

"If you even have to ask—"

"C'mon," Ford coaxed. "Say it."

"You just want to hear me laugh again." Gavin's smile widened. Ford loved the way Gavin stared at him now. Still a dash of confusion, Gavin's way of trying to figure out what the heck made Ford tick, but mostly just with dark sensuality. Ford would go so far as to say he looked *happy*.

Ford didn't expect Gavin to answer, but Gavin surprised him again. "Yes," Gavin said, though he tucked his face to Ford's chest and hung on too tightly to be lifted up again. "Good. Better than... I don't know. Just better than. Best."

Ford hugged Gavin back as tightly as Gavin clung to him, and wished he never had to let go.

The flickering light of the candle burning down cast shadows on Gavin's face, bringing him in and out of chiaroscuro. Ford glanced up to check the candle; if it came close to burning out, he'd have to go rummage for another, and he didn't want to leave Gavin's side.

He hadn't looked at the candle earlier, not really. Better things to focus on at the time, right? Now, when Ford got a clear look at the pillar, he could see the color of the wax and smell pine. *Green. Forever green.*

Ford massaged Gavin's back almost absently as he watched the candle flame dance. The green of the candle? An omen, no doubt about it. And where there was one, others followed fast on its heels. Usually in threes and sevens.

Hoping Gavin wouldn't notice his distraction, Ford searched the room for anything else that would clue him in to what the big picture might mean.

Nothing at first. No problem. Just had to look a little harder. *Hmm*. The bedroom had a small window, unadorned by any curtains, blinds left with the slats open enough to see through. Birds flew past, hard to count at this time of night. He had to count flashes of reflected light from their eyes and the sound of their winds as they passed.

One. Two. Three. Four. Four for a wedding.

Ford caught his breath. Apparently unaware of what Ford was doing, Gavin had begun to trace idle patterns on Ford's chest. Mostly squiggles, twirls without meaning, but always leading their way up to his heart.

And there, on the ceiling. A trick of the burning candle cast the shadow of a perfect circle within a circle, like two rings linked together.

The signs never lied. A green candle. Four for a wedding. Gavin's shy touch that led from Gavin's heart to his own, beating faster as his excitement grew. The linked rings on the ceiling.

Ford knew what he had to do. "Sh, lie there," he soothed Gavin when he slid out of bed. "I'm not going far."

Gavin frowned sleepily at him, then sighed in a resigned sort of way. Ford could tell Gavin didn't believe him. Well, he'd just have to prove that assumption wrong. Now.

Given his height and the relative closeness of Gavin's bed to the ground, Ford could still get down on one knee and reach to capture Gavin's hand between both of his. He liked Gavin this way, pliant, perplexed, and sleepily indulgent at the same time.

"I love you," Ford said. "You can believe that because it's true."

"Ford..."

"I feel what I feel. I. Love. You."

Gavin shook his head. He didn't rebut Ford this time. He could have chosen to look at that as resigned acceptance of not winning the argument, but Ford preferred to see it as an even better sign.

Ford thought Gavin might even have started to believe him.

"There's something I want to tell you," Ford said, keeping a firm hold on Gavin's hand. "And ask you too."

Gavin grew very still. Ford could see him listening with every ounce of concentration he had, still more focus returning as fast as the birds had flown by.

"Before the elevator, I'd known that something wonderful was going to happen that day. It was true. I met you."

Gavin's color darkened. "Because of an omen."

Ford shifted so that he could balance on one knee without letting go of Gavin. The light shone over both of them for one perfect, golden moment. Yes, Gavin's eyes were wet, his lashes spiky, but nothing spilling over. Yet.

"Yes."

Gavin snorted. Ford expected laughter, maybe a little scoffing. Not the sharp viciousness with which he pounded his pillow, a *thud* that startled Ford into flinching away from him. "Ford. For God's sake." Gavin sat up, weary and wary all over again. "Don't you get that it's all crap? You make it all up as you go along. It's not real."

The hurt sank deep. "But...it is."

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's true." Ford reached for Gavin, soothing himself by caressing Gavin's smooth, soft skin. "It's true that something wonderful happened when you came down that elevator."

The candle flame flared brighter. The linked rings on the ceiling began to lose their shape. *Uh-oh*. Ford plunged in.

Maybe too fast, and not wisely but too well.

"Gavin, I saw something else before you got off the elevator."

Gavin's eyebrows drew together. In silence.

Ford took a deep breath. Here it was—the moment he'd been waiting for, and one he was sure he wanted with all his heart. “This is what I saw, and what I've wished a dozen times before now I could go ahead and ask.” He kissed Gavin once more for luck before settling back down on one knee. “Gavin Yamea, will you marry me?”

If Ford had thought Gavin had gone still before, he'd have been wrong. Barely breathing, he didn't move, and underneath his freckles, he had gone as white as marble. Only his eyes were still alive, open, staring directly at Ford. So happy he couldn't speak? Ford hoped so.

The yellow flame of the candle flared high. *Uh-oh*. Gavin pulled away from Ford with a rough jerk and stared, and his eyes weren't wet at all now. They were angry.

Chapter Ten

“No? He said *no*?” Kayla almost dropped her plastic cup of bubble tea.

“And then he—well, he didn't exactly kick me out. More like he pushed me away so hard here”—Ford tapped his heart—“that the rest of me got yanked along in the undertow. Before I knew it, I was out in the hallway in my underwear with one shoe on and most of the rest of my suit in my hands, trying to figure out what the heck just happened and where I went wrong.”

Kayla hugged him. “Ford, that sucks. I'm sorry.”

Ford hunched deeper into the windbreaker he'd put on to protect him from morning windchill. Even in the summer, the early hours in the region could be surprisingly cold. Not to mention he felt a wee bit vulnerable after the unmitigated disaster that'd ended last night.

He hadn't planned to end up meeting her near the museum, a chance encounter in passing. He'd meant to keep his distance until he got it straightened out in his head. Figured out how he'd read the signs wrong. He must have somewhere.

Too much introspection was never a great way to spend the time, though. Meeting Kayla turned out to be like finding a lucky penny all over again. A good sign. Made him feel better after an hour or two of looking up and not seeing Gavin on the terrace.

“After I asked him to marry me... That silence, Kayla. It was the loudest thing I ever heard. All the signs were there. I thought I *knew*. Besides, the sex...oh my God, Kayla—the sex was—”

Kayla waved fast and frantic at him. “Single here! Unless you want me to sneak in and plant video cameras, stop teasing me. A vibrator's only good for so much.”

Ford almost brought bubble tea up and out through his nose. Kayla grinned at him, unrepentant. “Made you smile.”

“That you did.” Ford gave her a one-armed hug that sent him overbalancing into the bike rack, which was luckily sturdy enough to bear his body weight.

He poked his straw through his own cup of bubble tea, squishing the little blobs of tapioca gel “I can't stop wondering if... What if that was all he wanted? I mean, it fits. He didn't want to hear ‘I love you.’ When I asked him to marry me...”

“Ford?” Kayla dodged around to stand in front of him, blocking off his avenue of escape. “I say this with a sisterly affection, so listen up, okay?”

Ford nodded.

“You're a moron sometimes.”

“Ouch,” Ford said, that little lance crossing messily over the already tender hurt in his heart.

"Let me finish." Kayla poked him in the chest. "I said it with love. Remember that. All those signs you listed?"

"Yeah?"

She raised her shoulders. "Call me crazy, but I think those were signs for *you*, dum-dum. Not for him. Say it again: what did you see when you looked at *him*?"

Yellow, the flaring of the flame. Ford tried to scowl at her. "Don't go getting better at this than I am."

Kayla laughed, her natural sunniness replacing the severity she'd put on long enough to get her point across. "Nope. But look at it this way: you made a believer out of me. Give Gavin some time. Give yourself some time. Oh, I've got it! Look for something blue."

"Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue?" Ford liked the sound of that. "And yellow and blue make green, right?"

Kayla poked him again. *Ow*. Sharp fingers on that one. "Gavin is not a Ziploc."

"That much I did notice." Impulsive and feeling free to indulge that side of himself, Ford smooched Kayla on the forehead and tousled her hair. "Thanks."

"What are friends for? Just be yourself, Ford, and don't give up. He'll come around. I'm sure of it."

Ford had to ask. "How?"

"Because you made a believer out of me, brother. Because whatever it is you're seeing, it's true. Or it will be. You're a walking, talking fairy tale. You'll get your happy-ever-after."

"If you make a six-foot-nine man cry on a public sidewalk, I'll blame the eternal loss of my man card on you." Ford picked Kayla up and swung her around in a circle. She squealed and beat at him with her tiny fists, but he didn't let go before he made sure she was good and dizzy.

"Thanks. Now you're going to have to carry me to my next delivery," Kayla said, wobbling on her feet. She'd dropped her bubble tea. So had Ford, leaping without looking. *Oops*. "And you owe me a refreshing beverage."

"Hot cocoa?"

Kayla beamed at him. "A man after my own heart."

Just for one second—one traitorous second—Ford kind of wished he'd fallen for Kayla instead. Life would be so much simpler then.

Ford pushed that thought as far and as firmly away as possible. Difficult as it might be and as high a hill as it'd be to pedal his way up to Gavin, getting there would be worth it. Gavin was still the man he was meant to marry.

He hoped.

For the first time in his life, Ford found himself...unsure. There was a strangeness in Gavin that Ford didn't like. With it came the return of a thought that'd kept him awake the night before: what if he *had* read the signs wrong? And now, with what Kayla warned him of—did caution mean this uneasy doubt was all part of the challenge? Or was it just the new strangeness of uncertainty?

Don't go there, man. Keep the faith. Ford shook that off—with effort—and teased Kayla to distract himself. "You said something about me carrying you?"

Kayla snorted. Ford did like an unladylike lady. In a platonic sense. “Right. Just hold me still for a minute until I get my balance back.”

“Where's the fun in that?” Ford crouched down leapfrog-style and wiggled his shoulders. “Hop on.”

“You're not serious.”

“Absolutely! All aboard.”

Kayla hesitated, but Ford could see just how much she wanted to. “I'm not exactly a rag doll.”

That was another thing Ford didn't get about women. Kayla had some nice curves that even Ford could appreciate from a purely aesthetic standpoint. *She* probably thought she was fat. Not so. They'd invented the phrase “pleasantly plump” for women like her. Pleasantly or not, did she honestly think she'd be too heavy? *Pshaw*.

“You're a hummingbird,” he said, remembering with renewed fondness Gavin's adorable puzzling over what kind of animal he was. “C'mon. I promise I won't drop you.”

“I'm a what, now? And I'm not paying your chiropractor bills.” Kayla made up her mind and vaulted onto Ford's back. Totally negligible weight; he could barely tell she was there, though she had to spread and cling like a spider monkey to stay on board. Ford helped out by catching her ankles and letting her wrap her arms around his neck.

Kayla risked losing her balance to tweak his ear after Ford had explained the animal-comparison thing. “Dork.”

“So it's been said.”

She clung tighter, indeed hugging him around the neck. “One good turn deserves another. After what you've told me about Gavin, I'd say you're making progress. You've already gotten to him, inside his head. The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step. Also, he came pretty close. You're a dromedary.”

“Say again?”

“Dromedary. You know, a camel. Humps, humps.” Kayla hugged him when Ford cracked up.

“So you're saying I'm a giant, bedouin-carrying, spitting desert beast of burden-slash-nymphomaniac? There's a mental image for you.” Ford bounced her.

Kayla squealed. “You promised you wouldn't drop me!”

“And I'm a man of my word. But hold on tight, missy. I feel like going for a run.”

“Ford! No, Ford, no—Oh my *God*, wheel!” Kayla hung on for all she was worth and squealed in his ear when Ford picked up the pace.

He didn't mean to look up at the sun instead of the sidewalk in front of him. But when he did—

Gavin. On the terrace, balanced on the edge, one leg out over the street and one safely inside to keep him anchored. *Oh*. Ford saw it now. An omen as clear as the skies above. Kayla had been right. Gavin was on the fence. Time. Time and patience, and someday Gavin would learn to step out and fly without diving back into his private nest.

All disappointment forgotten, Ford slowed long enough to wave up at Gavin. He didn't really expect anything in return.

But Gavin waved at him. Tiny but there. And although Gavin was far too high up for Ford to be sure, he thought Gavin might just have been losing the battle against one of his small, sweet smiles.

Chalk another one up for Kayla. Luckiest sign ever, running into her today exactly when he'd needed both a boost and a good kick in the ass.

There was still hope. Now all he had to do was figure out a way back inside Gavin's shell. *Hmm. Where to start, where to start...*

* * *

Ford knew what he had in mind wasn't the way most men would go about winning back a skittish lover. Then again, Ford guessed he never had been great about doing things by the book. As long as he reached his destination, he'd take any road that'd lead him there.

So when he passed by the tiny shop window on his way from delivery to delivery, and an even tinier display grabbed his attention, Ford saw no reason not to give in to impulse. Besides, the idea that display gave him? Ingenuity like that had to be a sign, a good one—and frankly Ford was on the lookout for as many of those as he could find.

One purchase. One night spent with glue and painstaking care over his project. One favor begged from a softhearted Rush Plus messenger to make a special delivery.

One day later, Ford got the text he'd been waiting for. Slow traffic allowed him to steer with one hand and check his messages with the other. Multitasking at its finest, and had there ever been a better reason to take a chance?

You sent me a three-inch deer. Glued to a five-inch bicycle.

Ford laughed to himself. He could see Gavin's "confused face" so clearly in his mind's eye. Forehead furrowed, eyebrows drawn together, lips pressed together in the sexiest of perplexed moues.

He sent back an immediate reply.

Yep, I did. Turn it over. There's an itty-bitty kitten glued to the deer's back.

Gavin's response took longer. *Why?*

Ford chuckled. He pulled into a bike rack for safety's sake and so he could concentrate on this first good step. He held off on replying, wanting to see if Gavin would get it. When the new text came in, Ford laughed out loud. So easy to imagine exactly how Gavin had looked, putting the pieces together and hiding his face behind his hand.

Subtle, Gavin texted.

Good. This was good, right? They were talking to each other. Ford could feel that ice starting to fracture around the edges already.

Now for the risky bit...

Ford texted quickly, before he could second-guess anything.

I sent it because I wanted to. If you won't let me back in just yet, then keep these little guys. Whenever you see them, know I'm thinking of you.

A long, long silence and a two-word reply from Gavin.

Ford. Don't...

Ford could feel the indecision. The yearning. He understood now why Gavin had kicked him out. He had gone too far, too fast for a man ruled by fear and doubt. Yet inside all that fear was a man with a lonely, lonely heart who could love so much and so true if he'd just let himself take the chance. Ford knew that as surely as he knew his own name.

He texted back: *Meet me for lunch. For tea.*

Nothing from Gavin.

Ford took a chance. *With you or without you, I still love you. That didn't change.*

Still nothing.

A flash of sunlight off a nearby window made Ford sigh. Caution, okay. A timely enough reminder.

He sent his last text—for the moment.

Keep the deer? And think about it. Me. Like I'll be thinking of you. If, when, you're ready to talk to me again, I'll be here.

Ford didn't expect a reply to that, so the *beep* of an incoming text sent him diving for his pocket no sooner than he'd tucked his phone away.

Gavin said simply, *Okay.*

That right there? The best sign of all. Ford rode on, a half dozen saved texts tucked in his pocket, and hope keeping him all but afloat through the busy streets.

One other thing kept him distracted. Step one: successful. Step two would require a little more help from his friends...namely, from Kayla. At the next stoplight Ford hit speed-dial 2 on his phone and started chattering before Kayla had even finished her “hello, you've reached Flowers Fast!” spiel.

“Are you up for lending a hand on Mission Gavin?”

“I'm so in.”

Ford seriously considered adopting her as his little sister. “Okay. Here's the plan.”

* * *

Ford would have loved to stay and watch Kayla make her delivery, but even he knew when enough was enough and maybe a little bit creepy besides. He waited outside the museum as patiently as a man like he could. Metaphysical and philosophical patience were totally different animals. When it came to sitting still and staying put—well, there were reasons Ford loved his job as a bike messenger.

He all but tackled Kayla when she pranced out of the building, bright as a beacon with the excitement flowing from her. He *did* pick her up and swing her around in a circle, because that was just plain fun and surprisingly addictive.

“*Ford,*” Kayla squeaked, punching him in the chest. But she was laughing.

“You love it. Sometime I'll give you the full eagle.” Ford stopped. “That sounded much dirtier than I'd thought it would. Yikes.”

Kayla popped him one more for good measure. When he let her down, she stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. Sort of. More like she jumped and landed one by luck. “Don't worry. You're not breaking my heart. I know you only have eyes for Gavin. Who is surprisingly sweet, by the way. I see what you like in him now.”

“Love about him,” Ford corrected. Just to tease her, he waggled his eyebrows. “There's a lot more you *wouldn't* see in public.”

Kayla stuck out her tongue at him. *Pierced, ouch*. Not much Ford wasn't scared of. Punching holes through his body? *Oh God no*. “You want the story of how it went down?”

“Are you kidding?” Ford sat down on a handy bench that he'd already warmed nicely with his restless up and downing and pulled Kayla in front of him. That actually put them right about eye to eye. “Begin at the beginning and stop at the end, and don't forget the middle parts.”

Kayla bounced on her toes and tucked errant locks of blonde hair behind her ears. “He wasn't hard to find with the directions you gave me. You should have seen his face. Confused at first. Wondered if I had the right office. Then when he opened the box, even more confused. Not that I can blame him. That's possibly the weirdest floral arrangement we've ever put together.”

Ford chuckled. “I figured, and I forgot to explain. They had this whole 'language of flowers' back in the old days when gentlemen were gentlemen. Each one of those has a specific meaning, and if you put them all together, it's a message. 'I love you. I will wait for you. I am yours.'”

“Oh my God. Do you have a brother? Tell me you have a straight brother.” Kayla plopped down on the bench next to Ford and gave him a squeeze.

“And then?”

“Then he read the card. And he smiled. Teeny tiny but definitely a smile. And when I turned to go and he thought I wasn't looking, I sneaked a peek back and saw him reading the card again. A little pink in the cheeks, but”—Kayla exhaled the happy sigh of the true-blue converted romantic—“you're on the right track, Ford. Just keep on—”

“Being myself?”

“Exactly.” Kayla bounced up and pulled at Ford in a vain effort to haul him to his feet. “So what comes next?”

Ford grinned and pretended to let her win the tug-of-war that brought him upright. “Not sure yet. But I'll know it when I see it.”

* * *

The text message came late that night, right in the middle of Ford's dinner preparations. Well. Attempts at dinner preparations. He loved spices, whether sweet or minty or flaming hot, but he tended to get enthusiastic when cooking, and be damned if he could find the chili pepper flakes. Ground beef sizzled on the stove, thick tortillas warmed in the oven, and a jar of salsa bubbled slowly in a saucepan, but Ford dropped it all, even the half-sliced onion, to make a grab for his phone and read.

A text from Gavin. *Thank you.*

“Yes!”

He texted back, right away. *I love you.*

From Gavin: *I don't know what to make of you.*

Ford replied: *You don't have to make anything. Take me as I am. It's how I take you.*

He closed his phone, tucked the slim case in his pocket, and hoped for the best.

* * *

No new plans came to Ford right away, so he decided the best thing he could do was to wait for a sign.

Apparently the waiting list for omens was short when something this big rested in the balance. Three days after the textfest, Ford got home to a blinking light on his answering machine. An out-of-date machine, but he liked the anticipation of knowing someone had called.

At first Ford heard nothing but a crackly pause that might have been just plain static. *Oh no. Don't let it be a random hang-up or worse, a hang-up from Gavin.* Ford dropped to his knees in front of the machine and stared at it, willing the message to go on.

"Ford," Gavin said at last. Ford's heart softened. Poor guy. He'd have been pacing, maybe thrusting his hands through his hair. Ford could hear him swallowing as he tried to make the words take shape and come out.

Ford waited as he'd promised he would.

"Ford," Gavin started again on the tape. "*I don't think I can—*" Breath. "*I wish I could—*" *Damn it, Ford, you make me want to, but...*"

Long pause.

"*I can't,*" Gavin said, sounding so defeated. "*Fuck. I can't even say it like this.*"

"Baby, I talk enough for both of us," Ford said, stroking the edge of the machine. A poor substitute, but he'd like to think that many blocks away and probably still sitting on his couch with the phone in his hands, Gavin could feel the reassurance of the touch.

Ford heard Gavin gather his strength for one last burst. "*You get to me, Ford. Under my skin and you stay there. I can't dig you out. This was supposed to be... But you won't be driven off; you're still here... I don't get it.*"

The longest pause yet. Ford held his breath, sure this would be the end and that the tape would click off.

"*You shouldn't love me. Just stop. Please.*"

Click.

Ford rewound the tape, took it out of the machine, and tucked it into his pocket. That one was never getting recorded over. And he wanted to keep it as close to his heart as he could.

Out of all the stammering and pauses, Ford had heard the message loud and clear: *You make me want to believe you. You make me want to try.*

And beneath that, *Please help me.* Finally. Reaching out.

And like Ford had promised, he'd be there. Whatever it took.

And because the unorthodox, admittedly quirky approach had worked so well so far, Ford knew *exactly* what to do next. He grinned and patted the answering machine with loving fondness. Tapes, eh?

He could do tapes.

Chapter Eleven

Ford knew he was getting some pretty strange looks as he stood in the middle of the sidewalk across the street from the museum. Some pedestrians were angry at him for blocking the flow of foot traffic, some younger passersby who didn't know their classic '80s cinema scowled at him due to not getting what the heck he might be doing, and some—the romantics at heart—covering their mouths in suppressed delight and lingering to watch the show.

Let them stare; Ford was used to that. He could see Gavin sitting on the terrace wall from where he stood, though Gavin hadn't glanced down yet. Either he had no idea Ford was there or he wasn't looking on purpose. Maybe both—the latter so he'd be sure of the former.

He looked so lonely. So in need of love.

Ford nodded firmly. *Let's get this party started.* He raised his voice to its impressive full volume, the one that'd carry across a crowded street and hopefully five stories up. "Gavin! Hey, Gavin!"

Gavin popped his head up, as startled as a rabbit in its burrow. He looked from side to side, perplexed, then stopped, covered his face with one hand, and shook his head.

He couldn't fool Ford. Ford saw Gavin's shoulders shaking, and it was the sweetest sight ever. Ice: cracked. Mission accomplished. Almost.

"Gavin!" Ford bellowed. "Down here."

Gavin didn't look happy about it, but he turned to prop his chin on his knee. He was watching Ford anyway, and that was what counted.

Ford blazed his brightest smile up at Gavin and with the proper flourish, lifted the biggest boom box he'd been able to find at the pawnshop high above his head.

Gavin nearly tumbled backward. Since the street had fallen mostly silent, and by a miracle—or a good omen—the cars had slowed to a trickle, Ford could hear him shout back, "You wouldn't."

"I absolutely would," Ford called up. He waved the boom box. "Yes, I am this cheesy. Yes, I am willing to go there." *I love you enough to shout it to the rooftops.*

Gavin's shoulders were shaking. Almost there. Almost cracking up. "Oh God, don't!"

"You know I will," Ford shouted, shimmying his hips. "Baby, I've got Peter Gabriel locked and loaded. I've got ABBA; I've got the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack. I even have"—he struck a pose—"the Village People, and I know how to do the dance."

Gavin buried his face in his arms. "You're *crazy*," he yelled down.

"Crazy about you," Ford retorted. "C'mon. Talk to me?" He balanced the boom box in one hand. "I have Celine Dion on here, and I'm not afraid to use her."

There. Finally. Gavin gave it up, and Ford saw once again what he'd waited so long for—that gorgeous, real and honest and true laugh, that smile that would crinkle his eyes at the corners, the one that made him tip his head back and just...let...go. He needed to do that more often.

Ford figured that Gavin needed him in his life as much as he needed Gavin. Maybe—no, not maybe—Ford had finally won them both a second chance.

“My finger's on the button, and these woofers are cranked to max.” Ford waved the boom box. “Want to hear 'My Heart Will Go On,' or can I just come up instead?”

Gavin shook his head and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “My God. How are you even real?” He calmed down and looked at Ford in a way Ford couldn't quite describe, but was more than he'd hoped for. “Okay. Yes. Come upstairs.”

Ford whooped for glee, shoved the boom box into the arms of the nearest onlooker, and bounded across the street at a full gallop. He sang an entirely different song as he thundered into the service elevator and punched the buttons: “At Last.” *At last...my love has come along...*

Almost a week of separation and mostly silence before he made his way back inside Gavin's heart. Not bad, if you asked Ford. Not bad at all.

Provided, of course, that what waited for him on the patio was a Gavin willing to make a fresh start. Ford crossed his fingers, spit over his shoulder, and spun three times counterclockwise on the ride up—a ride almost as smooth as silk, with just a few bumps and one nerve-racking grind.

None of that mattered as soon as he stepped out and saw Gavin on the patio, still waiting. Still smiling.

Smiling for Ford.

Gavin had thought about this impending moment before. Of course he had. Ford didn't take no for an answer.

He wondered if he should have been surprised at how long it took for that to sink in.

Wondered still more if it shouldn't have gone deeper. Hated that part of him that was still afraid.

Been amazed that the longing for Ford never stopped, no matter how hard Gavin tried to push it away when Ford wasn't around.

But for all that, he hadn't quite been able to picture how this reunion would go. The shaking hands, slightly damp palms, and the knot in his throat he could barely swallow around—those were naturally to be anticipated. But the rest?

What would come next remained a mystery to him, even as the elevator doors rattled open and Ford stepped onto the terrace, three times as large as life, and as invigorating in his sheer life force as the fresh, clean morning air.

“Hi,” Gavin said. Ah. Awkward. That was how it would go.

“Hi,” Ford replied. Gavin registered a blur, and then he was wrapped up in a giant hug that squeezed the breath out of him, enveloped in Ford's scent, and blanketed by the body heat that made him want to cling tighter than even Ford.

Suddenly it wasn't awkward at all. Something jarred loose inside Gavin, and he didn't know what, but his throat was open and he damned if he would waste one second of it. He

pushed Ford, but only far enough away to be able to look up at the man and meet his eyes when he spoke.

Ford didn't seem to mind. He even kissed Gavin, a hearty smooch atop his head, as he shifted them both from a standing hug to sitting together on the terrace railing.

"Hi," Ford said, teasing at the collar of Gavin's shirt. "I missed you."

"I noticed." *Damn. The voice was going.* Ford was too...overpowering for Gavin to control himself when he needed that most.

Why did that not seem like a bad thing right now?

"A boom box, Ford? Seriously?" Gavin blurted instead, feeling himself go tomato red.

Ford laughed, a low rumble of a chuckle, and wouldn't let Gavin look down. He bracketed Gavin's face in his huge paws and kissed him once, a real kiss this time, soft and kind and patient and so much more than Gavin deserved. "Seriously," Ford replied. "I really did have a mix tape in there, and I would have done it."

"I have no doubt," Gavin said. A small measure of calm seeped back into him as he ran his palms over Ford's arms from wrist to elbow. Touching Ford soothed him. Gavin didn't know if he could cope with that, needing someone else so much.

Only that Ford made him think it might not be weakness.

"Lean on me," Gavin murmured.

Ford didn't ask. For once. He *did* smile almost softly and hummed a few bars of the song. He understood.

"Let me say this." Gavin stilled his touch, resting his fingers lightly on Ford's wrists. "Okay?"

Serious for once, surprisingly so, Ford nodded. He did reach out to brush Gavin's hair out of his eyes, the touch so tender that it spoke volumes.

"I don't understand how you can say you love me because of a sign," Gavin started all in a rush, determined to get it all out.

"I know, baby."

"No. You don't. Not all of it." Gavin rubbed his temples. "I don't believe in signs or omens. I hate people giving 'luck' or something else nebulous credit instead of taking responsibility for their own actions."

"Gavin." Ford touched Gavin's chest. "What's controlling you right now isn't 'out there.' Okay?"

Gavin held up his hand to shush Ford. "Let me finish. We're here. I'm with you. Can't that be good enough? For now?"

Ford scooted closer, enfolding Gavin under one of his massive arms and stroking his back. "For now," he said. "But if there's a now, is there going to be a later too?"

Gavin closed his eyes and pushed the word out. "Yes."

As abruptly as he'd been hugged, Gavin was being kissed. In a way. It felt more like being attacked by a giant, zealously affectionate Saint Bernard. He found himself laughing again—so strange, how that became easier each time Ford goaded him to it—and almost playful in his fending Ford off.

Ford nibbled at Gavin's lips and bumped their noses together. His gleeful grin told Gavin that Ford knew exactly what he'd accomplished there and was not in the least bit ashamed or abashed.

I wish I could be like you. Gavin settled for resting his hand at Ford's waist and pressing his forehead to Ford's. "Only...only one more thing. I have to ask. I mean this one. Promise you'll go along with it?"

Ford withdrew, frowning. "I can't promise anything until I know what it is. How could I be sure I'd be able to keep the promise?"

Gavin sighed. "Let me ask anyway?" Ford's nod reassured him, though the worried look he wore didn't. Gavin took a tighter hold on Ford as he got through the next part. "I don't understand all of this. Maybe I never will. But I'll try. Just...give me time to get used to it?"

Ford's face smoothed out. "I can promise you that. Without a doubt."

And there he went again, lifting the back of Gavin's hand to his lips and kissing the knuckles. Did he know what kind of effect that had on a man, even the most wary of disbelievers in romance? On *him*?

Oddly enough, Gavin thought Ford might not know. Odder still—or perhaps not—that made it all the more endearing.

"One more thing," he said, before he forgot—before Ford made him forget. "Promise me if you can."

Ford raised one shoulder. "Let me hear it first."

"Don't ask me to marry you again. Please don't."

The reaction was, finally, the one Gavin had anticipated. Disappointment chased by perplexed incomprehension both settling into resignation. But not into acceptance. "I can't promise that," Ford said. At least he was honest.

Donny never had been, unless it suited him to play so.

Another difference between them. A good one.

Gavin lifted up to kiss Ford. "Then give me time," he said. "You promised that much."

Ford laughed, sounding surprised. "Tricky little devil, aren't you?"

Gavin ducked his head. "I have my moments."

"And I lo—really, really like all of them," Ford said, cheeky grin fully back in place. "See? I'm being good. Now." He calmed, amazing Gavin with his ability to turn on a dime but be no less sincere each and every time. "It's my turn to ask you something."

Gavin felt the cool wind on the terrace bite deeper into him, stealing away the body warmth from his back. Too vulnerable. But he owed Ford this much. At least an answer.

He nodded. "If I can, I'll answer."

"Who was it who hurt you so much they broke you this way?" Ford asked, cupping Gavin's face again, brushing his thumbs as delicately as feathers over Gavin's cheeks. "I'm not going to go after him. Promise in advance. I only want to know so I can be sure I don't make the same mistakes."

Ford was not Donny. But Gavin couldn't tell him that without the rest of it coming out. "I can't."

Gavin didn't expect Ford to accept that. Maybe that was what gave Gavin the courage to mirror Ford's pose with his much smaller hands on Ford's face and to kiss him. "But soon," he said. "Soon."

Ford's smile seemed brighter than the sun through the clouds, and his kiss was warmer than any fire.

"Then I can wait," Ford said between kisses that teased, kisses that promised, and kisses for the sake of kissing, one melting into the next. "That's a promise I'll keep as long as I have to."

"Why?"

"Because," Ford said, pulling Gavin into his lap. "Because I want to. And that's true."

* * *

Gavin's lips still tingled from Ford's exuberance, and he knew for once his face was warm not from a blush but from whisker rash. Inside his office, the space he'd considered sufficient for his needs before seemed too small. Stuffy.

A messy stack of letters dropped atop his desk caught Gavin's eye. *Hmm*. Mail delivery came early today, he supposed. He tucked the lot under his arm and dropped with a casualness that surprised himself into his chair.

Where was that letter opener? *Ah*. Gavin flipped through the stack, sorting bills, letters of application for summer study from college students, handwritten envelopes that more than likely contained complaints about one collection or another, and ordinary junk mail.

The last of the letters bore neither a return address nor a canceled stamp of any kind. Gavin dropped that one and eyed it warily. He'd read plenty of news stories about—

Oh. Wait. Of course. This would be from Ford just in case the boom box maneuver—*dear God*—hadn't worked, or a secret delivery from Kayla when Ford gave her some kind of high sign.

Kayla was... a surprise, Gavin mused as he neatly slit that envelope open first. He hadn't thought he'd like her. Ford was enough enthusiasm and overabundant personality in a male. In a female? Gavin would have run scared.

Yet he did like her. She fit in.

Gavin could have described himself as content as he tilted the envelope upside down. No. Almost—no, not *almost*. He *would* have said he was happy.

When the contents of the envelope slid slickly out onto his desk, everything changed.

A glossy sheet torn from a magazine. The picture, a face Gavin knew far too well, circled in bold black marker, and a black arrow pointing to the text.

Donny flirted up at Gavin from his picture, older but no less the roguish charmer, caught by the photographer in a freeze frame of life so exuberant, he nearly leaped out of the frame and onto Gavin's desk.

For all the effect it had on Gavin, Donny might as well have done just that.

Gavin shoved his chair back as if the paper had burned him, his pulse hammering in his ears. *No. No.*

"You fuck with me, and I fuck right back." Roger pushed the door open and smirked smugly at Gavin. *Bastard*. He must have been lying in wait for this moment. Watching.

The skin on the back of Gavin's neck crawled with loathing. Gavin couldn't speak, but that was a good thing. Roger would have used whatever came out against him. In every way he could.

"Read the article," Roger said. "It's a good one. Come to find out, your old flame's going to be back in town in, hmm, about a month. He's working with a traveling performance of *Les Misérables*. Don't you just love irony?"

Glaring. That, Gavin could do, and if looks could kill, he would have reduced Roger to a pile of oily ashes before he'd gotten another word out.

Roger's smirk wasn't going anywhere, glare or not. "You really sure you're over him and not just fooling yourself with that dumb ox that follows you around? Think about that, dick. Think hard."

Gavin found his voice. "Get. *Out*."

Roger snickered as he raised his hands in mock surrender. "Hey, no sweat. My work is done here. Just think twice before you mess with me again, pretty boy, because if you do?" He clicked his tongue.

He could count himself lucky he'd gotten clear before Gavin slammed the door on his fingers and locked it tight. A jerk to the cord and down came the security blinds so Gavin could lean against the door and try to take slow breaths.

Donny smiled as brightly as Ford from the picture. Gavin could still see it on his desk. He knew now he'd see it in his dreams.

No. No. I won't let it—him—not now. Gavin swept the envelope and its contents off his desk and into his trash can.

Ford is not Donny.

Instead of sinking down at the desk and crushing his face into his hands, thinking about what had been, seeing Donny's face in his mind's eye—Gavin drew his phone out and dialed a number he already knew by heart. He wrote it across his mind, number by number, driving the strokes deep.

"Hey, you." Ford picked up on the second ring. He sounded...happy, like there was real joy for him in hearing from Gavin.

Ford is not Donny.

For once, Gavin could say what was in his heart even when the seas were at their most turbulent. "Come out with me tonight. I want to be with you again."

Chapter Twelve

Seven thirty. Still an hour and a half to go before Ford arrived. Or so Gavin had told him. Plenty of time.

Was nine p.m. a strange time to *start* a date? Gavin bit at his thumbnail. It'd been so long he didn't remember, and there hadn't been a plethora of much besides one-night stands before Donny. He could probably Google the information.

Gavin rolled his eyes, then stopped and hissed when his teeth dug too deeply at the sensitive quick of his nail. He looked at the digit in disgust. *Damn*. When would he ever manage to break himself of that habit?

It's not the only habit you can't shed, a voice murmured inside his head. Like falling for the wrong men.

Shut up, Gavin retorted. It didn't work.

Seven thirty-five. Gavin smoothed down the sweater he'd chosen. He'd told Ford to dress casually. Should he have added "dress warmly" too? The nights were still chilly at this time of year.

As quickly discarded as it came was the thought that Ford could borrow one of his sweaters. Not likely. Ford's hockey-champ shoulders would burst the seams before he had any sweater of Gavin's halfway over his head, and the length would probably end up around midchest.

Crop top. Gavin chuckled. He'd have to remember to share that one with Ford; even if it was sort of at his expense, Ford would get a kick out of it. Gavin found it as easy as dipping his hand into fresh water to drink to imagine the sparkling delight in Ford's eyes and the brightness of his smile.

Seven forty. All right, this was getting ridiculous. Better to be on the move. Gavin dusted off his jeans, frowned, forced himself still, and took a deep breath to smooth down the nerves jangled up from anticipation.

Gavin's other thumbnail crept toward his mouth, where he bit absently at it and considered the picnic basket sealed up tight and ready to go on the dining table he never used. What was the point when dining alone?

Making the right impression mattered. Gavin would have wondered why if he hadn't already known for sure. He wanted Ford to think better of him. A part of his brain argued that it didn't matter and that Ford would love whatever he came up with; the larger half insisted on attacking this move as a mathematical equation.

Gavin did history and art. Not math. He rubbed his forehead. Maybe he'd been right before, and this wasn't a good idea.

Seven fifty-five.

Gavin noticed movement in his peripheral vision. Oscar again. Strange how he'd become bolder since Ford had entered Gavin's life. The F1 was truly as close to a wild animal as could be, and honestly days could go by when Gavin wouldn't even have known he was there if food and water hadn't disappeared. He could escape and not be noticed as missing for days.

Such was the life of a loner.

Now Oscar disappeared beneath the breakfront that came with the unused table. Gavin could still see him peeking out, watching him warily through two glowing amber-green eyes.

"You're not used to this, are you?" he asked, slowly crouching. "Any of it. That makes two of us."

Oscar blinked and turned his head.

Eight o'clock.

A knock that could only be described as hearty thundered at the door.

* * *

You're early, was what Gavin had *meant* to say when he let Ford in. Followed by, *Can I get you something to drink?*

Would that have been right? Did you offer dates complimentary beverages *before* you left the apartment?

What actually happened was this: when Gavin opened the door, the full visual of Ford so physically *present* and crammed full of vitality stopped him in his tracks.

My God.

"Handsome" wasn't good enough a word. A black hoodie over a gray T-shirt and a pair of halfway-worn-out jeans made Ford look good enough to eat, never mind the way his hair begged to be touched, tousled as it was from biking. Thoughts of picnics and gardens fled from his consciousness, replaced by one thing alone: *Ford*.

Why was Ford staring at him? Was that how he looked to Ford? Gavin's cheeks warmed. Surely not. He had on a gray sweater with flecks of blue and green, one of his favorites, and blue jeans. What was so appealing about that?

Ford saw something, even if Gavin didn't understand it. He ate Gavin up with his eyes, the lids growing hooded and the light within them dark and saturated with sensual need. His bright smile didn't fool Gavin, who knew what Ford had on his mind.

Same thing as Gavin had on his. Was it a good idea? A bad idea?

He cleared his throat. "I have a picnic. For us." *Oh God*. "I'd thought. Romance. You like that stuff."

"Sounds good," Ford said, still drinking Gavin in with his gaze.

Gavin wasn't one to throw plans out the window. But this... Good idea, bad idea, Gavin didn't care, and abruptly he didn't *want* to.

He closed the distance between him and Ford and laid his palms on Ford's broad chest. "Or we could stay here," he said, amazed that it was him making the offer.

"Oh thank God," Ford said in a rush. "We can definitely stay here."

Gavin smiled.

* * *

A smile like Gavin's, so pretty and so real despite the nervousness, deserved a reward. Given gently.

Ford tipped Gavin's chin up and bent to brush his sweet mouth with all the good meaning he could pour into such a small thing. Slow and careful. Not Ford's greatest strength. For Gavin, he'd try. For Gavin, it might even be easy. Love did that to a man if it was true.

And so when Gavin leaned into the kiss and should have melted into Ford's arms but didn't, Ford covered Gavin's hands on his chest with his own and held them until the fine tremors running through Gavin's fingers eased.

Gavin broke the kiss with a shaky, self-deprecating laugh that Ford didn't like half as much as his previous smile. "You must think I'm such a hopeless case."

One more small kiss. "You're anything but hopeless. Believe me."

Ford didn't think Gavin believed, but despite that, he turned his cheek toward Ford's palm and rubbed like a lonely cat shyly begging for attention. Even more slowly, he twined his arm around Ford's waist and stroked low, both teasing and daring to hope all at once.

Ford was the one at a loss for words now.

Gavin smiled at him again. Was that amusement Ford saw there this time? Shy but true? "Don't think so hard," he said in his softest voice. "I can smell wood burning."

By God. A joke. That deserved another kiss. Ford forgot he'd meant to be playing with a light hand, but as luck would have it, apparently Gavin didn't mind.

"Didn't mind" being an understatement. Gavin threw himself into the kiss as if he were starving and Ford were a banquet. It was almost all Ford could do to keep up with Gavin's swarming hands locking behind his neck and Gavin—*holy cow*—wrapping a leg around Ford's thigh, as high as he could go.

Most of Ford said *woo-hoo, yes!* The rest warned him, *Tread carefully for once, you big ox.* Ford pushed Gavin down—well, as far as he could make himself let Gavin go—and studied him. "Are you okay?"

Gavin growled. He sounded like a lion cub. "We're... And you ask me..."

"I do." The more Ford checked Gavin out, the more he figured Gavin had something weighing heavy on his shoulders. "What's wrong? Hey, hey, look at me. Gavin? You can tell me."

He could see Gavin's struggle for words before Gavin shook his head and shrugged helplessly.

Okay. So he couldn't coax the words out of Gavin. Maybe Ford could love them out of him. And this time, he meant that in a more carnal—no, *sensual*—way. Show him how good it could be to trust.

"Does anything ever get to you?" Gavin blurted. He pushed his glasses up on his nose. Lightweight or not, they slid right back down again.

If they hadn't make Gavin look so hot and if Ford hadn't had a sudden burning urge to see Gavin naked except for those glasses, Ford would have taken them carefully off Gavin's nose and laid them aside.

Gavin waited for Ford to answer his question. Ford could see the nerves rising again, closer to the surface, and that wouldn't do. He stroked Gavin's jaw with the pads of his thumbs, one on either side. "Sure. Things get to me. All the time."

Gavin blinked. Clearly not the answer he'd expected.

Ford had kind of hoped it wouldn't be, because this was important. "So I do something about them. It helps if you have faith. You can turn things around if you believe. You don't have to believe in luck. Just believe in something. You could believe in me, if you let yourself."

The ghost of a smile passed fleetingly over Gavin's lips. "You make it sound easy."

"It can be." Enough talking. Gavin, vulnerable and somehow naked even with a mouthwatering sweater on, needed to be shown, not lectured, and there was a couch in the corner that positively beckoned.

Ford took Gavin by the hand and pulled. "I could stand to get more comfortable. How about you?"

That likely hadn't been as subtle as Ford had hoped, but maybe that wasn't a bad thing. A sparkle crept into Gavin's eye. He squeezed Ford's hand and nodded.

Good sign. Good, good sign.

* * *

First things first, which meant taking care of Gavin. Ford guided him to the couch and down, one foot propped on the cushion and one flat on the floor. He watched Ford in a way that made Ford's hands shake. Shy, still wary, but willing to give his trust.

"If you knew how much that meant to me," Ford said. He guided both of Gavin's feet to the floor and settled cross-legged between them to start work on the laces of his sturdy walking boots.

Gavin's forehead crinkled. "What?"

Ford kissed the inside of Gavin's thigh. "Tell you later." He rose to his knees, soothing Gavin all the while with nonwordy murmurs. By the time he'd shouldered his way between Gavin's knees to start working on his zipper, Gavin had relaxed as much as he could and even chanced petting Ford's hair.

Ford nuzzled his way up Gavin's thigh and over the nicely promising beginnings of a hard-on beneath. The button-fly was open and the zipper tab was in Ford's hands, but because this was all part of the plan, he asked, "Can I?"

"God yes," Gavin said. Breathless. *Good!* He caught Ford's hands and pressed them down. Those promising beginnings moved beneath Ford's touch, growing and lengthening. He prodded Ford. "Please."

"As you wish." Ford took care lowering the zipper—it took more skill than one might imagine—and directed Gavin up far enough to scoot his jeans and boxer briefs down his hips. Ford had to stop right about there to drink in the pretty sight before him. Gavin, almost fully hard now, growing still harder under Ford's lusty appreciation.

Ford's mouth watered. Nothing beat a good long session of cock worshiping, and there was nothing better that he knew of for making a gun-shy man lose his cool. But he wouldn't take. He'd ask.

Ford kissed the inside of Gavin's thigh. "Tell me," he said, pleased at how that came out and content with whatever answer he might receive. No need to ask if this was going where Ford thought it was going. Only, "How do you want this?"

"What?" Gavin looked like a perplexed owl with his feathers ruffled up.

“Whatever you want, just tell me. It's yours.”

Uh-oh. He'd thrown Gavin for a loop again. Kind of adorable, but mostly kind of sad how Ford could tell no one had ever asked Gavin that question before.

He waited for Gavin to puzzle through it. Hoping.

And tonight he wasn't disappointed.

“I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you were more, um, naked.” He glanced at Ford with a good healthy flush from amusement, not embarrassment.

“Is 'comfortable' the word you're really going for here?” Ford raised Gavin to his feet.

“Not exactly. Is that okay?”

“More than.”

“Then...please.” Slowly but surely, Gavin began to move with more confidence. “Let me see you.”

“All you ever have to do is ask.” Ford began to undo his jeans first, because *whoa, Nellie*, did he need some relief in the zipper region. “Wait, what?”

Gavin had stopped him. “Let me?”

Ford wanted to close his eyes and sigh, but even more did he not want to miss a thing. “Like I said, all you have to do is ask.”

* * *

Ford held still—not easy—and let Gavin puzzle his way through undressing him. He got the feeling Gavin hadn't done this often, and somehow the inexperience—at least when it came to romance—made him all the more endearing.

Proud of himself for managing to last all the way from shoes to the T-shirt beneath his hoodie, Ford reckoned he was due for a reward and wound Gavin into his arms. He got exactly what he wanted when bare skin touched bare skin and his sharp breath in was echoed by Gavin's small moan.

There was something odd in Gavin's gaze when he tipped his head back to look at Ford. “Your turn. Okay? All you have to do is ask.”

Ford recognized that little strangeness now, and that it was only odd because it came from wary Gavin. This was the beginning of his willingness to trust, Ford thought. “Are you sure?”

Gavin nodded.

Chapter Thirteen

Ford eased Gavin over to the lamp and flicked it off. Now nothing but moonlight and city light enveloped them.

"You... The dark?" Gavin sounded puzzled. "You don't want to see?"

"Maybe later."

"I don't get it."

"I'd rather feel." Ford traced the slender, elegant arch of Gavin's neck. "Like this."

"*Oh*," Gavin said on a breath. He laid his hands on Ford, a tentative exploration that fast grew to eagerness, then hunger.

"Hey now, hey. We have time." Ford turned Gavin in his arms so that Gavin faced the window and his back was pressed to Ford's chest.

"What are you—"

"Going with what feels right." Ford smoothed his hand lower and lower on Gavin's torso, then stopped right where he could just barely tease the firm fullness of Gavin's cock. "Taking things as they come."

A pause before Gavin got the joke and then a deep, pained groan that made Ford laugh. "Thank you. I'll be here all night."

"Will you?"

"If you're willing. If you're not sure, then maybe I can convince you to invite me." Ford took Gavin's cock in hand.

Gavin's groan broke in the middle, and the second half had an entirely different tenor. "Oh God." He gulped air. "God. Ford."

Ford nuzzled Gavin's nape, keeping his movements slow and steady, refusing to let Gavin turn around except for an awkward neck crane for a haphazard attempt at a kiss.

"Face forward," Ford said, guiding Gavin. "Close your eyes. Focus on this." He jerked Gavin with slow, lazy strokes, not meant to make him come—yet—and wanting instead to bring all his attention spiraling down to what they were doing there.

Gavin shuddered with the effort to stand still when Ford could tell he wanted to writhe. Ford kissed his nape as a reward and stroked a little faster, a little harder. He couldn't resist, not when the cock in his hand throbbed in time with the beat of Gavin's heart, the same beat Ford could feel in Gavin's neck.

"Stop. God, stop," Gavin blurted. He knocked Ford's hand away. Surprised, Ford let him do so. Gavin shook his head, already damp hair tickling Ford's chest. "I don't want to come yet."

"Then we're on the same page." Ford peppered small kisses as far down Gavin's neck and jaw as he could reach. Gavin arched and stretched for more, his breathing settling.

Not all the way. Good. They were nowhere near done here. Ford let Gavin turn around, hard put to bite back his own groan and harder put still not to just *grab* Gavin and rut their bodies together until they both spilled.

Go slow. Slowww and steady wins the race. Besides, Gavin needs this. To be cherished. And I'm not ashamed to give him that, no more than he should be ashamed to need it.

Ford kept his touch on Gavin, never in the same place twice or for long, teasing him. "What do you want? Anything. Ask, and it's yours."

"Just you," Gavin said simply. "As long as I can keep you."

What could a man say to that? Ford kissed Gavin lingering and slow, dirtier and deep and wet. Gavin wasn't the only one who wanted to spin this out. And how amazing was it that he'd asked?

"Tell me what you want from me, here, now," Ford coaxed. "Honest. I want to know."

Gavin's look this time was maybe a little frustrated, but mostly dark with lust. "I...I—Oh hell."

Ford didn't have a clue where Gavin was going when he yanked free of his hold, but got one PDQ when Gavin's fluid move brought him to his knees at Ford's feet.

Only...there, they had a problem. Height differential. On his knees, the much smaller Gavin would have needed a step stool to reach.

"No problem," Ford said, quick to reassure. "We can improvise."

Gavin was already way ahead of Ford, up on his feet again and guiding Ford to the couch. The big, deep, marvelously comfortable couch with enough room for Ford to sit—be pushed down—and for Gavin to mimic the way they'd started this, only the other way around.

Ford had never seen anyone stare at a cock the way Gavin stared at his. Almost made him want to fidget. Gavin *had* seen it before. What—

Oh. That wasn't uncertainty. *That* was anticipation that Ford quickly decided put his own appreciation for sucking cock to absolute shame.

Gavin had technique. He covered what he couldn't take into his mouth with his fist and knew exactly how hard Ford liked to be gripped. Instinct? Talent? Ford, as he slid his fingers through Gavin's hair both to guide Gavin and to stop himself from thrusting deeper, decided that question could wait.

Gavin had style. He knew tricks Ford hadn't come across before. Figure eights with his tongue, a hint of teeth with exactly the right faint pressure on the thick vein—God, if he hadn't known what that'd do to Ford before, he sure did now.

He even shyly slid his finger into his mouth, wedged in with Ford's cock, then slipped the wet digit beneath and behind Ford's balls. Pressed up.

Ford grunted and bowed over with the effort it took not to fuck in for all he was worth. This...is...about...Gavin, he thought, breathless even inside his head.

Serendipity happened. Gavin grunted and drew off Ford's cock. His shoulders rose and fell with what Ford could tell, even like this, was an effort to hold it back.

Ford exhaled. Maybe a little too roughly. Gavin snapped his head up. He searched Ford with anxious uneasiness. "Should I—" He licked his swollen lips. "I could finish—"

"Not what I meant," Ford rasped. "Don't think something's wrong without asking. Okay?"

Gavin's smile vanished. He nodded as seriously as if they were in school.

"I wasn't scolding." Ford pulled on Gavin to guide him up and down. As he moved Gavin, he too moved, stretching his legs out on the couch. Didn't stop until Gavin straddled him.

Gavin braced himself on Ford's chest, question marks visible in his aura. But as it turned out, they and the small accompanying frown weren't what Ford anticipated. Nor was Gavin drawing tiny love scratches down Ford's chest, barely firmly enough to leave a mark.

"What?" Ford asked as if they had all night and he didn't burn for Gavin so intensely that the fire hadn't already come too close to the last frayed edge of his control.

"You," Gavin started, fumbling but not embarrassed. Determination made him harder. Ford too, though not in the same way. "Want to give you... I don't know. What?" He fisted his hands on Ford's chest, hard knots of nerve and bravery. "Tell me."

Gavin *asked* for something. If he trusted Ford enough to make the offer, Ford needed to take him up on it or risk losing the best part of all this. Sex was good—sex was great—but when hearts were in the game as well as sweat-damp limbs tangled together and mouths that tasted of one another...

One problem. What Ford wanted, he wasn't sure Gavin would be able to give. *Believe that I love you. It's true.*

"Ask me," Gavin insisted. He dug his knuckle into Ford's chest.

Ford could see the courage slipping away. Okay, then. Second best, and pretty darn close to the surface right now. "Ride me."

Gavin stilled, as Ford had thought he might. Why Gavin didn't like to be on top, Ford couldn't figure out and didn't have the brainpower to try at the moment. "You asked what you could give me," he said, not letting Gavin slip away in any sense. "That's it. I'd love watching you."

Doubt replaced Gavin's silent denial.

Maybe it wasn't fair, but it was the truth. "And I don't like looming," Ford admitted. "I'm so scared I'll crush you that I can't..." His turn to trail off and shrug sheepishly. "See? Some things do get to me."

Ford could see Gavin's throat work in a hard swallow, but nothing more before Gavin's lips were on his, coaxing his open and sliding his tongue inside. Could be he'd meant to be gentle, but dear God, were they ever past that by now. Fists tightened, legs wrapped around and about until Ford couldn't tell which belonged to whom, and between them their cocks slid hard together until they had to stop or come.

"For you," Gavin said against Ford's lips. "Only because you asked. And I want to give you this."

Ford groaned and tightened his arms around Gavin. "Don't wanna let you go," he whined, taking it deliberately over the top to keep Gavin smiling. Felt so good in his kiss when he was happy.

As it did now. Gavin dropped a light peck on Ford's lips. "Don't have to," he said. "Reach beneath you. Under the cushion."

Delight lit Ford up from the inside out. He plunged beneath the cushion and hunted for the buried treasure. There. A mostly new tube.

Gavin's lips brushed Ford's ear. "I was thinking about you the other night."

“Holy...” Ford's own words slipped away. All he could do was hold Gavin tight, tight, tight, and try to uncap the lube at the same time.

Multitasking. Mostly underrated if you asked Ford.

And the pleasures should be shared. All of them. “Gavin?”

“Mmm?” His eyes were heavy lidded.

“I want to see you too. Undress for me?”

Gavin laughed soft and low. He pressed his lips to Ford's. “All you had to do was ask.”

Good God. Teasing. Ford only made himself stop kissing Gavin so he could follow through. Otherwise, he wouldn't have given up for a king's ransom. Watching Gavin come alive like this, because of him—

There were better things out there. In the world. Probably.

Right now, Ford couldn't think of any.

* * *

Ford worked his fingers deeper inside Gavin, almost not wanting to stop. Though Gavin's eyes were squeezed tightly shut and his fists still pressed hard and knotted to Ford's chest, his lips were parted on shallow breaths, and—even better—he moved with Ford as Ford pressed in. Way past being stretched. Fucking himself on Ford's fingers.

“Feels so good,” Ford said, all he could manage.

Gavin's eyes opened the barest of slits. He shook his head. Maybe to clear the sweat from his eyes. Maybe not. “Same as last time.”

“Nothing like the last time.” Ford withdrew reluctantly and wiped his hand on Gavin's couch. *Oops.* Gavin didn't notice. His eyes were fully open now, and he stared down at Ford with fast-returning trepidation.

Not allowed. As gently as he could without risking Gavin's nerve breaking, Ford lifted Gavin by the hips and nudged him into position. Gavin's swallow sounded painful, but he nodded. Why was this such a hurdle? But that he was willing to climb over it, or to try, for Ford—

Ford groaned. End of his limits: reached. “I've got you,” he soothed, lowering Gavin inch by inch. Or at least he tried to; when he slid inside his body took over and drew Gavin down hard, slick, fast. Making them both shudder and gasp.

“I've *got* you,” Ford said, catching and holding Gavin's wrists. He said it over again, how many times he didn't know, watched Gavin relax by inches and at last back to where he needed to be. Lips parted, eyes open and dark. Surprised.

Eager. Wanting.

Gavin raised himself on Ford's cock, slid back down, and scratched him with firmer intent. He moaned, and there was no faking that or the jerk of his cock slapping against Ford. “Please...”

Ford wanted to kiss him for that. He settled—and it was hardly “settling”—for taking Gavin by the hips and guiding him to...to—

Making love to Gavin wasn't anything like it had been before, just as Ford had said. Wasn't like it'd been with anyone else, because they hadn't been *Gavin*. The depth he could penetrate and the clinging heat—they were wonderful, beyond intense. But what Ford liked better still was

watching Gavin come undone, rising and falling atop him, writhing and breathing faster and faster still.

Gavin moaned, sudden and sharp, then faster. Ford couldn't see through the haze, but he knew that noise.

"Don't stop." That was begging, Gavin grinding down to take Ford as deep as he could go, his shaking vibrating through Ford. "Oh God, don't stop. *Harder.*"

He was serious. Gavin was always serious. Almost. "I want..." Ford needed to have his hand around Gavin's cock.

"*Harder,*" Gavin repeated, breath coming more quickly and choppily still. He bore down and took Ford deeper than Ford had thought he could go, and left Ford with no choice but to do as he'd been told—asked.

Watched, no words in his head, just images. Gavin, beautiful on the verge, fucking himself deep on Ford. Faster, his breathing rough gulps; deeper, his nails scratching deep into Ford's skin; stopping so abruptly and shuddering. Holding it for one second...two...

"Oh God, I love you," Ford said without thinking.

"*Ford.*" Gavin arched back, ground down, and bowed forward to crush his mouth to Ford's, coming without a hand on him, thick spurts that smeared messy and thick between them.

Serendipity might not have had much to do with it, but Ford didn't care; the flex and squeeze of Gavin's near-violent orgasm around his cock drove him out of what little remained of his mind; he hung on so tight, he heard his knuckles creak, and let it go, all of it, flooding Gavin as far inside as a man could go. Seemed to go on forever, Gavin still kissing him fast, hard, frantic between jerks and spurts—and not long enough.

Ford could do this for the rest of his life. He wanted to.

And when Gavin shivered out his last and collapsed to lie flat on Ford, careless of the mess between them except to lap it up—holy mercy, Ford's still-half-hard cock liked that—Ford thought that maybe it wasn't as impossible a mission as he'd thought, or that it might take as long.

Because when he'd said "*I love you,*" Gavin hadn't told him not to. Three words had made Gavin come.

Ford tried again, just to be sure, smoothing down Gavin's soaked hair and whispering it in his ear. "I love you."

Gavin hid his face against Ford's chest, his glasses digging in, but Ford couldn't care less.

He could feel Gavin's lips too, more so. Quirked into a small, real smile.

"Love you," Ford whispered, holding Gavin to him and savoring the silence of not hearing no. "Love you, love you, love you..."

Chapter Fourteen

Ford was the one to get up and fetch warm, wet washcloths to clean them with. Of course he was. Gavin watched him move, confident in everything he did, at home even though this wasn't his home.

For Ford, home was wherever he happened to be, Gavin thought sleepily. He was that kind of man.

Gavin never thought about much during or after sex. Nor did he talk. He hadn't wanted to. Not before now.

And now the words were rising. No one before compared to Ford. Just like always, Ford got to him. So strange how it seemed not to matter as much.

He stopped Ford from going down on one knee to wipe the drying cum off him. "Let me take care of you first."

Ford grinned and sat bare naked on the floor for Gavin to lean over and carefully swab him clean.

Gavin wondered if Ford knew how different this was for him.

He thought maybe Ford did.

Ford kissed the back of Gavin's wrist and rested his head on the couch cushions so close that his hair tickled Gavin's side. Inexplicably, he began to chuckle.

The quiet rumble of laughter interrupted, again, Gavin's gathering of the words he *had* to get out. They needed to be spoken. Tonight. Ford never stopped giving. It might not be a two-sided question of owing, for Ford wouldn't be one to keep a tally, but Gavin was. He wanted. No. He needed.

He would have if Ford hadn't found something funny. Annoyed, Gavin flopped over with the last of his physical strength. "What?"

"Sh." Ford didn't move except to point beneath a bookcase directly facing them. "Do you see?"

At first, Gavin didn't. Then—"My God," he breathed, holding utterly still. Huddled beneath the bookcase, Oscar watched them with unreadable feline eyes. Closer than an F1 cross should have come with all the ruckus and racket.

"Hey, big guy," Ford crooned. He shifted forward as slowly as a leaf drifting from tree to earth, as fluidly as water from a pitcher. How such a large man could be so graceful baffled Gavin.

Not so much that he didn't try to stop Ford. "I know what you're thinking. *Don't* try to pet him. He'll scratch or bite."

"I'll be careful," Ford said, intent on his progress. Beneath the bookcase, Oscar remained anchored in place. "I just want him to know I won't hurt him." He stopped within arm's reach, which for Ford was considerable, and extended his hand for Oscar to sniff if Oscar were so inclined.

Gavin watched, fear skittering up his spine. He wasn't joking; Oscar *would* slash bloody gouges in Ford's hand if he decided Ford posed a threat. "*Careful.*"

"It's okay," Ford murmured. He held still, letting Oscar make up his mind.

Oscar didn't come any closer, but—It was a night for firsts, Gavin supposed. From beneath the bookcase, a noise Gavin first thought was a wood rasp emerged.

But no. Oscar was *purring*. Only for a second before he disappeared into the depths of darkness where he couldn't be seen, but...

"My God," Gavin breathed. Did Ford's charm work on animals too? He stifled a loopy giggle. It made sense; he'd be that kind of man.

Ford's grin nigh blinded Gavin when he turned around. "Did you see that?"

"Unbelievable," Gavin said. He wasn't so thick he couldn't recognize a parallel when he saw one. *Not* a sign. Or an omen. Just a sense of symmetry. "Ford. Come here." He opened his arm as Ford had to Oscar.

Ford swarmed happily over and stopped not quite so happily when Gavin let the words he needed to say come out. "We need to talk."

His lover looked abruptly uncertain and uneasy, not that Gavin could blame him. "That doesn't sound good."

"It's not..." Stupid, stupid way to start this conversation. Gavin patted the edge of the couch, the best way he could think of to coax Ford nearer. "That's not what I meant."

Some of the enthusiasm leaked out of Ford as he finished his journey. Gavin hated himself a little for that.

He hated himself far more for what he had to do next. The truth might crush Ford. Might make him pack his metaphorical bags and take off for good.

But it couldn't stand between them any longer.

Gavin licked his lips, struck by how odd the contrast was between kiss swollen and scared dry.

Leave it to Ford to pick up on the smallest cues even now. He came to Gavin without needing any further provocation and took Gavin's hand between both of his. He met Gavin's eyes, and Gavin let him.

Gavin held him there. "You asked me before," he started. "Questions I couldn't answer."

"You don't have to. Not if you don't want."

"I don't want. But I do have to." Gavin pressed his fingers to Ford's lips.

Ford, the annoying romantic, kissed them.

"Stop. Just...let me, while I can, before I can't. If you want to know. Your chance. This is it."

Ford hesitated. Of course he wouldn't want to push, but maybe he knew Gavin meant it about this being a onetime offer. Finally, with a sigh, he nodded.

Gavin let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Best to look at this like taking medicine or pulling off a bandage. One quick jerk to get the worst over with all at once. He should have done it already. Would have, if he could have.

"You're not the first man who asked me to marry him."

Ford's mouth dropped open.

Gavin drove on. "His name was Donny. He was a lot like you, Ford. A *lot*. Or I thought at first. Not as much now. Risk taking. Excited about life. He asked me to run away with him at nine thirty on a Thursday night."

"Gavin." Ford started to reach for him, his dismay near-palpable.

"*Stop*." Gavin shifted away from Ford. "By midnight, we'd booked ourselves into the cheapest room at a posh hotel near the Canadian border. Had sex. Me on top. Him watching me, just in the moonlight, saying I was beautiful."

God, oh God, Gavin didn't want to go on. But he had to finish this.

"When I woke up at six in the morning, he was gone. I didn't know where. Or why. Not until he sent me a postcard about a month later. He'd met a guy in a bar who gave him the number of a producer—Donny was a stage actor wannabe. Maybe that's why I never figured out that he was a natural liar, or that...that everything was just one big story to him. All the world was a stage and everyone except him nothing but ephemera." Gavin shook his head.

He'd expected any number of reactions from Ford, but not the one he got. Not Ford drawing in on himself, somehow small now despite his hockey-giant body. Dismayed. Broken somehow.

No. No. That was *not* meant to happen. Gavin wouldn't let it. He reached out to Ford, caught his hand, and refused to let go. "That was then. This is now. And you are not Donny," he said, shaking Ford's arm hard to drive that point home. "You are not and I don't think you ever will be. But that's why I can't marry you. Why I won't."

Ford's expression grew unreadable; Gavin grew uneasy in equal measure. Nothing more at all came out, nothing but empty air.

Gavin waited. The silence of uncertainty was the most terrible of all.

Ford got to his knees, both of them, and propped his crossed arms on the couch. Eye to eye with Gavin. "There's something I don't know how to say."

Gavin snorted a surprised laugh. "There's a first."

Ford began slowly. "Don't think you're going to make me run even with something you know I don't want to hear. Okay?"

Gavin wanted to say *thank you*. He didn't have the words anymore. He tried to show it instead in the way he copied Ford's signature move and brushed the backs of his knuckles along Ford's cheekbone.

Ford shifted, moving in a way Gavin couldn't make sense of until he was on one knee. "I know you're still not used to hearing it, but I love you." He took the hand he'd held between both of his and pressed it over his heart, then over Gavin's. "Keep that with you. Because it's true."

Ah God. Ford...

Ford rested his cheek in Gavin's hand and looked at him with the kind of love that *still*, even after this night, Gavin almost couldn't handle.

Head bowed and eyes closed, Gavin shaped the words on his tongue without sound. *I wish I could say yes. For you.*

Chapter Fifteen

The earliest part of the morning was when Gavin kept himself busy with all the little things. Checking schedules, making coffee, taking care of paperwork that no one wanted to bother with but someone had to.

Today he'd accomplished almost nothing. Would have been an absolute nothing if he didn't count starting the pot of office-staff coffee. After that, the always tall stack in his in-box lay ignored by the wayside while Gavin stared out at the street, seeing and not really seeing it at the same time.

He could still feel Ford inside him when he moved, especially when he sat. All the more reason to stick to one place. The sweet burn when he twisted his feet to make the chair swivel left to right was something to be savored.

More, it kept him focused in a way he wasn't accustomed to. Sharper. Clearer. Inward facing, examining heart and mind and wondering at what he found there.

Mostly, what he found was Ford. All roads led back to him and the ever-circling what-if questions to which Gavin could yet find no answers, but constantly, annoyingly felt them just beyond his grasp.

Every so often movement outside would catch his eye and draw him up to the window proper. So far this morning he'd gone three times. Once when a fleet of yellow school buses, freshly painted and waxed, drove by with such a shine to them they reflected the sun so sharply as to make Gavin squint and cover his eyes.

A second time, when clouds rushed fast across the rising sun, making Gavin wonder if there'd be a sudden storm or an eclipse he'd forgotten about. Nearly as dark as night, and then as fast as it'd come on, the clouds drifted away.

"Weird," he'd heard more than one person mutter, and Gavin was inclined to agree.

The last time Gavin had gotten up, he had lingered at the window, shaking his head in amazement. Of all the things in the world, a line of ducks quacked and flapped their wings as they made their way across the street in a haphazard but stubborn row and brought traffic to a standstill. Ducks! There wasn't even a pond nearby. Gavin would have seen it from his window.

Children's exhibit. He remembered as if he'd heard about it a hundred years ago. *Behold the wonders of nature. Quack, quack. Right. They must have escaped.*

Gavin snorted quietly behind his hand so as not to draw attention to himself. More than he already had. Curators and office staff had to have noticed Mr. Machine's abrupt cease and desist.

Oddly, Gavin found he couldn't make himself care.

He watched the last of the ducks make its way across the street, shaking its wings at the car that dared honk at it. *Who's afraid of the big Buick wolf? Not I.*

Ford would have seen all of these as omens, Gavin thought. Idly, just for amusement, he tried to see them as Ford would have. The buses: a bright new journey. The darkened sky: unexpected storms that made the passage perilous. The ducks: a “come hell or high water” determination to make it to the other side without looking back.

Gavin frowned and rubbed away the shiver that made his arms prickle with goose bumps. Weird, and if he let himself believe, it could make a sort of sense, but it was all games, and Gavin knew he'd made it all up.

Strangest of all this morning, even knowing he'd invented the whole string of omens and disdained their reality didn't stop Gavin from wanting to look for more and to wonder what these meant beneath the surface. Poking at himself with the sudden insight. *Against all odds, do I believe?*

The ring of his office phone came as a welcome distraction. He straightened his sweater to bring his mind back away from the fantastical and into the professional, lifted the phone to his ear, and said, “Mill Museum. You've reached Gavin Yamea. How may I assist you?”

“Gavin?”

For a moment Gavin thought it was Ford, but it didn't sound like him. For another blankly confused moment he couldn't figure out who it might be, and the bafflement kept him silent.

“Open the door, would you? I'm standing right outside and getting some funny looks out here.”

Still puzzled, Gavin did as he was told. No one dangerous would have gotten past security. “You're not Ford,” he said, knowing he sounded like an idiot. “Who is this?”

“Baby, it's me. I know it's been a while, but don't tell me you've forgotten.”

Oh God. No. Gavin wanted to click the phone off; he wanted to pitch it out the window; perhaps he would have if his hand hadn't been already on the knob and turning in when comprehension clicked.

The door swung inward to reveal Donny leaning on the jamb, larger-than-life and brighter than ever, the brilliance of his smile dazzling and the entire effect rendering Gavin stunned into silence.

Donny laughed, that big, ebullient laugh Gavin remembered all too well. “Would you look at you? You're more gorgeous than I remembered. Can I come in?”

* * *

Donny didn't wait for Gavin to answer yes or no. He sailed in as if the invitation was a formality, a teasing sop to courtesy and nothing more.

Gavin would have stopped him. Only he couldn't seem to move.

Either ignorant—or maybe “clueless” was a better word—or just not caring, Donny meandered around Gavin's office as carelessly as he would have three years ago, poking through papers and lifting the few small trinkets Gavin had collected since Ford entered his life. “Man, talk about close quarters. Don't you get claustrophobic in here?”

“I go outside when I like,” Gavin said. Poke, poke, prod, prod. Donny went about shoving his nose in wherever he liked. “Watch it. Some of that is confidential.”

"You're joking, right?" Donny sat on the edge of Gavin's desk, nudging a stack of folders as askew as the Tower of Pisa. "It's a museum. What's gonna be so secret in here?" He grinned gleefully at Gavin and patted the desk beside him. "I've missed you."

Gavin didn't speak. Couldn't. He'd have thought he'd have oceans to say right now. He did. The words refused to come out, choked in his throat.

"Huh." Donny tilted his head owlishly, a move so like Ford's that Gavin's tongue froze to the roof of his mouth. "Hey, I just noticed. You finally dropped the stutter. Good for you."

Gavin said nothing.

"Or maybe not," Donny said, laughing again as if that were actually funny. "You're not coming? I came all this way for you." He beckoned Gavin.

Despite the invitation, he didn't notice Gavin didn't come to him, already distracted by the makeshift sculpture Ford had put together with eccentric affection. "What the hell is this?" He picked it up to turn it to and fro. "A deer and a cat on a bike? Weeeeird."

Gavin found *some* words. "Careful. It's a gift."

"From who, a five-year-old?" Donny tossed Ford's gift from hand to hand and thumped it down carelessly.

The kitten fell off the deer's back and tumbled to the floor. Gavin watched it roll beneath his desk. A cold knot of uneasiness made his stomach twist. Ford would have called that an omen too. Not a good one.

"I think you should leave," Gavin said. It would have been "blurted" not too long ago. A fine shade of difference; the words still not conceived with care, but this time no regret in speaking them. Just relief. "Now."

Donny either didn't hear Gavin or ignored him. Gavin saw another difference now between Ford and Donny. Ford might spin off on a tangent. Donny just didn't care.

"Donny." Gavin cleared his throat. "You should go."

"What? I just got here." Donny scooted farther back on the desk and swung his legs. He tossed his hair out of his face, or pretended to. Gavin might not have been a fashionista, but he recognized hair cut and styled and painstakingly arranged into a bedhead look. He gave Gavin a smile that had done the trick every time. Back then.

Not now. He'd known Donny was an idiot. Why had he never realized that Donny was a fool?

"Gavin, seriously. Don't be this way," Donny coaxed. He gazed at Gavin as if Gavin's growing temper was adorable. Ford did the same. Only...that was different. It had to be.

Gavin searched for the difference between the two.

Donny rolled his eyes. "Come *on*. How long's it been?"

"Three years ago. Today," Gavin said, the date on the calendar jumping out at him. Dear God. "Around one a.m."

"The way you keep time in your head. Anal to the last. And that was some pretty good..." Donny waggled his eyebrows. He patted his knee. "Come on. Be nice."

Ah. There. The pieces snapped into place. Donny looked at him as an adorable doll, something to play with. Ford looked at him as something treasured. Neither terribly flattering to the masculine ego, but by damn there was a big difference between the two.

And there was more. "Why did you leave?"

Donny made a face. "Gavin, don't drag up the past like that..."

"No." By damn, he wasn't going to get away with a dodge. "I've waited three years to find out."

"You know why. I got cold feet, I guess. Marriage? I mean, it's pretty big." Donny shrugged in a way that would have been and still was, in a skewed sort of way, endearingly sheepish. "And then there was that chance the producer offered."

"Did you have to get down on your knees for him to seal the deal?" Blurted. Not regretted.

Donny's rare silence answered that question. He recovered as fast as ever, though, and hurtled on. "Look, let's leave the past in the past, okay? I mean, three years is a lot of water under the bridge. Bygones. Turns out *Les Misérables* isn't so much happening after all. Not yet, anyway. I've got weeks off between performances, and since I'm in town, I thought maybe we could hang out."

Weeks off? You mean you were fired. And "hang out"? The direct translation for that would be "pick up right where we left off."

"Anyway. How about you and me go hit the town tonight? It's a pretty far cry from New York or San Francisco. Wow, Gavin, you would *love* those places."

"You don't know me at all, do you?"

"Huh? You and me used to stay up until the break of dawn."

They never had. Either another lie or someone Donny had confused Gavin with. Both made Gavin sick.

"Say yes. We'll have so much fun, I promise. For me?"

"No." One word. Clear. Ringing. Ford would have understood how much Gavin meant that. Two more: "Get out."

"You don't mean that, sugar." Donny moved as quickly as Ford. Gavin had forgotten that about him. And he could pin a man into a corner just as efficiently, blocking out the light. Gavin couldn't help the way he reacted, three years' worth of reflex drawing him as still and silent as a graven image.

"Pretty eyes," Donny said, taking Gavin's glasses off and tossing them onto the desk. "God, you are gorgeous. I made a mistake walking away from you. Hey."

Hey. One small word. One refrain. Gavin couldn't breathe. Couldn't stop Donny from bending and kissing him, his lips soft, his cologne sharply crisp, and the heat of his body making Gavin sweat. Reflex. Gavin's lips parted to let Donny in.

"That's my boy," Donny said. He slapped Gavin playfully on the hip and laughed when Gavin put his hand to his mouth. "God, I love how shy you are. Totally cute. Okay. Eight o'clock tonight good for you?"

"Donny, I..." Gavin rubbed his lips. They tingled. "I didn't say yes."

Donny waved airily at him. "I'm going to go look up some of the guys. Do you still live in the same place?"

"No."

"I'll find you." Donny grinned cheekily. "I'll call you. We'll hook up. It'll be like old times."

“No.”

Donny blew him a kiss. “Old stick-in-the-mud. It's cute. I wish I'd remembered that sooner. I promise it'll be good. Besides, you don't have someone in your life right now, do you?” He didn't wait for an answer. Assuming Gavin didn't. He wouldn't have, back then. “See you at eight, gorgeous.”

He left as quickly as he'd come, slamming the door casually and carelessly behind him. Hard enough that the door bounced back and in. The rush of air knocked the deer and bicycle off their precarious balance, off the desk. They broke apart when they landed.

Gavin crouched to pick them up, but his hands were shaking too hard. *No. No no no no no—*

In that position, with the broken deer in his hands, he was at the perfect angle to see small feet in polished wingtips stopping in his doorway. To look up and see Roger leaning just as cockily as Donny had on the door, dusting off his hands. “That's one-nil,” he said. “Your turn.”

Gavin was quite aware of rising to his feet, of putting the deer, kitten, and bike carefully in the middle of his desk. “You told him. Looked Donny up and told him where to find me.”

Roger smirked.

“You told him.”

“You sound like a broken record. Want me to change your needle? No, wait. You've got that hockey moron to grease your gears. And now you've got the pretty-boy idiot as well, and isn't that going to be—”

He didn't get to finish that sentence. Gavin had never hit a man with his fist before. Hurt like hell, but by God he wished he'd done it sooner.

* * *

Gavin closed the museum door behind him with a soft *click*.

Fired. They'd told him to pack up and go. He guessed that happened when someone broke a man's nose, when he had to be pulled off before he kicked his opponent in the head.

Huh. Who'd have thought?

Roger had gotten in a few strikes back. No one seemed too busy bothering to worry about the dizziness that beset Gavin. He hadn't minded. When they'd said go, by God, he'd been glad to leave.

So odd. This place used to be the home he cared about. When had that ceased to be? Maybe the minute Ford came in to take him out. Maybe when Donny sailed in as if nothing had ever happened.

Maybe it never had been that way after all.

He had no idea where to go. Clinic, to get patched up? Home, to take care of the problem himself?

To Ford's? *No. Not yet.* Gavin wanted the world to steady a bit beneath his feet, despite the urge to run to him. He wanted to get his own balance first.

“Where” would have to come to him. What to do—that, Gavin knew with a sudden clarity that seemed too bright and cold, like staring into an ice-coated sun.

On the surface, it made no sense. But it was what had to be done. Not just for himself either. For Ford, who'd be proud of him for everything today, and maybe this most of all.

Things didn't seem so impossible anymore. No. That wasn't fully right. Things like putting his trust in Ford, who'd been nothing but trustworthy, didn't seem impossible at all anymore.

Ford was something he could believe in.

* * *

Gavin knelt in front of the bookcase Oscar had hidden beneath. They'd both been there for what, close to an hour? His knees ached even with the pillow he'd put beneath them for padding.

Didn't matter.

A line of cat treats, still good inside the package Gavin had bought back when he didn't know any better, stretched between man and wild animal. Untouched. So far.

Gavin said nothing. Only waited. Watched Oscar flick his tail back and forth, but never looking away from Gavin, fixed firmly in his sights. He'd never locked eyes this long with Oscar before. He could grow hypnotized staring into those windows to the wild animal's soul.

He wouldn't call this a test, nor a sign, nor any kind of *Twilight Zone* moment. He wouldn't. Just...something he needed to do, to see if he had this much courage now. This kind of faith that would last, that Ford had given him.

"It's okay, Oscar," he murmured. "You're safe."

Oscar narrowed his eyes, clearly dubious. Yet he inched forward. Gavin almost thought he'd been mistaken, but there was Oscar's paw almost at the edge of one treat.

Gavin waited, breath held tight.

Almost delicately, Oscar drew the treat underneath the bookcase and, with himself, out of sight.

Not much, but it was a start. Gavin even thought he heard Oscar crooning the smallest of rough-rasped purrs.

All right, then. As signs went, it wouldn't make sense to anyone else but him and Ford. He wasn't sure he believed in it. But it gave him confidence in what he wanted to do.

Maybe that was the whole point in believing, even in things that weren't and couldn't really be true.

Gavin found the phone in his pocket without looking and dialed Donny's number. There or not, he had a message to deliver, and it could go to voice mail as long as the words could be spoken.

Either it wasn't much, or it was everything. Maybe both.

And it was a start.

Chapter Sixteen

"You said I could come up for coffee and cookies. You didn't tell me I'd need hip boots or maybe a shovel." Kayla stood on tiptoe at the threshold and shaded her eyes to peer into Ford's apartment. "View halloo!"

"It's not *that* bad. Your choice. Thin Mints and chocolate macaroon thingies with fresh coconut going once, going twice—"

"Sold." Kayla daintily picked her way into the apartment. Honestly, it *wasn't* terrible. Mostly. Ford lived by the "if I still know where things are, it isn't actually a disaster" rule. And he knew what Kayla's endgame was. Cheering him up.

Ford shook his head at himself.

Kayla took a light seat on the couch—after poking the cushions. "Okay, spill."

"Where?"

"Not on the couch, you idiot. Unless you're in the habit of"—she made a surprisingly rude gesture and a couple of honking noises—"over here. In which case I have to say nice job with the spot removal."

Another reason to love Kayla was how she didn't hop right up with a heartfelt "eww!" at the idea of sitting in a love nest. All the cozy family feeling of a kid sister without the sibling awkwardness at times like these.

"In the past, yeah," Ford said in the interest of honesty. "Lately? No."

Kayla tipped her head like a bird. "I know you've gotten some."

"Kayla," Ford protested.

She got why he didn't care for the phrasing, and patted his knee in apology. "I know you've been together. It's always at Gavin's? Makes sense to me. He seems like the kind of guy who's comfy on his home turf. Now, *spill*. There's something wrong with this picture. There has been all night."

Ford popped off the couch as if the springs were loaded, and made smartly for the kitchen. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh-uh." Kayla had such a light step and quick bound that she shocked the heck out of Ford by pushing her way under his arm without him having known she'd left the couch and before he'd managed to snag the cookies off the shelf. She peered up at him from beneath the mass of his solid arm and petted as high up as she could reach. "You look... I don't know, Ford. I've been trying to figure it out. Something's bothering you."

Ford mumbled under his breath, sighed, and pushed his hands through his hair. "Sort of?"

"Gotcha. Forget the cookies. Talk to me."

There was a strangeness in being commanded to confide in a five-foot-nothing currently dressed in vintage Jams and a Lady Gaga T-shirt, but what the hey, right? Ford always did feel better when he let 'er rip. Good on Kayla for pushing.

Kayla bounced up, snagged a box of Cocoa Puffs instead of the cookies, and led the way, beckoning Ford to follow in her footsteps. Halfway there she twirled around to walk backward, already digging into the box and plucking out munch-sized mouthfuls. "You are such a girl. Inviting a lady up to your apartment for cookies and actually meaning cookies?"

"Cookies are delicious. I'll have you know I'm good in the kitchen."

"No way you make good cookies. Takes measurements and all that jazz. Nope. You're just a girl." Kayla grinned at him, a chocolate smile.

"Ugh." Ford pretended disgust as part of the game, though he had a feeling his snickers were giving him away.

"*Girl*," Kayla insisted. "Next time trying asking someone up to see your etchings."

"What are etchings, anyway? I am not a girl." Ford indicated the length and angular blockiness of his body. "Exhibit A."

"So you're a girl with an unfortunate body-hair problem and no boobs. Sucks to be you."

"Not a girl!" Ford made a swipe for Kayla. She danced out of reach. "I am metrosexual."

"Girl."

"In touch with my feminine side!"

"That's a hundred percent of you."

Ford wasn't the kind of guy who'd grab his crotch to prove her wrong. Not that the idea didn't cross his mind, but—*Nah*. He stopped in place instead and held out his arm at shoulder level. "Okay, so I'm a girl. Try and pull my arm down."

Kayla glared. "I have brothers. I know how this game goes."

"You brought it on yourself, she-devil." Ford wagged his fingers. "If you can pull my arm down, I'll tell you what's going on up here." He pointed his thumb headward. "Deal?"

"No tickling." Kayla tossed her cereal box on the couch—oh, now who was the messy one?—and made a jump up for Ford's arm.

He let her dangle and growl like a kitten long enough to make his point before he bounced her. "Who's the girl now?"

Kayla kicked him smartly in the shins, not one but both.

"Ow!" Ford dropped her. "That's against the rules."

"Not only a girl, but a wuss too. I told you no tickling. You said nothing about no kicking." Kayla plunked down on the couch, hmm'd in appreciation of its softness, and crossed her legs beneath her. "You big goof, I ask because I care."

She reached for Ford, who let her pull him down this time. The shock wave caused a tsunami effect that nearly bounced her right off the couch again, but she hung on to Ford and spilled cereal in his lap while she was at it.

Ford steadied Kayla, admiring her pert little face and the adorable twinkle in her eye. "You know..." he said, straightening spikes of blonde hair that'd twisted askew.

"There is a look in your eyes I do not like. Put that thought *away*, big boy." Kayla scrambled out of reach.

“Kayla, jeez. You're pretty. I appreciate pretty, even if I don't have a clue what to do with it.”

Kayla groaned. “You weren't thinking about dumping Gavin for me?”

“God no! I just said no to the girlie bits before I hit high school.”

“Dick.” She pinched him. “Don't scare me like that.”

“I'm that unappealing? You wound me.”

“No, you're plenty appealing,” Kayla said with a nicely appreciative once-over to prove her point. “But you're also totally gaga for Gavin. Cuckoo for his Cocoa Puffs.” She waved the cereal box and pointed out her T-shirt. “How d'you like those signs?”

Actually, Ford kind of did.

“Also, when I think about you and me, I mostly think about being crushed like a bug. Not so much a turn-on.” Kayla wrinkled her nose to let Ford know she was joking and nudged him with the toe of her shoe. “Talk to me. It's weird when you don't. I'm used to Ford Plus. Ford Lite kinda sucks.”

“I don't know.” Ford crossed his arms behind his head and rested against them. “Where do I start?”

“In the middle and work your way out. Doofus.” Kayla sobered. “It's Gavin, right? You dimmed like someone blew out a candle when I mentioned him. Drooped like a sad little moth.”

Ford stopped her before she could come up with any more alarming metaphors. “I honestly don't know. I just—” He tapped his chest. “It feels heavy in here.”

“And that's not a good sign.”

“Not usually, no, but I don't think it's a sign. It could be. I'm not sure.”

Kayla waited silently for Ford to go on.

How to say this without sounding like the most selfish dick on the planet? “I'm not sure of *him*.”

Kayla's eyebrows shot up. “Mmm?” Her best attempt at keeping it zipped while zinging question marks at Ford.

Needing something to do with his hands, Ford started to unlace Kayla's shoe. He could work a mean cat's cradle. “What if I read the signs wrong?” Ford confessed at last, though he felt no better for finally letting it out. “Things are going so well. Great, even. So why can't I get this doubt out of my head?”

“Oh...Ford,” Kayla sighed. “Don't let yourself go there. It'd be like Harry Potter ending with You-Know-Who stomping Harry flat.”

“Never read the books, but I know what you mean. What *I* mean is...what if I've been wrong and Gavin's been right from the beginning? If he won't ever marry me, and Kayla, I think he honestly means it, then maybe I made a mistake when I read those signs. Maybe I should just leave him be before I break him.”

“Uh-huh. Here, hold still.”

“Why?”

Kayla wiggled free of Ford's fiddling and punched him smartly in the ribs. Before he'd finished his yelp of protest, she'd sat up and caught him by his square chin. “Do not be an idiot.”

“That's kind of harsh.”

"Tough love, big guy." Kayla had surprising finger strength. Or maybe Ford just wanted to hear what she had to say enough to stay put. "Even if you *did* read the signs wrong—and now that I've seen what you can do, I *so* doubt it—then so what? Would it change how you feel about Gavin?"

Ford took the time to consider that, drawing on all his heritage to formulate the right answer. Lot of help that was. He got nothing but a great big "who knows?" from all quarters.

He had to answer from his own heart. "No," he said at last. "I love Gavin. I do. But I still wish I felt sure of things. You know?"

"I do know." Kayla patted his cheek. "You're a big romantic and a giant softy, and since you're deep in love you naturally want a wedding with flowers and a cake you can smooch into your husband's face, and a ring on your finger. Here's the thing. Doubt is natural. Why do you think 'getting cold feet' is in the lexicon?"

Ford blinked. "Huh?"

"Besides. Gavin loves you too. Or at least he'd better. You, Mister, are a hell of a catch."

"I think I'm in his heart too," Ford said.

"There you go. Would it help if you looked for another sign?" Kayla hopped from tangent to tangent as easily as she would from foot to foot. "Something to back it up?"

Ford brightened. "Could be, yeah."

"Do your thing, Svengali."

"Svengali did *not* do what I do. Sh. Gotta concentrate." Ford opened himself to the possibilities and cast his unfocused gaze around the room. Ears pricked too in the near-total silence.

Which was why he and Kayla both yelped and nearly levitated out of their seats when the knock sounded at his door.

"Holy *cats*," Kayla panted, pressing her hand to her chest. "Also, who the heck?"

"I don't know." Ford had had a lot of practice vaulting over this couch for one reason or another and put it to good use now, skidding in stocking feet to the door. "Besides, I asked for a sign, right?"

He opened the door. Gavin stood on his doormat, arms full and eyes only for Ford.

"You're home," Gavin said.

Ford gaped at him.

"Ask and ye shall receive, boy howdy," Kayla said from the couch. "Remind me never to ask you to pray for rain. Jeez."

Ford picked Gavin up bodily and kissed him. Poured all his heart and soul and hope into it. And Gavin, as if they were picking up where they'd left off when it was good, right before Ford had asked and Gavin had said no, Gavin tossed his armload onto the nearest handy surface and gave back as much as he got, wrapping his legs around Ford's waist and digging his hands into Ford's hair. The band popped off Ford's ponytail and pinged off the facing wall.

Ford considered it a heck of a small price to pay.

He heard a familiar happy sigh somewhere behind him. "And I think that's my cue," Kayla said. She squeezed past them where they blocked the door.

Gavin squeaked. "Did she just pinch my ass, or was that you?"

Ford threw back his head and laughed, and wow, did that feel good.

"It's a really pinchable ass," Kayla said without a single trace of regret. Ford could just see her waving and giving him a thumbs-up over Gavin's shoulder. He returned the favor and, when she'd shut the door, turned all his attention to Gavin, where it should be.

Or tried to. Gavin kissed him once more, all too quick but encouragingly affectionate, and let go of his monkey hold. "Manhandling me again," he mumbled.

"You love it."

Gavin's cheeks pinked appealingly. "Maybe I do."

Music to Ford's ears. He set Gavin carefully on his feet and stood back a few inches to better admire him.

His jaw dropped. "What the hell happened to you?"

Gavin grinned. Normally, Ford would have been all over that with some more kisses—honest to God, kissing Gavin was addictive—but...

"You should see the other guy," Gavin said proudly.

"Gavin." Ford hovered his touch over the bruises and scrapes on Gavin's pretty face, not so pretty now. A real shiner well on its way to black-and-blue, an unpleasant bruise over his cheekbone, scratch marks, and worst of all, a swollen lip. "You're this banged up and you let me kiss you that hard?"

"I wanted you to." Blushing or not, Gavin stood firm. "And you really should see the other guy."

"Who?"

Gavin's grin widened and brightened. "Guess."

Criminy, if getting into fights lit him up like this, Ford wondered if Gavin should take up boxing as a hobby. Or maybe not. Ford couldn't take seeing him hurt like this again. "Don't," he said, settling for stroking Gavin's neck, as the nape was the only place he could be sure Gavin wasn't all battered up. "Just tell me who."

"Roger."

Okay, that was a different story, and it called for some celebration. Ford took an exuberant chance and picked Gavin up by the waist, then spun him around. "Hot *damn!*"

He put Gavin down before he could protest, but for the first time Ford wondered if maybe Gavin might not have. "How bad is he?"

"Broken nose. Maybe some stitches," Gavin said.

"Amazing. Huh." Ford's pride dimmed a tad. "Did you get in trouble?"

"I got fired." Gavin blazed with pride. And...a little something more. Ford wasn't sure he liked either of those possibilities. It worried him that Gavin was so glad to walk away from something he'd loved.

Gavin picked up on that. He wouldn't have before. "I need to tell you why." He took Ford by the hand and pulled. It really was a night for firsts, wasn't it? "Sit before you fall down," he said, sounding worried now. "What's wrong?"

Ford fought down the pall that tapped its fingers impatiently, wanting to color over his pleasure again in shades of gray. "Nothing."

"You're a bad liar." Gavin led Ford to the couch and arranged them so that they faced each other, exactly as Ford and Kayla had sat, only completely different somehow. In the lamplight, the bruises and marks on Gavin's face softened. Or maybe that was just his general mood.

He studied Ford the way Kayla had. Ford grew a little more uncomfortable than he had with her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Ford lied.

"Uh-huh." Gavin tried to quirk one eyebrow. It didn't work so well with a black eye beneath it. He settled for propping his chin on his hand and his elbow on his knee and frowned at Ford. "You look..." He stopped. "I don't like it."

Do not let him see you doubting. What else would make him run farther or faster? Dumdum. "I'm fine," Ford said. He forced the uneasiness down.

Gavin wasn't buying it, and his reluctance told Ford he knew he was about to make it worse. "We need to talk."

"I really hate conversations that start with those words," Ford confessed.

"*Not* like that." Gavin took a deep breath. "I hope."

"I don't like those much better."

"Then let me finish. First. Here. I got you something. No fair calling me a girl, okay?"

Synchronicity. A guy had to love it. Or he didn't.

"I promise I won't," Ford said. He kept his word, though he was kind of hard put not to laugh or *aww* when Gavin worked a stuffed tiger that reminded Ford of Hobbes out of his pocket and tucked it down the front of Ford's jeans.

"You like symbolism," Gavin explained. "And I kind of broke the other one. Well, I didn't. And I can fix it. But it's a long story. Hold on." He breathed, visibly working to keep cool and vocal while digging in his pocket, and pulled out a flyer for an exhibit at the museum. He pressed it, careful as if it were glass, into Ford's hands.

"I'm confused."

"Yeah. Just—" Gavin rubbed the back of his neck. "Open it. Carefully."

Still puzzled but not a little intrigued, Ford unfolded the paper with as much caution as he could muster up, and he wasn't bad when he really tried. Unfortunately, finding the hidden treasure didn't provide him with any clues.

"Ashes?"

"I need to tell you what happened."

Ford nodded, caught up in the story and in the intensity of Gavin's stare. It wasn't like Gavin's usual. He seemed more focused. Clearer. His irises even seemed a lighter brown.

"Donny came by the museum today."

Ford's heart sank like a stone thrown off the Empire State Building.

"Wait." Gavin gripped Ford's wrist. "I'm not done." He looked a touch worried himself, and his speech rhythm grew more uneven. "Donny came by. I *did not* invite him. Roger told him where to find me. Hence the—" He waved at his face. "Still proud?"

Ford had to think about that one. Hard to do when he kept hearing the name "Donny" echo over and over in his head. "I didn't even know he was in town."

Gavin's grip on Ford tightened. "Neither did I. I swear."

"I believe you."

"You'd better."

Ford wasn't sure. He wanted to believe, and he knew he could trust Gavin, but...there were things Gavin held back when he wasn't able to get the truth out...

Gavin blew on the ashes in Ford's hands. "He's gone. From here." He tapped over his heart. "Seeing him again. I thought if I was ever dumb enough to fall for someone again, it'd end up just like it did with Donny. So I refused to risk it."

The ashes stirred in Ford's hands.

"He made assumptions. That's Donny. Just figured he could walk right back in."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"*Because.* And I'm not done. I saw him. I knew. What I wanted. What I didn't. I'm here." Gavin placed his hands beneath Ford's, holding them up. "Donny's there."

"Now I'm really confused," Ford said. He eyed the ashes. "Kind of light for a human body..."

Gavin laughed. "No, it's not his corpse. Or...sort of. This is a picture of him. A stupid damn picture I kept in my office to remind me of why I didn't get involved. Do you understand now?" He closed Ford's hands around the ashes, squeezed, then let go. "Blow them away."

Chapter Seventeen

"Gavin," Ford said. Weird how those tables turned. Now he was the one who didn't know what to say. He'd asked for a sign. Whoever it was out there that delivered had come through in more spades than he could process. It made him feel as if he were on a roller coaster going through loop-the-loops.

Gavin jostled him. "Blow them away."

"Not on the floor." Ford stood and nudged Gavin's foot, wanting him to come along for the trek. His den window wasn't far away, and Gavin slipped ahead of him to open it.

Ford took a deep breath, held on to hope, and blew the ashes out into the night with an exhale that he pushed until the last whiff of air escaped him. He didn't know he'd started shaking until Gavin curled under his arm. "It's okay," Gavin said.

Ford hugged him. He couldn't have done anything else.

Gavin patted his back. "This won't do," he said in such utter seriousness that it made Ford laugh despite himself. "I thought this would make you *happy*."

"It does." Ford thrust his hands into the night wind streaming past his window to get rid of the last of the soot. He let those two small words sink in and wipe away whatever these weird conflicting feelings were.

Gavin wouldn't marry him. Probably not ever.

But if Gavin loved him enough to choose him over Donny...

That wasn't nothing. More than. Something, a big something. More than he had hoped for, come to think of it.

Ford let go and let—made—the lingering traces of "not good" wash away, and when he turned back it was with a big grin that made Gavin relax and return the enthusiasm.

"Check it out," Gavin said, displaying his bruised knuckles with all the pride of a schoolyard scrapper. "Not bad. Right?"

"Pretty impressive, if you ask me," Ford said. He admired them with due respect and actually a heck of a lot of pride. "Did you knock out any of his teeth? Or twist his ear off? Maybe literally kick his ass?"

"Could be. I know for sure I broke his nose. The rest is a blur. It was good, you know? Just good to..." Gavin ran out of words, but Ford knew exactly what he meant to say.

Or so he'd thought. Gavin grew serious again and took Ford by the arms, a sure sign that he was about to say something big. "There's one more thing."

Ford chose to trust. "Tell me."

"That's not all I came for."

Ford. Chose. Trust. "What else?"

He almost missed the madcap sparkle in Gavin's eye before Gavin tackled him, and for once in history, a guy the size of Ford went down like a stone under the impact from a guy the size of Gavin. "I came for this," Gavin said from atop Ford before Ford had stopped seeing double, and kissed him harder than he'd been kissed at the doorway. Kissed like a free, wild thing.

Ford had asked for a sign of Gavin's love and a clue that this was meant to be, no matter what the twists or turns and roundabouts. They didn't come much clearer than this. He wound his arms around Gavin, hugged him tight, and started to laugh. Gavin didn't mind. He bit Ford's lip, but it was with love.

Gavin *loved* him.

Ford could feel that now, and he liked it. More than he'd dreamed.

And did Gavin stop at just one kiss? Uh-uh. He moved around, too fast to track, his lip apparently bothering him not at all, pressing his mouth to Ford's, then to Ford's jaw and chin and his neck. Stretched out atop him in that manner, he had Ford wholly at his mercy, and it became *pointedly* obvious what he'd knocked Ford down for.

"Really, really have to get you into a fight club," Ford said between kisses.

"Huh? Never mind." Gavin shook off the query and dived back in. That alone would have been good enough. Forget good. Great. But then...he goosed Ford. Goosed him! Tickled along his ribs and dug in, growling like the toy tiger that, huh, apparently remained caught between them.

Ford would have hated to toss it aside. He didn't do that to gifts. Gavin on top of him, hungry for it and as enthusiastic in showing it as Ford always had been, was admittedly a much bigger gift. And Gavin had no such qualms. He yanked the tiger free, tossed it—somewhere—and while he was down there went for the zipper.

"Slow down, tough man. We—*Oh*." Ford had gotten up onto his elbows; he went down again with a *thunk* of his head on the floor when Gavin wrapped his fist around Ford's cock before he'd even gotten it out of his jeans. "You're not playing around, are you?"

"Maybe." Gavin looked up at Ford, the angle odd for Ford to get a decent look at him, but what he saw took his breath away. Gavin had come to life. "Maybe not. Double negatives. I'm lost. But I want this. Can I have it?"

"God. You don't even have to ask *that*." If Gavin hadn't been in a particularly delicate area of Ford's body with his hand locked in place, Ford would have hauled him up to kiss him silly. Sillier. A newly awakened Gavin was a creature that glittered with something close to impishness that demanded proper appreciation.

Or for Ford, a proper retaliation, because one good move deserved another, and like heck he'd miss out on a chance to play, really *play* with Gavin. Call him an overgrown bear cub or a deer or whatever, Ford didn't care, not as long as he got to enjoy this for all it and he were worth.

And as it turned out, that was quite a lot.

Undressing? Not so much an option. Ford *tried*. He liked nothing better—almost—than the sight of Gavin bared to his eyes, sleek and supple and firm, and he wanted a chance to nibble Gavin's pretty ass. To be honest, he'd had that in the back of his mind ever since Kayla had pinched Gavin.

Ford struggled to catch hold of a zipper, a sweater edge, anything. Besides being hungry for the full beauty of the visual, he wanted to make sure he didn't accidentally squish or hammer any spot on Gavin that might be bruised or sore from his tussle at the museum. But every time he tried, Gavin growled and writhed just out of reach, as eager as Ford—or more—to do the exact same thing.

“Time-out.” Ford wrapped his arms around Gavin in an unfair but necessary bear hug to haul him to a stop. Gavin grumbled and used his teeth on Ford's ear. “Time, I said. Or do I have to put you in the corner with your nose pressed against the wall?”

“Could if you wanted to,” Gavin said, his tongue delicate against the shell of Ford's ear.

Ford had to gulp for air over that one. Wouldn't he ever love to—“You'd need a box to stand on.”

Gavin pinched him. “Okay. Other way around.”

Sweet God. Ford had to shut his eyes and work to keep himself under control. “Or...” he started. He wanted this so much; it'd been years since anyone had been willing, and maybe, maybe tonight...

“Or?” Gavin stilled.

Ford had to look at him then, pleading though he might be and dumb as that might appear on a guy built like a wall. “Or you could fuck me.”

Gavin's silence was the all the answer Ford needed. “I don't—I'm not—Fuck.”

“That's the idea,” Ford said, trying to joke again.

Gavin recovered well. “I'm not saying no. Maybe someday. Not tonight.”

“Are you sure?” It wasn't fair to ask. Ford knew that, no matter how much he wanted that dark-edged burn of Gavin's cock in his ass. He could at least, and did, grab pleasing handfuls of Gavin's bubble butt and knead. “I've been thinking about this for a long time.”

“You heard the lady. It's a nice ass.” *There*. Gavin was getting really and truly back into the game now, arching up with sensual pleasure as Ford worked him over.

Ford took a chance. “It is. You know what I like best about it?”

“Hmm?” Gavin mumbled, suddenly busy with pushing Ford's shirt up to attack his stomach. He stuck his head underneath, making Ford laugh at the sight, and stop laughing PDQ when Gavin caught one nipple between his teeth and sucked.

Ford almost—almost—bucked Gavin off with his surge and groan. Gavin wriggled out and popped up, his eyes wide, glasses askew, and his hair standing on end with the static.

“I didn't,” Ford panted, “say stop. Please don't stop.”

Gavin slid beneath the shirt and tweaked where his lips and tongue had been. “Good to know.” He pinched and rode the wave of Ford's reaction. Actual fascination came dangerously close to overriding healthy lust. “Could you actually come this way?”

“For God's sake, shut up and kiss me,” Ford begged.

“That's my line,” Gavin said but did as he'd been told anyway. And stayed there like a good boy should, even through Ford's skimming his shirt nearly off his back with the need to stroke and massage his smooth skin and knuckle over the wings of his shoulder blades.

Gavin took a breath. His arms shook, but Ford thought that was lack of practice at being on top. Gave him hope, and so did what Gavin said next. “You were saying?”

Took Ford a few beats to remember. The hard press of Gavin's cock *right there*, separated from his only by Gavin's slacks, brought it all back. Determination gave Ford a nice clear head. Sort of. Enough to jerk open those damned pants and slide them off Gavin's hips.

Holy...

"You're not wearing underwear," Ford blurted, betting he looked even more startled than Gavin had upon discovering the joys of nip sucking. He had to laugh at Gavin's shy but naughty wiggle that slid his slacks down, then groan and grit his teeth at the motion on the ocean when Gavin tried to kick them off. They caught on his shoes. Eh. Not a big deal. The naked cock, now that was a *much* bigger and better deal.

Best of all, Ford had all that smooth, firm swell of ass to play with as he liked. "I was saying," he started over again, dodging every time Gavin tried to kiss him. "This is my favorite part."

Gavin frowned with puzzlement when Ford traced two rounded lines over his ass. "Come again?" He groaned before Ford could hoot and hid his face.

Ford pulled him back up again, giddy on sex, but wanting this so much, it made him fumble. "Right there," he explained, feeling uneasy for the first time ever when he and Gavin were this close to naked. "It's a shelf."

Gavin blinked his good eye. "Huh?"

"A shelf." Ah heck, the only real way was to show him, and maybe once he'd gotten a taste... As carefully as he could, Ford spread his legs and raised them. Yes, the way he had to scrunch up was a total bitch, and the angle was kind of more impossible than he'd thought, but when he rested his bare feet on the taut rise of Gavin's ass—perfect. He let his eyes fall shut and sighed. "Shelf."

Gavin kept his face pressed to Ford's chest, but his shoulders were shaking. Ford just hoped that was laughter.

Relief came when Gavin pinched him. "Someday," he said. "Not. Now." He wiggled to knock Ford's feet away and very deliberately yanked Ford's jeans down. Ford couldn't actually complain; that zipper was becoming a major problem even when open. Especially when open and those metal teeth threatened serious chafing. *Ouch*.

He *definitely* couldn't complain when Gavin's sigh of relief emerged louder than his own, and he forgot about complaining altogether—complain about what, again?—when Gavin writhed eagerly down between his conveniently parted legs and sucked Ford's cock between his lips.

"Oh God, *unh*, God!" Ford snagged and twisted handfuls of Gavin's hair just to hang on and not throw him off again. "No. Wait. Stop. Gavin, stop."

Gavin let go with a wet *pop* and stared at Ford. Ford guessed he couldn't blame Gavin for the incredulosity. What man in his right mind called a halt during a blowjob?

A man with an idea, that was who.

"Let me," Ford begged. He sat up, careful of Gavin's slighter body and mass, and laid Gavin on his side. Cock at mouth level, mind. And while again this did take some spine-crunching maneuvering, it was worth twisting himself about to have Gavin's cock resting at his lips.

"*Oh*," Gavin said, shock evident enough to make Ford laugh.

Ford stopped laughing, because surprised or not, Gavin apparently knew a darn good idea when he saw one. Gavin's lips closed around Ford's cockhead, suckled, and slid down.

He'd done sixty-nines before. This was more like a sixty-five. Either way, Ford fell fast, hard, and deep into the fight to keep up a rhythm. Not easy. Gavin's blowjob skills put world champions' skills to shame, and he knew it, the sly minx. Ford wasn't as skilled, but you bet he had enthusiasm on his side and never let anyone tell him that didn't count for just about as much. Same as bottoming—just lack of getting a chance to play.

He made this one count for all it was worth and shook it for the change left over. Gavin's cock was perfectly shaped for Ford's mouth, nicely thick, nicely long, and hey, would you look at that? Talking all the time must have helped wash away a gag reflex. Mostly. A little cough was worth it for the noise Gavin made, nearly a scream, when he hit the back of Ford's throat and kept going.

Faster. Faster still. Ford could easily have—almost did—lose track. He never found a rhythm. Too easy to slip off with a groan or a gasp when Gavin hit a sweet spot; too easy to give in to the craving more, more, more, more when he discovered a trick that made Gavin cry out and beg.

He could tell when Gavin came close; he'd learned those tells, and for once Ford wanted it to end fast and messy instead of long and slow. He *needed* this. He pulled his hips out of Gavin's reach and latched on, kneading Gavin's hips and hollowing his cheeks with suction.

He underestimated Gavin's flexibility. Just the tip of Gavin's tongue lashed Ford's cockhead, but as it happened exactly when Ford cupped Gavin's balls and stroked, Ford figured he still came out the winner. He caught every drop he could, and a big mouth turned out to be good for something else.

And after that, he was more than happy to flop on his back and try to figure out how to breathe again. Not really happening, what with Gavin climbing on board and showing Ford what proper cock sucking was *really* all about, his own skill given way to almost feral attack, every trick in the book, every twist on them that was only Gavin, and—

Ford yanked on Gavin's hair to warn him. Gavin shook him off and thrust his hand behind Ford's balls. Farther back.

Oh God. Ford froze. He's not—

But he was. The tip of a finger, wet with Gavin's saliva, reached the rim of Ford's hole, touched tentatively in a curious half circle, then pressed...

"Fucking *fuck!*" Ford bucked up almost in a sitting position, crashed back down, and Gavin hung on all the way, drinking down his payload. Ford couldn't stop tossing to and fro, even though the motion plastered his hair to his face and blinded him. Nor could he stop swearing and begging. He surged again, almost like coming a second time, and got a look at the thick spurt dribbling from Gavin's lips.

That was awesome. But even better was the look of pride and amazed "was that me?" Ford saw written all over Gavin's red, sweat-damp face when he looked up, licked cum off his lips, and blazed a grin as bright as Ford's. At him. For him.

All for him now.

* * *

Gavin rested with his head on Ford's chest, rising and falling with each breath, exactly where Ford wanted him. He could stroke Gavin's hair, a particular favorite, and he could watch the sleepy near innocence Gavin's sweet face took on when he'd gone this far and given up so much. Could enjoy every last drop of contentment when Gavin sighed and pressed one last weary kiss on him.

It was a perfect moment.

Ford had started to become a tiny bit wary of those. That troubled him more than he liked, which bugged him, and so on it went.

"You didn't honestly think I came here to break up with you, did you?" Gavin stroked patterns over Ford's ribs.

Busted. Ford wished he could pace to get out some of this nervous energy. "I hoped you wouldn't."

Gavin remained silent. For a minute. "You make me wish I could believe, you know." He began to fiddle with the loose ends of Ford's hair. "Wishing isn't the same as doing. Like, right now...I know you want to ask me to marry you. Right?"

Actually...wrong. But Ford bit his tongue hard, afraid to hope. How messed up was that?

Gavin took a deep breath. "I know you're not asking because you know I'd say no." He hooked his leg over Ford's to keep them close while he clearly struggled with his words. "That doesn't mean..." Another breath, one that sounded close to the destructive edge of frustration.

Ford couldn't fret about himself when Gavin was having a hard time. He patted Gavin's shoulder to show him it didn't matter if he couldn't make the words come out. He got the gist.

Only, he was wrong. "I can't say I'll marry you. I can't."

Ford accepted the dull thud of the blow for what it was.

He did not expect the follow-up punch.

"I've got some unexpected free time on my hands. If you can get away—maybe for a weekend—if I can't give you a wedding, I could give you a honeymoon."

Ford could only lie still and stare at Gavin.

Gavin ducked his head. "Dumb," he muttered to himself. "Forget I asked."

"Like hell I will." Ford hauled Gavin fully on top of him, as he had in the beginning, and hung on equally tight. "Give me five minutes to pack a bag, and we can hit the road."

Gavin scanned him intently; Ford could see the hint of nerves and admired his man all the more for the courage this invitation took. A slow smile replaced that apprehension, and this time Ford liked the change much, much better. "I was thinking more like next weekend."

"I love you," Ford said. He couldn't hold that back. "I do. No matter what. You don't even know."

"Don't say that." Gavin looked at Ford with utter clarity and such purpose that Ford couldn't doubt he meant what he said, even if he'd wanted to, and he didn't. "I can't say it back...yet...but I think now I like hearing it."

Ford's heart squeezed.

Gavin settled atop Ford, where Ford liked him best. "I just... I want you to know. Unless you leave me, I'm not leaving you. I promise. And you can believe me."

Ford wondered if he looked this bright and dazzling, as if you could wish on him, when he was as sure of himself.

“Know how?”

“How?”

“Because it's true.”

There was no better response to that than a kiss. Except to roll over and put Gavin beneath him where he could be kissed all over, and Ford was more than eager for that.

Such a good start. Such an unexpected, wonderful good omen of a turn. Ask and ye shall receive.

You'll see, Ford swore between presses of his mouth on soft skin over firm core. I'll show you, and you'll see, and maybe then, maybe...

Chapter Eighteen

Gavin didn't check his watch. He had no need to. Ford had said he'd be there in the early afternoon to pick him up, and Ford wouldn't let him down. Granted, he'd originally said ten a.m., then noon, then with increasing sheepishness phoned again at five till and extended the time again. And through all of that, Gavin remained calm.

He trusted Ford. So strange. When had that happened? Not after they'd first slept together. Sometime after, somewhere along the way...

Gavin had not thought it could ever happen again, but somehow he'd gone and fallen in love with Ford. And wasn't that the strangest thing of all?

He slid his cuffed sleeves farther up his arms and propped his chin on his knee, content to wait. In years gone by, whenever Donny had called to say he'd be running late, more often than not he'd made other plans and didn't plan to show at all. "Late" meant "I don't know when," if at all.

But Ford could be trusted. Counted on.

Strange to sit in his apartment window and watch instead of on his terrace at the museum. At least he hadn't had to ask for a day off.

Gavin found he was smiling to himself. So much different these days. Good different.

He could sense Oscar moving around behind him, from beneath one piece of furniture to another, always keeping an eye on him. Kayla would come and check in on Oscar to make sure he had food and water while he and Ford were away.

"Don't worry, big guy," Gavin murmured, gaze on the street. "You're in good hands. Just don't get scared if she's a little wilder than you're expecting."

A rasping rumble of a purr answered him. Gavin's smile broadened; he hid it against his knee.

A moment later he startled upright at the cheerful, thundering knock on the door that signaled Ford's arrival. Strange; no car outside, and Gavin knew he couldn't have missed Ford biking down the street. No one else sounded like Ford. Gavin knew it was him. Just knew.

"Come in," he called over his shoulder, swinging about when the door whipped open and Ford filled the room with life and the crisp scent of the outdoors. "You look good," he said, no blurting about it. And Ford did, his blue and green plaid flannel shirt worn comfortably into the solid square lines of his torso and his strong legs encased nicely in broken-in jeans and sturdy boots.

Ford dropped a small sheaf of brochure-type papers on the floor as if he'd forgotten he held them, and looked at Gavin as if he both wanted to eat him up and put him somewhere snug for safekeeping. "What?"

Ford's grin came slower these days. No less bright. "You know what. *You*." He stood and swung the duffel by the door up over his shoulder; Gavin had barely been able to drag the thing, and Ford handled it as if its weight were inconsequential. "This your stuff? I've got it."

"I can see you do."

Ford's grin widened. He offered Gavin his hand and pulled him along as soon as Gavin took it. "None of that, Mister, or we'll never leave the apartment."

For fun, Gavin dragged his heels. "Would that be such a bad thing?" The way Ford's shirt clung to him made Gavin want to smooth it down over his muscles and pluck the buttons open one by one.

"Normally, no. Today we've got places to be." Ford tweaked Gavin's nose. Only Ford would do that; only Ford could manage to make it turn Gavin on instead of baffling him, probably annoying him. Now.

"Are you planning on telling me where, or must I guess?" Gavin gave the apartment one last sight check, saw Oscar beneath the couch, and shut the door behind him.

"And away we go!"

"Ford! Christ, slow down!" Gavin scolded, but he couldn't help laughing too. He didn't have time to double-check the lock, or even check it once. Ford hauled him along like Ford was a sled dog and Gavin had just shouted "Mush!"

Gavin struggled to keep up. "Where are we even going?"

Ford winked and tapped the side of his head. He dropped Gavin's hand and descended the stairs faster, duffel bouncing on his back, mirth in every step. So that was how he wanted to play it, hmm?

"Am I supposed to guess? Fine. Cancun." Gavin did his best to keep up with Ford even though it meant a dangerous hop down two and three steps at a time. "Fiji. Anchorage. Camden. Norway."

"I'm good, but I don't think I'm good enough to get us there in a weekend and back." Ford finally stopped on a landing to let Gavin catch up. Tease. "I, uh... Heck."

Now he truly had Gavin's curiosity roused. "Seriously, where are we going?"

"I had to park around back," Ford said, swerving around the question. "I want you to see this first."

Oh God. No telling what Ford had come up with now. Gavin shook his head and followed in Ford's footsteps. Stranger still that he didn't want to lag back but to surge again and... It was like unwrapping a present, this.

This time he wasn't the one to stop and in fact had to slow down, lest he crash into the broadside of Ford's back. "Something wrong?"

"Mmm." Ford swung Gavin's duffel to and fro, lost in thought. He seemed to zone out more often these days. Gavin wasn't sure if he liked it or not. "Do you think you've seen the last of him?"

Gavin was lost. "Who?"

"Donny."

Ah. "More than sure. He's probably halfway across the country by now, chasing some crazy dream or whim."

Ford tucked his chin down and scratched at the stubble on his cheek.

"What?"

"Nah, never mind." Ford visibly shook it off. "The guy gets under my skin; that's all."

Gavin didn't tease Ford. He understood. Better to distract him. "We're burning daylight," he said, giving Ford a tiny shove. No worries about knocking him down; he'd need Superman at his back to give him the oomph to topple Mount Ford.

Ford's laughter made it worth the risk. He bounded down the stairs at a faster pace; Gavin gave up and hopped onto the banister to slide.

"Holy—" Ford caught Gavin at the bottom. The kiss he delivered was one of pride, amazement, and something more.

Gavin was tired of looking for the right words if they didn't come. Why not just live in the moment and not waste time playing thesaurus inside his head?

Ford paused one last time at the door. Drama queen. All he needed was a drumroll. "You're really ready to take a chance?"

Gavin didn't have to think about it. "Yes."

"Careful about that." Ford swung open a rarely used side door that'd lead them into the side street. Nothing but parking and an alley back here.

And a fire red Jeep 4x4, either new or washed and waxed so well Gavin could see both their reflections in its glossy side.

Ford jumped down the last half flight, then landed with ease at the bottom, bracing himself on the Jeep. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure what I think," Gavin said honestly. "Except that this is so you, I'm not surprised at all."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I believe it is, yeah."

Ford crossed his arms, teasing Gavin now. "You're sure? We can take something smaller, something that rides more easily if you really want. But if you've never gone off road, you don't know what you're missing out on." Ford caressed the Jeep's hood. "It's been... I don't know how long. I'd love to drive this."

What more did Gavin need? He'd never thought he'd go off road, but Ford made him want to take chances. It was almost as if he'd been given a second chance at life. Best not to waste it. Gavin hooked his duffel off Ford's shoulder and heaved it, with effort, into the Jeep. "I'm in."

Ford's smile was like the sun. "Impulsive. Never thought I'd live to see the day."

"I've done impulsive before. I—" Gavin stopped. *I've even run away with a man before* had come perilously close to tripping off his tongue. A guilty peek at Ford told him he might as well have finished that sentence out loud. Ford knew exactly what and who was on his mind now.

Gavin would not allow it. "This couldn't be more different. Ford. Trust me. Okay?"

Ford's hesitation lingered longer than Gavin liked, and the sparkle of good humor was slower to return, but he got there in the end. Maybe thirty seconds that felt like a lifetime. "Okay," he said. "Ready to roll?"

Gavin's glasses slipped down his nose. "You still haven't said where we're going."

"I don't want to spoil the surprise."

Gavin huffed. "In case you hadn't noticed, I like certainties."

Ford could easily be seen just over the top of the low-riding Jeep, tall enough to make it look small. "Please? I want to see the look on your face when we get there. I sort of dropped all the brochures back up in your apartment, but I have a map in the Jeep, I have you, and *we* have a 4x4. It'll be fun. I promise."

Gavin couldn't in a hundred years have resisted that kind of artless plea from the man he cared most about in the world. Besides, there was something about the sporty look of the Jeep that made him feel almost reckless. He popped the passenger door and climbed up and in. Low for Ford, high for him. "Will we at least get there before dark?"

"Absolutely! Do you want the map? You can navigate."

"Not quite. If we're going to do this"—Gavin took a breath—"we're going to do it right." He reached across without looking and plucked the map off the dashboard, crumpled it into a ball and stuffed it beneath his seat.

"Hey! What'd you do that for?"

Ford's uneasiness worried Gavin—and pushed him that final inch he needed to make up his mind. "Follow the signs," he said. "Whatever you see, as you see it."

"Wait." Ford twisted about to get a better look at Gavin. A frown line appeared between his eyebrows. "You're sure about that?"

"Sure enough."

"Gavin, you don't—"

Gavin held up a hand to stop him. "Even if I don't believe, it's okay. I kind of want to see what happens."

"Even if we never get where we're going at all?"

Why did Ford sound so worried?

"I'm not saying we might not need to backtrack, but we'll get there in the end, won't we?" Gavin laid his hand on Ford's thigh and squeezed. "Start driving."

There. Ford finally loosened up and grinned. Not his usual high wattage, but warm and wide enough to put Gavin at ease. "Your wish is my command. Let's do this." Then his grin brightened that final degree. "Fair warning that I went over the route so much that I mostly know the way by heart already."

"There you go, then."

Ford stretched out his legs as best as he could, driving with the butt of one hand on the wheel and the other arm stretched out behind Gavin, where he could play with Gavin's hair. "Hold on to your hat."

Gavin chuckled to himself, leaned back, and rested his head on Ford's arm. The thought came to him: I could grow old with this man.

Where that had come from, Gavin didn't know. Or maybe he did. Maybe it'd been building for a while now. No. No maybe about it. Gavin mentally circled the concept. Built tight and held water.

He tried it again on purpose: *I want to grow old with this man. Never leave him.*

The truth of it glowed deep within him. He could say it. If he wanted to.

Maybe he would.

* * *

The sun looked amazing at it climbed skyward. Golden warm after a cold night that hadn't been what Gavin pictured for a honeymoon. But it had been what he'd needed, even though he hadn't known it.

Kind of like Ford, he mused, pulling the Jeep into park.

"Mmm?" Ford stirred when the Jeep stilled. Figured. Even after four hours of Gavin spelling him and four more hours fast asleep while the rocky road roared beneath them, and he woke up when they came to a stop. That was Ford for you. Gavin ruffled his lover's sleep-messy hair as he sat up, blinking around them.

"Unless I took a wrong turn somewhere off the highway, I think we're here."

Ford winced as he sat up. He blinked at the world outside. "I think you're right."

"There by dark, huh?" Gavin said, teasing him gently. "Sunrise was half an hour ago."

Ford grinned sheepishly. "I remembered how to get here. I forgot how long it'd take. One out of two isn't bad. Come on, I want you to see this." He fumbled the Jeep door open and stepped outside.

Gavin didn't want to be parted from Ford, not even for a second, and neither was he willing to miss out on a moment of this adventure. Or waste a second he could spend looking around himself.

If this was what following flights of fancy led to...

All they could do was look.

Gavin sensed Ford reaching out for his hand. He took it without comment, letting Ford's warm, dry palm and strong fingers engulf his.

"Worth every second of the trip," Ford said quietly, watching Gavin.

Blue stretched out in front of them, ringed about by trees that stretched high in a circle around a lake perhaps the width of two soccer fields. They'd come as close as they could without driving off a wooden pier into the water.

Off to one side, four or five cottages spread out in a rough five-sided star shape. Small, some with smoke drifting from their chimneys to stave off the early-morning nip from the breeze off the lake, though the day itself would be nearing hot. Gavin would have thought for sure they'd stumbled upon a residential neighborhood if he hadn't seen a discreet wooden sign swinging from two posts and some chain: NORTHPOINT LAKESIDE RENTALS.

Ford engulfed Gavin from behind and hung on almost too tightly. Gavin didn't mind; it only meant Ford was as excited in his more exuberant way as Gavin. "What do you think?"

"I think it's you. The last thing I'd have expected." *And the best.* Gavin leaned back into Ford, letting Ford bear him up. They didn't say anything else. Nothing needed to be said.

Gavin had thought he was tired. In need of some coffee first and a nap second. Who wouldn't be after a night's drive? The wind off the lake woke him up instead—or maybe that was Ford. Not that he wanted to move. That was Ford's thing, always on the go.

He wanted to stay right here, like this. He'd never been on a honeymoon. Too many years spent regretting that. Maybe they'd been worth it, to make this worth waiting for.

We'll see, he thought. It's like a test, isn't it? It could be. I could grow old with this man. Maybe I should.

One weekend on the lake. If it's all as good as this, then maybe I'll... Maybe if he asks, again... Maybe I'll change my answer.

Gavin's shoulders shook with a sudden fit of amusement. Ford nudged him. Jostled him, playful again. "Share the joke."

"Nothing." *Just that I realized you've got me thinking like you. Looking for signs.* "No, honestly, nothing."

"Uh-huh."

Gavin turned in the circle of Ford's arms and stood on tiptoe to kiss as high as he could reach on Ford. "It's not anything bad. Leave it at that."

He could tell Ford wanted to press but didn't. Instead, Ford bent to rest his head atop Gavin's. "Let me go make sure they've still got our room reserved."

"You'd better. I'm not going anywhere but here. It's gorgeous, Ford." Gavin thought he knew what Ford meant by his "worth it" when he saw the way Ford lit up with happiness at those words. He turned Ford about and pointed him toward the nearest cabin, the one with its door propped open and a sign Gavin couldn't read at this distance, but which he'd bet said OFFICE. "I'll wait for you."

"You don't want to come with me?"

"I want to stretch my legs first. Go on," Gavin said, giving Ford a little push. "I'm still in your hands."

Ford's kiss warmed everywhere the cool wind touched, and lingered long after Ford hotfooted it into the open-doored cabin. Gavin hugged his chest and turned his gaze to the sun emerging from behind a handful of clouds.

Maybe that's the thing, was what circled around and around in Gavin's head. Maybe belief is a choice, even if you're not sure.

Maybe not being sure is what makes believing worth taking the chance.

Chapter Nineteen

Ford took longer in the rental office than Gavin had expected, but no longer that he might have figured it would. Ford could find a friend anywhere he went. He'd probably struck up a conversation with the manager and was halfway down a cup of coffee by now, spinning some elaborate tale about signs and omens.

He'd come back.

Gavin wandered away from the Jeep, down to the pier. It proved to be sturdier than it might seem at first glance, and though the struts holding it up from beneath were slicked with green moss, they held firm.

He walked that wooden road as far as he could, right before the ninety-degree turn that'd take him around on his way to heading back. Not wanting to go back, not yet, Gavin let the rising wind off the lake pluck at and tickle him. Felt good. He'd reached that place in his second wind where he felt a little too large for his skin and a little too light on his feet, but the cool air helped.

His eyes had still drifted mostly shut by the time he heard the heavy tread of Ford's footsteps and caught the smell of a good dark roast drifting in front of him.

Gavin smiled.

Ford's body heat blanketed Gavin from behind, long arms wrapping him round about, coffee pressed into his hand. As good as it smelled, Gavin only took a sip for the taste of it and was content to rest back against Ford. "Well?"

"They rented the cabin I reserved, but another one opened up not half an hour before we got here. The last one available."

"Lucky us," Gavin said, not sure if he was teasing or... "You'd say that was a sure sign we're meant to be here, huh?"

Ford's chuckle sounded sleepy. "Guess so." He shivered when the wind picked up abruptly. Gavin felt him go still for a moment. He knew Ford well enough now to know he'd seen something. Well enough still to know when it was something that gave Ford pause. Or that he didn't like. "What's wrong?"

Ford held Gavin a little tighter.

Gavin frowned at the horizon. He didn't see anything different. The wind blew harder, but that was all. Maybe they'd get a shower or a good hard rain. "What's bad about the wind off a lake?"

"It's coming from all different directions. It's confused."

Gavin didn't exactly know what to say to that. He didn't like Ford's peculiar attitude.

However, he thought he could guess the cause, and he knew the best cure. *Sleep.*

"Tell me again," Ford said before Gavin could give him the order to go to bed. "Do you like it here?"

"Yeah, I do. It's perfect."

"There's not much perfect in the world," Ford remarked.

"Shut up and let me enjoy this."

Ford's laughter felt more convincing this time. "Yes, sir."

Gavin fought the blush. "Thank you."

"Other way around," Ford said, rocking Gavin in time with the ripples off the lake. "Other way around."

"If you say so."

"I do."

"Then I have to believe you, don't I?" Gavin sipped his coffee, the dark liquid cooling fast in the chilly wind. He said, turning about in Ford's arms where he could reach up and loop his arms around Ford's neck, "What happens now?"

Ford's eyelids were heavy, giving Gavin his answer before he said a word. "I'd love to suggest we drink about a gallon of coffee each and then inaugurate this place."

Right. Sleep. "If you weren't weaving on your feet, maybe I'd say yes." Gavin patted Ford's cheek, a tap to keep him awake long enough not to take them tumbling off the pier. "What you need is some sleep."

"Sucks being this big." Ford rolled his shoulders. "I'm not built for snoozing in a moving vehicle, extra legroom or not."

"I like you the way you are," Gavin said and meant it. Thought Gavin would just bet Ford ached. Sore and creaky in all the wrong places and his back aching. "C'mon." He took Ford by the hand and turned them around, okay now with going back. "Which cabin's ours?"

"The one on the farthest end. Number four."

Something in the way Ford said that made Gavin look back. "What's wrong with that?"

Ford winced. "Remember what I told you about the word 'four' in Chinese?"

"So? We drove all night in a 4x4 and got here just fine. Stop that," Gavin scolded when Ford shivered. "If the difference is in how you say the Chinese word for 'four,' then say it right."

"You make it sound easy."

"It's just a word."

"Yeah." Ford stood too still for too long. Enough of that. Some sleep, some food, and he'd be back to his old self.

"Follow me, you. Let me take care of you for a change."

Strange how that seemed to help. How Ford brightened despite his sleepiness. This, Gavin didn't understand, but he'd take what he could get. Gladly.

Walking to the cabin took all of three minutes, even with dodging around neatly stacked woodpiles and the temptation to be distracted by the slow chatter of early-morning risers inside other cabins. Gavin made it up the stairs before Ford and tried out the cockiest smirk he'd ever attempted to summon.

It did and didn't work. Ford dissolved into laughter; Gavin guessed it truly hadn't come out as he'd hoped. "That looked ridiculous, didn't it?"

"Kind of," Ford said. There was a gleam in his eye that—

Gavin backed up fast, sand crunching under his sneakers as he skittered across the porch. "Ford, this is a make-believe honeymoon, not the real thing. Ford, don't you dare try and carry me over the threshold. *Ford—*"

Too late. Gavin oofed and thumped Ford hard in the back with one fist, but nothing stopped Ford from toting him in a fireman's carry through the door and all the way to the bed. There, he dropped Gavin—tossed him, more like. Gavin bounced, then again, nearly off the bed this time with the shock wave when Ford's much greater weight crashed across the mattress by his side.

Gavin grumbled. Ford wasn't the only one who'd gotten knotted up after a day and a night's worth of driving. But when he turned to Ford to complain, he stopped before he'd even started. Ford had landed on his back, faceup, his eyes closed and his breathing already slowing down. Fast asleep.

"A double handful of trouble, that's what you are," Gavin said. "My handful." He tucked Ford's hair behind his ears. With the last of his energy, he crawled off the bed and rummaged at a trunk at the foot that—*aha*—held some extra blankets. He spread three over Ford, keeping only one for himself—all he needed, whereas Ford was big enough that two wouldn't be enough.

When Gavin settled back down, he could feel the same exhaustion that'd TKO'd Ford drawing him inexorably down. He fought it only for a moment longer. There was something he had to do first.

He kissed Ford in his sleep, stifling his laughter when even off in dreamland, Ford smiled and turned toward him. Who could get tired of that?

But that wasn't the one thing Gavin needed to do. Now, with Ford out cold, was the time he had to try. A test run.

Gavin lay on his side, his head on Ford's chest and his arm wrapped around the man, and whispered it to him. "I love you."

Ford turned—probably not aware he'd done it—and wrapped himself around Gavin like a human-sized teddy bear.

"Such a child," Gavin chided, not meaning it. How could he when, right after, a yawn made his jaw creak? "Some kind of honeymoon where we fall asleep *before* the good stuff," he grumbled, not meaning that either. And he hadn't even gotten a good look around at the cabin yet.

That could wait. Right now, Ford's heart beat steadily beneath Gavin's ear, Ford's arms and legs wound around Gavin to keep him steady as a rock, and Gavin could do nothing but let himself drift away on the ebb and flow of Ford's breathing, one after another after...

* * *

No one ever remembered their dreams. Not really, or for more than five hazy minutes after their alarm clock went off, the details already fading to one or two quirks that made a man shake his head at himself in dismay or disbelief. The quiet corners of the mind were strange places.

Fifteen minutes after Gavin awoke and maybe five minutes after he knew Ford knew he'd drifted out of sleep, Gavin's dream was as clear in his mind as if he were still asleep and

watching it cycle around and around. He rubbed his index finger in a continuous circle, slow whispers of skin on skin that he thought weren't audible beneath the wind off the lake or the crackling of the fire he guessed Ford had built.

Gavin faced that fire, the abrupt light in the darkness teasing him back into the world. He lay as long as he could before he had to open his eyes and see; once he'd looked at the fire, he didn't want to look away. If he did, it still came as a peculiar shock to see his ring finger bare instead of banded about with slim gold.

Ford would call a dream like that a sign. Maybe it was. Maybe a cigar was just a cigar. Or maybe it was all in what you wanted it to be.

He could hear Ford moving around behind him, trying to be quiet and failing so thoroughly that it made Gavin want to laugh. He kept it to a small smile instead, still playing the "I'm still asleep" game.

"I know you're awake." Ford tousled his hair, then finished the brisk rub with a slow caress around the shape of Gavin's head and down his neck, a touch that made Gavin shiver and look up. "Here."

Gavin sat up to take the steaming mug Ford offered him. He sniffed the contents. Just coffee, black, a hint of sweetness. "How'd you know? Signs?"

Ford settled across the way from Gavin, good for looking at, but out of arm's reach. He'd propped himself against the wall facing the bed, perpendicular to the fireplace. "Absolutely. I could go through the list, but the big giveaway? You stopped snoring."

Gavin wanted to throw a pillow at him. He settled for a glower. "I do not snore."

His quietly conceived plan worked; Ford laughed. "You really do."

"Not too loud?"

"More like a purr."

"Oh God. I've heard Oscar."

"You're not as bad as Oscar." *There.* Ford levered himself off the floor, and his smile didn't go back into hiding. Gavin studied him as he settled closer, on the foot of the bed. "It's cute."

"Cute," Gavin scoffed automatically. He drank his coffee quickly, never minding the heat of it, wanting it out of the way and the caffeine at work so he could have both hands free.

There wasn't much of the cabin he could see. Dark outside and only the fire to light it from within. Gavin got an overwhelming impression of *brown*, from polished wood floors to throw rugs to bed, all different shades. Ford stood out like a cherry in a pile of sawdust in a new red plaid flannel shirt.

Wait. "We slept the entire day?"

"You did." Ford moved a little closer still. "I woke up maybe midafternoon. You were more tired than you let on, huh?"

"Why didn't you wake me?" Gavin drained the last of his coffee and set it aside, rubbing his chest where he could feel the burn.

"I dunno." Ford looked at his feet. He'd kicked off his boots and socks, leaving him able to toe the floor. "I guess I wanted to watch you sleep."

"Hmm." Gavin licked the taste of sugar and coffee off his lips and watched Ford lose himself in thought. Maybe he couldn't read signs like Ford did, not that he believed in them. *Even though they led us here.* What he could do was use his eyes.

It didn't take long. A rush of wind off the lake made the windows rattle, though it had no effect on the temperature of the cabin. Ford still shivered and turned his face toward the outside as if inexorably drawn to listen.

"Ford." Tired of waiting, Gavin closed up the distance between them. "What are you hearing?"

Ford flicked a surprised look at Gavin. "I thought you didn't believe."

"You brought me coffee. I owe you one." Gavin laid his head on Ford's shoulder, worried by the tension in the muscle. "Seriously. Tell me."

"Ah, it's stupid." Ford picked at a hole in the knee of his jeans. "That wind, blowing from all different, confused directions? It's a Jonah wind."

"A what, now?"

"Jonah wind."

"And it's not a good sign," Gavin guessed. "What with the Jonah reference and all."

"You could say that."

Gavin considered it. "I could, but I won't. Don't listen to the wind. What's the wind got to do with anything?" He covered Ford's lips with his fingers. "Come back to bed."

Ford grinned broadly at him. "Is that how you seduce all the men? And you say my approach is too strong."

Gavin moved out of the way to make room for Ford. "No, just you." Ford obeyed but frowned at the rise of the wind, and that wouldn't do. Gavin had had enough.

Besides. Ford had turned to face the fire and flopped down on his front, not his side or his back. He crossed his arms under his chin and sighed, content. The bulk of him almost blocked the hearth from Gavin's view. All he could see was a hint of flames that outlined Ford's body.

The shape of Ford, rectangles and squares. The length of his torso, the solidness of him, and his ass. Firm, flexible, slightly rounded—not like Gavin's. Harder.

Gavin rested his palm atop that ass before he knew what he was doing, but he didn't move it away. Especially not when—because—Ford drew in a quick breath and shuddered for another reason.

I could. For you, I could.

Gavin spread his fingers wider. "I want... Can I?"

Ford wrinkled his forehead. "Want what?"

Gavin couldn't say it out loud, blushing idiot that he was, even after all they'd done together, and he'd been no virgin to start with. He sighed and whispered it in Ford's ear instead.

"I want to be on top. For you. With you. Tonight."

Chapter Twenty

Ford lifted his head. Hope warred with caution, keeping the one carefully in check with the other. “You don't even have to ask. But I”—he propped himself on his elbows—“Gavin, you don't have to because you feel...I don't know, obligated.”

Gavin tweaked Ford's ear, teased the short hairs at the base of his nape beneath the thick hair that had long since broken free of its tie. “Sit up for me,” he said in answer. Ford didn't need to hear reassurances. Words were words. Actions spoke louder.

Though he'd have to go a long way to convince Ford of that, he did as he'd been told. There was something to it, watching such a big man obey orders, even if he didn't obey them without question. “Are you sure?”

“Sh.” Gavin touched his mouth to Ford's. He tugged at Ford's shirt, wrestling it up his chest. Not easy going, annoying Gavin. “Help me with this.”

Ford lifted his arms and let Gavin wrest him free, but no sooner was it off than he opened his mouth to talk again.

Enough. Gavin pushed Ford down and straddled him. Easier, this, remembering how he'd done it once, and easier still since they both had good sturdy jeans on. He knew he couldn't really pin Ford down with body weight alone. It had to be willingness that made Ford lie quiet beneath him.

He spoke clearly, because he needed to, and it came as easily as water over smooth stone. “Obligation has nothing to do with it. I'm giving you what you need because I want to. Would you shush up and let me already?”

There. Ford's full-bodied laugh muted quickly to a chuckle, lest he pitch Gavin off. He reached up to brush the backs of his knuckles over Gavin's cheek. “I'm all yours.”

The jeans needed to go. Gavin climbed off reluctantly; he didn't want to leave the rising hardness behind Ford's zipper, yet he needed it free of its confinement, now. He kept Ford's shoulders flat to the bed with a tap on either side.

Ford nodded and kept mum, though when after his first attempt Gavin discovered the futility of body mass versus getting Ford's jeans more than barely open, Ford shook with barely restrained mirth.

“Smart-ass,” Gavin grumbled. He kissed Ford's bare chest because he could, and for the pleasure of hearing Ford grunt and feeling Ford's abdominal muscles flex. He could have kissed lower—Ford's cock, eager to be free, pressed up against his boxers and half out of his undone fly.

Save that for later. Gavin climbed off the bed. He gestured for Ford to be still.

Didn't work. Gavin decided he didn't mind when Ford turned carefully on his side and asked, “Let me see you?”

It wasn't something Gavin would have been comfortable with a month ago. That was then. This was now. Though he still blushed—damn his fair skin—he simply gave Ford what Ford wanted, because he wanted it too. Watching Ford all the while, he took off his shirt, jeans, sneakers, the lot.

When Gavin was naked except for his jockey shorts, he turned in profile to the firelight so Ford could see what Ford did to him. On the bed, Ford groaned and pressed the heel of his hand to his groin, pushing down on his cock.

Craving made Gavin bold. “Hands off.”

“Why?”

Gavin's color deepened; he still didn't mind, because this was Ford, teasing. Ford, not listening to the wind and letting it worry him. He blocked it out of his own ears and slid his shorts down, off. As soon as he'd kicked them out of the way, he reached out with both hands to pull Ford up on his feet.

“Because I want it all.”

“Poleaxed”—that would be the word for how Ford looked right now. Stunned and almost swaying on his feet.

Good, but Gavin wanted more. He used Ford as a support, letting that and his own weight carry him—and Ford's jeans and boxers—slowly down, pooled around his bare feet. He tapped Ford's ankles to guide him out of them.

Such long legs. Gavin couldn't do this kneeling, but if he got on one knee and stretched, he could kiss the very tip of Ford's cock. Just once. *Saving that for later too.* He tentatively pushed Ford backward onto the bed, then immediately changed his mind. “Wait, no. On your front, like before.”

Ford cocked an eyebrow at Gavin. “Already?”

Gavin wondered if Ford heard the thread of nervousness in his own voice. He understood it. Wanting to bottom or not, he knew what it was like to catch after—who knew?—maybe years between goes. If ever at all.

“Not quite. Just—Let me?”

A brief hesitation and Ford nodded. Gavin kissed the side of Ford's mouth, turn and turnabout all being fair. “Lie still.”

There were other things he wanted to try too. Things he'd never quite had the nerve to with anyone else, worried he'd look like an idiot or get it wrong. None of those mattered with Ford. Ford wouldn't mock. And if he got them right...

Gavin climbed atop Ford from behind, puzzling it out as he went. Ford obeyed without comment this time, even if he did try and twist his head around to watch Gavin, curiosity written all over him. He spread his legs under Gavin's silent guidance, a nudge here and a press there, and even took the initiative to tuck his knees up beneath him a little.

Now that Gavin had it bared in front of him, Ford's ass looked better than it had in the jeans. He had to touch, stroking the smooth skin and seeing how much he could fit beneath the splay of his fingers. More than he'd thought.

Ford's lips twitched. He lasted longer than Gavin would have bet. “Are you measuring me?”

"No." Not wholly. Sizing him up, yes, but not in inches. Gavin licked his lips; dryness wasn't a problem. Good. There was something he'd thought about more than once, not even consciously...

He pressed his lips to the base of Ford's spine, carefully pushed his ass cheeks apart, and pushed down to lick.

"Ah!" Ford bucked up. Gavin, ready for it, pushed him back down.

Gavin hadn't done this before. He thought, from the noises Ford made, that he wasn't getting it wrong. Tasted different from what he'd expected. Not something he could put a name to. Not bad, quite clean, just...very human. Easier than expected to lick Ford into a mix of tension and willingness to be relaxed; easier too, to stiffen his tongue into a point and slip inside.

He didn't stop before Ford shuddered, almost violently, and Gavin realized the steady motion beneath him was Ford humping the bed.

Guess he liked that, huh? Gavin knew, if he wanted, he could make Ford come this way. He'd rather not. If he was going to do this, he'd damn well do it all the way. He drew out, kissed the side of Ford's hip, and wiped his mouth on first his arm and then the comforter.

"I don't mind," Ford said, watching him through slanted eyes.

Gavin drew the ends of his hair over Ford's lips in lieu of a kiss. *Damn.* He hadn't thought about this before, not being able to kiss.

"I don't mind," Ford said again.

"I do. I changed my mind again. Roll over."

Ford was quick to catch on. Once he lay on his back, he guided Gavin up on top of him. Gavin let him do as he wanted. Ford wasn't the only one who'd reaped some benefits. Gavin had to hold on and catch his breath.

He looked down, caught and fascinated by Ford's cock. Hadn't really gotten a look at it from above before, both of them being too busy getting Ford inside for a proper study. And even though Gavin had sucked it, he hadn't *looked*.

Ford's cock curved desperately up toward his belly, stiff and dark and in need of attention, yet he waited patiently, willing to do whatever Gavin told him. It could go to Gavin's head; it would if Gavin hadn't remembered his sharpest worry: how was he going to make this work? Wanting something wasn't always enough, and with a foot's worth of height difference between them—

"Hey." Ford left off his fidgeting to draw his knuckles over Gavin's cheek and jaw. "Anything. Anything is good."

For you. He kissed the side of Ford's neck. "On your stomach for me? Again?"

Ford said nothing for once, and did as he'd been told. He drew his knees fully beneath himself, kneeling low and not high. Even that pulled him a little open, betraying a gleam of leftover saliva.

"God," Gavin breathed, unable to resist touching. "Don't move. *Don't.*" He had lube in his jeans. Spending time with Ford had taught him never to leave home without it, and he'd reckoned on needing all he could carry on a honeymoon.

All he had to do was reach down the side of the bed and grab the tube from his jeans pocket. Yet...

Odd. He didn't want to look away. He had the strangest feeling Ford would be gone when he returned if he did, and Gavin would not let that happen. Not now.

He made himself take the chance, whipping back into place as fast as he could. *Still there? Yes.* Gavin pressed his lips to the small of Ford's back, the nervousness he'd worked so hard to stave off betraying itself in a shaky laugh. "Keep your expectations low."

There was no doubt, only heat, in the look Ford twisted to give Gavin over his shoulder. And for once no words.

How tight would Ford be? Loose from the rimming, but nowhere near relaxed enough for...for—

Only one way to find out and Gavin *wanted* it. He slicked one finger with lube, slid around the rim still tacky from where he'd been, and in. That was easy.

Ford sighed, a soft wisp of air. "I won't break."

"Sh." Two were harder. Gavin might be small in stature, but his hands were a man's hands all the same. The stretch made him wince, maybe louder than Ford, who went briefly stiff and still and brought Gavin to a halt. He ground his teeth and waited, knowing what Ford had to be feeling, the uncomfortable burn of being stretched and feeling oddly too full.

An earlier half-formed thought manifested with force and drove a spike of worry briefly deep. "You *have* done this before, haven't you?"

"Been a while," Ford said, his breath easing out. "But yeah. Once or twice."

Once or twice and how long ago? Better safe than sorry, at least here. Maybe it was a good thing Ford hadn't had anyone to pitch to him before now. Perhaps no one else would have known him well enough to understand what he needed.

Just to be safe, Gavin took it slower than either of them wanted. Made sure two fingers slid nice and slick before he edged in one more. Ford moaned low and deep, but he didn't freeze up. There was something to it, Gavin knew, after a certain point. A place where you enjoyed the burn.

He wiped his fingers on his leg and took a breath to steady himself. Ford was so much bigger in body, and Gavin so much smaller—God knew he'd taken it enough times to be sure the body would stretch, but how did he get past this strange dichotomy where the brain was convinced this could not and *would not* work—

Ford buried his face in his arms and groaned. "Gavin. Please."

He couldn't say no to Ford. More lube for Ford—one could never use too much—and then a dollop drizzled out thickly over his cock. He forgot to worry when he touched his dick, the shock of cool lube and hot flesh startling him into a different state of mind altogether.

"It's okay," Ford said. He rolled his head on his forearms. "I trust you."

God. Gavin pressed his head hard to Ford's back. Without looking, letting his sense of touch guide him, he pressed his cock to Ford's opening and pushed in. From behind worked better than he'd thought, with unexpected goodness. He could wrap his arm around Ford's waist to hold on and to give him something to steady himself through the first rough hiss.

Ford hadn't relaxed by the time he said, through deep breaths, "Keep going."

"You're—"

"Keep. Going. Gavin, I want it. You don't even know... That you'd try—"

“Sh.” Gavin had to lift up and see, watch himself disappearing slowly inside Ford. *Oh God*. If he'd known what this would feel like... How did Ford hold back? Slick heat grasping him so tight, so tight, drawing him in deeper. How did Ford not drive in and hammer him when they were the other way around? Gavin wanted to.

He still liked bottoming better, he thought. But now he understood tops. Strange world, this. And preferring to bottom didn't mean he wasn't overcome with the need to thrust deep, fast. More. More, now.

Instead, he waited, breathing in slow, steady streams, waiting for Ford to relax again. Seemed to take forever and no time at all before Ford gave a full-body shudder and nodded.

Gavin had to hold Ford to brace himself. Maybe he looked like an idiot. He didn't care. It was worth the loss of dignity, if there were any loss at all, to watch Ford twist and moan beneath him, speared full of cock and begging for more.

Too much, too fast. Gavin drew still, wanting it to last so much longer, to give Ford all he could, but God, the *sensation* of it was more than he could keep up with. He kneaded Ford's hips, trying to rein himself in.

Ford shuddered, one long writhe that flowed along the shape of his body like a wave. “Gavin.”

There would be another time. Gavin knew this need too; even if it'd been too long to remember what this was like, craving more, more, more; and he gave Ford what Ford asked for. He felt a burning in his muscles and didn't let that stop him.

“Come on,” he coaxed, trying to reach beneath Ford to take his cock in hand.

Ford surprised him by growling and shaking him away. “Later. Soon. Keep going. Don't stop—”

Gavin couldn't say no, and he didn't want to. Ford's body opened easily to him now, drawing him in, clamping around him. He couldn't think and let his body take over for him. He could feel his orgasm building, coiling up tighter than a spool of wire, stretched to the breaking point—

“Love you,” Ford said, turning it into a chant as Gavin fucked him as slowly as he could, trying to make it last. “God, I love you. So much. You don't know. You don't—*Ah, fuck*, right there—”

Gavin bit at Ford's back. *Sh*. He made it last as long as he could; it still wasn't long enough, but he couldn't...couldn't...

Gavin didn't know who groaned louder when his body spasmed and the climax burst free, but he knew it was Ford when he fucked Ford through it. No slowing down, not even when it had passed, not before he'd gone soft enough to draw out.

His body ached. He rubbed over the red marks he'd left behind. “Over,” he encouraged or begged, not sure which, helping Ford on his way, careless of how sore he'd be. “On your back.” He rode Ford through it, slipping over his side and between his legs.

Ford's cock looked painful, red and sore, precum dripping a steady string. Gavin's turn—still—to take care of him. He liked it more than he'd thought he might.

He wrapped his hand around the base of Ford's cock to hold him steady and bent his neck. He guided Ford's cock over his face the way Ford kissed and touched him, teasing. To watch the

big man fall apart like this—there *weren't* words. He still wanted to laugh when Ford groaned and begged him to suck.

Gavin indulged him with three, four, maybe five slides of his mouth; it did them both good. Ford was flushed red from face to midchest, and his legs shook by the time Gavin let go and guided Ford's cock over his face. Insistent this time. “Want it,” he said.

Ford arched until his shoulders were clear of the bed; he seized Gavin by the hair and held him wrenched in place. Gavin could see it coming...coming...

There. Ford was abruptly kneeling in front of Gavin, straddling him this time, clumsy and heavy, but none of that mattered when he let go and spurted between them, covering them from navel to breastbone.

“Love you,” Gavin thought Ford was saying between kisses that were less kisses than frantic mouthing, until he realized no, that was him. “Love you, love you, love you—”

Ford squeezed Gavin fit to rattle his bones. He dug his nails into Gavin's back and shuddered his way through orgasm aftershocks, his body not yet ready to stop, never wanting the good feelings to stop.

Gavin knew how he felt. He didn't want to finish hearing Ford crumble apart inside; a messy tangle of moans and shakes, the language he spoke now. He held Ford to him and hung on tight until it was over, too soon, far too soon.

A glint of gold made Gavin look down sharply. A trick of the firelight and the dream he still remembered, not a ring.

But he knew what he wanted, and now he was sure of it.

Chapter Twenty-one

Ford eased onto his side, all the better to spoon Gavin. And because, from behind, he hoped Gavin couldn't sense it when he winced. Not a bad wince. Every time he moved, the reminder that Gavin had gone there—for him—and fucked him because he'd known Ford wanted it. Fucked him so well that Ford could only shudder with excitement and hope there'd be a next time soon.

Only he couldn't shake the feeling that there wouldn't be. He didn't know why. It bothered him more than he could say, so he kept his mouth shut.

Hard to tell what Gavin might be thinking. Ford didn't believe they were bad things. Though he looked like he was almost asleep, Gavin had covered the hand Ford rested on his chest with his own and begun to idly play with it from fingers to wrist.

The bursting *pop* of a nearly burned-through log in the fireplace made them both jump.

"Do you ever see omens in fires?" Gavin asked, stroking the back of Ford's hand. "Or is it just shape, like cloud gazing?"

Glad of a distraction, Ford kissed Gavin's ear. "Signs in the fire? Only by the way it burns."

"What about this one?"

Ford watched it crackle, far more awake than Gavin. He didn't see anything there—at first. Then he noticed, bit by bit, the way the logs burned white-hot at the last of their centers but shed ash in thick gray heaps that covered the embers. "I see that it's holding on," he said. "It's doing its best to keep going, even if it needs to be fed."

Gavin hmm'd and said nothing.

Ford tried to do better for him. It helped, the conscious effort. "I see... There, toward the left-hand side? Some kindling that got free. Weird. It should have caught, but it hasn't."

"All it needs is a spark," Gavin murmured. He abruptly grasped Ford's hand harder, hard enough that Ford winced in surprised pain, and didn't let go. "Ford? Turn over so I can look at you." No sooner had Ford obeyed than Gavin took Ford's sore hand and laced their fingers together. He held their hands pressed between them, heart to heart. "I want something from you."

"Anything." And that was the truth. "God, Gavin, anything. All you have to do is ask."

He regretted his words right away. Before, he'd been cautious enough to hear what a man wanted before he signed up. Even—especially—with Gavin. *Bad sign to regret promises only a second off the lips. Bad omen.*

What was said couldn't be unsaid. Ford steadied himself. "Ask."

"Other way around," Gavin said, echoing what Ford had soothed him with on the pier. He stroked Ford's third finger. "You ask me."

“Ask you what?”

His face red, Gavin dragged his nail across that third finger and said nothing. It took Ford fifteen, maybe thirty seconds to understand, and when he did—

Ford had given up on this happening. And to be given it on a silver plate now?

Good sign. It is a good sign. Maybe enough to wipe out the bad omens I've been seeing. Maybe it's a gift. “Will you marry me?”

Gavin pulled him closer and whispered his answer against Ford's ear, tracing the letters on his back at the same time. “Yes.”

Oh God.

“Ford?” Gavin's strokes on his back were as light as feathers and as fast as wing beats. “Ford, you're shaking.”

Was he? Yes, and he couldn't stop. Ford rolled onto his side to better curl around Gavin, trying not to crush him either, but he couldn't let go.

Gavin wouldn't let go either. He rolled with Ford, worry written clearly in his expression. “Ford, my God. Are you all right? You're scaring me.”

Ford couldn't help it; he crushed Gavin to him the way they fit best, with Gavin's head under his chin. “I didn't mean to. I'm sorry... I...” His throat was as thick as soup. “Gavin, I—”

“Hey.” Gavin wriggled free to look up at Ford. The concern made Ford pull it together. No scaring Gavin allowed. “I don't understand.”

“Nothing to understand.” Ford kissed him with deliberate intent this time, meaning to make Gavin forget about the shakes that still made his bones ache every third heartbeat. They were passing now. They'd soon be gone. They would.

He even managed a laugh. “You know how I am. Guess you finally did it. You shut me up but good.”

“Idiot.” Gavin had relaxed some. Not completely. Still a hint of worry in his eyes. Ford kissed the top of his head, wet and messy, just to make him splutter and so that shy sideways smile could warm him up.

“You're the strangest and most emotional man I've ever met.” Gavin sifted his fingertips through the strands of Ford's hair that fell over his shoulders, soft strokes.

“And you love me for it?”

The question mark came out accidentally. Gavin took it seriously. “Yes.”

Ford shut his eyes tight and counted his own breaths.

“Don't go stealing my routine. Get your own.” Gavin pinched Ford's side. “Are you sure you're okay? I didn't think—”

“I'm fine. I swear.” And he did feel it, moment by moment. Ford guided Gavin over so he could spoon the little guy.

He was not thinking about how, this way, Gavin couldn't look at his face.

Gavin wasn't having any of that. He made an impatient *tch* and rolled right back. “Don't...don't fall apart on me again. Okay?”

“I promise.” Ford lifted Gavin's hand to his lips. “You'd better do the wedding toast. I'll get flustered and break down just like this again. Wait and see.”

Now Gavin was grinning, forgetting. "That's the best man's job."

"Could it be the best woman's? Kayla?"

Gavin considered that with due measure. He stopped playing with Ford's hair and clapped Ford's shoulder with his palm. "All right. I trust her, and she's been a part of this. Sort of."

"Every little bit helps, right?"

"I think so." Gavin said that to Ford's face, his serious mien mixed with—what? "Awe" wasn't the right word. Not "wonder." Something bigger than both of those. "When?"

"When, what?" He'd lost Ford there, though since Ford's head was muddled that was easily accomplished.

Gavin heaved a melodramatic, put-upon sigh and pushed Ford onto his back, then followed. It seemed to get easier for him each time, climbing on top. Ford's ass ached, reminding him of how much Gavin had changed. Gavin stretched out atop him as comfortably as if he were on a bearskin rug. He tweaked Ford's ear. "When can we get married?"

"Oh wow." Ford's mind raced. "I don't know. When we get back home?"

Gavin ducked his head and looked almost shyly down at Ford. "Or...we're not that far from Canada," he said, neither stuttering nor breaking between words. "Maybe that's a sign."

Ford couldn't breathe. "I thought you didn't believe."

"I told you that you made me want to." Gavin shrugged, abashed. Ford could tell he fought the urge to wriggle down and off, but he made it and stayed put. That core of steel inside him spread outward. "We can get married tonight."

"Tonight?" Ford sat up, dragging Gavin along with him. He took Gavin's face carefully between his paws. "You're serious."

Gavin's complexion suffused dark red, but he didn't back down or retract a single bit of his statement. He really wanted this. "Canada's an hour's drive, maybe two." His strokes deepened to nearly a massage. "I don't know what life would be like without you chattering twenty-four-seven, making me crazy." He touched his lips to Ford's on the last word. "So marry me. Tonight. Tomorrow if places are closed."

Ford checked the clock on the wall, a strange piece that had to have come from someone's attic. An honest-to-God cuckoo, if he was any judge. Ten p.m. almost. "Tomorrow," he said aloud, thinking it over.

Gavin didn't know that. "Early tomorrow," he replied, as if agreeing to another proposal. "We slept the day away. We can drive tonight."

"You honestly don't want to take it any slower?"

"Ford." Gavin pushed their heads together. "I am sick and I am tired of going slow. Waiting to make sure something's to the letter. I want to get out there in that crazy Jeep and make this happen. Give me coffee, and I'm good to drive."

Ford flexed his hands to hide the occasional tremor. "You're sure?"

"Stop asking me that. I am."

"Wait. Passports." Ford didn't know how or didn't want to know how to describe what that flaw in the plan made him feel. "We'd need them for the Canadian border."

Gavin wrinkled his nose. "Like you didn't bring yours thinking you'd coax me around to a trip to a pub with a truly insane amount of hockey kitsch plastered over the walls."

True enough. "But you?"

Gavin finally let go and tumbled down to lie on his back on the bed. "Ford. When have you ever known me not to go anywhere, with anyone, without being prepared? The passport lives in a pocket of that duffel I brought. I'm good."

Then there was nothing to stop them.

"Ford?"

Would you look at him? The trust he has in himself? When did we change places?

Ford couldn't *think* with that damned bad-luck Jonah wind blasting against the cabin walls. "I should get a map."

"The office manager could probably give you directions."

"I think I need a map," Ford said, needing it in more ways than one. "I don't want to get us lost on *this* part of the trip."

There was Gavin's real grin, the one that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "All right." He cocked his head. "Do you want me to come with you? I honestly don't think I can move just yet, and my ego doesn't much like your being able to jump right up—"

"Silly." Ford kissed the tip of Gavin's nose. "I need to do it by myself anyway."

"For luck?" Gavin crossed his arms behind his head. He seemed to ask the question seriously.

It was as good a reason as any. "For luck."

"Okay. Go on, then." Gavin shifted lower in the bed. "I'll keep this warm for you."

Ford kissed him once more. For better luck. Then he—He didn't flee. He just threw on his clothes and left in a hurry. And if he hurried more than he should...well, it was cold outside.

Ford set his shoulders, clenched his teeth, and walked right into it. No turning back now. To hell with the signs. The hell with them and the fear he couldn't shake too.

He wanted this. Even if it wasn't what fate decreed he was allowed to have, he'd take it.

Chapter Twenty-two

The manager's office was shut up tight. No help there. And however far Ford drove toward what he thought might be the nearest town, the only thing he found open was a small bar with a collection of motorcycles but a few cars parked out front to leaven the effect.

Still not sure if going in there was a good idea or a bad one, Ford parked anyway and, once he'd killed the engine, pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He hadn't dared do this on the road.

Kayla. He needed to talk to her. Everyone and everything came along at the right time if you believed. *He said yes, Kayla, out of nowhere, after I'd given up. But now the signs are telling me to run away and stay away, even though that'd kill him and kill me too. I want to ignore them. I want to be someone I've never been and take this for myself. But I don't think I know how. Kayla?*

She'd laugh or she'd cry or she'd squeal fit to deafen him. Probably all three. Then she'd shake some sense into him and talk him down even from hundreds of miles away and make him promise they'd let her plan an after-the-fact bachelor party. *Better than going to see the wizard, you dork.*

Four rings and Kayla's phone went to voice mail. *Damn. Bad sign.*

Ford checked out the bar again. He still didn't exactly like the looks of it, for reasons he couldn't quite pin down, but an abrupt memory flashed through his head of Grandpa Xiao waving that heavy cane under his nose.

"I am not a drinking man, and if I ever hear you turn that way, you're not too big for me to turn over my knee." Remembering that made Ford chuckle. Even then he'd been almost a foot taller than Grandpa Xiao. Not that he doubted Grandpa could have made it happen.

He'd eyed Ford grumpily, then said, *"There's some men who look for answers at the bottom of a bottle. Horseshit. All you ever find there is glass and a few dregs. If you want answers, and drinking's where you are, then for fuck's sake, drink one-half of a beer and then ask the barkeep what you should do. Never fails."*

Ford had believed him then. He clung to that now, weaving it through the still-so-present sense memory of Gavin in his arms. Okay, then. Remembering one of Grandpa Xiao's lessons was a good sign. He still had hope.

He took a deep breath and climbed out of the truck. Here went nothing.

* * *

The difference inside and outside the bar—Ford couldn't call it night versus day or apples versus oranges. It was warmer than he'd expected. Smaller too. Lots of wood and plenty of rough types in leather and flannel, but the woman behind the bar had a kind if worn face and a no-

nonsense way about pulling the beer taps. Something about her, the way she moved and the angles of her face, made Ford think Chinese was part of her ancestry too.

A good sign. Maybe Grandpa Xiao's spirit had led him here. Who knew?

She nodded at him to acknowledge his entry, no curiosity about a nonlocal wandering in, and waved him to a seat at the far end of the bar.

That was a good sign too. Right?

Ford took a careful seat, surprised to find the stool long-legged enough even for him. Then again, they did grow 'em big up here. Perched on its edge, he shrugged out of his windbreaker and felt the icicles melting out of his hair.

Next to him, a couple of what could only be buddies huddled around their third, thumping him on the shoulder and keeping a steady line of shots coming. The barkeep rolled her eyes as she passed them another set of three of something with a hell of a fume on it, but she patted the middle guy's hand as she passed them and came to Ford.

"What'll you have? We've got beer, more beer, and hard liquor. You want anything fancy, you can drive fifty miles to Dolor."

Ford would have liked her if he'd met her at any other time. She had a world's worth of stories behind those lines on her face and the agile moves that made her age impossible to guess. He kind of liked her now. She was calm, steady, stable.

A good sign.

"Beer's perfect, thanks. As dark as you can get it."

"Here sits a man with troubles on his mind," the barkeep muttered, though she was already manipulating glass and tap to work up a good two inches of foam on the top. Skilled. "I know the look. I'd have the time if I weren't keeping that one well on his way to alcohol poisoning."

She wanted him to ask, Ford thought. His need for advice could wait a little longer. "What's wrong?"

"Why do men ever come in and drink themselves stupid? Women too, for that matter." She poured four more shots in glasses spread over a rubber grid. Three for them, one for Ford. "They need drink most when they've been unlucky in love. When they've got broken hearts on their minds."

The shot glass slipped in Ford's fingers; he caught it before it dropped and spilled. Bad sign. The worst of all. "Heartbreak," he said.

"You could say so." The barkeep clicked her tongue. "That one? His wife ran out on him. Bah. Marriage. I've been there twice, and if I had my way, I'd do away with the whole damn rigmarole."

Ford drank the shot without tasting it. "You don't believe in marriage?"

She made a face. "Maybe for a lucky few. Mostly, though, I do not. Marriage changes people. Best way to fuck up a good thing is to put a ring on it. Just makes it that much harder when things end." She raised one eyebrow. "You married?"

"No," Ford said. He followed that with a gulp of beer.

"Hmph." The barkeep shrugged. "Where you headed, then? Forward to Dolor or back to the highway? Out here, if you're not local, it's one or the other."

Ford opened his mouth to answer *forward*. He couldn't.

And though he drank his beer down to the dregs, none of it took away the bitter taste of the bad signs that crowded in around him.

* * *

Kayla still wasn't picking up her phone. At least Ford got a busy signal this time and not rings to voice mail that told him nothing. She was still there. All he had to do was keep trying.

That could be a sign. Something along the lines of *don't give up*. He'd have liked that usually, before tonight. Now? Ford growled in annoyance. He couldn't turn it off, could he? Everywhere he looked, he saw signs that warned of imminent disaster. A broken chain that left a sign swinging crazily in the wind. Snapped branches in a ditch. A pet on the side of the road—Oh God, he couldn't look at that one.

Ford didn't start his engine. He tucked the map the barkeep had sold him inside his shirt and tried Kayla again. No answer. God help him, he *had* to hear a comforting voice. He'd worked himself into a hell of a state, and he needed the comforting.

Who better—or worse—to turn to?

Gavin answered on the first ring. “Ford? Everything okay?”

“I just wanted to hear your voice.” Outside the 4x4, Ford could hear the dull *thump* of the broken sign, thudding against one of its side posts, as if the omens had decided he'd suddenly become too stupid or stubborn to understand anything but the simplest messages.

Gavin hadn't missed the pause, but he had happier thoughts on his mind than Ford did. “Daydreamer,” Gavin said fondly on the other end of the line, his affection still so shy—but not like it used to be. “Where've you been? You've been gone almost an hour.”

“Oh my God.” Ford felt himself pale. “I wasn't ditching you. I swear I wasn't.”

Gavin laughed, one of his real laughs. “I know you weren't.”

“You do?”

“I trust you,” Gavin said simply, as if it were nothing, not everything, and Ford was glad he'd already been sitting down. “Did you find a map?”

“Yeah.” Ford cleared his throat. “Took me about this long to find anywhere open. Rural, you know?”

Gavin made an *mmm* sound of agreement. Ford wished he could see Gavin's face. Needed to. “But you won the day?”

“Won the day. Listen to you.” So easy to fall back into the give-and-take. If it weren't for that damn sign blowing in that damn wind...

Static crackled across the line. Ford could feel the cold seeping in. *Gavin's breaking up. Breaking, broken, broken up, broken apart, broken hearts.*

“Can you hear me?” Gavin finally cut in after too long of the static. “Ford?” Clearer now. “Ford, are you there?”

“Yeah,” Ford said, forcing it to be so. He unfolded the map and spread it out on the steering wheel, focusing on that and only that.

Hard to read just by the semidistant lights from the bar, but it wouldn't take *too* long to figure out where they needed to go and how to get there. “Huh. We really aren't that far from the border. Maybe a hundred miles. It's mostly back ways and not much straight shooting. Could be a tough drive even for the Jeep, and we won't make it there before morning.”

"I don't mind." Ford could tell Gavin meant that. "I can start packing. We didn't get much out in the first place."

"No," Ford said, too fast, wanting something more. "I mean we shouldn't drive so far into the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night, *again*. My legs can't take being cooped up for another stretch like that yet. Wait there for me. We can spend the night in the cabin and start out closer to daylight."

Now Gavin sounded dubious. Maybe a little bit scared. "You don't want to go right now?"

"I'd rather be safe than sorry."

Gavin was quiet. Ford knew he'd be thinking, Since when do you worry about that? "Okay," he said at last. "Hurry back." He shifted from concerned to... Ford knew this tone. He could see Gavin so clearly in his mind's eye, stretching out like a cat beneath the comforter "I'm not tired. If we've got all night, we can keep each other awake."

The map fell away with a crinkle. "Gavin?"

Only a touch of shyness now, enough to make this new boldness as endearing as the lack of it had been before. "You know what I mean."

"Tell me anyway?"

"I want you to...love me." Ford could just see the pink in Gavin's cheeks, the embarrassed wiggle, and the way he'd be drifting his hand down to stroke at his cock. "I want to suck you first. Hard and fast. While you finger me open."

Ford—"Floored" wasn't the word for it. Neither was "stunned." "Gavin, damn."

"That mouth of yours gets pretty salty when you're this worked up, doesn't it?" The teasing, as it came through, felt like a kiss. "You don't know what that's like, to look at you looking at me, and you seeing..." He trailed off. That didn't need finishing. "One thing. One more thing before you come back. I can wait a little longer."

Curiosity was still Ford's downfall. "If it's something I can do, I will."

"I want a wedding ring."

Gavin could still take him by surprise. "A what, now?"

"A ring. Something I can wear on my finger and show everyone every time they look at my hands. When I turn a page, when I shelve a file. Something that says I belong to someone. That I belong to you."

Ford couldn't say a word. Nothing that wouldn't come out as gibberish and fear. It didn't feel right, Gavin's being the one to ask. The tables had turned too far.

"Ford?"

He coughed and cleared his throat. "I don't think there's a jewelry store closer than ten miles away. And—" No, he was not telling Gavin he'd blown 95 percent of his cash on the cabin rental.

"Then go to a grocery store. I bet you can find one of those. Get a couple of plastic toy rings from the dollar store. I don't care about fancy. I just want it to come from you."

Ford squeezed his eyes shut. Gavin wanted this so much, he'd worked himself past his limits and kept on going. Trusted Ford that much. Loved him that much. He had to do the same. He *would*. "I'll get you a real one when we're back home," he said thickly. "Promise."

"I'll still keep the other one." Gavin sounded more awake now, not less. "Take your time. I know you're coming back."

Outside, the wind stilled. Surprised, Ford looked around. Things looked different. The sign still hung cockeyed from its chain, but Ford could see now the broken chain had rusted through, and the other one was new. Past, present. The sign itself—a *sign, for Pete's sake*—was heavy and sturdy enough to come to a proper stop without the wind buffeting it.

One sign canceled out another. Gavin's asking; the barkeep's advising against it. Hesitance and reassurance.

Ford made his promise. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"And I'll be waiting," Gavin said, more "come hither" in him than a sultan's plaything. "For you. In bed."

Ford's heart contracted. "I love you so much," he said and meant it. "Just...wait there for me. I'll be back." This had to come out. "I wish I were there, or you were here right now."

"Yeah," Gavin said, driving back the last lingering wisps of fear. "Double for me."

"I'll be there soon," Ford promised. His heart felt as light as it had been heavy. He could still read the signs, but here was the thing: good canceled out bad. Vice versa too. And now? The windshield reflected a changing of the beer signs in the bar window, from the red of a name brand to the soft green of what had to be a local brewery.

Green for go. Green with a touch of yellow to highlight the neon cursive.

"Wait for me," Ford said.

"I always will. I—"

The phone cut off then. Completely dead. Ford jerked back, cradling it in his palm. He saw now that the battery was dead, drained dry. Nothing more to give.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

It doesn't mean anything if I don't want it to, Ford lied. He studied the map. Intently. There? Yes. Maybe an hour's drive to Dolor, where they had to have something open all night. Gumball machines or cubic zirconium signets or simple gold bands. He wouldn't come back without the rings Gavin wanted.

He just wished he'd never had to leave in the first place. That felt wrongest of all.

Chapter Twenty-three

Ford wished he were there? So did Gavin.

Gavin swung about, away from one corner of the cabin, and started the walk to the other side. He tapped Call Waiting and hoped the woman on the end of the other line hadn't hung up. "Kayla?"

She'd been the one to contact him. Tearful. Apologetic. Confused. Had woken him from a half-asleep sex daze and brought him cold to his feet. Then Ford had called, and—He hoped he'd heard her wrong.

"Kayla, are you there?"

"I'm here." She sniffled. "God, Gavin, I am so sorry. I don't know how it happened, I swear I don't, but I've looked everywhere. I even moved some furniture. I put out some fresh-cubed chicken, and I sat still and listened."

So he hadn't heard her wrong. *Damn* it.

"Oscar's gone. I am such an idiot. This should be the happiest night of your life. I am so—"

Gavin stopped her before she could apologize again; he couldn't listen to that right now. "Kayla, just...don't. Oscar might still be in there. F1 crosses are wild. Ford's the only stranger he's ever taken to. He barely comes near me. He doesn't know you at all, and it can seem like he's vanished when he's just hidden really well."

"Gavin, I checked *everywhere*—"

"You couldn't check every place at the same time." Gavin pinched the bridge of his nose. Ford needed to be there. Why had he sent Ford after rings?

No. He knew the answer to that question. Ford... The way he'd reacted to the proposal had scared Gavin. More than a little. He'd almost fallen apart when Gavin had expected a gigantic kiss, a bear hug, and instantaneous nonstop babbling about wedding plans and who to invite and where to hold it, and...and...and—

Maybe he still thought Gavin would change his mind; God knew Gavin couldn't blame him for that.

But Ford would deem that a bad sign. And Oscar's disappearing tonight, if he really had gotten out somehow? Worse, much worse.

I don't believe, Gavin tried telling himself. He knew it was a lie. He blocked his ears to the clamor in his head and focused on Kayla. "Okay. Here's what you do. Try again. Put out more fresh food and water where he can get to them. Sit quietly in a corner of the apartment. Wait for him. He'll come around. You'll see."

Kayla sniffled. "I'll try." Unhappiness suited her as badly as it did Ford. "I really am glad for you, you know. I'll throw you both a double bachelor party when you get back, even if you *are* already married. You still need a good party."

There. That was more like it. Didn't push all the worries back or quell the tension making Gavin's neck ache, but it was a start. He bit at his thumbnail. More than worry or tension. Dread. Like the worst had yet to come.

Would Ford change his mind? He trusted Ford, he did, but...

Am I changing my mind?

No. Gavin refused to go there. He was still riding on fumes and leftover adrenaline from the courage it'd taken to ask to be asked, and scared as hell by Ford's reaction, but he had chosen his course, and by God, he would stick it out. He wanted this. More than anything.

Everyone got the jitters.

"Call me back in about an hour if Oscar hasn't shown himself. Sooner if he does. Don't worry about spooking him away from the food dish. He'll come back. I just want to know he's okay."

"I promise."

I do. Yes. Gavin lifted his chin, feeling calmer somehow. "Good. Talk to you then." He snapped the phone shut on Kayla's reply—rude, and he was sorry for that right away, but then it was too late, wasn't it?

That's a bad sign, he imagined he heard Ford say.

Stop it. Gavin made a sharp turn toward suitcases and bed. Ford was busy doing his part; Gavin would take care of his end. It'd all be okay, even Oscar. They were the ones who controlled their lives, not random events and chaotic circumstance. They'd see.

He checked first for his passport in the tiny zipper compartment that was such a perfect size, it might have been made for the little booklet. Not that he'd ever used his passport, all the pages perfectly blank next to the photo that made him look like a startled doll.

Gavin liked that the first stamp in there would be made on his way to getting married. *Married, God.* Who'd have thought? He wanted to ruffle through those blank pages and wonder what the stamp would look like.

But when he reached inside the compartment, his passport wasn't there.

What? Gavin checked again, pulled the liner inside out, and felt around to see if there was a hole in the bag that he'd missed. Nothing.

Bad sign.

Gavin bit harder at his nail, tearing the cuticle. *Okay. Maybe it's at the bottom. It's somewhere.*

He'd almost finished searching when a boisterous knock sounded at the door. He sagged with relief, breathing out a thank-you to whatever might be listening, if anything did.

Up on his feet again and to the door. "That was fast. Did you find a quickie mart?"

No answer.

Gavin rolled his eyes and didn't bother to pretend to mean his scolding. "Why knock? It's not like we don't know each other well enough by now."

He heard chuckling on the other side, almost boyish. Happy. It went a long way toward lifting his spirits.

"You almost had me worried, you—" Gavin undid the lock, threw the door open... and stopped.

Ford didn't stand on the other side waiting to be let in, rings in his hand and a smile brightening the room.

Not Ford at all.

Donny.

Donny. Here. Why? With a red duffel in one hand and his cap—literally—in the other. Carefully styled hair falling artfully in his face and stars in his eyes.

Oh God.

“Gavin,” Donny said, the way he used to. As if Gavin meant the world to him. Like nothing else could ever matter.

Gavin had fallen for that once.

Not again. Not now. Gavin's limbs unlocked. He stepped into the doorway, half in and half out. Put him within reach of Donny but kept Donny from coming inside. “You cannot be here,” he said, amazed and stunned at how coolly that emerged. No stutter.

Maybe because there was no doubt. “Why did you come?”

Donny eased forward—*like Ford*—and Gavin gave way. Instinct or natural reaction to someone so much larger crowding his space?

Coincidence or a sign?

Donny's smile was simpler than Ford's. Vapid. “I came to win you back, Gavin.”

Gavin covered his face with his hands and groaned. “For God's sake, Donny.”

“Give me a chance. That's all I'm asking. Just one chance, Gavin.” For every step Gavin took back, Donny took one forward. “You remember how good we were.”

“That was then.”

“It could be now.”

Gavin had gone almost as far as he could go. Four more steps and he'd be at the bed. “Get out, Donny.”

Donny didn't listen to him. “You look...” His lips had the shape of the word “wonderful,” but that fell away when he tipped his head in confusion—God, did he have to look exactly like Ford when he did that? “Different,” he said, the changes eluding him.

“It doesn't matter how I look.”

“But it does. You're beautiful. I always thought so. You know that.”

Gavin scoffed.

“What was that for?”

“Men aren't...” Gavin rubbed his forehead. “Never mind.”

“Do we have to stand here arguing about it?” Donny stepped forward. He looked shocked when Gavin didn't move to meet him, the sort of look that made older women want to feed him cookies and the rest of the world want to kiss that dismay away. “I thought you'd be glad to see me, Gavin.” He touched Gavin's face. “I missed you.”

“You cannot be here.” Gavin moved back and away, surprised at himself, then shocked when Donny pushed into his space. “Get. Out. Get out now.”

Utter shock and confusion made Donny look like a simpleton. “Gavin—”

“No.” Another step and another, almost at the bed now. “How did you even find me?”

Donny ignored the question and tried to muscle past Gavin again. "Come on. It's going to rain." He peered at the sky. "It *is* raining. You wouldn't leave me outside in the rain, would you?" He stopped. "What are you laughing at?"

"At your having the sense to come in out of the rain." Rude. This time, Gavin didn't care. Donny couldn't make sense of how he'd changed or why. Poor stupid dog.

Pity surprised Gavin more than anything, even Donny's arrival. It kept him silent and gave Donny the opening he needed. "I'm here because I realized a few days ago that I'd made, you know, the biggest mistake of my life." He cupped Gavin's face in one hand and lifted his chin.

Sense memory kept Gavin still. It parted his lips, as if in anticipation of a kiss.

Donny noticed. "It was easy to find you, you know," he said, so obviously sure he'd won the day.

"How?" Gavin couldn't wrap his head around that; they were out in the middle of absolute nowhere, and there was no way Donny could be here—except he was.

"I have to start at the beginning."

"Or else you'll forget your lines?"

"Huh?" Donny wrinkled his nose. "I went to your apartment because I wanted to get you and take you out to a party, but you were gone," Donny explained very slowly, as if Gavin were the beautiful but dumb one here. "So of course I came after you." Donny traced the line of Gavin's nose. "I know you still love me, even if it's just a little."

"Donny, God. Don't do this."

"I have to. This is my last chance. And I'd forgotten how much I love you."

"And you'll forget again the next time the wind changes."

"I won't, I swear. I know how stupid I was, Gavin. Honest I do. I threw away..." Donny smoothed his thumbs over Gavin's cheeks, another of Ford's moves, one that made Gavin shiver—and gave Donny the wrong idea. "I want another chance with you."

"No. And answer me one simple question, damn it. How did you know specifically where I'd be? Were you following me?"

"Gavin, come on. You left a whole stack of brochures at your place. All I had to do was follow a map." How could a man so thick touch Gavin as if he were so precious? "Besides, you silly idiot, don't you recognize this area? It's only four miles down the road from where we stayed when we were running away together."

* * *

Sign. After sign. After sign. Ford could almost see the storm racing in front of him, heading toward the lake or where he thought the lake was, leaving him two car lengths behind.

He wasn't the only one having trouble. When the rain kicked up for a while there, Ford had shared the road with a dozen angry bikers and a couple of confused tourists.

They'd fallen away one by one. Bikers into dirt lanes you wouldn't see if you didn't know they were there, into the darkness, gone. Two of the tourists tried to cut each other off to stay ahead of the rain. The crash and screech when their bumpers met—

Ford would have stayed to help them. They weren't hurt, though, just angry, out of their cars and fists raised along with their shouts of rage.

Now? Alone. On a back road without a star in the sky to guide him and no clue whether he was headed to Dolor or back to the highway, following an internal compass and praying while he watched the seconds tick away on the implacable LED glow of the dashboard clock.

I have to get back to Gavin. Each minute away was too much, and if Ford couldn't see him, wrap Gavin up in his arms, and hang on, couldn't quash this damn *dread* that wouldn't stop—

Electric sparks startled him into laying on the brakes. One warning, almost silent, and it was the only thing that saved him. Even so, jerking the wheel out of pure reflex sent him spinning across the road. When he'd finally dragged the 4x4 to a halt half on and half off the shoulder he saw what'd knocked down the power lines: four pine trees, spindly on their own but grown knotted together, one pulling the others down.

Four.

Ford pulled away from the wheel, the feel of warm leather stinging his palms. Four by four, and four again. He could hear the word spat the wrong way: *sz!*

"No," Ford said out loud, like that'd help, and who knew? Maybe it would. "The road ahead's closed. That's not stopping me. I'll go back the way I came."

Sz. Ford ground his teeth and kept it together. That damned wind, if it didn't stop—

The smart thing to do would be to park the car and stay safely put until morning, or maybe retrace the roads until he hit civilization of some kind. Call Gavin and tell him what'd happened.

He'd forgotten the rings Gavin wanted. Fuck. All the more reason to turn back.

But if he did—if he called Gavin from a city away and promised everything would be fine...

Ford could taste the fear like metal on his tongue, the sense of "too late" that had dogged him since he had left the bar. Sign after sign and the wind, that wind that never stopped—

Fallen power lines sent out showers of angry sparks. *Sz! Sz! Sz!*

Ford threw the 4x4 into reverse. "Off road," he muttered. "Let's see how off road you can get." If he looked, really looked, he thought he could see lights reflecting off a small lake whipped up by rain.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe it was just an illusion. Maybe not.

Trying was all he had left. Holding on to hope.

Ford wheeled the 4x4 around with clear road ahead of him, though mud churned up under the heavy crash of each fat, angry raindrop.

He drove, pointed toward Gavin. His everything. Praying he wasn't too late for...for... He didn't know, only that the gnawing sensation inside told him that minute where he could make the right turn was long gone by.

* * *

Oh God. Gavin had forgotten. Not just about the brochures. Now he recognized the shape of the hills. Even the roads they'd twisted around on. How had he not seen that before? *Too excited. Too hopped-up on Ford.* Gavin rocked on his feet, needing something to grab to keep himself from falling. And Donny was there.

Donny misinterpreted him. Same as always. Gavin only needed something to lean on, and Donny thought that was a "yes, please."

Donny's lips weren't on his, and then...they were. Nothing like Ford's. Only...they were, a little. The size of him, the way he tipped Gavin just *so* and knew how to kiss him to make his knees unsteady all over again.

"See?" Donny stroked Gavin's cheekbones. "You *do* love me at least a little. If you didn't, you wouldn't have kissed me now."

If Gavin kept his eyes closed, he could so easily have confused Donny with Ford.

He kept them open and spoke the truth without hesitation, without a stutter. "I don't love you. Not anymore."

"But—" Donny's eyes were shiny. "It's not supposed to be this way."

That drew a spark of anger. "Wrong. Fool me once? Shame on you. Fool me twice? No."

"But you—I thought since I came back that we were getting past that."

"You never had a thought in your life that you didn't get from a play or a book." Weariness made Gavin ache. "You're just playing another role. The hero comes in and saves the day at the last minute. Wins him away from the wrong man. This isn't a stage drama and you're not my hero." He stepped away from the door silently and with purpose. "Go."

For once in his life, Donny stood like a tree trunk with no plans to budge. "But...this isn't how it's supposed to happen."

He sounded so like Ford. It made Gavin's insides twist.

"I came to rescue you. See?" Donny dug in his pocket for something that jangled. "Look. It was like a sign that you needed me. You left your keys in the door. That's how I got in and found the brochures in the first place. If I hadn't been there, you'd have been robbed."

Oh God. Oscar. "You." Gavin had to stop. "You went in. Did you leave the door open while you were there?"

"Maybe for a few minutes." Meaning however long he'd felt like staying—a minute, an hour. "Why?"

Gavin fought down crazy laughter that wouldn't have made sense to Donny. "You let the cat out of the bag."

"What?"

"My cat." Gavin couldn't stand still; he had to turn his back on Donny. "You let my cat get out. He's wild. He won't come back."

"Gavin." Donny followed him and placed his hand on Gavin's shoulder, his touch so firm and yet so hesitant. Just like Ford's. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

Gavin could almost believe him.

"But he's just a cat. You can get another cat. I can buy you one." Donny sounded so bright, as if that would fix it all. "Like a new start, right?"

Gavin shrugged him off.

"I'm sorry," Donny said. Repetition didn't work. "I wouldn't have hurt you on purpose."

There. That was the last he could take. "Wouldn't hurt me?" Gavin turned on him, expecting to be angry, to be furious, but when he looked at Donny, the fury melted away. He saw Donny as if he were a stranger. A confused little boy in a man's body, who'd never grow up and never see past the next big adventure.

Gavin had grown past him long ago. It'd just taken him longer than it should have for him to understand that. "I spent way too long being hurt by you. I have a chance to be happy now. I won't let you take that from me too."

"But I love you."

"The only man you ever loved was yourself. I love Ford." God. But—*There*. He'd said it out loud to someone besides himself and Ford, and maybe in a bizarre way it almost mattered more to say it to Donny. Or not so bizarre at all, if he thought about it.

"Ford—"

"Is the man I love. I'll marry him, and he'll marry me, because he *is not you*." Gavin stood aside and held the door open. "Go."

"One more chance, Gavin. Please?"

"There are no more chances." Gavin shook his head, *tick-tock*, back and forth. "Go. No. Don't lay your hands on me. Understand? Just go."

Crestfallen, Donny moved back. Gavin could see the questions and answers running through him. Intense cogitation didn't look good on Donny. Donny didn't think; Donny *acted*.

Gavin knew he should have seen it coming. It was his own fault that he didn't.

Donny covered Gavin with his body, lifted him high off the ground so that Gavin had the choice between falling or hanging on, and kissed him. Donny probably heard violins soaring in his head.

Gavin? Gavin saw headlights charging toward them, attached to the battered red hood of a 4x4. He saw Ford behind the wheel.

As Ford saw them. And when Gavin looked at him, he saw everything he'd never wanted from Ford.

An ending.

Chapter Twenty-four

Ford could have slammed his hand in the Jeep door; for all he paid attention, it might have happened, and he'd only have noticed once it had stopped his moving forward. He had eyes for one thing only. No, two, and for once Gavin wasn't at the top of that list.

Donny in the door, Donny wrapped around Gavin, Donny's lips on Gavin's, and Gavin—one wide eye on Ford, fists knotted, shoulders tight, half a second away from giving Donny a taste of Roger's medicine. That helped.

Some.

He had to have noticed the headlights flaring bright and the slam of the door. Not even Donny was that clueless. He might just be that much of a bastard, though.

Ford knew he'd called that one, because only when he was within spitting distance and Gavin had raised his fist did Donny stop kissing Gavin.

Ford *didn't* stop approaching. He backed Donny into the wall by the door and shepherded Gavin to one side. The whole maneuver took maybe five seconds.

Long enough for Donny to start sweating.

"I have zero time for you," Ford said, "and even less patience. You've got two options—you can walk away, or you can fall down. Right now I don't care which."

Maybe Donny was that stupid after all. "From what our Gavin here tells me, you're pure sunshine and sweetness. You wouldn't hit me."

Ford sensed Gavin's tension beside him but only heard silence.

"Wouldn't I?" Ford took Donny's fist in his—weak, floppy fist—and squeezed until he felt the grinding pressure of something on the verge of popping. Too easy, almost like crumpling a ball of paper. "Believe me when I say you don't know how fucking close you are to making me break a lifelong promise. Okay?"

"Jesus Christ, Ford," Gavin said. He crept back a step, and normally that would have put Ford on high alert, but there was only so high a man could go before he went too far to come back.

Donny darted a look at Gavin, maybe to get his help on scoffing, or maybe just to get his help. Didn't happen.

"Your choice," Ford told him. "Do you want to fight for Gavin, or do you want to take me on? Think fast, or God help me, I will make the choice for you."

Donny struggled. Away from Gavin. Ford let him go and watched him bolt in the opposite direction, heading for the tidy cluster of cars belonging to other renters. All of them were probably peeking through blinds and past curtains, woken from their sleep and trying to make sense of the ruckus. Let them.

His puling nemesis ducked into the farthest of the cars, a sleek silver coupe, slung so low you couldn't see it unless you were on top of it. Donny revved the engine and drove, casting up a splash of mud, and then he was gone. Fitting curtain call, if you asked Ford.

"He always loved dramatic exits," Gavin murmured, the slightness of his slim body's warmth drawing closer to Ford.

"I noticed." Ford hadn't wanted to do this, hadn't meant to do this, but he'd crowded Gavin where Donny had been. He made himself move back, because he was not that man, and by God, he would never do that to Gavin. But he could not control his voice, the volume, or the break down the middle. "Gavin. What the hell?"

Gavin wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He stayed put, watching Ford with that same old look, the one he'd worn when Ford had first met him. Small. Trapped.

No. No, not quite the same. Behind that fear, Ford saw anger rising to match his own.

"This is not what it looks like," Gavin said. Quiet, so quiet. Ford heard the fury in the coldness where he wouldn't have before.

It should have made him want to give way. It didn't. God help him if he weren't strung tighter than a garrote, which came out as disdain that he didn't—no, he did—mean. "I know it wasn't. God."

"Ford—"

Ford wasn't done. He'd had this bubbling inside him for too long now, and it was coming out now, no stopping it. "That?" He flung his arm out in the direction Donny had fled.

Gavin didn't flinch from the swing. Ford would have been proud of him. If...

"That's the man you loved. That's the guy who you thought I was so much like that it scared you sick."

"You're hurt by that."

"No shit I'm hurt." Ford speared his hands through his hair. He came away with a strand or three pulled loose, not even feeling the sting.

"You're angry."

"You blame me? Jesus Christ, Gavin. If you ever thought I was anything like him—"

"That was before. I didn't know you then. I do now. Or I thought I did."

Ford stayed silent. What else was there to say?

Plenty.

Gavin moved forward now; he didn't crowd Ford back, but he could have if he'd wanted. He could have hurt Ford with his fists if he'd taken a swing. A hammer could chip scars into brick walls.

"I've taken a chance on everything because I don't believe that. I didn't ask him up here, Ford. I had nothing to do with that." Gavin enunciated each word as clearly as the tap of a silver bell, just as pretty and just as cold. Metal rubbing against ice.

"Gavin—"

"Shut. Up. I am not done yet." Gavin hadn't put his glasses on, and in the chiaroscuro half-light of the cabin, the brown of his eyes stood out too darkly against the milky paleness of his skin. "He found me. I left my keys in the apartment door because I was so crazy to come with

you, I wasn't thinking. He let Oscar out. I've lost my job because I cared enough to take a swing at a colleague.”

“Broke his nose.”

“Still not sorry.”

Ford wanted to say, *still proud*. He didn't, couldn't. If he opened his mouth now, he had no idea what'd come out. Nothing good.

“Don't you fucking dare think that I'm playing games.”

“I didn't—”

“If you think I'm trying to turn the tables and make someone else hurt the way I did, then I am leaving right the fuck now, even if I have to walk all the way to the main roads.”

Don't leave me. Ford stopped. Above Gavin's head, he could see the branches of the small shade tree waving in the wind. The first drops of rain splattered heavy at Gavin's feet; the storm was here on the rush of the Jonah wind.

Ford didn't say the words he should have. Signs, everywhere signs. The light cast crosses over Gavin—X, X, X, X. He swallowed a thick knot of nastiness and shook his head.

Would you look at Gavin? On fire. Standing tall, proud, on his own.

He didn't need Ford anymore, did he?

Four X's of crossed light and shadow rested on Gavin when Ford looked him in the eyes. Ford would have said his heart had sunk if it hadn't already been buried in the earth at his feet.

“Goddammit, Ford.”

Ford looked away. Didn't mean to, but it happened, and in front of him, unseen, Gavin was as silent as a cold night's grave.

“So where does this leave us? No. You tell me.”

Ford's lips wouldn't move. *Don't go there. Please don't.*

But he knew Gavin couldn't have done as he'd been asked, not even if it'd made it out into the air between them, which seemed colder and emptier by the second.

“Ford.” One word, but it was enough.

“What do you want me to say?” Ford shifted. Another half foot of space separating them.

Gavin followed him. “I want you to say you still love me. Like I love you. I want you to say you still want to marry me. That's what I fucking want, because I gave everything up for you. The way I changed my life, there is no going back. I want you to say it, Ford. Don't you fucking dare not.”

“Gavin, please.”

“No.” Gavin was the one who pushed into Ford now, as Ford had pushed into Donny; Ford recognized that same cold anger. “You were gone for how long after you left? I might have thought you weren't coming back. I didn't. Where were you?”

“The roads were bad.” A fat drop of rain slapped the crown of Ford's head and rolled down between his eyes. “There's a storm coming in. Accidents. I almost got hit by a tree.”

“Uh-huh. You got a map. I see it in your pocket. You told me so.”

Ford knew where this was going, knew there was no hiding from it, and he would not try. He owed Gavin that much.

X's swung across Gavin. They flashed across Ford too, with them this close together. One. Two. Three. Four. Sz.

"I asked you to get something while you were out." Gavin pushed Ford one arm's length away, his hand splayed open between them. "I trusted you to do it."

"Gavin, don't."

"No, I know you. You'd have twisted the bark off a tree if you hadn't been able to find anything else." Gavin folded his fingers down, then out. They shook. "I want my ring, Ford. I want that fucking ring I gave up everything for."

Ford couldn't give him anything. His pockets were empty.

Gavin didn't lower his hand. He rubbed his thumb across the still-bare space where, by God, Ford had intended—had *wanted*—a simple band of gold to shine. One he'd dreamed of time and time again. Now, nothing.

"I'm sorry," Ford said. Not enough. He knew it.

Gavin did too. Ford could see it, the second the walls slammed down, and a black smirk, the kind he hadn't ever seen on Gavin, made his pretty mouth ugly. "So that's how it is. You changed your mind."

"Gavin—"

"Don't you lie to me, Ford. Don't you fucking lie to me. Tell me why. I know you wanted to marry me. Tell me why you're doing this to me a second fucking time, bringing me up to the edge and then walking away."

"I'm not walking away."

"Aren't you?" Gavin drew farther away. There was almost a gulf parting them now. Ford saw the shine in Gavin's eyes, the gloss of tears his stupid stubborn nature would not let him shed. "Then tell me how it really is."

"Gavin, God! What can I say to you? What is there that'll be anything like what you need to hear?"

"The truth isn't? God. No, I know it isn't. Say anything. I don't know. I don't care. I have no...idea...where your head's at. Tell me what happened. Give me a sign."

Gavin stopped cold. So did Ford. He knew that Gavin knew.

Ford knew that what came next would be bad.

He was right.

"Signs," Gavin said. "You're seeing them... My God, I am so stupid. I should have seen it before, and still you asked me, and still here I am. How long, Ford?" He'd found his voice at last, and he poured all his fury and fear into it. "What have you been seeing? Signs that tell you 'no, bad idea, turn back now'? For how long?"

Ford wanted to move away from the questions hurled like knives that buried themselves deep in his heart. He said nothing.

"Weeks," Gavin guessed. "*Tell me.*"

He had to. Even if it was the end. Wasn't it the end already anyway? "Weeks," Ford said.

Gavin shut his eyes. "Damn you."

Thunder rolled across the sky. Rain hit the lake and then the pair of them. Though they were soaked to the skin in seconds, neither of them moved.

"You're going to throw us away because of superstitious bullshit."

"I thought you wished you could believe."

"Not if it costs me this much." Gavin came back, close enough to touch. "Or...is it... *Did* I do something wrong?"

"Gavin, no. God no." It was second nature by now to touch Gavin, to cradle Gavin's face in his hands.

"Then stop being a dick and say you're still going to marry me."

Rain fell thick, hard, fast. Ford almost couldn't see Gavin, even as close as they were. He said one thing, but the world said another. *Slipping away.*

Maybe Gavin didn't know some of the water on his cheeks wasn't rain. Ford couldn't tell. For himself, he knew. But only that and nothing more. "I can't."

Ford could see the wrath had given way to a hurt so deep, it broke his own heart. He wanted—so much—to brush the wet hair out of Gavin's face and kiss him. To tell him it'd be okay. They'd get through this.

But Ford couldn't.

Gavin pulled his lips back over his teeth. "Nothing to say for yourself?"

Ford's throat unlocked. "Gavin, I am so sorry. God, I'm sorry. Sorry I ever got you into this."

"Sorry." Gavin ignored the rain that slicked his face. He shivered from the cold that pebbled his bare chest with goose bumps, but didn't notice or didn't care. Probably both. "You're sorry."

"I know it's not enough. Gavin, I can't... I want, but... My whole life before this. It is what it's always been, and God, don't you think I didn't fight it. You think I want to be here, doing this?"

Gavin turned his back, sharp and deliberate. "Ford, give me some space."

Ford had heard that before. He knew what it really meant. *Go away.* He'd always gone after Gavin or come back to him. Tonight...

Tonight he watched Gavin go. It wasn't a long distance, but it still seemed to take forever. He caught Gavin at the last second possible, the reach of his arm just enough to capture rain-chilled flesh and hold tight.

"Gavin—"

"Give me some space, Ford. Give me some fucking space!"

"*Gavin.*" That went through to him when shouting hadn't. Maybe it was the worst idea Ford had ever had. Maybe not. He bent as far over as he could, to press their heads together.

"I will always love you."

Gavin squeezed his eyes shut. Ford kissed him. No, not a kiss. One last attempt to lay claim and shunt the rest aside. He would have climbed inside Gavin if he could have; he had to settle for moving his mouth over Gavin's. His tongue fought with Gavin's, and his hands were everywhere, not able to touch enough at once.

But even as Ford wrapped Gavin as tight as he could without hurting him, and even as Gavin kissed back as desperately as Ford kissed him, Ford understood now what he'd done. He'd

forced luck's hand, and no one could do that and get away unburned. She'd turn on a man as quick as a wink. He should have seen it from the start, and he hadn't.

Gavin let Ford go when Ford released him. "I'm going inside," he said quietly. "I'll wait for you to cool down and get some air. We're not done here."

"Gavin..." Ford let it die away, lost in the wind.

The door closed behind Gavin, a last blast of rain hammering it shut with the sound of a thousand nails. And then, as soon as Gavin was out of sight, the rain stopped. The storm was over.

Damn it.

Ford knew what he had to do. He'd rather cut off his arm or his gift. But he knew. Funny thing, fate. No matter how hard he ran, or how many twists he took. He couldn't outrun the finish line as it stretched out before him.

No matter how much he wanted to.

"Gavin, I'm sorry," Ford said and turned to walk away. Toward the road.

Back the way he'd come.

Chapter Twenty-five

Gavin woke to moonlight in his eyes, bright through the window despite blinds and sheer curtains.

But not to Ford's smile. Not to Ford anywhere, neither in bed nor on the porch and not, when Gavin stumbled out of the cabin with a blanket still dragging from his shoulders, out on the lake or on the pier.

Baffled—cold all over again—Gavin turned to the parking lot. No, the 4x4 was still parked there, safe and sound. He knew he'd almost tripped over Ford's still-half-packed duffel inside.

Then where was...

Gavin reached for the cabin door, wondering if he'd missed Ford inside somehow. In the bathroom, maybe, standing under a hot spray.

He knew he hadn't. Ford had gone. Left Gavin the 4x4 so he wouldn't be stranded. Gone, because—*Oh God*.

It should have broken his heart. Made him quit, lay down arms.

The hell if he'd let that happen again. Not if he had one hope, and if Ford had taught him anything else, a man in love had to hold on to hope. He couldn't give up.

Now that Ford had...

Then that left Gavin in charge, and there was only one thing he knew to do.

* * *

Ford had done the right thing. He had to believe that. Otherwise he'd actually go out of his mind instead of constantly thinking he just about might.

Steam from the shower he'd badly needed after half a night's hitchhiking covered the glass he'd wiped clean, leaving his reflection smudged into something smoky and Picasso-like. Gavin would have known the kind of art he meant. Dalí? Escher?

Ford tched impatiently and wiped the mirror clean again. He couldn't meet his eyes this time. Not without seeing, down by his mouth, the mark of where Gavin had kissed him with all the fire in that small body and left his mark. His lips were as swollen as if he'd been punched, not kissed.

The steam crept in. Ford knew he shouldn't be surprised. He'd taken the hottest shower he could coax out of his plumbing and stood underneath until it ran cold and his skin glowed a deep pink.

Funny how it'd never quite seemed to warm him all the way through. Just washing hadn't been quite right. Everywhere he went, there was a reminder of where Gavin had been. In places no one else had gone, the tenderness of abused flesh and a deep ache inside, one that he'd have loved to dwell on and enjoy with each stretch, each stoop if—if—things were different.

Fuck it.

Ford's thermal-knit shirt and jeans clung to his still-damp body, and his bare feet were cold on the floor. He stuffed them into a pair of old slippers and called it good. Old King Kong slippers, gorilla heads bouncing every time he took a step. A joke gift he'd taken seriously. Hey, his feet got cold, same as everyone else's. Gavin would have either loved and laughed his ass off at those or cringed at the sight of them and begged Ford to burn them. Ford wasn't sure which.

Seriously, he had to stop thinking about Gavin. *Yeah. Good luck with that.*

Ford shuffled to his kitchen and pulled down a dusty bottle. What was this, Crown Royal? Honestly, he wasn't a drinker. Maybe a glass of wine, like at that dinner—

Damn it, again. Ford rummaged in the same cupboard for a shot glass. He settled on a one-quarter measuring cup instead.

Oof. Ford's throat burned after the first swig. Possibly that'd been too much at one go. Just possibly. Gavin would have laughed at him right now, Ford bet. It had to look strange, but no weirder than anything else Ford did on a regular basis. Besides, run of the mill shot glasses looked like rejects from baby-doll tea sets in his oversize mitts. Thimbles. He had to hold them way too carefully for fear of breaking them. Like he'd broken Gavin.

Ford took a second shot and didn't like it any better than the first, but at least he didn't splutter. No, actually he did. He just wasn't admitting it to himself. At least with his kind of body mass, it wouldn't go right to his head.

He poured out a third and shuffled back into his sitting area. Usually, it was barely big enough to contain him. Felt weirdly empty tonight with just him and his Crown Royal.

None of this was fair. None of it was right. He'd be okay. Eventually. Maybe.

Probably not. But he didn't matter. Gavin did, and Gavin...

Ford drank his third shot and poured a fourth. Why not, right?

* * *

Ford sat cross-legged in front of a shelf of bric-a-brac, drawn there by the blinking light on his house phone's answering machine. Wow, that light was going. Ford tossed back the fourth shot, still truly not liking it, and punched the Play button.

"Ford?" Ah. Kayla. *"Ford, where the fuck are you? Gavin phoned me—"*

Ford hit the Stop button. Or he meant to. All he managed was skipping ahead to the next. Kayla continued, *"And for all either he and I know, you're dead in a ditch somewhere, and if you are dead, I'm going to hunt you down and feed the bits through a meat grinder—"*

Ouch. Ford picked at the label on the Crown Royal and let the ranting wash over him. She meant well.

He couldn't help but notice, though, that although the message clicked from one through nine, only six of them were from Kayla. Two, silence and then nothing. Plus one wrong number.

Ford tuned back in on the last once the whisky bottle's label rested in confetti shreds on his knees. Still Kayla, come full circle. The time stamp on that one was maybe thirty minutes ago, when he'd stood under the shower, hot outside, frozen stiff inside.

"Just answer me one thing," Kayla said. *"Tell me how you could do this. Not to Gavin, though believe me, I'm not forgetting that. How could you do this to yourself?"*

The tape ran out. Ford had the urge to chuckle, even though it really wasn't funny. Kayla: the only other person on the planet who could outchatter—and apparently outrant—him. He thought about taking the tape out and saving it to tease her with later.

He took it out, broke it in half, and tossed the pieces over his shoulder instead. *Wonder what Grandpa Xiao would have said about this?* Probably nothing. He'd have been too busy beating Ford half to death with either his cane or a switch the size of a tree limb he'd marched Ford outside to choose for himself.

Ford poured another quarter cupful. Hangovers weren't much as cosmic spankings went, but it was the best he could think of right now.

Better to have loved and lost.

Sure. Ford tossed the cup aside in favor of trying to swig from the bottle itself.

WHAM. WHAM. WHAM.

Ford couldn't have called it a knock on his door. That would be like calling a Roman candle a sparkler. This was more like a battering ram. His whisky-raw tongue swelled in his mouth, choking him silent.

Gavin?

Wham. Wham. “Ford Tremaine, there are lights on in your window. If you don't open up this *second*, I'm going to show you why hell hath no fury like a woman—”

Ford's heart hammered hard at all his pulse points. This called for a tactical retreat. He couldn't cope with Kayla right now. She meant well but right now all she could do was make it feel worse.

He'd never used the window that opened out onto the fire escape. Actually wasn't too sure it'd work. Wasn't aware of his choice until he got there and found himself hanging on to pitted iron in a sudden driving shower of sharp, cold rain.

The storm had followed him from the lake to the city.

“I get the point,” he told the sky as he hurried down the steps. Too fast, he knew that. Funny how easy it was to keep running once he'd started. “I can't run from the trouble I brought on myself. I have to face it. Real subtle.”

A shot of lightning sent everything into negatives, black turning white and white black. Knocked Ford on his ass, one foot slipped on an already chancy step and body weight doing the rest. He thudded down to the bottom of the landing and grabbed the railing, gasping for breath, his head aswim.

“I get it already!” Ford yelled. He tried to stand up. He had all kinds of new bruises now. *Ow.*

If there'd ever been a chance of the whisky working, it'd long since passed, and a good dousing of cold rain took care of any hope of its recovery.

So where did that leave him? Locked out of his apartment. As gummy and gritty and cold as he'd been before he got there, without a car, without the bike he'd chained up inside before they had left town. No keys and no wallet.

He'd ask if the night could get any worse, but even now Ford knew better than to tempt fate that way.

He kind of wondered if it might not be worth finding out.

I should have stayed. If I got one sign wrong, who knows what else I misinterpreted?

He heard Gavin's echo when he thought, Because of this, I lost it all.

Ford shook wet hair out of his eyes and glared up at the storm. "Fuck you. Fuck you!"

Nearby tenants started shouting. Ford truly didn't care. Once he'd started yelling at the fates, it was as if he couldn't stop. "Come on! What do you want? Give me a sign—any sign; I don't care!"

He'd ended up in the alley, where no one went, and not another soul out there tonight where there was no shelter from the rain except a pile of trash bags and cardboard boxes too small for humans to crawl inside.

Only Ford could have sworn—

He dropped to his knees, not really giving a damn about the pain of it, and bent over sideways to look inside the nearest box.

At first he saw nothing. Then, deep inside, the solid, huddled mass of a giant cat. Amber-green eyes. Ford knew those eyes, especially when they locked on to his.

He knew that purr too, raspy like an old saw grinding through hardwood. Oscar crept forward paw by paw. Never looking away.

Gavin would be going crazy if he had found out Oscar was missing. "How did you even get here?" Ford murmured soft and low. "How'd you know to come to me?"

Harsh lightning strobed the alley.

It made up Ford's mind for him. He wouldn't think about the rest. Couldn't. Oscar would run if Ford made a grab. Ford knew that. All he could do was hold out his hand and coax closer the wary cat that had somehow chosen to come to *him* for shelter.

Oscar crawled closer still.

Overhead, the thunder rolled.

* * *

By the time Gavin reached the city, the 4x4 was more of a 4x3. Almost wreckage. Long, screeching scratches from tree branches out in the middle of nowhere, a flat tire he'd fixed despite not having a clue how—maybe a knack he'd never known he had, and about twenty bucks' worth of emptied gas-station coffee cups littering the passenger-side foot well.

Everywhere he'd gone, he'd asked if anyone had seen Ford. Nothing.

Didn't matter. *I will not quit.* Gavin took out his cell phone, still warm from the clutching when he'd hit Redial not two minutes ago, and called Ford. Again. He'd forgotten what number this would make. He couldn't think.

Thinking was overrated. Right now he just wanted to stay on the move.

You will not do to me what Donny did. I don't care if you thought your heart was in the right place. You were wrong. I lay down and died before.

His call went straight through to Ford's voice mail. Didn't matter. *I will not quit. Not again.*

I will find you, Ford. Believe that. It's true.

Dry clothes. If Gavin didn't get some, and fast, he'd catch his death. He twisted awkwardly around in the driver's seat of the 4x4 to rummage through his duffel.

Damn, damn, damn! Nothing. He'd barely packed much to begin with, probably forgot a few things back at the cabin, and all he had left was a wadded-up pile of rain-soaked, mud-smear ragtag tatters.

And Ford's clothes. Gavin could have worn one of Ford's shirts. He wanted to. To breathe in his smell and let the folds of cloth wrap around him.

He did not want to trip over the hem of a hockey jersey.

Damn. Gavin drummed his thumbs on the steering wheel. The only place he could go was home, which wasn't a home at all without Oscar or Ford to keep him company.

But he had no other choice.

He revved the 4x4's engine and started it down the streets he traveled every day on foot. They looked different from up here. The wrong angle.

Time for a change of plans.

Chapter Twenty-six

Ford had been on foot; Gavin would go by foot. He knew these streets better this way anyhow.

Only he didn't know where to go. All the stores were still closed. Not even a coffee shop open yet. The rain picked up and kept going. Lashed him from stem to stern and just...wouldn't...stop. All he could manage was to put his head down and keep one foot in front of the other and keep going until he reached the steps of his building.

Not that they were any comfort. Gavin wanted to pound the concrete newel with his fist. He dropped his forehead on it instead and ground his teeth.

I won't give up. But I don't know how much longer I can keep going before it's too late.

"Anyone up there want to give me a sign?" he muttered. "I'll take whatever you've got."

No answer. He hadn't expected one, not really. Fine. He still had a few drops of hope left. He'd cling to them. Gavin stood up, blinking against the rain.

Looked up the stairs, and there, in the overhang that kept the rain from a balustrade. *There.*

There sat Ford, with a cardboard box tied with heavy, dirty twine in his lap. Arms wrapped around it, hanging on for all his considerable strength was worth. He looked worse off than Gavin, both of them soaked to the bone and whiter than ghosts, Gavin had no doubt.

But. Ford. Ford, here.

A dark striped paw fought its way free of the box. *My God.* Ford and Oscar. Somewhere, somehow, Ford had found Oscar and brought him—them—all home.

He'd asked for a sign...

There were no words. No. Wait. There were two. Gavin murmured them out loud, though he didn't know to whom or what. "Thank you."

* * *

Walking up the steps, Gavin couldn't look away from Ford any more than Ford could look away from him, the terrible silence of uncertainty far louder than the driving rain. *My God.* Gavin knew he must look like a drowned mouse, and Ford looked like...a drowned redwood—wet, tired, and grubby, but Gavin didn't care.

Gavin remembered, as if from far away, that at the first he hadn't thought Ford was built to be handsome, and he never had understood how a man could be called "beautiful."

Now, he did. He still wasn't sure about himself, but to him Ford was beautiful.

And now, anything could happen.

They could apologize. They could explain. They could collide like two cars spinning and crashing together on black ice. Gavin didn't know what Ford had in mind. But above, the rain

slowed from pounding off the streets to a fine drizzle, almost a mist. He'd asked for a sign, and he'd gotten one.

Ford sat quietly, waiting for Gavin. Gavin could feel the helplessness in him, the not knowing what to do. Maybe expecting Gavin to shout or turn his back on him and walk away.

Gavin put his foot on the first step. He did not look away from Ford. There were words—so many Gavin could have wasted time sorting through them. He didn't have to.

“Do you believe in magic?”

Ford's hands flexed around Oscar's box. “Gavin.” The working of his throat; the hope and fear in those two small syllables.

Gavin took another step. “Do you believe in luck?”

Ford sat—white, still, watching—lips parted.

“Do you believe in omens? Do you believe in signs?” Gavin climbed a step with each question, each one bringing him closer. He didn't bother with the safety rail. If he fell, Ford would catch him.

But he wouldn't fall. The rain stopped, cool air sweeping in after it, washing away the smell of the storm.

Gavin saw the omen in that. He believed.

He stepped up closer, close enough to notice the fine tremors in Ford's hands. So strange to see a man Ford's size shaking. And to be brought there by a man like Gavin.

That's the thing, though. Love is the great equalizer. It doesn't matter who we are or how tall we stand. It brings us together like sea to shore. It brings us home.

Gavin could have reached out and touched Ford if he'd wanted to, but...not yet. He had to gather his own strength now, a handful from deep inside, and he had to look Ford in the eyes.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?”

“Gavin.” Ford sounded broken. Not in a way that couldn't be mended, and well, Gavin was good with mending rare things. “My God, Gavin—”

Gavin touched the tips of his fingers to Ford's lips. Warm and cold at the same time. Strange how much taller he felt, even though now when Ford sat and Gavin stood two steps below they were on eye level.

Ford fell silent, waiting. Watching, not quite daring to hope. *Silly, stupid buck.* Gavin had meant to move back—he wasn't done, but instead he took over the touch that'd done him in before, the backs of his knuckles drawn as light as a bird's wing over Ford's cheek.

Ford turned into the touch, his eyes closing.

“Ford,” Gavin said, keeping him there. He needed to say all of this. Ford needed to hear it.

Ford looked at him, the hope growing there almost too much to be borne. Gavin shouldered it without thinking about a protest.

He climbed the last step and stood over Ford, bent above him, his head atop Ford's, and Oscar's box digging into his legs and Oscar *purring* inside and Ford's arms going around him, long enough to reach no matter what.

“Understand this. I love you.”

Color drained from Ford. “You love me?”

"Idiot. Yes. Of course I do. And I will always love you. And you cannot make me love you less if you're afraid. If you run, I come after you. That's how this works."

"God, Gavin..." Ford held him by the wrist, swallowing him with the differences in their size, hanging on. Made Gavin's arm ache, but it was a good, deep burn. "Gavin—"

"I love you." The slurry of a rainy city night had never mattered less. Gavin trusted in Ford in catch him, and as Ford tried to pull him up, he let himself fall.

Fall, down to his knee, and then it was he who wouldn't let go. Held on, to keep Ford with him.

"I love you," Gavin said, as crystal clear as the strike of a hammer against a bell. "I always will. Ford...Ford, marry me. Please."

And Ford—that amazing, annoying, wonderful man—began to laugh.

Below him—so far below, too far below—Gavin bristled up. He didn't let go. *God, Gavin, if you knew...*

Maybe you do.

Gavin's short-clipped nails, ragged tonight—what had he done to those poor hands?—dug into Ford's hand. "What could you possibly find funny here?"

"You," Ford said, helpless against the relief, the hope, the everything that had blown away the Jonah wind and everything else since that first wrong turn. He went to his knees in front of Gavin because he couldn't look down on Gavin. Not in any sense. "You. Me. Life's so damn funny."

The hesitant but not annoyed smile Ford loved best teased its way onto Gavin's lips. He put his arm around Ford's neck and drew them closer. "Ford, I love you, but you're not right in the head."

So earnest. So adorable. So loved.

No more doubts. Ford pressed his forehead to Gavin's and rolled their heads together. He let himself play with the soft, almost curly ends of hair that Gavin had let grow out since they'd met.

Gavin sighed. Small, content, nearly a purr. "I loved you for a long time," he said. "I just didn't know it. Guess everything does happen for a reason."

Ford couldn't speak. To hear Gavin say that...

Gavin moved to rest his head on Ford's shoulder; that was okay. Ford had big, broad shoulders made for this; he saw that now. Resting places where Gavin belonged. "I love you," he said, his lips against Ford's throat. "All of you."

Ford kissed him, the top of his head. Then, because he had to see Gavin eye to eye for this, he guided Gavin back up. He looked like hell; Ford knew he couldn't look any better. They'd both earned themselves some scars tonight, reminders on the inside, even when the dirt smudged over them washed away.

Gavin waited, watched him. Clung tight and wouldn't let go, hand to hand, knee to knee. Trusting him.

Ford did as Gavin had and cradled Gavin's face in his palms. He could engulf all of Gavin if he wanted to. He did. "Say it one more time."

Gavin's eyebrows drew together; he didn't question out loud. "I love you," he said, more clearly than Ford had ever heard the words from him. No hitches. No reason for them. "I'll say it as many times as you want to hear it."

"I do. Always, I do. But..." Ford kissed the side of Gavin's mouth. He traced with the pad of his thumb what he didn't kiss. "Not that. The other."

Gavin got it now. He knelt back, both Ford's hands in his, in his lap. "Marry me."

Ford lifted Gavin's hands to his lips. "One more time?"

Gavin scowled. "Marry me, you giant idiot!"

Ford laughed and couldn't stop. He wrapped Gavin up in the kind of bear hug he'd already missed giving him, and didn't let go.

"So not right in the head," Gavin mumbled, though Ford could hear the relief and feel it in the warm wet drops against his chest that chased away the chill of the rain. "I asked. You never answered."

"Yes. My God. Yes." Ford couldn't last a minute longer without kissing Gavin. He didn't have to. Gavin tasted as sweet as he remembered, sugary dark like gas station coffee, like rain and salt too. "Life is funny."

Gavin blushed. Ford could see the love in there now. He should have from the start. He didn't answer in words. There was no need for them.

Ford drew him back in and pressed Gavin's head to his chest. "Feel that?"

"Like a drum," Gavin murmured, his ear over Ford's heart. "For me?"

"All for you. And the rest of me. I'm yours, you know."

"I do." Gavin shivered in Ford's arms.

"You're wet," Ford said. He rubbed Gavin's back. "God, you're soaking."

"And you're not?" Gavin shivered harder. "We should get Oscar inside."

Ford knew an invitation when he heard one. A hesitant teasing too. A hope laid out in sounds that fell off the tongue without pause. He chafed Gavin's arms to warm him, though he would have the rest of his life for that.

"Then let's get him inside," Ford said. "Us too."

"Us too," Gavin said and surged up to kiss him. He wound his arms around Ford's neck and pressed his lips to Ford's. "Come inside, Ford. Come and stay." His smile turned dark and wicked. "We can take the elevator up."

The last of the clouds cleared away from a waxing moon. Ford took Gavin's hand and raised him to his feet, Oscar balanced between them. Still purring.

"How could I say no to an offer like that?"

Chapter Twenty-seven

The ride up to Gavin's apartment was nothing like the service elevator. Smooth sailing all the way. A good sign. Still, Ford wished they'd gone slower. Even stopped once or twice. That way he wouldn't have had to think about letting go of Gavin. Sliding beneath Gavin's soaked shirt to splay his fingers wide on Gavin's stomach, to hear him hiss and feel the contracting flex of those lean muscles. Reaching around to find Gavin's ass, that gorgeous shelf, and knead him as hard as he wanted. More time for Gavin to moan and lean into him, giving Ford room for everything he wanted.

Ford even reached for the Emergency Stop button. Gavin stopped him, but he was smiling—almost grinning, a loopy, dazed bliss that made Ford willing to give him anything he wanted.

“Cameras,” Gavin said. Then, perhaps just to shock Ford, or to tease him, he explained. “When we make a tape, I don't want anyone but us to see it.”

“My God.” Ford had to kiss him, and he made it last the rest of the ride up. “You've changed so much.”

“I know.” Gavin brushed Ford's lips with his. “Because of you.”

“No regrets?”

“None.” Gavin backed through the elevator doors the second they opened, pulling Ford along with him. “And I won't go looking for them.”

Ford kissed him again. It'd take them a while to get to Gavin's apartment, he figured.

Then again, the destination was sometimes worth a good, long, slow journey.

“Slow” wasn't what Gavin had in mind. Ford found it a little difficult to keep it in low gear himself. Still. Step-by-step, a chance to gather his control along the way. Helping Gavin slide the key into the lock, even though both their hands were shaking. Letting Oscar out of his box. The F1 cross shot beneath the bookcase from where he'd first let Ford pet him. Not all the way. Ford could see amber-green eyes watching him; better, he could hear the tug on the carpet as Oscar kneaded, and best of all the purr, a raspy rumble that rose even over the rattle of the radiator when Gavin turned it on with his elbow.

They'd been here before, and it had always been different. Always with Ford on the coaxing side. Not now. A heartbeat after Oscar was safe and sound, Gavin was on him. Love gave a man strength, power enough for Gavin to turn them around and push Ford to the wall, his hands roving everywhere he could reach.

“No rush,” Ford said, though he didn't try to fight back; no, he couldn't stop either, again.

He stripped his wet shirt off and fought for the right to do the same to Gavin, up and over. Gavin's glasses were knocked badly askew, and Ford knew Gavin would have been annoyed enough by the wayward specs to have taken them off if he hadn't righted them on Gavin's nose.

"Leave them on," he said to Gavin's querying look. "I love sexy, smart men."

Gavin blushed. Ford kissed that trace of bashfulness away and forgot about it when Gavin's clever fingers began to work on Ford's zipper, taking it slow only because he had to. Wet jeans with no underwear beneath to protect Ford's hard-on required caution and a sure, slow hand.

Ford let the wall bear up his weight and watched Gavin work, his head bent in concentration and the light tickle of his touch—maddening. Even the sticky pull of soaked denim away from his hips was to be savored.

He stepped out of them as soon as he could. Naked now, with Gavin still halfway there. "You're wearing too many clothes." Gavin would have gone to his knees, and Ford would have let him. Gavin had that dark light in his eyes, his lips open in hungry anticipation.

Ford wouldn't say no to a blowjob. Later. Right now, this was...a troth, he decided. This needed everything.

"No," he said, guiding Gavin back to his feet. All the better to turn Gavin around and see how he didn't mind being crowded in, to watch him go sloe-eyed and shivering when Ford opened Gavin's jeans. His hands were not made by nature to be gentle.

Gavin made it easy.

Ford reached inside Gavin's jeans and fondled him, the heaviness of his swollen cock filling Ford's hand. He squeezed just to hear Gavin moan and watch his eyelashes flutter over his cheeks. Squeezed softly, then stroked him nice and easy—even if he wanted to go to his knees too.

"With my body, I thee worship," Gavin said abruptly, laughter running in currents beneath his skin. He sifted Ford's hair through his fingers. "I think they had you in mind when they came up with that one."

"It's like you know me." Ford slid Gavin's jeans off him. Looser and made of a lighter denim, they slipped away and left Ford able to lift him right out, up into his arms, where Gavin could wrap his legs around Ford's waist and knot his hands behind Ford's neck.

"I'm starting to know you," Gavin said, still serious. "What I don't know, I have the rest of my li—"

Ford knew what Gavin was going to say, and he wanted to hear it, but he wanted to kiss Gavin even more.

"With my body, I thee worship."

He carried Gavin to the bedroom and didn't stop until he'd dropped Gavin on the bed and closed the door behind him, shutting out the rest of the world.

Leaving them alone, together.

"You're still cold."

"Then come and warm me up," Gavin said. He stretched on the bed, reminding Ford of a wildcat ready to play. His cock stood up red and stiff, begging for attention. Even as Ford watched, Gavin raised one knee to plant his foot on the bed and expose himself. No fear in love. No shame.

Where do I start? Ford climbed onto the bed over Gavin, shielding him—no, keeping Gavin all to himself. No lights on. He wished he could see.

Maybe Gavin could read his mind. Maybe he just wanted the same. Maybe it was a sign. Gavin reached out with the awkward ease of learning practice and clicked on the bedside lamp.

"One better." Ford took up the candle they'd left there and the matches. He turned off the lamp when he could replace it with the candle's glow, looked at Gavin, and...stopped, breathless. "My God."

Gavin laughed, almost a purr, and drew his hand up his chest. "You like what you see?" Still the tiniest bit shy. Still asking to make sure, wondering that it could be so.

Ford knew how to answer that. He always had. "More than you could know."

"I think I have an idea." Gavin tugged at Ford. "All the way down. Get me warm."

"I'll do more than that." The first touch of skin on skin made them both draw in ragged breaths, and the first slide of Ford's naked cock beside Gavin's made Gavin shake and moan and Ford butt his head to Gavin's chest to keep from just letting go. Rutting against Gavin like a mad thing. It would have been good. But not enough.

"What, then?" Gavin traced meaningless glyphs on Ford's back and moaned into Ford's kisses.

"Like this?" Ford moved down, scattering presses of his lips in the spaces he'd learned Gavin liked best, the ones that made him lose control. "Or do you want slow?"

Gavin nudged him; the man was soft and sleek, but he could make use of sharp bone when he wanted to, even in play. "I don't want slow."

The light in his eyes told Ford why Gavin protested. He was on fire, even if it wasn't the kind of conflagration that could be seen for miles. It was all for Ford, wrapped up in a coal inside a body. No one else got this part of him but Ford.

"Why fast?" he asked, slipping up, sliding his cock next to Gavin's for the fun of making him shudder and curse.

"Why not fast?" Gavin struggled not to laugh.

So did Ford. "Only us," he said, knowing Gavin would understand him, but by God, it was getting hard to talk. His body drowned him out, demanding, *More, more, more, now, now, now*. He staved it off—long enough to get this decided—by tangling his fingers with Gavin's and lacing both their hands around both cocks. Gavin grunted, straining up. He'd gone red in a slow roll from cheeks to chest, his lips slack and his moves first jerky, then languid. Choosing.

"You...tell me—"

"I don't want to hurt you, Gavin. God, I never want to—"

Gavin growled. Less of a kitten, more of a lynx. He pushed Ford up and followed him over, slipping as easily into straddling Ford as if he *knew*, as Ford felt, this was where he belonged. He put their hands around their cocks again, guiding Ford in the stroke that drew sweat to both their bodies.

Cold? Cold was a distant memory.

"But I want your strength." Gavin stretched over Ford to draw a bottle of lube from beneath the pillow beneath Ford's head. "All of it. You won't hurt me." He slicked his own fingers and pushed them between his legs.

Oh...God. Ford bit his lip and gripped Gavin so hard by the hips that Gavin would wear a new set of handprints over the ones that had almost faded. "Up." He pushed Gavin higher on his knees. "Want to see."

Gavin's smile was wicked. He knew what he was doing to Ford. And just to know that...dreams did come true. "Yes." He knew what he was doing here, stretching himself open, fucking himself on his fingers.

Almost no prep at all. Was he that hungry for it? *Yes*. Gavin rose without asking for any help, already poised to sink down.

Ford caught him by the forearms and held him up. He shook his head, unbound and still-wet hair rustling on the pillow. Gavin slid down, Ford's hold on him not tight enough to stop him, clever man, from using it to his advantage. He only hesitated when the swollen head of Ford's cock brushed the rim of his hole. "Want you."

Ford couldn't say no. "What you can take," he said, "I'll give."

Gavin's eyes glittered, dark and drugged and not just lustful. Adoring. "Everything you have." He slid down, spearing himself on Ford's cock. He moaned, and his eyes rolled back in his head. Ford caught and held him so they could fall together and not apart.

"Always," Gavin breathed and began to move. Not up nor down. Grinding clumsy figure eights that took Ford deeper. When there was no more to give, Gavin let his head fall backward and breathed shallowly.

Ford knew what he asked. Some signs any man knew how to read. Gavin wanted his strength. He could have it. He wouldn't break.

He lifted Gavin off his cock, teasing him as long as he could bear—almost a second—and brought him down.

"*Ford!*"

More, Ford needed more. Up the way they had the first time, Gavin's back to the wall this time, but Gavin still straddling his lap, where Ford could hold him hard and let Gavin ride, straining against the strength, aglow with dark light.

More. He tasted Gavin's mouth, stroking his tongue against Gavin's in time with the pumping of his hips.

More, still more. Ford lifted Gavin off, soothed him through the disappointed glare and the moan of protest. Laid Gavin on his side and pressed in behind. Slipped in deeper than before and caught Gavin before Gavin arched off the bed.

He would always catch Gavin before he fell, from now on.

"To have and to hold," Gavin said between gasps. He thrashed his head on the pillow. "Oh God, right there, right *there*—"

He'd never get enough of this, would he? Watching Gavin fall apart, not a shy curator nor a wary watcher nor a blushing doll, but a tiger riding him, taking all Ford could give and demanding, begging for more. Ford set his head to the back of Gavin's shoulders and gave him what he wanted, what they both did. He splayed his hand open over Gavin's chest, only able to hold on at first. When Gavin locked on tight and clung to him, he could *finally* free one hand to take Gavin's cock in his fist and stroke him.

Not enough at first and more than enough, too slow and then too fast, but hard, no going back now. As it should be, as it was, as it was—

"Ford," Gavin begged. "Don't stop. Don't ever stop."

"Never will," Ford said. He thrust deep and shuddered, wanting to stay there. Always.

Or until Gavin loosed a shaking cry and arched into Ford's hand. "I'm," he said, gulping. "I can't—Oh God, I love you—"

Ford came, as shocking as a gale, without a warning. He thought he might break something, but he didn't fear it; he fucked Gavin through it, flooding him with cum that coated his cock and dripped out with each stroke, slicking Gavin's thighs. The noises Gavin made, Ford would never forget, never wanted to.

He rolled them over one more time with the last of his strength, putting Gavin on top, where the cum that leaked from him would puddle on them both. One hand to keep Gavin still, one on Gavin's cock. Mercy in what seemed like no mercy, love in the roughness of his touch. He didn't let go. Not even after Gavin bowed forward to muffle a hoarse yell in Ford's mouth and let go between them, his cum sticky hot on both their chests and seemingly never ending.

Ford let Gavin breathe. He needed the time too. But the second he thought Gavin could speak, he lifted Gavin over him again. His and Gavin's cum was smeared over them both, white streaks that swirled and smudged about. Hair still wet from the rain. Bodies warmed. Still joined, Ford half-hard inside Gavin.

Gavin was as sleepy as a basking creature in the sun, the candlelight throwing him into all light and no shadow. He smiled. It looked as brilliant as Ford's own felt. "What?"

"Say it again," Ford asked. "Just one more time."

The smile didn't go anywhere. "I love you."

"The love of my life," Ford said, stroking Gavin's hair, his chest, his arms. "As long as we both shall live."

Stubborn to the last—even like this, and Ford adored him all the more for it, Gavin lifted his chin stubbornly. And he laughed when he said it. "Other way around."

People said there were no such things as perfect moments. People were wrong. Ford knew because this was one of them. Every dream he'd ever had, and every wish he'd ever wished.

Here and now, tonight, with Gavin, they'd come true.

Epilogue

“Ready for this?”

Gavin stood still and let Ford adjust his tie. Clumsy as ever and gentle as ever, but with a new ease to the way he moved. He'd finally found the grace he needed for that big body of his.

He could even knot a tie better than Gavin.

Gavin reached up, and up, and did the same for him. Once there, he left his hands resting on Ford's chest, smooth onyx-dark tux so soft over such strength barely contained within. They'd had a hell of a time finding two of the same style that fit them both.

Worth it in the end to see Ford looking down at him the same way Gavin looked at him. Worth anything to feel inside himself and find no ice, but fire instead, a warm banked glow that he could fan into a blaze whenever he wanted. Needed.

Ford brushed his knuckles across Gavin's cheek. “Beautiful,” he said.

Gavin grinned and didn't correct him, but fair was fair. He mirrored Ford's touch. “I'm not alone.”

Ford touched his lips to the inside of Gavin's wrist. “And you won't be ever again.” He stopped, letting go of a long sigh Gavin never had known he still had inside him. “Me neither.”

They had to get moving. Gavin took the time anyway to stretch up and kiss Ford, to muss him up without caring about that, all for the pleasure of seeing Ford dazed and grinning again.

“Fair's fair.” Ford ruffled up Gavin's hair and tilted his glasses on his nose.

Fair was fair indeed. Sometimes better than. Gavin took Ford's hand in his and guided him forward. “Ready?”

“Since the moment I met you. Yes.”

Gavin kissed him once more before pushing the doors open into a bright room crammed with tables piled with fragrant food, and chairs filled with friends, with family, and with friends who *were* family. Mostly Ford's, but in the three months it'd taken them to get a real wedding together, Gavin's world had expanded by ever-widening circles every day. They knew him, they'd heard it all, and they welcomed him in as Ford had, without questions or criticisms.

Gavin closed his eyes for a brief second and savored the feeling.

Kayla stood, a microphone in hand. “It's about time, you two! Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce Mr. and Mr. Tremaine-Yamea?”

The applause never seemed to end. Gavin didn't mind. Gavin loved it. Loved Kayla too, dressed like Cyndi Lauper in her heyday with lace and taffeta and pink hair up in spikes. What a crazy wedding. He couldn't imagine one better and wouldn't have wanted to.

Gavin took Ford's hand in his, intertwining their fingers so that their rings rubbed one against the other. Gold bands that matched on matching fingers, one big, one small, both perfect.

Ford glanced down at the way they fit together. Gavin recognized that smile and, better yet, the lack of any doubt. "It's a good sign," Ford murmured.

Gavin didn't let go. "What do you see, Ford? They lived happily ever after?"

"Why ask if you already know?"

"Because I want to hear it."

Ford turned away from the crowd to take both Gavin's hands in his, as he had before the officiant, and kiss him breathless. "And they lived happily ever after," he said.

"Good sign," Gavin said, just as Ford had.

Ford looked both delighted and surprised. "Gavin, we'll make a believer out of you yet."

"No need." Gavin breathed in the roomful of noise and laughter and warmth and everything he'd ever wanted, and Ford, what he'd wanted—needed—most. "I already am."

"Why?"

Gavin stretched up to kiss Ford and couldn't stop smiling either through the kiss or what he said, though he thought he might burst from the strength of light inside him. "I'm still not sure about the rest of it, but I believe in this," he said for Ford to hear and write across his heart. "I believe in love. Your love."

Teasing to the last, Ford jostled him closer and asked in a way that could not be denied, "Tell me why?"

Gavin let all his cares, the last shreds of them, fly away to be forgotten. With Ford's lips on his, he murmured and meant it, "Because it's true."

 THE END 

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Willa Okati

A multi-published author of GLBT fiction since 2004, my passion is for writing hot love stories with quirky humor and a sensual eroticism.

I exist primarily on caffeine and pixels, take “camera shy” to a whole new level, and persist in trying to learn the pennywhistle despite being woefully tone-deaf. During the summer, I’m a wild woman with henna.

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