



Left of Center

By Zathyn Priest

Chapter One

Hidden from view, in the midnight abyss of a darkened bedroom, clothes lay taunting their fleeing owner. The treacherous journey toward the door was fraught with hidden dangers: unknown territory. Furniture seemed to leap out in ambush. Floorboards creaked in protest, as though set to booby-trap an absconder from every conceivable angle. A precision line of aftershave bottles clattered onto a dressing table surface.

"Ffffff..." Brandon buckled in agony, slapping his hands over his crotch after a chair harshly introduced itself to his penis. "...uck!" He finished the cuss in a pained whisper.

At least capture had been averted, and Brandon bravely soldiered on. The steady rattle of a snore comforted him. Thankfully, the one who remained in bed hadn't woken prematurely and foiled the getaway plan. Somewhere, strewn across those noisy floorboards, his elusive clothes beckoned. Without them there would be no escape.

Something snatched around Brandon's left ankle and right toe. Like an elasticized foot noose it tightened mercilessly into a restraint. He stumbled forward, blindly flailing his arms in reach of anything to break his fall. His feet shuffled in tiny steps, pawing at the floor until Brandon realized they too touched nothing but air. Bare knees cracked hard onto the lacquered floorboards.

This was no time to give in to the pain. If Brandon was caught now he'd have to explain being on his hands and knees, in the center of the room, with a pair of boxer briefs shackled around his feet. He held his breath, listened for snoring, heard it, and breathed a sigh of relief. Buying that second bottle of wine -- even though he'd mentally complained at the time -- now seemed like a very smart investment.

Despite the awkwardness of the boxer brief location procedure, Brandon at least now had underwear. He squirmed into the boxers and, while on the floor, felt around for any clothing items that may have been nearby. It was a good thing Jason was a heavy sleeper.

Jason? Brandon rolled onto all fours and frowned. *Jason or Justin?* His hand fell upon a shoe. *Or Jasper?* He located another shoe slightly to his left. *No, it's not Jasper,* he thought. *Jasper was the dog I castrated yesterday.*

If Brandon's navigational calculations were correct, and if he hadn't veered too much off course during the unfortunate chair and underwear encounter, the bedroom door should be found directly in front of him. Rather than attempt to stand, he stayed on his hands and knees.

Brandon's forehead found the door with a sharp crack.

Sometimes he had to make sacrifices and this proved to be such an occasion. The jeans and shirt were expensive, but Brandon was willing to forego them. He'd left his jacket in the living room, and car keys were in the jacket pocket. He reached up, found the doorknob, and turned it carefully.

Once out in the hall, Brandon quietly shut the door behind him and used the wall to guide his journey into the living room. He had to move fast now. If Jason, or Justin, caught him in the bedroom then Brandon could've tried the old "needed the bathroom and didn't want to wake you" excuse. That defense never went down as well when caught halfway out the house.

Soft light from streetlamps lit up the living room enough to outline a jacket thrown over the arm of a chair. Brandon snatched it, grabbed his keys, and made rapidly for the front door. From there it was an easy jog toward a green Astra convertible.

He pulled away from the curb and smiled. When Jason, or Justin, woke up, Brandon would be long gone and, hopefully, never seen again.

As he drove home, Brandon's smug attitude dissipated when he saw police officers flagging down drivers for random breath testing. His panic had nothing to do with being over the alcohol limit. It had to do with sitting behind the wheel of his car in white cotton boxer briefs and a jacket. He hadn't even bothered to put shoes on.

Luck continued not to shine on him, and a police officer flagged down Brandon's car. He took a deep breath, pulled to the side of the road, and reached for his license.

A bald cop approached the driver's side window. "Evening, sir," he said as he placed a clean tube onto the breath analyzer machine. "Have you had a drink tonight?"

"Yes," Brandon replied, trying to keep his voice sounding as natural as possible for someone sitting at the wheel in underwear. "I had two glasses of wine about five hours ago."

"Blow until I say stop."

"Said that myself earlier!"

The joke plainly didn't go over well, and he obeyed the officer's request by blowing into the machine.

"Stop." The policeman looked at the reading and then leaned closer to the window. "Now's the part when I ask you why you're driving in bare feet and boxers."

"I had a feeling you'd ask me that."

The officer lifted his eyebrows. "How intuitive of you."

"I can explain."

"I certainly hope you can." He snapped his fingers. "License please, sir."

"The truth is," Brandon handed over the license, "I was at someone's house. And... umm... I didn't want to be there in the morning."

"She was that bad you couldn't even wait to put all your clothes back on, Dr Faulkner?"

Quibbling about the gender of his one night stand wasn't necessary, and Brandon returned the officer's grin. "I only have another five minutes drive to get home. You can't cut me some slack here, can you?"

"Yeah, go on." The cop laughed and gave back the license. "Maybe next time keep a change of clothes under the seat!"

Late the following morning, no worse for his midnight flit, Brandon chugged back one coffee after the other and sat staring at the computer monitor.

"Butt-hugging black PVC pants, knee-high boots... damn!" Spinning around in his chair, he feigned an aroused shiver and smirked at his unimpressed roommate. "Gets me hard just thinking about it."

"There's something seriously wrong with you if *that*," squinting through pink-rimmed glasses, and screwing his face up with distaste, Tarin jabbed his finger at the computer screen, "makes you horny."

"Okay, so he's not that hot, but he's one hell of a cyber lay." Brandon pushed a large pile of printed pages across the desk. "Check those out. Emails from different guys, all members of my fan club."

Ever since Brandon stumbled on Crystalline Court, a website with members ranging from the Gothic sublime to the full on ridiculous, it had become his lustful addiction. It pandered to his fixation with the Goth style, though he hadn't ever pushed his own fashion sense further than off the rack casual wear.

"You jerk off at the computer?" Tarin's complexion shaded green.

"I'm an expert at it. Rarely make a mess."

"You say that with such pride it's frightening." Tarin lowered an eyebrow and his glasses slipped down a narrow nose. "There's a whole lot of emails here from a guy called Indigo." Taking one from the pile, Tarin held it up. "Seems to be under the impression you're dating him exclusively."

"Yeah, I've told a few of them that."

Tarin flicked long, blond hair over his shoulder and strode away. "You're a good friend, Brandon, but you're a wanker."

Laughing, Brandon pushed the chair away from a neat desk. At twenty-seven years of age, standing six feet tall, modesty in his appearance wasn't something he was known for. A self-confessed player, he liked to keep options wide open. After all, why settle for one fish in a sea when there were entire schools to reel in? It was a mantra he lived by.

Leaving the study, Brandon cast an appreciative glance at himself as he passed the hall mirror. He'd always loved the aqua color of his eyes. They never failed to gain compliments and contrasted nicely with his chestnut brown hair. Hair he styled in that just-fallen-out-of-bed look. Then, of course, there was a buffed physique to admire as well. Through sweatshirt sleeves Brandon's well-defined biceps were clearly visible.

He stepped away from his reflection. "Draven was hot."

Beautifully made up blue eyes watched Brandon slump into an armchair. "I can't believe you jerk off at the PC."

"You still going on about that?" With his toe Brandon pushed away magazines on the coffee table and rested his feet on the surface. "Change of subject, princess, I'm talking about Draven."

Tarin frowned in silent question.

"I showed you his photo weeks ago. The one with vampire contact lenses."

"Oh yes, red eyes, how delightful!"

"He sent me an updated photo a few days ago. Put on about ten pounds, so I dumped him. Shame, he was hot before he got fat." A sly smirk lifted the corner of Brandon's mouth. "Then there's Chaos and Enigma."

Showing disinterest in the conversation, Tarin began channel surfing, and he punched buttons on the TV remote at random. "How many freaks are you jerking off with?"

"Three currently." Brandon screwed his nose up. "Two, if you wanna get technical about it. Enigma isn't into cyber sex yet. I've got seven others waiting in the wings for emergency purposes."

Clearly, nothing on the television satisfied Tarin's interest and he threw the remote aside. "Ever thought of dating a real man? So you could have sex *with* another person?"

Brandon's roguish grin broadened. "I got laid last night. Gonna get laid this weekend, too. Scored a date with Enigma tomorrow night, a date with Rapture on Saturday afternoon, and date with Chaos on Saturday night. I need your help."

Silence engulfed the room for several seconds.

"Crystalline Court has a strict member policy. Which means you can't be a member unless you're a Goth."

A thinly plucked eyebrow arched above the rim of Tarin's glasses. "Hmm... I figured that out without you clarifying it. Guess you failed to mention you're a liar when you filled out your profile?"

Brandon dropped his chin and laughed. "Come on, Tarin, be a good girl and help out your best buddy."

"Help you do what?"

"My hair and makeup. I need you turn me into a Goth."

"You *can't* be serious!"

"Chaos has a sex in public places fetish. Man! The images he's put into my head!"

Thoughts of wild romps in the outdoors flashed through Brandon's mind. He felt the results of those visions in his hardening crotch. Having sex in public places wasn't something he had done before, though he found the concept exhilarating.

"Not sure how smart Chaos is." Brandon continued speaking, unaware of Tarin's total indifference. "There's no point trying to hold a conversation with him unless it has to do with pounding his ass." When Tarin stood and wandered into the kitchen, Brandon followed. "I have no idea what he looks like."

Tarin reached for two mugs. "If he hasn't shown you his photo that means he's as ugly as a hat full of assholes."

"Not necessarily. I haven't added a profile photo and I'm hot. I don't know what Enigma looks like, either. He's intelligent enough, but not into hook ups." Brandon folded his arms over his chest and shrugged. "The only reason he agreed to go out with me is because I told him I'd been to Prague. He's obsessed with Prague."

"You haven't been to Prague." Tarin took a carton of milk from the fridge. "You don't know a thing about Prague. Can you even tell me where it is?"

"Czech Republic. I Googled it. I'll print out photos and say I took them when I was there."

Even though Brandon hadn't agreed to coffee, Tarin shoved a mug in his hands. "Why are you going out with him if you're not going to get laid?"

"He'll put out eventually; they always do. I don't know what it is about Enigma, he's..." Brandon shrugged. "Don't know, I can't put my finger on it."

"If he's as smart as you say he is, he won't let you put your finger anywhere."

"Rapture will. And, before you say anything, I know he's..."

"Hideous?" Tarin offered with a mocking simper "Looks like Satan's butt crack?"

"That's rather harsh." Putting the mug onto the counter, Brandon reached out his arms for a hug. "Come on, turn me into a Goth. Please?"

When he sidled in, putting on his best "I'm irresistible face", Tarin caved. "I can't say no to seeing you make a total dick of yourself!"

Chapter Two

Living with Tarin placed Brandon very firmly on easy street. It was like being married without the ball and chain of monogamy, though they'd never been more than friends. They also worked together at a veterinary practice close to home. The living arrangements suited them in a lopsided match of weird equality only they understood.

Brandon listened to Tarin rifle through an assortment of clothes while he sat immersed in Crystalline Court. In a few hours he'd meet Enigma at a club called Iniquity, one of the most popular GLBT Gothic meeting places in Adelaide. Iniquity had a Victorian era feel with a dark interior matching perfectly with the 19th century building. It wasn't a foreboding atmosphere. At least, it didn't look foreboding on its website. Two levels were set aside for different purposes. A café and restaurant on the lower level appeared as respectable as any high quality establishment. The second floor had a bar and one large nightclub.

"You need black eye shadow," Tarin shouted from his bedroom.

"I'll use yours," Brandon yelled back.

A brief moment of nothing followed until Tarin poked his head around the door of the study. "Do you honestly think I'd have black eye shadow in my cosmetic bag?"

Shifting in the chair, Brandon peered over his shoulder. "Why wouldn't you?"

"I'm a spring," Tarin replied tersely, as though his cosmetically challenged roommate should have already worked this out. "I look best in *warm* colors. I would not compromise my skin tone with black eye shadow."

An alert on the computer monitor grabbed Brandon's attention, and he looked around to see a message box in the center of the screen.

Rapture Says: *Got ya pants down?*

Brandon smirked and hastily typed a return message.

Shade Says: *Gimme one sec and they will be!*

Rapture Says: *Don't keep me wating long.*

Before Brandon closed down the chat window, Tarin peered over his shoulder. "Plainly he never graduated from primary school. Maybe you should take him a dictionary tomorrow instead of flowers."

Rapture's poor spelling hardly caused concern in comparison to his cyber abilities, and Brandon changed the subject to the previous topic. "Can you buy me eye shadow?"

"You expect *me* to go out and buy *your* makeup?" Tarin jutted his jaw forward in exasperation. "I have my hands full trying to sort out a passable Goth outfit for you."

With Rapture waiting in the wings, Brandon wanted the house to himself. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. "Buy yourself perfume while you're gone."

Tarin snatched fifty dollars from Brandon's hand and flounced out of the office, saying, "Don't jerk off at the PC!"

As soon as he heard the front door close, Brandon maximized the chat window, his crotch already hard in anticipation.

Shade Says: Back.

Rapture Says: Bout fuckin time. U no I don't like being kept wating.

Rapture didn't possess patience. It didn't bother Brandon. In fact, his bossy nature added to the kink factor of masturbating to what, in reality, was only typed words. He certainly didn't have an emotional attachment to Rapture. He didn't have emotional attachment to any Crystalline Court guy.

Shade Says: I'm all yours. Had to get rid of Tarin.

Rapture Says: Turn ya cam on. I wanna wotch ya cum.

Wotch. The guy couldn't spell to save himself, but the mention of displaying his genitals on a cam switched Brandon's mind away from poor English. Jerking off in private was one thing, doing it while Rapture 'watched' was another.

Shade Says: I don't have a cam.

Rapture Says: Lyer.

Brandon raised an eyebrow. The cam sat on the top of the monitor where it always sat. Rarely used, but very definitely there.

Shade Says: You want to argue or get me off?

In preparation Brandon unzipped his jeans and slipped his right hand into the parted denim.

Rapture Says: Turn ya cam on or nuthin from me.

"Shit!" The word emerged as a growl.

He glowered at the monitor, trying to determine whether a few minutes rubbing off was worth putting an image of his penis on Rapture's screen. Could a video cam session be saved and uploaded onto an Internet site? Brandon didn't know.

Rapture says: If ya let me wotch ya cum I'll suck ya off 4 reel tommorow.

Even if a video could be saved and uploaded onto the Internet, who would know to whom the penis in question belonged to? A blowjob in exchange for turning the cam on -- it seemed a good enough exchange to prompt rapid reconsideration of his prudish virtue.

Shade Says: Deal.

The cam had to be set perfectly to avoid any chance it might accidentally film his face. Now the idea had a minute to settle in, Brandon began to appreciate another dose of kink factor. It wasn't as though he had anything to be ashamed of. He positioned the cam to the right and angled down to his lap.

Shade Says: Ready.

An invitation to begin the video chat blinked on the screen. Brandon hesitated, finger poising on the mouse button, and then clicked 'accept'. Several quiet, tense seconds elapsed before Rapture responded.

Rapture Says: Dam that makes me hungary.

Brandon sniggered. There was a first for everything he supposed, but the sight of his prick hadn't ever before succeeded in turning a human into a country.

Rapture Says: Start strocking.

Why had Tarin pointed out the poor spelling? Brandon hardly noticed it any other time and now it started to get irritating.

"Focus." He shook the thought out of his head.

Obeying Rapture's order, Brandon wrapped his hand around his shaft, impressed he'd remained hard in spite of suffering a degree of performance anxiety. In a preview screen to the left of the chat window, he watched exactly what Rapture saw. His prick looked long, thick, and standing upright. He gave a nod of self-appreciation.

Rapture Says: imagin puting ya cock slowly into my mowth. Pushin hard betwene my closed lips until u feel the head on the tip of my tonge.

To recreate the fantasy, Brandon ran his hand up his shaft and then tightened his thumb and forefinger around the head. As he pushed into his fist he felt the warm lubrication of pre-come slide against his palm.

Rapture Says: *u can feel my tonge ring teese the head and ya slit. Flikking fast until u thrust into my mowth. My tonge wet pressing under ya shaft. The back of my throwt hot and my lips hard around u. I wanna see u pump hard and sqeez ya balls at the same time.*

Typing a response was now out of the question, not that Brandon had any desire to anyway. He shifted forward in the chair, cupping his left hand around his swollen sack and massaging, per Rapture's instructions. Heavy breathing intermingled with the occasional groan, and Brandon rocked his hips.

Rapture Says: *Think of fucking my mowth as hard as ya fucking ya hand.*

It was all Brandon *could* think of. Normally, Rapture didn't get him off quite this quickly, but as Brandon felt his cock strain he doubted his ability to stave off coming for much longer and watching himself on the cam preview heightened the experience.

Two hours until the date with Enigma and Brandon sat at Tarin's dresser with his back facing the mirror. He wondered what Enigma looked like. The profile stated his age was twenty-three; there wasn't much else to go on. The nickname he'd chosen suited him.

"Stop blinking." The liquid eyeliner brush hovered close to Brandon's top lash line. "This is a precision instrument; if I screw it up I'm going to have to start all over again, and you don't have time for that."

"How do I look?"

Stepping back, Tarin admired his handiwork with a satisfied nod. "I'm a genius with cosmetics." He tapped Brandon on the brow with the liner bottle. "You should use a toner to close up those pores. The foundation I used hides most of them, I guess."

"Can I look in the mirror?"

"In a minute." Tarin stepped forward, liner brush poised. "How are you supposed to recognize Enigma if you don't know what he looks like?"

"He said to look for the guy reading."

Closing his eyes while Tarin worked, Brandon thought about an email he'd received from Chaos laden with guarantees of a sexual romp in the outdoors. He guessed he probably should've been thinking about Enigma rather than tomorrow night's date.

"You can look now," Tarin announced proudly.

Brandon spun around in the chair, eager to see a Goth masterpiece and quickly deflated. "Tarin!" He lurched forward, closer to the mirror. "I look like King Tutankhamun's sarcophagus!"

"Don't be stupid. King Tut's sarcophagus is gold and the foundation I used on you is ivory. Goths are supposed to be pale." Instead of remaining at the dressing table arguing, Tarin turned to a double bed and clothes laid out in ready. "Quit whining and get dressed."

Brandon sighed, rising to his feet and stepping toward the bed where Tarin held out shiny PVC pants. They appeared painfully small. The black jacket looked far more promising size-wise.

"Where did you get those... *things*?" Brandon pointed to a pair of boots. "Are they cowboy boots?"

"They *were*. Cost me five bucks at a thrift shop. A bit of black spray paint, stuck those old buckles on the front, and voila! Goth boots!"

Brandon had never felt as intimidated as he did walking up to the entrance of Iniquity. He hadn't felt quite as uncomfortable as he did now either, squeezed into PVC pants that practically pushed his testicles into his lower abdomen. The drive to the nightclub had been a physical nightmare, and he reasoned it was a lucky thing he didn't want children since he'd more than likely be sterile by midnight.

As it was early evening, Iniquity hadn't reached its full Friday night capacity. Brandon had arranged to meet Enigma in the cafeteria, and he prayed he wouldn't have to walk around blindly between tables before he located his date. Although, when he thought about it, sitting for an extended period of time in these pants wasn't a pleasant thought either.

There didn't need to be a bustling crowd for Brandon to feel all eyes turn on him. The men sized him up mercilessly and the women were just as ruthless. He'd never seen so many corsets, vinyl, leather, and dagger-like glares in one concentrated area. Suddenly the concept of Crystalline Court appeared far more agreeable than the reality of Iniquity.

He scanned the room, avoiding eye contact with anyone as he searched for Enigma. When Brandon began thinking he'd been stood up, his gaze landed on small figure sitting at a table and immersed in a novel. He took a deep breath and walked over.

"Hi. Enigma?"

"That's me."

Deep amethyst eyes with perfectly painted gothic makeup and long, raven lashes stared unblinkingly. Jet-black hair, short at the back and long at the front, parted in the middle with the right side of his bangs dyed purple, framed the most exquisite face Brandon had ever seen.

"Shade?"

Brandon snapped his mouth closed before he started drooling onto painted cowboy boots. "Uh-huh."

"The guy who's been to Prague."

Brandon lifted his brows, feeling his ego deflate like a week-old balloon. If that was all Enigma remembered him for, then his chances of ending up in Enigma's bed were suddenly considerably lower.

"Sit down." With a nod, Enigma gestured to the chair across from him. "*If* you can."

Was that sarcasm? Brandon wondered.

"I didn't realize you were so tall," Enigma added. "The seats in these booths are very close to the table."

Perhaps it wasn't sarcasm, and Brandon comforted himself with the thought he might be feeling overly sensitive in a café filled with leering eyes. He squeezed between the table and dark red seats, grimacing as his pants cut a cruel line from his crotch to his butt.

"If I'd known you were this hot I'd have arranged to meet you weeks ago." There didn't seem to be a reason not to hit Enigma with smooth talk immediately. "What's your real name?"

"I haven't decided whether or not I want to share that information with you."

"Okay." It didn't matter. It wouldn't have been the first time Brandon bedded someone without knowing their name. "I'm Brandon."

"I knew a Brandon once. Couldn't stand him. Hated that name ever since."

Brandon's smile slipped away like butter off a hot frying pan. There was something extremely odd about the static, smiling, mysterious Enigma, and it started to become unnerving. The bottomless violet eyes hardly blinked; he was gorgeous but decidedly creepy.

"Did you bring photos of Prague?"

Brandon reached into his jacket, and the PVC pants squeaked against the leather seat, twisting his testicles into a position God never intended testicles to go. Once he'd retrieved the printed photographs from his jacket, he handed them across the table.

"Um." The ensuing awkward silence drove Brandon into trying to think of anything to break it. "Was the best trip of my life."

"Better than a bad trip."

Was that a drug reference or a comment on dreadful vacations? Either way, Brandon thought maybe it was the time to try a little humor. Whether Enigma was a loon or not, he was worth one good roll in the hay.

"You can say that again! If only I..."

"Why would I say it again?" Enigma arched an eyebrow. "It'd only waste breath I might need on my death bed."

There was no denying it. Enigma was sexy as hell, with a face like a Gothic angel, and very definitely wacky. Brandon made a mental note not to hang around long after he'd finally shagged the guy.

"Forget it." Brandon dismissed the conversation with a wave of his hand. "Do you hang out at this place a lot?"

"Yes." Without hesitating, Enigma slipped the photos into his own pocket, ignoring the look of disbelief shot in his direction. "Most Friday's I'm here."

"Bet you get hit on a lot."

It was an additional attempt to flatter while still coming to terms with the fact Enigma had stolen what may have been, under truthful circumstances, precious holiday snaps.

"Do you do your own makeup?"

"Yeah." Brandon lied. "Always been a Goth. Always done my own makeup."

"It's horrendous."

Never had anyone made Brandon's self-esteem take a battering as quickly or as easily. He was used to guys fawning over him, used to getting anyone he set his sights on. It only made him want Enigma more.

"*Your* makeup is excellent." It was time to cater to ego. "Maybe you can show me some tips." He added a wink for extra effect.

"Maybe not." Enigma picked up the book, slid across the chair, and stood.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," Enigma replied, as if it should have been blindingly obvious.

This meeting became more bizarre with each passing second and Brandon would've welcomed his date leaving if Enigma wasn't so incredibly shag-worthy. "I just got here!"

"I never said I was going to hang around."

Now that Enigma was standing in front of him, Brandon had the chance to check out his tight, little butt in leather pants. He was short with a narrow waist and long, elegant limbs.

"I can drop you home." Somehow he had to get the odd, though divine, Enigma into his bed.

"There are perfectly roadworthy cabs outside."

"I take it that's a no, then?"

Together they weaved out through the growing crowd onto the sidewalk. Light rain fell steadily, and Brandon cursed not only the weather, but also the embarrassing squeak his pants made with each step. He imagined arriving home and finding his groin purple and grossly swollen.

"So..." Brandon attempted to once more rescue the defunct conversation. "Will I talk to you again online?"

"That would depend on how desperate I am for conversation." With a jerk of his head, Enigma gestured to Brandon's feet. "By the way, your boots are turning tan."

Sure enough, when Brandon checked, the spray paint had started washing off in the rain and black pooled onto the pavement. By the time he looked up, Enigma had jogged across the road toward a taxi.

Less than ninety minutes after leaving the house, Brandon returned, sporting a bewildered expression, and found Tarin painting his toenails.

"That was quick." Tarin set the nail polish aside. "What happened?"

"I have no fucking idea!" Brandon immediately unzipped the PVC pants, desperate to relieve the searing pain in his crotch. "The guy could..." Trying to remove the pants was like trying to peel an apple with fingers. "...drain the self-confidence out of a... a... bottle of self-confidence."

"What a clever analogy!" Tarin watched Brandon fight to get the pants to his knees. "What did you expect? You meet a freak on the Internet and you think he'll be normal?"

"Help me get these off."

Sighing, Tarin left the sofa and ordered Brandon to sit in an armchair. "Guess the spray paint wasn't water proof."

"Yeah, no kidding! I feel like my balls have been pulverized."

Tarin sniggered. "By the pants or Enigma?"

"Both!" Brandon gripped the chair while Tarin pulled at the torturous pants. "He hardly blinks. Stares until you feel like you have to look away, but you can't because he's so God damned gorgeous."

"You're still left with Rapture and Chaos."

"The guy's creepy. Odd. Weird. A freak." The pants finally came loose, and he fell into the chair, staring up at the ceiling. "I *have* to fuck him!"

Chapter Three

Every second Saturday morning Brandon got up early to work from eight a.m. until noon. Though he'd gotten little sleep during the night, wondering what had actually happened between him and Enigma, Brandon at least took solace in the fact his groin hadn't suffered permanent damage. Considering Friday night had been a disaster, he wanted to make sure Rapture made good on his blowjob promise.

Standing at an examination table, Brandon watched the clock, willing the minutes to elapse faster. He heard Tarin approach the door and looked up when he spoke.

"Someone's walked in with an emergency case."

"Fuck it," Brandon mumbled. "Show them in."

Tarin left and came back moments later with the new client. Brandon froze.

"Dr Faulkner, this is Lewis." Tarin couldn't hide the smirk. "He informed me you know him by the name 'Enigma'."

Brandon dropped his stunned stare from Lewis' unreadable expression to a plastic bag filled with water and one disoriented looking goldfish.

"Fluffles is sick," Lewis said directly. "He has fish vertigo."

"Does it?" replied Brandon nervously, trying to ignore Tarin's sniggering. "How can you tell it has vertigo?"

Lewis stepped forward and placed the bag onto the exam table. "He's doing the backstroke."

Sure enough the goldfish was swimming upside down, its boggle eyes wide and staring, its fins flapping madly at its sides. Brandon felt like the fish looked. He was anxious over how Lewis knew he was a vet and the address of the practice he worked at.

"I don't think it has vertigo, Lewis." A professional approach was all he could think of. "Has it ever done this before?"

"*He*. He's not an 'it' and his name is Fluffles. I'd appreciate it if you referred to Fluffles by his name rather than a generic term demeaning him into nothing more than an object devoid of gender." Lewis cocked his head, staring unblinking. "Fluffles is a beloved pet. I demand you show him respect!"

"Ooookaaaay." Brandon pressed his lips together and released them with a loud pop. "Has Fluffles ever done this before?"

"Don't know." Lewis peered into the bag. "I've only had him forty-five minutes."

Tarin burst out laughing, apologized, and coughed in an attempt to cover his amusement.

"Are you going to have to put Fluffles to sleep?"

Before Brandon could reply to Lewis' question, Tarin stepped forward. "Euthanasia might be the kindest option in this case, Dr Faulkner. All things considered."

"Thank you, Nurse Bentley, but I don't think that's necessary." He shot a dark look at his friend and then forced a smile at Lewis. "Fish have a swim bladder, it's what regulates flotation in the water. Sometimes, when goldfish take a trip from the pet store, the movement of a car disrupts the swim bladder for a while. Fluffles should be fine tomorrow, once he's settled into his tank."

"I don't have a tank."

"Why did you buy a fish if you don't have anywhere to put it?"

"Who else would buy an upside down goldfish?"

"A very good question!" At this point, Tarin giggled openly. "Who else indeed?"

Lewis gave Tarin a quick once over. "I shall give my beloved pet to you." He handed over the bag and miserable goldfish. "Be kind to Fluffles and he'll repay you with years of faithful companionship."

Lewis strode out of the consultation room. Thankfully, they had an aquarium at the house; at least the deserted goldfish wasn't homeless. Brandon gripped the sides of the examination table, hunched his shoulders, and shook his head.

"Man!" said Tarin, still giggling. "You know how to pick 'em!"

"God!" Leaning over, Brandon bumped his brow onto the metal surface. "What I wouldn't give to bend him over this table and fuck his brains out!"

At three o'clock, dressed in comfortable clothes, Brandon walked into Iniquity. This time he kept his face lowered, avoiding the harsh stares from regular patrons. He found a seat at the café bar, far enough away from others, and sat down. A buxom woman in a red velvet corset took his order. She came back moments later with cola inside a highball glass.

"Hello."

Brandon knew that voice without having to glance up. He squeezed his eyes closed, cursed under his breath, and looked around to see Lewis perched on the barstool beside him. Damn, he was

gorgeous. With perfect Goth makeup, perfect little body in tight latex, perfect lips, perfect face, perfect hands... just *perfect*. Except, thought Brandon, for his undeniable sanity imbalance.

"Hi." Brandon's voice sounded a little higher than normal. "I thought you only came here on Friday."

"I also come here Saturdays." With his elbow on the bar, Lewis turned and rested his chin in his palm. "You have creepy eyes."

This from someone who rarely blinked? Brandon's ego took another tumble. Everyone complimented his aqua eyes. Plainly, they didn't impress Lewis.

Brandon ignored the statement. "I'm meeting a friend here."

"How lovely for you!"

Seducing Lewis toward a sexual encounter was the plan, but for Brandon this wasn't the appropriate time. "His name's Chaos."

"Chaos? Interesting. Very interesting."

"What's so interesting about it?"

"Nothing at all." The buxom waitress approached as Enigma removed a black wallet from his jacket pocket. "Hello, Marissa. Cappuccino on the rocks, please."

"Sure thing," she replied with a smile.

"You want a cappuccino with ice?" Brandon inquired incredulously.

"Yes, I do, which explains why I placed the order."

Curiosity got the better of him. "Why do you want ice in it?"

"Turns it into iced coffee."

He pointed to a chalkboard menu. "They do actually *sell* iced coffee here."

"Why order iced coffee when I can have a cappuccino on the rocks?"

"No idea. Forget I asked."

"Don't mind if I do, it was a ridiculous question anyway." It didn't seem as though Enigma had any intention of taking the hint and leaving. "It warms my heart to know you're meeting a friend, even if it is someone called Chaos. Nice to know some people, those very much like myself, are

prepared to spend time with other people, like *yourself*, who have obvious problems with social interaction."

It was all the confirmation Brandon needed to rate the guy in desperate need of psychological intervention. "*I have obvious problems with social interaction?*"

"Yes, I know you do."

When the buxom waitress placed a large mug of cappuccino on the rocks onto the counter, Brandon watched Enigma stir his cappuccino first and then open five packets of sugar and add them.

Ice cubes clinked against each other when Enigma took a sip from the mug. "Eww! Why isn't this sugar sweet?"

"Stir it *after* you add it."

"Oh, yeah." Lewis seemed briefly flustered. "Dancing House and the Astronomical Clock. Have you seen them?"

Brandon peered at his watch, once again trying to press home his earlier hint. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Lewis."

"I thought you'd remember those places since you apparently took photos of them."

They must have been tourist attractions in Prague, and Brandon knew Lewis had just outsmarted him. The information he'd crammed the day before hadn't included researching the images. Brandon's ego had not only taken a tumble, now he also felt his IQ fall just as far.

"Funny thing about the Internet, Brandon." Each time Lewis smiled it appeared carved in wax. "If you look for pictures on search engines, chances are the same ones keep reappearing." Enigma winked. "Next time you might want to be more careful who you're trying to con."

Brandon finally grinned, assuming the wink was a flirtatious one. "What can I say? I wanted to meet you, I knew you loved Prague, and I thought it was my best bet."

"It's okay." Lewis softly petted Brandon's arm. "I know how difficult it must be for people like you to get dates. I mean... no offense or anything," Lewis took his hand away and picked up the mug again, shrugging sympathetically. "I know you can't help how you look. It must be tough on you though."

I know you can't help how you look? His warm tan complexion waned in horror at the implications of that statement. It made no sense to Brandon how anyone could fail to notice his obvious gorgeousness. He was the prettiest baby in the family photo album, the best-looking boy in high school, and an adult who turned heads wherever he went. No one ever implied he was unattractive.

There wasn't any time to reply before, over the top of Lewis' head, Brandon saw a familiar face attached to a body looming toward the bar like a massive satanic shadow. He cringed, wanting desperately to hide and avoid being seen.

"Well, well!" A deep baritone voice rumbled Iniquity on its foundations. "You must be Shade. I saw those aqua eyes you bragged about from the other side of the room."

Rapture stood almost seven foot tall. Approximately seven feet and four inches including the platform boots.

"Ain't you a purdy little thang?" he drawled in a southern American accent, leaning in closer as Brandon recoiled. "You're as purdy as your cock is." He winked. "Thanks for showing it to me on cam. Can't wait to taste it."

The man was terrifying, built like a skyscraper, dressed in a black cloak, looking every bit the devil's henchman. Rapture's picture hadn't been a turn on, but it was a damn sight better than reality. Brandon imagined being the man's bitch minus a cellblock.

"I'm not who you think I am!" A previously unheard Mickey Mouse quality threw Brandon's voice into soprano range. "I was about to leave."

"You ain't going nowhere, Shade. You wanted a blowjob and ya gonna get one."

Brandon had never felt so short at six feet tall.

"He saw *what* on your cam?" As if Rapture's revelation hadn't been mortifying enough, Lewis' loud question had everyone seated at the bar turning around to stare.

"His cock," replied the waitress in the red corset. "And I don't think we're talking poultry, unless he was choking his chicken."

"Do you mind?" Mortified by the sniggering around him, terrified of Rapture's dominating presence, Brandon glared through narrowed eyes. "Don't you have orders to take?"

"Not from you, sunshine." She leaned farther over the bar, her ample bosom almost falling onto the countertop. "Whip it out again so we can all take a look."

Lewis leapt from the barstool. "I don't want to see it!"

"I do," rumbled Rapture.

"Me, too," quipped the waitress. "All those who want to see this guy's penis," she yelled into the café, "raise your hands and say aye!"

A sea of hands lifted into the air and a chorus of "ayes" rang out.

"He's all yours." Lewis snatched his cappuccino on the rocks and backed away.

Chapter Four

Hiding in a cubicle inside the men's bathroom proved almost as uncomfortable as the PVC pants had been the night before. Brandon's legs were bent in an awkward position, his feet planted on the toilet seat. At least the door could be locked, though he doubted that would keep out the gigantic Rapture should he go hunting for his dungeon bitch. He seemed determined to follow through on the blowjob promise, and Brandon didn't think he'd left Iniquity on his own accord.

"See what happens when you meet people on the Internet?" Tarin's voice shrilled through the mobile phone. "What are you going to do?"

To stop from slipping off the toilet, Brandon braced himself against the wall. "I don't fucking know!" he hissed, listening for any movement outside the cubicle. "Come down here and distract him so I can escape."

Someone walked into the bathroom. Brandon held his breath, hoping whoever it was would leave quickly and praying it wasn't Rapture.

"You think I'm going to walk in there and be beaten up by transvestite hating Goths? Get a security guard to walk you out."

"*Please!*" His frantic whisper lowered even more. "If I leave this cubicle, he'll be waiting!"

The stranger knocked on the toilet door, and Brandon felt his already blanched complexion pale to white. "You okay in there?"

Thank God, it wasn't the baritone voice of Satan's henchman, though it was terrifyingly familiar nonetheless. "For God's sake, leave me alone!"

"If someone's making trouble for you, I can get help."

"I'll call you back, Tarin." Brandon folded his phone and dared to put his feet on the ground.

"Is someone harassing you?"

Brandon hesitantly got off the toilet and opened the cubicle door. "*You're* harassing me!"

"Geez, relax dude, I was just offering some help!"

Brandon frowned, noticing Lewis now wore no makeup, different clothes, and the purple streak from his bangs was gone. "Listen, Lewis, this is stalking! If you think I'm such a loser, why are you following me?"

"Ahh, you've met my brother?" He stepped back to allow Brandon out and smiled warmly. "I'm Casey. Unfortunately for me, Lewis' twin."

"Stop fucking with me; I've had enough." Stumbling to the basin, Brandon turned the faucet on and splashed cold water onto his face. "Is that giant still out there?"

"You mean Wayne? No, he left with Lewis. They were walking out as I walked in."

"You need professional help. I'm meeting Chaos and I want you to leave me alone."

"Oh, my God, you're Shade? *I'm* Chaos."

"That does it, I'm leaving."

"No, wait!" The guy snatched Brandon's sleeve. "Go outside and ask anyone here and they'll tell you I'm Casey and I have a fucked up twin brother called Lewis. Actually, they'll tell you I'm Chaos because that's what everyone calls me." As though suddenly realizing the implications, he narrowed his eyes and let go of the sleeve. "How do you know my brother, anyway?"

Now that Brandon took the time to analyze the situation, he did notice differences between this guy and Lewis. They looked identical but spoke differently. Lewis had a clipped, sarcastic tone to everything he said, whereas Chaos spoke softly and calmly. Lewis carried himself upright with shoulders held back. Chaos slouched against the basins. He didn't stare right through Brandon like Lewis had. There was a long scar in the center of Chaos' brow just beneath his hairline, something Brandon hadn't noticed on Lewis. Twins weren't such a rare occurrence that circumstances like this were unheard of. And, Lewis had made a point of stating "very interesting" at the mention of meeting Chaos. Perhaps, Brandon thought, his luck had finally changed. Now he might have the opportunity to bed a Lewis look-alike without fearing for his life in the process.

"Can you prove you're his twin?"

"I don't carry birth certificates with me." Chaos laughed. "You still haven't answered my question, Shade. How do you know Lewis? Did you pick him up online, too?"

The more he spoke, the more Brandon believed him. "I've emailed him a few times. We met here yesterday. Briefly."

Shrugging, Chaos grabbed a handful of Brandon's jacket and led him toward the door. "No problem. We're both only here for sex. I know it, you know it, so let's find a spot in the park where you can fuck me."

A cloudless sky let the full moon shine brightly, lighting up the outdoors a little more than Brandon would have liked. Chaos chatted continuously, more than likely sensing his date's reserve, and trying to ease his nerves. However, the farther they walked from the perimeter of the park into its heart, the more Brandon's anxiety increased.

"Hey, listen." Chaos slipped an arm around Brandon's waist. "This place is a known hangout for sex. The cops rarely bust anyone. They pretty much turn a blind eye."

Rarely bust anyone. After the last twenty-four hours of disaster it was obvious to Brandon that Murphy's Law had it in for him. Even if the cops hadn't raided the park for a year, he figured tonight would be the night they changed their minds.

"You're not messing with me, are you?" Another rush of doubt added to his nerves. "You're not Lewis pretending to be Casey pretending to have a twin brother called Lewis? 'Cause that'd be something Lewis would do."

Chaos led him to a bench nestled under a tiny, dense glut of trees. Sheltered enough from people sticking to the pathways on an early evening stroll, there was still the chance of being caught should anyone stray off those paths.

"Shade, there's one nutcase in every family and in ours it's Lewis." Warm hands slipped under Brandon's jacket and Chaos stepped in closer. "Can we stop talking about him?"

A shot of adrenalin pulsed through Brandon's veins. He didn't want to turn back now. He wanted to add another notch to his long list of sexual encounters. Not so much a notch with Chaos; he'd lost count of how many guys he'd actually had sex with over the years. This was more a notch of where not who. If Brandon had his preference, no matter how much Lewis had disturbed him, he'd rather have been with the PVC-clad, crazy twin.

Chaos didn't seem to leave the ground as he pushed Brandon onto the bench seat and straddled his lap, gripping a handful of chestnut brown hair. For someone who stood no taller than five foot five, he had an amazing amount of strength. His body pushed in hard and he pinned Brandon forcefully.

"You're already hard for me." Warm breath brushed over Brandon's lips. "Like it rough, do you?"

In spite of the pain Chaos inflicted by harshly knotting Brandon's hair inside his fingers, despite the dominant position he held, Brandon indeed felt heatedly turned on.

"Got a condom?"

"In my pocket," Brandon rasped hoarsely. "Left jacket pocket."

"Lube?"

"There's a packet in..."

His reply was stifled into silence by lips smothering the sentence and Chaos' tongue diving into the depths of Brandon's mouth. It felt like being kissed by an inferno: blistering hot and totally out of control. Chaos tasted sweet with a hint of spearmint. Teeth clashed now and then, and it seemed Chaos wouldn't be satisfied until his tongue burned the back of Brandon's throat.

A tearing sound ripped through the silence of the park as Chaos tore Brandon's shirt open. Buttons flew off in all directions and the next heady sensation Brandon felt were those fiery lips traveling across his chest. Dexterous hands worked open the buckle of his studded belt and Brandon shifted his position to allow Chaos easier access.

Dismounting, Chaos yanked the pants down to Brandon's ankles. One shoe came off, then the second, and he hurled them into the trees followed by the pants. Boxers came off next and they too joined the shoes.

"What the hell are you doing? Stop throwing my... *ohhhh, Christ!*" In reflex, Brandon jerked his hips up in reaction to a heated mouth taking in almost the entire length of his prick. His hand clamped to the back of Chaos' head. "*Fuck!*"

There was a fine line between pleasure and pain. Chaos pushed the limits by sucking hard and scraping his teeth over soft skin. The more Brandon bucked his hips, the more the wooden bench seat nipped at his ass. Even if he spent the entire week pulling out splinters, he decided it was worth it. Chaos gave one hell of a blowjob, using his tongue to apply pressure in all the right places, and pressing it firmly against the shaft as he bobbed his head up and down.

Brandon gritted his teeth together, not wanting to vocalize his intense pleasure for the entire park to hear. "Stop! I'm gonna come... *please stop!*"

"Shame, I could've used the carbohydrates. Sperm cappuccino on the rocks."

Dropping his head into his hands, Brandon knew he'd been duped again and replied shakily, "You're *seriously* twisted, Lewis." He tried to calm the tremble in his arms and legs, though he still felt more turned on than he'd ever been before. "Mentally fucked in the head!"

"I'm fucked in the head? You're the dipstick who fell for 'I'm his twin'." Lewis flicked open the buckle of his belt and guided Brandon's hands to finish the job. "You still want me?"

"God, yes!"

By the time Brandon had rolled on the condom and stood, Lewis was already braced with his hands on the back of the bench, his head down between his arms, his legs spread apart, waiting. Brandon walked behind him, running his right hand down Lewis' spine.

Lewis reached for the packet of lube and held it out. "Slick up and fuck me."

He said it so bluntly that Brandon faltered. He tore open the packet with his teeth, squeezed the contents on to his palm, and slicked up as he'd been ordered to.

Brandon guided his prick between rounded butt cheeks. He spread them apart, mouth almost watering at the sight. The head of his cock rubbed over the puckered hole and he fought the urge to come. Lewis had left him aching from the blowjob, but now he had what he wanted. He

pushed in and Lewis jammed his butt backward impatiently. Tight heat closed around Brandon's dick, nearly taking his breath away. He thrust in and out, setting up a quick rhythm that left his head spinning.

He dug his fingers into Lewis' skin and ground his hips against a firm ass. Every stroke drove him back into the slick heat, and Brandon knew he wouldn't last much longer.

"Fuck, that's hot," he panted, thrusting hard and fast.

Rapid breathing and smothered moans switched to hoarse grunts. He gripped Lewis' hips tighter and slammed into the guy several times until he came loudly. Hot seed flooded into the condom, Brandon's body shuddered, and he fell forward over Lewis' back.

There he stayed for several moments, trying to catch his breath and allowing the relaxation of fulfillment to encompass him. "Holy shit!" Finally Brandon found his voice. "That was damn hot! *You're* damn hot, no matter how fucked up you are!"

Lewis straightened up and walked over to retrieve his pants. "You think that was hot, do you?"

"Hell yes!" Brandon remembered his clothes were somewhere hidden within the glut of trees and turned his head to see if he could locate them. One shoe hung from a branch, but where the other items had disappeared to was anyone's guess. "I know why you get off on sex in public places!"

"Only when I come, too." Lewis pulled on black jeans. "I've proved my point, Brandon. You're a selfish jerk." He reached for his shirt. "Maybe I am weird, but at least I was legitimately interested in you until I found out you were trying to hook up with as many guys as you could."

Shamefaced and stark naked, Brandon watched Lewis dress, feeling a sudden sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Lewis angrily shoved his feet into shoes. "Enigma, Chaos, Rapture...they're all *me*." Now fully clothed, he stalked toward the bench, face contorted in fury. "Three months you talked to me! Telling lies, telling me you had feelings for me, sending romantic emails, convincing me you were a nice guy, and I believed you. Until I found out you were playing me. Do you even remember me? Indigo. Ring a bell?"

It was true. Brandon had been the one who'd sweet-talked Lewis while trying the same treatment on many other Crystalline Court guys. Only Lewis, or Indigo as he'd been known then, had always been different. A pleasure to chat with, intelligent and funny, someone Brandon had actually enjoyed getting to know. Always obscure but never dull. He'd been the only one in an impolite chat room to speak and welcome a new member. From the start, Brandon's intentions had been to work Indigo over, seduce him online, and eventually bed him. As soon as he managed to build up a list of guys more willing to partake in cyber sex than Indigo was, Brandon had dumped Indigo like yesterday's newspaper.

Brandon stared deeply into violet eyes, glistening under a full moon. "I'm sorry."

"You're not sorry at all!" Lewis balled his fists at his sides. "I fell for you and you made me look like a fool." Brandon didn't see the knee coming until it slammed into his crotch. "That didn't hurt anywhere near as much as you hurt me!"

Chapter Five

A tabby cat lay splayed out on a steel table with its back legs spread open. Normally a veterinary practice with a lively environment, today the operating theatre bathed in silence. The melancholy atmosphere had been exactly the same around the house.

"If you don't snap out of this mood I'll lay you out on this table and cut *your* balls off!"

"Might be a good idea, Tarin," Brandon replied irritably, setting aside the scalpel. "Being neutered might keep me out of trouble."

"What trouble? You've hardly left the house for two weeks."

The latex gloves came off with a snap. "I'm done here."

From the operating room, Brandon walked lethargically into a kitchen at the rear of the practice. He took a coffee pot off its warmer and poured black liquid into a mug. Lewis hadn't replied to his emails. They bounced back without reaching their intended target.

Once the cat had been placed back in its cage, Tarin joined Brandon at the table. "You got played, get over it. Even the great Brandon Faulkner can't win every time."

Narrowing his eyes, Brandon glared over the rim of the coffee mug. "Drop it."

"I'm the one who has to live with you and, quite frankly, you're about as pleasant to endure as a bikini wax." It seemed that enough was enough and Tarin wasn't prepared to let Brandon sulk any longer. "Vent. Get it off your chest. Then maybe I can start living in peace again."

"Lewis won't answer my emails."

"You've got to be kidding! You're moping around because of that freak?"

Brandon instantly bristled. "He's not a freak."

"I stand corrected. He's not a freak; he's a psycho."

"Lewis is looking for something and he hasn't been able to find it."

Tarin huffed and rolled his eyes. "His medication maybe?"

One thing Brandon couldn't extol upon himself was the title of world's most considerate lover. In the past, sex had always been about his enjoyment. He believed the only gratification his partner's were worthy of was the honor of being the one he chose for the night.

"You didn't see the look in his eyes." Brandon ignored Tarin's sarcasm and focused on what had taken place a fortnight ago. "He was furious and he had every right to be. Yeah, he scared the shit out of me, but I deserved it."

"Why? It was an Internet hook up, nothing more."

"It was more. It *is* more." Picking up his coffee mug, Brandon stood and began walking away. "I led him on, made him believe I was falling in love with him. I'm a selfish bastard and I'm paying for it."

"My God, you don't actually have feelings for him, do you?"

"I don't know!" Brandon paced the kitchen floor. "I reread all the emails we sent each other. I didn't realize there were so many. I told him a lot of things, Tarin." He poured bitter coffee into the sink. "When I had a shitty day I told him about it. He cared. He gave me advice, he lent me an ear, and he *cared*."

"Or he was pretending to care, just like you were." The mockery vanished from Tarin's voice. "He'd be nothing but trouble. For him to behave like he did, even for payback, means he's not all there upstairs."

Brandon shrugged despondently. "Maybe he *is* loopy. But, I don't believe Lewis is dangerous and it's because he's crazy that I can't stop thinking about him."

For the next week, Brandon moped around the house, praying one of his emails would result in a reply, and being disappointed when they continued to bounce back. For every guy he'd bedded in the past and then left with no concern, Brandon felt the punishment of Karma. Twenty seven years and he'd never once come close to finding someone who held his interest for more than a few hours. Brandon knew it was Lewis' unpredictability, the element of danger, of never knowing what Lewis might do next, and a pile of selfless emails that had captured his imagination.

Early Friday evening, after finishing work, Brandon made the decision to brave the Iniquity leers. If Lewis was there, and if he dismissed any attempt to reconcile, then Brandon would back off and leave him be. He couldn't walk away entirely before giving it one last shot.

The buxom waitress served bar and Brandon walked directly over to her, a magazine tucked under his arm. "Has Lewis been here today?"

"Looky here." Melissa dried a glass with a dishtowel, black painted lips lifting into a smug smirk. "If it isn't penis man."

Embarrassed, Brandon flushed red. "Has he been here?"

She lifted black eyebrows. "Do you ever say please or thank you?"

"Please?"

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" She put the glass down and leaned over the counter, giving Brandon an unwanted bird's eye view of her voluptuous breasts. "He told me to pass on a message in case you came in looking for him."

"What message?"

"That his right hand makes a better lover than you do, and your cock looks bigger on cam than it is in real life."

"Right." Clearly Melissa enjoyed taunting him, and Brandon donned a simpering smile. "Has he been in tonight or not?"

"Not."

He stepped away from the bar, prepared to wait on the chance Lewis made an appearance. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome, dipshit."

Brandon headed toward a nearby table, sat down, and opened his veterinary magazine. Judging by the amount of disdainful glowers speared in his direction from nearly everyone in the café, it seemed Lewis was a popular member of their clique community. He obviously knew giant, ominous Rapture well enough to weave him into a game of revenge. In a way, it soothed Brandon's lingering reserves and proved his theory that Lewis was harmlessly wacky. If he was truly dangerous, chances were the patrons of Iniquity wouldn't be so willing to engage his acquaintance.

Over the next forty minutes Brandon sat reading, occasionally glancing up and searching the café for the face he desperately wanted to see. A strong coffee or, better still, large shot of scotch would have aided in settling his anxiety. Both of which he could've ordered if not completely intimidated by the big-breasted, loud-mouthed waitress.

Another five minutes elapsed, and Brandon peered up from the pages of his magazine. There, sitting at the bar stool looking striking in red leather pants, a body hugging black military jacket, and patent leather, knee-high buckled boots, Lewis sipped from a mug and read a novel. Seeing him sent Brandon's pulse racing.

Taking a long, slow, deep breath in, Brandon left the table and approached the café bar. "Lewis?"

"I'm reading."

Wuthering Heights, the ultimate Gothic romance novel but a title Brandon wouldn't have expected to find Lewis to reading. Despite being fobbed off, he smiled. Lewis turned a page from back to front, obviously reading the book from end to start. It only reminded Brandon why he found the guy so intriguing.

"Please?"

Lewis sighed, peering sideways through eyes decorated beautifully in black and red makeup. "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." He stood up and tapped hard on Brandon's forehead. "Except for in there where even God can't lift the ignorant darkness of an eternal moron!"

Humiliation, shame, guilt, and helplessness -- they were emotions Brandon hadn't dealt with prior to meeting Lewis and now they'd become familiar adversaries.

Brandon nodded, knowing his face flamed scarlet and feeling his heart hit the pit of his stomach. "I'm sorry for everything and I wish I could change it." He tucked the magazine under his arm in preparation to leave. "I won't bother you again."

"Oh yes, you will!" Snatching the novel off the countertop, Lewis smacked Brandon hard in the arm. "Midnight tonight, you'll meet me at Henley Beach, by the jetty."

Blinking in surprise, Brandon broke into a wide smile. "Sure!"

"You'll bring with you a six and a half page essay explaining why you're an eternal moron, and why I should trust you again. Twelve point, Times Two Numeral Font with single line spacing." He smacked Brandon on the other arm. "Get out of my sight before I change my mind."

Brandon worked diligently on the assignment until eleven in the evening. The longer he slaved over exactly the right words, the more he realized the project had a far deeper reaching meaning. Lewis wasn't a fool, not by a long shot. To write out his behavior in an essay forced Brandon to delve into aspects of his personality that had long been left unanalyzed. At first it seemed little more than a way to sooth Lewis' anger. By the time Brandon finished, he despised the man he'd written about.

"Let there be light." Brandon whispered to himself as he reread printed pages. "And there was light."

He folded the pages, slipped them into an envelope and grabbed car keys off the desk.

Chapter Six

Henley Beach boasted a lively square with trendy restaurants, cafés, bars, and a grassy area where visitors could laze around eating fish and chips wrapped in paper. Even at midnight, in winter, people milled on the jetty or walked hand in hand along white sand on the water's edge. Certain areas of the beach were bathed in soft light from the square. Only the moon lit other sections.

Brandon half expected to be stood up. As he walked along the pavement toward the jetty, he spied Lewis already waiting. This was going to be a one-off second chance.

"Hello."

"Hi." Brandon resisted the urge to bend down and greet Lewis with a kiss. "You look gorgeous. No makeup tonight?"

"Your powers of observation are astounding." Lewis ignored the compliment. "Did you bring the essay?"

Though nervous over possible reactions to what he'd written, Brandon laughed softly. No one he'd met dished out sarcasm as frequently as Lewis did.

"I did." He removed the envelope from his jacket pocket. "Spell checked and everything."

"Hmm." A small, half smile tilted the corner of Lewis' lips. "You actually did it? I'm impressed."

Brandon returned the smile with a wider version. "I did something right?"

"Statistically, it's difficult for someone to fuck up *all* the time." As he opened the envelope, Lewis walked toward the sand. "We're going under the jetty."

Thrilled he'd managed to impress Lewis, Brandon followed eagerly. Cool weather kept most people off the beach and away from a brisk ocean breeze. Lewis continued to the water's edge. He took a diminutive flashlight from his pocket and started reading. Brandon stood biting his thumbnail, feeling exposed by the words he'd written.

After reading all six and a half pages, and not uttering a sound in reaction, Lewis slipped the papers into his jeans pocket. Cracks in the wooden jetty were wide enough for those walking above to peer down at anyone below. It didn't seem to faze Lewis as he began peeling his clothes off, dropping his jacket and shirt in a pile.

"What the hell are you doing?" Brandon rushed forward, sweeping up clothes and trying to thrust them into Lewis' arms. "We can't have sex here!"

"Shh!" Shoes, socks, and jeans came off next until Lewis boldly stood in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs. "Take your clothes off, Brandon," he whispered.

Suddenly the essay didn't seem as revealing as standing naked on a popular beach. "People might see!"

"Which is why you have to be quiet." Lewis waded into the water. "They'll think you're in a bathing suit." He gasped as the icy water hit waist high. "It's *cold*."

"It's *winter*!"

"This is fun, trust me."

"Trust me" were two words which, when used in conjunction with the name Lewis, seemed like an oxymoron. He appeared to suffer from a severe lack of inhibition. Fascinating, unpredictable, volatile, impulsive, intelligent, and charismatic. Even if Lewis were slightly derailed, even if he behaved irrationally, he'd gotten under Brandon's skin.

"Braaaaandon." Beckoning with his right hand, walking backward into the water, Lewis seduced in a quiet, husky coo. "Come on."

Shit. How can I resist you? Brandon whipped off his clothes, exhilarated by the prospect of whatever Lewis had in mind. "Coming!"

He splashed into the water, braving frigid temperatures and moving quickly to place himself behind Lewis, circling his arms around Lewis' waist. "Christ, I'm gonna freeze my knackers off!"

"How's Fluffles?"

"Swimming upright." Nuzzling into Lewis neck, Brandon experienced an ecstatic rush when the move wasn't rejected.

"I saw him at the pet store and felt sorry for him." Lewis craned his neck and peered over his shoulder, meeting Brandon's eyes and smiling. "I hate fishermen. They show no empathy for fish."

An honest, warm, cheerful smile that wasn't carved in wax. Brandon smiled in return.

"Which is why this is so much fun," said Lewis. "Watch."

Several nylon lines hung from above and disappeared into clear water. Lewis pinched one of the lines, paused, and then yanked hard.

A man shouted jubilantly from the jetty. "I got one!"

It was a childish prank, but it folded Brandon into laughter. The shuffle of heavy footsteps above made it even funnier. Grown men hollering over a catch that, when they reeled in the line, would ultimately leave them deflated.

Lewis twisted in Brandon's arms and placed his hand over Brandon's mouth. "Shh, we don't want to give the game away this early."

Light from between the jetty cracks glistened inside Lewis' violet eyes and Brandon watched, mesmerized. "You're mad." He whispered through Lewis' fingers.

"Your turn next."

Brandon lifted Lewis' hand off his mouth. "Have you noticed the crabs?"

"Geez, you could've mentioned that *before* you fucked me!"

They giggled like delinquent schoolboys. No matter how juvenile or immature their behavior, Brandon hadn't ever had this much fun on a date. There weren't any false attempts at tedious conversation and no need to feign laughter when it came naturally.

"The crabs over there in the net." Brandon pointed a little farther under the jetty. "Wanna set them free?"

"How do we get them out?" Lewis' eyes glinted mischievously. "They have..." With his hands he mimicked pincers.

"Looks like a simple two ring net. All I have to do is tip it upside down and hope they're smart enough to escape."

"What if they get you with their nippers?"

It was the perfect opportunity and Brandon thought it worth a shot at least. "Then you'll have to reward my self sacrifice with a kiss."

Hugging himself and shivering, Lewis lifted an eyebrow and smirked. "You're going to deliberately get nipped now, aren't you?"

"I like you, but I'm not that brave." Putting his hands on Lewis' waist, Brandon edged him out the way and prepared to wade out to the net. "Move aside, honey, time to emancipate my crabs."

The fact he'd used a term of an endearment gave Brandon the strangest sensation of warmth, as did the giggles of appreciation and whispered cheers egging him on toward several annoyed Blue Swimmer Crabs. The clear midnight ocean was deceiving in depth and Brandon soon had water up around his shoulders.

The slender pincers sure looked menacing, and beady black eyes peered up through the net. Shaped like a basket, with a rope leading up to the jetty, it seemed like a fairly easy procedure. All Brandon had to do was lift the net without alerting those on the jetty to it being interfered with. He plunged his hand into the water, grabbing the rope as close to the basket as possible and gently eased it upward. Six furious looking crabs immediately thrashed against one another.

Three crabs tumbled out, using their back paddle-like legs to make a getaway. Two floated gracefully to the bottom of the sand where they hustled to bury themselves in sediment. The last one clung to the net and refused to budge.

"This stupid bastard won't let go. I might have to leave his fate to God."

"They'll eat him!" Lewis waded farther out but still hung back. "Tap on his shell."

The basket hung suspended in Brandon's wary hand. "I'm not tapping on anything."

"Is it just me or has the water gotten a whole lot warmer?"

"I believe that's called hypothermia." Brandon shook the basket a little. "Nope, he's not gonna move."

"Tap *hard* on his shell!"

Not wanting to look like a sissy, Brandon knocked on the shell. The crab immediately let go, floated through the water, and then snatched a pincer full of boxer fabric.

"Ahh, Lewis? I have a crab attached to my underwear, dangerously close to my penis."

Lewis broke into laughter. "Come out of the water."

"If I move it could get even more pissed off." Brandon stood stationary, staring down as two black eyes glared at him. "Stop laughing and help me!"

"I can't swim. Move slowly and it'll be fine"

"Easy for you to say, Goth Boy, you're not the one who's about to be a eunuch!"

Brandon edged slowly backward, keeping his eyes firmly pasted on the crab and hoping to psych it out with a staring competition. When he'd reached knee deep water, Lewis approached with a shirt he'd retrieved off the sand.

"We need to get him out of the water."

It was official; Murphy's Law hated him, and Brandon saw his entire sexual future dependent on the crab's next move. "That will piss him off!"

"I'll wrap him in your shirt so he can't get you with his other pincer." The whole time Lewis cackled, obviously not worried anymore about being heard. "Then I'll breathe on him."

"Oh, Christ, I'm not even going to ask!"

With the crab safely wrapped in the shirt, Lewis bowed his head and huffed hot breaths in its face.

"I've changed my mind. Why are you heavy breathing on the crab?"

Lewis stopped huffing and peered up. "I had hermit crabs when I was a kid." After another several huffed breaths, Lewis continued. "When they get you with their pincers you breathe on them. It confuses them."

"It's confusing *me*, Lewis, I'm getting a hard on!"

"Stop making me laugh! I need to keep breathing on it."

"Breathe away. I like your head down there." A sharp slap stung his thigh. "Ow!"

To Brandon's astonishment the crab finally let go, paddling off as they scrambled out of the water. "Well... you owe me kiss."

"The crab didn't pinch you." Lewis retreated toward a pylon. "Only your boxers."

"Don't split hairs, I still risked my manhood." Wet underwear clung to Lewis' body, and Brandon took an indulgent look at a semi-erection. "Admit it, you know you want to kiss me."

"You're so cocky."

"Don't say anything with the word 'cock' in it 'cause that gets me more worked up." Pinning Lewis under an expectant gaze, Brandon ambled over, placing his hands either side of the pylon with Lewis between his arms. "Are you gonna make good on your promise?"

Taking Brandon's hand, Lewis held it against his face and leaned in. "Kiss me."

The softly whispered invitation was all the incentive Brandon needed. His lips brushed over Lewis' mouth, lingering long enough to treat his senses before instinct took over. This time kissing Lewis was different. It still felt like fire only now it smoldered heatedly rather than scorched in mimic of an out of control inferno.

A hard crotch dug into the top of Brandon's thigh, and he took a chance on slipping his hand between Lewis' legs. He massaged gently and received an appreciative moan. A moan he reciprocated when Lewis keenly returned the favor. The smooth, hairless body felt like satin to Brandon's fingertips. Languishing in bottomless kisses, they stroked each other and rocked their hips in unison. Whether anyone on the jetty watched from above no longer mattered.

Inside a warm cafeteria, seated beside a roaring fireplace, Lewis took five packets of sugar from a small bowl and picked up a spoon. "Hot chocolate. Yum!"

"I expected you to ask for ice in it." The contented smile refused to leave Brandon's face. "How can you have so much sugar? No wonder you're hyper all the time."

"I like sugar."

"No kidding! By the way," Brandon folded his hands and leaned over the table, "how did you know where I worked?"

"You're not the brightest sparkler in the box, are you?" Picking up a spoon, Lewis stirred before adding sugar. "You told me you were a vet when we first met in the chat room. Check your email settings Einstein, 'cause every time I got an email alert from you it said Brandon Faulkner."

Brandon had to laugh at his own stupidity. "How did I ever get into university?"

"Who knows?" Lewis shrugged, sipped his hot chocolate and twisted his face in disgust. "Yuck! This sugar doesn't taste sweet!"

Twice Lewis had stirred a beverage before adding the sugar, and Brandon's brows knitted together. "Sugar first, then stir."

"Oh, right, yeah." That same look of humiliation covered Lewis' expression as it had when he made the same error at Iniquity. "Hey!" The entire café jumped at the sound of a sudden shouted request for the waiter's attention. "I ordered marshmallows and I do not see them in my hot chocolate!"

Brandon shrank into his seat, covering his face. "You're not the most subtle guy in the world, are you?"

The waiter approached, face set firmly. "Keep your voice down, sir."

"Do your fucking job, moron, and get my marshmallows!"

"Lewis!" Brandon nudged Lewis under the table. "Settle down, okay? It was probably an honest oversight."

Lewis was instantly subdued, his cheeks reddening, and he snatched his wallet off the table. "I'm sorry." He shoved the chair away, making a hasty exit.

Chapter Seven

Late the next morning, after enduring another restless night, Brandon staggered into the kitchen in need of a strong hit of caffeine. Tarin stood at the counter dressed in his nurse's uniform, and looking every bit as exhausted as Brandon felt.

"Busy night?"

"We were called out to Blake Riding Academy. One of the horses had a twisted bowel." Tarin took an extra mug from the cupboard. "How did your date go?"

"Don't ask."

Feeling like sand had been emptied into his eyes, Brandon rubbed at his face and walked toward the living room. After the café outburst, Lewis had fled the scene, and left Brandon bewildered and alone in Henley Beach Square.

Tarin placed a large mug on the coffee table and sat on the sofa. "You look terrible. What happened?"

"We were having fun. We went to a café and the next second he's screaming abuse at a waiter." He shrugged dejectedly, his mind racing in an attempt to understand. "I told him it was out of line, he got upset and left. Told me never to see him again."

"You know nothing about him."

"I never will now! He made that clear."

Sighing heavily, Tarin ran his hand over the top of Brandon's head. "You need to forget about him."

There wasn't any point in replying. Tarin despised Lewis, and Brandon didn't feel like getting involved in a discussion.

"He's not all there upstairs, sweetie." Meaningful worry accented Tarin's voice. "Literally."

"Drop it."

"We spent hours with that horse last night. The Blakes asked us inside, made us tea and something to eat."

Although Brandon appreciated attempts to divert attention off the disastrous date, all he wanted was to be left alone.

"There were photos everywhere." Tarin continued, holding fast to his friend's hand. "Pictures of their son in riding competitions. He had a promising future, wanted to ride in the Olympic team. They told us all about him."

Brandon rolled his eyes.

"His horse spooked during a dressage competition and he fell. His foot tangled in the stirrup and reins. Broken leg, arm, ribs and, because he was wearing top hat not a helmet, massive head injuries. He was only eighteen."

"That's terrible." No matter whether he felt like talking or not, Brandon shook his head in sympathy. "Far too young to die."

"He didn't die. He was in a coma for eight months." Tarin firmed his grip on Brandon's hand. "Permanent brain damage to the frontal lobe. Changed his personality completely, and the Blakes felt like they lost their son anyway. He'd sneak out of the house, have sex with strangers, do bizarre things he never used to do. In some ways he's made progress, in other ways he hasn't."

Every inch of Brandon's skin heated and he turned to meet Tarin's gaze.

"He can't hold down a job, he can't focus enough to live independently, he has trouble with a lot of different things. A year ago they put him into Mydeena Lodge; it's a group home. I'm sorry, sweetie. I saw the photos; I know it's him. His name's Casey Lewis Blake."

The pain knifing through Brandon's chest couldn't have hurt more if he'd been speared with a sword. He pictured Lewis' beautiful face and the long scar near his hairline. The odd quirks, crazy ideas, wacky conversations, lack of inhibition, those were the things Brandon found magnetic. A young man's entire life, his dreams and aspirations, cut short due a horrific accident.

Mydeena Lodge was only six short streets away from the veterinary practice and a fifteen-minute drive from Brandon's home. He'd driven by it many times, never taken much notice, and not given any thought to those who lived there. Now he sat inside the main living area, occasionally glancing up as a resident wandered in and out, and feeling his tension rise with each passing minute.

Yvonne, a woman in her late fifties and the group home's House Mother, sat opposite Brandon in an armchair, looking far calmer than he felt. Every now and then she smiled, as though sensing his anxiety and offering comfort between her words.

She squashed the cigarette into the ashtray. "He's probably close by. He likes to walk down to the local pet store and look at the aquariums." She smiled. "He just loves fish. Fish and Prague, his two favorite things!"

"I know." Brandon offered her a fragile smile in return. "Should he be wandering around by himself?"

"He doesn't venture far from his safety zone," she replied. "He'll walk around this suburb, go to Iniquity, he goes to the local library, that's about all. This is his home; it's not a jail."

One of Brandon's eyebrows flicked up, thinking Yvonne obviously didn't know Lewis very well.

When the doorbell sounded, Yvonne rose from the armchair. "That'll be Lewis! He has a habit of forgetting his keys."

The sight of Lewis dressed immaculately in black pants and a Goth jacket, makeup perfect, sent Brandon's heart beating double time. In his hand, Lewis held a plastic bag filled with water and a goldfish with obvious spinal malformation.

Yvonne exhaled and exasperated sigh. "Not another one, dear!" She addressed Brandon next. "He buys every deformed fish he sees. Feels sorry for them."

Like a deer caught in headlights, Lewis stared with an embarrassed flush over his cheeks. "What are you doing here, Brandon?"

Standing, he met Lewis halfway across the floor. "Can we talk?"

Clearly not too keen on relinquishing the goldfish, Lewis held tight to the bag and refused to allow Yvonne even temporary custody. "I guess. Want to come to my room?"

"No men in your room, Lewis." Yvonne stated firmly.

"Why not? I've already fucked him once."

Brandon cringed, devoured under Yvonne's glare, thankful Lewis refrained from revealing they'd also jerked each other off the night before. "It's fine, we can talk outside."

Lewis held out the bag. "Can you give Bendy a home?"

"Bendy?" Brandon laughed, it was a name well suited to the unfortunate goldfish. "How do you know I have an aquarium?"

"I don't." Lewis shrugged, as though it didn't matter either way.

Focused solely on Lewis, Brandon ignored Yvonne's gaze and walked him toward the door, whispering into his ear. "Luckily I *do* have one."

They stepped out onto the veranda and sat down on a cast iron bench seat overlooking gardens. Brandon's insides tied into knots, his throat constricted, his legs shook, and he prepared to lay it all on the line.

He carefully took hold of Lewis' hands, gently breaking the news of what he'd learned from Tarin. At all costs Brandon needed to avoid making Lewis feel uncomfortable, but things had to be said and knowledge of circumstances revealed. When Brandon finished speaking, Lewis appeared small, dejected, and humiliated.

Brandon squeezed Lewis' hands. "You ran off last night and I was worried sick. Before the hiccup in the café, we were having a good time together, weren't we?"

"Yes." Tears washed across Lewis' eyes. "I know what I did in the café was wrong. I sometimes get angry quickly." Digging around in his pocket, he removed a scrunched up tissue and dabbed carefully around his makeup. "When people tell me it's inappropriate I can see that it is. By then it's too late; I've fucked up again."

"Hey." Taking a chance, Brandon eased Lewis into his arms and kissed the top of his head. "I fuck up all the time, too. Hell, I'm the king of fuck ups."

Lewis nodded against Brandon's chest. "True. You are."

"Face it, Goth Boy." Brandon chuckled. "We're perfect for each other."

Awkward silence followed before Lewis leaned away and drilled that unwavering violet stare into Brandon's eyes. "I'm perfect for you because I have brain damage?" he asked doubtfully. "Why doesn't that make me feel good?"

"No. It's because you make me want to be a better man." Brandon cupped Lewis' chin in his hand, his heart pounded against his ribs, and he swallowed to relieve the knot of anxiety. "You made me realize what a jerk I've been during my life. That essay made me face myself and I didn't like what I saw. I never knew you before the accident. It's the left of center person you are *now* I want."

"The person I am now can't even make a cup of coffee properly."

Frontal lobe brain injury at times caused problems with activities requiring sequencing. It explained Lewis' errors with stirring a beverage before adding sugar. Brandon figured Lewis probably had similar problems with tasks like making phone calls or cooking a meal.

"Don't push me away." His thumb caressed Lewis' bottom lip. "Give us a chance."

The tip of Lewis' tongue snuck out to lick the pad of Brandon's thumb. "You really wanna keep dating me?"

"Yes!"

"Hmm." A cheeky expression lit up Lewis face. "Well, Brandon, if you're prepared to date a freak, I'm prepared to date someone who's ugly."

Brandon's ego took another bashing. "You honestly think I'm ugly?"

"It gets you every time, doesn't it?"

"Well, do you?"

Taking Brandon's face in his hand, Lewis pressed hard until his lips puckered. "No! I think you're gorgeous." He planted several noisy kisses on those puckered lips. "Except your eyes *are* spooky looking."

Epilogue

Three months later

"Have I told you how sexy you look tonight?"

Lewis perused a menu intently. "Yes, Brandon, you have."

Iniquity stole Tarin's attention and he looked around the large restaurant approvingly. "It's classy here, isn't it?"

A waiter approached and Lewis ordered first. "I'd like one scoop of chocolate chip ice cream. Half a scoop of banana ice cream."

The waiter wrote down the order. "What would you like for an entrée?"

Lewis never looked up from the menu. "That is my entrée. For a main course I'd like one large slice of cheesecake and one small slice of Black Forest cake."

"For dessert?" The waiter asked skeptically.

"No, thank you. I never eat dessert."

The waiter took Brandon and Tarin's order next and walked away. There was a quiet ambience about the restaurant, along with the sound of subdued chatter, low lighting, and a small dance floor. Brandon leaned in to kiss Lewis on the cheek and reached for a glass of wine. His relaxed posture changed when he noticed a statuesque male striding across the room on four inch platform boots.

"Well, well," rumbled Wayne as he reached the table, "what have we got here?"

Tarin sat speechless, cowering slightly.

"Brandon's my boyfriend now," said Lewis, showing no fear. "You can go."

"How can I go," black eyes, set into a massive head, turned to give Tarin the once over, "when I've been struck by a vision of loveliness?"

Brandon and Lewis exchanged a quick, disbelieving glance.

A blush swept over Tarin's cheeks. "You mean me?" He giggled girlishly when Wayne winked.

"Yes you, rosebud." Wayne took hold of Tarin's hand and attempted to bring it up to his lips.

The sight broke Lewis into laughter. "He's going to rip Tarin's arm out of its socket!" he whispered into Brandon's ear.

It certainly looked that way, with Wayne forgetting to bend down and Tarin struggling to stretch far enough for the back of his hand to meet with ready lips.

"I guess a beauty like you wouldn't consider sharing dinner with an ogre like me." Wayne caressed Tarin's hand. "I'd be honored if I was permitted just one dance."

"Ogre? Don't be silly!" The blush turned from pink to scarlet and the nervous girly giggle refused to cease. "You're a fine specimen of a man."

Brandon bit down on his bottom lip, suppressed a laugh, and whispered near Lewis' ear. "He told *me* Wayne looked like Satan's butt crack."

"And twice as hairy!" Lewis whispered back.

"Will you indulge me?" Considering the bass of Wayne's voice, when he attempted to coo seductively it sounded more like a train derailing. "I'll keep the memory of dancing with an angel inside my heart forever."

Tarin hastily scooted off his chair and allowed Wayne to whisk him over to the dance floor. They were the worst pickup lines in the world but, to Brandon's astonishment, had worked a treat. Rather than dancing, it looked more like Tarin was attempting rock climbing while Wayne stomped from one platform boot to the other.

By the time the food arrived it seemed Wayne and Tarin were inseparable. They appeared to have forgotten anyone else in the room existed, sharing a table in a darkened corner and plainly immersed in each other.

Ice cream dripped down the handle of Lewis' spoon and he licked it off with a sweep of his tongue. "Did you wear that suit to impress me?"

"Uh-huh." Brandon tried to focus away from the distracting licking. "Has it worked?"

"Yes. Far better than the first time I met you. You looked preposterous."

"It's a wonder my balls didn't break like eggs in those pants."

"You're a dipstick, Brandon."

"With spooky eyes," he replied without taking offense. "That you hate."

"I never said I hate them," Lewis corrected. "I said they're spooky. I happen to like spooky." When Brandon offered his hand across the table, Lewis took hold. "I think it's love."

"Pardon?" The word sounded like a spluttered cough.

"Tarin and Wayne. I think it's love."

"Oh. Yeah." Brandon dropped his eyes to his plate. "Seems like it."

A crooked smile lifted the corner of Lewis' mouth. "You thought I meant you and me, didn't you?"

"Fuck it!" Scooting out of the booth, filled with sudden bravado, Brandon snatched Lewis' hand. "Come with me."

He dragged Lewis to the dance floor, left him standing alone, and climbed the dais to a small DJ booth. After a quick whispered word in the DJ's ear, Brandon took the microphone.

"Casey Lewis Blake." Falling to one knee, slapping his right hand to his heart, Brandon shouted at the top of his voice. "I love you, you crazy Goth Boy!"

In response Lewis dropped to both knees, holding his arms outward and screaming his reply. "Brandon James Faulkner... I love you, too, you egotistical fool!"

THE END

Left of Center

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