



Loose Id

THE
ICE PRINCE

JESSICA FREELY

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www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

The moment they got in the door, they started shedding their clothes. Parkas, sweaters, T-shirts all shucked and tossed to the floor, and in an instant, they stood before each other, naked from the waist up.

The sight of Seth's bare chest rising and falling made David's nipples tighten. Seth's vivid blue eyes stared with such intense need, it was as if he could fuck David with the force of his gaze alone. A now-familiar warmth spread from David's groin up his chest.

Seth wrapped him in long, powerful arms. David rested his face against Seth's chest, relishing the contact. Seth's skin was as soft as David's *Frodo Lives* sweatshirt—the one he'd washed so many times it was nearly falling apart, but that he still wore on cold winter nights for comfort. David ran his hand up and down Seth's arm, delighting in the feel of his tawny skin. Seth sighed and held him tighter.

David had read somewhere that you could tell if a person was suited to you, biochemically, if they always felt warm to your touch. It was that way with Seth. Though they'd just come in from outside, where it was ten degrees and snowing, Seth's skin felt kissed by the sun. Even in the dead of winter, David had plenty of sunshine with Seth around. And the radiance of his presence made David grow.

He pressed his hips against Seth, rubbing his erection against Seth's thigh. The friction and the snug confinement of his jeans combined to build a sweet ache in David's cock that felt like it could last forever. Seth's low moan made him want to test that notion.

Seth cupped his chin and tilted it back to swoop in for a kiss. Hot, lush lips claimed David's. Seth's tongue, agile and insistent, soon followed. It was like sinking into a vat of hot chocolate topped with whipped cream. He drank Seth in.

David ran his hands down Seth's arms and across his back, where rope scars interrupted the smooth expanse of velvety skin. Seth twitched. He was still uncomfortable with being touched there, still felt that those marks from his time in the Pit made him ugly. But they didn't. They only emphasized his courage and humanity, that he could endure so much and still be able to love another person.

David lowered his hands to Seth's ass and pulled him in tight, shifting so their jeans-clad erections pressed against each other. Seth gave another moan.

Seth's moans were intoxicating—low and rumbling. David swore he could feel the vibration in his balls. His heart sped up. Sweat stood out on his naked skin. He couldn't wait anymore. He wanted Seth in his bed now. "Come on," he said, his voice husky with desire. "Come on." He took Seth by the hand.

When they got to the bedroom, David pushed Seth down on the mattress. Seth let himself drop. He lay sprawled in the sheets that were still tangled from this morning's adventures. His lips were red and wet from their kiss, and a blush appeared on his chest and neck. He looked absolutely delectable.

David shucked off his jeans and underwear. Cock bobbing, he got to his knees between Seth's spread legs. He could see the outline of Seth's cock pressing against his fly. The sight made him so hard he felt like his cock was made of steel.

"I love when you get that intent look," said Seth. "You're so hot, so aggressive."

David took a deep breath to keep from coming at those words alone. He was beyond a doubt the smaller, less physically prepossessing of the two of them. He was a fucking book nerd. And despite the fact that he loved getting fucked, he had a dominant streak a mile wide. Some guys might have found that weird or out of place, but it seemed to suit Seth just fine.

David drew the zipper on Seth's fly down. His big, beautiful cock popped out, the skin dusky rose, surrounded by the crisp whiteness of Seth's new underwear. David stroked Seth's shaft. The flesh was like warm velvet.

Seth sighed and arched his back. "Oh, David."

Desire made David's head swim. He pulled Seth's underwear and jeans down around his hips, and his lover lifted his butt off the bed so David could slide them the rest of the way off. In seconds, they were both completely naked. Just as they should be. David threw himself across Seth's body and kissed him hard. Seth gasped into his mouth and ran his fingers over David's cock. The feel of his rough hands on David's tender, heated flesh was so intense it sent little sparks of lightning shooting off in all directions through David's body. Now David was the one gasping.

Their lips still locked together, Seth whimpered into David's mouth. Seth's hips undulated as he thrust into David's hand. David imagined that cock thrusting deep inside him, pounding his prostate, filling him with more heavy pleasure at every stroke. God.

He was tempted to slap a condom on Seth that instant, but...no. He broke their kiss and turned around. He circled Seth's cock and balls with his thumb and index finger, restricting the blood flow and making it impossible for Seth to come before David was good and ready. A little trick Seth had taught him. Seth moaned.

David lowered his mouth over the bulging head of Seth's cock and sucked him in.

"God! David..."

David ran his tongue in circles around the heated, silken flesh. The taste of Seth was exquisite, like smoke and honey. He bobbed his head, stroking Seth with his lips.

"Move over," Seth said, pulling on one of David's knees.

Oh. Oh yes.

David shifted so he straddled Seth's chest. He sank back a little, and Seth stroked his ass cheeks, kneading his muscles. Seth probed David's crack with his thumbs, gently exploring. He ran the callous pad of one thumb over the pucker of David's asshole.

David gasped around the cock in his mouth, then tried to focus his attention on giving Seth the best head of his life. He sucked and stroked. He teased Seth's balls with his free hand.

Seth's sigh gusted warm and damp against David's exposed hole. Seth pulled at his hips, and David flexed backward, flattening his chest against Seth's belly so he could continue to suck him while Seth...Seth...

Seth's hot, agile tongue circled his hole, then swept across it. David fluttered open in response. Deep inside him, a nerve pulsed, beckoning. His mouth full, David could only manage a groan of appreciation.

Seth planted his face in David's ass and drove his tongue into David's hungry channel. David's cock, smashed between their bodies, pulsed, and he barely held back from coming. He couldn't concentrate on sucking Seth. His whole body was heavy with need. He could barely think. "Seth...I'm..."

"Yeah," said Seth. His breath struck David like the wind before a summer rain. "I know. Just...yeah... Hang on..." He let go of David's hips, and David scrambled for the lube and condoms.

It was all business now. David ripped open the packet and rolled the condom over Seth's wet, raging erection. Seth lubed up and handed the tube to David, who smeared a handful over his hole before straddling Seth again, facing him this time.

David settled over Seth's cock. The flared head nudged his hole, and he pressed down on it. They'd done this a number of times. It wasn't scary. It was amazing. David loved the feeling of Seth's cockhead prying him open. Those first few inches where the muscles were tightest were almost the best part. He could feel every inch of Seth sliding into him. Seth was so big. And David took him.

They paused a moment, with just the upper few inches of Seth's cock resting inside that inner ring, holding David open while deeper inside that pulsing nerve ticked like a clock. Constant, incessant. David sighed and sank the rest of the way onto Seth's erection. Seth's heat filled David, touching him everywhere. Warmth spread from David's core outward, to every inch of his body. His scalp tingled, and so did his palms and the soles of his feet.

Seth stared up at David, his face flushed, his hair already lying in tangled, sweaty strands across his forehead, his mouth open. David leaned down and kissed him, the press of their lips as soft as a cloud. Then David started to move.

He lifted up off Seth in a long, slow glide, paused at the top, again with just the tip of Seth's cock inside him. Seth tilted his head from side to side, his eyes shining. David grinned and sank down on him again.

The angle was perfect to nail David's prostate on the downstroke. Every time Seth's cock touched him there, it seemed to fill David with even more rich delight, especially in his balls. David was so close. He rose again, slow, and back down, and Seth met him, bucking into him. David's balls got tighter, heavier. He was losing track of what he felt where.

He rose one more time, and this time he slammed down onto Seth and Seth pounded up into him. "Yes! More!"

They fucked each other mercilessly, past all restraint, all games. Seth's cock pounding David's prostate made bolts of electricity rocket through his whole body, and Seth's ragged moans brought the pleasure suffusing David's body to a sharp, sweet peak at the base of his cock. "Seth, Seth..." David cried out, panting.

Seth reached up, grasped David's cock, and worked him with an iron fist. That hand, hard on his hot cock, was the very thing he needed. David slammed back down again, filling himself with Seth's heat, his strength. The heaviness, the tightness, the intense joy centered at the base of David's cock released, flooding his body everywhere, and he shot into Seth's hand.

His orgasm rolled through him in waves, like a tropical storm, warm and wild. His ass rippled around Seth's cock, making it feel bigger than ever. "God! David!" Seth drove up into him fast and sloppy and finally grabbed him by both hips. He held David down, plastered against his bucking groin. He cried out, pulsing his release deep inside David's body, and then sank back down on the bed.

David fell on top of him, and they lay together in a boneless heap, sweat and cum sticking their bodies together. David heard singing.

Really? he asked himself. Isn't that a bit much?

But then Seth said, "Do you hear that?"

"Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright..."

"The singing?"

"Yeah. You hear it too? It's not just..."

"No. We both definitely hear it."

It came from outside, in the street. Several voices, high and sweet, getting louder. Suddenly it all struck David at once. Late December, singing... "It's Christmas," he said and laughed. "We forgot about Christmas."

"Our first one together," said Seth.

"Yeah... I guess we should do something to celebrate."

Seth kissed him. "We just did."

* * *

The jingling of bells snapped David out of his reverie. It was Mrs. Pinkerton, entering the bookshop for her Friday-morning mystery fix.

"Hello, David," she said, untying the scarf over her hair and shaking the snow from it. She was their most loyal customer. Too often these days, she was their only customer.

David collected himself and focused on the warm wood paneling, brass fixtures, and closely spaced shelves of the Haverstock Bookshop. For a little while there, he'd been transported back in time to last Christmas, the first one he and

Seth had spent together, the one they'd barely even noticed because they were so wrapped up in each other.

"Hi, Mrs. Pinkerton," he said, his voice wavering a bit. "How've you been?"

"Oh, you know. The cold makes my old bones stiff. These winters of ours just get harder and harder."

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from getting distracted by thoughts of stiff bones getting harder and harder. "Well, you wouldn't know it," he said, recovered. "You're looking great. Is that a new coat?"

She smiled. "It is. A new coat at the start of winter just helps, I find."

"Well, it's a good color for you," he said. "The blue brings out the pink in your cheeks."

"Oh." She tittered and waved a hand at him. "You flatterer! Don't you have any shame, leading an old lady on when you don't even like girls?"

David grinned at her. "I like you, Mrs. Pinkerton. Maybe we'll run away to Florida together. What do you say?"

Her laugh deepened. "I say you're a very bad boy, and I'm telling your husband you said that to me." Still chuckling, she made her way toward the mystery section. "Shameless," she muttered.

"The new Carl Hiaasen is in," he called after her.

He and Seth weren't really married. Michigan didn't have that. But Mrs. Pinkerton was of a generation that believed in marriage, and she was the kind of person who didn't give a damn about the particulars, so long as two people loved each other. She was great. So was David's boss, Mr. Haverstock.

David had known Carl Haverstock all his life. He'd been a friend of his parents when they were alive. David had worked for him here in the bookshop since high school. Mr. Haverstock had not only accepted David's relationship with another man, he'd stood by them when Seth faced criminal charges connected with his time as an unwilling inmate in the illegal death-fight ring known as the Pit.

He'd handled the sale of some valuable books David inherited from his father, collector's editions of Rafael Sabatini novels. He'd gotten a good price for them. Enough for a lawyer and plenty left over to help David and Seth get started on their new life together.

As if summoned by David's thoughts, Mr. Haverstock bustled out of the back room, a mug of coffee in his hand. He wore a tweed jacket and wire-rimmed glasses. His round head was fringed with wispy white hair, and his blue eyes twinkled when he smiled. "Is that our favorite customer I hear?"

"Carl!" said Mrs. Pinkerton, emerging from the mystery section with a stack of five mass-market paperbacks. "Did you come out here just for me?"

"Of course." Mr. Haverstock took the books and stacked them on the counter. "You look well, Ida. Did you find everything you wanted?"

"I did." She nodded at the books. "That'll keep me going for another week. What would I do without you gentlemen to keep me entertained?"

David grinned, but inside, uneasiness coiled in his stomach. It was really the other way around. Mrs. Pinkerton was one of their last remaining regular customers. And sales from foot traffic and special orders had slowed to a meager trickle. Mr. Haverstock looked worried these days, and David didn't have to wonder why. He didn't do the books, but he knew all too well what was in the till each night. He didn't know how they were still open, frankly, or how much longer they'd be able to hang on.

"Can we look forward to another one of your fruitcakes this year?" Mr. Haverstock asked. David didn't think he was aware he rubbed his belly when he said it. The stock cliché about fruitcake did not apply to Mrs. Pinkerton's creations. Every year they were a little bit different, depending on the combination of fruits and nuts she used, but one thing remained consistent—they were delicious.

"They're already soaking in rum," she said, her head high. "But I won't tell you what's in them this year. It's a surprise."

"We'll look forward to it, won't we, David?"

He nodded.

“Oh! Now that you’re with Seth, I’d better give you your own, hadn’t I?” She gave Mr. Haverstock a wink. “That means you’ll get one all to yourself, Carl.”

David’s boss seemed to glow with happiness, but after Mrs. Pinkerton left, his customary jolliness turned somber. “David,” he said, “we need to talk.”

* * *

“That’s two fried-egg sandwiches, one big-plate breakfast, easy, rye toast, and an order of apple flapjacks,” Yolanda called out through the doorway to the dining room.

Seth cracked five eggs on the griddle, added three strips of bacon, two sausage links, and a side of ham before popping a couple of slices of rye bread into the toaster and fetching the pancake batter from the fridge. By then it was time to flip the eggs and plate the two orders of veggie scramble that had come in a few minutes before.

“One breakfast lasagna and a Benedict Arnold,” yelled Yolanda.

Seth loved the breakfast rush at the Conant Community Café. Some people might be flustered by the rapid pace, but Seth actually found it relaxing. The trick was to stay in constant motion and not think too much. Just take it one task at a time. There was no room for thinking ahead, planning, worrying. It was just flip the eggs, plate the toast, turn the ham, slice the tomato.

Of course it helped that he knew the tiny kitchen like the back of his hand, and since it was small, everything was in easy reach. It all came naturally to him now, and he slid into the flow of the rush like a fish into the current of a stream.

Before he knew it, it was nine thirty, and the rush was over. Seth walked into the dining room and sat down at the little table in the corner by the cash register where the staff always congregated.

Yolanda and Karine were already there, having coffee. The two sisters were in sharp contrast with each other. Though both of them were dark-skinned, the

similarities ended there. Yolanda was rail thin, with sharp features and a disposition to match. She had a temper, and she didn't suffer fools gladly, but she was also one of the most generous, warm-hearted people Seth had ever met. This restaurant was her brainchild. Karine, a mother of three, was the younger sister. She was short and plump, with a mischievous personality and a love of laughter. Seth adored both of them and was perpetually grateful for this job. Getting paid to feed people was the most honorable work he'd ever had.

The Conant Community Café had a voucher system where people volunteered with the community center next door and earned credits that they could spend on meals here. About a third of their patrons were homeless and/or on a low, fixed income. Another third were socially conscious suburbanites and young hipsters recently moved into the city to take advantage of low property values and to be a part of what they insisted was the imminent rebirth of the city. If optimism were money, Detroit would be the richest place in the world.

He poured himself a mug of coffee and joined them.

"Hey, sugar, take a load off," said Karine. "You work so hard. How is it that it takes two of us to wait tables and just you to do the cooking? I can never figure that out."

"Shh," said Yolanda. "He'll want me to hire an assistant."

"I don't need an assistant," said Seth.

"Well, I tell you what I wish we did have," said Karine. "A busboy—or girl. I'm getting tired of washing dishes between taking orders, and it's hell on my hands."

"I know, I know," said Yolanda. "Lookit, just keep your hair on a couple more weeks. We're doing pretty good. Maybe soon we can hire a dishwasher. Maybe."

Karine's face lit up. "Really? We're doing that well?"

Yolanda shrugged. "Receipts are up. Not a lot of dining options in the city these days, and a lot of people like the idea of patronizing a place that's benefiting the community."

“Eeeeeeee!” squealed Karine. She jumped up and danced around in a circle, clapping her hands. “A busboy! I can start getting my nails done again! Woooo!”

“Karine. That’s enough now. We’ve got work to do.” Yolanda gave her “the Look.”—chin down, mouth a flat line, eyes wide and full of fire, Seth was grateful he’d never done anything to earn him that glare, though Karine seemed to live to see just how far she could push before Yolanda unleashed it on her.

All the same, she subsided. “I’ll just go rinse out mugs now,” she said.

Seth stood, drained the last of his coffee, and handed his mug to Karine. “I better get started on prep for lunch.”

“What are we having today?” asked Yolanda.

Seth’s chest swelled with pride. Not only did Yolanda respect and trust him as an employee, she let him make up his own dishes too. Technically, that made him a chef.

“Well, we’ve got all that rutabaga still, and it’s really good with the goat cheese, so I thought rutabaga-goat-cheese fritters with a honey, cilantro, and mint dipping sauce. Then, we’ve still got all that venison from the deer Mr. Brice shot on his hunting trip and gave to us, so I thought I’d make a venison stew with some of the apples that are getting wrinkly, plus mushrooms, carrots, and onions. I’ll make some cheddar biscuits to go with that. What do you think?”

They stared at him in silence a moment, just until he started to sweat, and then they both broke out in grins. “Sounds amazing,” said Yolanda.

“He just keeps getting more imaginative,” Karine said to her sister. She turned to him. “And here I thought you couldn’t top barbecued brisket with blue-cheese potato salad, but I was wrong.”

Seth blushed. “It’s no big deal.”

“Oh, it is a very big deal, hon,” said Yolanda. “You know a big part of the reason business is picking up is that word has gotten around about your specials.

The fact that our regular menu items, our burgers and sandwiches, are a cut above doesn't hurt either."

Seth's heart felt so big he expected it to burst at any moment. He turned and headed to the kitchen before all this adulation gave him a swelled head.

"Better make a double order of the stew," said Yolanda to his retreating back. "Something tells me it's going to be a seller."

To think that not long ago his only two career options had been beating people or sucking cock. That time seemed so distant now. Sometimes he felt like it had all happened to somebody else.

Chapter Two

“David, we need to talk.”

The uneasiness that had crept into the pit of David’s stomach earlier came back to life. “Yeah?”

Mr. Haverstock nodded. “Let’s go in the back. We can leave the door open so we’ll hear if we get a customer.”

Both of them knew how unlikely that was. David followed his boss into the back room.

They used the large, warehouselike space to store their back stock. Tall metal shelves held boxes of books. A sliding ladder gave David access to them. Fluorescent fixtures high in the ceiling above lit the place with a ghostly pale light, except for where Mr. Haverstock kept his desk. There, his desk lamp cast a warmer glow.

Mr. Haverstock’s “office” stood in the corner nearest the doorway to the store. It consisted of his desk, a tattered oriental rug, a file cabinet, and a table that supported the coffeemaker. The desk was scattered with papers, but Mr. Haverstock always knew where everything was.

Mr. Haverstock made a valiant effort to look cheerful, but there was no mistaking the seriousness in his eyes. “Would you like some coffee?”

“No. What’s wrong, Carl?” David pulled up the folding chair he used the few times he’d sat back here. The last time had been when Mr. Haverstock told him he knew Seth was the man the police were looking for.

Mr. Haverstock opened his mouth, probably surprised at the use of his first name. David almost always called him Mr. Haverstock, out of habit. He looked at

David for a long moment, then sighed. “Well, I’ve put it off long enough, I suppose. You need to know the truth. And you’re all grown up now. You can handle it.”

David was getting more alarmed by the minute. Maybe this had nothing to do with the bookshop. Was Mr. Haverstock ill? “What?”

“I imagine you’ve noticed we’re not very busy these days. What you might not know is that we haven’t shown a profit for three months. I’m afraid if things don’t turn around by the first of the year, I’m going to have to close the shop.” Tears filled his boss’s eyes. Mr. Haverstock searched his pockets until he found a handkerchief. He dabbed at his eyes with it. “You’ll have severance pay, of course, and you’ll be eligible for unemployment, but you should probably start looking for another job.”

“Close the shop?” Fear and loss snaked up from the pit of David’s stomach and wrapped around his heart, squeezing. He couldn’t breathe. He stared around at the warehouse, as familiar to him as the back of his hand. Likewise, he could picture the bookshop, every shelf, every crease in the carpet, every crack in the ceiling. This place had been his whole life until he met Seth. But it would be gone in just a few short weeks. Unless... “There has to be some way to drum up more business. We can’t just give up!”

“I don’t want to close either. Maybe you can think of something. You’re young. Me, I barely understand the interweb. I’m too old for this business now. Everything is changing. But maybe you can bring this grand old dame into the twenty-first century. I hope so, because—”

“Why?”

Haverstock shook his head.

“Oh come on. You can’t not tell me now. What else?”

Haverstock sighed, and he seemed to age before David’s eyes. “I wanted to leave this business to you.”

David stared at him in shock. “You...what?”

“Yes. Who else, David? You know this business. You’ve worked it your whole life. You’d run it better than I have, I’m sure. But now”—Haverstock bowed his head—“I’ve failed you.”

“No! Don’t say that! You’ve done more for me than my own father. You gave me this job in the first place. And when Seth and I needed you, you didn’t hesitate to help us. You could have turned him in, and you didn’t. No. Don’t feel bad for me. Worse comes to worst, I’ll get a job at freaking Books and Baubles. They’re always hiring around this time of year. But what about you? What are you going to do? If we close, that is.”

Haverstock took a deep breath. “Don’t worry about me, David. It’s not important what happens to me. I’ve had my life and—”

“Don’t give me that. It is important. It’s important to me. And the shop matters too. If we close, what happens to the other businesses around us? You’ve seen it before, and so have I. It’s like dominoes. One goes, and that decreases foot traffic, and then they all fall, one by one.”

Haverstock’s laugh was weak, but it was a laugh. “If you’re trying to cheer me up...”

“I’m sorry. I suck at this. The important thing is, we have to try.”

Haverstock’s smile looked more genuine this time. “Of course you’d say that. You’re very like your father, you know.”

Sudden anger pushed aside David’s fear and grief. “You mean I turn my back on people as soon as they don’t live up to my expectations?”

Haverstock held up his hands. “Sore subject, forgive me. I meant that you have great determination.”

David nodded and got ahold of himself. “I know you two were good friends.”

“Yes. And I promised him I’d look after you. That’s why it’s important that you know, even if we do have to close, I will always be here for you. I have a little money, and if you need—”

“I won’t take your money.”

Haverstock looked at him with a mixture of fondness and exasperation. “Well then, I hope you’ll accept my friendship. The worst part about losing the store would be losing touch with you.”

David swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. “Well, we won’t let that happen.” He got up and went to the coffee station so he didn’t break down bawling in front of Mr. Haverstock. By the time he’d poured them both a mug—black for him, cream and two sugars for his boss—his vision had stopped wavering and he could turn around. “So,” he said, “spell out the financials for me. Just how many books do we need to sell?”

* * *

One thing Seth didn’t like about the café kitchen was how hot it got, especially when he had the oven on. Between the biscuits baking and the big vat of venison stew bubbling on the stove, the little room was sweltering by ten thirty. Even stripped down to his T-shirt, he was sweating.

He opened the back door to let some air in. Across the alley, near the Dumpster, he caught a flicker of movement. A stray dog, startled by the sudden sound of the door, trotted away.

Poor thing. Probably scrounging for food. He made a mental note to put a bucket of scraps out when he was done fixing lunch.

The chilly December breeze felt like heaven. Refreshed, Seth returned to his lunch prep, but before long, the back of his neck prickled, and he sensed someone watching him. “Just go on about your business, Karine. I’ll let you know when it’s ready, and yes, you’ll get a taste,” he said, too absorbed in forming fritters to look up. There was no answer. That wasn’t like Karine. He turned and found the doorway to the dining room empty.

That was when he saw the dog in the doorway to the alley. She sat on her haunches, watching him with doleful brown eyes. She looked to be some sort of pit-bull mix, with a large, broad head and heavy jaws. Her coat was short and russet

brown, with a white blaze on her forehead, another on her chest, white feet, and a white tip on her tail.

“Hey, uh, I’m pretty sure it’s a violation of the health code for you to be in here.”

She licked her chops and stared at the stew bubbling on the stove then back at him.

Seth sighed. “You don’t understand. My boss will have my hide if I start feeding you the food we’re supposed to sell to our customers.”

She whined.

“Look, anything that doesn’t get eaten, I’ll put in this pail just for you, all right?” He hefted one of the plastic five-gallon buckets that their tofu came in.

She continued to stare at him.

“Okay, look, here. Maybe this’ll tide you over until after lunch.” He gathered some fat and bits of gristly meat he’d trimmed from the venison. “Here.” But when he started toward her, she jumped to her feet and snarled at him.

“Whoa!” Seth took a step back. “Easy there. Easy. I’m not going to hurt you. Look.” He held the scraps out. “These are for you. You don’t have to take them from my hand, but you have to let me put them outside.”

She sniffed the air, whined, and slunk out the door. Seth put the scraps in the bucket and placed it next to the Dumpster while she watched him from the cover of a pallet that leaned against a fence half a block away.

“Well, I guess you’ve got plenty of reasons not to trust people.”

Where would he be now if it weren’t for David?

He knew the answer to that. Out on the street with that dog, fighting her for those scraps of food. He’d been alone, hungry, and damaged when he and David met. Shattered by his experiences in the Pit, Seth had been plagued by nightmares and flashbacks. He had lived on the street because he had nowhere else to go, and

he'd vowed never to return to the Pit. Even scrounging for food in Dumpsters and turning the occasional trick had been better than that.

But then he'd met David, and David had seen past the grime and the haunted expression. David didn't have any more reason to trust him than that dog did. He'd just been attacked by a gang—nearly raped—and Seth had put a stop to it by caving the leader's head in with an iron pipe. To this day Seth could only wonder what wonderful, reckless impulse had inspired David to invite him into his home after all that.

But he had, and he'd changed Seth's life forever. It hadn't always been easy, but the love between them had sustained them through Seth's posttraumatic stress disorder, his unemployment, and his illiteracy—yeah, he was quite a catch. But David never cared about any of that. Even when Seth went against his wishes and went undercover to help the police shut the Pit down for good, David had stood by him. Now, all that was part of the past, and every day was a new opportunity to make the most of his good fortune.

As Seth chopped cilantro and mint, his mind wandered to his plans for the rest of the day.

David would stop by the café when he got done at the bookshop, and they'd go home. Seth had some leftover chili in the fridge for dinner. Even odds whether they'd eat first and then make love, or vice versa.

Seth grew warm at the idea of caressing David's smooth golden skin, of kissing him until they both were breathless. He could picture perfectly the pink blush that rose on David's cheeks and chest when he was aroused. His mouth watered at the notion of sucking David's beautiful cock, and the thought of David's needy moans made him so hard he—

Seth set down the knife and took a deep breath. He needed to focus. This was inappropriate work behavior. Not to mention that in his distracted state, he'd chopped way more cilantro than was needed.

Seth hated to waste food. It was one of the few nonviolent acts he considered inherently immoral. He wrapped up the extra cilantro in a damp paper towel, wrapped that in plastic film, and put it in the fridge. Tomorrow's breakfast special would be cilantro scramble.

To keep his mind off David, he forced himself to think about the thing next week. That took the wind out of his sails fast.

After the bust-up of the Pit, Seth had been assigned a therapist. Dr. Michaels worked with the other men who'd been inmates of the Pit too. Most of them lived in a group home, working on reintegrating into society.

Seth had been unsure about therapy in the beginning, but he liked Dr. Michaels, and after a few sessions, he found talking with him helped a lot. Now, less than a year since all that had happened, Seth was doing so well Dr. Michaels had asked him to come to the group home and talk to the other former Pit fighters.

David was against it, and Seth understood why. At first, he'd been hesitant too. Would the whole thing dredge up the past? And what could he tell them, anyway?

But Dr. Michaels assured him he didn't have to prepare a speech or anything. *"Just be yourself and answer their questions honestly."*

Thinking about those men reminded Seth of the dog. They'd all been dealt an unfair hand in life. He wanted to help, if he could.

"Here we go, Seth," said Yolanda from the doorway. "I got a table of five. Two stews, one fritter, a Basic Burger, and a Metro Club."

Seth was glad to set his thoughts aside and focus on the lunch rush.

And he put a quiet word in with Karine to save the table scraps for the dog.

* * *

As David entered the Conant Community Café, the luscious smell of fresh-baked raspberry-chocolate-chip scones embraced him like a warm hug. Mmm. Seth

was baking again. The warmth of the café chased away the chill of early December as the smiling faces that greeted him eased his anxiety over the bookshop.

“David, sugar. How you doing today?” Yolanda greeted him from atop a stepladder, where she was stapling a glittering red and green garland over the archway to the kitchen. “Seth,” she called out, “your blond hottie is here.”

When he first started hanging out at Seth’s workplace, he hadn’t been sure how to take this kind of thing from Yolanda. But over time he’d come to understand she wasn’t mocking him or his relationship with Seth. And when David got the flu and she let Seth stay home to take care of him, with pay, he knew she was really a friend.

The café had a regular afternoon crowd that gathered for coffee and whatever baked goods Seth had whipped up that day. David nodded at Mr. Scarpelli and the Lowinskis as he made his way to the table by the kitchen where he always waited for Seth. He was a lot better around people than he used to be.

David had never had much use for other people until Seth came along. He was an only child, and life at home had been quiet. His mother had passed when he was ten, and after that, it was just him and his dad. His experiences in high school had done little to engender interest in socializing, and after his father passed, he’d pretty much kept to himself. Apart from his boss and a few of the regular bookstore customers, he rarely spoke to anyone.

David hadn’t considered himself isolated until Seth pointed out that he had no friends. He still wasn’t entirely sure he needed friends, apart from Seth, but since it made Seth happy, David made an effort these days to be more outgoing. Still, he was glad no one tried to make conversation with him today. Operating on automatic, he helped himself to a cup of coffee, sat down, and stared into its depths.

He was pretty sure he didn’t need more coffee. Thoughts of the bookshop and how to save it whirled around in his mind. Maybe they needed a guest-author series or a book club. They should definitely get a Facebook page and a Twitter account. David closed his eyes and focused on the warmth of the mug in his hand. He might

be more modern than Mr. Haverstock, who still kept the store's books using an adding machine and a ledger, but not by much, and social media was about as enticing to him as a fork in the eye. All those anonymous strangers yammering at one another. How could Haverstock Bookshop hope to brand themselves with all that going on?

"Hey."

Seth, apron-clad and flour-smudged, appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. Drinking in the sight of him, David's busy mind quieted immediately. Seth was tall, broad shouldered, and lean—muscular, but not in a showy way. With his high cheekbones, piercing blue eyes, and prominent nose, he was breathtakingly handsome, but quirky enough that he didn't have a swelled head about his looks, no matter how many times David told him he was hot. Seth's glossy black hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Streaks of raspberry and chocolate adorned his face and arms from the afternoon baking. David wanted to forget all about the bookshop, hustle him into the utility room, and lick him from head to toe.

"Hey," he said instead. It came out husky. He cleared his throat and stood.

Seth gave him one of those brilliant smiles of his and wrapped him in a hug. David tensed just a little. He knew Yolanda was okay with them, but he didn't really know the patrons that well. Over Seth's shoulder, he saw Mr. Scarpelli turn away. The old man didn't say anything, but David could imagine what he was thinking.

Seth released him and turned to fetch a cup of coffee from the beverage station. He took three raspberry-chocolate-chip scones from the bakery case and piled them on a plate, not once indicating if he'd noticed David's hesitation or what he thought about it if he had. David couldn't help himself. He looked over to where the other patrons sat. No one seemed to have noticed anything. "Here, try these. I'm not sure if I've got it right yet. Too much raspberry? Not enough chocolate?"

He took a scone and bit into it. The texture was perfect: tender and crumbly. The tang of raspberry was exactly right, but he only caught a hint of chocolate. “Just enough raspberry,” he said, “but not enough chocolate.”

Seth nodded. “Okay. Next time I should have it right. So how was your day?”

David sighed.

“Uh-oh. What?”

David told Seth what Mr. Haverstock had said. Yolanda joined them and sat listening, an intent expression on her face. David looked up and saw the others listening too. His throat got tight. He couldn’t say any more, not with everyone watching him.

“That’s bad news for the whole neighborhood,” said Yolanda.

“Haverstock’s has been there for over thirty years,” Mr. Lowinski said. “It’s a shame to see it go.”

David stopped himself from asking why he never came into the store to buy anything.

“Out with the old, in with the new,” said Mr. Scarpelli.

“We’re not closed yet,” David said with more heat than he’d intended. “Sorry.” He pushed away the plate with his half-eaten scone on it and stood. “I can wait for you outside, Seth.”

“No. Don’t do that. It’s okay. Just hang on a sec.” Seth got up and went into the kitchen.

Yolanda reached out and put a hand on David’s arm. “I feel you, baby. You let me know if there’s anything we can do to help, okay?”

David took a deep breath and nodded. Seconds later, Seth was back with his coat. “Leonard will be here in another hour,” he said to Yolanda. “You mind if I—”

“No, not at all. Take your man home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sorry about that,” David said once they were outside. Suddenly the cold was a welcome relief. He’d felt like he was baking under a spotlight in there.

“Sorry? About what?”

David looked up to see if Seth was being sarcastic. But that wasn’t like him, and Seth looked back at him in perfect sincerity. “What I said to Mr. Scarpelli.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.”

“I was pretty sharp with him.”

“Yeah, but it was an asinine thing for him to say. I don’t think you hurt his feelings, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I just don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“Did Yolanda look like she gave a damn? You weren’t as harsh as you might think you were.”

David nodded. He had to take Seth’s word for that. He had a hard time gauging how he did with people, especially when he didn’t know them well.

Seth sidled closer to him, so that their elbows brushed against each other as they walked. When they got home, Seth drew him into a big bear hug the moment they got in the door. “I’m really sorry about your news. But if anyone can figure out how to turn that store around, it’s you, love.”

David was going to have to take his word for that as well.

Chapter Three

“Are you sure about doing this?” asked David again. That vertical worry line between his brows was back as he reached up and adjusted the collar of Seth’s dress shirt.

Seth sighed. “Yes. I’m sure. I told you, helping them will help me.”

David’s mouth set in a flat line. “You sound like your shrink.”

“Dr. Michaels did suggest this, yes, but he’s right, and I feel right about it. It’ll be good. Not just for them, for me as well.”

“Won’t seeing them stir up bad memories for you? You haven’t had any nightmares lately, and I’m afraid if—”

“It’s because the nightmares are gone that Dr. Michaels thinks I’m ready for this step.” Seth gently pried David’s hand from where it fussed at his tie. He twined their fingers together. “As for stirring up memories...I haven’t forgotten anything. I’m not likely to, so there’s nothing to be stirred up. I remember my time in the Pit, all of it.”

David squeezed his hand. “But dwelling on it—”

“Pretending it didn’t happen gives it more power, not less. Confronting it...is scary, yes, but ultimately, it puts me in control.”

David still looked unconvinced, but he didn’t say anything.

“You know,” ventured Seth, “this therapy stuff’s not so bad. I really think it’s helped me. You’ve said so too. You might consider trying it yourse—”

David jerked his hand free from Seth’s and turned away. “I don’t need a shrink!”

Seth closed his eyes. Why had he pushed?

The social worker who'd spoken with David and Seth in the hospital following the sting on the Pit had recommended therapy for both of them. But while David had supported Seth's going to see Dr. Michaels, he'd refused counseling for himself. He'd had a whole litany of reasons, a list Seth had memorized. But that didn't stop David from reiterating them, anyway.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Okay," said Seth.

"I've got friends now and everything."

"I know."

"There's nothing a shrink can tell me that I don't already know myself."

"I see." Seth was skeptical about this one, but he didn't want to get into it.

David turned and pinned him with his gaze. "You're just trying to avoid an argument."

"Well...I do have to go. We can argue about it tonight if you want, but I can think of better things to do."

That got him a smile. "You sure you don't want me to come with you? I could call Mr. Haverstock and take the day off."

"No, don't do that. I'll be fine."

David stood a moment more, then rushed forward and threw his arms around him. "Be careful."

"I will."

"I'm afraid one of those guys is going to come after you," he blurted.

Oh. Now Seth felt like a bit of an ass, not realizing that of course David would see the other fighters as a threat. "It'll be okay. Dr. Michaels wouldn't have me come if he thought there was any danger in it."

David placed one hand over Seth's heart, tracing the scar where a bullet had almost ended his life. "You thought the cops would keep you safe too, Seth, and you

wound up getting shot and nearly died. You're too trusting. I just want all this to be over!"

Seth held David tight and rocked him, side to side. "I know." He hesitated. "If you really don't want me to go, I won't."

David stilled. He looked up at Seth, his brown eyes searching Seth's face. "But you said it would help you."

Seth shrugged. "But if it's going to upset you this much..."

David sighed and rested his head on Seth's chest. "I'm sorry. I'm being high maintenance again, aren't I?"

Seth kissed the top of David's head. "You're not high maintenance, love. Just a worrywart. Kiss me?"

David lifted his face and leaned up, and their lips met. The soft press, like sinking through flower petals, quickly gave way to the warm slide of tongues. Seth loved kissing David. They caressed each other with their mouths, taking turns sucking gently at lips and tongue, trading little sips of each other. Seth started getting hard, and he broke their kiss. "If you're trying to get me not to go, this is a really good tactic," he said.

David grinned. "No. Go. It's important to you. I can see that much, even if I don't understand. Just be careful, please."

"I will."

One more hug and Seth was out the door, down the stairs, and climbing behind the wheel of their car.

* * *

Few of the former Pit fighters had families to return to. Most of them were homeless and lived in a former YMCA that had been donated to the city as a rehabilitation facility.

Dr. Michaels was an African American man in his seventies, tall, with white hair and a long face. He wore dark suits and thin ties, and his rectangular glasses

had thick black frames. He was a warm person whose kind eyes twinkled when he laughed, which was often.

He greeted Seth at the doorway of the facility. “Thank you so much for doing this. Seeing you and hearing you talk about your life will mean so much to the others. A lot of them are really struggling.”

Seth nodded and fought to quell the sudden nervousness that rose inside him. This was it. In another moment, he’d be in there, in the same room with a bunch of other men who’d survived the same ordeal he had. There was always the chance he’d been in the ring with some of them, though it was unlikely he’d encounter any of the really bad actors. These were the guys whose evaluations had shown they had the potential to become socialized again.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m ready.”

The men sat in a circle of folding chairs in the middle of the gymnasium. Seth crossed the gym, his footsteps echoing on the polished wood floor. Two chairs stood empty.

“Gentlemen,” said Dr. Michaels, entering the circle. “You all know who Seth Ingersol is. He’s here today to talk with you and answer any questions you might have. Please welcome him.”

They clapped. That just made him more uncomfortable, but Dr. Michaels waved him on, and the others watched him expectantly. Seth took a deep breath and crossed the gym. He sat down and rested his elbows on his knees. He looked around the circle at each of the men. Their bruises were gone. Only a few had visible scars, but all of them carried a burden he knew too well. He was relieved to discover he didn’t know any of them.

“Hey,” he said. “I’m not sure what to say here, but Dr. Michaels thought it would be helpful if I came and talked with you guys. I guess you can just ask me questions, and I’ll try to answer them.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone sat there and stared at him. Then a thickly muscled white guy with a bald head raised his hand. “You had it good, but you came back to the Pit to shut it down. Why would you do that?”

He’d had plenty of practice answering this question for David. “I’d escaped, and yeah, I’d finally found a good situation. Nice home, decent job, but...it felt like a house of cards. The cops were looking for me, and even more than that, I couldn’t put the Pit and everything that had happened there behind me. It was slowly poisoning me from the inside. I couldn’t enjoy what I had because I knew others were still suffering. I did what I did to help guys like you, true, but it’s also true that I did it for myself, to free myself, once and for all.”

Another man raised his hand. He was tall, with thick, dark, wavy hair and olive skin. “If you freed yourself by coming back and shutting the Pit down for good, then how can we do something like that to free ourselves from our own inner Pit?”

Smart question. “I get it. The Pit’s gone, how do you remedy the past when the past no longer exists? Well, you can help each other, for one thing. Dr. Michaels tells me you do group therapy. That’s good. Keep supporting one another. Not a lot of people can really relate to what we’ve been through, but you’ve got each other.

“There’s other stuff too. The thing I’ve discovered is that the more I focus on the well-being of others, the better I feel, and the more I focus on my own problems, the worse I feel.” He glanced at Dr. Michaels. “It’s good you’re all getting therapy. Dr. Michaels helps me a lot too, but you might also want to try some volunteer work. I used to feel like my life was completely pointless, like I was a total waste of space, but now I see the difference I’ve made in my community, and I know I’m good for something.”

“That’s great advice, Seth,” said Dr. Michaels.

An African American man with scars on his forearms raised his hand. “In the hospital, I had the room across the hall from yours. There was this guy who hung out by your bed the whole time. It seemed—Are you gay?”

Seth took a deep breath and centered himself, preparing for whatever was about to happen. “Yes.”

“Is it because of something that happened to you in the Pit?”

That wasn’t what he’d expected. “Oh! No. Not at all. I’ve known I’m attracted to men since I was just a kid. Though the abuse I experienced in the Pit included sexual assault, Dr. Michaels has helped me understand that it wasn’t about sex, not for me and not for the rapists. It was about power. You may have been forced to do many things against your will, but that doesn’t change who you are. Your affection and your sexual orientation belong to you. No one can take them away.”

The room was silent for a moment as the men took that in. Many of them nodded in agreement. Some just stared at the floor.

“How did you get past your hatred of the people who abused you?” asked the same man.

“Well, I’m not sure I have, to be honest. I still get angry when I think about it. But there’s a big difference between anger and hatred. Anger can be your friend. In certain situations, it’s justified and it can help you protect yourself. But hatred will just poison you. I try not to dwell on hatred.”

“How do you stop from hating yourself?” asked the bald white guy. “I’ve done things I’m ashamed of. I try to make amends, and for the most part, I’ve been forgiven, but I can’t forgive myself. What do I do with that?”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. One of the things that happened the night of the bust was that they gave me some kind of drug that turned me...into someone else. Someone who took pleasure in hurting others.”

Several of the men nodded. The man with the dark wavy hair murmured, “I remember that.”

It sent a shiver through Seth to realize some of these men had probably witnessed his barbarity, but he forced himself to go on. “They put my boyfriend, David, in the ring with me, and I beat him nearly senseless before he snapped me out of it.

“Of everything that happened that night, that’s been the hardest for me to deal with. You can’t really make something like that better. You can make damn sure you never do anything like it again, and you can apologize, but beyond that, it’s not in your hands. David forgave me. Do you think it matters if I forgive myself?”

The bald man bowed his head. Everyone was silent for a moment.

“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet,” said Dr. Michaels. “Case?”

A young guy—he probably wasn’t even twenty—skinny, dark-skinned, with a short, neat Afro, flinched. Seth’s heart went out to him. Of everyone here, he was the least engaged. He sat turned to one side, his shoulders hunched and one foot propped on the edge of the chair, his leg shielding the rest of his body. He stared at the floor with a vacant expression that only altered when Dr. Michaels addressed him.

He shrugged. “You saved our lives,” he said, gaze still glued to the floor. “No one here’s thanked you for that yet. I’m not sure if all of us are going to make it like you did, but at least we’re not in the Pit anymore. That’s something, so thank you.”

The others all murmured thanks, but Seth couldn’t take his eyes off Case. There was a disconnect between his words and his tone. Hopelessness infused every syllable, every line of his body language, and it wasn’t until he came to the “not all of us will make it,” part of his speech that it clicked for Seth. This guy didn’t see a future for himself.

Seth’s heart pounded. How could he reach this kid? “It gets better,” he said, but the words didn’t seem like enough.

* * *

“I think that went well,” said Dr. Michaels, escorting Seth to his car.

“You do?”

“Absolutely.” He stopped and looked at Seth. “You’re not sure?”

“No. I’m not. I mean, some of them seemed to follow what I was saying, but some of them—they still have too much pain, you know? I don’t know how to reach

through that. I don't know the right words to say or what to do for someone like that."

"You're thinking of Case."

"How did you know?"

He shrugged. "He's having a particularly hard time of it." Dr. Michaels looked out across the street to a vacant lot, and for a moment, he seemed lost in his thoughts. "You know," he said, straightening his shoulders and looking at Seth once more. "Every person we help is a victory. It's important to focus on that."

Seth saw the sadness in his eyes. "You don't think he's going to make it, do you?"

He stared at Seth, his lips compressed. "I've been a trauma counselor for forty-five years, and I've treated a lot of people who've been through horrible things. People have surprised me many times, so I don't throw in the towel on anyone, ever. But Case does seem to be...further out of reach than most clients I've worked with." He smiled, and it only seemed a little forced. "But focus on the positive, Seth. I know your words—hell, just your presence today—will have a profound impact on a lot of these men. And you never know. Just because someone doesn't seem able to hear you doesn't mean they aren't storing up what you've said for a time when they can take it in. I've known it to happen."

Chapter Four

Haverstock Bookshop was dead. All morning long, not a single customer entered the store. As the minutes ticked by, David fancied he could hear the money for the shop's overhead—the heating, the electricity, hell, his salary—trickling down the drain. He surfed the Internet, looking at Web sites for other small independent bookstores, hoping to glean some pearl of wisdom that would enable him to save this place. It wasn't much help. A lot of the sites were antiquated, even by his standards, and several were defunct.

"This is too depressing," he muttered and exited the browser.

He felt like he needed to move around, so he started cleaning. While dusting, he found a loose shelf in the romance section. He went into the back room to find a hammer and nails.

It was Mr. Haverstock's day off. David's footsteps scuffed on the concrete as he walked down the aisle between the tall metal shelves, trying to remember where he'd last seen the toolbox. He found it resting on an empty box near the hinged steel door that opened onto their loading dock.

He opened the toolbox. There was a box of nails and one of screws, and a screwdriver and a wrench, but no hammer. *Huh.*

David went back to Mr. Haverstock's office. He searched the file cabinet and the coffee area without success and then went to the desk. He opened the top drawer but only found a hodgepodge of pens and pencils, erasers, a ruler. No hammer. He tried the next drawer. Ledgers and notebooks. The third one held, inexplicably, a coffee can full of old matchbooks. He pulled open the final drawer,

one of those deep ones made to double as a file cabinet. Inside sat a brown paper bag with a bundle of cloth in it. No hammer.

“This is pointless,” he muttered. “He must have taken it home for something, I’ll just fix the shelf tomorrow.” But then, just as he was about to shut the drawer, something in the bag caught his eye. The gleam of metal.

He put his hand on the bundle of cloth. It was red. Thick red wool. He lifted it out of the bag and unfolded it. It was a letter jacket for Finney High. The metal he’d seen was from a pin. A little tack pin with a crest and the words *Class of 1956*. It sat on the breast of the jacket, just above the letter, which was for track. On the other breast, the name *Carl* was stitched in cursive writing.

Finney was where David had gone to school and his parents before him, as well as, evidently, Mr. Haverstock. Wow. The thought of Carl Haverstock running track boggled his mind. But he’d been a teenager once too. *Huh*.

So why did he have his jacket stashed in a grocery bag in his desk drawer? Why wasn’t it at home in his closet, protected by mothballs?

That was none of his business. David was suddenly aware he was going through Mr. Haverstock’s stuff like a snoop. Never mind he hadn’t started with that intention. He was snooping now. And snoops always got what they deserved. They found out stuff they didn’t want to know. In a hurry, David folded the jacket to put it back in the bag.

And froze.

Scaramouche stared up at him from the bottom of the bag.

Or more precisely, the image of Scaramouche looked up at him, darkly handsome, hand-painted, and visible through a cutout in the finely tooled leather of his father’s collector’s edition of the Sabatini novel of the same name. Feeling as if he were floating above his body, watching, not controlling events at all, David reached in and took the book out.

The other two were there as well. *The Sea Hawk* and *Captain Blood*. All fine-quality collector’s editions over fifty years old and handed down to David from his

dad. The books David had given Mr. Haverstock to sell in order to pay for Seth's lawyer.

He hadn't sold them.

But Seth's lawyer had been paid, and Mr. Haverstock, assuring him the books had garnered a good price, had given David a check for the remainder of the money. Money he and Seth had used to get themselves started. A car, cell phones, doctor's checkups, and dental work. *What the hell?*

David picked up each book in turn, reacquainting himself with his old friends. He opened *Scaramouche* and ran a hand over the thick, heavily textured endpapers. They were orange. These were the only books David had ever seen with orange endpapers—just another feature that made them unique.

They were inscribed too, on the inside of the front cover.

To my son, David, on his thirteenth birthday. Let love and a love of justice be your guide.

Ironical words, considering what his father would say about him and Seth if he were still alive. Or rather, not say. There'd be no arguments, no epithets or condemnation. Just cold silence.

But David Baylor Sr., his father, had given him these before he found out the truth about his son. They were artifacts from a past that had vanished long before his father died of a heart attack.

David sighed and flipped through each of the other books. For three years running, he'd received one on his birthday. *Scaramouche* had been the first. A lump formed in David's throat at the memory of how proud he'd been to receive them. Even then, he'd known these books well. They were his father's favorites. As a child, David had fallen asleep to the gentle baritone of his father's voice reading them aloud to him.

As he got older and faced the challenges of life, the books became a special dialect between them. It was always, "*What would Scaramouche do?*" or "*I wrote that report as if Sakr-el-Bahr were standing behind me with a sword.*"

Of course, all that had come to an end after David turned sixteen when Brian Munro came along. Tall, dark-haired, and athletic, he'd moved into the school district in David's junior year and promptly become the most popular boy in the school. He'd played every sport, and he'd gone out with any girl he wanted. And David couldn't stop staring at him.

He'd tried. He'd tried so hard not to be obvious about it, but he'd never felt this way before. Just seeing Brian walking down the hallway had been enough to make him pop a boner. He'd finally understood why everyone was so worked up about sex all the time. And of course, it was only a matter of time before he'd gotten caught looking.

That was when the whole "David Gaylor" thing got started. But that wasn't the worst part.

* * *

It was early winter, and the ground of Hendrickson Park was already hard and frozen. It did little to cushion David's bruised body, but at least it wasn't covered in snow. He pushed himself up and turned to where Munro and his buddies sauntered away, laughing. Rage overwhelmed the pain from their fists. He knew he should just shut up and let them go. He'd already gotten his ass kicked three times in the last three days. He had a black eye, his stomach still hurt from yesterday's encounter, and his nose and mouth were starting to swell. If they came back, he might get hurt really bad.

But the injustice of it was intolerable. Would Scaramouche accept defeat like this? "Fuck you!" he shouted after them.

Munro turned. David's pulse raced. How could he still be so handsome, even now that David knew he was a bully and a coward?

"You wish, Gaylor," he said. His friends all laughed, and they continued on their way.

When David got home, his father was sitting in his overstuffed armchair, reading *Entanglement* by Amir Aczel. He worked the early shift at the Great Lakes Stamping Plant so he could be at home when David got back from school.

“Hi, Son,” he said, setting the book down. Then he got a good look at David’s swollen face, torn jacket, and scuffed pants. “Oh. Again?”

David nodded and went to get some ice.

“Wait.” His dad followed him into the kitchen and pulled out a chair at the table where they ate and played chess. “Sit down. Let me.” His hand was warm and gentle on David’s shoulder, guiding him to the chair. David sat and watched as he took out a bag of frozen peas and wrapped it in a dish towel. “Tilt your head back.”

David did as he was told, and his dad pressed the cold compress to his throbbing mouth and nose.

“Here, hold that,” he said. With the good eye, David watched him take another chair and pull it out from the table. He sat on it backward, resting his arms across the backrest. He wore his usual after-work outfit of jeans, T-shirt, and flannel shirt. The shirt was rolled up almost to his elbows, and his forearms were corded with muscle from work. He and David both had blond hair and brown eyes, but David had inherited his mother’s fine features. His dad’s face was wider, with a blunt, square jaw, and heavy brows. He sat regarding David a moment or two. “They’re bullies. You know what I taught you about bullies.”

“They’re just like La Tour d’Azyr and Chabrilane. They prey on people they think are weaker than them.”

“Which is why it’s so important to stand up to them.”

David lifted the ice pack from his face. “How do you think I keep getting my ass kicked?”

“You’re fighting back, and they’re still not leaving you alone?” His father knit his brow.

“Yeah.” David dropped his head back and applied the ice pack again.

There was a long pause this time. “Why are they picking on you?” His tone had changed, but David couldn’t quite place it.

David wanted desperately to tell him the truth. All the truth. “I don’t know.”

His dad sighed, and in a quiet voice, he asked, “Is it because they think you’re gay?”

David’s heart seemed to stop. How had he landed so close to the truth with so little information? Well, he *was* a frigging genius. David’s voice was tight with all the things he couldn’t bring himself to say. “Yeah.”

“But you’re not, are you?”

David startled and sat up. He hadn’t expected that question or the hopeful tone that came with it. He lost his grip on the ice pack, and it hit the linoleum floor with a *smack*. The truth burned in his throat like a miniature sun. David searched his father’s face for some sign it would be acceptable.

In those moments while David’s pause went on way too long, his father became someone else. He stared back at David, his face transforming. First pain flared in his eyes, then his expression hardened. David barely recognized him. It was as if a door had opened somewhere, and a draft had blown through, chilling the air between them. In seconds, they became stranger.

“No,” David blurted at last, desperate to shut that door again. He’d take the fucking beatings if he had to so long as his dad stopped looking at him like that. “Of course not.”

But it was too late. David Baylor Sr. knew, and apparently it mattered. A lot.

His sigh was like a gale force wind, bitterly cold with disappointment. He stood and nodded stiffly. “Get yourself a girlfriend, David. Then those boys will leave you alone.” He went to the fridge and started pulling out stuff for dinner.

A week later, he announced he was taking the afternoon shift to help out a buddy whose wife was expecting again. Apparently the man needed to be around to pick the rest of his kids up from school. “And you’re old enough to be on your own

now, anyway,” said David’s dad. “Heck, in another year, you’ll be graduated and moving into your own place.”

David took the hint and started working for Mr. Haverstock. As soon as he had enough for the deposit, he rented an apartment. He’d been there two weeks when he got a call from his dad’s foreman at the plant. David Baylor Sr. had collapsed at work and was in the hospital. A heart attack, the doctors told him when he got there. David sat by his bed for three days, but David Sr. never woke up.

* * *

Ring-jingle-jing.

At first the bells on the front door sounded like the beeping of monitors, then David came back to himself. *A customer!* Here he was, sitting in the back of the store, mulling over old sorrows when they had a customer. David shoved the books back in the bag and stuffed Mr. Haverstock’s letter jacket in over them. That was a mystery to be unraveled later. He hurried out front.

By the time he got there, the customer was already browsing in the romance section. He nodded to her as he passed. She was a middle-aged woman in a navy blue pea coat. David had never seen her before. It was unusual to have a brand-new customer. He took his station behind the checkout counter and tried to look prosperous. Please buy something, he thought at her.

For an hour, she browsed the whole store without ever taking a single book off the shelf. Maybe she was just killing time waiting for a bus or something. He wondered if he should go and ask her if she needed help, but if it were him, he’d hate someone bothering him while he was browsing. Finally, she came up to the counter, still empty-handed.

“How can I help you?” he asked, hoping his smile hid his frustration.

She took a deep breath. “Do you have *Surrender* by M. Broadheart?” Her long salt-and-pepper hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she lifted a hand to smooth a stray hair that wasn’t there. *Nervous.*

David knew most of their stock by heart. Most, but not all of it. “I don’t think I’m familiar with it. Let me check.”

While David looked for the title on their inventory database, she fiddled with some paperwork bulging from the black messenger bag slung over her shoulder. He couldn’t find the book. *Shit*. A sale would be good right now, even if only for psychological reasons. “I’m sorry. We don’t have it in stock,” he said.

“Oh, okay. I’m sorry for bothering you.” She started to turn away.

“Would you like me to order it?”

She paused and shot him a startled look. “Um...okay.”

“I’ll be happy to do that for you.” David was definitely getting a nervous vibe from her. He was beginning to think she’d been browsing so long because she didn’t want to ask him about the book. She’d been hoping to find it herself. What was this book she wanted, anyway? From the title it could be erotica or maybe erotic romance. He kept his face carefully neutral as he said, “Let me check availability.”

She turned crimson.

The way she was acting, this had to be some book. David tried to think of what to say to put her at ease. “Our business is to provide you with the books you want,” he said. “We do this for customers all the time.”

Ingram’s listed *Surrender* in their Lightning Source catalog, which meant it was a print-on-demand book. The publisher was a company called Free Impulse, which he’d never heard of, and the book was listed as erotic romance. *Well, hell, good for her*. “Yep, I can definitely order it for you.”

“It’ll be delivered here? Or to my home?”

David hated to give up the business, especially to one of the behemoth online stores, and especially now, but it would be dishonest if he didn’t tell her all her options. “Ordinarily if you order through us, it’ll come here, and I’ll call you. Or we can arrange to have it delivered directly to your home...or you can order from an online bookseller like—”

“No! I want it delivered here. Not to my home!”

David nodded slowly and smiled, hoping to reassure her. “Then that’s what will happen. Is there a particular number you’d like me to call? Your cell, maybe?”

Her shoulders dropped. “Yes, you can call me on my cell,” she said, as if realizing this for the first time. She definitely did not want whoever was at home to know she was buying this book. The smile she gave him was genuine, lighting up her dark eyes.

“Okay, I’ll need your credit card to place the order, but you won’t be billed until the book ships. The charge will appear on your statement as coming from Haverstock Bookshop, LLC.”

“Oh good.”

She handed him her credit card, and he began processing the order. He wondered if he should say something to indicate he knew she was buying an erotic book and he didn’t care. But that seemed too intrusive. He went ahead with the order and checked the shipping data. “Your book should be here in about three days,” he said. “I’ll call you then. Thanks for your business.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking into his eyes. “You’ve been so helpful. Thank you.”

“Anytime. Please come back again.” What was he saying? She had to come back to pick up the book. *Duh. Desperate much?*

After she left, David checked the time on the computer. It was six thirty. Seth would be finished with his talk at the group home. David called him.

“Hey!” said Seth. “How’s it going?”

“Fine,” David said by reflex. It was pretty much what he’d say if he’d just lost an arm. Still, it was for the best. He didn’t want to get into something as bizarre as the presence of the Sabatini books in Haverstock’s desk over the phone. “What about you? How did your thing go?”

“Good, I guess. I know I didn’t reach everyone there, but”—he sighed—“Dr. Michaels says I may have helped some of them without even knowing it.”

How like Seth to put it all in terms of what benefited others. “And what about you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Kind of tired, I guess.”

David decided right then and there he was going to keep this business about the Sabatini books to himself until he got to the bottom of it. Seth had enough to deal with. “Yeah, that must have taken it out of you.”

“It was good, though. At least, I think it was.”

“Are you okay on your own until I get home? Do you want to come here?”

“Nah. I’ll just chill out. Maybe I’ll lie down and think of you.”

For a moment, David forgot all about the strange discoveries and painful recollections of the day. “Then you’d better rest up, because that makes me want to...you know.”

“Mmmm.” Seth gave one of his low rumbles.

David’s heart lifted. What was in the past was in the past. Seth was his now, and that was all that really mattered. “I can’t wait to get home.”

Chapter Five

David seemed extra keyed up when he got home. The minute he got in the door, he threw off his coat and charged to where Seth lay on the couch, reading *The Chessmen of Mars*. He took the book from Seth's hand and tossed it aside. "Hey," said Seth. "What's—"

David knelt on the floor and pulled Seth in for a kiss. His face was cold from outside, but his mouth was hot and insistent. Seth opened for him, letting David plunder him with his tongue. Seth cupped the back of David's head with one hand and ran the other down his back. David was trembling, and it wasn't from the cold.

"Hey," he said again, when they broke for breath. "Are you okay?"

David nodded. His eyes were downcast, hidden by his long blond lashes. He reached out and stroked Seth's neck. "Yeah. I just—Sorry."

"No. It's okay. Come here." Seth sat up and drew David onto the couch beside him. "You seem upset."

David shook his head. He looked up at Seth, his brown eyes wide. "I'm just glad you're okay, and..." For a moment, he seemed to teeter on the brink of saying more. Then he wrapped his arms around Seth and held him tight, his face pressed against the side of Seth's. "I love you so much." His voice was muffled by Seth's hair.

Seth hugged him back. "I love you too. More than I know how to say."

For a while, they simply held each other. David exhaled—a warm, damp puff of breath on Seth's neck. He relaxed and leaned back and kissed Seth again, slower. This time, when they broke again, he was smiling. He gave Seth a lascivious wink. "Were you thinking about me?"

Seth ran his fingers down the side of David's face. Was he really feeling better, or had he only pushed down whatever that had been? It was impossible to know. Right now, he gave every appearance of sexy self-assurance, but...David could be very hard to read. It wasn't that he was emotionally shut down. Far from it. He was a passionate lover, an affectionate partner, and a fierce combatant when they argued. But when he didn't want to talk about something, he just didn't.

Like his family, for instance, or what had happened to him in high school. It actually pissed Seth off a little bit that David knew every horrifying detail of his most unwanted memories, and he didn't know squat about David's past except that his parents were dead and he'd gotten beat up a lot in high school for being gay, even though he'd tried to hide it. And apparently, though Seth had only gotten this through inference, David's dad had given him the silent treatment when he found out his son was queer.

Silent. Right. Well, Seth stood a better chance of getting David to open up after they'd made love, that much he knew from experience. He leaned in slowly and kissed David, trying to infuse the soft press of their lips with all the love and comfort he wanted to give. David's usual warm apricot-and-almond scent mixed with the tang of cold. His mouth tasted like honey. His hands caressed Seth's back in circles, sending little shivers through Seth's body. Reeling from all those sensations, Seth held David tighter, kissed him harder.

David stood and drew Seth after him. Seth leaned forward, pressing his hips against him, feeling the length of David's hard cock. David made a low, growly noise and grabbed the waistband of Seth's jeans. He tugged and started backing toward the bedroom, pulling Seth along.

Once inside, Seth reached down and started unbuttoning David's dress shirt, savoring the rise and fall of his chest, the heat of his body. David shrugged out of the shirt, and Seth pulled David's T-shirt over his head, enjoying the way the neck hole tousled his short blond hair and made it stand out in all directions. Seth's gaze traveled to David's bare chest. David wasn't the biggest guy in the world, but he

was perfectly formed. Lean and lithe, with fair skin that gleamed, showing off the rounded caps of his shoulders, his flat pecs and belly, his well-muscled arms and graceful collarbone. Despite the robust crop of dark blond curls that graced David's chest, the sex blush was visible on his skin, patches of pink across his upper chest and neck.

Seth ran his hands up David's chest and over his shoulders, then stroked David's arms. "I love looking at you."

David swallowed, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing. For a moment, he looked like he was going to argue. Seth had gathered, again, from tidbits dropped here and there, that David didn't think he was attractive. That was ridiculous and probably a holdover from his bad time in school.

But David didn't say anything. Instead he focused on Seth's pants, and with a look of intense concentration, his tongue poking out of the side of his mouth, he popped the button on Seth's fly and unzipped him. He pushed Seth's jeans down over his hips. Both of them breathed harder in anticipation. Seth pulled off his flannel shirt and tee. He embraced David, pressing their bare chests together. He loved the soft-scratchy feel of David's chest hair.

His arousal mounting, Seth undid David's pants. They both stepped out of the clothing pooled at their feet and skinned out of their underwear and socks. Cocks bobbing, they jumped into bed.

Seth was immediately surrounded by David, enveloped in his warmth as he wrapped his arms and legs around Seth and thrust their cocks together. The steamy friction of their heated flesh made Seth tingle all over. He gasped and sought David's mouth.

Their lips met in a fierce press that held all their love, gratitude, and passion. As their mouths moved together, sucking and tasting, it was as if they passed their love back and forth to each other, making it stronger and sweeter each time it was given and received.

Seth ran a hand through David's hair and cradled his head. They broke for air. "I love you," Seth gasped.

"I love you too," said David, his brown eyes hazy. "I love you so much."

That was about it for the talking. The next thing Seth knew, David was trailing kisses down his chest. Each one was like a raindrop falling on a still pond, sending ripples of pleasure through his body.

And then David engulfed Seth's cock in the hot, wet cavern of his mouth. Seth arched off the bed as those raindrops became a deluge, and his whole body pulsed with desire.

David ran his tongue up the underside of Seth's cock. The slick glide made the cum stir in Seth's balls. Already he felt like he could shoot at any second, but this was way too soon. "David," he said, "Wait. I'm—"

David ran a hand over Seth's balls, which were drawn snug up against his body. "Dang."

"Yeah. You got me all worked up." Seth pushed up on his elbows in time to glimpse the pleased grin on David's face. "Here, let me." Seth sat up, wrapped an arm around David's shoulders, and kissed him, then lowered him gently onto his back.

It was his turn to go exploring. He nuzzled David's nipples, enjoying the springy feel of David's blond curls against his face, searching through the coarse hair with his tongue to find a tender bud of flesh. He licked at the nipple, teasing it until it poked up, hard and pebbly. He sucked it.

David let out a long breath, and Seth felt him relax. That was often the way with David—words never seemed to accomplish as much as simple contact.

Seth wouldn't call David high-strung exactly, but there was no denying he operated on a higher energy register than Seth did most of the time. He had the habit of control, both by natural inclination and life experience. That just made these rare moments when David really let go all the more precious.

Seth reached down and gathered David's cock in his hand. He stroked it, nice and slow. David breathed in deeply. "Yeah," he murmured.

Seth continued stroking him as he sought out David's other nipple. No good letting it get jealous. David writhed under his touch, arching his back, thrusting his hips. Seth kissed his way down David's chest to his belly. He ran his tongue in circles around David's navel, around and around, before finally spiraling into the shallow depression. He pressed in and felt David's cock pulse.

David drew a sharp breath, then settled again as Seth trailed his tongue down the line of fair hair that led to his groin.

He took a detour at David's hips. "I know what will take your mind off your troubles."

"Oh, you—Ahh! Cut it out!" David's protest broke off into giggles, and he squirmed as Seth nipped at the tender flesh stretched taut over his hip bones.

"Stop!" David pleaded, gasping. "It worked. I'm not thinking about the bookstore anymore, okay?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah." David panted.

Seth left David's hips and turned to his cock. David had a beautiful cock. It sprang out of its nest of golden curls, pink and proud and elegantly curved. A drop of precum glistened at the tip like a pearl.

Seth licked it up. The musky taste exploded on his tongue and made his mouth water. David's gasp went through Seth like a warm wind, filling him with anticipation of the storm to come.

He licked David's cock from the base to the tip, then circled the flared head with his tongue. David hissed, clenching the sheets in knots. "Jesus, Seth!"

Seth grinned, then sucked David's cock into his mouth, drawing him in until the head rested against the back of the roof of his mouth. Not so far that Seth

gagged, but deep enough that he could keep a steady suction going while he played with the cleft at the base of David's cockhead with his tongue.

David's desperate whimpers made Seth's all-but-forgotten erection pulse to life. David flexed his hips, pushing into Seth's mouth, and Seth worked him, up and down, stroking with his lips and his tongue. When David's thrusts picked up speed, Seth pulled off him and reached for the lube.

While Seth coated his fingers, David grabbed a condom from the strip lying on the floor by the bed. He sat up, tore open the packet, and rolled the sheath over Seth's erection. He took the lube and slathered Seth's cock with it. David's cheeks were flushed bright pink, his hair was tousled, and he had that urgent, intense expression again. *Oh yeah.* Seth's heart pounded in time with his hard-on.

"Take me," David said, lying back and raising his knees. "I want you to."

Seth struggled for control. It was a battle just to keep his breath even in the face of the wanton banquet displayed before him.

He circled David's hole with his slick fingers, mesmerized as David's eyelids fluttered. And then, when he breached David with the tip of his middle finger, David formed a little O with his mouth, and the tiniest of whimpers escaped him.

David bit his lips when Seth slid that finger in and out, and pushed up to meet Seth on the next thrust.

Seth slid another finger into him and scissored them. David shook his head from side to side and groaned. "Come on, Seth. I'm ready already. Didn't you say you were all worked up?"

He had been. And now his cock felt like it was made of marble. Arousal blanketed him from head to toe, wrapping him up tight and making every move he made somehow feel preordained.

He pressed the head of his cock to David's hole as if they were drawn together like magnets. He pressed in slowly, savoring the tight, wet heat of David's body closing over him, inch by inch. He drank in David's expression, mouth open, eyes unfocused, chest heaving.

The long, smooth glide came to an end, and Seth was fully seated inside David, enveloped by him. David pulled him down and kissed him, their mouths melding together, just like the rest of their bodies.

Seth began to move with the long, languorous strokes that drove David wild. Each withdrawal, each thrust sent waves of tingling warmth radiating through Seth's body, pulsing outward from the base of his cock all the way to his fingers and toes. His scalp prickled.

"Yeah," whispered David, "yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah."

Trapped between their undulating bodies, David's cock was rigid and damp with precum.

Their pace quickened. Faster, harder, until Seth's chest heaved like a bellows and their bodies slammed together. Seth pounded into David. David bucked up to meet him. Both of them cried out with every thrust.

Seth couldn't stop. David wouldn't let him, even if he'd tried. He'd wrapped his legs around Seth's hips like a vise. The intense friction of their lovemaking was overwhelming, all-consuming. On some level, Seth was aware of the tightening of his balls, of the sweat pouring down his chest and back, of David's breath, hot against his shoulder, but most of all he felt as if the same force that had drawn him and David together in the first place now held them in its grip, cradling and protecting them.

Balancing his weight on one arm, he reached down and gathered David's hard cock in his palm. He stroked him in time to their thrusts.

"Oh God, Seth, I'm so close!"

David's cry filled him to the brim with love, for David, for himself, for what they were together. It saturated every cell in his body, and more kept coming with every thrust. Every time David's hot, slick channel stroked his cock, every time he nailed David's prostate and heard him moan more joy and love pumped into him, until he was so full, so tight with happiness that the sweet pressure almost became

painful. And just as he thought he couldn't take any more, David cried out his name and pulsed thick jets of cream between their bodies.

The reverberations of David's orgasm around Seth's cock brought his pleasure to a sharp pinnacle, where he teetered for a breathless, timeless moment before tumbling down, spilling all the joy within him. It flowed from Seth like a river, and for a moment, he thought it would never end. But it did, and it left him both empty and complete.

They lay together in a boneless tangle, panting. Seth rested with the side of his face against David's chest, his breath stirring the short blond curls. David ran his fingers through Seth's silken head of hair.

Seth propped up on one elbow to peer at David, who was rumped and smiling. "Feel better?"

"What do you think, silly?"

Seth kissed him. "It goes both ways, you know," he said, pulling back.

A little line appeared between David's brows. *Shit*. Why hadn't he left well enough alone?

"What does?" said David.

"You've been there for me through everything, David. I—It's important to me that you feel you can count on me too. No matter what."

David nodded. The line was gone, but he looked serious now. "I do know that. Absolutely."

"You can talk to me about anything. Just like you listened and didn't judge me... I can do that for you too."

David's eyes grew bright, and his nostrils flared. His lips parted, and for an instant, Seth thought he was actually going to let go and say whatever was on his mind. Then he blinked and took a deep breath. "Of course you can. But I don't have any secret tales of imprisonment and torture to tell you about, Seth."

"It doesn't have to be—"

“I’m just really worried about the bookshop, is all.”

“Yeah.” But something told Seth it was more than that. He could feel David withdrawing from him, and he didn’t understand why.

“Talking about it isn’t really going to make me feel better.”

“No?”

“No.”

Well, that was it, then. Seth trusted his instincts, and they told him that when David came home, he’d had more on his mind than the fate of the bookshop. But if David didn’t want to talk about it, he couldn’t force him. They cuddled awhile longer, and then Seth heated up some stew for David. After he ate, they went to bed, spooned together. Seth lay awake a long time, trying not to feel hurt that after a year together and more trials than most couples faced in a lifetime, David still felt the need to hold back with him.

* * *

The day was unseasonably warm, and Seth kept the kitchen door open while he worked. He scanned the alley but saw no sign of the dog from yesterday.

He put two sheets of cranberry-almond scones in the oven and started chopping vegetables for salads.

When the aroma of fresh scones perfumed the heated air of the little kitchen, he took them out of the oven. They were golden brown. *Perfect.*

Seth set them on the rack by the open door to cool.

Then the lunch rush hit, and Seth was busy fixing chicken-salad plates, Metro Club sandwiches, garden salads, and Bling Burgers. Eventually the rush slacked off. Seth fixed himself a chicken-salad sandwich, but before he had a chance to eat it, an order for scones came in. Seth set his sandwich on the rack above the sink and went to plate the scones. He frowned, staring at the empty spaces on the previously full cooling rack. Three light brown circles of crumbs showed where someone had helped themselves.

Seth poked his head into the alley and saw that the dog was back. “Did you steal those scones?” he asked her.

As if admitting her guilt, she slunk behind the Dumpster. But Seth looked at the cooling rack again. Even if she had jumped up on her hind legs, she wouldn’t have been able to reach those scones.

Neither would Karine’s kids, if they were even here yet, which they weren’t.

It must have been Yolanda, though that wasn’t like her.

Seth sauntered into the dining room and up to the cash register, where Yolanda reigned. “You know, if you wanted some scones, you could have just asked.”

Yolanda raised an eyebrow. “Scones? What are you talking about?”

His smile faltered. “Didn’t you sneak into the kitchen during lunch rush and snag three scones?”

“Three scones? Seth.” Yolanda stepped out from behind the counter and gestured at her tiny waist and lean build. “You think I stay in this kind of shape eating scones?” She shook her head. “Maybe you forgot you plated ’em already. It was busy.”

But Seth knew he hadn’t forgotten. He had an excellent kinetic memory, and if he focused, he could run down every move he’d made in the past four hours. None of them included retrieving scones from the cooling rack. “Or maybe a homeless person came in through the back door and took them.”

Yolanda frowned. “We need to get you a fan so you don’t have to leave that door open when it’s hot.”

“But if they’re hungry, Yol, shouldn’t we—”

“If they’re hungry, they can earn a voucher working at the community center. That’s how it works around here Seth. Heck, let em walk in the front door and sit down, and we’ll feed ’em and worry about the voucher later. You know that. Ain’t no call for anybody sneaking in here and stealing food.”

She was right of course. Seth nodded and went back into the kitchen. The sandwich he'd left on the rack over the sink was gone. The dog wouldn't have been able to reach that either.

* * *

"So," said David when Mr. Haverstock came in that morning. "I've been meaning to ask you for the longest time, who bought the Sabatini books, anyway?"

Haverstock paused a moment, then went back to removing his coat. "A man in New Hampshire, a book collector. His name is Richard Chessworth. Why?" He peered at David closely. Was that suspicion in his eyes?

"He received them okay? Is... I know it's dumb, but I want to know. Is he taking good care of them?"

Haverstock smiled. "Believe me, David. I understand. To people like us, books are much more than mere objects. Yes, he's taking excellent care of them. He's very wealthy. He has a special climate-controlled room where he houses his collection. They are safe and sound and will be preserved for years to come."

Liar. They're in a paper bag in your desk. "Good. Thanks, Mr. Haverstock. That gives me peace of mind."

That afternoon, Haverstock announced he was going out to run some errands and left. David held out a half hour before he crept into the back room and took the books out. All three of them were as familiar to him as his apartment or the bookshop or Seth's body. Only now, they held secrets.

He got a cup of coffee and sat at Haverstock's desk, staring at them as if he could will them to divulge the mystery of what they were doing here and why his boss had lied about it. He opened *The Sea Hawk* and read the inscription his father had written on his fifteenth birthday. *May your voyage in life be as full of passion and valor as that of Sakr-el-Bahr.* He ran his fingers over the words. How could the same person who had written them have turned his back on David the moment he learned where his true passions lay? Another mystery.

The texture of the unique paper was grainy under David's touch. "*Part of what makes these books unique are their endpapers,*" his father had told him long ago, when he'd shown David the decorative paper that covered the inside cover on a hardbound book. "*No other books have endpapers like these.*" The orange didn't go with the rest of the binding, but his father insisted that it was an integral part of their design. "*You must never let anyone alter the endpapers on these books, David. They're special.*"

Still staring at the inscription, David sighed and reached for his coffee, but he wasn't looking. He bumped it with his wrist. The cup went over, spilling coffee all over the endpaper.

"Shit!" David jumped up, pushed the other books out of range of the pool of coffee, and lifted *The Sea Hawk*. He dashed to the bathroom and blotted up the coffee with paper towels, but it was too late. The endpaper was soaked and starting to buckle. "Goddamn it!"

Before his eyes, his father's inscription blurred and faded. Why hadn't the fucker used permanent ink? David wanted to reach out and pull the words back, make them legible again. They were the last remaining evidence that his dad had, at one point, loved him. But now they were gone. David stared at the smeared blobs of black on orange. They were totally illegible. His face grew hot, and the blobs blurred even more, and the next thing he knew, he'd added tears to the mix of coffee and ink, making a mess of the treasured book.

What was wrong with him? He'd gladly relinquished these books to Mr. Haverstock months ago, for the sake of getting Seth the help he needed. And keeping Seth out of jail would have been worth much more. Their attorney, Mr. Benton, had made sure Seth's assistance in the sting freed him from serving any time for the crimes he'd been involved in.

David had never once regretted selling the Sabatini books. They were artifacts of a past best forgotten. Why did he care if that inscription was ruined? What was he doing back here picking over old wounds and prying into his boss's secrets,

anyway? Whatever Haverstock's reason for keeping them he'd certainly paid David more than enough. If some rich guy in New Hampshire hadn't bought them, then one way or another, Haverstock had, and he could do whatever he wanted with them. Even if that meant keeping them in a grocery bag under his old letter jacket.

Only now, David had totally fucked up Mr. Haverstock's book. He swallowed the rest of his tears, wiped his eyes on his sleeve, and took a good look at the damage. At least, his quick action had kept the coffee from ruining the whole book. But the precious endpaper was soaked and stained. The only way to really fix it was to replace it entirely.

Mr. Haverstock had some archival equipment for repairing old, damaged books. He kept it in a box in the bottom drawer of the file cabinet. David was just about to open the drawer when he heard the front door of the shop open, and Mr. Haverstock called out, "David?"

Shit! David put the paper towel between the two leaves of the endpaper to soak up any remaining moisture—it was better than nothing—shut the book, and shoved it and the others back in the bag. He stuffed Mr. Haverstock's jacket on top and bundled the whole thing into the drawer. He sprinted into the bathroom, turned on the faucets, and flushed the toilet. "Mr. Haverstock, is that you?"

"Yes, David."

"I'm in the bathroom."

David splashed water on his face and frantically tried to think of a reason why he'd look like he'd been crying besides the fact that he'd been crying.

"Hey," he said, wiping his hands on another paper towel as he came out. "I was cleaning, and I got some dust in my eyes. How did your errands go?"

"Just fine," said Mr. Haverstock, sitting down in his chair. He picked up a file of orders and started going over them.

David tried to see if Haverstock noticed anything out of place, but he didn't want his boss to see him looking either. "Well, I'd better get back out there," he said.

It sounded lame, but Haverstock didn't seem to notice. He was already absorbed in his work. "Very good, David. Carry on."

* * *

Walking home that afternoon, Seth had the feeling he was being followed. He turned around but saw no one. Still, the feeling persisted all the way down Conant. Seth knew his battle-honed instincts didn't lie. If he felt like someone was following him, then someone was following him.

As he turned the corner onto Seventh, he ducked into an alley and waited. No one came by.

Seth waited there behind the Dumpster—the smell taking him back to his homeless days—for a full hour. No one ever showed.

Cautiously, he went back out onto the street and continued toward home. The feeling was gone now.

* * *

Seth was going to tell David all about the missing scones and being followed, but when he got home from the bookshop that night, David seemed more on edge than ever. He came in the door looking like he'd just lost his only friend. Seth supposed it would be hard to overestimate the impact of the bookshop being in trouble, but he couldn't shake the feeling there was more. "Hey," he said and got up to give David a hug.

David clung tight. "Hey."

Seth held him close, rocking slightly. "It'll be okay," he whispered in David's ear.

"Yeah?" David laughed, but it didn't sound like he really thought anything was funny. "I'll have to take your word for it."

"What happened?"

“Huh?” David pulled back, looking at him like he was crazy. “What do you mean?”

“Well...you seem...”

David shook his head. “How am I supposed to seem? Business was shitty today.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” David took off his coat and tossed it on the comfy chair. He flopped down after it and slouched there, staring at the ceiling. “I don’t know if I’m going to be able to fix it,” he said.

“Fix it?”

“Yeah, you know, the situation with the store. I...I can’t stand the idea of having to go work for Books and Baubles. I hate them.”

“Well, we might be hiring a dishwasher.” The moment the words were out, he knew it was the wrong thing to say.

David stared at him a long moment, his eyes narrowed. Then, with visible effort, he smiled. “Right. Absolutely.”

“David, I didn’t mean—” What had he meant?

“No.” David stood, picked his coat up, and hung it on the rack by the door. “You’re right. It’s honest work.” He started toward the bedroom.

“Yeah, but you’re not—”

In the archway to the hall, David whipped around and braced his arms against the wall. “Not what? Do you think I think I’m too good to wash dishes?”

“No!”

“Well, good, ’cause I don’t! My dad worked with his hands his whole life, and he read more than anyone I know. Just because I like books doesn’t mean I have airs.”

“I never said you did. God.”

“Then what are we fighting about?”

Seth held up his hands. “You tell me.”

Silence stretched between them as they stared at each other. “I’m going to go change,” said David, and he went into the bedroom and shut the door.

Chapter Six

The following morning, on the way to work, Seth had the same sensation of someone watching him. He pretended to stop at a storefront and look at the display, but he was really using the reflection in the window to scan the street behind him.

There, on the other side of the road and about a block down, he caught a flicker of movement as a slender figure ducked behind a corner. *Uh-huh*. Seth turned and ran as fast as he could after it.

But by the time he reached that corner, the guy—he was pretty sure it was a guy—was gone.

* * *

David had just opened for the morning when a delivery arrived. It was from Free Impulse. He opened the box to make sure the order was correct and got another surprise.

It was the right book all right—*Surrender* by M. Broadheart. But on the cover were two men. One was dark haired, with a five-o'clock shadow and a muscular bare chest. He wore jeans that rode low over his hips. He held another man in his arms—a handsome blond in a disheveled business suit, who looked up at him with a mix of lust and confusion. There wasn't a woman in sight.

Curious, David flipped the book over and read the blurb.

Jason Niles is a rising star in his law firm. The job is demanding, but Jason loves nothing more than arguing a case, and he's never missed having a personal life. Then he meets Brent Foster, a rough-and-tumble cowboy who makes him reexamine all his assumptions, including the assumption that he's straight. The next thing Jason knows, he's surrendering to love for the first time in his life. But when

his boss finds out about Brent, Jason has a choice to make: protect his career or be true to himself and the love he craves.

Dang! That sounded good. But it was about two guys, and his customer was a woman. Why did she want it?

Well, that was none of his business. He called up the order form on the computer and dialed her number. She didn't pick up, so he left a discreet message.

Out of curiosity, David looked up Free Impulse online. The header on their Web site read, *Free Your Most Intimate Impulses*, and in one corner, a butterfly emerged from a cocoon with an expression of more than just insectile rapture. *Huh.*

As David browsed the site, he discovered it was indeed an erotic-romance publisher. And it was an e-publisher. All the titles were available as digital files the purchaser could download on their computer or phone or e-reader. Some of the books were also available in print.

Interesting. David could see the sense in a business model like that. It would be a lot more cost-effective than trying to guess ahead of time how many copies of a book would sell, then printing them up, shipping them out, and hoping they sold.

He was also stunned by the variety of interests reflected in the titles. A list of categories ran along the side—*LGBT, Multicultural, Rubenesque, BDSM, Shape-shifter...* Wow. David clicked over to the LGBT section and started scanning blurbs.

The next thing he knew, it was an hour later; he'd bookmarked eight titles and forgotten about his troubles. And his customer had arrived. She came to the counter with a spring in her step. "I got your message. It's here?"

She looked so happy, it brought a grin to David's face as well. "Yep! Here you go!" He took the book from where he'd set it beside the computer and handed it to her.

Her mouth fell open as she saw it was unwrapped. "Oh, you opened it. I didn't know—"

"I'm sorry. I had to make sure they sent the right title."

“Oh.” She glanced rapidly from him to the cover and back. “I see. Of course.” She bit her lip. She didn’t say anything further, but she searched his face with her gaze. She put her hand over the cover.

“It looks really good,” he said. “I’m thinking of getting a copy for my boyfriend.”

Her eyes became as wide as dinner plates. A little smile curled the corners of her mouth. “You are?”

“Yeah. In fact, I checked out this publisher—Free Impulse? Looks like they’ve got a lot of good books.”

She leaned over the counter. “Oh, they do. I’ve bought a bunch from them. I used to read them on my laptop, but it died, and we just have the one desktop at home, so...” She shrugged and held the book to her chest. “Thank you for ordering this for me.”

“That’s what we’re here for, ma’am.”

“Trina.”

“Trina. A pleasure to do business with you. I’m David. I hope you’ll come back if you need anything else.”

“Oh, I will!”

He rang her up, and she left, smiling from ear to ear. He felt better, even though this one sale didn’t really change anything. The store was still in trouble, Mr. Haverstock had still lied to him, and he’d still ruined *The Sea Hawk*. But at least he’d helped one person find what she wanted. That was something.

* * *

Later that day, when Mr. Haverstock went out again, David headed straight for the back room. He left the door open so he’d hear if his boss came back in. He took the books out and opened *The Sea Hawk*.

Where the coffee had soaked in, the endpaper was stained and warped. He looked at the smudged dots and dashes that were all that was left of his father’s inscription. David let out a long breath. Those words had been meaningless for a

long time. Why preserve them? The book would look better with a new endpaper, and obviously Mr. Haverstock would notice something had happened, but whatever had prompted him to lie about their presence in his desk would also likely discourage him from saying anything. And David would feel better if *The Sea Hawk* was restored to the best shape possible.

He fetched Haverstock's book-repair kit. He set it down on the desk, turned on the lamp, and opened *The Sea Hawk*.

He took the microspatula out of the kit. With its very thin, flat, flexible blade, it was simple to cut a slit in the buckled endpaper and peel back the paper. The coffee seemed to have dissolved the glue, and it lifted easily.

Except that underneath it was another endpaper. One made of a creamy vellum that suited the style and quality of the overall binding much better. This was clearly the original endpaper. And it had an inscription of its own. Stained from the coffee, it was nonetheless legible:

To D.B., in love and friendship.
C.H.

David's mouth went dry. There was no mistaking Haverstock's fine, spidery handwriting, even if his initials hadn't given it away. As for the other set of initials, it was obvious they stood for *David Baylor*. Only, it wasn't his name they denoted. It was his father's.

"In love and friendship," David murmured. That sounded... David had long suspected Mr. Haverstock was gay. Had he had a crush on David's father?

David took a good look at the endpaper he'd removed, the color, the grainy consistency of the paper. His father's voice came back to him. "*No other books have endpapers like these. You must never let anyone alter the endpapers on these books, David. They're part of what make them special.*"

Special, his ass. This was a piece of orange construction paper he'd cut and pasted on to hide Haverstock's words. *You fucker!* David wasn't sure what pissed him off more, that Haverstock had lied to him or that his dad had hidden Haverstock's inscription and the true origin of this book.

Then he remembered the other two books had orange endpapers too.

* * *

When Seth took the day's food scraps out to the bucket beside the Dumpster, the dog was waiting for him. As soon as she saw him, she stood and wagged her tail. Still, as he neared the pail, she backed away.

"It's okay," he said. "I won't hurt you. I've been feeding you, haven't I?" He held a hand out and took a step toward her. She growled and backed away farther.

"Okay, fine," he said. "Just use me as a meal ticket."

Seth got back to the apartment building in midafternoon. David was working late again, so Seth was on his own. At the front door, he stopped in his tracks. Their building was well kept, but old and idiosyncratic. It had a lobby on the first floor that looked like it hadn't been touched since 1962. Seth had never seen anyone use it, much less the antiquated television their landlady, Miss Pierce, dusted every week.

Seth and David each had a total of four keys to the building. One for the side door that led to the laundry room in the basement, one for the storm door in the front, one for the inner front door, and one for their actual apartment. Miss Pierce was adamant about keeping the doors locked, even the storm door. No one who lived here would dream of neglecting their duties. But the storm door was unlocked. Seth peered through the storm glass at the lock on the inner door. Scratches. The kind left behind when someone picked a lock.

Seth reached for his cell phone, then paused. How long would it take for the cops to arrive? He thought about his feeling of being followed, of the missing food. Someone was stalking him, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it. Sirens might scare the intruder away, and then it would start all over again.

But how to proceed? Through the front, as whoever this was would be expecting? Or through the side entrance into the laundry room?

If they'd bothered to pick the locks, then this wasn't a smash-and-grab. Whoever had broken in either wanted to stay awhile, didn't want anyone to know they'd been here, or both.

Well, if they were waiting for him inside, they'd be expecting him not to expect it. And he was fairly sure, from a certain quality of the previous incidents, he was dealing with one person. From the glimpse he'd caught this morning, the guy was smaller than him. Seth would have the advantage when he sprang.

Seth used his key to let himself in, just as if he hadn't noticed the doors were already unlocked. He took a good look around.

The lobby, with its faded couch and ancient TV, looked exactly the same as always.

The mailboxes appeared unmolested. They didn't have names on them, just the apartment numbers, so the intruder would not necessarily know what apartment Seth lived in.

He had likely followed Seth home one night to discover the location of his residence. Probably some night when he was with David and thus distracted.

The thought gave him a chill.

All this was assuming, of course, the missing scones and the tail and the picked locks were connected. But he couldn't afford to assume they weren't.

So the intruder would not know what apartment he lived in, which meant he'd be hiding somewhere, waiting to get the drop on Seth.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He turned around, his gaze riveted to the keyhole in the door of the utility closet. There. It had a good view of the whole lobby and part of the stairs. From there, the intruder could see everyone coming and going.

In three brisk strides, Seth crossed the room and flung open the door. Someone scrambled backward on hands and knees. Seth tensed to attack and flicked on the light.

A young man huddled against the back wall of the closet. He held his hands up to ward off any blows and blinked in the light.

Seth stood, blocking the doorway, staring. He recognized this kid. Thin, dark-skinned, high cheekbones, and large eyes. “You. You’re from the group home.” Seth couldn’t remember his name, but the haunted expression and the defensive posture were familiar. He looked like he was still wearing the same clothes he’d had on that day too.

“Please, don’t call the cops. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—I’m sorry. I’ll go.” He scrambled to his feet and made to duck past Seth.

Seth braced both arms on the doorjamb to block his exit. “Wait.”

The young man stopped and shrank back, fear etched in his hunched shoulders and his lowered eyes. He was thin, frail. Even fed, he’d be on the small side for a Pit fighter. Remorse made Seth’s stomach sour. He must look pretty fierce. Then again, he had reason to. This guy had broken into his home. Seth noticed crumbs in the corner, where an old tarp had evidently served as a bed. *Scones?*

“You’ve been following me,” Seth said.

“I’m sorry.”

“And yesterday you stole a sandwich and some scones from the kitchen I work at.”

The young man glanced at the crumbs in the corner. “The biscuits?”

“Biscuits. Scones is just high-end talk for the same thing.” Yolanda had explained that to him when he first started at the café.

The kid looked up at Seth, his jaw set. He’d found some courage. There was a hint of defiance in his voice as he said, “I took ’em. I don’t have any money.”

Apprehension crept into his gaze, and he inched backward. He was probably worrying about what Seth would demand as payment in lieu of cash.

Seth sighed. "What's your name again?"

He seemed taken aback at this. "Case."

"Case, if I let you out of here, will you promise not to run? I want to talk to you, but I think we'll both be more comfortable in the lounge. And if you answer my questions truthfully, I'll get you some food."

The truth was Seth would feed him regardless, but when someone was this scared, a little incentive could get results, and Seth wanted to get to the bottom of this before David got home.

Case trembled.

"I won't hurt you. You know who I am."

Case took a deep breath and nodded.

Seth stepped out of the doorway, positioning himself between Case and the front door. He caught the longing glance Case directed at the door and congratulated himself on his savvy. "Over there, on the couch," he said, pointing.

Shoulders slumped, Case went to the couch.

Seth followed and sat down next to him, but not too close. "So, just to check, it was you yesterday following me on my way home?"

Case wouldn't look at him. He gave an unsteady nod.

"And again this morning?"

Another nod.

"Why are you doing this, Case?"

Case shrugged.

"If you don't talk to me, I'll have no other option but to call the police."

That got his attention. He looked up. "No, please. Don't. If I go to jail..."

Seth understood. As a former denizen of the Pit, Case was almost certainly a survivor of sexual assault. In jail, he'd be facing that all over again. "Then help me out. Why did you leave the group home?"

Case sighed. "I wasn't getting better there."

"These things take time."

"I know, but...I wasn't just not getting better. I was getting worse."

"Worse how?"

Case started to shrug, then seemed to recall Seth's threat about the police. "I found a knife," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "I was going to—I just couldn't stand to sit there one more day and rehash everything over and over. We all know what happened in there. What we did, what was done to us. What's the point in talking about it all the time?"

Seth couldn't help but smile. "You sound like my boyfriend, David. Or like me when I first started therapy. But talking about stuff, naming it, describing what it meant to me when it happened—it's given me power over those memories. It's difficult, but a lot of people find it helpful."

"Yeah." Case's face had gone blank. He was putting up a front, but Seth's words weren't really getting through; that was obvious.

"What were you going to do with the knife, Case?"

Case folded his hands between his knees. He kept his eyes on them as he spoke. "I was going to open my wrists."

"But you didn't."

He lifted one shoulder. "I got to thinking about the mess I'd leave. Dr. Michaels is a good person. I didn't want him or the other staff to have to clean that up. So I left to go do it somewhere else."

Seth smiled. "But you didn't."

"Not yet." Case looked toward the doorway, but his gaze seemed to be on something far away. "I remembered your visit. I thought, maybe if I could—It's

stupid. Never mind. I'll just go. I won't bother you again. I promise." He started to get up.

"Wait!" Seth reached out and grabbed him by the arm. Case whirled and broke away, his face a mask of terror. "Sorry!" Seth held up his hands. "I'm sorry. But please, don't leave. How do you think I'm going to feel if you go out there and kill yourself, and I let you go?"

Case shook his head, watching Seth warily. "Why should you care?"

"We both survived the Pit. There aren't a lot of people who can comprehend what we've been through. That's a bond. Of course I care."

Case stared at him, his eyes growing brighter as they filled with tears. He sniffed and looked away. "This was a mistake," he said, his voice thick.

"I don't think so. And I don't think you followed me and broke in here to hurt me or David. Did you?"

"No!" The idea seemed to startle him. "No, I'd never—That's not—No."

"Then whatever impulse drove you to come here instead of killing yourself was a good impulse, Case."

Case frowned and glanced at the door.

"I can't make you stay, but aren't you hungry?"

He sighed. "Yeah."

"I'll fix you something to eat. You like my cooking, right?"

That got the whisper of a laugh. "Yeah."

"Come on." Seth gestured toward the stairs. "If you want, you can grab a shower and a clean change of clothes. My boyfriend's about the same size as you." Was this how David had coaxed Seth back into human society? With offers of basic necessities like food, clothing, sympathy, and gentleness?

Case stared at Seth, looking him up and down. "I never saw you fight. Everyone says you were really good, but that you never...you never did anything worse than what you had to in order to survive to the next fight."

"I won't hurt you, if that's what you're worried about. I don't like hurting people."

Case studied him a moment more and then seemed to make up his mind. "Okay."

"There's just one more thing," said Seth.

Wariness returned to Case's features like a set of blinds closing.

"You still have that knife?"

Case frowned but nodded.

Seth held out his hand. "I can't let you into my home with a weapon. It's not just me. I have David's safety to consider too." Though there were plenty of knives in the kitchen, not to mention windows and mirrors that could be broken. If Case really wanted to hurt himself or one of them, this wouldn't stop him. Still, it seemed important that he relinquish the knife he'd planned to commit suicide with before accepting Seth's help.

Case seemed to be weighing his options. Suddenly a loud gurgle sounded from his midsection. Case closed his eyes. His shoulders sagged. Seth chuckled and raised an eyebrow. "Listen to your body, Case. It won't steer you wrong."

Finally Case dug a small, newspaper-wrapped bundle from his back pocket and handed it to Seth, who unwrapped it. A paring knife. *Ouch*.

"You have knives in your apartment," said Case as they made their way up the stairs, Seth leading.

"I know, but I'm hoping that if you didn't want Dr. Michaels to find you, you won't want me to either. I've seen enough blood, don't you think?"

He looked over his shoulder at Case, who gaped at him. "Sorry."

"It's okay," said Seth. "Come on. Let's get something to eat. I'm hungry."

Chapter Seven

The endpaper for *Captain Blood*, being dry and undamaged, was much more difficult to remove. David was almost tempted to pour coffee over it too, but instead he disciplined himself to go slowly, gently prying the paper up at the glue line. One time his anticipation got the better of him, and he gouged the vellum underneath. After that, he went even slower.

And he saved the corner where an inscription, if there was one, would likely be. As it turned out, there was:

*To D.B., the captain of my dreams.
C.H.*

David stared at the words, his heart pounding. The sentiment was so...effusive. But then, Mr. Haverstock had been in high school and, apparently, completely infatuated.

Unable to stop, David started on the false endpaper for *Scaramouche*. This time, he started in the upper-right corner, where the other two inscriptions had been:

*To C.H.,
Liberté, égalité, fraternité.
D.B.
P.S. I love you.*

David stood so suddenly he knocked Mr. Haverstock's chair over. He turned around as if he could erase what he'd seen from his mind. But he couldn't. Those

words, written in his father's loose hand, glowed in his mind's eye, an incantation of transformational power. But was the transformation for good or ill?

A million things raced through his mind. So it hadn't just been a crush on Mr. Haverstock's part. His dad had... They'd been... That fucking hypocrite, turning his back on David when he himself was queerer than a three-dollar bill. Those liars, both of them! How long had they been carrying on? And what about his mom? Had she known? Was the marriage just a sham? Was everything he thought he knew about his family a lie?

He got up, put the books back in their hiding place, punched out, locked up the store, and left. No matter that the shop was supposed to be open until nine on Mondays and business was already shitty. Fuck it. Why should he care? Besides, he needed to see Seth and lay all this out with him. He couldn't keep it in any longer. He needed to talk to someone, and he knew he could trust Seth.

* * *

Seth fixed ham sandwiches and chicken soup for him and Case. After they ate, Case took a shower, and Seth went through David's dresser to find some fresh clothes for him to wear. Would David mind? No, of course not. After all, he'd done the same for Seth. Well, he'd done a lot more for Seth than feed him and give him clean clothes, but this was the extent of what Case was getting—apart from a sympathetic ear when he was ready to talk.

Seth gathered one of David's oldest pairs of jeans, a faded T-shirt, and a sweatshirt so old the neck and cuffs were frayed, grabbed a pair of socks and underwear, and stacked them all in a pile just outside the bathroom door. He tapped on the door and said, "There's fresh clothes out here for you when you're ready. Take your time."

He went back into the living room and sat in the comfy chair, out of view of the hallway so Case would have as much privacy as possible in the small apartment.

The situation took Seth back to his first night here. He'd been so certain it would be his only night with David. In fact, he almost hadn't come up, because he

knew how hard it would be to leave again. But David had astonished him at every turn. Seth hated to think of how he'd been back then—haunted and burdened with feelings of worthlessness. Amazing that it had only been a year, but then, he hadn't come this far on his own. He wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for David.

Case came into the living room, wearing David's clothes and looking uncertain.

"Have a seat," Seth told him. "I was just going to call Dr. Michaels."

"I don't want to go back there. There's no point."

"Well, you need a safe place to sleep—you probably haven't slept much since you left, have you?"

He shook his head.

"And I don't know how David's going to feel about you staying here."

"You mean...you'd let me..."

"I don't know, Case. I'm not making any promises I can't keep. We're getting ahead of ourselves. Dr. Michaels has been good to you. Don't you think he deserves to know you're all right?"

Case furrowed his brow. If Seth could extrapolate from his own background, it probably hadn't occurred to him that anyone would give a second thought to what happened to him. "I guess so."

"So let me call him."

Dr. Michaels was relieved to hear Case was alive and well.

"He says he doesn't want to come back. He doesn't think the therapy was helping him."

Dr. Michaels sighed. "I hate to admit it, but I don't think it was either. The fact that he nearly committed suicide is a pretty clear indication that we're not reaching him. But I'm glad you found him, Seth. I can come by and pick him up later today." He paused. "I just wish there was more we could do. You know, the standard therapeutic model we use works well for most people, but not everyone."

Unfortunately, there just isn't room in our budget or our schedule for a more diverse approach. We have to go with what's going to benefit the majority of our clients."

Seth got up and went into the bedroom, out of Case's earshot. "And the ones like Case?"

Regret thickened the therapist's voice. "We can't always save everyone."

"What if he stays here for a few days?"

There was a pause. "Are you sure you're prepared to deal with that?"

"No," he admitted. "And I have to check with David first, anyway. I'm just asking if it's even a possibility. If it's allowed."

"Case admitted himself to our facility. He can check himself out at any time. He's an adult. It's certainly allowed, but..."

"He told me he was going to kill himself, but he left the facility because he didn't want you to find his body. But once he got out, he started following me instead. I have good instincts for this kind of thing, and I can tell he doesn't mean me or David any harm. He wouldn't tell me exactly why he's been following me, but...I don't think he really wants to kill himself, Dr. Michaels. I think he's searching for something that will help him, and that search has led him here. Maybe if we just give it a few days, maybe he'll lead us all to an answer."

Dr. Michaels chuckled. "I don't know how you got to be so wise, Seth. Talk to David about it. It's important that he's on board with this too. And stay in touch. Call me later tonight, okay? I want you checking in with me regularly while this is going on."

When Seth came back into the living room, Case was asleep on the couch. He went into the kitchen, stacked the dishes in the sink, and started getting a few things ready for dinner. He was just about to call David and give him a heads-up about what was going on, when a scream rent the air.

Case was in the throes of a nightmare. He thrashed on the couch, shouting incomprehensibly. All Seth could really make out was "no!" and "don't!"

Seth ran to his side. So this is what David had gone through. “Case! Wake up. It’s a dream.”

“N-n-noo! Oh!” Case opened his eyes. For a moment, Seth wasn’t sure what he saw, but then he focused on Seth’s face. They stared at each other.

“It’s okay. It was a dream.”

Case sat up, nodding. He wrapped his arms around his chest and rocked.

Tentatively, Seth put a hand on his shoulder. Case didn’t flinch away. Okay. That was good. Now he should say something. He didn’t know what to say. What kinds of things had David said to him? “There now. You’re okay, Case. You’re going to be okay.”

Case burst into tears. He covered his face with his hands and sobbed. “No, I’m not.”

Seth sighed. Well, maybe words weren’t the way to go with Case. Seth squeezed his shoulder, and Case leaned into the contact. Moving slowly, he put his arms around Case and hugged him.

Case buried his face in Seth’s shoulder and clung to him as if his life depended on it.

* * *

David walked home, his hands shoved into his pockets, his head down. It was one of those winter days with a hard, flat gray sky and the taste of metal in the air. Thank God Seth would be home. David needed something solid to hang on to while the rest of his world crumbled around him.

When he reached the apartment, David ran up the stairs and threw open the door. “Seth, you’re not going to believe what—”

Seth sat on the couch, holding another man in his arms. At his entrance, they started and pulled away from each other.

The bottomless pit he’d been expecting to open up at any moment and swallow him whole finally made its appearance. David’s heart flipped over as he plummeted,

all reference points to what he'd considered reality gone. Everything he'd thought he could count on was gone. Except for one thing. He reached for his anger, and it was there for him, as always. "What the fuck is this?"

Seth turned toward him. "David."

The other guy was young, African American, and about David's size. In fact, he wore a faded green sweatshirt with the words *Frodo Lives* barely visible across the chest. He shrank back, wrapping his arms around himself and hiding the words from view, but it was too late. David had seen.

Seth turned to the young man. "It's okay." He stood, placing himself between David and the interloper. "David, this is Case. He's a former Pit fighter like me. He's been having some trouble, and he's come to us for help."

David shook his head, trying to make sense of it all. "That's what you call help?"

"What? Oh no. He had a nightmare. I was just comforting him."

David desperately wanted to believe that. He looked between the two of them. "Why is he wearing my clothes?"

Seth knit his brow, as if something about the question was wrong. "He's been sleeping in his own for a couple days. I gave him these to wear until his stuff is washed. I didn't think you'd mind." There was no mistaking the disappointment in his tone. He thought David was being selfish. Overreacting. And he still stood between David and this...Case. As if he needed to protect Case from David.

"I didn't mean to cause trouble," said Case, edging off the couch. "I'll go."

"No!" Seth whirled around, holding his hands out toward Case. "Please. Stay. Just let me talk to him, okay? Will you wait here, please?"

The other man looked uncertain, but he nodded and sat back down.

Seth took David by the elbow. "Let's talk in the bedroom."

Humiliation burned through David. Seth was treating him like a poorly behaved child. Why was he letting himself be led into the bedroom for a lecture

instead of just walking out? Well, maybe because this was his home, for one. If anyone should leave, it should be Seth and his new boyfriend. And in spite of everything, the thought of these rooms without Seth in them made David go cold all the way through.

Seth hustled him into the bedroom and shut the door. "I'm sorry you came in when you did. Bad timing."

"Really. What would have happened if I hadn't?"

Seth narrowed his eyes. He'd never looked at David like that before. He was pissed. "Nothing except that I would have helped him calm down and then called to let you know what was going on. You wouldn't have surprised us and jumped to conclusions."

"I'm sorry if my arrival in my own home was inconvenient for you."

Seth ran a hand through his hair. "Do you have to be this way right now? This is a very delicate time for Case."

"Then maybe next time you should pick someplace else for your little assignation."

"Are you serious? Do you honestly think I'm cheating on you? Really?"

David hesitated. He didn't actually, but how could he trust his feelings when so much he'd taken for granted had been proven false? "I don't know what to believe anymore, to be honest."

Seth glared at him, wide-eyed. "Well, I'm not!" He caught himself and lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "For crying out loud, David, the guy is a survivor of the Pit. For me to—That would be—What do you think I am?"

"That didn't stop us."

Seth put his face in his hands. He didn't say anything for a moment. When he did, his voice was muffled. "That was different. You're special. I thought you knew that."

Seth's words pricked David's conscience. He did know that. Thought he did, anyway, and...well, questioning everything was turning out to be just too painful to bear. Time to change the subject. "So why did Case leave the group home?"

"He says he wasn't getting better there. Dr. Michaels agrees actually. He says—"

"Wait. Dr. Michaels? He knows about this?"

"Yeah, I called him, and he—"

"You called the shrink, and you didn't call me?"

"I was going to!"

"But you called him first."

Seth raised his hands in the air. "Yep. I did, okay? I was faced with a situation I wasn't sure how to deal with, so I called a professional before I contacted you. I'm sorry. I'm a horrible boyfriend."

Seth's words burned. How could they burn like that yet leave him so cold inside? "I didn't say that." David's face was hot, his throat thick. Christ, he was on the verge of tears. "You still haven't told me how he wound up here."

"He says he was getting worse at the group home, not better. He left after he started contemplating suicide. I'm not sure why, but he started shadowing me. For whatever reason, following me has kept him from killing himself, but—"

All of David's hurt and anger at Seth evaporated in a white-hot flash of panic. "Wait. He's been stalking you?" *Could this day possibly get any worse?*

"I wouldn't say stalking exactly. Just, you know, following me."

It felt like someone reaching into his chest and squeezing. David wondered if he might be about to have a heart attack. "How long has this been going on?"

"Just a couple days."

A couple days? "And you didn't tell me?" David clenched his fists to keep from strangling Seth.

“You’ve had so much on your mind lately, what with the bookstore and all. I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Worry me? Fuck you!”

“David.”

“How could you keep me in the dark about something like that? This is dangerous.”

Seth held his hands out as if the explanation was obvious. “I knew you weren’t the focus of it. Whoever it was, they were following me, and I can handle—”

David gave in to temptation and shoved Seth in the chest. “I can’t believe you! After everything you’ve been through—we’ve been through—how can you be so reckless? Thanks for not telling me shit!”

Seth backed up and sat down abruptly on the bed. He looked stricken. “You’re right. I should have told you.”

“Yes. You should have.” David glanced at the door. In his living room sat an unpredictable stranger with a violent past. “And you’ve brought him into our home? You said yourself he’s unstable.”

“I said he’d contemplated suicide, not—”

“And if he’s prepared to hurt himself, what’s to stop him from hurting you or me?”

Seth shook his head and gave him that narrow-eyed look again. “He won’t. I can tell. And I made him give me the knife.”

David laughed. This was all too much. “The knife. *The knife?*”

Seth put his head in his hands. “Shit. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, by all means, keep lying to me instead. That seems to be working out all-around.”

Seth looked up at him. “You can stop being a dick about this anytime now.”

David stared at him, speechless, poised between lashing out in anger and bursting into tears.

In an eyeblink, Seth's expression went from angry to remorseful. "Shit, I'm sorry. That was uncalled-for. You're right. I should have told you what was going on."

Tears were winning. "Fucking right you should have. Nobody's telling me shit these days. I don't know what to believe anymore. And then I walk in here? And I see you? With him?"

"Oh, David." Seth stood and took David in his arms. "I'm so sorry. I haven't handled this well. I was going to call you, I swear. But then Case had a nightmare. He was screaming." Seth's shoulders sagged, and he looked at the floor. "Now I have some idea of what you went through with me."

David's heartbeat steadied. Suddenly he felt bad for yelling at Seth. He leaned in and rested his head on Seth's chest. "So he's been out on the streets a couple of days?"

"Yeah. He hasn't had much to eat, much less a shower or a bed to sleep in."

Homeless, just like Seth had been when David brought him home. No wonder. David sighed. "I see."

"I'm just trying to help him."

"Yeah. I know."

"You do?"

David nodded.

For a little while, neither of them said anything. They just leaned together, their arms wrapped loosely about each other. "I'm sorry for the things I said, David. You're not a dick."

"I'm sorry I suspected you of cheating...and sorry I shoved you."

"It's okay."

Seth rubbed his lips against David's hair. "You were about to say something when you came in. What was it?"

The thought of opening that can of worms was overwhelming. David was already exhausted. He'd really wanted to talk with Seth about what he'd discovered, but now... "Nothing."

"It was something. Does it have to do with the bookstore? You're home early."

"Yeah. Business was dead, and I just...I just wanted to come home." He tightened his grip on Seth and buried his face in his chest. Seth's familiar smell and the warmth of his body were a balm to his fractured heart. He wanted to stay this way forever.

"You know you can talk to me, right? If there's something on your mind."

"Yeah, I know." David closed his eyes and imagined telling Seth everything. Only, in his dream there wasn't some stranger sitting in the other room.

As if on cue, Seth said, "About Case."

"Yeah?"

"What do you think about him staying with us for a few days? I...I think it might help him, and Dr. Michaels..."

"Go on."

"Dr. Michaels thinks so too."

David looked up at Seth. Of course he'd want to open their home to Case, whose situation was so similar to his own past. But was it safe? "I don't know, Seth. I mean, no offense, but what if he's unstable?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Seth pulled back, staring. "Unstable? Like I was?"

"No, I don't mean that. You were never unstable."

Seth raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, maybe a little bit, but not...not dangerous. I always knew you wouldn't hurt me. But we don't really know Case, do we? And he was stalking you."

Seth laughed and threw his head back. He raked his fingers through his hair. “Jesus, David. You just described me when we first met. Unstable and you didn’t know me and I *was* stalking you.” He fixed David with his bright blue gaze.

“You were?”

“I followed you to and from work every day after the Thai noodles. Of course, I justified it by telling myself I was doing it to protect you, but I wanted you. I was stalking you.”

The knowledge made a warm glow spread through his body. He supposed it was wrong to feel that way. David knew stalking was no joke. Hell, he was pretty freaked-out about the idea of Case following Seth around. But this was different. This was Seth and Seth had wanted him, even before that first night when David had brought him home. But that wasn’t the point. He had to focus. “But you did protect me.” He reached up and stroked Seth’s arm.

“Yeah, and you trusted me, and because of all that, we changed each other’s lives. You helped me get my shit together.” Seth jerked his head at the doorway. “But what about him? Who’s going to help him?”

There was nothing David could say to argue with that. Seth had him, lock, stock, and barrel. He sighed. “We are, I guess.”

Seth grinned. “Really?”

“He’s not violent?”

“No. Do you trust me?”

He had to trust someone, didn’t he? “Yeah. Of course I do.”

“I have a sense for these things, and I know Case won’t harm us. I never would have brought him up here otherwise. David, you remember the Pit. You were there too.”

David swallowed. He’d been in the Pit for just for a few hours, but it had been enough to last him the rest of his life. “Okay. Yes.”

Seth hugged him. "You're wonderful. I love you." He was out the door before David could say anything more.

* * *

Seth fixed spaghetti and garlic bread for dinner, and he, David, and Case sat around the little table in the kitchen and ate. Case leaned over his plate shoveling noodles and sauce into his mouth at a steady pace. David, on the other hand, twirled his fork around his plate with a faraway expression on his face. Every once in a while he'd seem to catch himself, and with great determination, he'd eat a bite.

Something was wrong with David. Something beyond the bookshop being in trouble, something beyond the shock and upset of coming home to find Seth comforting Case. Not that those two things weren't enough to upset anybody. But Seth had never seen David like this before. And when he'd come in the door this afternoon, he'd been about to say something. "*Seth, you'll never believe what—*" *What?*

The chance David would actually tell him with Case in the apartment was pretty much nil, but if Seth admitted it to himself, David had been withdrawing from him for the past couple days. Whatever this was, it had started well before Case showed up. And Seth had asked him again and again what was going on, and David had made it clear he didn't want to talk about it. He had no choice but to accept that.

It hurt. David had done everything for him. Why couldn't he trust Seth to be there for him now?

"Excuse me, Seth?" asked Case.

"Yeah?" Seth came to himself and realized he'd been playing with his food just like David was. But not Case. He'd demolished his noodles, but there was still some sauce on his plate.

"Can you pass the bread, please?"

This simple request warmed the chill in Seth's heart. He didn't know if he'd really be able to help Case, but at least Case was willing to let him try. "Of course." Seth smiled and passed the bread.

Chapter Eight

In the middle of the night, David woke up to someone screaming. “Seth, it’s okay,” he mumbled, reaching out to comfort his lover. “It’s just a dream. You’re safe.”

But where David expected to find Seth, sweating and thrashing in the throes of another nightmare, he found instead empty bed. He pushed himself up and shook his head, trying to get his bearings. Seth was gone. The door stood open. From the living room came another cry and a gasp and Seth’s low voice, offering reassurance.

It was Case having the nightmare.

David got up and pulled on a robe. He padded down the hallway but stopped short of entering the living room. Case sat up on the couch, his face in his hands. Seth sat beside him, one hand on Case’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” he said. “It was a dream, Case. All that is over now.”

Case breathed in ragged gasps. “Sometimes it seems like it’s never going to be over.”

Seth stroked his shoulder. “I know.”

David felt like he was intruding on something private between the two of them. He was. Seth and Case shared a common experience that David’s brief time in the Pit had only given him a glimpse of. He would never really be able to understand what Seth had been through.

But Case did. As Seth put an arm around Case, and Case leaned against him, David retreated down the hallway, ashamed of himself for feeling left out.

* * *

David's first customer that day was Trina. This time she stood a little straighter, and she met his eye as she said, "Can you order some more books for me?"

Her smile was infectious, and David welcomed the distraction from his chaotic thoughts. "Sure, what you got?"

She reached into her overstuffed messenger bag, pulled out a sheet of paper, and slid it across the counter. There were easily ten titles on it.

"Okay!" he said. "Let me get right on this."

Ordering Trina's titles kept his mind occupied, but no sooner had he finished than the miasma of confusion, betrayal, and anxiety that had kept him awake all night returned. How could Haverstock and his father have kept the truth of their relationship a secret from him, especially after they knew he was gay? Had it just been a high school fling, or had they been long-term lovers? And where did his mother fit in this new picture of his family? David couldn't take this. He had to have some answers.

He glanced at the clock. It was nine forty-five. Haverstock would arrive in another fifteen minutes. *Okay. Fine.* Everybody wanted to be all mysterious and dramatic and shit? He could be dramatic too.

* * *

After seeing David off to work, Seth threw on his jacket and turned to Case. "Come on," he said. "You're coming to work with me."

Case stared at him.

"I mean it. You can't stay here alone, and the restaurant will be good for you. I've already spoken with my boss. She's expecting you. We're planning to hire a dishwasher soon. Consider this a working interview."

Case looked a bit panicked, and Seth felt bad for springing this development on him, but then, he hadn't had much time. After another moment of hesitation, Case got up and followed him out the door.

“What if I break something?” he asked as they walked to the restaurant.

“Depends. First one’s free. More than one in a day and you have to pay for it.”

“But I don’t have any money.”

“You planning on breaking a bunch of stuff?”

“No. I just—I want to know what I’m getting into is all.”

“It’s not complicated, Case. You’ll wash some dishes. If you like it and Yolanda likes you, she may offer you a job. Then it’s up to you if you want to take it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep.”

Case was silent the rest of the way to the restaurant. When they arrived, Mr. Scarpelli was out front, sitting on the bench by the door and reading his paper. “Morning, Seth,” he said, then stood as he noticed Case. “And who’s this?”

Case shrank back. He shook his head, casting a panicked glance at Seth.

“This is Case,” said Seth, stepping forward slightly. “He’s going to be washing dishes for us today.”

Mr. Scarpelli took in the tense look on Case’s face and Seth’s position between them. He smiled warmly at Case but made no attempt to shake his hand. Instead he sat back down on the bench. “Welcome, Case,” he said. “I hope you’ll like it here.” He picked up his paper again.

Seth unlocked the door and let Case in. Yolanda was counting out the change for the cash register. She looked up as they entered. “Well, so this is our volunteer. Thank you for helping us out, Case.”

When Case looked at Yolanda, his eyes seemed to glow. He shut his mouth with a visible effort and nodded. “I’ll try to do a good job.”

She looked about to come back with one of her snappy remarks, and Seth braced himself for whatever reaction Case would have, but she just smiled and said, “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

Karine came out of the utility room. “So this is our dishwasher! Bless you, baby!” She started toward Case, her arms outstretched. Case backed up.

Yolanda reached out, seized her by the arm, and reeled her back in. “I was telling Case how nice it will be to have a real dishwasher and how we all respect each other’s space around here.”

Karine gaped at Case a moment. “Oh, right,” she whispered, as if to herself. “Sorry, hon.”

“S’okay,” said Case, his voice barely audible.

Yolanda gave him a wink. He smiled a little.

“I’m just so glad to be off dish duty. You have no idea.” Karine’s face fell. “Not that it’s a bad job or anything! I only meant—Oh shit, I’ll be over here sorting silverware if anyone needs me.”

Seth and Yolanda laughed, and Case’s smile grew.

Seth showed Case the washing station and the bucket where they scraped table scraps for the dog.

“There’s a dog?” asked Case.

“Yeah, a stray that hangs out in the alley, near the Dumpster. But don’t try to touch her. I’m pretty sure she bites.”

“But you feed her, anyway?”

Seth shrugged. “Biters are hungry too, right? Besides, something tells me she’s got good reasons not to trust people.”

“Yeah.”

* * *

When Mr. Haverstock arrived at the bookshop that morning, he looked somber. “Hello, David. How are you today?”

“Okay.” Nothing could have been further from the truth. David hadn’t slept much last night. He’d lain awake, listening for sounds of Case coming to stab them

in their sleep, and trying to get his head around the idea of Mr. Haverstock and his dad as gay lovers.

Now the fact that Mr. Haverstock had lied about selling the books and kept his relationship with David's dad a secret seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the room. David couldn't take it. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Of course. Out here or..."

"I think we'd better go in the back. We can leave the door open so I'll hear if we get a customer."

"Very well."

Mr. Haverstock sat at his desk, but David didn't take his customary seat in the folding chair. Instead he opened the bottom drawer of the desk and took out the grocery bag with the letter jacket and the books. He set the bundle down in front of Mr. Haverstock, who looked up at him with a question in his eyes. Mr. Haverstock took a breath and seemed about to say something, but he didn't. He sat back in his chair and folded his hands, watching David.

"I didn't mean to go through your stuff. I was looking for the hammer the other day, and I found them."

Mr. Haverstock's face was still, expressionless. "Found them."

Anger got the better of David. He pulled away the jacket and upended the bag, spilling the books across the desk. *Scaramouche* fell open, its original endpaper and inscription exposed. "You lied! You never sold these. You bought them from me and kept them, and...and you never told me about you and my dad."

His anger seemed to roll right off Mr. Haverstock. It was almost like David wasn't even in the room. His boss leaned forward and picked up each of the books.

Mr. Haverstock examined the endpapers and, with a wan smile, ran his fingers over the inscriptions. He closed them and stacked them neatly in a pile. "You did a beautiful job removing the second endpapers, David. I couldn't have done better myself."

David stared at him, dumbstruck.

Mr. Haverstock met his gaze and then looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry I lied to you. And that I couldn't tell you about the past history between myself and your father. I wanted to. Very much."

"So why didn't you?"

"I promised I wouldn't."

"Promised him."

Mr. Haverstock nodded.

"So, when were you two...together?"

"Our freshman and sophomore years in high school."

"Two years?"

"We were friends since childhood, but we didn't—it didn't become..."

"Romantic?" David didn't want to say *sexual*. This was his dad and Mr. Haverstock they were talking about. The thought of them together—it was weird on a lot of different levels.

"Romantic, yes, as you say. That didn't happen until we entered high school."

"But you were. I mean, both of you were—It wasn't just, you know, a crush on your part?" David couldn't tell if he was hoping the answer would be yes or no. Talking about this might have been a mistake. It felt a lot more real, with Mr. Haverstock here right in front of him admitting everything.

"Oh no." Mr. Haverstock looked at him, but it was as if he was also looking into the past, and what he saw there put a smile on his face, half-wistful, half-tender. "It was quite mutual. In fact, it was your father who, well, I wouldn't exactly say I put up a fight, but he was definitely the instigator."

David gave a bark of laughter. "I'm sorry. This is so bizarre." He sank into the folding chair and put his head in his hands, trying to imagine his father as a teenager, putting the moves on Mr. Haverstock. But the family story had always

been that Dad and Mom were high school sweethearts. “What about Mom? Where was she in all of this? I mean, was dad bi or full-on gay in a sham of a marriage?”

“Your mother and father loved each other very much.”

“Really?” His bitterness overflowed into his voice. “That must have been painful for you.”

Mr. Haverstock looked him straight in the eye. “It was.”

David hesitated, taken aback at the blunt honesty. Concern for his boss caught up with his confusion and outrage. “So, what happened? He just met her and dumped you?”

“Not exactly.”

“What, then?”

“Something happened, and it was decided it would be best for everyone if we went back to being friends. Like we used to be.”

“It was decided. By him, you mean. He decided for both of you. For her too, probably.” *“Get yourself a girlfriend, David. Then those boys will leave you alone.”* “You said something happened. What happened? Did it have to do with him leaving school?”

“Will you let me tell you, or would you rather keep asking questions?”

“Sorry.” David sat down. “I’m listening.”

“We were at Windmill Point. It was a popular place for boys like us to go at the time. But some of the members of the high school football team found out about it. They came up there and went on a rampage. They didn’t see me. I got away, but your father—they beat him so badly he wound up in the hospital. It was all hushed up of course, but...there was no question of him coming back to school after that, and your mother—the three of us had been friends in grade school, but by the time we got to high school, June had blossomed into a real beauty. She drifted away from us as she joined the cheerleading squad and started dating football players. But when she found out about Dave, she came to see him in the hospital every day. Her

being there all the time made it a lot easier for folks to decide it had all been some kind of mistake.

“And I think Dave fell in love with her then. It was more than gratitude. He really wanted to be the person people saw when he was with her. You know how determined he was. Like you. Anything he put his mind to, he accomplished.”

“So you’re saying he willed himself straight.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he was bisexual all along. Or maybe he was the kind of person for whom desire originates in affection, regardless of the characteristics of the person in question.”

“Well, he was a total fucking hypocrite. That much is certain.”

Haverstock sighed. “I know he hurt you very deeply, David.”

“When he found out about me, he just...turned away. How could he do that when he himself was queer?”

“I’m not sure why he acted like that either, but...I think he was afraid for you. He didn’t want what had happened to him to happen to you. And he only knew one solution.”

“Go in the closet. And stay there, apparently.”

“It was a different time.”

“Yeah, but time marches on. And Mom died when I was ten. Did you two ever get back together?”

“No.”

It was a single syllable, yet it held a lifetime of heartbreak. “What a fuckhead.”

“David, don’t—”

“No! I’m sorry, Mr. Haverstock, but you deserve better than that. We all do.” David stood and paced. “All my life, I worshipped him, and he was...”

“He was a human being, not a god. You’re old enough now. You should be able to understand that sometimes people make mistakes. And sometimes they hurt the people they care about most.”

David shook his head. "I needed him. And he turned his back on me."

"I'm positive he didn't mean to. At the time, I thought he just needed a chance to come to terms with himself and with you. I was sure he'd get over it."

"That's why you hired me, isn't it? So you could watch over me. So you could step in for him after he didn't want to be my father anymore. That makes you my what, my fairy godfather?"

Haverstock's smile had more warmth and amusement in it than David felt like he had left in his whole body. "If you like. In any case, I was honored. And I still am."

"Not honored enough to be honest with me."

"I'm sorry. I would have preferred for you not find out like this, but..."

"He made you promise not to tell me?"

Haverstock nodded.

"Why? To make sure I felt as alone as possible? To punish me? To punish you? I don't understand."

Haverstock held his hands out. "I don't either really. But I can tell you, David, he punished himself the most. Of that I'm certain."

"He erased your relationship. With orange construction paper! And then he gave the books to me. What the fuck was that all about?"

"I wondered myself, you know?" It was a trip hearing Haverstock talk about his dad like this. "When he wanted *Scaramouche* back, I refused at first. But then he told me he wanted to give you the best part of what we'd had together."

They stared at each other a long time. "He still loved you."

Mr. Haverstock's eyes grew bright. "In his way."

David snorted. "Yeah, his way. It always had to be his way, didn't it?"

"He was who he was."

"He made you hide the truth all these years. How can you be so forgiving?"

Haverstock shrugged. "I loved him."

"So did I!"

"I know. And he knew you loved him, David. Always."

"But he couldn't love me once he knew I was queer...like him."

"He did. He always loved you, more than anything."

"Fucked-up way of showing it, then."

"I can't argue with you there. All I can tell you is that he was very conflicted about his feelings, and when he realized you were attracted to men, he... Well, I don't think he knew what to do."

"He could have told me. He could have told me about you two so I didn't have to feel like I was letting him down, like I was wrong for how I felt, like I deserved to be jeered at and beaten. But he just turned away. Never even said anything. Nothing."

"I know."

"You do. And you knew what was going on back then too."

"We spoke about it at the time."

David tried to wrap his head around Haverstock's words. It was as if there was a whole secret history of his life that everyone knew about except for him. "Unbelievable. And you never said anything."

"I couldn't. I'd pr—"

"Promised him. Yeah, I know. But he's dead, Mr. Haverstock, and I'm alive. You didn't even have to tell me you were my dad's boyfriend. You could have just come out to me, you know? But you didn't. You let me keep on believing I was all alone."

"David. I'm sor—"

"No. Don't apologize. I don't want to hear any more explanations. Not now." He returned to his post at the cash register. Later that day, when Mr. Haverstock came out to say good-bye, David just nodded and didn't say anything.

Chapter Nine

By the end of the day, Case had startled several times when people came up to him unexpectedly or called out loudly, and when Mr. Scarpelli clapped him on the back, he fled to the men's room and stayed there for half an hour. But he didn't break a single dish.

"You did a good job," Seth said, untying his apron.

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. How are you feeling?"

"Okay. A little... Okay."

Seth nodded. "You want to come back tomorrow?"

"Yes!"

Seth laughed. "Okay, then." Seth turned away, but he didn't get very far.

"Seth?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for everything. And...um...when do we get to feed the dog?"

"Right now if you want. Do you want to do it?"

Case's face lit up. "Could I?"

"Sure, you know where the scraps are. Just be careful. She's not a house pet."

Case actually grinned. "I'll be careful. Thanks again!"

Suddenly Case darted forward, wrapped his wiry arms around Seth, and hugged him hard. "Thanks for everything."

"Sure."

Seth went back to the kitchen. A few minutes later, he looked out the back door to check on Case and stopped, staring. A little distance from the Dumpster, Case sat on the ground, his back against the wall and the bucket in his lap. He held a piece of leftover hamburger patty outstretched in one hand. The dog watched him from her spot between the Dumpster and the wall.

"It's okay," said Case, his voice gentle and low. "I won't hurt you. I promise. Shhh. Shu-shu-shu-shu. You're a pretty girl. Yes, you are. Who's a good puppy? Wuj-juj-uj."

He was going to get bitten. Seth was about to go out there and put a stop to it, but then the dog took a step forward, her head low. She whined.

Case didn't move. He kept holding the food out toward her, his upturned hand resting on the ground. His body language was relaxed—more relaxed than Seth had ever seen him. He slouched against the wall, his head on a level with hers. "Are you hungry? I bet you are. Sweet puppy. Shu-shu-shu."

Still whining, the dog crept closer.

It took twenty minutes, but eventually Case coaxed her to take the hamburger from his hand. The moment she did, she ran back to the cover of the Dumpster. Case watched her go with a contented smile. He left the rest of the food out for her, got up, and turned toward the door.

"Wow," said Seth as Case passed him. "That's impressive."

Case shrugged. "I like dogs."

* * *

When David got off work and started toward the café, he paused. Seth had taken Case to work with him today, which was probably better than leaving him alone in their apartment, but still... David showing up at the café with Seth already busy keeping an eye on Case and keeping up with his job at the same time—David would just be an added distraction.

And if he were honest with himself, he didn't want to see them together again. At least not any sooner than he could help it. He couldn't make up his mind if he was irrational for being jealous or a fool for not being more concerned. Case was young and attractive. David had no idea if he was gay, but there was no denying he and Seth had something in common that David could never share.

In his mind's eye, he saw Seth comforting Case the night before. If it weren't for the fact that Seth was supposed to be his man, the sight of the two of them together would have been beautiful. Instead it seared David with a jealousy he was ashamed to admit, even to himself.

He knew what Case had been through, because it was more or less the same as what Seth had been through, and David had spent a lot of time comforting Seth after nightmares and bringing him back from flashbacks. So how could he begrudge Case the same kind of understanding and support? Easily, apparently, if Seth was the source of it.

It wasn't even so much that he really thought Seth was attracted to Case. Even if he were, he wouldn't betray Case's trust by doing anything. It was the connection between them. He felt left out. How pathetic was that? He was actually upset about *not* being in the locked-up-in-a-cage-and-raped club. What was wrong with him?

Disgusted with himself, David turned around and headed toward Gratiot Avenue. The very least he could do was actually see about finding another job. He forced himself to walk into the Books & Baubles and immediately regretted it. He hated this place. Past the magazine section and the new releases, the rest of the first floor was taken up with remaindered books selling for three dollars apiece—books that neither the authors nor the publishers earned a dime on. For that matter, the *New York Times* best sellers and many of the new releases were offered at such steep discounts it was hard to imagine how anybody was able to turn a profit on them.

David went to the information desk, where a woman greeted him with a friendly smile and dead eyes. “Good afternoon and welcome to Books and Baubles. How can I help you?”

“I’d like to fill out a job application, please,” he said.

She gave a reflexive nod and looked lost for a moment. “You are welcome to fill out an application online at www.booksandbaubles.com. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

David took a look around the store. There weren’t many customers. It was practically Christmas and the store was almost empty. Didn’t look like they were doing much better than Haverstock’s. That gave him a perverse satisfaction. “I fill out the application online?”

“Yes, and you can select which stores you want to apply to. Just enter your zip, and a list will come up. You can pick this one or any other store in your area.”

“Are you guys actually hiring?”

She opened her mouth but didn’t answer right away. “Uh...no. Actually. We didn’t even hire holiday temps this year.” She looked around, then leaned closer. “Business isn’t so good.”

“Not much point in applying, then, is there?”

She shrugged. “You never know.”

“Okay,” he said and made for the door. On his way out, he noticed that a large section of the first floor had been rearranged into a toy store. He spotted a few books among the stuffed animals and Lego sets, but not many. Not only were they turning away from selling books that were still in print, it looked like they were abandoning the idea of selling books at all. And from all appearances, it wasn’t working.

Despite the fact that he was no closer to finding a new job, the possible imminent demise of Books & Baubles warmed him on his way home. Seth might be drifting away from him, and the father he’d worshipped was in fact a hypocrite and

a liar, but at least the big-box bookstores were getting a dose of their own medicine. It wasn't much, but he clung to it.

* * *

"Would you set the table, Case?" Seth stood at the stove, reheating some Brunswick stew. He glanced at the clock. Six forty-five. Where was David? "The silverware is in the drawer to the right of the sink, and the plates are in the cupboard above it."

Case was just setting the third plate down when the door opened. David came in, looking preoccupied until he glanced up and saw Seth and Case in the kitchen. His brown eyes widened, and his lips tightened. Then he seemed to catch himself, and he smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Hey," said Seth, "there you are. I was getting worried."

"Oh," said David. "Yeah. I stopped at Books and Baubles to see about a job. Guess I should have called. Sorry."

He didn't sound very sorry. In fact, he sounded pissed. Something was definitely wrong, but Seth knew better than to try and draw it out of him in front of Case and on an empty stomach. "Just glad you're okay. Come and sit. Dinner's almost ready."

They all sat down, and for a few minutes, there was no talking. Just eating. Seth savored the sounds of quiet, contented chewing. His granny always used to say you could tell the food was good when everyone was too busy eating to talk.

At length, they slowed down.

"So did you get a new job?" asked Case.

"No," said David. "Just a runaround."

"A runaround?" said Case. "You mean like—what?"

David breathed deeply through his nose. Seth could see him fighting to control his irritability. "I don't really want to talk about it. I'm not feeling very social. Sorry. It's nothing personal."

Case nodded and, to Seth's relief, said nothing further.

After they ate, Case did the dishes, and David disappeared into the bedroom. Seth followed. "Hey," he said, shutting the door behind him and coming to perch on the edge of the bed, where David lay staring at the ceiling. "What's up?"

The way David looked at him, Seth expected him to say Mr. Haverstock was in the hospital, or David had decided to move to Tibet and become a monk.

"Nothing," said David.

"You seem upset," said Seth.

"Do I?"

"Is it the bookshop?" Of course it was. Seth realized he could hardly overestimate the impact that was having on David.

"What else would it be?"

Something about the way David said that made Seth pause and take a second look at him. He was pissed, that much Seth could see by the flat line of his mouth and the rigid set of his shoulders. "I don't know. But I hope that by now you know you can talk to me about anything."

David's nostrils flared, and his eyes grew bright. He rolled over onto his side, facing away. "I don't want to talk, Seth."

"Okay." Seth lay down and wrapped his arms around David from behind. David leaned back into him, and for a long time, they simply lay there.

Eventually, David rolled over to face him. "I love you," he said and kissed Seth. He ran a hand down the side of Seth's face. "I love you so much." The look in his eyes was heartbreaking.

"David, what?"

"No. Shhh. Just... Let's just..." He kissed Seth again and ran a hand down Seth's chest. When he got to Seth's waistband, he slid his hand under it and gathered Seth's cock in his palm. He started to stroke.

Seth took a deep breath, wondering if this was okay while at the same time his body couldn't find a thing wrong with it. David's agile fingers teased him to stiffness; David's lips and tongue enticed him. He remembered what Dr. Michaels had said about Case—talking doesn't work for some people. Maybe this was exactly what David needed from him right now.

* * *

David crouched on all fours on the bed, Seth behind, drilling him. Seth's hot, hard cock nailed his prostate with every stroke, sending fireworks cascading through his body. The intense sensation flooded his mind and drove out the pain of his jumbled thoughts. Unable to hold back, David lifted his head and let out a shout. "God! Oh God!"

Seth's breath gusted hot and moist against his back as he leaned forward and grabbed David's cock. "Come on," he said. "You know you want to."

Seth's touch made David's skin tingle, not just the sensitive, heated flesh of his erection, but all over his body. And then Seth started to stroke him, and all those diffuse, tingly feelings coalesced into a pulsing ball of need in the pit of his stomach. "Ahhhh! Oh God!"

Suddenly there was a shout that wasn't his or Seth's, and the bed shuddered as someone hurtled into Seth, knocking him sideways. "What the fuck!" Seth sounded as startled as David was.

David, his ass abruptly empty and his cock aching from denied release, whipped around to see Case standing at the foot of the bed, one fist clutching Seth's hair, the other drawn back to hit him. His eyes were unfocused, almost as if he didn't see Seth at all. Or saw someone else.

"What the fuck are you doing!" David lunged and grabbed Case's arm before he could hit Seth.

Case looked back and forth between David and Seth, getting more confused by the second. And then he blinked and shook his head as if he was waking up from a dream. Maybe he was.

“Oh,” he said. “Ohhhh shit. I’m sorry!” He released his hold on Seth’s hair. David let go of his arm, and Case backed up, his hands out in front of him. “I’m so sorry. I woke up and heard shouting. I thought someone was hurting David.”

Seth laughed. David gathered the sheets around himself to hide his wilting erection. It was pretty funny, also heartbreaking and, on the shallower side, deeply frustrating. “Uh, thanks for trying to protect me, Case.”

Case hung his head. “I...” He sighed and continued backing toward the door.

“Case,” said Seth, pulling on a pair of boxers. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” said Case, clearly not. He hurried out of the room.

Seth turned to look at David. He gestured with one hand toward the hallway their guest had just fled down and with the other at David. David rubbed his face to hide his uncomfortable mix of feelings.

“Go ahead. Make sure he’s okay.”

Seth gave a reluctant nod and went after Case.

When he’d gone, David flopped back on the bed and blew out a deep breath.

He was almost asleep by the time Seth came back to bed. David rolled over and reached for him, hoping to rekindle what they’d almost finished.

Seth put his arms around him. “You’re so warm.”

“Mmmm. Been keeping the bed warm for you.”

“That took a while, I know. I’m sorry. Sorry about all of it, actually.”

“Let’s see how sorry you really are.” David reached down and wrapped his fingers around Seth’s cock.

Seth let out a long breath and stroked a hand down the side of David’s face. “Um, do you mind if we don’t? I’m just...I’m just tired is all.”

“It’s more than that,” said David. “This business with Case is stirring up a lot of stuff for you.”

Seth shrugged. “Maybe. But I think it’s helping him. You should have seen him at work today. He did a great job. And there’s this stray dog I’ve been feeding—”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

Seth tilted his head in acknowledgment. “Anyway, Case lit up around her. She’s feral, but he got her to take food from his hand. You should have seen it. It was amazing.”

“Hmm.” Seth sounded so pleased and proud. David knew he should be happy for him. It was probably important for Seth to reach out to someone like Case who’d had similar experiences and help him get on with his life. But knowing all that didn’t prevent his jealousy from keeping him awake the rest of the night.

Chapter Ten

The next time Trina came to the bookstore, she wasn't alone. "Come on," she said to someone still outside. "It's okay, I told you. He's really nice." She looked over at David and grinned. "She's nervous."

"I don't bite," he said.

"Did you hear that? Come on. Do you want the new Vivian Vixen book or not?"

Eventually, Trina coaxed her friend, a tall blonde with an angular face, into the store. "Amanda, this is David. He's cool."

Amanda still looked like she might bolt for the door at any moment. David came out from behind the counter and held out his hand. "Amanda. Welcome to Haverstock Bookshop. How can I help you?"

Amanda shook hands with him and managed a smile, but when she spoke, her voice was barely audible. "Um. There's a new book out—*Bound by Love* by Vivian Vixen? It's... You ordered *Surrender* for her..." She looked at Trina. "Can you...?"

"Yeah. Absolutely," said David, welcoming the distraction. He took a deep breath to fight off his weariness. He wasn't getting very much sleep at night. Worries about the store closing took turns with anger and betrayal over the secrets his dad and Mr. Haverstock had kept from him. Between them, he was up most nights. And of course Case was still staying with them, and David and Seth hadn't attempted sex again since the disaster. And on top of everything else, Seth kept giving him the strangest looks, like David was somehow making him very sad, even though he wasn't doing anything. All in all this was shaping up to be a pretty crappy Christmas. Trina and Amanda were the only bright spot on the horizon.

He went to the computer behind the counter and did a search for the title and author. "Beltane is the publisher?" he asked when the results came up.

"Yeah."

But the book was only available as a download. No print edition. "I'm sorry. It's digital only right now. Do you have an e-reader or a laptop?"

She shook her head.

"Amanda's like me," said Trina. "Just the one computer at home. She can't really have anything on it that's..."

"For mature readers, I understand," said David.

Amanda gave him a wide-eyed stare, and he smiled at her. "What about your phone?"

"My phone?"

"Yeah, can you open a text file in it?"

"I don't know. It's a smartphone, but I'm not very good with it." She looked like she was adrift at sea.

David glanced at Trina. She nodded at him. "Can I see your phone? I might be able to load the book on there for you."

Trina elbowed Amanda, who snapped out of her haze of confusion and dug in her purse until she came up with her phone.

David spent some time fiddling with it and eventually found an app that enabled her to purchase the book from a reseller site and download it, all right on her phone. He showed her how it worked.

"Oh, that's easy!" she said.

"Yeah." He realized he'd just made himself obsolete.

"Thank you!" Amanda took his hand and squeezed it. "Thank you so much." She looked to Trina. "You were right. He's amazing."

"I told you."

David looked from one woman to the other. "It's no big deal. I'm a bookseller. It's my job."

"No, you don't understand," said Trina. "These books—they're m/m erotic romance."

"M/m?"

"Male/male."

"Oh yeah, I figured that. I mean, the cover of *Surrender* had two guys on it and they obviously weren't just friends. So what?"

The two women laughed.

"So what? He says, 'So what?'" cried Amanda, jumping up and down a little.

"We're not gay men," said Trina.

"I can tell," said David.

"So, the 'so what' is that a lot of people—a *lot* of people—think there's something really strange about us for liking these stories."

"They think we're perverts," blurted Amanda. "When I was fourteen, my parents found my Picard/Data fanfic, and they made me go to a psychiatrist."

"My mother-in-law thinks I'm a closet lesbian," said Trina.

"I *am* a lesbian," said Amanda, "and my partner thinks I'm exploiting gay men."

"Everybody has an opinion," said Trina. Both women sighed.

"Wow. That's—Pardon me, but...that's totally fucked-up. You're just reading, for crying out loud. It's none of their business!"

They grinned. "That's why we like you," said Trina.

David felt himself blush. "Thanks. You come here whenever you want. If we don't stock it, I'll order it for you, no judgment, no questions, okay?"

"Okay!" said Amanda, who seemed to have come out of her shell all of a sudden. "So what do I owe you?"

“Owe me?”

“For the book.”

“Oh no,” said David. “You already paid for it when you ordered it from the Web site. All I did was help you load it onto your phone.”

“So?” She looked quite severe when she frowned. David wouldn’t like her to be angry with him. “Your time is worth money, and not many people would bother to do that. I’m paying you something.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Trina. “You have to let her pay you.”

“I can’t let you give me money for nothing. That’s fraud. Businesses get in trouble for stuff like that.”

Amanda made a snort of disgust and started browsing the store. “Here. I definitely need one of these,” she said, returning with a thick volume entitled *Cross-pollination: 100 Years of Lesbian Feminist Thought*. It was twenty-nine dollars.

David whistled.

Trina raised an eyebrow.

“Oh come on, you guys,” said Amanda. “I bet there’s some really good stuff in here. Besides, I’ll put it on the bedside table, and it’ll keep my girlfriend off my case for months.” She paused. “I’ll probably get laid more often too.”

David rang her up.

“I’ll be back,” said Amanda. “And I’m telling all my pervy m/m friends about you too.”

David’s grin faltered. “Oh, um. Actually, if you want anything more, you’d better hurry. We, uh, I don’t think we’ll be in business much longer.”

“What?” said Trina.

“No!” said Amanda. “This can’t happen! We just found you.”

“Why are you closing?” asked Trina.

The looks on their faces made him feel even worse about the news. “We’re not making a profit.” There’d been so many confusing developments since Haverstock

had told him about the closing, he'd forgotten the simple sorrow of the fact that in a few short days the bookshop would be gone. Now it hit him full force. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," said Trina.

"I know." David wondered if there was a way that the three of them could help each other. "So, um. Are there a lot of women who like m/m?"

They grinned.

* * *

It was midmorning at the café, and Seth had just put the lasagnas in the oven to bake. He came out into the dining room to get a glass of water. Case and Yolanda sat at the table by the kitchen, talking together quietly.

"I bet you were," he heard her say, but he didn't try to linger and listen to the rest. He went back into the kitchen, and a few minutes later, Case came through on his way to the alley with some scraps for the dog.

"Making time with the boss?"

Case smiled and nodded. "She's cool."

Seth went back into the dining room. Yolanda was filling napkin holders. "Hey," he said, "I just wanted to thank you for letting Case help out around here."

"Happy to have him. He's a good worker." She paused. "Think he might want stay on for a while?"

"Probably, especially if he can keep feeding Sasha." He hesitated. "Are you sure you want to make him a permanent employee?"

She gave a little half smile, and her eyes seemed warmer than usual. "I'm sure."

"He is doing a lot better. No nightmares last night. But he still doesn't say much. I don't even know why he was following me in the first place. I think the conversation the two of you just had is the most talking I've seen him do."

Yolanda shook her head. "He doesn't need more talking. He needs something useful to do and to remember who he used to be before the Pit came along. Do you

know nobody has asked him what he did and who he knew before he was taken? No wonder he wasn't getting better. All anybody wanted to talk to him about was the Pit."

Seth took that in. He'd never thought of that. Was there something in that he could apply to the situation with David? If there was, it eluded him. David was getting more and more distant every day. He was working hard trying to drum up more business for the bookshop, and that was good, but Seth got the distinct impression it also gave him a convenient excuse not to be home much.

When Seth returned to the kitchen to chop vegetables for salad, the back door stood open. He looked out and saw Case with the pail, feeding the dog by hand. A few yards away, two more dogs stood watching. Case crouched and held a piece of Monte Cristo sandwich out to them. One of them, a black dog with a white underbelly, slowly approached. The first dog tried to grab the sandwich, but Case redirected her to the bucket. As she ate, he patted her on the shoulder, and she wagged her tail. This seemed to encourage the black dog, who closed the distance between them and snatched the food from Case's hand.

Case tossed what remained of the scraps toward the Dumpster, where the third dog, a black and tan shepherd mix, could easily reach it. He turned around and saw Seth watching. "Hey," he said walking to the door. "It's a little pack. They're friends. They hang together. That's Sasha." He pointed to the red-brown dog with the white blaze on her forehead. "And that black one there's Tommy, and that's Jack. He's shy."

"You really have a way with them."

Case's face lit up. "Thanks. I love animals. Before...before the Pit, I used to work for a dog groomer. They closed, and I wound up on the street, and... Well, you know. But I loved that job."

"I bet you were good at it."

“Yeah,” said Case, his chin up. “I was. Some of the groomers, they had to give their animals meds to calm ’em down so they could clip ’em? But not me. I just talked to them real quiet and kind, right? They knew I wasn’t going to hurt them.”

What Yolanda said about not everybody benefiting from talking, and seeing Case with those animals got Seth to thinking. “Taking care of them seems to be helping you.”

“Yeah. A lot. It’s simple with them, you know? If you’re kind to them, they like you. Easy.”

Seth nodded. “I wonder if the other Pit survivors could benefit from something similar.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, these dogs, and a lot of other dogs in the city, need homes. And the Pit survivors need to, I don’t know, Dr. Michaels would say ‘rediscover positive feelings about themselves.’ Like you have, feeding Sasha and the others. Maybe there’s a way for these dogs and the Pit survivors to help each other.”

Case smiled. Light seemed to slowly infuse him, and Seth could have sworn he got taller. “Yeah.” He nodded as if thinking it through. His smile grew wider. “That’s a great idea. Can I borrow your phone?”

“Sure,” said Seth, a question in his voice.

“I’m going to call Dr. Michaels and ask him about it right now.”

* * *

David printed out the handbill and looked at it. *Haverstock Bookshop: Discreet, Personalized Service and a Wide Selection of Titles for Every Taste*. In the middle of the five-inch-by-four-inch sheet was a list of popular m/m titles and authors. Along the bottom of the flyer ran a couple of testimonials:

“David didn’t just get me what I was looking for, he made me feel great about it too.” – Amanda

“Knowledgeable, professional, and supportive. I trust Haverstock Bookshop.” – Trina

He showed it to Amanda. “What do you think?”

“Perfect. You don’t come right out and say, ‘We sell gay books to women,’ but it comes across loud and clear. And anyone not in the know won’t pick up on a thing. Print out a hundred, and I’ll start passing them out around campus. Oh, and Trina will want some for her book group, and my stylist wants some for her clients.”

“You got it,” said David.

Amanda beamed at him, but inside, he still wasn’t sure that this was going to work.

Just as she was leaving, Mr. Haverstock came in. David froze, his heart sinking with the combined weight of anger, betrayal, and guilt. He hadn’t spoken with Mr. Haverstock since their conversation over the discovered inscriptions, even though his old boss kept shooting him doleful looks on his way to and from the back room. David didn’t know what to say, and he was so short of temper he felt certain he’d lash out and make things even worse. He decided now was a good time to reorganize the photography section, and he headed for the opposite end of the store.

Chapter Eleven

It was the night before the night before Christmas and Seth, David, and Case sat around the kitchen table, eating in near silence.

“So, Case,” said Seth, hoping to lighten the mood. “Tell David your good news.”

“About the dogs?”

“About your new job.”

“New job?” said David.

“Case is a permanent employee at the café now,” said Seth, as pleased as if he’d hired him himself. “Yolanda sent in the paperwork today.”

“You got him a job? At the restaurant?” David stared at Seth as if he’d just admitted to murder. Actually, when he had admitted to murder, David hadn’t been nearly this appalled.

“Well, I didn’t. She asked him.”

“Oh!” David nodded, and it was clear from his tone of voice he was trying to sound happy, but there was no mistaking the look on his face. He was pale, his jaw was stiff, and his nostrils were flared. He was furious. “That’s awesome. Congratulations, Case.”

“Thanks. Excuse me.” Case sidled off to the bathroom. Whether he really had to go or was hiding, Seth couldn’t say.

He wished he could hide too. “What’s wrong?”

David raised his eyebrows. “Wrong? Nothing! What could possibly be fucking wrong? Just because I’m going to be out of work in a few days and instead of helping

me get the job you're thrilled to have it go to some total stranger who was stalking you. What could possibly be wrong?"

"Oh fuck. I didn't think you really wanted that job," he said. "Did you?"

"Jesus, we discussed this. I told you I'm not too proud to wash dishes!"

"No! Of course not." Seth couldn't think of a thing to say that wouldn't make the situation worse.

"You forgot, didn't you?"

"Huh? No."

"You've been so focused on helping him"—David jerked his head in the direction of the bathroom—"you forgot that I'm facing imminent unemployment."

"I didn't really. I thought you'd want something different. But I should have asked you. I'm sorry."

"Unbelievable." David shook his head. The flat look in his eyes was right up there in the top five worst things Seth had ever seen.

"We'll find you a job, David. I promise."

David's eyes went from dead to bright as he fought to keep from crying. He turned his back on Seth, grabbed a book off a shelf, and went into the bedroom. Seth followed him, but David shut the door. Later that night, when Seth came in to go to bed, David was still reading. He didn't say anything, just rolled over and turned on his book light.

* * *

The next morning, when Mr. Haverstock came in, he headed straight to the counter where David sat. "This can't go on," he said. "We need to talk."

David didn't want to talk. Everything was falling apart. He had no idea what to say to Mr. Haverstock. He wasn't even sure how he really felt about everything. And last night, with Seth... He hadn't seriously been pursuing that job. It was just a convenient excuse to get mad. He was a dick.

“The flyers went out several days ago, Mr. Haverstock,” he said, grasping at straws. “But there’s been no appreciable change in business. It’s looking like we’re going to have to close.”

Haverstock nodded and held out a hand. “I know. And that’s awful for both of us, but that’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it.”

A wall of pain seemed to rise in front of David. He could barely move, let alone speak. He turned toward the computer screen so he didn’t have to see the look on Mr. Haverstock’s face. Everything just hurt too much. He couldn’t talk, not now. So he said nothing at all. But every moment the silence wore on, David felt a little bit more of himself dying away. This was wrong. What was he doing?

He was just about to turn around and say something when he heard the door to the back room click shut. Mr. Haverstock had walked away, and David hadn’t even heard it. He put his face in his hands. He wasn’t going to cry. He didn’t deserve that release, anyway. What was wrong with him?

* * *

On Christmas Eve, the Conant Community Café was abuzz with activity. Seth mixed dough for sugar cookies and consulted with Yolanda on the final menu for the big Christmas Day feast.

“We need cranberry sauce,” said Yolanda.

“I found a great recipe for orange-cranberry relish,” said Seth.

“That sounds good, but you know a lot of the people around here are going to want something more traditional.”

He sighed.

She held out her hands. “Creativity is all very good, but when it comes to Christmas, people don’t like to experiment.”

“Can we do both?”

“Yeah, but we’ve already got two kinds of stuffing too. Pretty soon this meal is going to be enormous, and we’re actually expecting a smaller-than-usual crowd ’cause so many people will be going to visit relatives’.”

“Yeah, but we want it to be really nice for the ones who come.”

“You know you’re not going to do anything that’s not nice, hon.”

Seth looked at the menu again. Roast turkey, glazed ham, chestnut stuffing, polenta and rosemary stuffing, green beans almandine, garlic mashed potatoes, butternut squash, baked apples, sugar cookies, and magic cookie bars. It was a lot. “Well, what if instead of just making a big vat of squash, we halve ’em and stuff ’em with the polenta stuffing? That combines two dishes in one.”

“Okay. That’ll work. I’m going to do the ordering now, so this is it. No more changes after this. You want to take another look?”

Seth scanned the list. “It’s good,” he said.

“Okay. I’ll call it in, then. You go see how your boy is coming along with that prep.”

They’d expanded Case’s duties to helping Seth with some basic kitchen prep work like washing lettuce and kneading dough. He was doing well, but at the mention of him, Seth ran his hand through his hair.

“What’s that about?” said Yolanda, sharp as ever. “And by the way, you gotta wash your hands now, you know.”

He gave her an affronted look. “I always do.”

“All right. Things not going so well at home?”

Seth searched for the right words. “I don’t know. I think Case is getting better, but it’s really taking a toll. If I’d known how hard it was going to be on David, I don’t know if I—”

“It was only supposed to be for a few days, right? So, it’s been a few days.”

“What, I just kick him out? On Christmas Eve?”

“No, you take him back to the group home, where he finishes what he started. He can keep working here, and he already knows he’s expected for Christmas, but there’s no need for him to be in your home if it’s putting a wedge between you and your man.”

Seth felt like she’d lifted a huge weight off him. “Yeah. You’re right. Okay.”

He went into the kitchen and found the lettuce washed and the dough for the day’s scones—apple-rum-raisin—resting on the cutting board. But Case was nowhere to be seen.

Seth had a pretty good idea of where he was. Sure enough, when he checked out in the alley, Case was playing with Jack and Tommy while Sasha, lying on a flattened piece of cardboard, watched them. Case tossed a plastic lid to a five-gallon bucket like a Frisbee, and the two dogs ran after it. They played tug-of-war with it for a few minutes before Tommy won and trotted back to Case with it, head held high. Case reached out, and Tommy let him take it from him. *Amazing*. Case straightened, saw Seth, and tossed the plastic lid one more time before walking over. “Hey.”

“You’ve really come a long way with them.”

“Thanks. They’re great, aren’t they?”

Seth stared at him. Not everybody might think so. Some people might see them as dangerous strays, hopeless creatures with no future. But not Case. He stood straight, looking at Seth directly, and there was a light in his eyes. A light Seth had thought he might never see in Case. But there it was, unvanquished.

“You know,” said Case. “I talked to Dr. Michaels about your idea of getting the Pit fighters and the street dogs together in a therapy program?”

“Yeah?”

Case grinned. “Yeah. He loves it. He’s talking today to someone who’s done something similar down in Texas. It sounds like this could really happen!”

Case might have a long way to go, David too, Seth undoubtedly, but the sight of Case looking like he had something to live for filled Seth with boundless optimism. "That's fantastic news! Hey, listen, uh..."

"What's up?"

"Well, do you think you're ready to go back? I mean...if you're not..."

"Oh no. I have to go back now. If I'm going to be doing this program with the dogs, I need to be there. Do you think after work you can drop me off?"

"Sure," said Seth. "But you're still coming for Christmas, right?"

Case's smile turned shy. "I'd be in trouble with the boss if I didn't."

* * *

Seth was taking a break when Mr. Haverstock came into the café. It was unusual enough to see him here, but the look on his face made alarm bells go off in Seth's head. He'd never seen him look so sad. Seth hurried to his side. "Mr. Haverstock. What brings you in?"

"Good afternoon, Seth. May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Is something wrong with David?"

"No. I mean, he's in good health, but he's taking it very hard, and I thought perhaps a word with you might..."

It was the afternoon lull. Lunch was over, and the afternoon coffee rush had not yet begun. "Sure," said Seth. He took Mr. Haverstock's coat and directed him to the table near the kitchen. They both sat down. Case went by with a tub full of dirty dishes. "Case, can you hold down the kitchen for a little bit?"

"Sure."

Mr. Haverstock nodded at him. Case nodded back and disappeared into the utility room.

"New employee?"

"That's Case."

"Ah." The look in his face told Seth that had clarified nothing for him.

"You know, our houseguest. He's working here now. I think it's helping him a lot."

"Houseguest?"

"Well, he's going back to the group home today." Seth sat back. Haverstock gave him a blank look. "David didn't tell you about Case?"

"No."

"Jesus. Well, Case is a former Pit fighter. He ran away from the group home, and he's been staying with us the last few days."

"I see." Haverstock frowned.

"I can't believe he didn't tell you."

"Well, it's not as if there hasn't been plenty going on at the store."

"Yeah, I know. I was so sorry to hear about that. Has business picked up at all?"

"A little bit. Not enough." He looked at Seth closely. "But that's not what I was referring to."

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't said anything to you about the Sabatini books or his father or me?"

Pain tightened around Seth's heart. Whatever this was, it was crucial enough to bring Haverstock over here in the middle of the day to talk about it. But as usual, David had kept Seth in the dark. "No. What?"

"Oh dear." Haverstock sighed.

"What do you mean, the books, his dad, and you?" Anger, warm and bright, eased the cold tightness of his heart.

Haverstock shook his head. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No," said Seth. "I think you'd better tell me everything."

"I don't know, Seth. David is a very private person. If, for whatever reason, he's chosen not to inform you..."

“Inform me of what? Mr. Haverstock—”

“Please call me Carl.”

“Carl. David has been steadily withdrawing from me for weeks. I know something’s wrong, but he won’t talk about it. It’s driving me crazy. I can see he’s in pain, and he won’t let me help. I feel like I’m losing him. If there’s anything you can tell me that might help me reach him, I’m begging you, please tell me.”

Haverstock stood. “You’re going to have to hear it from David or not at all, I’m afraid. My relationship with David is precarious enough as it is. If I disclose information to you that he’s not ready to share... Well, I don’t want to lose him either.”

Seth jumped up. “You can’t just tell me there’s some big thing going on and then not tell me what it is.”

“I’m sorry, Seth. I really am. This was a mistake.” Seth heard him mutter, “Another one.” Haverstock put on his coat. He stopped at the door and turned around. “Please be patient with him. Trust doesn’t come easy for him.”

Seth stared, unbelieving, as Mr. Haverstock left. Incredible. *Trust doesn’t come easy?* After everything they’d been through, David still didn’t trust him? Would he ever? And if not, could Seth live with that?

Chapter Twelve

“Do you have *Ragged* by Ada Bird?”

“I’m looking for *Victim* by Jennifer Truly.”

“Has Vision Weaver published the print edition of *Silver Sin* yet?”

David’s fingers flew across the keys of the computer as he searched for titles and authors, checking availability, ordering books. He’d never, in all the time he’d worked at the bookshop, experienced anything like this.

They’d started arriving in the afternoon. First came Trina, and then, a few minutes later, an African American woman Trina knew from her book club, who introduced herself as Janice. Then Mark and Mark, clearly partners, from the way they argued over who got to read what first. After them, Amanda showed up with three more women—two more book-group members and a friend from her lesbian studies class. After that, David started to lose track.

Now, the store was full, but most of the customers weren’t even browsing the shelves. They were all lined up at the counter, placing orders. Those who weren’t currently being helped chatted animatedly with one another about their favorite authors and books.

“Did you read *Admiral’s Ardor*?” a twentysomething woman in a Wayne State University knit cap asked an older woman with gray curls and a button on her coat that read *Ask me about my grandchildren*.

“Oh yes. I love *Age of Sail*! I hope Fleetfoot Press can continue their line. Did you hear that Books and Baubles broke their agreement with them to stock the books in the romance section?”

“Yeah. In fact, I had a big argument about it with one of the assistant managers at the campus store. But nobody listens.”

“That’s not quite true,” said the grandmother, nodding at David.

He smiled to himself and kept on working. He was getting a crash course in a brand-new genre he knew next to nothing about. M/M romance, or gay romance, or LGBT romance, depending on who you asked, included within it every other romantic subcategory you could think of, from regency to paranormal. There were a lot of different opinions on what the genre should be called and who it was for and why they read it, but two things remained consistent: the books were about men in love with other men, and the readers were passionate about the stories.

Most of them were voracious readers as well. The majority ordered more than one book, and a significant percentage ordered three or more. David kept hearing tantalizing phrases like “that should hold me for a few days” and “I have a busy week, so I’d better just get these four.”

By the time David took care of the last customer, it was well after dinnertime, and he was starving. He fetched his sandwich from the fridge and brought it back to the computer, where he took a look at the long list of orders. They represented more business than they normally did in a month. A lot of the orders were concentrated in just a handful of publishers, and some books had been requested multiple times. *Hmm.*

David finished his sandwich and checked the Web site for Free Impulse. Their business offices were in Oregon, so there was a chance someone might still be there. He picked up the phone and dialed their number. “Hello,” he said to the woman who answered. “I have a bookshop, and I’d like to talk to someone about stocking your titles.”

* * *

David walked home in the winter dark. It was starting to snow, but he felt warm inside. Everyone who’d been in the shop that day had left happy, promising to

come back and to tell their friends about the place. Another few days like that and they'd be in the black again. He couldn't wait to tell Seth the news.

Only when David got home it was to find Seth sitting on the couch glowering. He didn't move as David entered and took off his coat. He just stared at David with that look again. Pissed.

David's stomach tightened. "What's up? Where's Case?"

"Case moved back to the group home," said Seth, with almost no inflection at all.

"Oh. Is that why you're mad? Because I lost it last night?"

"No. Case and I both agreed it was for the best, and nobody's mad at you about last night."

"What, then?"

Seth's bright blue gaze drilled into David like twin laser beams. "You tell me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Haverstock came to the café this afternoon."

David's pulse raced. "He did."

"Yeah. He's worried about you."

"What did he say?" David tried to keep his face and tone neutral. Why, exactly, he couldn't say except that he felt like he was on trial for something, and he wasn't going to give up any more than he had to.

"Not much. Of course, he assumed I already knew. Given how close we supposedly are, it hadn't occurred to him that you hadn't told me."

"Told you what?"

"I don't know. Before he realized his mistake, he mentioned the Sabatini books, your dad, and him. But once he realized I had no fucking idea what he was talking about, he stopped. He wouldn't say any more. So I still don't know."

Seth's accusatory tone baffled David as much as it enraged him. "Wait, you're mad because I haven't told you something, even though you don't know what it is?"

Seth's eyes widened. As if it should be obvious, he held his hands out. "Yeah."

David shook his head. "What the fuck, Seth?"

Seth stood. He did more than stand. He towered. "Even before Haverstock brought it up, I knew something was going on. It's probably the reason you've been such a pain in the ass lately. But every time I've asked you, you've palmed it off on the bookshop closing. You lied."

"Oh, so what, I have to tell you everything, regardless of whether I feel like talking about it?"

"Why wouldn't you want to talk to me? We're supposed to share stuff. But you're shutting me out. I've told you everything, and I don't know shit about you. How your parents died, what really happened in high school. Nothing."

"I didn't realize it had to be tit for tat. Fine. My mom died of ovarian cancer when I was ten, and my dad dropped dead from a heart attack when I was seventeen. What happened in high school? What happened in high school was that I fell for the football captain and got the shit kicked out of me every day. Okay? You happy now?"

"Fuck you! You didn't have to do that."

"Apparently I did. What, now you're telling me you don't want to know? Make up your mind."

"God! Stop twisting everything around. The point is I trust you. I want you to trust me."

"So now you think I don't trust you? Now I have to prove it to you? That doesn't sound like you trust me at all."

Seth ran his hands through his hair and stared at the ceiling.

David's anger was like a freight train. He couldn't stop. "You know, I wanted to tell you about the books and everything. That's why I came home early that day. And then I found you practically making out with another guy on our couch!"

"Don't you dare blame this on Case."

"No? Exactly when was I supposed to talk to you, Seth? In between you hugging him and getting him jobs?"

"Why are you being such a dick? Case needed me."

"And I don't?"

"How would I know?"

They stared at each another. David's anger had finally brought him to a place beyond words. Seth seemed to deflate before his very eyes.

"You know what? This was obviously a mistake," Seth said, grabbing his jacket from the hook beside the door. "I'm sorry I even brought it up. You're right. You don't have to tell me anything. But I don't have to sit here and listen to you twist everything I say into something ugly. I'm taking a walk."

He left.

* * *

Snowflakes drifted down out of a pitch-black sky. They landed on Seth's upturned face, each one a tiny, frozen kiss. Their icy touch and the freezing air cooled Seth's temper but did little to ease his pain. The things David had said, the way he'd looked at Seth when he said them, as if Seth had done something monstrous... But all he'd wanted to do was help! Wasn't that how it was supposed to be between them? Weren't they supposed to help each other? Where had he gone wrong?

Seth didn't really pay attention to where he was walking, but somehow he found himself standing outside of Yolanda and Karine's apartment building. He looked up to the third floor and saw the light on. Maybe he shouldn't bother them on Christmas Eve, but he really needed to talk to someone, and Yolanda was sharp. She'd sussed things out with Case a whole lot better than he had. Maybe she could help him. He rang the bell.

* * *

"You did what?" said Yolanda.

They sat in the living room of the small apartment Yolanda shared with her mother, sister, her niece, and her two nephews. It was strangely quiet, though. Karine, Mrs. Thomas, and the kids were out doing some shopping. Seth sweated a little. "I confronted him about how he'd been holding back on me."

Yolanda stared at him. "Let me get this straight. You *confronted* Blond Hottie, who obviously is about as much of a talker as Case is, about not talking. And this was supposed to what, get him to suddenly open up to you?"

"Well, yeah."

"Uh-huh. Which is why you're here, at my doorstep, instead of at home taking advantage of having the apartment to yourselves again. Oh, Seth."

Seth sighed. "I totally fucked up, didn't I?"

She raised one eyebrow. "So what are you doing crying to me about it? I can't forgive you. Why aren't you making up to him?"

Seth shook his head. The look on David's face, the things he'd said still burned in his memory. "It got really ugly. I had to go. He was... I've seen him mad, plenty of times, but this was different."

"You backed him into a corner, hon."

"I did, didn't I?" How could he have been so stupid?

"Uh-huh. And if you know one thing about Blond Hottie, it's that he's not going to show his belly for anybody. Not even you."

"But he's my boyfriend. We're supposed to share stuff with each other. I wasn't trying to make him roll over, I just wanted to be there for him."

"Hmm." She sat back on the couch and took a sip from her cup of coffee. Seth's sat on the table, untouched.

"What?"

Yolanda gave him a stare that seemed to peel back Seth's skull and peer at the meager contents within. "Well, forgive me, but, I can't help but wonder, if David wasn't ready to talk about this, whatever it is that you were so determined to drag

out of him, then why were you pushing? Is this about you wanting to be there for him, or is it about you needing him to make you feel good about your role in the relationship?"

Seth closed his eyes. "Oh fuck. I—Yeah. You're right. It bugs me that he knows all my shit and he's held my hand every step of the way from the Thai noodles to the courthouse to the nightmares. Yeah. I wanted it to be even."

"And by even, you mean giving David what he's given you, regardless of whether that's what he needs from you at this particular time."

Seth stared at his cooling coffee. "You make it all sound so obvious."

"Nah. It's not obvious. Not when you're in it. It's easy for me to spot it 'cause I got a better view. That's all."

Seth sighed. "Do you think he'll forgive me?"

Yolanda laughed. She could look so severe, but when she laughed, it lit up her whole face. "Of course he will, once he's had a chance to simmer down. How long ago was this?"

"Maybe a half hour."

"Give it another thirty minutes. Come on. Help me wrap some presents for the kids. I'm always doing this kind of stuff at the last minute."

* * *

David sat and stared at the books on the walls. They stared back at him. Every single one of them was a world he could escape to where nothing would be demanded of him. He could sit, safe and comfortable in his big, overstuffed chair, and enjoy the loves and sorrows of the characters with no risk to himself.

And by that same token, he could know the characters inside and out, but none of them would ever know him.

Suddenly, instead of a welcome escape, his library felt like a prison. He got up, grabbed his coat, and left.

He walked. He didn't really pay much attention to where he was going. Mostly he was just trying to outpace Seth's accusing glare. It was hard, because Seth was right. David had been holding out on him.

Oh, there'd been plenty of fodder for excuses, but none of that changed the fact that David just wasn't comfortable talking about himself.

He hadn't been raised that way.

He came to a stop, realizing his feet had led him to Euclid Avenue. The street he grew up on.

And there was his childhood home, a small, red brick bungalow with a white and red metal awning. Only, the awning was gone and someone had planted a crab-apple tree where the little pine had once stood.

David had not been back here since the reception after his dad's funeral. The sight of the place sent a sudden, searing pain through his heart. He could picture his dad perfectly, dressed in cutoff jeans and a T-shirt, mowing the lawn or sitting beside him on the front step as they read the paper together in the lazy warmth of a Saturday afternoon. He'd taught David to read that way. Pointing out words in the articles and having David repeat them. As if his dad were really here, right now, David saw him turn and smile. *Well done, Son. I'm proud of you.*

Despite the chill, the consuming warmth of grief enveloped David. That had been real. Whatever had come later, his father had, at one time, loved him.

How could a person do that? Just turn love on and off like that? Even if he never saw Seth again, he'd never stop loving him.

But that hadn't stopped him from saying some pretty mean things to Seth. Seth had been right. David had twisted his words. He'd made Seth feel bad just for wanting to know what was going on.

He should find Seth, to apologize if nothing else.

* * *

When Seth called David, he got his voice mail. He left a message and headed home.

“David?” he called, unlocking the door. “David, I’m sorry. I—David?” The living room was empty. Seth went into the bedroom. Empty. And the bathroom.

And then Seth saw David’s cell phone sitting on the little table by the door. *Fuck.*

Cold dread congealed in his guts like day-old oatmeal. Where had he gone? Was he planning on coming back? What if something happened to him? Seth had always fancied himself David’s protector, but he suddenly felt very small and vulnerable at the thought of facing life without his blond firecracker.

He took out his phone and called Mr. Haverstock. “Have you seen David?”

“No, not since I left the shop this afternoon. What’s going on?”

“I screwed up. We had a fight. Now he’s gone, and he’s left his phone behind, and I don’t know where he is.”

“Well, have you checked the shop?”

“No. I’ll head over there right now.”

“You might try the café too. I know it’s closed, but he has a key, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. There’s one other place I can think of that he might be. I’ll check there.”

Seth hesitated. He wanted to ask for details, but he’d learned his lesson. “Okay. Thanks.”

“I’m sure he’s all right, Seth. Probably just needed to blow off some steam. If I find him, I’ll call you.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Seth hung up and headed out again.

He hadn’t reached the bottom of the stairs when his phone rang. His heart leaped. Maybe it was David, calling from the shop. “Hello?”

“Seth, it’s Dr. Michaels. Have you seen Case?”

“What?”

“Case is gone again. I thought he might have come back to your place.”

“No. I haven’t seen him. Dr. Michaels, David’s taken off and left his phone behind. We had a big fight. I have to go find him. I’ll keep an eye out for Case too, but—”

“I understand. You go find David. And be careful. And call me later either way, okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Seth paused in the lobby. He made one more phone call. “Yolanda? It’s me. David and Case are both missing.”

Chapter Thirteen

David wasn't at the bookshop, and when Seth entered the café, he didn't see him there either. But he did hear noises coming from the kitchen. Strange noises. Whimpering and a low moaning.

Seth opened the door and saw Case kneeling on the floor.

What was he doing?

"Case?"

"Shhhh, it's okay," Case said softly, not to Seth, but to someone or something in front of him. He turned, and Seth saw the cardboard box behind him with Sasha in it. "Hey. Look who's going to be a mother."

Seth stepped forward just enough to see Case had lined the box with dish towels. Sasha lay on her side, licking a small, squirming creature. Once cleaned of its birth caul, she nudged it toward her belly, where another one was already attached, nursing mightily. With a low groan, Sasha passed a third pup and commenced cleaning it as well.

Case grinned up at him. He'd never seen the young man show such unguarded joy.

Seth didn't know what to say. The sight of those tiny creatures, blind and helpless, watched over by Sasha and Case—it was beautiful. He wished David were here to see it.

"I hope this is okay," said Case. "She was out in the alley, and it's snowing. I brought her in here. I know it's probably against the health code, but I didn't know anyplace else I could take her that was warm, safe, and nearby. We can't move them now, not for at least a few days."

Seth nodded. "We'll just hope the health inspector doesn't come around. It's unlikely this time of year. Hey, Dr. Michaels called. He's worried about you."

Case struck the heel of his hand to his forehead. "Shit. I was only coming to check on her because she'd been acting weird this afternoon, and when I saw her, she was about to whelp. I completely forgot."

"I'll call him. Have you seen David?"

"No. Why?"

"We had a fight. I totally fucked up, and now he's taken off and left his phone behind, and I don't know where he is. I'm starting to freak out."

Case glanced at Sasha. Her contractions had stopped. She had four tiny whelps nursing on her. She rested her head on the bottom of the nest and closed her eyes. "Let's go outside and let her get some rest. The daddies are out there."

They stepped out into the alley. Sure enough, the black dog and the shepherd mix were out in the alley, slinking around the Dumpster and casting anxious looks at the door to the kitchen. "It's okay, guys," said Case. "She's fine, and your pack just grew by four."

It was chilly, but the cool air was refreshing. They sat on a couple of milk crates. "I'm sorry if I caused problems between you guys," said Case.

Seth shook his head. "It's more than that. Something's going on, but he won't tell me what it is. I just want to help him, but he's withdrawing from me more and more. Why won't he talk to me?"

"It hurts too much," said Case.

"What?"

Case looked down the alley, where the dogs were playing. Tommy, the black one, had a bone. Jack, the shepherd mix, tried to get it from him. Because they'd both eaten, it was a game.

"Sometimes talking just seems to make things worse. It's all just feelings and feelings change all the time. Sometimes you hate a person for what they did to you,

and sometimes the same person, you're grateful to for doing some amazing thing that made you actually love them, even though—" He stopped and blew out his breath. Seth stayed silent, listening. "It moves around all the time. It's different things, and you feel differently about it at different times. So what is there to say? How do you talk about something that you can't even describe to yourself?"

Seth's throat thickened with unshed tears. His David was out there somewhere right now, alone and feeling this way. Seth could lose him so easily, because what Case said was true. He'd been demanding of David something that David couldn't give him. At least, not now.

"So what does help?" he asked.

Case nodded at the dogs. "Them. And this," he said, leaning against Seth's arm. "Friends and feeling safe and"—and as he watched the dogs, Seth could feel his whole being leaning out toward them—"having something useful to do."

He sat back and turned to look at Seth. "I never told you the real reason I started following you in the first place."

"That's okay."

"No. I want you to know."

* * *

Since the café was between Euclid and the apartment, David stopped there first. The lights in the front were all dark, but when David circled around to the alley, he saw light coming out from the back door. And in its illumination, Seth sat with Case, deep in conversation.

The sight of them with their heads bowed together stabbed David in the heart. Seth had a bond with Case that David could never share. They were both Pit fighters. Nothing David had ever experienced could compare with what they'd been through.

Maybe he should let Seth go. Every instinct he had urged him to fight for their relationship. But what if he was wrong? What if Seth needed to be with someone

like Case—someone who could really understand him? What if the one thing that stood between Seth and real happiness was David?

Despite himself and the two dogs lingering near the Dumpster, David edged closer, keeping within the deep shadows along the wall.

“I never told you the real reason I started following you in the first place,” Case said to Seth.

“That’s okay.”

“No. I want you to know. It’s going to sound stupid, but I thought if I could see you, watch you in your daily life, maybe I’d be able to figure out how to do it too.”

“How to do it?”

Case nodded. “How to be okay with yourself after everything that’s happened. I thought you had a secret, and if I could figure it out, I could be like you. But what I found out was something else.”

“What?”

“I saw you working at the Conant Café. I saw you joking with your boss and chatting with the customers. I saw you and David together. Everywhere you went, you were surrounded by people who liked you, respected you, relied on you. And I realized you don’t have a secret. Just a lot of people who care about you.”

After a pause, Seth said, “You know, Case, after I escaped from the Pit, I wasn’t okay for a long time. I was a mess.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I had nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks. I was homeless, turning tricks. I was about as far from getting my shit together as you can get. If it hadn’t been for David...” Seth looked out down the alley. “And now, I feel him slipping away from me day by day. He’s there, right in front of me, but it’s like there’s this invisible wall between us, and everything I do to tear it down just makes it wider. I’m losing him, and I don’t know how to stop it.”

David stood frozen in place, stunned by what he'd heard, and the echo of it in his thoughts just minutes ago. How could his father have turned from him? The same way he could shut Seth out. Out of fear, pain, and weakness. What if what Haverstock said was true? What if his dad had never stopped loving him? What if he was so wounded by his past that he couldn't cope with David going through the same thing? So instead of helping David, he freaked out and shut down. He made a mistake. A terrible mistake.

And David was in danger of doing the same thing with Seth.

He stepped out from the shadows into the light cast from the kitchen door. His foot scraped on the concrete, and the dogs turned. They barked.

"Seth," said David, loud, to be heard over the dogs. He'd fight them off if he had to.

Seth stood. Case whistled, and the dogs ceased barking and trotted to him.

"David?" said Seth, and he started toward him.

They met and clung to each other. Seth's arms were warm and strong around him. David sank into Seth's embrace and breathed in his familiar, comforting scent.

"I'm so sorry," they said in unison and laughed.

"But I am," said Seth, resting his head on top of David's. "I never should have pushed you."

David squeezed him. "Yeah, but I should have told you what was going on, right then, that first day I found out, Case or no Case."

Seth's sigh ruffled David's hair. "That's another thing. I let myself get distracted. I should have been focusing on you."

"Well, that would have been kind of hard, since I was avoiding telling you about anything. Besides, don't ever regret wanting to help someone, Seth. It was hard, and maybe the timing wasn't great, but look."

They parted to see Case down at the end of the alley, playing with the dogs. "Sasha had puppies," said Seth.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I was looking for you. I went to the bookshop, and you weren’t there. I tried here because I couldn’t think of anyplace else, and I found Case in the kitchen, playing midwife to Sasha and her litter. Want to see ’em?”

“Absolutely.”

* * *

David felt so good in his arms. Seth wouldn’t let him go. He kept his arm around David’s waist, tucking him close against his side. Case had already gone back into the kitchen. He knelt beside Sasha and the puppies as David and Seth leaned in the doorway. They were all sleeping, the mother curled around her pups, their little chests rising and falling, rising and falling.

“Beautiful,” whispered David. And then chuckling. “It’s just like the nativity.”

Seth barely suppressed a guffaw. “Does that make us the wise men?”

“No. The fools.”

“Well, I’m a very lucky fool, then.”

“So am I,” said David. He arched up, and Seth leaned down to meet him. Their lips met in a kiss as gentle and insistent as the snowfall outside. David’s breath was like a benediction, and Seth drank it in. He couldn’t get enough. He pressed harder, sliding his tongue past David’s lips to taste his mouth. And his cell phone rang.

He was going to ignore it, but David broke their kiss and said, “You were looking for me, you said. How many people did you call and tell I was missing?”

Seth groaned. “Just about everyone we know.”

David clapped him on the shoulder. “Then you’d better get that.”

It was Mr. Haverstock, sounding harried. “Have you found him? I checked at his father’s old place, but he wasn’t there. I’m on my way to the bookshop right now, in case he doubled back.”

“He’s here. He’s fine, Mr. Haverstock. I think he’d like to talk to you. Can you stop by the café?” Seth’s phone beeped. “Oh hang on, there’s another call. Just come over.”

“If you’re sure it’s not an intrusion.”

“I’m sure.”

The other call was Yolanda, followed quickly by Dr. Michaels.

“In about ten minutes, this place is going to be packed,” said Seth, closing his phone and putting it in his pocket. “Everybody’s coming over. They’ve all been out looking for either you, me, or Case, and apparently, they want to see for themselves that we’re all okay.”

“In that case,” said David, “come with me.” He led Seth to the utility room and closed the door. He steered Seth to the stepladder in the corner, sat him down on it, and got into his lap. “I said some really shitty things to you, before.”

“Well, I’d backed you into a corner.”

“Yeah, but that’s not how I wanted to tell you about my folks. And in a few minutes, Mr. Haverstock will be here, and I have to apologize to him too, and I still haven’t told you anything.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But I want to. I want you to know.”

The only light in the utility room came from a little window high in the wall. A streetlight cast a pale glow that outlined David’s fine features in silver. He looked so beautiful—an ice prince. But the kingdom he’d ruled over for so long was a lonely one. As he told of his father’s reaction to finding out he was gay, Seth began to comprehend how lonely. David related it all in measured tones, as if it were a perfectly reasonable story about people behaving reasonably. But Seth wanted to bring David’s father back to life just so he could strangle him.

“So he was gay all along, and he still rejected you? What a—” Seth stopped himself.

“I know, it sounds bad.”

Even now, David couldn't let himself show how much he hurt. Seth cupped his cheek. “David.”

He leaned into Seth's palm. His eyes fluttered closed, and the pain Seth had sensed in him for so many days finally broke across his face, a sheet of ice cracking. Seth pulled him close, and he buried his face in Seth's neck.

“I thought he didn't love me anymore,” he said, his voice muffled. Seth felt little spots of wetness on his neck, but this was David. There was no deluge. Instead he held on to Seth tight while he breathed deep and exhaled hard.

Seth held him back, and by degrees, he relaxed. He sat back and sniffed. Tears still glittered in his eyes like ice crystals. “But now, I think he always loved me. He was just really fucked-up. I could never see that before because I thought the world of him, you know? Only looking back on it, he was kind of unrealistic. He had all these grand ideals about what it meant to be a man, but he couldn't really deal with the people who mattered the most to him. And he didn't know how to handle being queer. No wonder he didn't have the first clue what to do for me.”

Seth still didn't see how that justified not cherishing David. How could anyone, much less a parent, not appreciate David's courage and generosity?

“So he made a terrible mistake. And he died before he could find his way to correcting it.” David smiled, and the curve of his lips seemed to encompass all the mingled love and pain of a complicated relationship. He took Seth's hand and squeezed it. “When I heard you talking to Case outside, I realized I'd been doing the same thing, turning away from you, not because I don't love and trust you, but because”—he shrugged—“because I was in pain, and I didn't know how else to deal with it.”

Comprehension made Seth's voice thick with jumbled feelings. “But you came back to me. And he was your dad, and he should have been there for you no matter what.”

“Yeah, he should have,” said David, “but I don’t know. I’m tired of being angry about it. I want to remember the good stuff too.”

They looked at each other. Seth found himself close to tears, moved by all David had been through, and grateful he had the opportunity to help make the rest of his life full of love and friendship.

And passion. He held David close. David leaned in, and they kissed again. He stroked David’s back with long, slow caresses. David straddled his lap and pressed against him. Their kiss became more urgent. David ran his hands down Seth’s back and up again, through his hair, making his scalp tingle.

David’s mouth was so sweet. His taste, the hungry caress of his lips, his roaming hands—all of it filled Seth with a heady mix of tenderness and arousal. He longed to show David how much he was loved. He poured himself into kissing him, stroking his tongue. The whimper David made deep in his throat made Seth’s cock fill.

David flexed his hips and pressed his firm length into Seth’s belly. “It’s been a while,” he said.

“Yeah. Longest we’ve ever gone. But...” He looked over David’s shoulder to the door. Light poured into their little hideaway from the crack at the bottom, and Seth could see shadows moving. Muffled voices could be heard too. “There are people out there.”

“I don’t care,” said David.

Seth pulled back and looked at him. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Here,” he said, unzipping Seth’s jeans, then his own. “Scooch down a little and lean back against the wall.”

David braced his knees on either side of Seth’s thighs and tilted his hips forward even more so their cocks brushed against each other. The warmth and friction made Seth’s hands and feet tingle, and a sweet knot formed in the pit of his stomach. David gripped Seth’s shoulder with one hand and gathered their cocks in the other. Seth caught his breath and flexed up into David’s touch.

“Remember our very first time together? On the couch? This was all we did, and it was amazing,” said David.

Seth remembered. It seemed so long ago. Almost as if it had happened to somebody else. He’d been so different then and so certain he could be nothing more for David than a one-night stand. How long had it taken him to accept that someone could love him? “I’m sorry for being impatient with you.”

“Shh.” David kissed him. “No more apologies. Come on. Time for you to make it up to me.”

David closed his eyes and sighed as Seth clasped hands with him, and they stroked their cocks together. He leaned to one side and nestled his face in the crook of Seth’s neck. Seth’s body was warm and strong beneath him. The steamy friction of Seth’s cock against his made his toes curl. They stroked each other together with long, firm pulls that made David’s stomach muscles tighten with need. Everything between them was vivid, solid, and real. As it always had been, only he’d been lost in the past.

How could he have lost sight of what was right in front of him? Seth, their life together, the daily joy and comfort of loving and being loved. To let past hurts blind him to the great gift he’d been given—it seemed sacrilegious. Only, he’d been granted grace, and they were here together now, rubbing off on each other in the utility room, while on the other side of the door their friends were gathering, probably perfectly aware of what was taking them so long. And the biggest miracle of all was that he didn’t care.

The feel of Seth’s cock against his, the friction of their heated skin, and the stroking of their fingers made the tingling ball of warmth coalescing in his belly tighten. His balls drew up. It had been days.

“David,” whispered Seth, “I’m gonna come.”

“Me too.” He raised up and kissed Seth, locking their mouths together. Seth arched up, and David pressed down, and the warmth and pleasure in his belly

sweetened past all endurance. They bucked against each other as they came, moans muffled in each other's mouths, cum spilling all over their hands and their cocks.

Spent, David rested against Seth, who held him loosely. Outside the door, they clearly heard Case say, "Oh, don't go in there. Trust me."

David laughed and Seth joined in. They cleaned up with paper towels and helped each other put their disheveled clothes back to rights. Seth held the doorknob. "You ready?"

"Yeah," said David. "Let's go."

Chapter Fourteen

Their exit from the utility room was a bit anticlimactic. Case was in the kitchen with Karine and her children, Tanisha, Darien, and Oscar. David heard him say, “You can look, but no touching. They’re too young.”

Yolanda was in the dining room talking with Mr. Haverstock. She glanced over at them and gave them a sardonic smile. “Well, I’m glad you two got yourselves sorted out, finally.”

David nodded sheepishly and then looked past her to Mr. Haverstock, who gazed back at him uncertainly. David started toward him, but before he could get there, someone knocked on the door, and a voice shouted, “What’s going on in there? If you’re breaking into my favorite restaurant, I’m calling the police.” It was Mr. Scarpelli.

Seth got the door. “It’s okay. Nobody’s breaking in. We’re all just...” He shrugged. “Why don’t you come in?”

He did. “The Lowinskis will be along,” he said. “I called them when I saw that something was going on over here.”

Mr. Haverstock’s phone rang. “Hello, Ida. Yes, he is.” He looked at David. “Yes, he appears to be fine... You do? Well, we’re at the café, but... Okay, all right. We’ll see you soon, then.” Haverstock closed his phone. “Ida stopped by the store shortly after you called,” he told Seth. “She’s coming over with her fruitcakes. I’m afraid there was no stopping her.”

“Ida?” said Mr. Scarpelli. “Ida who?”

Before Haverstock could answer, Seth said, “No stopping her? She’s more than welcome. She’s bringing that fruitcake I’m always hearing about?”

“Yes. It’s very good.”

“Great!”

Haverstock nodded slowly. “I’m glad you’re pleased.” He glanced at David again, a question in his eyes.

David was about to go talk to him, but then Karine came out of the kitchen with a jug of cider. “David, honey, will you help me pour?”

Moments later, the Lowinskis arrived. “What’s all this?” asked Mrs. Lowinski.

“Almost-Christmas party,” announced Karine.

There was another knock on the door, and Mr. Scarpelli answered it. “Ida?” he said, stunned. “Ida!”

Mrs. Pinkerton’s eyes lit up. “Alfonso Scarpelli, as I live and breathe! How long has it been?”

“Far too long!”

“Don’t blame me,” she said. “You moved.”

“I did. And now I’m back. And you?”

“I live in the same house I grew up in. Still has the broken slat in the fence where you used to sneak in.” She shook her head, laughing, with tears in her eyes. “My, my.”

“You two know each other?” asked Mr. Haverstock.

“Carl, this is Alfonso. We were next-door neighbors when we were kids.” Ida wiped her eyes and turned back to Mr. Scarpelli. “It is so good to see you!” They embraced.

“Let’s make cookies!” shouted Tanisha.

“Those are for tomorrow,” said Yolanda. “So’s that.” She pointed to the jug as Karine poured Mrs. Lowinski a glass.

“Aw, come on, Yol. We’re all here now. Ain’t that worth celebrating?”

Yolanda looked around at all of them, and her gaze landed on Case. Nothing was said, but the way they looked at each other, David got the distinct impression his fears about Seth taking up with Case had been even more ludicrous than he'd thought. "Yeah. You're right, Sis," said Yolanda. "We got plenty to celebrate right now."

Mr. Scarpelli helped Ida serve the fruitcake—apricot, raisin, citron, and almond, while Seth and the Lowinskis put a couple of tables together to make a cookie-decorating station.

David headed to where Mr. Haverstock still stood by the window. Another knock sounded just as he passed the door. *Good God, now who?*

"David, hon, can you get that?" said Yolanda. She and Case were busy bringing cookie-decorating supplies out from the kitchen.

David opened the door. It was Dr. Michaels.

"David," he said, "Good to see you." He looked into the room. "Oh my. I didn't know there was a party going on. I came to see if Case was here."

"Oh shi—dang," said Seth. "I was going to call you."

Case came forward. "I'm sorry, Dr. Michaels. I was only going out for a second to check on Sasha, but she was having puppies and..."

Dr. Michaels broke into a grin. "Puppies?"

Case smiled back. He had a really brilliant smile when he was happy. "Yeah, want to see 'em?"

As they headed to the kitchen, David turned back to Mr. Haverstock.

"I don't have to stay," his boss said. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and I can see that you are, so..."

"No!" David reached out and grabbed Mr. Haverstock by the arm. He pulled him into a hug. "No. I owe you an apology."

Mr. Haverstock hugged him back. He was warm, and he smelled like paper. “On the contrary, David. I’m the one who should apologize. You were right. I should have come out to you a long time ago.”

“But you promised...”

He shook his head. “A promise to a dead man? How can that be more important than helping a living friend? He also made me promise to look out for you, remember?”

David shrugged. “Well, maybe we’ve both been blinded by the past.”

“But not anymore.” Mr. Haverstock accepted a glass of cider from Karine, downed it in one, and cleared his throat. “Excuse me, everyone.” Case and Dr. Michaels emerged from the kitchen. Everyone fell silent. Haverstock paled but went on. “I have an announcement to make. A very brief one, but it’s long overdue. I’m gay.”

There was a brief moment of stunned silence, and then Karine shouted, “Woo-hoo! You go, Mr. Haverstock!”

“Yeah!” yelled Seth. “Booksellers are hot!” And then everyone was clapping and cheering, even old Mr. Scarpelli.

Mr. Haverstock turned bright pink. David put an arm around him. “You okay?”

“Yes, I think so. I imagine it, uh, takes a bit of getting used to.”

David snorted. “Yeah, I guess that’s right.”

Dr. Michaels wandered over. “That was very brave of you,” he said to Mr. Haverstock.

“Thank you?”

Dr. Michaels smiled. David had only spent a little time with him. He hadn’t noticed the way he smiled before. It lit up his whole face. Behind his black-framed rectangular glasses, his eyes twinkled. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Jim Michaels. I’m Seth’s counselor, and I work with Case and the other survivors from the Pit.”

“Ah yes. A pleasure to meet you, sir. I’m Carl Haverstock of Haverstock Bookshop.” They shook hands. Mr. Haverstock’s old-fashioned manners took over, and he seemed to get his bearings. “Seth says great things about you. I know we all appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“Well, Seth and the other survivors do the heavy lifting. I just facilitate.” Dr. Michaels nodded to where Case was heading back toward the kitchen to check on Sasha and the pups. “So much has happened so quickly. Have you heard about Seth and Case’s idea about using the dogs as therapy animals?”

“No,” said Mr. Haverstock, “But I read a fascinating article about a similar program in Texas where convicts are training service dogs for disabled veterans and children. Apparently, it’s very effective for everyone. The dogs are a big help to their disabled owners, and training them is helping the inmates to rehabilitate.”

Dr. Michaels’s eyes lit up with excitement. “That’s the organization I spoke with!” He leaned in and touched Mr. Haverstock on the elbow. “The director is going to work with us to set up something similar for the Pit survivors.”

“That’s wonderful!”

The conversation might have ended there, but Dr. Michaels was still staring at Mr. Haverstock, smiling, and Mr. Haverstock smiled back. Between the two of them, the twinkling was getting blinding. Bemused, David began to fade away, but as he left, he heard Dr. Michaels say, “So, Seth’s mentioned you’re interested in rare books. I’m a bit of a collector myself. I wonder if you’d like to come over sometime and see my first-edition modernists?”

David wandered over to where Seth, Mrs. Lowinski, and the kids were making cookies. Seth was in his element, smudged with flour, his hands and arms peppered with little dots and streaks of chocolate from the sprinkles. Oscar had clearly gotten into the red sugar. It coated his mouth, and he grinned. Meanwhile, Mrs. Lowinski helped Darien extricate a Christmas tree from its cookie cutter.

“We’re making a cookie family,” said Tanisha. “Uncle David, you have to help.” She grabbed his hand and dragged him to a chair. “You sit here.”

“Okay.” David obeyed.

She held up her arms. “Now pick me up.”

David hoisted her into his lap. “See,” she said, pointing to several cookies that had already been cut out and decorated. “That’s Uncle Seth and that’s Auntie Yolanda and that’s you!”

The figure had yellow sprinkles for hair and two cinnamon candies for eyes. “Is that what I look like?” he asked.

She looked up at him and grinned. “Yep! Now you have to help me make the rest. We need one for Mama and one for Darien and one for Oscar and one for Case and one for Mrs. Lowinski and one for...one for everyone!”

David looked over her head at Seth, who laughed and raised his eyebrows. “She’s in charge.”

“Well, what if we make one for you now,” said David, “and tomorrow after you get up in the morning and open your presents from Santa, then you can come back here and we’ll make the rest?”

She considered it. “Hmm. Okay.”

By the time the first batch of cookies came out of the oven, Oscar had already had a sugar meltdown and then crashed, and Darien and Tanisha were both rubbing their eyes. “I’m taking my babies home so Santa can come and do his thing.” Karine lifted Oscar onto her hip.

“Yes, it’s getting late,” said Mr. Scarpelli. “I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s right. The Christmas dinner.” Seth checked the time and cast David an apologetic glance. “There’s not much point in going home. The turkey has to go in the oven in another two hours.”

“Go home,” said Yolanda. “Case and I have got it.”

“You sure?”

“I am absolutely sure. Somebody’s got to stay and watch over the new mother and her babies, and I know Case isn’t leaving them. I might as well just sit up too. I

had too much cider. I'll put the turkey in and baste it and all that. I don't promise it'll be as good as yours, but it'll be good enough. Besides, you need to get Blond Hottie alone in the privacy of your apartment so you don't go getting nasty in the utility room again. I've got enough for the health inspector to fine me for as it is without that shit going on."

* * *

They walked home hand in hand. The falling snow blanketed the city in white, and all was silent but for the gentle whisper of the snowflakes landing. David rested his head on Seth's shoulder, and Seth put an arm around him. David soaked in the warmth of Seth's proximity, the *crunch* of their footsteps, and the beauty of this night. He was so grateful for all of it. He wanted to remember it forever.

They got back to the apartment. It seemed to welcome them with its cozy warmth. The books on the shelves were back to being old friends again, no longer jailers now that he'd found the key to his self-imposed prison.

Seth shut the door behind them and turned to David. His gaze was intense, warm, irresistible. He stepped closer and unzipped David's coat. David reached to do the same for him, but Seth pulled him in close and kissed him.

Seth's lips were gentle but insistent. The way Seth probed David's mouth with his tongue made David feel he was being claimed. And since it was by Seth, that was okay. More than okay.

Seth cradled the back of David's head in one hand and tugged David's jacket off with the other. David relaxed. It felt good to let Seth take care of him. It didn't make him feel weak or helpless at all, just loved.

Seth shucked off his jacket and then began unbuttoning David's shirt. Each time he undid a button, he placed a kiss on the newly exposed flesh. A kiss at David's collarbone, another just above the neck of his undershirt, another at midchest through the thin cotton fabric. The kisses left a trail of tingling sparks behind, running down his body in a line, all the way to...

Seth knelt, his face level with David's belt. He looked up, smiling mischievously. David ran his hands through Seth's dark, silky hair. It was damp from the snow, beaded with the glittering droplets of melted snowflakes. He wanted to pull Seth to his feet and drag him into the bedroom, but he didn't. He waited to see what Seth would do next.

Seth seemed to make up his mind all of a sudden, and he stood. He picked David up in his arms. David hadn't expected that. By reflex, he put his arms around Seth's neck. He was surrounded by Seth's strength and warmth. It felt good. He pressed his face to the crook of Seth's neck and kissed him. Seth had a smudge of powdered sugar just below his jaw, and David licked it.

"Mmm. You taste like cookies," he said.

Seth's laugh rumbled through his chest and into David, sending more warm tingles shooting through his body. "And you taste like banana-cream pie, remember?"

David remembered. When Seth was learning to read and write, David had given him a notebook and suggested he practice his writing in it. And he had, producing pages and pages of sentences like "David is a hottie" and "David's ejaculate tastes like banana-cream pie."

Now, Seth carried him into the bedroom and laid him down on the bed. Seth got undressed. David watched, breathless, as more and more of Seth's beautiful body was revealed. It made David hard just to look at him.

When he was done, he knelt on the bed and undid David's jeans. David reached up and ran a hand across Seth's chest, tracing the scar over his heart where a bullet had very nearly ended his life. Their eyes met, and without words, the truth was plain. Seth had taken that bullet protecting David. David had brought Seth in from the cold and given him a chance at a new life. Seth had rescued David from a gang of men who wanted to rape him. David had made sure Seth had legal representation and stayed out of jail. Seth had persevered through David's silence

and anger, and David had found his way back to him. They saved each other over and over again. They did it now, as they would for the rest of their lives.

Seth took David's cock in hand. David sighed and seemed to sink deeper into the mattress. Seth stroked him, strong fingers kindling a warm glow in the pit of his stomach. Then Seth sank between his thighs.

Seth's lips, so soft and full, wrapped David's length in moist heat. Seth's tongue danced up the underside of David's straining shaft and licked at that spot just below the crown, where any touch seemed to send sparks shooting up David's body and outward, all the way to his fingers and toes. David grabbed the sheets and moaned.

"Mmmm." Seth's low voice reverberated through David's cock and into his balls. He lifted up, stroking David with lips and tongue, and then slid back down. The warm glow in the pit of David's stomach became a fire.

David wanted Seth to fuck him. He wanted it bad, but he wasn't going to demand it. He didn't imagine his dominant streak would just go away. He didn't want it to. And he really wanted Seth to fuck him. But this night, he wanted Seth in charge more. He lay back and closed his eyes, savoring the slick glide of Seth's mouth on his cock and the unaccustomed sensation of leaving the decisions to someone else.

Seth sucked David for what felt like an eternity, but just as David thought for sure he'd come, Seth lifted off him. He sprawled full length at David's side, leaning over him to grab the lube from the bedside table. As he squeezed a dollop onto his fingers, David rolled to face him and reached down. He stroked Seth's cock. He loved the way it felt in his hand, big and hard, but covered in the softest skin, like velvet.

Seth drew a sharp breath and then released it with a sigh. He lifted David's top leg, pushing the knee up to his chest. As his fingers found David's cleft, Seth leaned in, capturing David's mouth in a kiss. Seth's tongue and fingers did a dance David knew and loved. Licking and stroking, scissoring and fluttering, the two

conspired to turn David into a warm puddle of goo. It was always effective, but tonight David found himself more relaxed than he'd ever imagined was possible. Every tension, fear, and hurt just seemed to float away on a warm tide of pleasure. He felt surrounded by Seth, protected, loved.

Seth rolled him onto his back, and David moved as if he didn't have a bone left in his body. Well, except for one. His cock was rock hard and leaking precum. A drop hit his belly. David expected it to evaporate from the intense heat building in his abdomen.

Seth crouched over him and kissed him again. "I love you."

"I love you."

Seth lubed himself up and guided his cock to David's hole. The head pressed against him, hot and slippery. "Oh, David," Seth gasped as he pushed in.

Seth's cock filled David with pleasure. The expression of tenderness and rapture on Seth's face made David's heart swell. And the heat and pressure at the base of David's cock warmed him all the way through, melting every icy vestige of his lonely past.

Seth moved slowly at first, long, languorous strokes that glided over David's prostate and made waves of joy ripple back and forth through his body, from his ass all the way out to his fingers, toes, and scalp and back again. David rocked on the ecstatic tide. "Oh God, Seth."

"Yeah." Sweat glistened on Seth's face and chest. His pace quickened. The musky smell of their lovemaking perfumed the room. David's head spun with all the sensations and feelings rolling through him, but when Seth reached down and stroked David's cock, it all coalesced into a perfect point in the center of that ball of heat at the bottom of David's belly. Everything rushed inward, the tingling in his hands and feet, the gentle waves of pleasure, the sharp sparks of delight, even the heady smells and the intoxicating sounds of Seth's moaning. All of it poured at once into one spot at the base of David's cock. And of course it was too much for him to

hold. Too much pleasure, too much joy, too much love. It overflowed, and David came, bucking helplessly in Seth's grip, around Seth's cock. "Seth!"

Seth shouted wordlessly and thrust in hard. David felt his cockhead swell as he came, ejaculating deep inside David's body.

They clung together through the aftershocks. Seth got his arms under David, and David wrapped his around Seth's back, and they pressed against each other, as close as they could get. Seth's warm breath puffed in David's ear. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

"Silent night, holy night..." Somewhere in the building, someone was playing Christmas carols. "Do you hear that?" Seth asked.

"Yeah. It's a beautiful song, but I think the silent part is kind of overrated."

Seth laughed and kissed him. They pulled up the covers and went to sleep in each other's arms.

 THE END 

Loose Id Titles by Jessica Freely

Amaranth & Ash

Hero

Rust Belt

The Ice Prince

The AWAKENINGS Series

Virgin

Instinct

Jessica Freely

Jessica Freely has been writing and publishing genre fiction under a variety of names for over fifteen years, but it wasn't until she stumbled upon a stash of Jay and Silent Bob fanfiction that she found her true calling: male/male romance. She hasn't looked back since.