

Secondhand Heart



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To all those who give so others can live. Your spirit will live on.

Chapter 1

THE coffee was good that morning, as it had been every other morning that week since Christian had started coming here on his way to work, but it did nothing to dispel the cloud lingering low over him or the aching in his chest. Some days it was worse than others; today was definitely a bad day.

The palm trees and the glorious Southern California summer sun made no difference. If anything, they made him hurt more.

He glanced around the cafe, people watching, trying to distract himself, trying not to dwell on how he had woken alone once again and pressed his face into the empty pillow next to him. The bell above the door jingled and a man entered wearing jeans and a black T-shirt with a Metallica logo. He was a little shorter than Christian, a little less muscular, and a whole lot paler, his skin virtually translucent on the most exquisite face Christian had ever seen. Christian didn't realize he was staring as this ghostly man walked to the counter, digging in his pocket for change.

As he looked down at the silver in his hand, jet-black hair fell over his eyes and he reached up to brush it back. Suddenly the man looked up. Christian's heart seemed to stutter to a halt as large, pale-green eyes met his. The man did not look away but stared in return and then slowly, to Christian's absolute shock, he smiled, a dazzling smile, all white teeth and glittering eyes.

Christian dropped his gaze back to his coffee in confusion. He had no idea why this stranger had just smiled at him or why his heart was hammering like it would burst through his ribs and bounce out onto the table in glee. Random people didn't smile at him in coffee shops, and he didn't smile at random people. Christian didn't smile anymore, period.

A shadow fell over his table, and he looked up, finding the stranger suddenly so close that that troublesome heart of his seemed to clench and tense along with his whole body. He had only had that feeling once before in his life, and he had never expected it again.

"Hi," the man said. Up close his coloring was even more stunning. His face was even whiter, his hair blacker than black, his eyes like endless, shimmering pools of sea water.

Christian stared mutely. He did not know why the man was bothering him; he only hoped he would go away as quickly as he had arrived.

The man seemed nervous. He gestured to Christian's cup. "Can I buy you another?"

Christian looked down at his coffee and then back up at the stranger blankly. He frowned in confusion. He only ever had one cup here and he only ever stayed twenty minutes. Why would he want another cup and why would this man want to buy it? His frown turned to a glare. Why exactly would he want to even approach within a hundred yards of a man who had such a tight blanket of grief wrapped around him that even people on the street sidestepped him? Couldn't he see that Christian belonged to a dead man? What gave him the right to blatantly approach Christian in public and think he could just take what he wanted, offering his coffee as some sort of cheap bribe?

"I don't come here to get picked up by strange men," he said coldly.

The stranger blinked a little and the hopeful expression fell from his face. A flood of blood enveloped his pale cheeks. He turned away quickly, head down, almost scurrying to the door, clutching at his coffee, setting off down the street without looking back.

Christian sat back in his chair. *Asshole. Just because you're having a bad day, doesn't mean you have to ruin someone else's.*

HE HAD only been in the office five minutes when his phone rang. Eban had called him every day at the same time since Christian started back at work four days ago. Christian had inherited Eban. He had been Conrad's best friend, not Christian's, but out of all the things Conrad had left behind, Eban was definitely the best. As strong and solid on the inside as he was on the outside, Eban had been the very rock that had held Christian up for the past six months.

"How was your coffee?" This had been Eban's standard question as the week had worn on and Christian had fallen into the coffee shop routine. It was a little teasing, and Eban had asked him the previous day if he behaved like Jack Nicholson's character in *As Good As It Gets* when he went into the coffee shop.

No, I don't take my own cutlery or ask Jews to move from my favorite table, Christian had responded sardonically. Eban had hooted with laughter.

"The coffee was fine," Christian told him. "The company not so good. Some random guy tried to pick me up."

"Wow!" Eban said enthusiastically. "That's great. Was he hot?"

Christian didn't expect Eban's reaction to be so encouraging. He expected him to be as angry and outraged as Christian was. "It's not funny. I found him offensive."

"Why? *Was* he offensive?"

“He....” Christian hesitated, suddenly feeling foolish. “Wanted to buy me a cup of coffee.”

Eban was silent a moment. “That’s it? That was his pickup line?”

“Yeah.” Christian wished he’d never brought it up now.

“And you found that offensive?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Christian was silent. How stupid he must appear to Eban. His gaze fell on the picture of him and Conrad which still graced his desk. Taken a year ago, it was the two of them standing on the edge of a cliff with the endless blue of the ocean behind them. They had gone away to some remote island in Greece with Eban and his then-partner Damien. Damien had taken the picture. The reason Christian was laughing so much in it was that Conrad had whispered in his ear that he was going to take a picture of Damien and Eban next and encourage Damien to stand too close to the edge.

Now Damien was gone as well as Conrad, and Eban was as alone as Christian. Christian put it in the drawer of his desk. “See you later,” he told Eban and hung up.

The picture had already been in the drawer of his desk when Christian started back at work after six months on personal leave; he had taken it out on Monday morning. Some thoughtful colleague had evidently put it there, most likely Jack, who he shared a desk with at the Newport Beach publisher’s office. It was unlikely to be Marcus, his flippant and often downright strange boss, who thought the world revolved around him. He ran a relaxed ship, often to the point of horizontal as evidenced by the snores which emitted from his office on a regular basis. Marcus didn’t give a damn about the company and did as little work as possible. Instead, he paid his employees a generous wage to make sure they kept it—and *him*—afloat.

Marcus had been one of the men to carry Conrad’s coffin. Christian had almost laughed hysterically when Marcus’s skinny frame had taken position with one edge of the coffin on his shoulder. He expected his boss’s legs to buckle, for him to unbalance the other men, and for the coffin to crash to the ground, Conrad’s impeccably dressed body rolling from it, a smirk on his beautiful lips because Conrad would actually have found it hilarious to be dropped from his coffin at his own funeral.

“Hey.”

Christian looked up. Jack was probably his closest friend after Eban and also helped carry the coffin, which had doubled the amusement, what with Jack being almost a foot shorter than Marcus. The only people who looked capable of holding Conrad up were Damien and Eban, and even Eban looked

like he might drop his end any minute as his lip trembled and his face grew ever more ashen. But he still did a better job than Christian, who had refused to help, and had instead trailed behind. Or rather, behind Conrad's parents, who stoically ignored him.

Jack was a surfer dude with an infectious smile, his hair as white as his teeth from the sun. "How was your coffee?"

Christian groaned, switching his computer on. "Don't you fucking start."

"What did I say?" Jack perused another one of Marcus's regular, pointless memos before crumpling it up and tossing it into the trash. This was actually Marcus's main act as boss. Not many of them made sense. Often they related to the work bathroom, chastising men for leaving the seat up or women for using the last of the toilet paper then not bothering to inform someone the dispenser was empty.

Usually they were written under the influence of alcohol or illicit substances. Many a time in a bar after work, Marcus barked at Christian, who always had a pen in his top pocket, "*Take a memo!*" And Christian would have to scramble for the nearest beer mat and scribble down some incomprehensible rant.

Marcus would pretend to read it over, nod in satisfaction, then pocket the mat. He would later type it up at home, even more drunk, and morning would find the office scratching their heads as they tried to decipher the misspelled words, poor grammar, and complete lack of punctuation. Often Marcus used the word "bitches" to open his memos when drunk rather than the standard "To all staff." Often he peppered his memos with swear words and random slang phrases such as "dude" and "ho." Often he threatened to "kick all your asses" if his action wasn't carried out. Usually no one could work out what the action was that he was asking for, though, and they whispered amongst themselves before feeding the memo through the shredder while casting guilty looks at their boss's door.

A smile came unbidden to Christian's face when he remembered that one of Conrad's favorite questions when greeting him after a hard day at the office was, "Get any memos from your boss?" And Christian would usually produce a slip of paper he had stuffed into his pocket for Conrad's entertainment, while all his colleagues put theirs instantly in the trash. Conrad would wipe tears from his eyes as he read it, then kiss Christian and thank him.

"You're smiling," Jack remarked. "The coffee must have been really good."

Christian looked up guiltily, the smile swallowed by a frown. He shook his head. He was about to mention his harassment by the stranger but thought better of it. Eban already thought he was an idiot; Jack surely would too.

EBAN was busy stirring a pot of something delicious when Christian got home. He tossed his briefcase and jacket on the couch then made his way to the kitchen, pausing at the door as he always did when he saw Eban wearing Conrad's apron.

He went to the fridge, taking out a bottle of wine. "Someday you're going to make someone a fine husband, Eban."

"Not going to happen." Eban looked over his shoulder with a wicked smirk. "I'm committed to cock."

Christian laughed as he got two glasses out. His gaze lingered on Eban's profile as he went back to his stirring. He would be a liar if he said he wasn't attracted to Eban. He was beautiful. With his startling, amber-colored eyes and jet-black, carefully styled hair, he couldn't walk down the street without having people stop and stare. He would be a liar if he said he hadn't imagined crawling into Eban's bed during his loneliest moments after Conrad's death. Christian might have thought about it, but the idea in reality was shocking and wrong. Eban had been Conrad's best friend and now he was Christian's.

And besides, Eban was brokenhearted too. Damien, who Eban had been with five years, had dumped him only two weeks after Conrad's death. Suddenly Christian's rock had turned to clay, crumbling beneath him as he tried to hold on for dear life. As Christian wept on him, Eban wept even harder, because he now had two bereavements instead of one. And Christian had never been able to give him any sort of emotional support over his loss of Damien, because he had been drowning beneath the waves, unaware of anything but his own broken heart and his own ended life. Eban had suffered alone and continued to do so. The shadow of Damien was in his every word and every smile. He continued to give every drop of himself to Christian, but Christian gave him nothing in return. He was too afraid of handling someone else's grief when his own consumed him.

Eban had lived with Damien and when they broke up, Damien had immediately put the house up for sale. Christian had taken Eban in and never regretted doing so. Damien's loss had been his gain. Six months later, Eban still waited for his half of the money from the house, and six months later Christian still didn't know why Damien had dumped Eban and had never asked.

Conrad had never trusted Damien even though he was polite to him when Eban was around. He always told Christian that one day Damien was going to hurt Eban badly. Christian was glad Conrad couldn't see what Damien had done to Eban because most likely it would have been *Damien's* coffin they would have been carrying if Conrad had got hold of him.

Christian drank his wine and continued to look. Eban was a cop and he looked fucking hot in his uniform. That was a fact and Christian wished it wasn't. He wished Eban would take his uniform off before Christian got home because it was kind of distracting. He might have removed his gun from its holster and the baton from its holder, but the handcuffs still dangled from his belt, and Christian swore that would give Jesus himself an erection. The strangest thing was that Eban seemed oblivious to the amount of chaos he caused when he walked into a room wearing his uniform. He was conceited for sure, and vain, spending inordinate amounts of time and money on his hair, but his ego didn't stretch to thinking he was God's gift to anyone. If one were to ask him if he thought he was good-looking, he would probably shrug his shoulders and say he got by.

Christian held out a glass to Eban, and Eban smiled sadly, as though his thoughts echoed Christian's own. *We're a pair of sad bastards, drowning in our memories and wishing for a past that's dead and buried.*

"Want to watch a movie?" Christian asked over Eban's meal, splendid as always.

"Er... I'm going out, actually." Eban looked a little bashful.

Christian raised his eyebrows in surprise. The two rarely went out. Sometimes Eban went out with some of the guys from his station, and sometimes Christian went out with the guys from work. More often than not, they watched a movie, or each retired to bed to read a book or surf the Internet.

"I've got a date. Some guy called Darius." Eban actually blushed.

Christian almost choked on his pasta. "That's fantastic."

"Don't know about that," Eban said dryly. "It's a blind one. He may have no teeth and three eyes, who knows."

Christian groaned. "Poor you, but hey, it's a night out." He gave an encouraging smile.

"Never mind that. Let's talk about this guy who came on to you in the coffee shop."

"Please don't."

"Why not? Was he hot?"

"Don't."

“Don’t what? Answer my goddamn question, Christian, and stop evading the issue. Was he hot or not?”

Christian lowered his head and pushed at his food with his fork. “No.”

“You’re lying. I’ve known you ten years, Christian, and you’ve always been a piss-poor liar. Now, was he hot or fucking not?”

“Yeah, okay? He was fucking hot; now leave it alone.”

When Eban had left for his date, Christian lay on his bed staring at the ceiling. He wondered if Eban would compare his date to Damien and find him wanting the way Christian had found the man in the coffee shop wanting. Beautiful, yes, but not Conrad.

Chapter 2

CHRISTIAN woke up before dawn the next day and lay awhile in the silence, remembering.

Conrad had gone out for beer and pizza that Friday night. Christian had worked late at Marcus's behest, and Conrad had been a little pissed off when Christian arrived home at nine. A few angry words had been exchanged before Christian silenced his partner with a kiss, which worked every time. In no time, they were wrenching at each other's clothes and Conrad had Christian bent over the kitchen table.

The argument was forgotten. In their ten-year history, Conrad and Christian had never had a serious fight. Neither of them had ever slept on the couch or sought sanctuary at someone else's house. There was no obstacle they could not surmount together or any disagreement which a few kisses couldn't solve. Christian wasn't perfect; he was obsessive and stubborn, while Conrad was prideful and arrogant. In Christian's hands, Conrad was a pussycat. In Conrad's hands, Christian was a teddy bear.

After one of the quickest, most desperate sessions they had ever shared, they took a leisurely shower together, then Conrad said he would go out for dinner. Christian still wished twenty times a day that he had refused to let him leave the house that night. In a towel at the door with his hair still wet, he had kissed Conrad goodbye and looked into those glorious emerald eyes, not realizing it would be the very last time.

Eban had been the one to phone Christian, because he had been called out to the scene of the accident. Imagine, Christian had ruminated much later, when he was capable of coherent thought, imagine being the one to find his friend's body broken and half dead, spilled out on the road from his unrecognizable car. Eban had suffered a sight he would never forget, and Christian couldn't even help him with that.

"You need to come," Eban had said numbly when Christian picked up the phone, expecting it to be Conrad saying he had forgotten which number pizza Christian wanted. But Conrad would never call him on the phone again, and Christian knew, as his stomach clenched and threatened to spew its contents. He knew from Eban's voice and he knew it was already too late.

When he arrived at the ER, he walked straight into Conrad's parents' grief. They were weeping and wailing in the corridor outside the resuscitation room, and Christian almost sank to the floor right then and there. *Oh please,*

no, he heard himself say in a whisper, *please not yet, please let me just have....*

Conrad's mother looked up and saw him, and her swollen eyes narrowed. Conrad's parents had never accepted that Conrad would never give them grandchildren, and they had always treated Christian appallingly on the rare occasions he had met them. "This is your fault!" she screamed at Christian and launched an attack with the palm of her hand, a hard slap which knocked his head into the wall and made him see stars.

"Please, Mrs. Muller," he heard a voice object as he stood there a moment, and then he felt a hand on his arm and someone leading him away.

"Are you Christian?"

He nodded numbly, following the man into a quiet room with a coffee table and couches. Somewhere you sat when you were told your life is over. He sank onto the couch and focused his confused eyes on the man in green scrubs before him.

"He asked for you. When he got here," said the dark-haired man with kind brown eyes.

Christian opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again because he knew from the man's face. He knew from the outpouring of grief in the corridor. He knew as soon as he answered Eban's call that this was the day he lost his other half. Naively, when he had made his commitment to Conrad, he had expected a good fifty years.

"I'm so, so, sorry," the man said quietly.

Christian lowered his head. He watched a tear drop soundlessly onto the knee of his jeans.

"Is there anyone you want me to call for you?"

"I—Eban, but I think he's...." Christian said just as the door opened and an ashen-faced Eban entered. Christian heard himself give a muffled sob of utter despair as he was crushed violently into Eban's uniformed chest. *My life is over. It is over.*

A voice penetrated his grief after a few minutes. "I'm sorry to have to do this now. We asked permission to harvest Conrad's organs for donation."

Christian lifted his head. For a moment he was confused. "What?"

"I just needed to tell you, so you understand why he's still on the ventilator being kept artificially alive."

"What? You mean he's not dead?"

"No, he *is* dead. His *brain* is dead. He sustained a massive head injury. We're keeping him breathing in order to keep his organs well perfused to collect them. He'll be moved up to the ICU in order to—"

"You fucking bastards. You can't have them," Christian spat.

"I realize this is difficult," the doctor said gently, looking embarrassed.

"I don't give you my permission! He never told me he wanted to donate his organs. I don't give you permission to steal them."

"We already sought and received permission from his next of kin, his parents."

That was like a slap in the face to Christian. *Of course*. Legally, he was nothing to Conrad. Their ten-year history counted for naught, as though Christian never existed, as though he hadn't been the most important person in Conrad's life. As though *he* was erased along with Conrad.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said, his tone still low and conciliatory. "We have the transplant coordinator on her way to speak to you."

"I don't want..." Christian tried to say once more.

"Shh," Eban said beside him. "Let it go."

Christian dropped his face onto the warm, solid shoulder of the man who was going to become his salvation.

THE funeral only held in store the same kind of treatment from Conrad's parents. They organized it down to the lining of the casket. It was only by some miracle, and perhaps a lack of strong men in the family, that a quiet word from Eban resulted in the couple allowing Conrad's and Christian's friends to carry the casket.

Christian's parents, who lived in Florida, flew up for the funeral and at least provided the support Conrad's parents could not. Conrad had always been embarrassed that Christian's parents treated him as a member of the family whereas his own shunned Christian from the start. At the wake, angry words were exchanged between Christian's parents and Conrad's. Christian's mother slapped Mrs. Muller and told her, "Shame on you." Conrad's parents immediately left, and Christian had not heard from them since.

A MONTH after Conrad's death, Christian received a phone call from Anna March, the transplant coordinator who had taken him up to the ICU that day and told him how they were going to cut his love up and remove parts of him, while Christian stood there staring at a body which was still pink and warm, but from which the essence, the soul, had already gone. There wasn't a single second of the previous thirty days when he hadn't thought of whose body Conrad's organs now pulsed with blood inside.

They had taken Conrad's lungs, his pancreas, his liver, his kidneys, and his corneas. He spared these organs little thought, however, because they seemed insignificant next to the burning issue. *Conrad's heart*. Who had Conrad's heart? The question tormented him at every hour of every day. The thought of Conrad's heart contracting and relaxing in a stranger's body, pushing out that blood to circulate around it, giving this person life, bringing them reprieve from a death sentence, was almost more than he could bear. He had never expected to hear from Anna again, and her call that morning sent him into an acute state of anxiety over what she could want. She only requested that he meet her at her office at the hospital. He replied that he could not, but he would meet her on the pier.

She understood and was waiting at the end for him at one thirty as planned. She greeted him with a handshake and a smile.

"You look well, Christian."

Liar. I look like death warmed over. I look like my life has been torn apart and I'm now merely existing from day to day until I can die and be with him.

"I'll get straight to the point," she began. "The person who received Conrad's heart has asked me to pass this message on to you. I'm sorry, I can't answer any questions about them and the person wasn't allowed to sign their name."

Christian stared at the pale blue envelope she held out in utter disbelief.

"A man or a woman?" Christian asked.

He knew the heart must have gone to a man. Conrad was big all over. Big hands, big feet, big body, big cock. And although Christian had not seen Conrad's heart when it was cut fresh beating and rosy with blood from his chest, he knew without doubt Conrad's heart was huge. He had shown Christian that fact every single day. A woman's fragile body would not take Conrad's big heart.

"A man," Anna said reluctantly. "But I can't tell you anything else, Christian. Please don't ask me."

Christian nodded in satisfaction. A man. A man as big and strong as Conrad, able to accommodate that magnificent heart with ease. He tucked the letter into his inside pocket, where it seemed to rest on his heart, scorching it. He thanked Anna and made his excuses to leave, walking back to his car as fast as he could.

He started the ignition in order to turn the A/C on, and then sat for a moment, examining the envelope in his hands. The neat writing on the front read, "To the partner of the donor."

He wondered for a moment why the letter wasn't addressed to Conrad's parents. As Christian had no legal rights, he wondered why he had even been mentioned to the recipient.

Slowly, with violently trembling hands, he slit open the envelope and slid out a single sheet of matching paper, starting to read.

Forgive me for writing to you in your time of grief. I don't mean to stir up any memories during this difficult time. When I asked if I could write to the donor's next of kin, I was told it was his parents, but I also asked if he had a partner and I was told that he did, but that this partner had been opposed to the donation of his organs. And so I felt I should write to you as well, because I don't want you to be angry at me for the rest of your life.

I had days to live when I received the heart of your partner a month ago. I contracted a virus that gave me cardiomyopathy, which led rapidly to heart failure. I had been in the hospital for most of the year, unable to move from my bed, too weak to even feed myself. I had many false alarms where a heart seemed to be available and then it was found not to be a match. I had given up all hope and I was ready to go. And then the perfect match arrived. And may God forgive me, but I was happy that someone had died in order to save me. I received the heart of your partner and my life has begun again. I go home from the hospital next week.

This letter may make you angry; it may make you sad. Please forgive me for any unintentional hurt I may have caused in writing it. Only please know this, that your partner's heart saved my life, that it beats strong inside me, and that I know he must have been a good man. Words can never express my gratitude over the sacrifice your partner made and I only hope this fact can help you in your grief.

Yours, the recipient.

Christian's head fell onto the steering wheel and the letter drifted onto the floor.

AT HOME, Eban wept when he read the letter, then reassured Christian that this was proof that the right thing had been done. Conrad had saved a man's life and a part of him lived on. Christian wanted to agree with him, but the way he irrationally saw it, this man was alive at the *cost* of Conrad's life.

This letter still obsessed Christian, and lying there that morning looking at the ceiling, he remembered every word. They were branded across his mind. They tortured him; they killed him; they owned him.

Chapter 3

CHRISTIAN thought about not going back to the coffee shop. But after nearly a week, it had become part of his routine, something to look forward to, to plan for and keep him moving forward. He needed structure, focus, or he would stay in bed and grieve until he died. He wouldn't let the stranger drive him away.

Waiting at the counter, he looked anxiously around, his stomach unclenching from the knots it was in as he saw the coast was clear; the man with the green eyes wasn't there. He retreated to a booth at the back and took a newspaper from the stand, relaxing into his seat and starting to read.

After a few moments, he looked up and his gaze met the green one of the stranger.

His heart lurched up into his mouth and a violent wave of nausea swept through him, so he clutched at the edge of the table lest he fall from his seat. The man's eyes were a paler shade of green than Conrad's, but still, the color was enough to distress him. The man was coming toward him, that hot gaze on him for the briefest of moments as Christian sat pinned in place, staring. Then suddenly the man's eyes swept away, his cheeks scarlet, and he moved past Christian's table to the bathroom at the back of the cafe.

Christian let out his breath. *Fuck*. He closed the paper and picked up his coffee with a trembling hand, drinking it quickly. He took a few more moments to compose himself, not sure he could negotiate his way to the door just yet without his legs giving way, then he stood up, moved to the rack to deposit his paper and went on to the door. As he did, he was aware someone was approaching the door from his opposite side and the two were about to clash unless one of them stopped. With one hand on the door, he stopped, glancing around.

No. Oh God, please no. Suddenly the stranger was there next to him, within touching distance, raven hair falling over ivory skin, a plump, pink mouth that seemed made to be kissed, and eyes you could fall into and never come out of alive. He stared at Christian just as Christian stared back, a startled expression on his face, like a rabbit caught in headlights. *He's still mortified by the way I spoke to him yesterday. He hasn't deliberately come to the door at the same time as me. He wants to do all he can to avoid me the way I want to avoid him.*

Christian turned his head away, wrenching open the door, good manners making him hold it open for the stranger to follow him.

"Thank you," he heard the man say in a soft, deep voice, and to Christian's horror, a hand touched his as he gripped the door.

Christian whirled around, stumbling out onto the sidewalk in the bright sunshine. "What are you *doing*?"

The stranger looked like he would combust with embarrassment, his face cherry-red. "I'm sorry, I didn't...", he stammered.

"I thought I told you yesterday."

"You did. I wasn't... I'm just... going home. Let me go home." The stranger tried to dodge around Christian, and Christian moved the wrong way so the two did an almost comical dance; their gazes met for one last time before the other man roughly shouldered past him, shoving Christian aside and stalking away down the street.

Christian stared after him and then slowly he made his way to a nearby bench and sank down, trying to reclaim his breath and his heart, which had been buried with Conrad, but which was trying to claw its way through six feet of earth and present itself to someone else.

"HOW was your coffee?" Eban asked softly fifteen minutes later.

Christian sighed.

"You saw him again, then?"

"I saw him again."

"Was he just as hot this time around?"

"Hotter," Christian mumbled. He proceeded to relate the confusing tussle in the doorway, and for some reason, this amused Eban.

"You're such a bastard."

"What? Why?"

"You need to find him tomorrow, buy him a cup of coffee and tell him being an asshole is in your nature and you can't help it."

"Firstly, Eban, tomorrow is Saturday, hence I won't be at the coffee shop but eating one of your lovely breakfasts like I do every weekend, and secondly, do you really think I'm a asshole?"

"No. Come on, I didn't mean it. Just... don't keep yourself locked away. It wouldn't hurt you to talk to this guy."

"I don't want to talk to him. I want him to leave me the hell alone." *He's dangerous. Way too dangerous. He makes me feel and I don't like that at all.*

"Okay, fine."

Christian sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. I'll see you later, when I want all the details about last night's date."

"Yeah." Eban sounded halfhearted. "See you later." He hung up.

Christian gave a sigh. He reached for the memo lying boldly on his desk. Typed in the strangest font he had ever seen, it read,

To all you thieving sons of bitches,

Someone has stolen my favorite mug. The one with the hot chick wearing a swimsuit and when you pour coffee in it, her clothes disappear so you can see her tits and bush. If you don't return it immediately, you are all fucking fired.

Lots of love from your boss

Christian shook his head and tossed it into the garbage. He reached over and switched on his computer, glancing at the pile of letters in his in-tray. Which reminded him, Marcus was supposed to be coming for dinner tomorrow evening with Jack. He got up and walked to his boss's door, knocking once before entering and closing the door behind him.

Marcus sat behind his desk with both hands braced on it, head flung back and moaning loudly.

Christian froze. "What are you..."

Marcus's eyes snapped to him. He cleared his throat. "Er... nothing, Christian, what can I do for you?" His voice was strangled and high-pitched.

Christian was confused. If he didn't know better, he could have sworn Marcus was jerking off behind there, but both his hands were on the desk. "I... just wanted to ask if you're still coming tomorrow?"

"Ah... aha." Marcus's eyes rolled back in his head. "I am definitely... coming all right." He gave a whimper and then cursed loudly.

"Marcus, what the..." Christian looked down and saw two shiny shoes peeking out from behind his boss's desk.

"Fuck, oh fuck," Marcus said softly, hands slamming down on the desk and head falling back slackly.

Christian stared, unable to believe what he was witnessing as his boss went still and slowly a white-blond head rose from behind the desk, a hand up to wipe at the mouth, a sheepish grin turned in Christian's direction.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Jack!"

"Sorry, Christian," Jack muttered, standing up and turning away, appearing to be zipping himself up.

"Fucking hell, Marcus!"

"Whatever, Christian," Marcus drawled. "If you'll excuse me now, I need a nap."

Christian, jaw still hanging open, scurried from the room, followed by Jack. As the two retook their desks, their eyes met over their monitors.

"Fuck, Jack," Christian said. "Is that the way you get your pay rises?"

"Fuck you!" Jack growled, apparently offended by this. "I like to get off and Marcus likes to get off. This has nothing to do with him being my boss, you son of a bitch."

Christian was taken aback. So far that day he was a bastard, an asshole, and a son of a bitch. Things could not have been going better and it was only nine forty-five. "Sorry," he muttered. "How long have you been...?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't know, about a month maybe, off and on."

"Jesus, I guess I missed a lot while I was away."

"I guess you did." Jack smirked. "Am I still invited for dinner or are you worried Marcus and I might sneak upstairs and fuck in your bed?"

Christian smiled around the wince of pain as he thought of the glorious fucking that bed had seen and would see no longer. "Sure you are."

"WANT to go out?" Eban asked as he unpacked the takeout Christian had brought home that night. Christian looked at him in surprise. "I could use a drink, I don't know about you."

Christian nodded without enthusiasm. "Yeah, okay."

In the shower later, with the hot water raining down on him, he told himself this night would be okay. That he would not spend the entire evening looking at other couples in love and wishing them dead. That he would not be rude to the first person of either sex who tried to pick him up. That he would not get so drunk that Eban would have to pay the cab driver extra for vomiting in his car.

The water was like a caress on his needy body. He wrapped an arm around himself and stroked his back as he buried his face against the tiles, imagining the hand was Conrad's. He remembered all the times he had been pressed up against these tiles and he started to stiffen, his hand moving down to his groin.

He hadn't jerked off often since Conrad's death. The first time, he had plucked a shirt of Conrad's from the laundry and lay on the bed with the scent of his lover pressed against his nose. It was still under his pillow and had never been washed.

He took some soap and lathered his dick up nicely, sliding it rapidly through his fist, knowing he was short on time, but remembering Eban had to spend half an hour at least on his hair and so slowing down a little, giving

himself long, firm strokes. He remembered the last time over the kitchen table but this upset him too much.

He tried to remember other times when he was on his back and Conrad was over him, wanting to see the image of Conrad's face as he came. But he couldn't. He couldn't remember the exact shade of Conrad's eyes, the exact curve of his eyebrows, or the exact pattern of the freckling over the bridge of his nose. He wept with his forehead against the wall, desperate to come and unable to. He pictured himself being fucked, his legs tight around a hard body, and he saw a rosebud mouth leaning down to claim his own. As he panted and gasped and begged for more, this face drew back and he saw black hair falling over it and jeweled jade-green eyes. The mouth parted to say Christian's name, and Christian came violently over the shower wall with a cry, his head falling against it with a bump.

CHRISTIAN was drunk by eleven. He leaned against Eban, slurring into his ear, "I jerked off in the shower and thought of the guy from the coffee shop."

Eban snorted with laughter. "I jerked off in the shower and thought about a three-way with Damien and that dude I had a date with the other night. Damien got spit-roasted. He always wanted to do that."

Christian drew back to look at him, laughing. "Listen, are you going to tell me what happened or what?"

Eban's gaze slid to his. "I suppose."

"Come on, then, how far?"

"Just kissing," Eban said. "And fondling. Oh, and a blowjob."

Christian almost spat his drink out. "He gave you one?"

"Yeah." Eban looked embarrassed.

"And? Marks out of ten?"

Eban groaned, eyes focused on his drink. "Oh, fucking eleven, you're making me hard just talking about it."

"Jesus, I really hope you're going to see this guy again."

Eban shook his head.

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"No, I don't. You might not be looking for someone to replace Damien yet, but until you are, doesn't mean you can't have some fun with this guy."

Eban's gaze swung sharply to his. "I don't know how you dare, when you won't do the same with the guy from the coffee shop."

Christian shook his head. "No disrespect, but our circumstances aren't the same. Conrad's never coming back, whereas Damien, well, he's an asshole, but maybe you could get him back if you wanted."

Eban glared, blood rising to his face. "One," he said coldly, "*blow* me. Two, I couldn't get him back, trust me on that one, and three, he's not an asshole, you just think he is because Conrad put that idea in your head. You weren't interested in getting to know him because Conrad told you all you needed to know. No one I ever went out with was good enough for him. Well, how about you have an independent thought for yourself now Conrad's gone?"

Christian stared for only a brief moment before he grabbed Eban by the shoulders and threw him against the nearest wall, both their bottles of beer smashing on the ground. The two struggled angrily for a few seconds.

"Break it up, you fags," drawled a voice, and Christian's gaze whipped around to see neat blond hair and pale gray eyes. *Damien*.

"Why don't you fuck off?" Christian hissed, letting go of Eban and stepping back.

"Well, Christian, I just overheard you telling Eban you think I'm an asshole, so I'm not about to leave when you're dragging my good name through the mud." Damien's eyes flickered to Eban, and there was a brief glimmer of deep pain before they turned ice-cold. "Guess you haven't told him yet why we broke up?"

"Go to hell," Eban said between his teeth.

"Oh I'm already there, Eban; it's where you *put* me. Now fucking tell him or I will."

Christian frowned and stared at one man then the other. "What the hell is this?"

"Your precious Conrad always thought I was screwing around. For five fucking years he thought that," Damien growled. "Why was that? Why was I never good enough for him? Was he fucking *jealous* of me, Christian?"

Christian stared.

"I am so well rid of you," Eban muttered.

"No, I'm rid of *you*, dickwad." Damien shoved Eban back against the wall. "*Tell* him! Tell him right now."

"What did you *do*, Eban?" Christian asked, his voice barely audible above the music. A terrible feeling of dread twisted his stomach into knots. He prepared himself to be ripped apart by the answer.

“He screwed someone else,” Damien spat. “Now I’m not so much the asshole, am I, Christian? Tell him who you screwed, Eban. Tell him who I found you doing in our bed, you dirty son of a bitch.”

Christian put a hand up to steady himself against the wall as his legs went weak. “No. Please *no*, please, Eban, say you didn’t.”

Eban’s eyes flashed amber fire as they glared at Damien. “You shit, making him think that. No, Christian. He caught me fucking *Jack*. That’s who it was.”

Christian looked from one to the other. Then he pushed past both men and stalked from the club.

Chapter 4

THIS was not how Eban wanted his first meeting in six months with Damien to go but with their history, it was never going to go any other way. It was all such a mess, and Damien had to add insult to injury by alluding to *that*. Eban had always known one day he would.

Damien restrained him with a strong hand when he tried to go after Christian.

“You fucking shit,” Eban yelled, knocking Damien backward. “How could you do that to him? The man is still broken into fucking pieces. He’s barely holding it together and you made him think I screwed Conrad.”

“You *did* screw Conrad,” Damien said coldly.

“When I was *sixteen*. Fifteen years ago! Before you and before Christian. He doesn’t need to know that. Just because I’ve made you miserable, doesn’t mean you have to drag everyone else down with you.”

Damien pressed him back into the wall. “And he was jealous of me because he wanted you all along and he couldn’t have you.”

Eban stared at him. “I don’t know where you’re getting this shit from, Damien. He never wanted me, he never made a move to get me, he was with Christian and he fucking loved him.”

Damien shook his head. “You wanted him and he wanted you.”

“No,” Eban protested with gaze averted.

“Yes,” Damien insisted. “And you fucked Jack because you couldn’t have Conrad.”

“You’re fucking unbelievable! I fucked Jack because I never got what I wanted from *you*!” Eban brushed roughly past Damien and set off after Christian.

Outside in the balmy summer air, there was no sign of Christian. A moment later a hand grabbed Eban’s arm and he was dragged along behind Damien, roughly bundled into an alleyway and shoved against the wall.

“What did you want from me?” Damien demanded, hands on either side of Eban’s head, pinning him in place.

“You,” Eban said defiantly. “Your commitment and your fucking *time*, and I never got either.”

"I lived with you! I fucking bought a house with you, I spent every penny I earned on you, trying to make you *happy*, and you say I wouldn't commit to you?"

"And you worked every hour God sent and I never saw you. You came home when I was asleep so we couldn't even talk, never mind fuck. I grieved for Conrad alone; you were never once *there*!" Eban's voice trembled.

"And I did it for you. So our life would be good. It wouldn't have been forever."

"Wouldn't it? I thought you were having an affair. All the fucking time I thought you were screwing one of your colleagues, and that's why I fucking did it!"

Damien slammed his body against Eban's, pinning his wrists against the wall. "I didn't have the time or the inclination to screw around, Eban. Not when you own my fucking heart and always will."

Eban gasped as Damien's lips collided brutally with his own, his tongue seeking Eban's, gripping his wrists so hard it hurt. Abruptly Damien jerked back, spun Eban around and crushed him back against the wall.

"Now why don't I show you what you've been missing for the last six months, you bastard, and what you're never going to get off me again," Damien growled in Eban's ear as his hands swiftly unfastened his pants.

"No," Eban said squirming against him, moaning loudly when Damien's hand slid inside to take hold of him. "Oh fuck... Damien..." He looked over his shoulder to see Damien rolling on a condom.

Damien dragged Eban's pants and boxers down. He thrust into him hard so Eban cursed and cried out. He moved swiftly, his mouth nipping at Eban's ear.

"Please, please..." Eban clutched at Damien's hands, squeezing hard. "I love you, I love you so much."

Damien's face fell against his neck with a groan. "Oh God, I love you too, you bastard." He gave one last thrust and went still, holding Eban hard around the torso.

Eban hadn't come. He trembled against Damien, hard and desperate.

But Damien pulled free. Eban turned his head, watching Damien fasten his pants, flick his condom into a nearby dumpster and leave the alley, not looking back.

Eban leaned his forehead against the wall and cried, with fists clenched at his own weakness.

CHRISTIAN woke up late with a hangover from hell. Eban's door was still firmly shut when he came out of the shower and made his way downstairs. Sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and looking out over the summer rain-drenched garden that Conrad had lovingly tended and that Eban now did his best to maintain, he thought of how his life had been rocked the night before.

What were those things Damien had said? He accused Conrad of being jealous of him. Why? His head pounded like it was being hit by a sledgehammer. He lowered it to the table and closed his eyes.

"Hey."

Christian opened one eye. Eban looked even worse than him, red-eyed and milk-white, hair crushed in some parts, perfect in others.

"I'm sorry about Damien. I'm sorry you had to find out about me fucking Jack."

Christian didn't speak. He looked toward the garden again, watching the rain run down the windows.

Eban poured a cup of coffee. "Want to go to the grave today?"

Christian nodded.

THE grave was under a huge magnolia tree in the Pacific View Memorial Park, looking out over the deep blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean. It had a black marble headstone with gold lettering. None of the words on it mentioned Christian, because Conrad's parents got it done. It merely stated Conrad was a beloved son and that God had taken him too soon, to be with the angels. Christian always curled his lip in scorn at this inscription. There was no God; how people clung to that lie in times of desperation. The headstone should have read *beloved partner of Christian*. It grieved him so desperately that it didn't.

While Eban waited in the car, Christian arranged his blood-red roses in the urn in front of the headstone. Then he knelt in quiet contemplation and finally began to speak to Conrad, as he always did.

"So, we unfortunately saw Damien last night. I'm so glad you weren't around to see how he broke Eban when he ended it with him. I found out, though, that it was actually Eban who broke them up by screwing around, how ironic is that? I wonder what you'd think of your best friend for doing that? Strangely, I don't feel any different. I don't think badly of him at all. He's Eban and I'll always love him the way you did.

"I have to say Damien is another matter, though. He took some sort of sadistic pleasure in making me think it was *you* Eban had slept with. And I was so scared. I think I almost believed him. I hope you can forgive me for that, wherever you are."

He rested his hand on the headstone, head hanging down. "And there's something else. There's a man. I can't stop thinking about him. I hate myself for disrespecting you so. I'm sorry."

He trailed off because it was too much of an effort to speak. It was only when he felt gentle hands on his shoulders that he allowed himself to be helped to his feet and led back to the car.

MARCUS and Jack arrived together that night, greeted by Christian while Eban was busy in the kitchen. Christian had asked Eban if he was sure he wanted Jack to come and told him about Jack and his boss. Christian had worked at the company a long time, and Eban knew both men well.

Eban had replied that he and Jack were a one-off, that it was cool between them, that Marcus didn't need to know. They did not mention Damien or the jealousy he had accused Conrad of. Some things could not be mentioned in the cold light of day.

Dinner started off with tension between Eban and Christian, which Marcus and Jack picked up on and tried their best to defuse. Christian couldn't help looking for signs of flirtation between Eban and Jack and found none. He relaxed as he got more wine in him and when Eban asked him to help bring dessert out, he felt a little drunk as he followed his friend into the kitchen.

"Listen, whatever shit Damien said, those were just his own issues with me. Conrad had nothing to do with it." Eban leaned against the counter, arms folded.

Christian nodded. He wouldn't be forgetting Damien's malice in a hurry.

"Hurry up in there," called Marcus. "People need a sugar fix in here. Shit, Jack, take a memo."

Dinner was over and the four men were sprawled on the couch with bottles of wine open on the coffee table when Eban casually mentioned that Christian had a coffee shop admirer.

Jack pounced on this immediately, while Christian shot daggers at Eban. "I knew it. The last two mornings you have been so fucking weird when you've arrived at work. Even more weird than usual."

Christian glared at him. "It's nothing. I'd rather not talk about it."

"You're going to talk about it," Marcus drawled. "We're going to dissect it in great detail, and if you don't let us, we'll go down to that fucking shop and tell that guy you want his babies."

The other three men looked at him in confusion a moment.

"He's hot," Eban said. "Really hot, says Christian."

"Is that right?" Jack smiled.

"No," Christian said.

"He is, you liar," Eban protested with a snort and reached for another drink.

"Whatever."

"Come on, give it up," Marcus insisted. "Does he just stalk you or has he spoken to you?"

"He offered to buy me a cup of coffee," Christian said reluctantly.

"Hardcore," Marcus muttered.

"And what did you do?" Jack asked, enthralled.

"He told him to fuck off in so many words," Eban growled. "And he managed to upset him the day after too. He's clearly a nice guy and too good for Christian."

"Oh fuck you," Christian retorted.

"Ladies, please," Marcus said. "If we can get back to the hotness. Just *how* hot are we talking here, Christian? How long from first glance to full erection?"

"Fuck off, Marcus."

"Oh, that tells me about ten seconds, if that. Jesus, I must see this piece of ass for myself. In fact, I must fucking test-drive it for you first, Christian."

Jack was snorting with laughter.

"Why don't we talk about *your* action, Eban?" Christian said haughtily. "Seeing as it's much better than mine."

"Oh, this night is just getting better," Marcus said. "Tell me you got laid and don't spare any details of ass-pounding."

"Just a blowjob," Christian told him as Eban glared.

"Nice. Did he swallow or did you come on his face?"

“You’re disgusting,” Eban said. “Not all of us live in a porno movie. He swallowed and said I tasted great.”

“Kinky bastard.” Marcus grinned. “So I have to meet both of these pieces of ass. Next week, dinner at mine with your two fuckees.”

“He’s not my fucking fuckee,” Christian growled.

“Whatever,” Marcus dismissed him. “I expect him to be by next weekend.”

“And I’m not seeing mine again,” Eban said quietly.

Marcus groaned. “God, what’s the matter with the pair of you? Don’t you know there’s an official state-wide shortage of hot gay men?”

Eban and Christian exchanged a confused look. “And where did you get that data?” Eban asked.

“Men in Speedos dot com,” Marcus said authoritatively.

Chapter 5

CHRISTIAN went nervously to the coffee shop on Monday, almost biting Eban's head off when he told him to buy his admirer a cup of coffee. He wouldn't be doing anything of the sort. He wouldn't be speaking to him or even looking at him. It would be better if he wasn't there and he didn't have to breathe the same air as him.

And indeed, the green-eyed stranger wasn't there. Christian heaved a sigh of relief and took a seat, opening the newspaper. He had only seen the man twice. There was no reason to think he would ever see him again. It was not like he had seen him before—and Christian would have noticed him—so the guy was obviously not a regular. And yet, the thought of not seeing his admirer again didn't make him happy in any way, only more maudlin.

He found himself watching the door instead of reading the paper and loitering ten minutes more when the stranger failed to show. He cursed himself finally and left, walking to work as quickly as he could. Marcus was out in the main office, leaning over Jack's shoulder to point something out on his computer screen while blatantly dipping a hand into his crotch.

The two looked up as Christian took a seat.

"You're late, Christian," Marcus said. "That can only mean he serviced you in the bathroom and you *come* to us with damp boxers. Pardon the pun."

"You're gross, Marcus. I don't fuck random men in bathrooms; that's more your style."

"Ouch," Marcus said. "Did you hear that insubordination, Jack? Take a memo."

Jack rolled his eyes and ignored him. "What happened, Christian?"

"He didn't show. Looks like I got rid of him." He smiled tightly and lowered his head over his work.

"I'M SORRY he didn't show," Eban said that night over dinner.

"I'm not. Let's change the subject."

"Okay, then. Darius called me today looking for another date."

"That's fucking great. Tell me you said yes."

"Yeah. Wednesday. Kind of a shitty night but he said he couldn't wait until the weekend."

Christian smiled. "He must have it bad for you."

"He just wants to get laid. If I put out for him on Wednesday, he won't want to see me again."

Christian frowned. "Not all guys think like that, Eban. Is that what you're going to do? Sleep with him in order to get rid of him?"

Eban shrugged. "Maybe." He averted his gaze, pushing the food around his plate. The unspoken presence of Damien loomed heavily over the table. Christian thought yet again of the things he had said that night about Conrad.

He sighed, reached over, and squeezed Eban's arm. "Don't. You're worth more. And you're worth more than Damien."

"In case you've forgotten," Eban said, "I was the one who screwed around on Damien. I deserve everything I get. I deserve for Darius to fuck me and then fuck me off."

Christian didn't speak, only kept his fingers on his friend's arm in the silence that followed.

WHILE Eban went to shower, Christian thought about Damien. He didn't have Damien's number, but Conrad did. For the first time in six months, he reached into the bedside drawer where he had pushed the bag containing the stuff that had been taken from the wrecked car—wallet, keys, and cell. The cell had fallen out and lay at the bottom of the drawer. How it was not smashed beyond repair he didn't know.

He plugged it into the charger, switching it on. His heart constricted as a picture of him and Conrad came up on the screen. He scrolled quickly through the address book for Damien's number, then took his own phone and saved it in the memory. Going back to that picture of the two of them on the main screen, he paused as he was about to switch the phone back off.

He had never looked at Conrad's phone, ever. He had never scrolled the address book or read his text messages or looked at his received calls. He had never wanted or needed to, because he trusted Conrad with his life. But Damien had planted a seed of doubt in his heart.

Slowly, hating himself more than he ever had in his life, he opened Conrad's inbox. There were two hundred messages there. Scrolling down he saw the vast majority were from himself and Eban. He began to read the ones from everyone other than himself, starting with the oldest first. There was nothing sinister to any of them; Conrad was beyond reproach as Christian knew he was, so why was he looking for something which wasn't there?

He tired of the inbox soon enough and flipped to the outbox, looking at the texts Conrad had sent, starting with the most recent first. He could not

help but read the last text Conrad had ever sent in his life. The one Christian still had on his own phone.

See you tonight and don't be too late because I love you and want to show you.

Christian swallowed the lump in his throat and moved on to a text sent to Eban the same day.

I got the one you wanted. It cost me two fucking grand! I'll be working overtime until I die. Just don't tell him okay?

Christian's heart seemed to stop. He re-read the message, the phone shaking in his hand. He read it again. And again. He flicked back to the inbox and read the most recent text from Eban.

I'm so glad you bought it. You won't regret it.

"What are you doing?"

Christian's eyes moved to the door and the figure of Eban standing lazily in it, wearing nothing but a towel. Christian put the phone down on the bed. "What did Conrad buy you that cost two grand?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"What?" Eban looked confused. "I assure you Conrad never bought me anything worth two grand. What the hell is this, Christian?" His eyes were narrowed warily but his face seemed open and honest like it always did.

"He says so in this text message he sent you the day he died."

Eban stared at him. "So, what? You believed Damien with his shit-stirring? You believed Conrad was jealous of him and you've gone looking for evidence when you've known me ten fucking *years*, Christian?"

"It says so," Christian said stubbornly, ignoring him. "Why did Damien say Conrad was jealous of him? Why would he say that?"

"Because I hurt him, Christian, and he's a poisonous bastard. Because he still loves me and hurting *you* hurts *me*. Come on!"

"Explain it, then."

"Oh Jesus, he bought you a ring. I thought you had it all along."

"A ring?" Christian asked in disbelief.

"Yes, a ring. A two grand fucking ring. I picked it."

Christian lowered his head and bit his lip hard. "He didn't give it to me. Where is it? Why didn't he give it to me?" He cast his head wildly around the bedroom.

"Calm down." Eban moved to the bed. Christian turned his head away as the towel started to fall from Eban's slender hips and he caught it quickly and retied it. "We'll find it. You haven't even been through his stuff yet, have you?" He put his hands gently on Christian's shoulders.

Christian tried not to be aware of the hard, muscular body in front of him and its freshly showered smell. He wouldn't have blamed Conrad for having a piece of that, not at all. He was disgusted with himself.

He looked around again. "We... had a minor fight, but we made up. Why didn't he give it to me after?"

"Maybe he wanted to give it to you when he got back? Let's look for it. Can you remember what jacket he was wearing when he got home from work?"

Christian nodded. "He wore the same one to go out for pizza. The... hospital... cut his clothes off him. I didn't get them back."

Eban squeezed his shoulder. "So, he took it out with him. Where's the stuff the police gave you back?"

Christian got up, wrenched the bedside drawer out violently, and tipped everything out onto the bed, reddening as the intimate things Conrad kept in there were revealed—a pair of handcuffs, a dildo, a cock-ring, flavored lubricant.

His eyes also fell on the letter, which he had not taken out and looked at in several days. The letter from the man who now literally held Conrad's heart when Christian thought he would always have that honor. He took it with an almost embarrassed glance at Eban and put it to one side, where it wouldn't get creased, falling apart as it already was from repeated readings.

He saw the small black bag and put his hand in, finding a square shape immediately. A black velvet box that had lain next to Christian every night for six months while he had no idea. Slowly he took it out with trembling hands and opened it.

Inside nestled a ring of some silvery metal—maybe white gold, maybe platinum, Christian didn't know—embedded with three diamonds. He took it out and held it between his thumb and forefinger in awe, before the engraved words inside caught his eye.

Conrad & Christian. Forever.

"Oh Jesus Christ," he whimpered and fell upon Eban's damp shoulder.

Chapter 6

THE stranger wasn't there on Tuesday morning, either. *I really did scare him off. Maybe he went and killed himself because I was so mean to him.* Christian smiled grimly to himself over his coffee. He couldn't even remember exactly how the man looked now, just like Conrad. Soon his admirer would be a distant memory.

He twisted the ring around on his finger, eyeing the glint of light on its diamonds. He wished with his whole heart that Conrad had given it to him in person before he had left that night. He ached to see the expression on his face when he saw Christian's reaction. That smile would have lit up his beautiful green eyes and the dimples would have appeared around his mouth, his pleasure caused by Christian's pleasure, as always. And food would have been forgotten until much later, when Christian had finished showing Conrad his gratitude for a present which had cost two fucking grand and which he would never take off for the rest of his life. This ring comforted him now, a physical reminder of Conrad's love for him there on his finger.

Unless.... His thoughts darkened. Unless this was a guilt present. Bought because Conrad was jealous of Damien and secretly wished he was with Eban. Christian didn't know why his twisted little brain kept going down that route. Conrad had never shown any inappropriate behavior toward Eban in ten years. He had never *not* shown deep love and affection for Christian. But it was true he disliked Damien with no logical reason, because Damien seemed an easy-going guy who loved Eban very much.

Eban would deny it until he was blue in the face; it was pointless to ask him and destructive to their relationship to voice his thoughts aloud. So it looked like whether it was true or not, the secret died with Conrad. Unless Christian could get something out of Damien.

He had the man's number there in his cell and still hadn't called it. Was it fear of finding out something he didn't want to know that prevented him? This was wrong, so wrong. Looking for evidence to besmirch the good name of a dead man who could not stand up and defend himself. Looking for evidence that would destroy all the memories which were the only things that kept Christian going.

He made a conscious decision. He wouldn't call Damien. He would stop feeling this way. Instead he would concentrate on healing himself a little more, day by day. Still, though, he didn't delete the number.

“WHAT’S that?” Jack asked in surprise, indicating Christian’s hand as he passed over his coffee.

“This is what Conrad was supposed to be giving me before he died. I only found it last night.”

“Wow. Can I...”

Christian nodded. He slid the ring off and passed it over.

Jack held it gingerly while reading the inscription. “Fuck. That’s beautiful. It must have cost him a fortune.”

“Two grand,” Christian said.

“Jesus. He sure was a romantic, wasn’t he?”

Christian smiled because this was true. Conrad might have looked like a big bastard of a man, tall and muscular with an almost satanic twist to his beautiful mouth, but in private he was a little different. He was soft and kind and generous. He liked long walks on the beach. He liked making love by the fire in winter. He liked lying in Christian’s arms in the hot tub. He liked watching sad movies. He liked buying Christian presents at least once a week.

Even in his kinkiest, most sexual moments, when he had Christian cuffed to the bed and he was telling him in graphic terms what he was about to do to him, afterward he would hold Christian close and tell him he loved him.

He told him he loved him every day. But maybe, Christian thought, as he took the ring back from Jack and replaced it on his third finger, Conrad told him so often to make up for the fact that he couldn’t tell Eban the same.

EBAN was sitting outside the police station in the early morning sun while a puncture was being repaired on his patrol car and thinking about the misery that was his life.

He still hurt and not just physically. Damien had opened up the wounds like he had opened Eban’s entrance with his dick. The scabs had come off and the wounds had started to pour once more, so Eban ached all over at the callous way Damien had used him in that alleyway.

It’s no more than you deserve. You fucked around on him. He never did that to you once in five years. You did it, you lost him. You deserve his revenge. But Damien had said he still loved him. How did Eban reconcile not being with his love anymore when he knew Damien still loved him?

How did he explain away those cruel words Damien had spoken about Conrad being jealous of him, the words which had planted that seed of doubt

in Christian's mind and driven a wedge between them? Christian would deny that wedge was there, but Eban knew it was. Christian was thinking and wondering if there had been anything between Eban and Conrad. He had already been searching the text messages of a dead man, had already accused Conrad of spending two thousand dollars on Eban. How long would the ring placate his friend before he started to wonder once more? Maybe next time Christian asked him, Eban wouldn't be able to avoid the truth about that one time so long ago, which was supposed to be buried forever.

Chapter 7

WEDNESDAY was rainy but warm, the ocean choppy, its scent drifting onto the boulevard. Christian hurried into the coffee shop and got in line. As he did, he found himself behind a broad-shouldered figure in black a little shorter than himself. He stared at the strip of milk-white skin between collar and short jet-black hair and groaned inwardly as his heart took off at a gallop.

The stranger turned around slowly, as though he felt the heat of Christian's eyes on the back of his neck. He flushed violently, his jade-green eyes a startling contrast against the blood flooding his skin.

"Thought you'd gone elsewhere," Christian remarked sardonically in a too-loud voice because he could hear nothing over the pounding of his own heart in his ears.

The stranger turned away, grasped his coffee with a muttered thanks to the girl, and retreated immediately across the shop to a vacant table.

Christian moved up to the counter on trembling legs. He took his coffee and went to a window table, putting his back firmly to the stranger. He drank his coffee and perused the newspaper, not reading a single word as his heart continued to beat furiously hard. *Oh Christ, what's happening to me? Please just make it go away.*

He knew the stranger was watching him because the back of his neck burned. His fingers clutched his coffee cup; he was not enjoying the hot drink this morning. He fought the urge to turn around, the need to see the stranger's green eyes again almost overpowering. Finally, he closed the paper and drained his coffee. His peaceful start to the day had been shattered. The stranger had invaded his oasis of calm. These mornings would never be the same again. Without doubt, Christian would have to find another coffee shop.

Even as he passed through the door, he could not help but look back at the man who was watching him.

THERE was a knock on the door promptly at seven thirty that evening. The curse from Eban's room could only mean one thing—that he was still doing his hair. Christian called that he would get it. He opened the door, blinking a little when he saw the attractive man standing there.

"Hi," the man said with a hesitant smile. "I'm here to pick Eban up."

“Come in.”

He showed Darius into the living room and shook his hand, introducing himself. Then they sat down, and Christian looked at Eban’s date. Darius’s deep blue eyes were his most attractive feature, emphasized by his severe haircut, dark stubble gracing his elegant skull. Those and his strong jaw, button nose, and sensual mouth. He displayed a calm, friendly manner, and Christian liked him instantly, which he couldn’t have said about Damien.

They made small talk, and Christian asked what Darius did for a living.

“I’m a cop,” was his response.

Christian almost groaned because now he had a vision of both Darius and Eban in uniform, brandishing handcuffs and nightsticks, and he was pretty sure he was going to get hard. Luckily Eban saved him by appearing in the doorway, dressed in black and smelling strongly of cologne.

Christian didn’t miss the way the two smiled at each other. “Have a good time,” he said softly to Eban as he followed them to the door.

Eban turned back and smiled, winking at Christian. The smile didn’t fool Christian because he knew him well enough by now. Eban carried his broken heart on his sleeve for anyone to see.

“EBAN,” Darius remarked as he set off driving down the road, eyes sliding sideways to him. “Your friend likes men in uniform.”

Eban responded with a confused smile. “Does he?”

“Fuck, yes.” Darius laughed. “You’ve never noticed? I bet he goes into your closet when you’re out and jacks off over your regulation pants.”

Eban raised a sarcastic eyebrow. “Please. That’s my best friend you’re talking about. He’s never raised his uniform fetish with me.”

It was a testament to how well their first date had gone that both felt comfortable enough to banter like this. Darius laughed again and then said, “Is it okay if I cook for you or do you want to go out somewhere?”

Eban was taken aback. Darius wanted to cook for him on their second date? Mind you, his second date with Damien had been spent in bed. He felt nervous, wondering if Darius had decided on this to make it easier to bed Eban after dinner. He nodded tightly.

“Sure?” Darius darted an uncertain look at him.

“Yeah.” The way Eban saw it, if you went to someone’s house, you could make your excuses and leave any time you wanted with no obligation. Unless Darius was a serial killer and planned to put Eban in a casserole.

Predictably, they didn't get past the front door before they were upon each other. The action was fast and frantic, a little desperate on Eban's side. Clothes were ripped and bodies were scratched and bruised before Darius had finished taking Eban facedown on the stairs and Eban had finished yelling for more.

IN THE house, Christian lay motionless on the bed with eyes turned to the window, trying to muster the energy to get up for a shower. He had been crying, and his face was sticky with tears, but his eyes were dry. His head ached with dehydration. He wondered if he had cried out all the fluid in his body and if his face in the mirror would resemble a desiccated raisin. These days it hardly mattered what he looked like. Some days he didn't shave, other times he went weeks without a haircut. What exactly had the coffee shop stranger seen in this once attractive, now neglected man?

Dusk was falling outside over the garden Conrad had lovingly landscaped. He had always said he had made the garden for Christian. It was totally secluded and had a swing chair on the patio where the two would curl in the early evening and make lazy love. Christian closed his eyes and pictured one such instance on the swing.

Conrad lay between Christian's legs, his head on his chest, his arms around him, his weight always comforting rather than crushing the smaller man. Christian stroked his hair with one hand while looking out over a sunset which blinded his eyes with its brilliance. Both Conrad's hands slid up his shirt and started to stroke the curve of his spine. He sighed a little, moving his own hand down Conrad's back and onto the strip of honey skin where his shirt had ridden up. He felt Conrad shift a little against him, face nuzzling the material of his shirt. "I want you," he said in a low voice.

Christian started to harden rapidly. His hands moved down to Conrad's belt. "I guess you better take me then, hadn't you?"

The two of them did it with Christian sitting on Conrad's lap, the swing lazily moving back and forth with each movement they made. Conrad's face pressed into Christian's damp neck; he used his teeth against the soft skin, making Christian moan as he thrust up into him with unerring accuracy.

Christian's hand moved to the bulge in his jeans. He pulled Conrad's shirt out from under the pillow and held it against his nose. In reality, he was sure the masculine scent of Conrad had long since vanished from the cotton, but he was still convinced he could smell him. Would Conrad be disgusted at this image of Christian jerking off over him?

He rolled onto his side and pressed his face into the pillow, the shirt between his skin and the pillowcase. He kissed the material softly, conjuring up the memory of Conrad's lips on his. Conrad had been such a skillful kisser. So talented, so sweet. He had kissed Christian so many times every day, that mouth so calm and loving, able to soothe any worry from Christian's mind instantly.

He kept his mouth against the material as he worked himself quickly and needily and kissed that shirt of Conrad's as he came, gasping lightly into the material, this time the coffee shop stranger well and truly blocked out by the only one who had ever mattered and ever would.

DAMIEN had made an early start that evening, going straight to a bar when his shift at the hospital finished at seven, only stopping to throw his blood-stained scrubs into the laundry. One more cardiac arrest to add to the number he'd already presided over and one more for the mortuary, this time a man younger than himself, dead from a cocaine-inflicted heart attack.

By eight o'clock he was beneath some toned, tattooed guy named Aaron, moaning with all the desperation still left in him. Damien wasn't a bottom kind of guy. He often took control with Eban but had still allowed his ex to top whenever he wanted it. Tonight he needed to indulge his masochistic side and be hurt, because maybe the physical pain would obliterate the mental pain brought about by his inability to forgive Eban one mistake in five years. Under Aaron, a nice enough guy who tried not to hurt him, he clawed and bit and begged for more, only more pain satisfying him, and finally Aaron had to hold him down to avoid being hurt himself.

He was still feeling guilty over making Christian think Conrad and Eban had fucked, and still feeling lost over walking away from Eban in the alleyway, leaving his love there against the wall with pants around his knees. But Conrad and Eban *had* fucked, no matter that it was fifteen years ago, and maybe that was the root of the problem for Damien. It was something he could not and never had been able to accept. Maybe he used Eban's infidelity as an excuse to break them up, because he was pretty sure when he first found out about Eban and Conrad some two years ago they were already doomed.

It was something he could not get over, and every time he saw Conrad he imagined Eban and him entwined on damp sheets, Conrad pinning the smaller Eban down and fucking him mercilessly while Eban begged for more. Damien could not get this image out of his mind, mainly because the two seemed to look so goddamn *right* together in his head, better than Conrad and Christian did. He allowed this thought to poison him for two years, treating

Eban appallingly and driving him further and further away until, finally, the end result was finding his lover fucking Jack Summers.

For six months he had told himself Eban was to blame for all of this, but now he was starting to acknowledge his own role in it.

Truth be told, Damien was falling fast beneath the surface by the time Conrad died, and the loss of Eban was one less millstone around his neck, or so he thought. He had been outraged to the point of violence when Eban's excuse for fucking Jack in their bed was that he was receiving comfort for Conrad.

While Jack had gathered his clothes and scuttled out, Damien had grabbed Eban and punched him in the mouth before blacking his eye. Now he thought about what Eban had said to him the last time he had seen him.

And you worked every hour God sent and I never saw you. And you came home and fell asleep before we could even talk, never mind fuck. I grieved for Conrad alone; you were never once there.

And he thought that maybe Eban knew the truth, namely that Damien worked so late a lot of the time because when he crept into their bed, Eban would be so deeply asleep that he wouldn't hear Damien crying.

Six years in the ER was enough for anyone in their right mind, and yet Damien, with little experience in any other area of medicine, clung on, lacking motivation, lacking anything. He didn't want to look for another job because he didn't want to be a doctor anymore. But he didn't know what else he could do and he had a hefty mortgage to pay. That was the crux of the matter.

He wasn't exactly enamored with Eban's job, either. In the five years they were together, Eban had been shot once and stabbed twice, plus suffered many more minor injuries. Damien would often trace the scars these injuries had left as they made love. It got to the stage where he was afraid that the next stretcher through the doors at work would be Eban, dead.

On the job was where he met Eban. One of the nurses had called the police to assist them with a drunk who had procured a scalpel off a procedure cart and was waving it around in an unfriendly fashion. Two cops had burst through the door, and Damien's jaw had dropped as the hottest of the two, a toned guy in his late twenties with black, spiked hair, had kicked the weapon out of the guy's hand, grabbed his arm, twisting until the cracking of bone was heard, and turned him, shoving him against the wall, cuffing him swiftly.

Damien, awestruck, had immediately thought of what it would be like to be man-handled onto a bed by this cop and cuffed to the headboard until he begged for mercy. "Officer," he had spoken up, so the cop's amber eyes had swung his way and stared back at Damien. "That was very impressive. I

wonder how you would feel about teaching some of my colleagues self-defense?”

When Eban came to the department the next day, he had a virtual scramble on his hands for his attention from the nurses. But it was only Damien he had eyes for.

Later on, Eban had taught Damien self-defense alone. These sessions where they grappled with one another, kicking and twisting arms while desperately trying not to actually hurt each other, always ended up the same way, with them naked and entwined.

Strange, but when Damien actually needed to use these moves to save his life, he wouldn't remember a single one.

He came beneath Aaron with a whimper and dropped back onto the bed limply, dimly aware of his partner coming to a climax more or less at the same time. Damien lay there with his face turned away, studying the reflection of their two entwined forms in the mirror and not finding it remotely hot.

“What do you do for a living, Aaron?” he asked.

“I'm a cop.” Aaron shifted off him to lie beside him.

Damien groaned. It wasn't even funny. The man he had had a six-month relationship with before Eban had also been a cop. He was starting to get a pattern, here. He couldn't deny that he found them hot, though. Eban in uniform and holding handcuffs out threateningly to Damien was an image he had jerked off to for the past six months.

“What about you?” Aaron reached out and trailed a hand idly over Damien's chest, raising goose pimples.

“I'm a doctor,” was Damien's reply. He had once been proud of saying that. Now he saw it as the biggest mistake of his life. Apart, that was, from losing Eban.

“And who is he?”

“What?” Damien asked, startled.

“The guy you're trying to get out of your system with me,” was Aaron's laconic reply.

“You know what,” Damien said, “if I wanted conversation, I would have stayed in the bar. So how about you shut the fuck up and fuck me again?”

Aaron's brown eyes narrowed. “You know, Damien, there's something about you I quite like, despite the fact you're a fucking asshole.”

And as he rolled onto Damien and put a hand down to stroke him back to erection, Damien smiled against his mouth, because Aaron reminded him of Eban.

Darius had already sucked, licked, and fucked him into oblivion three times that night, showing Eban the time of his life, the dinner forgotten, before he spoke, holding Eban against him, stroking his disheveled hair. "Who is he?"

"What?"

"The guy you've been thinking about the whole time we've been making love tonight."

Eban was uncomfortable at the expression. As far as he was concerned, he had only made love with one person in his life; the rest of the time he would call it fucking. But another memory drifted into his mind, which he pushed roughly away because he didn't think about that anymore.

Certainly he and Darius hadn't made love that night; they had only fucked. Eban had merely satisfied his physical desires; his mental ones had not even been touched.

"I haven't," he replied flippantly. "I thought of you the whole time and how much I was enjoying having your big cock in my ass."

Darius immediately let go of him and rolled onto his side, his body stiff with tension. Eban was surprised at how clearly he was offended. "Hey," he said, touching Darius's back as he sat up.

Darius shrugged away. "I'm getting some juice. Want some?"

"Sure."

Darius pulled on his boxers and stood up. When he was across the room at the door, Eban said, "His name's Damien. We've been over six months."

"Over according to who?" Darius asked. "Him or you?"

"Him," Eban said. "I want him back. I still love him."

Darius lowered his head. He didn't speak.

"I'm sorry," Eban said.

Darius slipped through the door.

Eban lay back on the bed and buried his face into a pillow which smelled of Darius. *It's been so many years since I actually had a date that I've forgotten how to act. You don't mention your ex when you've finished fucking your date; it's poor protocol.* Darius would never want to see him again after tonight. Who would want a man as clearly bruised and damaged

beyond repair as Eban was? Which was just fine, because Eban never intended to see him again, either.

When Darius came back, his lips were cool and sweet with orange juice as he leaned over Eban, kissing him tenderly and lowering him back to the bed. Eban lay still as Darius explored his body with mouth and hands, finally taking him in his mouth and sucking him close to climax before letting go and lifting his head.

He regarded Eban with ocean-blue eyes, holding out a condom. "Want to go on top?"

Eban nodded and took it from him. He maneuvered Darius beneath him and opened him up gently with lubricated fingers, watching his lover's face as he stroked the right spot. Darius was one of the most beautiful men he had ever seen in his life. He didn't know quite what he had done to deserve this night or why he couldn't let the image of Damien go when Darius pleased him as easily as Damien had been able to do.

Their lips met as he entered Darius, and his lover moaned against his mouth, nails digging into his back lightly. Eban, eyes closed, drifted away in bliss, pushing away memories of other times with other men which threatened to overwhelm him. Now was all that mattered.

In the afterglow, Darius spoke again. Eban was beginning to think Darius spoke far too much and he added this to the list of reasons not to see him again. The reasons to see him again was a list of one so far: *he's hot and he pleases me effortlessly*. But maybe that was two things.

"What about Christian, what's his problem?"

"What do you mean?" Eban asked in surprise.

"Eban, your house is like a fucking mausoleum. The whole time I was talking to him I thought he was going to burst into tears."

Eban sighed. "My best friend Conrad died six months ago. He was Christian's partner of ten years."

"I'm sorry." Darius paused. "So let me get this straight. You split up with Damien at the same time as Conrad died?"

"Damien dumped me two weeks after Conrad died, yeah."

"That must have been devastating for you."

Eban turned his head to look at him. He was taken aback by Darius's apparent sympathy, the concern in his eyes.

"How long were you and Damien together?"

"Five years. Listen, I'm not sure I want to talk about this anymore." Eban was afraid Darius would ask the reason Damien left him. He didn't need

to know that Eban was a faithless liar. But then, what did it matter? He wasn't going to see him again.

"Okay," Darius acquiesced. "Sorry."

Eban didn't say anything, only curled himself a little closer into his lover's body and hid his face against his neck.

Darius held him there for the longest time, stroking his hair until Eban fell into exhausted sleep and slept like the dead for the first time in six months.

Finally, at dawn, Eban crept out like the dog he was, leaving his wonderful lover sleeping.

Chapter 8

CHRISTIAN was anxious when he found the usually calm coffee shop bustling that morning, even though he was five minutes early. He got in line, thinking he would take his coffee back to the office with him, but as he waited, his eyes strayed, unable to stop himself checking every face. There he was, by the window, side on to Christian, head bowed over a newspaper, chin resting in his hand. Christian's gaze slid over the perfect lines created by his strong nose and his pink, pouting lips, the dusky lashes shadowing his amazing eyes. *He's beautiful.*

The stranger looked up abruptly and their eyes met. "Your coffee, sir," the girl behind the counter said. Christian quickly turned around, muttering his thanks, then anxiously looked around for a table. Because he didn't want to leave now. He wanted to sit for fifteen minutes and drink in the eye candy.

There weren't any free tables and he didn't want to join anyone. As he started reluctantly toward the door, his gaze rested once more on the stranger.

The stranger's own gaze moved pointedly to the chair in front of him and back to Christian. *Inviting.*

Suddenly Christian couldn't breathe. He came to a stop in the middle of the cafe, clutching his coffee like a weapon. He couldn't. He couldn't sit with the stranger. It would mean making conversation. It would mean staring into those endlessly green eyes up close. He couldn't. His legs moved independently of his brain, and he pulled the chair out, sat down, and put his cup on the table.

"Hi," said the stranger softly. "I'm Luke."

And suddenly the stranger was a stranger no longer. He was *Luke*.

Christian swallowed. "Christian," he heard himself say in a voice which was not deep and manly and supremely self-confident as it always was, but rather sounded more like the voice which had first addressed Conrad ten years ago when the love of his life had marched up to Christian's table in the university dining hall and said, "*I'm Conrad. You free tonight? Because I want to buy you dinner, get you drunk, and make love to you all night. Not necessarily in that order.*"

Christian, crimson-red and staring, had stammered his name in reply and not even thought about refusing the man who had stalked, caught, and killed his prey effortlessly.

Now he stared at another man who seemed as afraid and alone as Christian himself was, and yet, Luke intimidated him just as much as Conrad had.

Luke held out his hand, a delicate long-fingered hand. Terror overwhelmed Christian. What was Luke thinking? The way Christian's hormones were in overload, the way his senses were on overdrive, Luke might as well have been inviting Christian to stroke his crotch under the table. It felt just as intimate, to touch the hand of this stranger, to feel his skin against his own desperate one. He couldn't do it. And yet, he wanted it.

As he stared and analyzed and fought with himself too long, Luke withdrew his hand. "Nice to meet you, Christian. I just wanted to say sorry for the other day. I didn't mean to offend you. It wasn't any sort of cheap pickup. I'm not that way. I'm sorry I gave you the impression I was."

Christian lifted his gaze to Luke's. The startling green was solemn and earnest.

"I just wanted to talk," Luke continued. "You seemed... lonely."

Christian bristled immediately, the haze of lust clearing. "I'm not lonely."

"Sorry," Luke said quickly, looking repentant. "I guess I was projecting myself onto you there, because I *am* lonely." He gave a little smile and stood up abruptly, so Christian's gaze moved up his lean, pleasantly muscled body slowly to his face.

Christian opened his mouth to speak, anything to keep Luke there, but Luke was already gone.

He lowered his head and his hand curled hard around his cup. *Fuck*. He was an asshole. He was a lonely, mentally scarred, fucking asshole.

It was never going to get better. Conrad was always going to be dead and Christian was always going to be treating perfectly nice strangers like Luke badly. What would the green-eyed man be like in bed? Submissive? Dominant? Christian rather liked the idea of Luke being dominant. Of taking what he wanted and satisfying him effortlessly. Christian stared blindly from the window as his pants started to tighten steadily.

Then suddenly his aimless gaze focused sharply. Across the street was a bench and a man holding onto it, bending over, back heaving up and down as though trying to catch his breath.

Christian frowned. Abruptly, he shoved his chair back, coffee forgotten, and left the shop. Outside on the street he glanced along the road before crossing quickly, coming up behind the man who stood with his face turned

away. Even over the sound of the traffic, Christian could hear the wheeze of breath rattling into his lungs.

“Are you okay?”

Luke turned to face him. He was chalk-white, and his pale lips carried a hint of blue which set Christian alight with terror. “Are you asthmatic?” he asked urgently, a hand grasping Luke’s shoulder. The man felt fragile beneath his hands, as though Christian’s rough touch would snap bones and bruise flesh.

Luke nodded. His breath came in short, shallow bursts.

“Where’s your inhaler?” Christian demanded, not even waiting for a reply, but jamming his hands into both Luke’s jacket pockets, finding them empty.

Christian glanced around wildly. He leapt into the road with arm outstretched and flagged down a cab. “Come on.” He yanked the door open, put an arm around the wheezing Luke and guided him to the back of the cab. He hesitated for a second with the door open. What did he do? Was it protocol to go with Luke? He wanted to and yet he was afraid. He didn’t need this. He didn’t need the problems of some stranger intruding on his own grief.

“The ER *quick!*” he told the driver urgently, slamming the door. He saw Luke’s ashen face for a moment as the cab pulled away and Christian stood watching it go. Finally he turned away and started the short walk to work. Never in his life had he hated himself more.

A SONG came on the radio while Eban was driving to work, something about handcuffing someone and throwing them down in the backseat. He’d been thrown down in the backseat of his car many a time. He and Damien had done their fair share of kinky sex. Eban didn’t know a cop who *didn’t* use their handcuffs on their partner. Damien loved it and Eban did too. Damien liked him in uniform, but then once he said he was a cop, everyone seemed to get a gleam in their eye as though a cop uniform was a universal kink. Maybe Christian had been turned on by the revelation that his date was a cop as Darius had suggested. Maybe it meant that Christian also thought Eban was hot. Which Eban didn’t want to think about, because he thought Christian was hot, too, but he would never disrespect Conrad’s memory by acting on it. Sometimes, though, it was difficult to lie there sleepless next door to him and not have the urge to creep into Christian’s bed.

He was so tired and sore he could barely think. But it was a pleasant soreness, an aching which reminded him of all the things Darius had done to

him last night. Not that he wanted to be reminded of Darius, not when he had no intention of seeing the man again.

He didn't want to call Christian when he got to the police station. The weight of Christian's grief exhausted him. He wasn't sure he could keep them both afloat much longer, not when he wanted to sink beneath the surface himself. Christian didn't have anything left over for anyone else, submerged as he was in his own misery, but he surely wasn't so oblivious that he couldn't see Eban slowly going under.

So for the first time since Christian had gone back to work, Eban didn't call him and instead he drowned beneath his own grief.

DAMIEN had told Eban a week after Conrad's death that Christian should "*get a fucking grip*." A seasoned ER doctor, he had no patience with grief, no patience with any real kind of emotion, as fraught and jaded as he was. He conveniently forgot that he had cried like a baby when he found out about Conrad's death. Conrad might not have had any time for him, and they'd had a troubled history, but Damien had respected the guy, not least for his dedication to Eban, who deserved so much better than Damien. He was relieved he had not been on duty the day Conrad's broken body was brought to the ER.

That morning in the ER, he was to have a rude awakening. Having dealt with the same time-wasting hypochondriacs that he did every day, and feeling sleep-deprived and irritable after being fucked by Aaron for most of the night, he drew the curtain of a cubicle back, only to step into his worst nightmare: a man holding one of the nurses around the neck, a gun pressed to her temple.

Damien didn't feel all that scared, because he didn't feel all that much of anything anymore, but he was a little anxious lest the nurse be killed, as she was a nice girl. "Drop it," he drawled. "I'm not in the fucking mood for this shit. Take whatever drugs you want and get the hell out of my ER."

A moment later his face was awash with blood and brains as the nurse was shot through the head at point-blank range. He stumbled back a little in shock and tasted metal as blood ran into his mouth. This was enough to penetrate Damien's hard shell. Even *he* was bothered by seeing someone murdered before his eyes.

The man lunged forward, gun raised, aiming at his chest. Damien dodged sideways, bumping into a cart and sending suture equipment spinning onto the floor. Behind him people screamed. He raised his hands to let the

man know he wasn't a threat as he continued to dance backward and the man, tall and thin with manic blue eyes, followed him.

A loud explosion was followed by sudden weightlessness in Damien's legs. He slithered to the ground. His last thought as everything went dark was, *this might just be good enough to get me six weeks off work.*

Chapter 9

EBAN had barely been in uniform ten minutes when a call came to attend the ER. It might only have been ten a.m., but it was hardly an unusual request. He and his partner got into their patrol car and set the siren going while Eban's palms became damp; he had never yet bumped into Damien during one of these visits, but with his luck going the way it had the other night, no doubt he would this morning.

Aaron, his partner of the last five months, had called in sick today, and Eban rode out with Jamie instead, a big bear of a man who was the nicest guy you could ever hope to meet and whom Eban had known for years.

He suspected it was Aaron's hectic social life which was to blame for his absence today, that lucky bastard. He was a good guy, though and fairly new to the job. While Eban had taken a month's leave after Conrad's death and Damien's abandonment of him, his previous partner, Nathan, had been shot dead in a bank holdup.

Loud screams sounded as soon as they passed through the electric doors and into the department. Both Eban and Jamie stopped dead and looked around slowly. The place was a bloodbath. It looked like a dozen people had been massacred, judging by the amount of blood and brains sprayed on the walls.

Eban's legs turned abruptly to rubber, and his heart clenched in dread. *Damien*. In that moment, he didn't care how many people had been murdered. He only cared whether Damien was one of them.

Eban had been a cop for ten years and had seen everything there was to see. He was as cynical and coldhearted about humanity as Damien was, but he would have laid his life on the line for Nathan without a doubt, and he was pretty sure he would do it for Aaron, too, and today for Jamie. He was not afraid of anything or anyone and blood did not faze him. What fazed him was the thought that Damien might be dead. If he was, then it would be perfectly okay for Eban to take a bullet that morning too.

He glanced over at Jamie as he unsnapped his holster and took his gun out, noting how calm his partner was.

The two of them moved around the corner, one on each side of the corridor, guns held out in front of them, advancing toward the noise. The first thing they saw was a nurse cradling the body of another nurse in her arms and weeping over it, the second was the body of a doctor slumped against the far wall. The third was the figure of a man holding a gun, back turned to them,

arm around the neck of another doctor in green scrubs. Eban's lip curled scornfully as he flicked the safety off his gun. For a man who had graduated top of his class at the academy, this was way too easy. He aimed and shot the man clean through the top of his head before he could even turn around.

The ER staff scrambled toward the victims. Eban turned to look at the body against the wall. As Jamie moved to check that the perpetrator was dead, Eban waded through the clutch of doctors and nurses around Damien.

"Stand back Eban," a soft voice said as a firm hand pressed on his chest. Isabelle, one of Damien's closest colleagues. Eban did as he was told, watching helplessly as Damien's apparently lifeless body was hoisted onto a stretcher.

"I NEED you, Christian," came Eban's plaintive voice.

A strange thrill went through Christian even though something devastating must have happened. Someone needed him. Finally, he had the chance to show Eban the compassion he should have shown him six months ago. He had the chance to be strong for Eban, to make up for everything he had taken from his friend and never given back.

"What's happened?"

"I'm at the ER. It's Damien. *Please....*"

"I'm on my way." Christian hung up. He stood and shoved his chair back. "I have to go to the ER," he told Jack. "Tell Marcus."

EBAN was sitting in his patrol car with the door open and his legs outside it, head bowed and hat obscuring his face, when Christian arrived. A woman in blue scrubs bent down in front of Eban with her hands on his knees.

The parking lot was a hive of activity, a dozen police cars and vans from local and national TV stations pulling up.

Christian ran over to the car. The woman turned around to look at him. Mid-thirties and dark-skinned, she was attractive. He vaguely recognized her as one of Damien's friends. "Hello, Christian," she said. "Damien's been shot. He's in surgery."

Christian's heart sank. He nodded. He was strong. He could do this. He would not think about this hospital where Conrad lost his life and Christian had most certainly lost his. The woman moved back as Christian stepped forward to the car. He drew Eban to his feet and into his arms.

IN THE corridor outside the operating room, Christian fidgeted, his thoughts flitting wildly backward and forward. By all accounts there had been a massacre in the ER. What if Luke had been one of the victims along with Damien?

But maybe he hadn't even made it that far. Maybe Luke had suffered respiratory arrest in the back of that cab and arrived at the hospital dead. Maybe he was being ventilated in the ICU while well-meaning doctors coveted his organs and declared his brain dead.

Christian rested his head in his hands, covering his eyes as he thought about the words on the pale blue paper, about the body that carried Conrad's strong heart. Why hadn't he gone with Luke? If he had been in the back of the cab with him, he could have breathed life back into him.

He had caused the asthma attack, without doubt. He had probably killed Luke. And he would never again see the man who had given his heart a huge nudge and reminded it to keep beating.

He couldn't just sit there and wonder. He stood decisively. "I'll get us some coffee." He moved off down the corridor. When he reached a stairwell, he glanced back at Eban, finding him still staring at the ground with head bowed. Quickly, he ducked through the door and ran down the stairs to the ground floor. Exiting, he followed a sign for the ER. It was a long shot as he expected the place to be closed as a crime scene, but to his surprise, the main desk was functioning and it seemed they had partitioned off a small area for continuing use.

"Hi," he greeted the receptionist. "I helped a man out in the street this morning. He was called Luke; I don't know his last name. I put him in a cab with an asthma attack. I wonder if you could tell me if he's okay?"

"Just one moment, sir." The woman typed something into her computer. "Yes, we had one man named Luke come to us earlier. He went to the ICU. I can't tell you anything else. You'll find them on the first floor."

Christian thanked her and walked away. As he took the stairs up to the first floor, his heart surged with both relief and dread. Luke wasn't dead. But the fact that he was in the ICU made his condition as serious as serious could be. Or maybe he was dead and even now his organs were being harvested. He cursed himself for his runaway brain. *Just because Conrad went there with the sole purpose of being kept alive in order to cut him open, that doesn't mean Luke has too.*

Should he go to the ICU? They would not tell him anything. *You've established he isn't dead due to your lack of humanity. Just leave it at that. If he comes back to the coffee shop then he comes back. If he doesn't, then maybe another lucky person has got a huge, kind heart.* But it wasn't enough. To wait and never know would kill him.

His feet carried him to the doors of the ICU. A sign to visitors outside told them to buzz the intercom. Christian did so with a trembling finger.

“Hello?”

“Hi, I’m here to ask about a patient.”

“Come in.” A buzz sounded followed by the click of a lock. Christian stepped in and let the door swing shut behind him.

The memories assailed him immediately, and he found himself automatically reaching to rub his hands with alcohol gel. This was the place Conrad had officially died, even though his brain had been dead in the ER before Christian got there. The place Christian had leaned over his love and brushed his still-warm lips with his, to the disgust of his on-looking parents, whispering, “I love you” in his ear.

To his horror, he recognized the nurse behind the desk, the one who had watched Christian break down and cry like a baby as Eban led him out of the unit.

“Hi,” he began, approaching her. “You have a patient here called Luke. I don’t really know him and I know you won’t tell me anything, it’s just... I put him in a cab to the ER this morning with an asthma attack and I just wanted to be sure he was okay.”

The woman smiled gently. “It’s Christian, isn’t it?”

Christian was taken aback.

“I don’t forget a face. You were Conrad’s partner, right?”

Christian nodded. His eyes brimmed with tears.

She came around the desk and put a hand on his arm. “And how are you doing?”

He tried to shrug his shoulders, head lowered, teeth biting his lip. An arm went around his back and rubbed it, which almost undid him.

“How do you know Luke?”

“I don’t. He... comes to my coffee shop. He asked me if he could buy me a cup of coffee and I said no. I was mean to him. I wish I’d said yes now.”

The nurse plucked a tissue from the box on the counter, which he took gratefully. “Come on,” she said to his surprise. “I’ll take you to see him.”

She led him through to the main area, a large room containing seven beds in a semicircular pattern, each patient unconscious and ventilated, a nurse hovering over each.

Christian stood staring down at Luke. He was so utterly perfect and so utterly vulnerable lying there in a hospital gown with the tube between his lips, the hiss of the ventilator making his chest rise mechanically at a pre-set rate. Christian reached out to touch his hand and then hesitated, deciding there

was something not quite right about touching this stranger while he was unconscious. He turned his head to the nurse.

"Does anyone know he's here?"

"He doesn't have any next of kin. A friend of his is on his way, though."

"How do you know that? That he doesn't have any next of kin?"

"We know Luke here."

"What do you mean? He's been here before?"

The nurse smiled. "A few times."

"Why? The asthma?"

"You know I can't answer that, Christian."

"Is he going to die?"

"I can't answer that with certainty, either. But I don't think so. He's stable."

Christian swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to fight down his emotions. He mustn't cry over some stranger like this. He could not let the nurse see such a display. Crying over Luke like this was one more example of the disrespect he continued to show Conrad's memory.

"Thank you." He turned away from the bed, heading toward the exit.

The nurse followed him, going back behind the desk. "Press the button on the wall to release the door. And try not to worry. I'm sure you'll still have the chance to get that cup of coffee off him."

Christian tried to smile. He heard someone buzz at the outer door as he pressed the release button and pushed and he was suddenly face to face with a familiar man.

Christian did a double take as he saw the uniform and recognized the blue eyes. "Darius."

Darius also looked astonished. "Have you got somebody here, Christian?"

Christian nodded. "I don't really know him...." But he stopped at the recognition on Darius's face.

"Jesus, it's you," Darius breathed. "I don't know why I didn't recognize his description of you...."

Christian stared.

"I'm Luke's friend," Darius clarified. "We *are* talking about the same person, aren't we?"

Christian nodded in disbelief at this coincidence.

"He told me about a guy who goes to his coffee shop. Then when the hospital called, they said some guy helped him out on the street, put him in a cab."

Christian reddened as Darius gripped his hand hard. "Thank you," he said earnestly. He cleared his throat. "Have you seen Eban this morning?"

"Yes."

"He left without saying goodbye. I was a little... disappointed." Darius gave a smile which did nothing to mask the hurt in his voice.

Christian groaned inwardly. "That's not you, it's him. Eban has a few... issues. He's here at the hospital, actually; his ex was shot in the ER this morning."

Darius frowned. "Jesus. Is he...?"

"He's in surgery."

"Think Eban would mind if I came to see him after I get done with Luke?"

"I think he'd appreciate that very much." Christian gave him directions to the OR Damien was currently in. They shook hands again.

Christian made his way back upstairs and found new arrivals in the corridor. Eban sat with his face buried in Jack's shoulder, while Marcus jabbed irritably at buttons on the coffee machine.

"Hey," Christian greeted them both. "Thanks for coming."

"Marcus ran out of subjects for memos this morning so we had to get out of the office," Jack joked.

Marcus glowered at him and slammed a hand against the machine, swearing. He turned away and sat down.

"Any news?" Christian asked.

Eban lifted his head. "No. Where's your coffee?"

"What? Oh. I didn't.... Listen, I've been to the ICU."

"What for?"

"This morning at the coffee shop, Luke had an asthma attack."

"Luke? Your admirer?"

Christian nodded, for once ignoring the term.

"Jesus." Jack was the first one to speak up. "Is he okay? Well, I mean, obviously he's not, but...."

"He's stable. And I saw someone else there, too, who you know. A friend of Luke's."

Eban frowned. "Who?"

Just then, the door to the stairwell opened and a dark-haired figure moved down the corridor. Both Jack's and Marcus's jaws fell open. "Fuck," Marcus said. Christian was pretty sure his boss had a hard-on to split his pants but he didn't look.

Eban, after sitting stunned for a moment, hurriedly stood up and wrapped his arms tightly around Darius, who held him in return. The two murmured to each other, too low for the other three men to hear.

“Put your fucking eyes back in,” Christian told Jack and Marcus.

“Jesus, *fuck* me,” Marcus groaned. His gaze slid sideways. “Memo to Jack. Get cop uniform off eBay ASAP.”

Christian rolled his eyes. Marcus could lighten any situation, no matter how tragic.

IT WAS another two hours before Damien came out of surgery. The surgeon explained to the men gathered there that he was in stable condition but the next twenty-four hours would be critical. *That’s what they always say*, Christian thought. *He’s watched too many medical shows. He’s bullshitting because he has no idea whether Damien’s going to bite it or not.* They were told Damien was being transferred to the ICU.

How cozy. Damien and Luke might be lying next to each other, us all able to kill two birds with one stone and visit both together.

The five of them duly trooped down to the ICU, where they were told in no uncertain terms that it was one visitor at any one time and it wasn’t even visiting time yet. But the same kind nurse allowed Eban to sit with Damien a while after Christian explained what he was doing back there. *I bet she thinks I’m some sort of grim reaper. She’s now seen me with connections to a total of three men in this unit.*

Sitting in the relatives’ room in silence, Marcus murmured for Christian to come out into the corridor. Christian followed him. As soon as the door shut, Marcus said, “When did Eban screw Jack?”

Taken aback, Christian began to stammer.

“Oh, come on,” Marcus said, talking over him. “I’m not stupid.”

“Just after Conrad died,” Christian muttered.

“Oh right. Jack’s the reason Damien and Eban broke up?”

Christian nodded.

“Jesus,” Marcus said angrily.

Christian frowned at him in surprise. “Are you and he actually *serious*? Are you pissed off at Eban?”

“Yeah, I’m pissed off,” Marcus growled, ignoring the first question.

“It wasn’t... anything,” Christian said, wondering why he was making excuses for his friends. “It was a comfort thing. A one-off. Because of Conrad.”

A knowing look came into Marcus's eyes. "Hmm, yeah," he said, nodding sagely. "I see now."

Christian's brow furrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything. Come on, let's go back inside."

EBAN sat by Damien's bed holding his hand, wishing his last memories of him were not a drunken screw against a wall in an alleyway. Damien looked fragile and thin against the crisp white sheets, his blond hair falling across his eyes, so Eban reached out to brush it away. He glanced down the row of beds. It wasn't hard to spot which one was Christian's new beau; he was there two beds down. The man was startlingly attractive, his hair black as pitch and cut into a sharp, jagged style, his skin milk-white, the lashes resting on his cheeks dusky and thick, that awful tube snaking between his full, pink lips and down his throat. Christian had always had impeccable taste. Eban remembered the perfection which was Conrad, and his thoughts drifted to long-buried and long-taboo memories. He cursed himself. With Damien lying there half dead beside him, and Darius, who seemed more than eager to replace him, outside, now was not the time to be remembering things that had been swept under the carpet—at least by Conrad, who had been anxious that they remain that way.

ONCE the five of them left the ICU, Eban and Darius spoke quietly in the corridor before Darius turned abruptly and walked away.

"Let's get a drink some place," Eban told Christian.

"Isn't he coming with us?" Christian gestured to the retreating figure of Darius.

"No." Eban avoided his gaze. "Let's go."

When the four of them reached the parking lot, Marcus said, "We're going to head off home."

Christian nodded, watching as Jack embraced Eban while Marcus turned his face away in clear disgust. He sighed inwardly. He didn't need this drama on top of everything else. Why couldn't Marcus accept Jack and Eban for what they had been—a one-night stand and nothing more?

He climbed into his car and started the engine, waiting until Eban had done up his seat belt beside him before he pulled away.

"Why did you send Darius away?" he questioned as he drove to one of the bars he and Eban favored.

Eban took a moment to respond. "I don't want to see him again."

"Why not?" Christian darted a look at him.

"You know why. I told you I was going to let him fuck me and that would be that. And I did. It's done with."

"But he likes you," Christian protested. "You mean son of a bitch."

"Don't, Christian," warned Eban. "Just don't."

Christian shook his head angrily. "Prick," he muttered under his breath.

"Pull over!" yelled Eban to his shock.

Christian did as he was told. Eban instantly scrambled from the car, almost slamming the door off its hinges. Christian climbed out reluctantly, only to be grasped hard by the shoulders and slammed back into the side of the car.

"I'm not a fucking prick," Eban hissed into his face. "I'm someone who's still trying to deal with losing the two most important people in my life. I don't need anyone else on the scene trying to complicate things. And a little help from you *eventually* would be appreciated!"

Eban had finally spoken the words which Christian had known lay in his heart for the past six months. He couldn't speak.

But Eban could. His fingers dug hard into Christian's shoulders and his eyes glistened uncontrollably. "I've given you so much; I don't know how much more I can give you. You've bled me dry. There's nothing left."

"Don't," Christian said, appalled, hands coming up to clutch at Eban's biceps.

"Don't *what*?" Eban demanded. "Speak the truth?" He let go of Christian and stalked away, pacing agitatedly.

"Let's do this over a drink," Christian said softly. "Come on." He moved to Eban and put a hand on his shoulder.

Eban knocked it away. "I can't just sit down and discuss this with you, Christian. I don't know what to fucking *do*. I can't go on like this." His voice had risen to a yell, his face flushed, his eyes liquid.

A lump in Christian's throat threatened to choke him. When he opened his mouth to speak, his voice had gone, replaced by a hoarse whisper. "I'm sorry I've not been a better friend." He stared at Eban across the sidewalk.

This can't get any worse. Eban is disintegrating before my eyes. He is at absolute rock bottom. There is no way that things can get any worse.

Chapter 10

IT WAS some time before Christian and Eban were composed enough to drive to the nearest bar. There they lined up shot after shot and drank themselves into a stupor, neither speaking once about what had just happened outside.

Dusk was falling when they caught a cab home, both counting out handfuls of change to a despairing driver, then supporting each other up the drive to the front door. "Damien's going to die," Eban moaned as they stumbled through to the kitchen. Christian attempted to make coffee, which was difficult when he could barely see.

"No, he's not." He put an arm around Eban and drew his head against his shoulder, while he continued to fumble with the pot.

"Yes, he is. I'm sorry for what I said to you. I don't want you to go and then for Damien to die and for me to be all alone."

"Not going to happen."

Eban lifted a tear-streaked face. "Swear?"

"I swear. And you were right about everything you said to me today. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything, and if I can put it right, I will."

Eban shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," Christian insisted.

Again Eban shook his head. His hand curled around Christian's neck, and he stared at him intently with amber eyes. Suddenly Christian became aware of the heat and muscle of the body pressed against him, of the way Eban's glance flickered down to look at his mouth before moving back up to his eyes.

Christian's grip on him tightened. He could read Eban's thoughts like a book. Their faces were dangerously close. Eban's fingertips stroked his neck softly, then tightened, holding Christian still as he leaned forward, sooty lashes flickering closed as his mouth sought Christian's.

Christian jerked back abruptly from his grip, colliding with the work surface hard enough to leave a bruise. "What are you *doing*?"

"Christian, please," Eban said. He moved forward, pinning Christian against the counter, leaning in so close Christian felt his erection plainly, trying to kiss him again, his breath all alcohol fumes. Christian turned his head away.

“Fuck,” Eban moaned, burying his mouth against Christian’s neck so he gasped at the contact. “I want you. *Please.*”

“No.” Christian pushed weakly at Eban’s shoulders while his whole body screamed at him to give in. The mouth kissing his neck was soft and hot and oh so passionate. Eban would be capable of showing him the time of his life, no matter how drunk he was; Christian didn’t doubt that, and he wanted it so much. The erection threatening to burst his pants was testament to the fact.

But still he struggled uselessly at the assault on his neck, all the while thinking, *I’m sick of always doing the right thing. Why shouldn’t I take what I need, when I’ve needed this from Eban for six months?*

His hand clutched at Eban’s hair, and he groaned, his head falling back. A hand slid to his groin and started to rub him firmly.

“Oh Jesus...” Christian moaned, helpless to stop himself pushing into Eban’s hand.

“You like that,” Eban whispered, not a question but a statement, his mouth hot against Christian’s ear, teeth nipping at the lobe. He obviously knew only too well how much Christian wanted him.

“Oh fuck yes,” Christian gasped.

Eban continued to rub him through his pants, continued to lavish kisses on his neck and press his own erection into Christian’s pelvis, until Christian was reduced to rubble by the onslaught. He gripped Eban by the hips, pulling him closer, his hands sliding around to cup his firm buttocks.

Eban growled a little in pleasure and one hand slid up Christian’s shirt, finding a nipple, pinching it so Christian almost whimpered. Eban’s hand on Christian’s groin moved to his belt, trying swiftly to unfasten it.

Christian became suddenly lucid. He pushed Eban away. “No,” he said and moved swiftly through the kitchen before his friend could grab him, almost fleeing up the stairs, afraid that if Eban got hold of him again, this time he would give in to whatever he wanted.

He slammed his bedroom door and locked it then fell, panting for breath, on the bed. Footsteps halted at his door and there was a soft knock. “Open the door, Christian.” Christian didn’t respond. Oh fuck, what had just nearly happened? He had wanted Eban with all the desperation he had once wanted Conrad. The man had almost made him come just by touching him through his pants.

Christian’s hand moved over his bulge. He heard Eban’s bedroom door shut and frantically he tore his pants open and palmed his erection. It took him five hard strokes before he was spurting over his stomach and moaning with his other hand jammed against his mouth.

NEXT door, Eban lay on the bed bemoaning the fact that he was not buried inside the hottest piece of ass he would probably ever have. Well, almost. He thought of the way Christian had writhed against him in pleasure as he stroked him, and he took out his cock and started to jerk off.

But the images he had of fucking Christian were replaced by images of Conrad's broken body lying by the side of the road, the taste of his blood as Eban frantically sealed his mouth around his and tried to breathe life back into him.

He remembered Nathan doing chest compressions, counting loudly, telling Eban to breathe when it was time. He remembered the paramedics arriving and finding a pulse, and the triumph, which was short-lived when Conrad died on arrival at the hospital.

Conrad opened his eyes briefly there in the resuscitation room, his head restrained by blocks and a hard collar, his body strapped to a spinal board. His hand groped for and squeezed Eban's weakly, a smile of regret curving his lips as though he knew his time had come. He asked for Christian then in a barely audible voice. Eban reassured him that he was on his way, but he knew without doubt that Christian was never going to make it in time, and so he did what he felt he had to do in Christian's absence. He stood up, leaned over Conrad, and brushed his lips with his.

He heard Conrad's breath catch in his throat, felt his mouth respond to his. As he drew back, emerald-green eyes were fixed on his. "Eban," Conrad whispered, seemingly about to say more before his eyes rolled back and he was gone, thirty-one years extinguished like a candle's flame.

And so Conrad had gone to his death not with Christian's name on his lips, but Eban's.

Eban had been pushed out of the way then as frantic resuscitation attempts were made, and he stood at the back of the room watching Conrad's lifeless body jerk with the current of electricity sent through it. But Conrad's soul had already gone; Eban had felt it leave his body as he kissed him, and his lips burned with the last contact of Conrad's skin.

Lying on his bed, Eban felt his erection wither rapidly, and he took his hand away. He got undressed and slid beneath the covers, naked and shivering. He wished Christian would come to him and make it all better, kiss and caress him and fuck him into oblivion. Someone would have done that for him tonight, but he had pushed Darius away, instead preferring to hit on a man who was unavailable.

Eban's thoughts drifted once more to Conrad. There were many memories of his friend that Eban had successfully beaten away during the

lifetime he had known him, but some of these inevitably surfaced when Eban was at his most vulnerable, his most lonely. Like that day fifteen years ago.

They were home from school, dicking around in Conrad's bedroom. His parents were out, which was good, considering what came next. Sexually frustrated, with little progress with girls, Eban was only too aware of the rising tension between him and Conrad over the last few months, but he had no idea Conrad felt the same.

"Dude, when are you going to pop that cherry of yours?" Conrad snorted as they sat side by side on his bed playing video games. "I mean, you're a good-looking guy, what's the problem?"

"Am I?" Eban asked in disbelief, reddening.

"Fuck yeah. Half the girls in school are creaming themselves over you."

"So if I'm so good-looking, why don't you do it?" The words left Eban's lips without conscious thought. He would never again be so bold with Conrad, neither after this one time, nor in the next five years when he had the chance to take Conrad for his own and instead lost him to Christian. But, confused by his feelings and a little desperate to see what all the fuss was about, he didn't hesitate to say what was on his mind.

Conrad drew in his breath. "Me?" he asked, in a low voice.

Eban nodded his head, not trusting his voice, but keeping his gaze on his best friend, as he started to tremble all over with the idea that his dreams were about to come true.

He had never seen such a serious expression on Conrad's face before. The two sat side by side staring at each other for the longest time before Conrad let out a sigh, leaned forward and took possession of Eban's mouth firmly without further ado.

It was fumbling and it was awkward, but it was also beautiful. Conrad made sure of that, as sensitive at sixteen as he would be later in life. He undressed Eban with unsteady hands while his mouth worshipped him, laying him down and kissing his adolescent body all over with gentle lips.

When it came to the moment itself, he sat up against the headboard of his bed and drew Eban astride his lap. There he wet his fingers with saliva and pressed them into him, so Eban arched in shock under his touch.

Then he produced a condom from his bedside drawer and rolled it on. He steadied his cock with one hand and took a hold of Eban's right hip with the other, looking up at his friend, waiting for him to lower himself down.

Eban, hair damp and falling over his face, heart soaring in delirium that this was really happening, put his hands on Conrad's shoulders and slowly impaled himself on his best friend.

It hurt more than anything had ever hurt before in his life, and Conrad drew him into his arms when Eban cried with pain. For a moment he was pretty sure he was going to have to tell Conrad to stop, as they both sat there still, Eban filled with Conrad and afraid to move. But Conrad's gentle hands on his back, and his lips against his neck, aroused him easily again, and he murmured for Eban to move as his hand curled around him and started to jerk him off.

The touch paper was lit, and Eban moaned almost in astonishment at the way every thrust gave him an electric shock as it touched something inside him. Conrad kept his mouth against his neck, kissing, sucking, leaving marks which would be visible for weeks, murmuring endearments which Eban was too far gone to hear, but which he would recall later. Eban moved faster, cursed and blasphemed and shouted Conrad's name as he finally exploded against Conrad's stomach and dropped forward onto his shoulder as he felt Conrad shudder beneath him with his own climax.

There was nothing but ragged pants for breath to be heard, then a soft moan from Conrad as he pulled Eban's head up and sought his mouth with his own. "Fuck... you are something else."

Once the dust had settled for a few days, Conrad had been the one to say that what they did must never happen again or they would ruin their friendship. That was despite the fact that during the sex, Conrad had mumbled against Eban's neck, "I've wanted this forever."

Eban's drunken mind was on Conrad overdrive now and could not be halted.

When Eban had first turned up at Conrad's door wearing his uniform on the day he graduated from the academy, he had not reckoned on the sheer molten lust he had seen ignite those emerald eyes of his best friend. He had not seen this expression on Conrad's face for five years, and besides, his friend had someone new now. He stood in silence with the smile on his face dropping as the desire on Conrad's face grew and he braced himself to be dragged into the house at any moment and ravaged to within an inch of his life. Which he would not have refused.

Instead Conrad said in a low voice, dropping that burning green gaze, "You need to go right now."

"What?" Eban asked.

"I'm with Christian. You need to leave right now or I won't be responsible for what I do to you. Please." His voice was desperate.

Eban could have stepped into the house, put an arm around Conrad's neck, and kissed him, and it would all have been over. Conrad would have crumbled, Christian or no Christian. But he was too afraid. He didn't want to

open up the can of worms that Conrad thought he had successfully buried five years ago. He didn't want to be responsible for breaking Christian's heart.

He was a nice guy. And of course nice guys always finished last. So Eban obediently left Conrad's house that day and never dared show himself intentionally to Conrad in uniform again. He spent the next five years screwing around and earning Conrad's disrespect until he met Damien and built him up into the perfect idol he thought he was. Only, Damien let him down. Damien treated him thoughtlessly, and Eban felt he had no choice but to screw Jack and be caught doing it so that Damien could see how desperate he was for any type of kindness and consideration after Conrad's death.

Two years ago, Eban had drunkenly confessed to Damien about his one-night stand with Conrad and had paid the price. A furious Conrad had called him, ascertained Damien wasn't home and then turned up, hammering on the door.

The temper Conrad rarely showed almost frightened Eban as Conrad shoved past him into the lounge and started yelling about how Damien had come to his work that day threatening to tell Christian. Shocked and appalled that Damien had done such a thing, Eban tried to stammer an apology on his lover's behalf, tried to placate Conrad while he stalked the lounge like an angry panther.

"Why did you tell him?" Conrad cried. "I don't understand what made you tell him."

"I don't know," Eban said in a small voice. "We were talking about exes...."

"But I'm not your ex," Conrad shouted. "I'm your friend. I fucked you once. End of story. I've been with Christian eight fucking years."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think he would be bothered. It was so long ago. I don't see why Christian would be bothered either."

"Christian will be bothered," yelled Conrad. "He'll be fucking bothered, all right."

"Why?" Eban asked, eyes fixed intently on those flashing ones of Conrad's.

"Oh fuck, because it's you," Conrad snapped.

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do." Conrad gripped him hard by the shoulders and pushed him into the wall. "I know," he said in a ragged whisper. His hands cupped Eban's face firmly, body pressing into his.

"You know what?" Eban stammered, staring into the green eyes, "I don't know what you mean." The proximity of Conrad made him deeply afraid. His head ached with confusion, his chest with something more.

Conrad's hot, angry breath swept his face, his eyes burning into his. "Yes, you do. I know that you do. Don't make me say it."

"I don't." Eban's voice broke. He trembled all over. "Say it, because I swear I don't know what you mean."

Conrad pressed even closer. He tilted Eban's face up to him. His eyes were large, the pupils huge as they swept down to Eban's mouth and back up again to his eyes. "I love him," he said in a virtual growl.

"I know you do." Eban's mind swam, eyes fixed in terror on Conrad's. He put his hands up to clutch at Conrad's biceps because he thought he would faint. Time seemed to hang suspended as they stood staring at each other.

Conrad spoke suddenly. "Don't ever tell Christian, swear to me, Eban."

"Oh God, Conrad, you don't even have to ask me that. I wouldn't, you know I wouldn't," Eban groaned.

As he did, Conrad swept a thumb over his lips. Eban opened his mouth reflexively and sucked it inside, his teeth grazing it. He saw how Conrad's eyes darkened. He let it go and Conrad's wet thumb rested on his closed lips. Their gazes stayed locked for another minute, before Conrad let go of him abruptly and moved swiftly out of the living room, leaving the house.

Just in time, because there was rather more to be remembered from that day, the tap of memories switched off abruptly as alcohol took full possession of Eban's brain and lured him into unconsciousness. But even on that cusp between waking and sleep, the thought entered his head that had grown stronger and stronger with every day Conrad was gone. The thought that maybe Damien hadn't been the love of his life but Eban had only tried to make him that way to replace the one who was.

Chapter 11

CHRISTIAN rose early for work. From the bathroom came the sound of vomiting. He paused outside the door, resting his head a moment on the frame with eyes closed. With any luck, Eban wouldn't remember last night. He wished *he* didn't. He tapped lightly and was only met with groaning. He opened the door to find Eban on his knees in front of the toilet, retching bile.

Christian caught sight of himself in the mirror and his hand went to his neck, looking at the evidence an eager mouth had left on him last night. He bent down over Eban, rubbing his back with one hand and reaching for toilet paper with the other to wipe the strings of bile and saliva which hung from his friend's mouth and nose as he paused between retches.

"I'm sorry," Eban moaned hoarsely and then puked again. Christian's hand moved to his neck, stroking, murmuring platitudes, thinking about what this man's hands and mouth had done to him last night and what it would have been like to have been naked beneath him.

Eban called in sick and spent the rest of the day in bed, venturing out at seven p.m. to visit Damien, coming back with a murmured "no change" and retreating back to his bedroom, not looking Christian in the eye once.

Christian lay on the couch after a stressful day at work where Marcus and Jack had fought like cats and dogs all day. Was Eban's "I'm sorry" mid-puke going to be the sole mention of the fact that his best friend had drunkenly tried to hit on him the previous night? He wasn't sure if he wanted to discuss it or not.

IN HIS bedroom, Eban guzzled Tylenol and water and tried to sleep. But how could he when even as he had sat looking at Damien's pale face, eyes occasionally straying to the even paler form of the man who might yet replace Conrad lying in the end bed, he was thinking of the soft skin of Christian's neck and the straining of his erection against his hand as Eban rubbed it? He was thinking of the man's muscular body in his arms, of his heat, of his perfection, of the way he would taste as Eban devoured him.

He wasn't sure which memories terrified him the most—what he had tried to do to Christian or the things he had remembered about Conrad afterward, things he refused to think about when he was sober. He couldn't

even be sure if his drunken desire for Christian had been real or merely because of what Christian had once been to Conrad.

It was after midnight when he descended the stairs, padding barefoot into the lounge in T-shirt and boxers. Christian was asleep on the couch with the lights off, the TV playing away to itself, showing Jack Nicholson telling Helen Hunt, *"You make me want to be a better man."*

One of Conrad's favorite films, as both men well knew. Eban moved to the couch and sat down, leaning over Christian, brushing some dark hair back from his face.

Christian stirred slowly, eyes blinking in confusion.

"Christian," Eban said, leaving his hand on his face, stroking softly. "I'm sorry about last night. Please forgive me."

Christian, looking up at him with jet-black eyes, merely nodded mutely.

"Thank you," Eban said. "You're always so good to me when I don't deserve it."

Christian shook his head, put an arm around Eban and pulled him down into a hug. After a few moments, Eban slid himself onto the couch alongside Christian's body. Christian held him as the two lay watching the rest of the film in silence.

EBAN went to see Damien every day in the ICU. Christian asked for news of Damien's progress but felt it was insensitive of him to ask if Eban had noticed anything about Luke while he was there, when Luke was a stranger to them both and Damien was the love of Eban's life. He told himself it wouldn't be right for him to visit Luke when they didn't know each other and instead lived in uncertain agony, wondering if he could get hold of Eban's cell and get Darius's number to find out from him.

After two days, a sleepless Christian found Eban down in the kitchen in the early hours of the morning. He was wearing nothing but a pair of boxers, standing by the open French windows, a joint in his hand.

"Hey," Christian greeted him, crossing to the fridge and taking out some orange juice. Eban didn't often smoke pot, but Christian had always found it amusing that he was a cop who did. When he and Conrad wanted to get stoned, they had always stolen Eban's stash.

He put his glass down on the table, watching smoke curl from the delicate nostrils of Eban's small, freckled nose as he held the half-smoked joint out to him.

Christian took the joint and toked, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. He tasted the wetness of Eban's saliva on the end. Eban watched him with those amber eyes.

"How's Damien?" Christian asked, because Eban had gone straight to his room the previous evening and not come out all night.

Eban shrugged. "The bastard's probably going to live, more's the pity."

Christian stopped himself from asking about Luke. "And Darius?"

"What?" Eban looked uncomfortable.

"Has he called you?"

"Yeah." Eban took the joint back and took a drag, breathing the smoke out over the garden. "A few times. I think he's stalking me."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Are you seeing him again?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Eban's eyes narrowed. "Because I don't want to. I don't need to justify myself to you."

"I thought you liked him."

"I *fucked* him, Christian. I know you've never done casual sex before, but sometimes there's this thing where you lie in the dark with a total stranger for a few hours letting them put parts of themselves into your intimate orifices and then afterwards you don't give a fuck if you never see them again. You should try it."

"Why?" Christian shot back. "So I feel as dead as you inside?"

Eban stared at him. Christian had finally succeeded in stinging his friend. "He likes you," he said, softening his voice. "Why not give him a chance?"

Eban shook his head. "I want Damien back."

"I don't think he's right for you."

"There you go again with your Conrad bullshit," Eban snapped. "I've told you to fucking think for yourself, Christian."

Christian lowered his gaze, leaning on one of the kitchen chairs. He thought back to what had happened between him, Eban, and Damien in the bar.

Your precious Conrad always thought I was screwing around. For five fucking years, he thought that. Why was that? Why was I never good enough for him? Was he fucking jealous of me, Christian?

He took a deep breath. "Did you want Conrad?"

Eban's gaze swung, his face reddening. There was a heartbeat of silence. "Fucking hell, Christian, I thought we'd closed this topic. No, I didn't. I'm in love with Damien. I'll always be in love with Damien."

"Then why did Conrad think no one was good enough for you?"

"Christ, I don't know. He looked out for me as long as we knew each other. He was protective of me. He saw what bad choices I made and told me so, but I couldn't see it."

Christian sat down at the table and dropped his head onto his hand.

Eban crushed the joint out on the wall outside then flicked it into an empty flower-pot. He moved over to Christian, resting his hand on the back of his bowed head, stroking his hair lightly.

EBAN hurried across the parking lot, pointing the remote sensor at his car. It was growing dark and raining heavily. He had come from Damien's bedside again, sitting holding the unconscious man's hand pointlessly, willing his love to come back to him. Glancing down to the end bed as he always did when he came here, he saw there was someone else in Luke's bed now, a woman. He frowned, glancing around at the other beds, and his blood ran cold. What if Luke had died? It would finish Christian off and where would that leave Eban?

"What happened to the man in the end bed?" he asked Damien's nurse, who was engaged in taking a sample of blood from the line situated in his wrist.

She looked up with a smile. "Oh, he got moved to a general medical floor. He's doing a lot better."

Eban smiled in relief. *Thank you, God.*

He had his hand on his car door when he heard footsteps behind him and tensed a moment, his hand reaching automatically to his holster.

"Hey," said a familiar voice.

Eban turned around to see Darius, also wearing his uniform, his hair wet with rain, his eyes startlingly blue against its darkness. Eban was not pleased to see him. He had told Darius in no uncertain terms a few days ago that their night together had been a mistake and was not going to happen again.

"Hello," he said warily.

"Thought I'd find you here, seeing as this is the only way to get you to talk to me."

"I don't owe you anything," Eban told him. "I slept with you once. End of discussion. We're over."

"Thing is, Eban," Darius replied, moving forward a little so he had Eban virtually pinned against the car. "I know that the other night, in between you thinking of Damien and Conrad"—Eban's mouth opened in outrage at this mention of Conrad, but he did not speak—"you spared a thought for me at some point. I know you enjoyed it and I know you like me. So I'm not sure why you're cutting off your nose to spite your face. And despite the fact you've got serious issues, I like you too."

Eban regarded him wordlessly. He thought back to being in Darius's bed and how his body had been worshipped the way it should have been for the first time in so long, the way he had been held in those strong arms as he drifted off to sleep, the way Damien had never held him like that as they hurtled toward the end.

He shook his head. "You were just sex, Darius. I got off on fucking another cop. Now you're really going to have to stop stalking me or I'm going to get mad." He pushed the other man back so he could swing open his door and climb into his car. He kept his eyes straight ahead as he started the engine and roared out of the parking lot.

"LUKE'S been moved off the ICU to the medical floor," he told Christian over dinner. He smiled at the look on his friend's face, glad he could be the bearer of such good news. He didn't tell him about the cruel words he had spoken to Darius only an hour earlier; those were something he preferred to keep a shameful secret.

WHEN Eban arrived at the ICU two days later, Damien wasn't there either. In panic he asked one of the nurses, only to be told Damien had been moved to a general surgical floor. His heart surged with relief, and he thanked the woman, got directions, and hurried out of the unit.

Two floors up, he was directed to room eighteen at the end of the corridor. He pushed open the door to see Damien lying asleep without the tube and ventilator for the first time in so long, still pale against the white linen of the bed.

Eban drew a chair up and sat by the bed. His hand found Damien's, fingers interlacing with his. Damien's pale lashes lifted slowly and his gray eyes fixed on Eban.

"Hey." Eban smiled with his heart beating hard.

“Hey,” Damien replied in a voice hoarse from underuse.

Eban brought Damien’s hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to the knuckles. Damien pulled it away weakly. “Don’t.”

When Eban tried to speak, Damien talked over him. “I know you’ve been hanging around every day and I don’t know why. Just because I’m not dead doesn’t mean I’m going to run back to you in gratitude over the fact. We’re over. I don’t know how many times I need to say that to you. You fucked Jack, and I will never, *ever* forgive you.”

“Damien...” Eban’s eyes were full of tears.

“Don’t,” Damien said. “Have some fucking self-respect and stop begging.”

“But I love you.”

“Well, I don’t love you,” Damien replied scornfully. “Maybe I never did.”

Eban bit his lip hard, shaking his head. He tried to speak again, but Damien once more jumped in. “Go.”

When Eban didn’t immediately move, he raised his voice sharply. “Now.”

Eban got up quickly and left the room.

DAMIEN lay back on the bed with his eyes closed, trying to calm his breathing. The words lay bitter in his mouth. He had rarely hated himself as much as he did at that moment. Although it was a near thing when he had knocked seven shades of shit out of Eban on finding him in bed with Jack. His violence that night had disgusted him, but he had always seen red at the thought of anyone else having Eban. Worst of all had been Conrad.

Damien had only lasted a few days after finding out Conrad had screwed Eban before he had sought out his lover’s best friend at work. Conrad was an architect and was sitting at a drawing board in his office when his secretary showed Damien in.

“What a pleasant surprise,” Conrad said sarcastically, pushing his stool back and standing up when he saw Damien, the move obviously made to intimidate Damien, as he was much shorter.

Damien glared at him.

“Coffee?” Conrad asked. His tone appeared to be mocking. His dark green eyes were ice-cold.

Damien shook his head. “I’ll get to the point.”

“Please do,” Conrad said flippantly.

Damien clenched his fist. The two of them had always been like this when Eban was not around. They had hated each other for the three years Damien had been with Eban, and he had no doubt that Conrad whispered poison into Eban's ear about him like the muscle-bound Iago he was. Damien didn't know why Conrad hated him so much, but he had a good idea.

"Eban told me you fucked him."

It had been a drunken confession when the two had started sharing details about their exes.

Conrad raised an eyebrow. He looked deeply uneasy. "I don't know why he would do that or why you're here, Damien," he said stonily, "because the fact is, it's none of your fucking business. It was years before you met Eban. He doesn't have to answer to you about it and neither do I."

Damien stared him down. "The way I see it, Conrad, it goes some way to explaining why you hate me so much."

"Meaning?"

"The naïve act doesn't suit you. Everyone else might think you're a fucking angel, but I know better. You've had a thing for Eban since you fucked him."

Conrad paled noticeably. He shook his head.

"Yes," Damien insisted.

"No," Conrad growled. "If I wanted him, wouldn't I be with him? You're making a fucking prick of yourself, Damien; I'd leave right now if I were you."

Damien ignored him. "Tell me why I shouldn't tell Christian."

Conrad's expression contorted in pure fury. Before Damien could even react, Conrad gripped him by the throat and hurled him over the drawing table. "How about because I'll fucking kill you?" he snarled into Damien's face, green eyes blazing.

"But surely it shouldn't be Christian's business either?" Damien asked sarcastically as he choked. "Why should it matter if he knows?"

"Try me and see what I do to you," Conrad said, squeezing even harder until Damien saw stars and thought that quite possibly Conrad was going to kill him. When he began to black out, Conrad let him go abruptly and stepped back.

Damien staggered off the table, coughing.

"Do we understand each other?" Conrad asked.

Damien nodded, massaging his throat.

"Good. What's done is done. It's between me and Eban, and there's no need to involve anyone else."

Damien had retreated from the office and gone home with bruises around his neck, relieved to find Eban wasn't there.

Damien glanced over at the roses Eban had left on his bedside table. He had always fought a losing battle when it came to Conrad. Now he had the chance to have Eban all to himself and he had pushed him away. Conrad had won again.

EBAN sat downstairs in his car for a long while with his head against the steering wheel, refusing to cry because he knew Damien wasn't worth a single tear. Eban was to blame for all that had happened between them, but he couldn't go on shouldering the blame indefinitely because it was going to kill him. He was done with it. Damien had driven him to sleep with Jack; he believed that firmly. Another thing he believed was that Damien was never going to take him back. *Ever*. Eban could wear sackcloth and ashes and prostrate himself in front of Damien for the rest of his life and Damien would never take him back. This realization filled him with abject desolation. Maybe he had always believed that one day Damien would. Hadn't Conrad always been right about Damien? Hadn't he told Eban that one day Damien would hurt him badly?

He dug in his pocket for his cell, biting his lip hard as he called up the address book. He didn't ask himself what he was doing as he connected, and a cold voice answered with a stiff, "What do you want?"

"Can I see you?"

"Why?"

"Please."

"I'm at work."

"When do you get off?"

"Half an hour."

"Meet me somewhere."

A sigh. "Fuck, Eban. Come to my place in an hour." The line went dead.

AN HOUR later, Eban was standing in the rain waiting for the source of his comfort to answer the door.

There was a figure in the frosted glass and the door swung open. "Well?"

"Can I come in or not?"

Jack sighed and stood back.

He slammed the door shut and followed Eban into the living room. "Marcus is really fucking pissed that we fucked. You shouldn't be here."

"I don't give a fuck about Marcus." Eban gripped Jack by the neck and kissed him. They grappled fiercely, shedding clothes, Eban a little rougher than he had been six months ago, pulling a condom hastily from his wallet and taking Jack bent over the arm of the couch.

"YOU have to go," Jack said an hour later as they lay entwined together on the couch. "Marcus is coming."

Eban arched a sardonic brow. "I've fucked you senseless; how're you going to put out for Marcus too?"

Jack shrugged. "He doesn't always like to fuck. A blowjob might do him. I think he comes here for my cooking more than anything."

Eban snorted with laughter.

EBAN supposed that he had started an affair with Jack when that one session turned into another and another and another.

When he thought about Marcus and realized he was thinking in a derisive fashion about the boss with the memo fetish who always looked like he was on another planet, he chastised himself. *Marcus isn't an emotional wreck like you are and he has Jack. What gives you the right to try and destroy that?* But this stern talking-to didn't do him any good at all, because he knew he would carry on until either Jack somehow cured him of his grief or Marcus beat him senseless.

When he fucked Jack, he tried to make himself feel something for him. Maybe he could fall in love with him and silence the clamor in his brain from all those other men he kept thinking about—Damien and Christian and Darius and Conrad. It hurt him to think about them all for different reasons, most of which involved parts of his long-dead heart. But he didn't feel anything for Jack beyond an appreciation of his compact body and tight little ass and his bereavement counselor skills when Eban wept for everything he had lost.

But when Eban was climbing out of Jack's bed sometimes only minutes before Marcus came around, he knew it was only a matter of time before they were discovered.

CHRISTIAN didn't make the connection between Eban and Jack, even though Eban started to spend more time away from home. All he knew was that work was shit because of the atmosphere between Jack and their boss. He was not sure if they'd broken up or if Marcus was just still irrationally pissed about Jack's one-night stand over six months ago. Either way, the memos were getting more vicious and more confusing.

The day he found out about Eban and Jack was the day he stepped outside to see Eban leaning against his patrol car out front. "Hey," Christian said in surprise, "what are you doing...."

He got no further than that before he was shoved roughly aside by a swiftly moving, lanky figure and there was lots of yelling. Christian's fuddled brain quickly made sense of the fact that Marcus had Eban up against his car and was screaming at him to "leave him the fuck alone."

Christian stood staring, wondering firstly who Marcus was talking about and secondly why Marcus would want to start a fight with someone who could probably snap his neck in one move.

Eban demonstrated this by subduing Marcus easily, shoving him against the car and reaching behind him for his cuffs.

Christian almost groaned. Eban used those cuffs way too easily. He imagined that any submission he might have made to Eban that night he had made a pass at him could have resulted in the use of these cuffs, and he felt himself growing hard just thinking about it. Conrad had always been the kinky one, and Christian had gone along with it, but there was no doubting he had enjoyed it too.

He tried to get his mind out of the sewer as his gaze strayed to Eban's pert ass in the tight pants he wore, tried to focus on the issue in hand, namely why Marcus felt the need to try and beat the crap out of his best friend.

"What the fuck's going on?" he managed to say finally, holding his briefcase over his erection.

"Ask your fucking friend," snarled Marcus, writhing in Eban's grip, hands cuffed behind his back. "Tell him to get his own fuck buddy."

Christian frowned as daylight began to dawn on him. Just then Jack came out of the building with mouth open. "What are you doing, Eban? Let him go now."

Eban stood back from the car, roughly turning Marcus around. "What I'm doing is restraining your jealous little bitch, here, before he hurts someone." He gave a vicious smirk.

Jack went scarlet as his eyes met Marcus's.

"He's *mine*, motherfucker," Marcus hissed at Eban.

Eban regarded him coolly. “That’s not what he told me when he was screaming my name,” he remarked, stepping back as Marcus tried to head-butt him. “I have to warn you, Marcus, assaulting a police officer is a criminal offense. Do you need me to read you your rights or are you going to behave yourself?”

“Take the fucking cuffs off, motherfucker,” Marcus growled.

“So is using foul and abusive language to a police officer,” Eban said, moving for the key on his belt. “You try to hit me again, I’ll break your fucking arm, freak.”

Marcus said nothing as he was uncuffed. When he was free, he glared at everyone—Eban, Jack, and even the helpless Christian for good measure—before storming off to his car and driving away on squealing tires.

The three men remained, Jack going off on a rant instantly. “Where the fuck do you get off treating him like that, asshole?” He shoved Eban backward into his car. Rather than react with handcuffs again, Eban obviously decided that this wasn’t a fair fight and put his hands up in surrender.

“Hey, he fucking started it. I was just out here waiting for you and he comes charging out like some sort of demented superhero. Why didn’t you tell me how he felt about you?”

Jack reddened. “Because I didn’t know,” he mumbled. “I think we’re over, Eban. It was nice. I hope I helped you out.”

Eban watched as Jack strode away to his car. His gaze slid to Christian. “Don’t fucking look at me that way,” he snapped.

“You were cruel to Marcus. You didn’t need to say that shit about Jack screaming your name; it was just rubbing his face in it.”

“I’ve done Marcus a favor,” Eban responded. “The way I saw it before today, he didn’t even possess a single human emotion. I just gave him a kick in the ass and reminded him that it really fucking *hurts* to feel. See you at home.” Without further ado he jumped in his car and pulled out of the parking lot.

“How long?” was Christian’s first question when they made it back home.

Eban shrugged. “Since Damien told me to fuck off. A couple of weeks, maybe.”

“Why Jack, when you’ve got Darius just begging for it? I don’t fucking understand.”

“Jack was safer,” Eban muttered.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, I felt a little too much for Darius and I didn’t like it. Not when all my energy was supposed to be going on Damien.”

“Jesus, didn’t I tell you this before?” Christian complained. “Stop wasting your time on something which is gone and concentrate on making it work with Darius.”

Eban glared at him. “Darius has gone. I haven’t heard from him in a week or more. I told him to leave me the hell alone. I’ve burned my bridges there.”

“But...,” Christian started to protest.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Eban interrupted. “Damien is *safe*. I know him inside out. At my age I don’t want to get used to a new body beside me in bed, someone else’s things in my closet...”

“Jesus Christ, at *your* age?” Christian protested. “You’re thirty-two years old, Eban, not seventy-two.”

“I’m scared. Do you get that? I don’t want to be alone. I want to be safe and loved. And Damien, no matter what you say about him and no matter how he denies it, still loves me. I don’t want to try things with Darius when I’ve no guarantee it’s even going to go anywhere. He might just want a bit of fun, and that’s not what I want to be to him. I want to be his heart and his *soul*. I don’t want to waste my time. I just want to be loved.”

Christian was all out of words. Eban had just neatly encapsulated all the fears which kept him away from Luke.

Chapter 12

IT WAS another week before Luke reappeared at the coffee shop.

Christian was sitting in a booth at the back, eyes fixed on the newspaper while stirring his coffee lethargically. He didn't take note of the bell ringing above the door anymore because he had no hope left that Luke would ever return. Something, however, magically drew his eyes over to the counter and the line of people there. Standing at the back, gaze fixed on him, was Luke.

This time Christian didn't push away the feelings which swept through his heart and mind. This time he sat there and listened to them, deciphered them, and finally, embraced them. There was only one emotion which ran through his veins, heating his blood molten, and that was joy. Pure, unbridled joy.

An emotion he had never thought to feel again while his heart languished in darkness and despair. Luke looked astonished as Christian smiled.

He dipped his head quickly, a flush heating his face as though he had done something terribly intimate and shameful there in the shop. His heart beat furiously, in a way it had not done for so long, and he felt nauseous, hands clutching his cup hard. He both prayed that Luke wouldn't come over and desperately hoped that he *would*.

Soon enough he felt a presence looming over him and raised his eyes almost in terror. Luke stood at his table holding two cups of coffee. *I have my second chance. After I sent him away so cruelly, he comes back again, like a dog willing to be kicked once more by a sadistic master.* But there was only one master here. At that moment, Luke held Christian on a string.

He looked as pale and fragile as before, but even more beautiful than Christian remembered, his eyes a startling pale green against the black of his lashes. "Can I join you?"

Christian nodded mutely, afraid his voice would break if he spoke. He put his trembling hands under the table.

Luke took the seat opposite. He put the cups down and pushed one silently toward Christian. Christian muttered thanks with his head bowed. Luke began to speak in a low voice.

"One of the ICU nurses told me you came to see me."

Christian waited for something more, which never came. It seemed it was his turn to speak. He lifted his gaze to the man opposite him and found his face earnest and serious. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. I felt bad for... sending you alone to the ER."

"There was no need."

"There was every need." Christian quickly gulped some coffee down for want of something to do.

"It's a small world," Luke continued. "My friend Darius tells me your best friend was there every day, too, visiting a guy called Damien."

Christian nodded.

"And how is Damien doing now?"

Christian was surprised that Luke would care about some guy he had never met. But Eban was something to Darius and maybe this meant he was something to Luke too, indirectly, and hence so was Damien.

"He's okay. He's at home recovering."

"And Eban?"

Christian gave a sigh and fixed his gaze on the table once more. "Eban is...I don't know what to do about Eban."

"I've got to say," Luke said, his voice gentle, "he hasn't said as much, but it seems to me like your Eban has pretty much broken Darius's heart with his treatment of him. He's such a nice guy. He deserves better."

Christian's head lifted. "I know. And Eban is nice too; you'll have to believe me on that one." He was glad Luke didn't know about Eban fucking around with Jack. Eban's promiscuity tended to put him in a bad light.

There was a long silence. Christian put his empty cup aside and took the one Luke had brought him.

"So," Luke said finally. "I'd like to thank you for what you did for me the other week. Can I buy you dinner tonight?"

Christian's gaze snapped to his in complete shock. And there it was, finally, the offer of an evening with Luke. The man who had not been deterred by Christian's rudeness because he evidently saw something there worth pursuing. Christian couldn't begin to imagine what that might be. He stared at Luke, speechless, his hands clammy and his heart in his mouth.

He couldn't. Conrad had only been in the ground seven months. It would be a betrayal. But hadn't he already betrayed him anyway with the way he had been feeling toward Luke? Wouldn't it be better to have one night out with Luke where maybe he would discover that the man was boring and spending time with him pointless, and then he could put this infatuation to one

side and bury himself back in his grief for the rest of his life? It seemed the sensible way to rid himself of Luke, because he was pretty sure that no date with him would ever match up to the wonder of Conrad.

He nodded wordlessly.

A slow, almost childlike smile spread over Luke's face, showing perfect teeth, and Christian's heart clenched at how this reminded him of Conrad. "Shall I pick you up?" Luke asked.

Christian shook his head. "I'll meet you."

"Okay. Where's your favorite restaurant?"

The Villa Nova, the restaurant he and Conrad had haunted, was an Italian place a few blocks away. There was no way Christian could go there with another man. Not least because he knew the owner.

So instead he shrugged, making it clear Luke was doing all the work here. Luke was undeterred. "Do you like Italian?"

Christian nodded cautiously.

"I like Villa Nova; have you been there?"

"No," Christian said sharply. "I mean... I don't want to go there."

"Okay," Luke said softly. "How about La Dolce Vita?"

Christian nodded. He had been there with Conrad a few times, but they were never going to find a restaurant in the city which *didn't* hold memories, so this one would have to do.

"Shall I book a table for seven thirty?"

"Yeah," Christian said. "I'll see you there."

"All right."

There was silence now that the arrangements had been made. Christian felt curiously elated despite himself, triumphant, in a way he had not felt for so long. He stood up and took his cup. "I should go. Thanks for the coffee."

The sunlight hit Luke's startling eyes as he looked up at Christian. "You're welcome," he said graciously. "See you later."

Christian moved toward the door. As it swung shut behind him, he turned back for another look at the man who had brought him out of the darkness. Luke sat with head bowed, looking into his coffee, a smile playing around his lips.

Christian virtually floated to the office, placing his now-empty coffee cup on his desk, unwilling to throw it away because it was the first thing Luke had bought for him. He was smiling like a sentimental idiot when he caught Jack regarding him in disbelief.

“What?” he asked defensively, booting up his computer.

“Dude,” Jack said, “if I didn’t know better, I would say you got laid this morning.”

Christian glared at him.

“Is the resident whore in your house still handing out favors?”

Christian bristled. “Don’t call him a whore when you’re just as much of one, Jack,” he snapped, wondering what Jack would say if he knew just how close Christian had come to accepting one of Eban’s “favors” in the past.

Jack reddened. “Point taken,” he muttered and sat down.

His friends were alone. Jack had yet to make it up with Marcus and Eban had been forsaken by both Damien and Darius, and here Christian was on the verge of his first date in ten years. He smiled again.

“What?” Jack demanded. “I swear if you don’t tell me now....”

“Luke was at the coffee shop,” Christian blurted in a rush.

Jack’s eyebrows shot up. “And?”

“He asked me to dinner tonight.”

“And you said yes, you fucking said yes, you goddamn son of a bitch!” Jack yelled, leaping from his chair, racing around the desk and gripping Christian in his arms. Christian’s chair spun around crazily, almost knocking Jack off his feet, but he clung on, laughing hysterically.

“I thought I sent a memo out about laughing in the office,” came a gruff voice.

Jack let go of Christian and stepped back with a glare at his boss.

“What are you looking at, Summers?” Marcus demanded. “Is that insubordination I’m seeing right there?”

“What of it, Edwards?” Jack sniffed.

Christian stared from one to the other, recognizing the ridiculousness of the situation and thinking it might get out of hand.

“My office *now*!” Marcus snapped.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure,” Jack drawled and stepped off.

Marcus looked at Christian.

“I’ve got a date tonight with Luke,” Christian said meekly.

Marcus stared. “That’s fucking fantastic, Christian,” he said without changing his harassed facial expression. Then he went into his office and slammed the door.

Christian turned back to his work with a sigh, but his eyes lingered on the empty cup on his desk. He stroked its sides slowly with his fingertips, imagining he could touch the imprints left by Luke's hand.

"I'VE got a date with Luke," Christian said as soon as Eban peered out at him through the open French windows where he sat in the swing chair sipping iced tea.

Eban's jaw dropped. "You are fucking yanking my chain."

"I'm not."

"Wow, Christian, just..." Eban shook his head, perching on the side of the ornamental fountain opposite him. "Fucking wow! Did you ask him?"

"No, as if," Christian said, laughing. "He asked me."

"When are you going out?"

"Tonight."

Eban held his hand up so Christian could high-five it. "Stay right there, I'm getting us a beer." He got up and moved back into the kitchen.

Christian watched a tiny robin perch on the bird table at the bottom of the garden. Conrad had been religious about filling the table with nuts and seeds, especially in winter, and had taken great pleasure in the number of birds which flocked to it. Eban oversaw it now. Christian had never bothered to contribute to the upkeep of it. The robin was bright-eyed and inquisitive. It seemed to be watching Christian intently between pecks at seeds.

Christian felt a pang of guilt at his happiness. It was wrong, it was so wrong.

"You look great," Eban said when Christian presented himself at his bedroom door later on wearing a purple shirt and black pants, shoes highly polished, hair styled to within an inch of its life.

Christian reddened a little. "Thanks."

"Have a great time."

Christian nodded and turned to go.

"Want a condom?"

Christian turned back. "What?"

Eban sat up and dug in his bedside drawer, holding out a foil-wrapped square to him.

"I'm not going to sleep with him," Christian said, offended. "Just because you do that, doesn't mean the rest of us have to."

Eban regarded him laconically. “Sure,” he said, dropping the condom back into the drawer and falling back onto his bed. “Just don’t wake me up when you come in and start jerking off, okay?”

Christian stuck his tongue out at him childishly and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 13

AS SOON as Christian climbed from his car, he spotted Luke loitering uncomfortably outside the restaurant's entrance. For a moment he stood watching him, taking in his impeccable black shirt and black pants, the way the light breeze blew the shiny, raven hair across his pale face. And he wanted him; he wanted him so much it hurt. He wanted to make Luke his.

He set off purposefully across the parking lot, pointing the remote sensor back at his car to lock the doors. He didn't know what he intended doing until he reached Luke, until Luke turned around in surprise, and then Christian curled a hand around his neck and brought his mouth down on Luke's.

Luke gasped as Christian kissed him and a hand grabbed at the front of his shirt. Christian held the man close to him as he explored a different mouth with his own for the first time in ten years. Luke had just brushed his teeth. His mouth was all mint and so achingly soft and warm, melting under Christian's, the contact sending every cell in Christian's body singing and dancing in reawakened joy.

I'm alive! his brain cried. *I'm alive and at the moment I belong to Luke.* There was light at the end of the tunnel and a reprieve from the darkness he had been languishing in. Just one kiss had revived him.

His tongue curled hesitantly against Luke's and was caressed in return. Electricity flooded his body, blood pooled in his groin, and a bittersweet ache signaled the defrosting of his heart from the layers of ice it had rested in for so long.

I could fall in love, right here, right now! He was ashamed.

When he drew back, letting his lips part very slowly and lingeringly from those of his date, he watched Luke's lashes lift slowly and his sea-green eyes stare dazedly at him, almost glazed, the massive pupils shrinking as the light hit them. "We're in public," he said in a hoarse voice.

"So we are," Christian replied carelessly, still staring down into Luke's eyes in rapture, fingers caressing his neck, an unmistakable shudder making its way through Luke's body. "Shall we go in now?"

Luke nodded, looking much like he would rather stay out here all night, which was how Christian felt too. He smiled gently and let go of Luke, walking off toward the restaurant, looking back to make sure his date was following him.

Luke was, his pale cheeks a little flushed, his eyes bright as though with too much wine. Christian swung the door open and stepped back, waiting for Luke to go in ahead of him. Luke moved past him, and Christian caught the intoxicating scents of cologne and hair-styling products.

A waiter greeted them at the desk, Luke telling him he had a reservation in the name of Morgan. And so Christian found out his date's surname. He tried the name out in his head. *Luke Morgan. The first man I will have after Conrad.* The thought sent a pang of pain through his poor, broken heart, but then Luke turned to look at him once again, offering another devastating smile, and Christian was lost once more to this feeling.

The two were seated, and Luke immediately reached for the wine list with an unsteady hand. He studied it, biting at his lip.

Christian did the same. His hands trembled and his mouth burned. He wanted the dinner to be over and to be in Luke's bed. This was not something he had seriously contemplated before he had set out that evening. He had meant what he said to Eban, but now he wished he had taken the condom, because he wanted oh so much to use it.

"Shall we have champagne?"

When Christian lifted his head, Luke was smiling shyly. And Christian nodded. Because that kiss really *was* something to celebrate. This evening was something to celebrate. Christian was back from the dead.

The sommelier came over, and Luke ordered a ninety-dollar bottle of champagne. Christian almost laughed, because it didn't matter. He had tons of cash piled up in his bank account because he never went anywhere to spend it. He remembered that Conrad had ordered the same bottle at Christian's twenty-first birthday meal, and then the expense had really bothered Christian, while Conrad had been blasé, as though he had all the cash in the world, poor college student that he was. Conrad had come his brains out three times that night before Christian deemed the tab settled.

They both perused the menu. Christian didn't know about Luke, but he was too nervous to be hungry. They both ordered pasta and then a silence fell.

Luke cleared his throat. "So, Christian, what do you do?"

"I work in an office for a dickhead called Marcus."

Luke smiled. "What do you do in the office?"

"As little as possible. No, it's a publishing company. Romantic fiction." He smiled.

Luke looked amused.

"And you?"

"I'm a marine biologist, although I'm taking a leave of absence at the moment."

Christian studied his face, trying to gain more, but Luke's expression was a closed book. His heart started to sink. He didn't like this at all. Why wasn't Luke working? Was he sick, physically or mentally? Was he recovering from alcohol or drug abuse?

His hopes, which had steadily been rising against his will since he had agreed to this date, started to flag abruptly. What was he doing looking for someone to replace Conrad so soon? What was he doing looking to replace him with a man who had problems in his private life? Did he want to give his heart to someone else, only to lose that man ten years down the line too? He took a drink of water and said nothing. He wanted to go home. He had been stupid to come here.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked.

Christian nodded. He didn't look up.

"What did I say?" Luke sounded anxious.

"Nothing."

"Want to tell me about him?"

Christian's head snapped up. "What?"

"About the man you're grieving over."

Christian stared a moment. Just then the waiter arrived, placing an ice-bucket on the table and popping the cork. He poured two glasses with a flourish and left them to it.

Luke took his glass, looking solemnly at Christian. "Have I ruined the date already?"

Christian shook his head. He took a gulp of champagne and steadied himself a moment. "Darius told you? Eban told him about Conrad, did he?"

"Yes, he did. But I knew when I saw you that very first day that you were grieving. Tell me about Conrad."

Christian looked at him with a lump in his throat choking him. "Are you serious? You're on a date with me and you want to know about my dead ex?"

Luke nodded wordlessly.

Christian hesitated for a few uncomfortable seconds and then he began to speak.

AT HOME Eban dragged himself into the shower where he stood leaning against the wall with eyes closed, trying to force away memories which would not be banished: that day in Conrad's bedroom.

"Where are you going?" Conrad asked in surprise as Eban started to search for his clothes on the floor.

Eban looked over his shoulder at him. "Getting dressed."

"Okay, you can make yourself decent—my folks will be back any time—but that doesn't mean I'm done with you." Conrad smiled, a showing of dimples which caused Eban's heart to lurch in his chest.

When Eban was dressed, Conrad had also just finished and climbed back onto the bed, where he held a hand out to Eban. Eban took it quickly and lay down beside Conrad, head on his shoulder. Conrad put an arm around him, holding him close, and swept his lips over Eban's temple. "I've only one thing to say about your performance, Eban," he said in a murmur. "Wow. Just wow."

Eban flushed, turning his face up to look at Conrad. His friend smiled and inclined his head to kiss him, lips soft and sweet.

In the shower Eban launched his fist against the wall several times before slithering to the floor.

CHRISTIAN told Luke about first meeting Conrad, about their ten years together, about the last time Conrad had left. He only touched on the car crash. He could not describe Conrad's broken body or the animosity of his parents. Nor could he talk about the letter from the man who carried Conrad's heart. But he did talk about Eban, about the way Conrad's best friend suffered, and the guilt Christian carried around because of it.

Luke listened and asked questions throughout. They had finished their main course by the time the subject of Conrad was done. Christian put his knife and fork down and sat back. He had talked and talked and talked. And now a weight had lifted from his heart. He smiled at Luke with tears of gratitude brimming in his eyes. "Thank you."

Luke returned his smile. He poured them both the last dregs of champagne from the bottle and lifted his glass. "We need to have a toast now," he said gently. "To Conrad."

Christian gulped back the need to burst into tears. He touched his glass to Luke's and drank.

Luke drank too. "I'm not looking to replace Conrad. I don't believe anyone will ever do that, but I like you, Christian. I like you a lot." He reached across the table and touched Christian's fingertips lightly with his own.

Christian kept his hand still, his gaze searching the crystal green depths of Luke's. "I like you too. I was so *cruel* to you. I didn't mean it, I swear."

"I know," Luke said. He withdrew his hand as the waiter arrived to clear their dishes, telling him when asked, that yes, they would like the dessert menu.

"And some more champagne?" the waiter asked.

Luke looked questioningly at Christian. Christian nodded. He no longer wanted to go home. He wanted this night to last forever. Luke smiled.

"So, Christian," he said when the waiter had gone. "Tell me, what's happening with Eban?"

Christian sighed. "He was hoping Damien would take him back once he recovered, that he might be grateful for all the time Eban spent by his bed in the hospital. But he wasn't. He told Eban to fuck off."

Luke clucked his tongue and shook his head. "I don't know what the story is there, but it seems Damien doesn't deserve Eban, while there's someone else pining for him."

"I know. I guess you don't know why Damien left Eban, though?"

Luke shook his head.

"He slept with a friend of mine, Jack. Damien caught them at it."

"Jesus," Luke said.

"Yeah, it will be a cold day in hell before Damien forgives him."

"I'm not getting a very good impression of Eban's morals. He fucks around on Damien, then dumps Darius after one night with him. I could be forgiven for disliking him before I even met him."

"You could," Christian said. "But you wouldn't dislike him. Remember what I said? He never had one drop of support from me with his grief over Conrad and Damien. He's dealt with it all alone."

Luke nodded. "I'd like to meet him."

"And you will," Christian said. Their eyes met and he realized he had spoken as though this was going way beyond one date.

The waiter arrived with the dessert menus at that moment, and the two men took them, perusing them while the waiter opened the second bottle of champagne and retreated. Christian would have preferred to get the dessert as a takeout and eat it off Luke's body.

"What are you having?" Luke asked, interrupting his lascivious thoughts.

"This chocolate thing."

"Sounds good. Do you want coffee?"

"Yeah," Christian said. "With brandy. I'm too drunk to drive home now, so why not?"

Luke smirked. "I didn't mean to get you drunk." His intense eyes held Christian's, and Christian read the same thoughts there. Luke wanted him as much as he wanted Luke. He felt himself start to stiffen uncontrollably.

"Are you sure?" he asked with a smile of his own.

"Of course," Luke said in mock outrage. "I don't need to get any man drunk to have my wicked way with him."

Christian reached across the table to touch his hand. Luke interlaced his fingers with his and left them that way, even when the waiter returned and he ordered their desserts and coffee.

"Are you working tomorrow?"

Christian's gaze shifted to his, his heart beating painfully hard, his erection remaining stubbornly. Was some sort of invite to Luke's house coming? He shook his head. "I only occasionally work Saturdays."

"Good," Luke said. "I wouldn't want you to be too tired in the morning."

Christian almost choked on his champagne. A surge of such excitement went through his dead veins that he thought he would pass out from lack of blood to his brain.

"No I didn't..." Luke said, reddening. "I just meant... the champagne and..." He fumbled for words, looking desperately embarrassed.

Christian silenced him by stroking the back of his hand with his thumb. "It's okay." He realized he should know Luke by now. When Luke himself had told Christian he wasn't cheap. Luke didn't need to make suggestive comments because when it came down to it, he would probably be up front with his desires. He would probably tell Christian exactly what he wanted from him. At least Christian hoped he would.

They ate dessert in silence while Christian thought about how lucky he was.

"What do you like to do when you're not working for a dickhead called Marcus?" Luke asked. It was the sort of casual question which should be asked on a first date, rather than "tell me about your dead lover."

Christian shrugged because he didn't do anything anymore other than work for a dickhead called Marcus. "I..." He faltered. "Like to go to gigs."

"Cool," Luke said. "Who do you like?"

They discussed the bands they liked, Christian pleased to find they had several in common. Luke was getting more and more perfect as the night went on.

"What else do you like doing?"

Christian had finished the dessert without really tasting it. His stomach was a little too full. He was not sure taking part in strenuous activity later would be good for him.

"I like to read."

"What's your favorite book?"

"*Catch-22*."

Luke smiled. "I nearly wet my pants laughing the first time I read that."

"Exactly," Christian said. "What do you like?"

"Gigs, reading, movies. Going to the beach, but not the sun particularly. And sleeping. I love sleeping. I could probably represent my country if it became an Olympic sport."

Christian could not help but allow a wide grin to cross his face. Luke had merely confirmed what the feline green eyes suggested. He wondered how big Luke's bed was and which side he slept on. He wondered how often he shared that bed. He poured some more champagne.

The waiter brought the coffee just then and removed their plates.

"I bet you've never been on such a fun date before, right?" Christian asked teasingly.

Luke smiled. "No." He looked like he actually meant it.

"You have such a beautiful smile."

Time seemed to stand still as their gazes locked. It had been ten years since Christian had been on his first date with Conrad, but he had not forgotten that it had felt exactly like this. He had been wrong when he had expected Luke to disappoint and that he would be able to get swiftly rid of him after tonight.

"What?" Luke asked quietly.

Christian smiled and spoke what was in his heart. "You haven't disappointed me tonight."

Luke arched a brow, still smiling. "You thought I might?"

“Conrad is a pretty awesome man to live up to. I’m going to compare people to him for the rest of my life,” Christian admitted. “But so far, you don’t come up wanting.”

“Well, thank you, Christian.” Luke’s tone was a little sardonic, but his cheeks were dark with blood, his eyes dancing in pleasure. “Have you got a picture of him?”

Christian was taken aback. He nodded, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet, drawing out the picture which had been there since it was taken over a year ago and which wouldn’t be getting removed any time soon.

Conrad had been sitting in the garden watching the sunset when Christian had crept up with the digital camera and asked him to say cheese. A surprised Conrad had turned to the camera and given a radiant smile. The photo was a close-up; all white teeth, green eyes and gleaming dark hair.

Luke took the proffered picture and looked at it. “Wow.” He handed the picture back. “I should put a bag on my head now.”

“Oh no.” Christian tucked the picture away. “No, Luke, you’re....” Words failed him. He reached over and took his date’s hand once again.

Luke turned his hand over so they were palm to palm, fingers entwined. Luke’s skin was soft and cool as silk. Christian’s own hand became clammy with nerves.

Slowly, Luke stroked Christian’s fingertips with his own while keeping his eyes fixed on his.

Christ, Christian thought, thinking he was going to moan at any moment. The feeling was akin to the way Eban had stroked him through his pants a couple of weeks earlier. He drew his hand back abruptly.

“I’m sorry,” Luke said quietly. “Did I overstep the mark?”

Christian shook his head. “It’s not you.” He put his napkin on the table, pulled his shirt down a little and stood. “Just using the bathroom.”

He hurried across the room and almost fell into the men’s room with relief. He leaned over the sink, head lowered, controlling his breathing, willing his erection away. It was going to happen. He needed it to happen. He looked up, eyes straying to the wall, finding what he was looking for—a condom machine.

He fed some coins in with a trembling hand and pocketed the pack with a brief look. Some flavored things which were irrelevant because he intended to swallow Luke down without a condom. He wanted to taste the man on his tongue, he wanted to take down every drop of him inside. It was bad enough that they had to use the condom at all because he wanted to feel Luke filling him up the way Conrad had for ten years.

He moved back to the mirror and splashed some water on his flushed face. *I should ask for the check as soon as I get back out, take Luke home and fuck him until dawn.*

But he didn't have the balls to take control. He would be putty in Luke's hands. He could only hope that Luke would put him out of his misery tonight. He peed, washed his hands, and left the bathroom.

Luke was pouring two final glasses of champagne as he sat down. "Okay?"

Christian nodded. "Want to get the check?"

"Yeah."

Their eyes met briefly before Luke turned his attention to drinking the last of his champagne and Christian tried to catch the attention of their waiter.

It was only a moment before he did, and the man retreated to fetch the check. Christian drained his glass. Then he reached out his wallet and removed his credit card at the same time that Luke did.

Christian shook his head. "Put it away."

"No. I'm paying."

"You're not."

"I asked *you* out. This is a thank-you dinner for helping me the other day."

Christian frowned, suddenly anxious. "Is that all it is?"

Luke clicked his tongue. "No, you know it's not, but the fact remains, I asked you, so I pay."

Christian regarded him a moment. "I don't want you to."

"I don't give a shit what you want," Luke said glibly, and Christian caught a glimpse right there of the same stubborn streak Conrad had possessed. As he smiled, Luke put his hand out and almost forced his credit card into the returning waiter's hand.

"Take mine." Christian tried to give the waiter his, too, so he looked confused.

"Christian," warned Luke with a glare. "I won't tell you again."

Christian gave an exasperated sigh and slumped back in his chair, putting his credit card away.

"You can pay next time," Luke told him.

"Is there going to be a next time?"

"Do you want there to be?"

Christian only hesitated a moment before he nodded. Luke smiled. The waiter returned with the machine, and Luke entered his number before the waiter handed him his receipt and thanked him. Christian pulled a couple of bills out of his wallet and tossed them onto the table for a tip. "Let's go."

Luke stood up and Christian followed him through the restaurant, admiring his ass all the way.

AT HOME, Eban was in bed, having cried himself into exhaustion as he remembered thirty-one years of friendship with Conrad and one day halfway through it in his bedroom that had changed things forever. Conrad had avoided Eban for almost a week after that afternoon together, until finally he cornered Eban in school, in the locker room when everyone had left.

"We can't do it again," he said, while Eban frowned and regarded him blankly. "You know that, right?" His tone was anxious. "You're my best friend and always will be. This friendship will outlast any... thing we might start. I won't risk us by doing it."

Eban found himself nodding numbly but inside he howled as everything that had been given to him only a few days ago had now been taken away by the same hand. What if the "thing" we started turned out to be one soulmate finding another?

Conrad moved to him suddenly, cupping his face in his hands. "I love you," he said quietly, "I will always love you. But I'm not willing to fall in love with you. I'm sorry."

Eban didn't doubt Conrad's eyes were a mirror of his own—full of sorrow and regret. He bent his head and bestowed a featherlight kiss on Eban's lips. One, it seemed, which would have to last him the rest of his life.

OUTSIDE it was raining heavily, much to Christian's dismay. The two loitered a moment in silence under the shelter of the front door.

"Are you drunk, Christian?"

Christian turned his head from silent contemplation of the rain to look at his date. Luke's pale skin was ghostly in the darkness. "A bit. Sober enough to know what I'm doing."

"Which is?"

Christian put an arm around him and moved in for a kiss. Luke's mouth parted tremblingly against his. He tasted of chocolate and champagne, and it

drove Christian wild. Luke's fingers found his hair, threading through it the same way Conrad's used to do. Their tongues hesitantly touched as Christian maneuvered Luke backward into the shadows and against the wall, kissing him with all the passion he still held for Conrad.

Luke clung to him in return, reciprocating his kiss with equal fervor, moaning softly into Christian's mouth. "Now what?" he breathed when they drew apart.

"I don't know," Christian replied, fingertips tracing one smooth cheek. "I'm not sure I'm ready to say good night to you just yet."

"Do you want to come home with me?"

And there it was. What Christian had hoped and prayed for all night. When he hesitated, Luke added quickly, "For a drink. I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do."

Christian pulled his cell out and speed-dialed a local cab company. He handed the phone to Luke. "Why don't you give them your address?"

Chapter 14

THEY were silent for the most part in the ten minutes that they waited for the cab to arrive, trying to keep their hands off each other, then silent again in the twenty-minute ride to Luke's house.

Christian was tired and pleasantly inebriated, almost falling asleep, his hand in Luke's, trying not to let thoughts of what was coming consume him, terrified he would be a lousy lay or he would cry for Conrad during it. *I don't have to do it. I can go home any time I want. I don't owe him anything.*

Luke had a large top-floor apartment, all wood floors and treacherous rugs, one entire wall made of glass in the living room to give a breathtaking view over Newport Beach. He clicked on dim lamps around the place and bade Christian sit down.

"Do you want coffee?"

Christian nodded. Luke took a remote and pointed it at a fancy stereo system in the corner before leaving the lounge. A song Christian liked came on, slow and sensual, and as it moved to the chorus, Luke reappeared.

He took Christian's hand and pulled him from his seat and into his arms. "Want to dance?"

Christian swallowed a snort of laughter as Luke took hold of his right hand and placed his other on Christian's shoulder, starting to sway slowly. Christian tightened his arm around Luke's waist and matched his date's rhythm, looking into Luke's eyes. It felt strange because Luke was a couple of inches shorter than Christian whereas Conrad had been a few inches taller, and yet they moved together as though they had done this many times before. Luke let go of Christian's hand to wrap both arms around his neck and press himself as close as he could go.

Christian scooped him closer, both arms around Luke's waist, their bodies moving sinuously together, Luke's face against his neck. His gaze drifted to the window and the lights below. He felt at peace. It didn't matter if he had sex or not with Luke that night, it was irrelevant. What mattered was that the man in his arms felt right. One hand moved up to cradle Luke's head, stroking his hair reverently.

Luke pressed his lips lightly to Christian's neck, and he shivered in pleasure. The song came to an end and Luke disentangled himself. "I'll be right back."

Christian returned to the couch. He felt cold without Luke attached to him, his shirt a little wet from the rain.

It was only a few minutes before Luke brought in two mugs and placed them on the coffee table with coasters. Then he sat next to Christian and turned to look at him.

“Have you had a good night, Christian?”

Christian nodded immediately. “You know it. I wouldn’t be here with you now if I hadn’t.”

“I don’t want you to think that I brought you here just to seduce you.” Luke seemed anxious.

“I don’t think that.” Christian brushed some hair back from his eyes and then slid his hand around to the back of Luke’s neck. “But maybe I came here to be seduced by you.” He smiled to show he was teasing.

Luke smiled too, leaning close and pressing his still-smiling lips to Christian’s. Christian hoped that he could take this smile and suck it deep down inside him, holding it there forever where it would rest against his heart and slowly diffuse into it, filling it with life and hope once more.

Luke’s hands inched beneath his shirt and rested on Christian’s back. His touch burned and electrified Christian. He imagined his skin sizzling under Luke’s hands. He quivered all over, his spine reflexively arching. Luke’s fingers moved further up his shirt, stroking his back from top to bottom while Christian’s own hands rested on Luke’s hips, afraid to instigate anything more intimate, relieved Luke was taking the lead.

It was only a few minutes before Luke started to unfasten his shirt, and Christian willingly put his arms out to help him shed it. Luke smiled as he looked at Christian’s torso, and Christian virtually preened before his hot gaze. *He likes what he sees. He’s thinking of what it will be like to possess me.*

Luke pushed him down on the couch, straddling him. His hands started at Christian’s shoulders, and he moved them slowly over every inch of exposed skin, lingering on Christian’s nipples, rubbing them erect, before moving down to his taut stomach, as far as his belt, allowing the heel of his hand to graze Christian’s erection deliberately as he did so.

Christian drew in his breath. Luke leaned down, and Christian’s eyes fell shut as Luke buried his lips against his neck.

Christian let out a moan. He was exquisitely sensitive on his neck, something Conrad had found out on their first date too. A brush of lips against the area was always enough to give him an erection. He clutched at Luke’s head, fingers threading through his silky hair, the other hand on his back, inching brave fingertips up his shirt.

Luke moved down onto his chest, capturing one nipple and then the other in his mouth, working on them with teeth and tongue and lips, leaving them glistening with saliva. Christian arched against his mouth. His own skin felt feverish and was probably damp under Luke's hands while Luke's own skin felt cool and dry. Christian could not understand how Luke could be so effortlessly in control when he himself was going to pieces in his date's hands. Luke moved down to his stomach, lips nibbling gently alongside his belt, while a bold hand rubbed at the bulge in his pants.

Christian writhed under his touch. He worried he would lose control before the moment came. He sat up, seeking his date's neck with his lips. Luke's skin was as soft as satin and smelled like the ocean. It reminded Christian of lazy days at Reef Point down the coast where Conrad would rise dripping like a sea-god from the waves and Christian would taste paradise on his lips. Luke's skin tasted the same. Christian's breath caught abruptly in his throat, and for a moment he buried his face against Luke's neck, holding him.

Luke's hand cupped his head. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

Christian nodded. He reached for Luke's belt quickly, anxious to cut to the chase before he lost his nerve or got overwhelmed with memories. He unfastened Luke's pants with trembling hands and slid his hand into tight boxer briefs, stroking Luke's hard cock. Thick and long, the feel of it made his own twitch with excitement. His ass almost ached to be filled by it. Christian marveled that another man could make him feel the same way Conrad once had.

Luke shuddered at this first touch, hands clutching Christian's shoulders.

"Let's go to the bedroom," he said breathlessly.

They climbed up off the couch, and Christian followed Luke down the hall to a large, cool room. Luke didn't put any lights on, only left the door open, allowing the light from the hall to spill across the large bed.

Luke's room had pale walls and pale carpet, the covers on the bed deep red. Luke kissed him as his hands worked Christian's pants open, pulling his boxers down. He pushed him down on the edge of the bed and sank to the floor, pushing Christian's knees apart.

Christian gasped as Luke's wet mouth swallowed him. Fuck, he was going to lose control in a matter of moments; he was sure of it. His hands gripped Luke's shoulders, and he moaned desperately. Luke took hold of the base of his shaft and jerked him off as he sucked at his balls, dragging his tongue over them, pressing it firmly behind them against the sensitive skin which made Christian almost shoot off the bed.

Luke lifted his head. "Get undressed," he directed with such authority that Christian scrambled to obey. Luke moved to the bedside table. He withdrew two items from the drawer and placed them on one pillow. Christian almost laughed to himself as he remembered getting the pack of condoms in the restaurant, which he now had no need for. He should have known Luke would be prepared.

Naked, he crawled onto the bed. Luke joined him there, not bothering to undress, only pulling his pants and boxers down far enough that his cock sprung free. Christian didn't care; he only needed Luke inside him right now. He lay back, knees open, making his wishes plain.

He reached out for Luke, hands traveling up his back beneath his shirt as they kissed.

Luke sat back and reached for the tube off the pillow. He squeezed lube onto his fingers, and Christian caught his breath with excitement as Luke's hand moved between his legs, massaging cold gel slowly into his entrance.

Christian groaned, head falling back as two fingers penetrated him. When a hot mouth slid back onto his cock simultaneously, he almost cried out in his ecstasy. Luke worked him with his fingers back and forward, before withdrawing and applying more lube, slipping inside again, making Christian so wet and open he almost begged for it.

Luke withdrew his fingers. He sat back and rolled on a condom.

"I haven't been with anyone else but Conrad in ten years," Christian spilled out abruptly.

He hoped for similar reassurances from Luke, similar confessions of anxiety and nerves. That he would say it had been a long time for him or that maybe he had had very few men before, but he didn't get it. The firm lifting of Christian's legs around his back and the swift guiding of his cock to him suggested Christian's pleasure was not in the hands of an amateur. For which he was grateful. He needed Luke to take charge, incapable as he was of doing it himself.

Luke entered him, his cock spearing Christian in one slick slide, filling him so full he could barely breathe. And oh God, he remembered this feeling. He had once thought only Conrad could fill him this way. Conrad of the big cock, who knew how to use it, but no, Luke it seemed could do it too.

Christian arched against Luke, gripping him hard with legs and arms, their mouths meeting clumsily as Luke set a slow, sensual rhythm and went straight into the place which sent Christian out of his mind.

Christian had always been an easy man to please sexually, at least Conrad had thought so, and maybe Luke would think the same too. Christian was carried away on a current of white-hot sensation. For a moment he was

gone, out of his body, far away from Luke and far away from here. He knew only intense, unearthly pleasure, the kind of pleasure he had not known in so many months. *This isn't Conrad. This is someone new, and yet it doesn't feel strange or wrong. His skin seems to fit mine, his body seems made for me.* He felt like their two bodies were fused irrevocably into one there on the bed and would never be separated, not even when the physical act of lovemaking was finished.

Stinging tears welled in his eyes, and he gripped Luke by the hair, bringing his face down, kissing him desperately with all the adoration and gratitude he felt for this man in his heart. His mouth emitted whimpers against Luke's while they kissed, and he tasted his own tears. His lover drew back, stopping his movements, soft fingertips sweeping the wet tracks from Christian's cheeks.

"Shhh," was the only comforting sound he made as he pressed soft kisses to Christian's face, to his eyes, and to his mouth again.

With a moan of need, Christian lifted his hips, clutching at Luke's buttocks, urging him on, so Luke pressed once more into that spot, and Christian felt himself sucked under the current again. He whined for more, the orgasm rising inexorably, his nails digging into Luke's soft flesh, hearing Luke gasp as he picked up pace, burying his face into Christian's neck and hitting his prostate rapidly over and over until Christian felt so dizzy with the pleasure consuming his body that he was almost sure he would pass out.

"Please..." he heard himself cry, "please, Luke, oh please..."

Luke responded with a loud groan, sealing his mouth back to Christian's as his body started to quiver, and he gave one last thrust right into that sensitive area. Christian almost screamed, every muscle in his body tensing as he bucked up against Luke, keeping the kiss going with an effort, Luke gasping into his mouth, Christian's hands gripping him hard as though Luke would slide away and this feeling would end abruptly.

He shuddered beneath Luke for what seemed like an eternity until slowly his muscles ceased their trembling, his body uncoiled, and he fell back on the bed, Luke falling with him, his weight a delicious comfort, his face pressed into Christian's neck.

IT WAS some time before Luke moved. He planted a kiss by Christian's ear before disentangling himself and getting up to use the bathroom. Christian was sticky with his own semen and damp with sweat, his cheeks still streaked with tears. He moved over to the bedside table and gripped a few tissues, cleaning himself off. Then he lay back and waited for Luke.

Luke exited the en suite bathroom and moved to the bed. "Get under the covers," he said in a whisper.

Christian had wanted to in his absence but hadn't wanted to presume too much. Now he slid under the silky covers with eagerness and waited for Luke to join him. Luke had put on a sleeveless T-shirt and pajama bottoms, Christian's hands told him, and he was disappointed but said nothing. Luke's lips were cool and tasted of toothpaste as he leaned over, kissing Christian gently.

Christian held him close, returning the kiss.

"Do you want to stay?" Luke asked softly.

Christian nodded his head mutely. He was afraid to speak. Afraid that if he opened his mouth, frighteningly powerful words would tumble out regarding how he felt at that moment in time, drunk as he was on champagne and Luke.

But as Luke leaned over him, jade-green eyes aglow, fingers stroking his hair back from his eyes, Christian read the same thoughts there as were in his own mind. His heart, only just slowing after the orgasm, surged again.

"Luke," he said, one hand clutching his lover's shoulder.

Luke inclined his head, mouth an inch from Christian's. "I know," he said and his full lips curved into a radiant smile. And Christian smiled, too, as they kissed.

They exchanged no further words, only kissed and caressed for a long while before finally, with Luke lying behind Christian, curled against his body, they fell into sleep.

Chapter 15

CHRISTIAN awoke slowly, confused and disorientated, with warmth pressing against him. He stretched, opening his eyes to a room which wasn't his own.

He looked into a pale face right next to him, so close their noses almost touched, with jet-black hair falling over the closed eyes. Christian's stomach turned over. He remembered every kiss, every caress, every thrust in startling technicolor. His head ached fiercely, and the brightness of the sun through the gauzy curtains hurt his eyes. A muscular arm rested on his waist. He lifted it carefully and slid away, sitting on the edge of the bed a moment, scanning the carpet with hazy eyes for his clothes.

Panic rose in him, clawing at his throat. What had he done? What was he doing here with this perfect stranger, in his bed? He couldn't think straight with the pounding going on inside his skull. All he knew was he had to escape before Luke woke up. He located his boxers and stood to pull them on, followed by his pants. Sitting to put on his socks and shoes, he felt the mattress shift behind him.

"Hey," said a soft voice, a hand resting on the curve of his hip, stroking.

Christian flinched away instantly. He stood, turning around to look down at Luke, trying not to fix his gaze on him for too long.

But that was his mistake. Luke, sleepy-eyed and tousle-haired and looking like some sort of sex-nymph who had been fucked to within an inch of his life, drew and held Christian's gaze as his throat closed up and his pants tightened.

"Where are you going?" Luke asked. The covers fell down to below his navel as he sat up, and Christian's saw the thick outline of a half-hard cock in the flimsy pajama bottoms.

He swallowed. "I have to go."

"Oh," Luke said with evident disappointment.

"I'm sorry," Christian muttered. He wrenched his gaze away, casting around for his shirt, unable to find it, frustration rising in him, adding to the anxiety to be gone. He cursed under his breath.

"It's in the living room," Luke said quietly.

Christian went out quickly into the lounge. He took in the rumpled couch, the cushions strewn on the floor, the cups of cold coffee on the table as he dragged his shirt on.

He could taste Luke; he could still feel him inside him. He had been drunk. So why was he still thinking while *sober* that it had been the most magical night of his life?

Luke's voice stopped him as he reached the door, hesitant and unsure, all the happiness of last night gone from it. "Christian. Can I... get your number?"

Christian turned around slowly, the reality of the situation hitting him. He had been about to walk out with no way for Luke to ever contact him again. Is that what Luke was to him? A cheap one-night stand? Had it always been his intention to screw Luke and then leave him?

He felt like he would vomit at any moment. The pain in his head was so excruciating it hurt to keep his eyes open. Luke's T-shirt clung to such a well-sculpted torso that Christian couldn't help but admire, couldn't help but notice the two tiny nipples pressing rigidly against the fabric. Luke reached past Christian to the table where a phone was plugged in and a tablet of paper stood. For a moment Christian smelled his skin and his hair and knew that the scent of Luke would haunt him for the rest of his life. Luke held a pen out to him. Christian bent over the paper and scribbled his cell number.

Luke's gaze burned him as he did so. He laid the pen down and reached for the door handle, his hand stopping on it, aware of Luke standing silently behind him. For a moment he lowered his head, eyes closed, full of self-loathing, but he couldn't bring himself to turn back around and into Luke's arms.

He opened the door, slid through it and pulled it shut behind him. He ran down the stairs as fast as he could, forsaking the elevator in case Luke was following.

Eban lifted a sardonic eyebrow from where he sat at the table as Christian entered the kitchen. "You should have taken that condom from me. I knew you'd need it."

Christian walked past him to get a drink of water.

"Going to share the details?" Eban teased. "Or do I have to beg?"

Christian rooted for aspirin in the cupboard. "What sort of details do you want? Positions? Number of orgasms? That sort of thing?"

Eban grinned. "You know it. And who did who, obviously."

Christian sat down with his glass and shook his head. "Maybe later."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Eban gave a sigh. "You're thinking about Conrad."

Christian remained silent.

"Do you really think that Conrad would be pissed that you've had another guy, Christian? Do you really think he would want you alone for the rest of your life?"

"It's been seven months, Eban. That's not a respectful period of time."

"Who says? I know how much you like Luke and I know you wouldn't sleep with anyone lightly, so the fact that you already have, on your first date, tells me this is real, that it's going somewhere."

"It's not going anywhere."

"You mean you're not going to let it go anywhere."

"I don't think I should see him again."

"Oh Jesus, this is such fucking bullshit," Eban exploded suddenly. "Why not? At the moment can you ever imagine meeting someone better than Luke? You're really willing to just throw it away? The right people don't just come along every day, Christian, they come along once in a fucking *lifetime*."

"I don't know how you fucking dare." Christian scraped his chair back from the table, pointing his finger. "I've only got one word to say to you Eban—*Darius*. Not fucking *Damien*. Darius. When you're willing to quit wallowing in something that was never fucking right, and give that guy a chance, then I'll give Luke a chance, okay?" He stormed from the kitchen.

He had only just thrown himself angrily on the bed when the door opened. "Listen to me," Eban said earnestly. "If you could get some sort of closure over Conrad, would you give Luke a go?"

Christian regarded him warily. "I don't know how to do that."

"I've got an idea." Eban sat down on the bed. "You meet with the guy who got Conrad's heart."

Christian's mouth fell open. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Yeah. You got any better ideas? You're obsessed. You carry that letter around with you and read it a dozen times a day. That's not normal fucking behavior, Christian. If you saw this guy in the flesh, if you saw what Conrad has done for him, then maybe..." Eban shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe you can start your own life again."

Christian stared at him. "I'm not sure I'm ready to bury Conrad for good, yet. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready."

Eban sighed. "You're not letting him go, you're just... accepting that he's gone."

Christian lay looking at the ceiling with his mind spinning for the longest time. Could he do this? It would require such courage, and he wasn't sure he had ever been courageous. Finally he spoke. "I'll do it on one condition. We meet this guy together. Closure for me means closure for you too."

Eban looked taken aback. "Okay," he said with clear reluctance.

Christian nodded. "Now, isn't it time for one of your famous breakfasts?"

"Give me five to shower." Eban got up and left the room leaving Christian shocked at what he had agreed to.

EBAN went into the bathroom and closed the door. He was startled by Christian's suggestion. He wasn't sure he could bear to see the man who carried Conrad's heart, and he didn't think he would ever receive closure from Conrad, as tortured as he was by those memories which plagued him at every turn. He could see himself becoming way too emotional at the meeting. What would Christian say to Eban weeping and wailing over the man who had Conrad's heart? Wouldn't that give things away a little too easily?

A FEW miles away, Damien was venturing out for his first walk since his shooting. He made his way across the park in the afternoon sun, sitting on a bench overlooking the lake and watching a few children feeding the ducks.

Never one for exploring the deepest emotions in himself, Damien pushed all distressing thoughts of Eban aside and focused on the main issue. His sex drive was returning along with his strength, but his jerking-off session that morning had left him feeling unsatisfied. He needed some help in that department. He pulled out his cell and browsed the address book, something which had been full of friends when he was with Eban and which was now full of men he'd fucked.

By sheer luck of the alphabet, it was Aaron's name which came up first, or maybe Damien might have even been calling Eban for a quick fuck. He connected to the number and waited.

"Hey," came a deep voice, the sound of traffic in the background.

"Hey, it's Damien."

In the momentary silence Damien's ego plummeted at the idea that Aaron didn't even remember him.

“Well, hello,” Aaron said coolly, “it’s been a while.”

“Yeah. I’ve been sick. I want to make up for lost time. You interested?”

“Sure. Want to meet up tonight?”

Damien smiled at the ease of this. “Yeah. Shall I come over to your place?”

“No problem. Come over at seven thirty.”

“Okay, see you then.”

“ANY plans tonight?” Eban asked Aaron conversationally as they cruised around the neighborhood looking for trouble.

“Yeah, I’ve got a date,” Aaron said.

Eban looked at him in surprise. This was the first time he had ever got a hint of Aaron’s personal life since they became partners. “Great. Who’s the lucky woman?”

“Er... guy, actually,” Aaron said, a flush staining his cheeks.

Eban lifted an eyebrow. Now there was a surprise. He tried not to grin, seeing as he was not out himself at work.

“He’s called Damien. He disappeared for a while. I thought he wasn’t interested but he got back in touch today.”

Eban’s hands clenched the steering wheel hard, his teeth almost grinding.

“What’s wrong?” Aaron asked in consternation.

“This Damien, what does he look like?”

“I don’t know... average height, I guess, quite skinny, blond hair.”

Eban almost ran into a parked car.

“What did I say? Do you know this guy?”

“I used to know him,” Eban said, almost under his breath. “I don’t know him anymore.”

BY EIGHT p.m. Damien was naked and moaning under Aaron, legs over his shoulders, eyes fixed on the ceiling, wishing himself back in the alleyway where he had taken the love of his life ruthlessly up against the wall. He was firmly convinced that Eban had been in love with Conrad and maybe that had even been reciprocated, judging by the violence of Conrad’s reaction that day

in his office, but that did not stop him from wanting his love back. Whether Eban had ever really loved him or not, Damien had certainly loved him, since the moment he first set eyes on him. He wondered how much longer he could last without the other half of him.

"He knows," Aaron spoke suddenly, startling Damien, so Damien's gaze flickered to his.

"What?"

"Eban. He knows I'm fucking you. He's my partner. You should have told him."

Damien's mouth dropped open. "You're Eban's partner? Are you fucking serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious," Aaron grunted, thrusting harder into Damien.

"Of all the cops in all the world...." Damien mimicked Humphrey Bogart with a grin, fingernails digging into Aaron's thighs.

"I'm glad you find this so funny," Aaron snapped, "because this is the last time. He's a nice guy and he's in love with you."

"No, he's not a nice guy," Damien said. "He screws around, he breaks hearts, and most of all, he lies. I assure you he's not in love with me. Now why don't you shut the fuck up and make me come?"

AT HOME, things were tense. Christian checked his cell phone every few minutes, unbelievably anxious that Luke had not called or texted, and he kicked himself for not getting his number; meanwhile, Eban constantly channel surfed, drumming his fingers on his knee and messing with his hair.

"All right, give it up," Christian snapped. "What's wrong?"

Eban glanced over at him. "Damien's screwing Aaron."

"What? Your partner Aaron? Him and Damien?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus. Since when?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask for details." Eban's eyes were fixed on the TV, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

"Shit, I'm sorry. Does Damien know who Aaron is?"

Eban shrugged. "Don't know. It's the sort of thing Damien would do to get back at me, so yeah, probably."

"That bastard," Christian growled. "I swear, you've got to give me permission to knock seven shades of shit out of him the next time I see him."

Eban managed a weak smile. "Maybe it's time I did it myself."

BY SUNDAY evening, Christian was virtually climbing the walls at the fact that Luke hadn't called. But what did he want? Hadn't he walked out on Luke and told himself he wouldn't see him again? The man who had single-handedly roused Christian from the dead, whom Christian owed a debt he would never be able to repay as long as he lived.

Why did he miss Luke with an intensity which felt obscene so soon after Conrad?

Chapter 16

EBAN was on Christian's case at breakfast, asking him if he was going to call the transplant coordinator that morning with a view to setting up the meeting with the recipient of Conrad's heart. Christian muttered a yes, drinking coffee while watching the bird table through the window, and thinking whether he could brave the coffee shop that morning or whether the beautiful sight of Luke Morgan would reduce him to rubble.

Would Luke completely ignore him after the way Christian had treated him like a cheap one-night stand? And would they be back to the way they were before, only with roles reversed and Luke being the asshole who rejected Christian every time he tried to speak to him?

Somehow he couldn't imagine Luke ever behaving like an asshole, which gave him hope that the damage could be repaired, despite all the promises he had made himself.

Christian went upstairs. He searched the drawers in his bedroom for the phone number he wanted, then he drew the letter from the holder of Conrad's heart from the top of his bureau and placed it inside his jacket pocket, resisting the urge to open it and read the memorized words as he usually did.

The early morning heat promised another hot late summer day. He allowed his feet to carry him to the coffee shop, as he had known they would. Luke was there already, in a booth at the back, reading a newspaper. Christian fidgeted in line, trying not to stare, trying to play it cool when all he wanted was to sweep the man into his arms and smother him with kisses. Finally Luke looked up and their gazes met. Christian expected Luke to be pissed at him, because if the boot had been on the other foot and Luke had made his excuses to leave Christian's bed as soon as possible the morning after, then Christian was pretty sure *he* would have been pissed.

But Luke didn't seem pissed. On the contrary, his eyes lit up and he gave a shy smile, which resulted in Christian's heart taking off at a gallop. He turned back to the counter, flustered, as the girl behind it asked if he was having his usual. "Yeah," he said, "but two of them," and he glanced over his shoulder at Luke once more.

The coffees took an eternity. Finally he moved over to Luke, clutching the two cups, hovering at the table like an idiot as Luke looked up, those pale-green eyes resting on his.

"Can I sit down?" Christian asked stupidly.

Luke arched a brow, looking amused. "No."

Christian stared for a moment before Luke laughed, and Christian reddened.

He put the cups down, went to pull out the chair opposite Luke, and thought better of it. Instead he slid into the booth next to Luke, up close and personal, thigh pressed against his, hand seeking it, squeezing it through the denim.

Luke's pupils dilated unmistakably, and beneath the table his hand moved onto Christian's. "I missed you," he said urgently.

Christian thought he heard birds sing. His heart seemed to swell within his chest. He turned his hand palm up and held tightly to Luke's. The desire to lean over and capture the other man's lips with his was almost overwhelming.

"I'm sorry for leaving," he burst out. "It wasn't you, I just...." He trailed off, unable to formulate an excuse. Unable to even *begin* to apologize for his appalling behavior.

"It's okay," Luke said softly, squeezing his hand. "You don't have to explain anything to me. I know you need time and I'm prepared to give you as much as you want. I'm not in a rush for anything."

Christian smiled. "Luke, Friday night was just...."

Luke flushed a little. "I know."

"Can I see you tonight?" Christian asked desperately.

Luke nodded, rapturous eyes fixed on his.

Christian trembled with delight. "What do you want to do?" Beneath the table, their fingertips slid against each other's, softly caressing.

"I don't know."

"Me either. A movie?"

Luke shook his head. "I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you."

Christian grinned.

"I like to... walk on the beach." Luke said this with a trace of embarrassment, as though he thought Christian would laugh at him.

But Christian didn't laugh, because he was remembering all the days he and Conrad had spent doing the same thing. Of the ice cream parlor near the pier where they worked their way steadily through the one hundred flavors. Of Adam, the owner, who clearly had a thing for Conrad and always gave them free hot chocolate after their ice cream.

"That's what Conrad liked to do," he said quietly.

"Oh, okay, we don't have to..., " Luke said quickly.

"No. I'd like that."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll pick you up."

"Okay."

"Seven?"

Luke nodded.

Christian finished his coffee. "I should go," he said, but his hand remained where it was, entwined with Luke's.

Luke didn't speak, only held his gaze with his own.

"I want to kiss you so much," Christian said with his voice lowered.

"I know," Luke said wistfully. "Tonight."

Christian nodded. "Tonight." He let go of Luke's hand reluctantly and climbed out of the booth. "Bye."

"Bye." Christian lingered at the table a moment before turning away and walking to the door.

At work he threw Marcus's latest memo into the trash without reading it. It was nine thirty. How exactly was he going to get through almost ten hours before he saw Luke again? He wished with his whole heart that he had thought to ask for Luke's cell number so he could send him a text.

"You're looking way too happy again, man," Jack remarked, throwing himself into the chair opposite. "I take it Friday night went well?"

Christian nodded. "Very well."

Jack's bright eyes were as inquisitive as the robin's which visited the bird table, but Christian guessed he knew it was crass to ask. "Good. Seeing him again?"

"Tonight." Christian smiled.

"Fucking great," Jack said enthusiastically. "And you know we want to meet him ASAP, right?"

"We? It's back on track with Marcus?"

"Yeah."

Christian nodded in approval. "Good. And I have to prepare Luke first so he knows what to expect from you two fuckers."

Jack placed a hand over his heart. "I'm hurt."

Christian snorted.

"Listen." Jack's tone changed. "How's Eban?"

Christian sighed. "The same, man. Damien's fucking Aaron, his partner."

"That fucking son of a bitch. When is Eban going to leave that motherfucker alone?"

"There's something else. Eban wants me to meet with the guy who got Conrad's heart."

Jack looked astonished. "Are you going to?"

"I suppose. He thinks it might be cathartic."

Jack nodded. "I see where he's coming from."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. And I think Luke's even more cathartic for you."

Christian smiled.

"Dinner at my place soon, seriously."

"You can't cook."

"No, but Eban can."

"If you think I'm having Marcus and Eban under the same roof, you're wrong."

"It'll be cool. Marcus has gotten over his issues."

"I bet," muttered Christian.

AARON was dragging on his uniform as Eban entered the locker room that morning. He opened his locker and started to strip. "Eban," Aaron said softly behind him.

Eban turned reluctantly.

"I told Damien I wasn't going to see him again. Because of you."

Eban turned away, shaking his head. He kicked off his shoes and unfastened his pants. "Don't do that on my account."

"Listen to me. He says your name when he comes. That's no fun for me."

Eban closed his eyes and leaned his head on his locker door.

"I don't want this to come between us. You're a great guy, Eban. If I'd only known, I swear I would never have...."

"I'm not a great guy at all," Eban interrupted. "You obviously don't know me very well."

THE morning went slowly. At eleven Eban was on the phone asking if Christian had spoken yet to the transplant coordinator. Christian admitted he hadn't but distracted Eban by telling him he was seeing Luke that night.

Eban was enthusiastic, but urged again for Christian to sort out the meeting before hanging up. Christian waited until twelve thirty, when everyone had gone to lunch, before taking the card out of his pocket with the phone number on it. He dialed. As it rang, he took the letter from his jacket, and read the words he knew by heart on the pale-blue paper.

The paper had frayed along the lines it had been folded on and was starting to fall into three pieces. As he waited for Anna March to answer the phone, Christian reached over for some scotch tape, placed the paper face down and carefully repaired it.

"Hello?" came a voice, startling him in his task.

"Hello, it's Christian Seymour."

There was a pause. Why should she remember him? *She probably deals with hundreds of grieving partners every year.*

"My partner Conrad died seven months ago. You gave me a letter from the recipient of his heart a month after."

"Of course. How are you, Christian?"

"I want to meet him."

"Excuse me?"

"I want to meet the man who got Conrad's heart."

"I see."

"I'm sure it's not that unusual a request, right? People have asked you before?"

"Of course they have. But the request doesn't always lead to a meeting. I'll call him, but if he doesn't want to meet you, there's nothing I can do about that."

"I understand. But I think he will. He wrote to me first, after all."

"Yes, he did. I'll try to get a hold of him, Christian. Give me until the end of the day. I'll call you back. When will you be free?"

"Any time," Christian said immediately. "Whenever he wants."

"All right. I'll speak to you later."

"Thank you."

Christian hung up the phone. He didn't even know whether the man would be amenable to a meeting, but the thought of standing there and seeing the man Conrad had saved was almost too much to contemplate. He put his head down on the desk. He wished he could call Luke and spill this terrible story to him.

AFTER work, Eban didn't go home straight away. Instead he loitered at the station and searched the DMV's database for Damien's address, amazed he had not thought to do this in all the time since they had split up, scribbled it on a scrap of paper, and drove over there.

The house was modest and pretty, with a well-tended garden. Damien's car was parked in the drive. He and Eban had chosen the car together, just like they had done most everything else together, joined at the hip like Conrad and Christian had been.

Eban hadn't bothered to change, which was carefully calculated. The expression on Damien's face was astonished, then cold, when he came to the door. "I thought I told you—"

"I wanted to see how you are," Eban interrupted. "Can I come in?"

Damien sighed. He turned and left Eban standing there. Eban followed him down the hallway and into the kitchen. For a moment he stood at the door watching Damien busily making coffee, back turned. He wore a black T-shirt and tight black pants, his slender body clearly outlined, always able to incite unbridled lust in Eban.

"I miss you," he said from the door. "I miss you every fucking day like my heart's been cut out."

"Don't," Damien said sternly, keeping his back turned.

"I know you feel the same way. If you would just forgive me. If you only knew how sorry I am." Eban moved up behind Damien.

Damien, sensing him, dodged away, but Eban caught him easily by the arm, turning him around and pressing him back against the counter, bigger and stronger. Damien struggled, and Eban used more force, gripping both shoulders and moving in for the kill.

Damien gasped as Eban kissed him, all reluctance gone. Moaning, he wrapped his arms around Eban's neck, seeking his tongue with his. Delirious with desire, Eban's hands went to Damien's pants, only one thought driving him. Damien didn't complain, clinging to Eban as he was lifted up onto the kitchen counter, legs around Eban's back.

There was a flurry of desperate activity—pulling of clothing, a scramble in his wallet for a condom—before Eban was thrusting hard into Damien and Damien's head was falling back into the overhead cupboard with a loud bump that he didn't seem to feel.

It was hard; it was fast; it was furious. Eban spared no thought for the fragile body which had only recently been at death's door, and clearly Damien didn't want him to. He did spare a thought for the other men in his life, though, because even as he was fucking Damien, he was thinking about others.

It wasn't like he didn't want this like it was the very air he breathed, because of course he did, it was just... he didn't know. He was too lost down this path to even analyze his thoughts.

He came first, shuddering all over, biting a little too hard at Damien's neck, and jerked Damien off until his lover had come too. He pulled free and rolled off the condom.

"Sorry," he muttered, laying it on the counter and pulling up his pants.

Damien slid to the floor. "What for?"

"For coming first." Eban crossed to the trash with the condom.

Damien shook his head. "You might have apologized for that when we were together, but I didn't care then and I don't care now. It's not like you ever *once* left me unsatisfied in five years."

Eban flushed and said nothing. He took a glass off the drainer and filled it from the tap, drinking slowly.

"I think you should go now," Damien said quietly.

Eban turned to look at him. "You want me to go?" he questioned crossly. "You don't even want to talk about what just happened?"

"You fucked me, end of story. I don't want to do this now, Eban, I just want you to go."

"Son of a bitch," Eban snarled, hurling the glass into the sink, where it smashed. He stalked from the kitchen down the hallway. As he wrenched open the door, he heard Damien's footsteps.

"I'm sorry, just give me time."

"You've had plenty of fucking time." Eban slammed the door behind him and stalked down the drive.

AT HOME, Christian was sorting through his wardrobe fretfully and discarding everything he found as unsuitable. The transplant coordinator had not called him back and he was anxious. He wanted to call her again but didn't want to harass her. Surely if she had news she would have called, so maybe she couldn't get hold of the recipient.

Footsteps came up the stairs, and Eban leaned on the door frame with a tired smile. "I have nothing to wear," Christian moaned.

Eban clicked his tongue. "You're such a chick. Want to look through my stuff?"

Christian didn't need to be asked twice. Eban was always impeccably dressed, and the two were virtually the same size. While Christian was searching through his closet, Eban was stripping off his uniform unabashedly.

Christian, aware of this from the corner of his eye, tried not to look.

"I just fucked Damien," Eban said casually.

"What?"

"Sad but true."

"Jesus," Christian groaned. He wished he could knock some sense into Eban. He wished he would just leave Damien the hell alone. "So are you back together?"

"No. But it's a step in the right direction."

Christian bit his lip before he could retort and turned back to the closet, pulling out a black shirt with silver embroidery over the shoulder.

"What?"

Christian shook his head.

"Do you have something to say?"

"You know how I feel about him," Christian said in a low voice. "But whatever you want to do, Eban, if you're happy, *I'm* happy. Can I wear this?"

Eban nodded. "Sure, man, but if there's buttons pulled off it and shit tomorrow, I'm going to be pissed."

Christian smirked. "Luke has more self-control than that."

"Does he? When he sees you in that shirt he won't. When I wore it for Damien, I never used to get out the front door without being bent over."

"Too much information."

Eban laughed. "I'm going to shower."

Christian retreated back to his own room. He wouldn't think about the tragedy which would be Eban getting back with Damien. Eban was a big boy and could make his own mistakes. But Christian really didn't want to deal with the fallout a second time.

Chapter 17

AS SOON as Luke opened the door, he was in Christian's arms, all the breath squeezed from him. "Fuck, I wanted to kiss you so bad this morning," Christian told him. In one hand he held a bouquet of red roses. He didn't know how gay this gesture possibly was, but if it was good enough for Conrad, who had appreciated flowers and chocolates, then it was good enough for Luke.

They kissed tenderly, tongues delicately touching, Luke's fingers threading through Christian's carefully styled hair. When they drew apart breathlessly, Luke's eyes were bright, his cheeks flushed. He took Christian's hand and drew him inside.

Christian presented the roses with a flourish and a grin, hoping Luke wouldn't despise the gesture. But the winsome expression on his face suggested otherwise. "Nobody ever bought me flowers before," he murmured, taking the bouquet, lowering his nose into the petals.

"Then you've led a deprived life, Luke," Christian said, "and I'm here to remedy that."

Their eyes met, Christian smiling but thinking, *why am I offering this man hope and guarantees when I'm so damaged beyond repair?*

"I'll put them in water. Be right back."

Christian nodded. He moved into the living room and went to the giant window, looking down over the city. The sun slid lower down the horizon, casting rays across the furniture. Everything was so expensive in here. Luke's job must pay extremely well. When he was working, that was.

That nagging uncertainty that he had experienced on their first date came to mind again.

Just then, arms went around his waist and Luke's chin pressed into his shoulder. "Like the view?"

"Breathtaking," Christian replied.

They were both silent a moment, looking out across the city. "Luke? The asthma attack. Does that happen a lot?"

"Not a lot, no."

"I don't want to see that happen again."

"I know. I'm sorry if it frightened you." Luke's lips brushed Christian's ear, making him shiver.

Christian turned around into his arms, holding him tightly. He didn't want to think about this. He didn't want to think that Luke could be taken from him as suddenly as Conrad had been.

Finally, he drew back and said, "Are you ready for our walk?"

With a smile, Luke nodded.

THE beach was relatively quiet, just a few couples and people walking their dogs, but enough to ensure there would be no kissing or cuddling between Christian and Luke. They walked in silence, their shoulders brushing, their footsteps in sync, staying on the damp sand close to the incoming waves, the sun beginning to sink in the radiant, reddening sky. Christian's heart felt light and free, like winter was over and the clouds of grief were lifting.

They came to the pier, and Christian caught sight of the ice cream parlor beyond it. He hesitated before taking the plunge. It was just ice cream and it didn't matter what Adam or anyone else thought about Christian bringing another man into the shop. "Want to get some ice cream?" His fingers strayed to brush the back of Luke's hand.

Luke agreed with enthusiasm, and they made their way up the steps.

Christian didn't recognize the waitress and there was no sign of Adam, much to his relief. They sat at the counter, Christian nodding to Tom, the assistant manager, when he came out of the back. Although on speaking terms with him, Tom had always been reticent with Christian and Conrad, unlike Adam.

Luke ordered two scoops, one of walnut, one of ginger, while Christian had one of mint chocolate, one of white chocolate. He was a little boring with his ice cream flavors, which Conrad had always teased him mercilessly about.

"Is that the best you can do?" Luke ragged him when Tom went away. "They have one hundred flavors. At least try the sardine or something."

Christian rolled his eyes. "There's *not* sardine flavor and you know it, and *he* used to say the same thing."

Luke's smile faltered only a little, to his credit. "Great minds think alike. I agree with Conrad, you have boring taste in ice cream."

Christian smiled in return, even though the name of his lost love sounded a little strange on Luke's tongue.

Luke put a hand on Christian's knee and squeezed it.

"Christian!" Adam appeared from the back, a well-built man in his late thirties with dark hair and soulful eyes.

Christian turned around on his stool to greet Adam. Adam hugged him, while his gaze strayed to Luke, an undeniable expression of confusion and dismay on his face.

Don't say it. Christian met his gaze. *Don't ask me, please.*

Adam hesitated a moment then turned his attention to Luke. "Adam," he said, putting his hand out.

"Luke." The two shook hands.

"Hope you like hot chocolate, Luke," remarked Adam with a smile, moving off behind the counter. He got two cups out. "It's been too long, Christian."

"Yeah." Christian knew he couldn't finish up here and then just leave as though nothing was wrong. It wasn't fair on the man who had had a soft spot for Conrad.

"Adam," he said softly with a glance at Luke.

Adam looked up and his face fell immediately, as though he knew something really bad was coming.

"Conrad. He... died seven months ago."

Adam stared for a moment, then blinked, gaze moving away toward the far wall as a rush of tears filled his eyes. "Just...give me a minute...." He turned away abruptly, went into the back and shut the door.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked softly.

Christian nodded. "I just ruined his night," he said, trying to sound glib.

"We shouldn't have come here. Want to go?"

"You haven't finished your ice cream. What sort of date would I be if I hurried you out without finishing your ice cream just because Adam thinks I'm a callous prick for having another guy in my bed indecently soon?"

"Don't. Let's go."

Christian shook his head. "It's okay. Let's stay. I want to make sure he's all right."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

Luke finished his ice cream in silence, thanking Tom as he placed two hot chocolates in front of them. It was another few minutes before Adam returned from the back room.

He came and sat at the counter in front of Luke and Christian, his eyes red, leaning his chin on his hand. "How are you doing, Christian?"

"I'm okay," Christian lied.

Adam nodded. His eyes moved once more to Luke. Christian could almost read his thoughts.

“Luke and I,” he said, “this is our second date. I hope you don’t mind me bringing him here.”

His troubles were eased when Adam touched his forearm lightly. “Why would I mind, Christian? You should have come before now. Can I”—he hesitated—“take him some flowers?”

Christian nodded in grateful surprise. “He’s at Pacific View under the shade of a magnolia. Give me some paper and I’ll draw you a map.”

While Christian drew a sketch, Adam’s attention focused on Luke.

“So, where did he find you?”

“In the coffee shop,” Luke said a little shyly.

“Your eyes met over the lattes, how romantic, a little like me, but with chocolate chip.” Adam’s gaze moved over to Tom, who was busily cleaning the top. The assistant manager looked up and smiled at Adam.

AT HOME, Eban lay on the couch with his cell in his hand, the blank text message page displayed, the cursor winking. Another of Conrad’s favorite films, *The English Patient*, was playing, and he was studiously trying to ignore it. The end made him cry every time, and he had probably seen it twelve times.

He wanted to say something to Damien but was not sure what. Maybe he should send something sexual, just so Damien didn’t think he had any expectations from today, so he got a hard-on and thought that being done by Eban again was an exciting prospect. Eban was never above using sex to get what he needed.

He began to type. *I can still feel your tight ass around me.*

Damien had always appreciated salacious text messages; they made him hot. Smirking, Eban searched the address book, called up the letter D and sent the text. Satisfied, he dropped the cell to the carpet.

Then his gaze fixed on the far wall in horror. He snatched up the cell. Had he...?

He quickly went into the messages section of his phone, moved to the sent box, and looked at the recipient of the newest message. He stared in horror. He really had.

Somehow, he had sent that message to Darius.

He dropped the phone again. How had that happened? He hadn’t even been thinking of Darius. His thoughts had been consumed with Damien for so long, hadn’t they? No, they hadn’t. He had thought of Darius that evening

while fucking Damien. He didn't know why. He loved Damien. Darius was just some guy he had been out with twice. He was nothing to Eban.

He sighed in frustration. He could hardly text Darius again and say, "Sorry, that text wasn't meant for you." That would make him look like a slut. But he *was* a slut. *If I'm not making a pass at my dead friend's lover, then I'm sleeping with some guy and telling him he's just sex.*

He needed a drink but the fridge was empty. He would go out to the liquor store; it gave him a good excuse not to watch the rest of this film.

He found his wallet and keys, tied his shoes, and put his cell in his pocket. Outside, dusk was settling, the sky streaked with orange and pink. He drove fifteen minutes down the road to the liquor store and parked outside.

In and out and no fucking junk food, he told himself sternly as he stepped through the automatic doors. Within minutes he had beer, chips, and chocolate in his basket, and a pizza in case he got really drunk. He loitered for a moment in the hard liquor aisle before adding some JD and a bottle of Diet Coke.

He made it to the checkout just as there was a loud explosion, which had him reaching automatically for the holster which wasn't there. A voice yelled, "Everybody on the ground now!"

Eban turned his head to regard the short, white guy in his forties. While everyone else hit the deck, Eban continued to stand looking at the man implacably. "*You*. Pretty boy," screamed the guy, brandishing his gun, "are you fucking deaf? On the deck!"

Eban's lip curled scornfully, and he gingerly lowered himself facedown to the floor. The only time he preferred to do this was when he was getting fucked, not because some asshole with a piece said it should be so.

The floor was cold but relatively clean. The man ordered the cashier on duty to open up his register and then he started filling his pockets. The sound of sirens split the air. As the guy was momentarily distracted, turning his face to the window, Eban slithered up off the floor and launched himself at the criminal.

The guy reacted far too quickly, whirling around with arm raised, the gun smashing into the side of Eban's head with such sickening force that he was knocked to the ground unconscious.

LUKE and Christian left the ice cream parlor with a tub of ice cream forced upon them by Adam and started the walk back down the beach. Darkness had fallen, but the sky retained that pale violet color characteristic of summer. It was still warm, the lights of the city reflecting over the ocean. "Can we sit

down a moment?" Luke asked after a few minutes, pointing to the rocks down at the shoreline.

Christian acquiesced, following Luke as he led the way, perching on a rock next to him, their thighs touching. He glanced around. The beach was deserted. He slid his arm around Luke's shoulders and leaned into him.

"Are you okay?"

Luke nodded.

"I'm sorry if it looked like I was feeling the need to justify why I'm with you to Adam," Christian said quietly. "Really I was justifying it to myself."

"I know that," Luke replied.

This didn't surprise Christian because he already knew how perceptive the man next to him was. He slid his hand down to Luke's waist and moved it around his rib cage, feeling the bones through his T-shirt, holding tight as he turned his face into his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be. I expect you to feel like this. Didn't I say I was prepared to give you time?"

Christian didn't reply.

"That doesn't stop me from wanting to take you home tonight, though," Luke continued. "Which I think only complicates things."

Christian lifted his head to look into Luke's pale eyes. "Does that mean you regret it?"

"Oh no." Luke shook his head fiercely. "I wanted that since the moment I first saw you. Does it mean *you* regret it?"

Christian thought for a moment. "No," he said, speaking the truth in his heart. "It was the greatest moment of my life."

Luke looked taken aback. "But... what about the first night you spent with Conrad?"

Christian thought about that, as he had thought about it while Luke was making love to him. "That night wasn't anything to write home about. I didn't love Conrad at that point; I was only in lust with him. My love for him grew slowly. I had never had a man before, and him, well, I think he had had a couple, but he was far from experienced. It was awkward and it hurt. Neither of us got a great deal of pleasure from it. That came later, when we loved each other. Because I think the best sex is when you have a deep emotional connection to someone." He stroked Luke's side softly. "Do you know what I mean?"

Luke nodded. He seemed hypnotized by Christian's eyes.

"I think sex just gets better when you get older. I appreciate it for what it is now and I never appreciated it as much as I did on Friday night. That wasn't just sex, it was—" Christian stopped, lost for words, feeling foolish.

Luke's arm slid around his shoulders. He leaned in to nuzzle Christian's face with his nose. "I know. I never felt anything like it before, either. But I don't want it to overshadow us getting to know each other. That's not all I want you for."

Christian didn't speak. He didn't trust his voice not to tremble. Instead he turned his face to Luke's and pressed his lips to those of the man who was going to replace Conrad.

They walked back to Christian's car in silence, holding hands in the darkness until they reached the road and then reluctantly let go. For a moment Christian sat still without starting the engine. Luke's fingers found his.

"I'll take you home," Christian said quietly.

"Yes," Luke said.

Chapter 18

EBAN regained consciousness slowly to see a face looming over his, a hand slapping his cheek lightly. The features of the face came into focus, and Eban saw dark blue eyes.

“Are you with us?” Darius asked.

Eban blinked a little and nodded. Darius wore his uniform, which molded itself to the shape of his stunning body. “Do you feel okay to get up?”

Eban nodded again. Darius held out his hand to help him sit up, and Eban took it.

“Let me look.” Darius pulled Eban’s head toward him gently, parting his hair with his fingers. He clucked his tongue. “Nasty. They might want to take you to the hospital.”

Eban shook his head. “I’m okay.” He stood, Darius moving to take his arm as a wave of nausea overtook him. He glanced around the now-empty store and then back to Darius. “What happened?”

Darius shrugged and gave what he must have thought was an arrogant smirk, even though Eban knew the man possessed no arrogance at all, unlike himself. “I saved the day.”

Eban rolled his eyes and smiled. As he walked out into the evening, he saw the would-be robber being bundled into the back of a patrol car. Darius motioned over a paramedic to look at Eban. Reluctantly, Eban climbed into the back of the ambulance and allowed the paramedic to shine a light in his eyes, ask him to squeeze both her hands, and take his blood pressure.

Darius was my knight in shining armor. He’d always been able to look after himself, and suddenly he had been vulnerable and Darius had been there. He’d been vulnerable for a long time, but that was something he’d rather not start admitting to himself before he ended up in therapy. He didn’t want to think about how badly he needed someone to rescue him.

When he refused to go to the hospital, the paramedic shrugged and said someone needed to stay with him overnight. Eban’s gaze met Darius’s, who stood outside the ambulance.

“Christian’s at home,” Eban muttered.

“Christian’s out with Luke,” Darius said instantly, “and you know very well he won’t be home tonight.”

Eban thanked the paramedic for her time and climbed out of the ambulance. Darius followed him to his car. "Look, my shift's done now. Let me drive you. You can call Christian and see if he's coming home."

Eban hesitated. "I'm not ruining his date."

"I'm not telling you to. Just come on, you look like you're going to puke any minute."

With a sigh, Eban handed his keys to Darius. Once he was in the passenger side and they had set off, he opened his window, sticking his head out and praying he wouldn't shame himself.

"Are you okay?" Darius asked softly in concern. A hand squeezed Eban's knee.

Eban nodded, eyes closed, taking deep breaths of ocean air and willing the nausea away. The side of his head throbbed mercilessly, and he felt a large swelling when he touched it.

WHEN they drew up outside Luke's apartment, Luke released his seat belt but made no move to get out of the car. "Do you want to come in?"

Christian took a moment to reply.

"Not for that. We've agreed it's not a good idea," Luke said quickly. "But because it's still early, and I can't bear to say good night just yet."

Christian smiled. If Luke had said good night and climbed out of the car right then, he would have accepted it, but all the way home he would have been choked with disappointment and longing.

He switched off the engine and climbed out of the car. He followed Luke up the path as Luke unlocked the front door and stepped aside to let Christian enter first. Then the two got in the elevator to the top floor.

Inside the apartment, Luke asked if Christian wanted coffee. As he assented and sat down, he realized he was here sober, when the last time he had been drunk. He was overcome with nervousness. He wanted Luke; how could he not want him? What if he made an idiot of himself by instigating something between them and Luke rebuffed him? After all, hadn't they tentatively agreed to give the sex a rest until they knew each other better?

He got up and moved into the kitchen. Luke was pouring coffee. Christian waited until he had put the pot down before moving up behind him and putting his arms around his waist.

Luke sighed a little and leaned back into him. "What do you think of our second date, Christian?"

Christian leaned down, capturing his earlobe between his teeth, biting very gently. "I think it was another hit and in the morning I'll feel even better because I won't have a hangover." He felt Luke quiver a little under his mouth as he moved it down his neck.

"Mmm, yes...", Luke said, but Christian wasn't sure if he was agreeing with him or becoming aroused at the neck-kissing. Either way, he wasn't going to stop now, because the scent and tender skin of Luke's neck was making him delirious.

He pressed closer, so Luke braced himself on the work surface with his hands, and applied a little more pressure with his lips, using his teeth and tongue, but careful not to leave marks.

Luke turned loose-limbed in his grip, his head lolling back against Christian's shoulder, mouth open and eyes closed. Christian would go with the flow. If it happened, it happened. He would let Luke decide. If Luke stopped him, so be it, if he didn't, then Christian would go along with that too.

He worked both hands under the hem of Luke's T-shirt, sliding over his stomach in gentle circles, moving one up to caress a nipple with soft fingertips. Luke moaned overtly, both hands reaching behind him, gripping Christian's buttocks and forcing him closer, so his erection ground into Luke's ass, and Luke deliberately swayed against it.

Christian growled in pleasure and pressed Luke hard into the work surface, one hand straying down to stroke the bulge in his jeans.

Luke caught his breath. "Please...."

"What?"

"You need to stop or you're going to make me come right here," Luke responded breathlessly.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Yes," Luke replied. "Because I want you inside me."

Christian was pretty sure he had died and gone to heaven. He was also pretty sure that the blood supplying his brain had abandoned it for other, more important areas. He moved back from Luke, gripped his hand, and dragged him out of the kitchen, the coffee abandoned, just like it had been on Friday night.

In the living room, he pushed Luke down on the couch and knelt on the floor, pulling Luke's knees open before starting work on his pants. Luke moaned softly as Christian freed his cock and went down on him.

In ten years he'd never had another man in his mouth this way. Christian had always enjoyed blowing Conrad, though. The feel of the rigid cock in his mouth turned him on. He fondled Luke's balls while he was doing it before his hand strayed into his boxers to stroke his tight entrance.

He wanted to fuck Luke. He wanted to feel Luke come around his cock. He lifted his head and started to strip Luke. Luke helped him with shoes and socks, pants and boxers, before Christian went down on him again, pushing Luke's legs wide apart so he could work a wet finger into him.

Luke moaned and writhed, gripping Christian's hair. "Please... please fuck me, Christian."

Christian thought he would explode with excitement. "Where's your lube?" He was ridiculously hopeful that Luke might have been carrying it in his pocket and there would be no need to move.

"In the bedroom," Luke said.

Christian jumped up and almost raced out of the living room. He entered the dark bedroom, moving to the bedside drawer he had seen Luke reach the condom and lubricant from a few nights before.

There they were, right on top, an opened pack of twelve and an almost full tube of KY. He took them and moved back into the lounge with his blood molten in his veins. In the back of his mind was the image of something else he had seen in the drawer, too, something familiar which nagged at his memory but which he just couldn't place.

Luke was sitting on the couch with knees open, hard cock resting against the T-shirt he still wore. Christian flicked off the lamps so the scene was lit only by the lights from the city. Then he undressed as Luke watched.

"You're beautiful," Luke whispered as he stroked his own cock.

Christian's stomach tightened. How he had loved to watch Conrad jerk off. He remembered the time he had spied on Conrad in the shower, lovingly touching himself and blissfully unaware of Christian's presence.

"Keep touching," he said as he knelt down once again and pressed lubricated fingers into Luke.

Luke went crazy beneath him, jerking off while Christian sucked at his balls. "Oh my God," he moaned. "You need to stop right now."

Christian ignored him, pushing Luke's hand away so he could lick at the fluid oozing from his cock, flicking his tongue against the slit while his fingers continued to open Luke up.

Luke shuddered and squirmed. He ripped the condom open and pushed it at Christian, and Christian rolled it on one-handed.

He got to his feet. He took Luke's hand and pulled him up and around, only to push him back down on the couch, kneeling facing its back, bent over with legs spread, showing Christian just what was on offer, lube glistening between his buttocks. Christian almost moaned with need. He knelt behind Luke and thrust in.

Luke hissed and pushed back so he was impaled all the way. Christian held him, hands sliding up under his T-shirt onto silky skin, playing with Luke's nipples as he started to move into Luke with slow, smooth strokes.

He was so tight and hot that Christian thought he would lose his mind with pleasure. Quickly he stripped Luke of his T-shirt so he could feel every inch of their damp skin pressed together, and then he took Luke's cock in his hand while kissing the back of his neck.

Luke gasped and moaned. When Christian stayed still a moment, Luke fucked himself on Christian's cock, undulating sensually and driving Christian crazy. Oh God. He thought of all the things he wanted to do to Luke. How he wanted to taste and kiss every part of his perfect body.

He thrust hard into his partner with a growl. Luke almost whimpered, gripping hard to the couch with one hand while the other grabbed at Christian's, forcing him to jerk him off faster.

Christian did as he was bidden. He bit at Luke's neck and pinched his nipples with his free hand.

Luke cursed and cried out his name. He bucked against him, turning his head so Christian could bestow a fierce kiss on his lips. He caught sight of his partner's face, jet lashes veiling his jeweled eyes, pale skin flushed. Jesus, he was beautiful.

He fucked Luke harder and faster. The noises Luke made were sheer poetry. Had Conrad been so noisy on those occasions he allowed Christian to take control? Christian wasn't sure. All he knew was the impending orgasm was about to take his head off.

Luke began to tighten steadily around him, squeezing him in waves, and then he gasped out, spurting endlessly over Christian's hand. Christian came, holding hard to Luke, senses scattered and memories, for once, buried.

AS EBAN opened the door, Darius said behind him, "I got your text message earlier. I've tried so hard not to think about you, but I can't forget what you were like in bed."

Eban, hand on the door, bowed his aching head, eyes squeezed shut, already growing hard. He was such a liar and a cheat. Was he going to take advantage of Darius here after he had meant the message to go to Damien?

A hand on the back of his neck massaged softly. "I missed you," Darius murmured in his ear, lips caressing it.

Eban caught his breath in arousal. "Do you want to stay?"

“Yes.” Darius followed Eban into the house and embraced him fiercely in the hallway, kicking the door shut as their lips found each other’s insistently.

They moved up the stairs, shedding clothes, Eban guiding Darius into the bedroom.

Eban knew Darius would want to take control that night to prove a point and he allowed himself to be laid down underneath the other cop.

Darius had a condom and Eban provided the lube. Darius took a moment to stroke Eban’s sore head. “You sure you’re up to this?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll tell me if your head hurts too much?”

“Yes.”

That was Darius’s one concession. He pushed Eban roughly facedown, penetrating him deeply, leaving him gasping and groaning for more as he suddenly withdrew completely, then pushed in again.

He did this three times before Eban begged to be fucked, and Eban could almost see the smile on Darius’s face as he thrust in again and rode Eban into ecstasy.

NEITHER Luke nor Christian moved or spoke for a while, Christian holding Luke with one hand pressed against his chest, feeling the heart thundering below his palm. Finally he drew away and got up to use the bathroom.

He discarded his condom and looked at his flushed face in the mirror as he washed his hands. Christ, he had always imagined no one would be Conrad’s equal in bed, but Luke had effortlessly proved him wrong.

He felt ashamed of his thoughts.

When he got back to the living room, Luke was dressed again in boxers and T-shirt, and there were two glasses of orange juice on the coffee table. Christian sat down and drank thirstily.

He replaced his glass on the table and then leaned into Luke, nuzzling his neck.

Luke put an arm around his back. “Do you want to stay?”

“Yes.”

They lay there together in the darkness, kissing and caressing, both falling gradually asleep. Luke had set the alarm for Christian to be up for work, and they had laughingly agreed to go together to the coffee shop first after stopping at Christian’s for a change of clothes.

“Luke,” Christian murmured.

“Hmm?”

“I like you too much. I think I’m falling for you way too quick. I’m scared something bad’s going to happen to spoil it.”

Luke stiffened a little in his arms, more awake now. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. It’s too good to be true.”

Luke was silent.

“Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No I’m not. Why don’t you go to sleep?”

Luke turned over on his side, away from Christian. He reached behind him, grabbed Christian’s arm and draped it over his hip, pulling his lover closer.

Christian fitted his body into the hollows of Luke’s. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, lips brushing his neck.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. I feel the same. I feel any moment you’re going to sink back into your grief and decide you can’t handle this. Perhaps decide I’m not worth stepping into Conrad’s shoes.”

“No. I promise you, that’s not going to happen.”

“We shouldn’t have done this again. We should have given it more time.”

“Nothing ever felt so right. You know that.”

Silence fell and Christian drifted into uneasy sleep.

Chapter 19

EBAN awoke to a body pressed against his back and lips caressing that sensitive spot behind his ear. He shivered a little, glancing at the alarm clock. Six a.m.

Sleep was the only time he was not tormented by memories, and he begrudged Darius waking him so early. His head ached mercilessly.

“You should go,” he muttered. “I have to get ready for work.” Which was a lie because there was no way he would be allowed to work with his injury, even if he’d felt up to it, which he most definitely didn’t.

For a moment Darius stayed still behind him, morning wood pressing into Eban’s buttocks. Then he moved away and suddenly Eban’s skin felt chilly. He listened to Darius dressing with regret clawing at his throat.

Darius came around to his side of the bed and bent down to him, and Eban had no choice but to meet his gaze. The hurt in the depths of the sapphire eyes was obvious.

Darius’s fingertips moved down his cheek as Eban stared up at him silently. Slowly, the other cop inclined his head and pressed soft lips to Eban’s. Eban, eyes fluttering closed, tried not to respond to this angelic kiss. Tried not to compare it to anything he would get off Damien and find Damien wanting for many years on that score.

His eyes opened slowly as Darius drew back. He straightened up and moved away. A second later, the bedroom door closed.

CHRISTIAN awoke to a sensation of delicious comfort, silk sheets against his skin, buried beneath a thick quilt, soft warmth at his side. He was already smiling before he opened his eyes and found Luke lying next to him.

“Morning,” Luke said.

“Morning.” His arm was around Luke, and he tightened it, flexing his fingers, which were a little numb.

Luke moved closer, so Christian could feel his morning wood. He brushed his nose lightly against Christian’s, murmuring, “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” Christian replied, “your bed’s so comfy. You’re even comfier.”

Luke smiled. Christian slid a hand up his T-shirt, stroking his back softly. His heart seemed to be dancing in his chest and his erection was twitching in anticipation of more glorious sex with Luke. He thought guiltily of Conrad. He couldn't help it.

Luke kissed him. They kissed and kissed, slowly and lazily, until the heat between them built sufficiently that Christian tossed the covers back. He knelt up, looking at Luke below him.

Luke's gloriously green eyes were wide with lust, the pupils huge. His hard cock almost bulged over the top of his pajama bottoms.

"Turn over," Christian said.

Luke did as he was told, on hands and knees, looking back over his shoulder.

Christian pulled his pajama bottoms down. Luke caught his breath with excitement as Christian's hand smoothed over his buttocks.

"Open your legs."

Luke complied, shifting on the bed, dipping his head so his backside was presented shamelessly and Christian could see his cock and balls dangling down between his legs.

He almost moaned as he saw the tight little hole he had been in the night before. He touched it with one finger, rubbing around it, so Luke flinched and shuddered.

Christian bent Luke's cock back and sucked at the head. Luke swore and muttered under his breath, hands gripping the sheets. Then he gasped loudly as Christian spread him apart and licked him.

"Oh God, oh my God, Christian..."

Christian smiled to himself. Conrad had always enjoyed this. He had made Christian come this way more times than he could remember.

Luke squirmed under his wicked tongue. He pressed back, groaning loudly, a hand around his cock, jerking off furiously.

Christian tried to burrow the tip of his tongue inside him. He lapped over Luke's entrance with long strokes, leaving him wet with saliva. He pushed one finger in, then two, fucking Luke with them, thinking about sliding his cock in there before Luke even knew what was happening. *God, that would be hot. If I pushed in there suddenly with no condom and only spit as lube. If I fucked him bareback and left him dripping with me.*

He jerked off, flicking his tongue against Luke again, listening to Luke's moans of ecstasy.

"Oh please, oh, Christian..."

Luke began to buck under his every touch, before his body went rigid and he shook all over, crying out before he fell limply onto the bed. Christian looked at him with amusement.

After a few seconds, Luke turned over. "Sit on my face."

Christian didn't hesitate to obey. He straddled Luke, knees over his shoulders, guiding his cock into Luke's mouth. He was so close to coming that the first touch of Luke's lips around him almost brought him to climax. Luke gripped his buttocks. He pulled Christian forward rhythmically until Christian was rocking into him, fucking Luke's mouth, and Luke was lying still, looking up at him with those lustful eyes.

Oh God, he was hot. He was so hot and Christian was so damned lucky. For a moment he saw deeper green eyes beneath him and Conrad's sensual mouth around him, and cursed himself, before he came and Luke swallowed.

Christian climbed off him and fell onto his back, exhausted.

"I haven't finished with you yet." Luke fondled his still-hard cock, smirking.

Christian's blood boiled again. "Insatiable. What do you want?"

"To fuck you."

"It's a deal."

Luke scrambled over to the bedside drawer for a condom and lube. His cock was defiantly hard again, and Christian couldn't wait to have it inside him. The way he felt, he was going to give work a miss and stay in Luke's bed all day.

He lay back, knees open. As Luke put the condom packet to his mouth, to tear it open with his teeth, the doorbell sounded suddenly.

Their groan was mutual. "Get rid of them," Christian said.

Luke climbed off the bed, pulling on a robe. "You can count on that."

Christian lay on the bed, hand around his cock, listening as Luke went out to the front door.

He heard footsteps and then a familiar voice complaining loudly, "I fucked Eban *again* last night, and he fucking threw me out this morning. That *motherfucker*."

Christian groaned inwardly. He found another robe on the back of the door, slipped into it, and left the bedroom.

Darius was standing in the middle of the lounge wearing jeans and a black hooded top. He was pale and tired-looking, his hair disheveled. When he saw Christian, he looked sheepish.

"Sorry, man," he muttered.

"I'm not disagreeing with you," Christian said.

"After I saved that bastard's life too." Darius stalked toward the window and looked out.

"What?" Christian and Luke said together.

Darius sighed and sank onto the couch. "He was in the middle of some holdup at the liquor store last night. I saved his sorry ass from getting shot."

"Jesus. Is he okay?" Christian couldn't believe his ears.

"He's just fine. He deals with that shit every day, I'm beginning to think nothing fazes him."

Christian said nothing, because plenty fazed Eban. Like Damien. And like the proximity of Christian when he was drunk.

"But I think he pretended to be needier than he was and took advantage of my fucking good nature."

"Don't try to make excuses for the fact that you've been hard for him since you met him," Luke spoke up laconically.

Darius glared at him and flushed.

"I'll make some coffee," Luke said. "Why don't you two bitch about Eban a little bit more."

Darius leaned back. "That fucker. He has no idea what he's doing to me."

"I'm sorry," Christian said softly. "I know how much you like him. And trust me, he likes you too."

"Excuse me if I don't believe you on that one. He's still in love with some guy who doesn't give a fuck about him."

Christian didn't reply. It seemed a fair assessment.

"Do you know what he said to me when he said he never wanted to see me again? He said I was just sex and that he got off on boning another cop."

Christian lowered his gaze. "I'm so sorry," he murmured again, as though he were personally responsible for Eban.

"Christian, I've never let anyone treat me badly in my life and yet I let Eban do it to me whenever he wants. What does that say about me?"

Christian was all out of words and apologies. He wished he could make this right.

WHEN Luke had made coffee, he called the two men into the kitchen and told them to sit down while he made eggs and toast. While they ate, Darius told

them how he had arrived at the liquor store and disarmed some tin-pot villain with ease, only to find Eban unconscious on the floor. He had given him a ride home out of the kindness of his heart and ended up spending the night. He reddened when he mentioned this and then clammed up, saying nothing else.

Luke reached over and touched his hand. "No more, now, Darius. From now on, you leave him alone. Promise me."

Christian, who had been trying to persuade Eban to give Darius a go from day one, said nothing, because he knew Luke was right. He knew Darius had to stop giving Eban the opportunity to use and abuse him.

Darius nodded, biting his lip, not looking at either man. Luke looked at Christian sadly and his hand moved under the table to stroke his knee.

"LISTEN," Christian said when they were sitting in his car getting ready to go to his house, Darius having left a few minutes previously. "You'll meet Eban now if he's up. You're... okay with that after what's happened this morning?"

Luke shrugged. "He's an asshole, but he's your best friend. I have manners."

Christian regarded him dubiously.

Eban was up; sounds came from the kitchen as Christian led Luke in there.

"Hey," he greeted his friend. "What the hell happened to you last night?"

Eban turned around holding a mug of coffee, his gaze moving over Luke.

"Jesus," Christian groaned when he saw the bruise along Eban's temple, for a moment forgetting his introductions. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," Eban said nonchalantly.

Christian glanced at his lover. "This is Luke. Luke, Eban."

Luke came forward, hand held out, his face blank. Eban took it, studying him intently. "The famous Luke," he said with a pearly-white grin.

Luke smiled. "The famous Eban." In his tone was a slight hint of mockery. Eban frowned, releasing his hand, looking at Christian.

Christian put a hand on Luke's waist, a silent admonishment. Eban's glance at Luke turned to a hard stare. "Have you got something to say, Luke?"

"Yes," Luke shot back. "Darius came over this morning."

The two locked eyes fiercely. Christian felt the situation getting out of control.

Eban was the first to look away, a little shame creeping into his defiant expression. He moved to the window, drinking his coffee. "I can't say it's any of your business, Luke. Darius is a big boy, he makes his own choices about who he sleeps with."

"You know, Eban, Christian defends you to me all the time. He swears you're not an asshole, that you're just grieving and you don't mean to hurt anyone. And I always felt sorry for you until I had Darius at my door today telling me you fucking used him *again*."

"Luke," Christian warned.

Luke ignored him. His face was cold as stone, his gaze fixed unblinkingly on Eban. "Now, I'm very fucking sorry you're pining over some guy who doesn't want you," he continued. "But that's not a reason to make someone else miserable."

Christian was completely taken aback. He had never expected Luke to have this in him. He had never thought his tender, soft-spoken lover capable of such words.

"Fuck you," hissed Eban, eyes flashing with anger. "Just because you're screwing Christian doesn't mean I have to justify myself to you."

Both men moved forward at the same time, Christian immediately sliding between them, a hand on each broad chest. "What the fuck are you *doing*?" He turned his head to Luke. "Go and wait outside."

When Luke opened his mouth to protest, Christian snapped, "Now."

Luke turned away with a last look of contempt at Eban, stalking to the front door and slamming it shut behind him.

"Jesus, Christian, where did you find that dick?" Eban protested.

"Shut the fuck up," Christian spat. "Me and him are together so you better get used to that fact and you better quit whatever the fuck you're doing to Darius too. Leave him alone."

Eban lapsed into sullen silence. Christian stormed out of the kitchen and upstairs, pulling a suit from his wardrobe and dressing quickly.

"IS THERE history between you and him?" Luke asked in the soft voice Christian was more used to when he came out of the house.

Christian could not help but redden as he remembered that drunken almost-night. "No. Why would you say that?"

Luke didn't reply. For a furious moment, Christian wanted to shove him away, tell him to leave and come back when he wasn't being an asshole.

He set off walking down the street, with Luke trailing behind. Their perfect evening and perfect morning was ruined. He had seen a side to Luke he didn't like, not at all. And he knew that if he had to take sides, there would be no contest between the man he had just met and his friend of ten years. They walked to the coffee shop in silence, and he went to buy coffee while Luke chose a booth at the back.

"I'm sorry I made you so angry," Luke said as soon as Christian sat down, choosing the seat opposite rather than the seat next to him. "I know that you understand where I'm coming from, though."

"I do," Christian said with a sigh. "But that doesn't mean I liked it."

"I know. I couldn't help myself. I hate it when people make my friends unhappy. I know he's your friend and all, but..." He trailed off.

Christian didn't say anything to this. He merely stirred his coffee, head bowed, the same misery overwhelming him that he only recently thought had been lifted.

"I think we should take a few days," Luke said quietly. "Just to think about what we're doing and what we want."

Christian regarded him in dismay. *I know what I want*, he wanted to cry. He didn't want to be parted from Luke for one single minute. The thought hurt him deep down to his very soul. And yet, he understood why Luke was doing this. He was protecting himself from Christian. Christian was dangerous and damaged and he could unwittingly hurt Luke at any moment.

He nodded, lip held between his teeth, offering no protest because he could not. Not without crying.

"Okay. So why don't you call me when..." Luke didn't finish this thought. Beneath the table, his foot rubbed Christian's ankle gently through his pants.

Christian withdrew his leg. He stood up abruptly, leaving his coffee, and left the shop without looking back. All the way to work, he howled inside.

JACK, mouth open, probably to ask how Christian's date had gone, closed it when he saw his face. Christian threw his jacket on the coat rack violently and sat down.

His cell vibrated against his thigh. He pulled it out quickly, with an irrational joy that it might be Luke, then frowned in disappointment when he didn't recognize the number.

"Hello, Christian?"

"Yes."

"It's Anna."

Christian's heart lurched up into his throat. His hand gripped the phone harder.

"I spoke to the recipient of Conrad's heart. He's amenable to a meeting."

Christian was frozen in place, unable to speak.

"Are you there?"

"Yes. Yes, okay."

"Tomorrow, if you can do it. My office at the hospital at three. Is that okay?"

Christian squeezed his eyes shut. *No. No, I can't do it. I can't meet with the man who's having the blood pumped around his body by my dead love's heart.* "Yes."

"Christian, don't get yourself worked up about this. It'll be okay." Anna's tone was gentle.

"All right. I'll see you tomorrow and thanks."

"No problem."

Christian hung up. He looked over at Jack with fearful eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm meeting with him tomorrow. The guy who has Conrad's heart."

Jack nodded. "Go in and tell Marcus you have to leave early tomorrow."

Christian willed his legs to move and found Jack behind him. "Come on," his friend said gently, guiding him to Marcus's office, knocking and opening the door, allowing Christian to enter before he slipped in, too, and closed the door behind them.

Marcus was lying full-length on his leather sofa, throwing paper airplanes at a whiteboard in the corner.

"Christian needs to go early tomorrow," Jack said without preamble, his tone firm. "He's meeting the guy who got Conrad's heart."

Marcus looked at them both in surprise. "Okay. What time?"

"I have to be at the hospital by three."

"Fine, take the day off," Marcus said.

Christian was taken aback. "Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"Oh... okay, thanks." Christian made his way back to the door.

As Jack followed, Marcus said, "Er... Jack, wait up a moment, there's a couple of things I need to... ah... discuss with you."

Christian rolled his eyes and shut the door. He sat down and dialed Eban's cell.

"Hey," Eban answered, "if you're calling to give me another hard time about Darius, forget it."

"We're meeting the guy at three tomorrow," Christian interrupted.

Eban went deadly quiet. "Okay," he said finally.

"I'll see you tonight."

"Okay." Eban hung up.

Christian put the phone down and got up from his desk. He went to the deserted employees' bathroom and splashed some water on his face with trembling hands. Then he stood staring at himself in the mirror for a long while as droplets clung to his eyelashes. He detected fear in his eyes. The fear that the man who had Conrad's heart would set him free from his grief and allow him to give himself mind, body and soul to Luke. To start all over again with a new man with no guarantees that Luke would bring him the same kind of bliss he had once enjoyed.

EBAN shoved his cell into the glove compartment and turned his face to the window. "Are you okay?" Aaron asked beside him.

Eban nodded tersely.

"Was that Damien?"

Eban shook his head. "It was Christian. He's meeting the man who got Conrad's heart tomorrow, and I somehow agreed to go with him."

Aaron took his eyes off the road to look at him sympathetically. "That sounds like something you both need."

"That doesn't mean I want to do it. I don't want to see some fucking random guy being kept alive at the expense of the guy I knew thirty-one years." He was immediately ashamed at these words and surprised at how they fell off his tongue when he didn't even know they were in his head.

“Eban,” Aaron said softly. “Conrad died. You couldn’t prevent that. He’s given someone else life. Would you rather that heart went into the ground with him and this man died?”

Eban didn’t reply. He was visualizing that awful scene in the resuscitation room again. Leaning over Conrad and pressing his lips to his. He had analyzed that kiss a million times. Had Conrad’s mouth moved in response to the kiss? Or had it moved because he wanted to push Eban away but was unable to move any part of his body except his mouth? When he said Eban’s name, the last word he spoke before he died, what did he wish to impart to his friend?

His eyes must have glazed over as he remembered two years ago, Conrad yelling at him about Damien’s visit to his office, pressing him to the wall in the hallway.

“Don’t ever tell Christian. Swear to me, Eban.”

And his own reply, *“Oh God, Conrad you don’t even have to ask me that. I wouldn’t, you know I wouldn’t.”*

He squeezed his eyes shut, fist clenched as the rest of that night tried to come back to him and he fought the memory back like he always did, because he wouldn’t remember it. To remember it would drive him completely out of his mind.

Chapter 20

CHRISTIAN glanced over at Eban as the elevator ascended. The two had barely exchanged a dozen words the previous evening when they met up at home, both retreating to their rooms and staying there all night.

It had been the same that morning, Eban going to work early and returning to get changed and pick Christian up for the meeting. In the car, Eban had finally turned his gaze from the road, fixing it on Christian to say, "I'm sorry about yesterday. What I said to Luke."

Christian didn't respond for a moment. When he did, it was only to nod, too preoccupied to even give this apology any attention. He went back to looking out of the window, hands twisted together nervously in his lap.

AS HE watched the numbers above the door light up, Eban was pretty sure he was going to vomit. The anxiety on Christian's pale face raged just as strongly inside him, turning his guts to fire, making the very saliva in his mouth taste like acid. He was terrified. He couldn't bear to stand face to face with someone who held such an intrinsic part of Conrad inside them. He would go to pieces in front of Christian; he was firmly convinced of it. He would start to weep like a baby and then what would Christian think of that? *Like Christian will notice*, a sly, sarcastic voice responded. *Like Christian ever notices how far down you sink*.

The elevator stopped, the door sliding open, and Eban stepped out first, Christian trailing behind, leading the way to the office both of them knew and never thought they would have the misfortune to step into again. Before Eban opened the door, he turned back to look at Christian.

"Are you okay?" His white-faced friend had an expression of terror on his countenance like he was going to a firing squad.

Christian nodded.

"I'm here for you." *If only you were here for me.*

Christian didn't speak; he only motioned for Eban to go through the door. In the outer office, Anna was talking to her secretary. She looked up as the two men entered and smiled.

"Christian." She held her hand out. "How are you doing?"

Christian nodded, taking her hand.

"Eban," said Anna, turning to him.

Eban murmured something appropriate, glancing anxiously at Christian.

"Okay," Anna said, "he's just arrived. He's in there now. If you want to go in, I'll wait out here. Can I bring you some coffee?"

Christian shook his head, with his eyes fixed on the door. He trembled all over, looking like he would bolt back out into the corridor at any moment. He turned to Eban. "Come with me?"

"Of course." Eban placed his hand on Christian's back, slowly moving him to the door, turning the handle, pushing the door open and guiding Christian inside before stepping in himself.

A man stood by the window dressed in black, a man of medium height and medium build with short, ink-black hair. Eban and Christian froze by the door as he turned around.

"No." Christian let out a low moan as his gaze locked with the disbelieving one of Luke.

"Jesus, fucking..." Eban uttered helpfully. He thought he would start to laugh hysterically, because this had to be some kind of bad joke. How dense was Christian?

"What are you...?" Luke began in utter confusion, as though Christian must have coincidentally stumbled into the wrong office.

"Say it isn't so," Christian said pointlessly. "Tell me it's not you."

Luke looked from him to Eban in bewilderment, as though he really wasn't accepting what he saw.

Suddenly Christian found his voice. "You *lied* to me!" he screamed, red-faced.

"I didn't," Luke cried back. "I didn't know. How was I to know?"

Christian advanced on him so Luke shrank back against the window. "You never told me. You told me you had taken leave from work. You didn't tell me it was because you'd had a fucking *heart* transplant!"

"You never asked. And you never told me Conrad's heart had gone to someone," Luke shouted. "If you had, I would have fucking *known*, I would have told you I had it. I didn't deceive you, Christian."

"You fucking did," snarled Christian, gripping a hold of the collar of his shirt and shaking him. "What else have you been lying about? You weren't in the ICU with asthma, were you?"

"It *was* asthma, but it was pneumonia on top of that. It's one infection after another since I have to take the drugs to stop me rejecting Conrad's heart."

Christian gave an almost howl of pain. Suddenly his hands made a grab for Luke's shirt. Luke, startled, didn't try to stop him as Christian's fingers fumbled the buttons open. He only put his arms by his sides, hands raised as though in surrender, as Christian drew the shirt open to reveal the scar.

Vivid and pink, it bisected the length of Luke's sternum, a clean straight incision like a blade would have made.

Eban put his hand over his mouth for fear he would cry. Conrad's heart, pumping the blood around the body of the man standing in front of him. Christian's man.

"You never took your shirt off in front of me," Christian said, with tears bright in his eyes. "You kept this hidden deliberately from me. Oh God, I saw the writing pad in your bedside drawer and still I didn't realize."

Luke shook his head, but said nothing. Tears started to track down his cheeks.

Christian placed his right hand over the left side of Luke's chest. His fingers closed like claws, the muscle of the pectoral quivering under his grip. He stared down at the flesh for the longest time, like he longed to plunge his fingers straight through the barrier of skin, fat, and bone and pull the secondhand organ free.

His fingers continued to compulsively move, clutching, then relaxing, the nails scratching a little, until finally, suddenly, his face fell directly against the area and he gripped Luke hard around the waist with one hand while the other stroked and caressed the skin, his lips moving with his fingers, covering every inch from the outer edge of the scar, along to Luke's armpit with kisses. As he did, he moaned Conrad's name.

A whimper came from Luke's throat. He lifted his hand and threaded his fingers lightly through Christian's hair. Over his shoulder, his despairing gaze met Eban's.

Christian straightened up. He thrust a hand out, making solid contact with the left side of Luke's chest, hard enough to hurt, causing him to stumble back against the window. His face was ice-cold and emotionless. "You're welcome to it," he spat.

Then he turned, shouldered past a startled Eban, and stalked from the office.

Eban stood staring at an almost sobbing Luke, lost for words. This was like some terrible nightmare. Some terrible *joke*.

HE FOUND Christian pacing back and forth by his car down in the parking lot. "Christian."

"Open the fucking car, I need to go home. Hurry up before he comes out."

"Listen to me." Eban put a hand on his arm.

Christian shrugged roughly free. "Open the door or I'll fucking walk."

Eban sighed and unlocked the car, going around to the driver's side. Christian got in quickly, fastening his seatbelt. As Eban started the engine, Luke came out of the exit, looking frantically around the parking lot.

"Drive," hissed Christian.

Eban did as he was told, driving right by Luke, who looked despairingly through the window at Christian as he disappeared. Eban glanced over at Christian as he pulled out onto the main road.

"Nearest bar, now," Christian snapped.

Eban groaned. "This is not the fucking answer every time you have a problem, Christian."

Christian's head turned to his. "Oh? Worried you won't be able to keep your hands off me when I get you drunk again, Eban?"

Eban flushed and bit his lip. He kept his mouth shut as he navigated his way to the nearest bar, anxiety and misery tugging at his stomach.

Jesus, had that really just happened? Out of all the men in the world, the one who has Conrad's heart is the one who he's screwing. Poor Luke. He had been as shocked as Christian and hadn't deserved that spiteful reaction. Christian could be so thoughtless and cruel sometimes, although Eban was the same himself when riled. But there had been no excuse for the dig Christian had made about Eban not being able to keep his hands off him.

Eban set his jaw firmly, eyes staring straight ahead. He was not sure he could deal with any more of Christian's dramas. He didn't want this inevitable drunkenness to happen again. He didn't want to be the one lying on his bed again trying to jerk off while he thought of his best friend's broken body lying at the side of the road and the taste of blood in his mouth instead.

IN THE bar, it was the same old story as the day Damien got shot, only with Christian doing all the instigating and Eban tiredly abetting him. He matched him drink for drink, sitting silently as Christian stared down into the contents of his glass, an expression of such misery on his face that Eban ached for him.

And yet... he wasn't entirely sympathetic toward Christian's pain. Not when he had witnessed how he had treated Luke at the hospital. Some of his

pain had been of his own making. Christian didn't have to push Luke away; he didn't have to say all the things he did. The two could have been together now, offering each other mutual comfort as they tried to make sense of this cruel twist of fate.

"Christian," he spoke up.

"Whatever you're going to say," Christian snapped instantly, "zip it."

"Fuck you. You're such a fucking asshole."

Christian's head snapped up, dark eyes flashing. "*I'm an asshole? Me?*"

"Shut up," Eban snarled. "We're talking about you and the way you just treated the guy who's clearly in love with you for some bizarre reason."

Christian suddenly went very pale. His head fell onto the table. "Get me another drink, please."

SOME time later when they stumbled from the bar, Eban, being the most sober, hailed a cab and they both got in the back.

Christian leaned over the front seat to the driver and slurred an address which wasn't his own as the taxi set off.

"What?" Eban demanded, before immediately twiggling. "Oh no. You're out of your fucking mind. Do you really think I'm going to let you go to Luke's in this state?"

"I don't give a fuck what you want," Christian retorted. "I need to see him."

Eban studied his profile a moment in the dark. Maybe he wanted to make it up with Luke. Maybe it wouldn't go the way Eban suspected it would. He sat back in his seat and said nothing until the cab drew up, but when Christian leapt out and stalked with purpose up to the front door of the apartment building, an ominous feeling washed over Eban.

Christian jabbed the buzzer to apartment seven over and over again. Eban hurried up behind him and caught his hand, pulling it away, snapping at him to stop.

"Who is it?" came a wary voice through the intercom, as though Luke knew only too well.

"Open the door, I want to talk to you," Christian demanded harshly.

Eban, wishing he was anywhere but here, looked sadly at his friend in the ensuing silence. How had Christian behaved with Luke on the two dates they had been on and the two nights they had spent together? Eban could bet he had been tender and loving and gentle. All that was swept aside in the wake of him finding out this devastating news.

Just as Christian went to stab the intercom again, the outside door buzzed open and he virtually flung himself through it, almost letting it slam shut in Eban's face before he grabbed it and followed him.

Inside, the elevator stood empty, and Eban followed Christian in. "Listen to me. Don't do this. Don't lay the blame on him again when he's done nothing wrong."

"Shut up," Christian replied coldly. "I don't even want you here."

Eban, stung, fell silent, seething until the doors opened and Christian marched out. The door to the left of the elevator already stood open as Christian got there first, followed a moment later by Eban.

Luke stood in the doorway with his fingers curled around the frame as though for support. He was red-eyed and deathly white, his black hair falling untidily across his face, dressed in T-shirt and pajama pants. He visibly flinched as Christian stalked right up to him and shoved him backward hard.

Eban responded by gripping Christian's arm and holding him back as he tried to enter Luke's apartment. He was damned if he was going to stand there and watch Christian bully and intimidate the man in his own house.

"I want you to know that you may have Conrad's heart, but you will never, *ever* replace him," yelled Christian, twisting angrily in Eban's grip. "You will never be Conrad."

It hurt Eban just to see the look on Luke's face. Luke spoke up in a low voice. "If I could make it so I never got Conrad's heart, then I would. But then I'd be dead and you would have never met me."

"What are you trying to say?" Christian demanded. "That this is some sort of karma? That Conrad died so you could live? Because to be honest, Luke, if I was given the choice of seeing you dead and having Conrad back, then there would be *no* competition. I hope you know that."

Eban could not believe his ears. He had never suspected his friend had such cruelty and malice in him. "That's enough," he snapped and dragged Christian back.

"I *do* know it," Luke said, with green eyes liquid with anguish.

The two men stood looking at each other for the longest moment before Christian angrily shrugged himself free from Eban and disappeared into the stairwell.

Eban was left looking at Luke. "I'm sorry," he tried to apologize. "He's drunk, he doesn't mean it."

Luke didn't reply. He had his head bowed, sucking hard at his lip. Eban was filled with regret at the angry words he had exchanged with him at their first meeting and the way he had allowed his friend to come here and spit his venom.

Luke stepped back and started to close the door. Eban didn't know what else to say to him. He turned away.

AS HE came out of the elevator, Christian was stalking off down the street. Eban ran out of the door after him, yelling, "You fucking asshole. I can't believe you said that shit to him."

"Fuck you," hissed Christian without slowing his pace. "I don't have to justify myself to you."

"Yes, you fucking do." Eban caught his arm, dragging him to a stop. "I don't know how many ways I have to say this to you. It's not his fault. Why are you blaming him?"

Christian yanked his arm viciously free. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled a piece of paper out. "Look at this. *He* wrote this. I've had this six fucking months and he wrote it. I've slept with him twice and I never knew that the heart I could feel beating against me when he came was Conrad's." He tore the letter violently into pieces and tossed it onto the ground.

He set off again, veering off the sidewalk and through the gates of a park.

"Where the fuck are you going? Let's call a cab."

"I want to walk. Go away."

Eban had no intention of leaving him. In his drunken state, weaving haphazardly down the dark path into the heart of the park, he would be lucky to find his way home. He ran to keep up with Christian's determined walk.

"Wait." He caught Christian's arm again, using the weight of his body this time to propel him off the path and into the trees, blocking his exit when Christian tried to dodge around him to escape.

Christian stumbled backward, then turned around and launched his fist into the nearest tree with a yell.

"Stop, before you hurt yourself." Eban moved up behind Christian, gripped his right wrist and twisted his arm behind his back in the move he was so practiced in.

"Get your fucking hands off me!" Christian struggled furiously, trying to turn around and lash out with his left fist.

Eban merely responded by slamming him against the tree. There was no one he couldn't subdue. "Now listen to me. You fucking stop this right now, do you hear me?"

"Let me go, asshole."

“You going to calm down?”

Christian’s struggles ceased. The only sound in the park’s silence was his ragged breathing. Then suddenly he laughed drunkenly. “Fuck, man,” he said as he shook his pelvis deliberately from side to side, rubbing his backside against Eban. “Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?”

Mortified, Eban let go of him instantly and stepped back. Christian turned around to look at him.

The two stared at each other across a distance of a few feet that crackled with tension before Christian moved first, Eban meeting him halfway, arms around his back, Christian’s arms around his neck, two needy mouths crushing together bruisingly in a hot, angry kiss.

Eban pushed Christian back against the tree, hand groping him roughly, finding him as ready as the last time he had tussled with him. Christian moaned shamelessly as Eban rubbed him through the denim, grinding himself against his hand, his own hands fumbling Eban’s belt open quickly, exciting Eban so much that he was convinced it would all be over as soon as Christian touched him.

Christian’s mouth was way too good on his, his tongue insistent and efficient, blinding Eban with lust, consuming him with thoughts of where that tongue had been, of how many times it had curled around Conrad’s and moved over his body, tasting the very essence of Eban’s best friend.

Christian’s hand pulled Eban’s cock free, and he dropped to his knees and took Eban into his mouth, his lips clumsy with drink. Eban groaned, watching him a moment, and then took him by the hair, dragging him up. “Get up. I don’t want you like that.”

He was rough in his desire, stripping Christian’s clothes down without finesse, turning him around to face the tree, gripping his wrists and wrapping Christian’s arms around its trunk, pinning them there as he moved himself sinuously against his buttocks. Christian cursed and moaned and pushed himself backward against Eban until he thought he would lose the plot and spurt all over him right then and there.

He spat in his hand and rubbed it along his length. He didn’t care about a condom. He didn’t care about preparing Christian. He only knew he was getting what he had fantasized about for some time. *Conrad’s man*. Finally.

He was taking advantage of someone once again in the worst possible way. He was going to burn in hell, he was sure of it. He thrust into Christian without preamble, and his friend hissed in shock and pain.

Eban could bet Luke didn’t fuck this way. His dick would be sore in the morning; dry sex wasn’t the best. As usual, though, his cock was in control, despite the risk to it. His hands gripped Christian’s wrists with bruising

pressure as he fucked him steadily and roughly, and Christian grunted with every thrust. Eban had once imagined he would make love to Christian tenderly if he ever got the chance. Now he figured Christian didn't deserve such consideration, not after how he had treated Luke. *I'm supremely hypocritical. It's a good thing Christian isn't the one fucking me. I wouldn't walk for a month.*

As usual his thoughts drifted to other men. *I'm never completely happy with the person I'm fucking. I'm always thinking of someone else. Always. Apart from the time Conrad fucked me. And then I was thinking of how I had died and gone to heaven borne on the wings of the most beautiful angel God ever created.*

He stifled a drunken sob and buried his face in the back of Christian's neck. Christian slid his wrists free from Eban's grip and entwined his hands tightly with his. Eban moaned and pressed closer, covering his friend's neck with kisses, trying not to think that maybe Conrad would never forgive him for this.

The jeans resting against the back of Eban's knees began to vibrate insistently. Christian groaned and Eban cursed and continued to fuck him, going harder, trying to block the sound out which threatened to put him off his drunken stroke, but the vibration continued insistently.

"Fuck it," he growled, reaching down and fumbling the phone from his pants.

"Don't stop," Christian moaned fearfully, pressing himself back against Eban deliberately, reaching back to grip Eban's buttocks, forcing him deeper into him.

Eban hissed in pleasure, grabbing Christian's wrists and pinning him back to the tree, the cell falling from his hand as he did so. He thrust hard into Christian so his partner shouted his name, cursing, begging him in no uncertain times for more, to make him come, to never stop, to fuck him, to *please* fuck him.

Eban, amused at how vocal he was, trying not to imagine Christian being so vocal beneath Conrad, gripped Christian's hands hard against the rough bark of the tree and bit his neck savagely as he came.

Beneath them, lying forgotten in a forest of leaves, the cell lay open, the screen illuminated, the caller ID displayed, until Christian reached a noisy climax with no touch at all to his cock and the screen dimmed, the connection cut.

Eban fell limply against Christian, groaning softly in pleasure, his body still shuddering. The only sound in the deserted park was the hoot of owls and the sound of the two men's breathing. Already that awful lucidity invaded

Eban's mind, as it did every time he fucked an inappropriate person. He pushed it away. He was too drunk to try and reason with the voice of reason. As far as he was concerned, he hadn't finished with Christian yet.

He pulled away and started to fasten himself up. As he did, he caught sight of his cell lying on the ground, a little confused for a moment. He scooped it up and pocketed it with disinterest.

Christian pulled his pants up halfheartedly before he slithered down the tree trunk to his knees and started to cry, with head bowed. Eban moved forward in dismay, clasped Christian's head and crushed it to his chest.

Always you who ends up like this, isn't it? Always you being comforted by me and not the other way around when I long to collapse to the ground myself and be held by you until the misery of my life recedes.

Suddenly a stark thought hit him as he knelt there cradling Christian against him.

I want to die.

In his darkest moments after Conrad's death, without Damien, Eban had idly contemplated how he would kill himself. Most likely he would blow his head off. He knew enough to know where to point the gun to ensure instant death, but what if something went wrong? What if he misjudged the recoil at such close range and the bullet didn't go straight into his brain but blew half his face off? Then Christian found him and took him to Damien's fucking ER, for Christ's sake. Hanging? But he couldn't think of a good place to string a noose. Hanging himself in Christian's house would be disrespectful and would put prospective buyers off when there was a maudlin ghost dragging himself around the place. Overdose was pointless without thorough research, and the time to pump Damien slyly for information was gone.

But he had never thought seriously about killing himself, until now. He stroked Christian's dark, unruly hair. He bent his head and pressed his lips to it. Christian's sobs were starting to slow to exhausted hitches of breath and his arms clutched Eban around the waist.

"I want him," he moaned softly in anguish, "I want him so much it hurts."

Eban wasn't sure if he meant Luke or Conrad. He put his hands under Christian's arms and lifted him to his feet. "Let's go home."

They walked through the park with arms around each other, Christian's head on Eban's shoulder. When they made it back to the house, Christian climbed the stairs slowly without a word, while Eban lingered in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water. When he finally went upstairs, Christian's bedroom door was open, a shape buried beneath the quilt. Eban hesitated at the

threshold, then went in, stripping off his clothes and sliding into the bed. He wondered if he lay on Conrad's side of the bed.

Christian wasn't asleep; he reached for Eban immediately, lips seeking his in the darkness, just as intoxicating as they had been in the exciting environment of the park. Eban gathered him close, the kiss gentle, but no less passionate than it had previously been, despite the sating of their lust.

They kissed for many minutes, hands touching skin, bodies pressing together. Christian was the first to break away. "I want to fuck you, Eban. Please."

A shiver of surprise went through Eban at the fact that Christian still wasn't sober enough to be decrying this as a horrible mistake, followed by a shudder of unquestionable desire. He rolled onto his back and lay there in submission. "You'd better do it, then, hadn't you?"

Christian, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the darkness, reached over to the bedside drawer and scrabbled around in it. An unbearable guilt washed over Eban. While he had taken Christian thoughtlessly and ruthlessly against the tree, Christian was now looking for condom and lubricant to use on him. His eyes filled with tears. He wished himself dead again.

As Christian slid slickly into him, causing Eban to gasp with excitement, he thought of other times and other places.

As always it came back to that first time, like everything always did. Like everything always would, for the rest of his life.

Chapter 21

EBAN awoke to a feeling of overpowering heat in his bed, the signal that it was currently being occupied by two people. For a moment, as he stretched without opening his eyes and felt an arm over his waist and legs against his, he weighed the options. Darius or Damien, both of them fraught with guilt. And then he realized he wasn't even in his own bed.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. Christian lay naked and asleep beside him, face down, head turned to Eban, their noses inches apart.

Eban lay utterly still, staring, afraid to move in case Christian awoke, looking into his friend's pale face, which even in sleep looked troubled.

It was wrong, so wrong. But he had not been so drunk that he didn't remember how good it had been, as he'd always known it would. He had wanted Christian for so long and finally had him but the fact didn't fill him with elation. Christian was a man still in grief and falling slowly for another man; he wasn't even Eban's to take, had not been for several weeks, not since he had met Luke. And yet Eban had ruthlessly swept Luke aside and taken what he wanted.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling, his brain a tangled web of emotions, his head thumping with dehydration. *Could I make a move to be with Christian? Is that what I want? Do I want him more than I want Damien at the moment?* The idea was absurd. Christian belonged to Luke already; Eban would be wasting his time there. And oh God, Christian had been Conrad's man. If Eban had him, he would be able to touch and kiss the other half of Conrad whenever he wanted. He would be able to *pretend*....

He stopped his thoughts in horror.

Christian stirred beside him. Eban turned his head in dread. Christian looked as horrified as he did.

"Morning," Eban attempted glibly. "Want some coffee?"

Christian shifted back from him abruptly, letting go of him, moving as far onto the other side of the bed as he could. Eban got up swiftly, walked naked to the en suite bathroom and closed the door firmly behind him. Then he switched the shower on and got in, attempting to wash away his sins.

CHRISTIAN was gone from his bed when he got out. Eban stripped the sheets off and threw them in the laundry basket, leaving clean ones there on the bare mattress, not having the energy to make it. As he pulled on a T-shirt and

shorts, he caught sight of his cell lying on the floor amidst a tangle of clothes. A memory assailed him suddenly. He picked it up and thumbed a couple of buttons until he came up with the identity of the last caller.

He groaned out loud. Then he told himself not to jump to conclusions. He hadn't answered the phone. Sure, he had found it open on the ground, but that didn't mean he hadn't cut the caller off first. There was no reason to think the sordid little session against the tree last night had been heard.

He made his way downstairs and found Christian standing by the open kitchen window, wearing T-shirt and boxers, his body all tense lines. Eban poured himself a cup of coffee. When he turned back, Christian was staring at him. His blazing eyes told Eban something was amiss. Something more than what had happened last night.

"What?" Eban asked.

"Damien came round while you were in the shower."

Eban stared. As he read Christian's almost-black eyes, his heart sank into his stomach.

"He told me you fucked Conrad."

Eban closed his eyes with a silent moan of horror as his worst fear came true.

"It's true, then. Your guilty face tells me it's true."

Eban nodded wordlessly.

"How many times?" Christian's voice trembled on the edge of hysteria and his eyes glistened uncontrollably, full to the brim with tears.

"Once."

"When?"

"Oh Christ, Christian, I was only sixteen. I swear to you that was it."

"I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"Well, didn't you ask Damien? Because he would have told you the same."

"The way I see it, you're both liars," Christian spat. "Who knows what the fucking truth is." He stalked out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Eban followed him.

"Looking for evidence of your affair," Christian tossed back over his shoulder.

"What?"

Christian veered off the hallway and into the little office used mainly by Conrad, virtually untouched since his death.

"There'll be something in here," Christian said. "Obsessive organizer that he was. Maybe receipts for the dinners he bought you or the hotel rooms you stayed in." He grabbed the nearest file box from the neatly arranged row on the shelf and opened it, tossing its contents onto the floor, a cascade of paper.

Eban grabbed his arm and shook him. "What the fuck? You've fucking lost it. We didn't have an affair! I slept with him once. I was sixteen years old."

Christian merely grabbed hold of another file and emptied that on the floor too. Discontent with that, in one movement he swept every file off the shelf with a clatter and crash and suddenly both men were ankle-deep in paper.

Christian fell to his knees and started to rummage through the paper while Eban stared down at him in horror. "Stop," he said in a trembling voice, which Christian only ignored. There were letters, neat in their envelopes, addressed to "my beloved Conrad," photos of Conrad and Christian kissing, a couple of half-naked shots at the beach.

Christian pulled the file box to him which everything on the top of the pile had fallen from. Along its spine, it read simply, *Christian box*.

He looked up at Eban with eyes streaming. "I never knew he kept all this stuff. Look at this. The receipt from the dinner for my twenty-first birthday. The bottle of ninety-dollar champagne...." He started to laugh almost hysterically.

"We didn't do anything," Eban said quietly. "He was yours, Christian, and yours alone."

But Christian didn't seem to hear him. He was sitting on the floor and looking through his memories.

Eban slunk away like a guilty dog. He was on a late shift and wasn't due at work for another five hours, but he got dressed, packed a bag, and left the house, not sure if Christian would ever allow him back. He had a little detour to make, anyway, before he went to work, although he was sure it wouldn't take him too long.

SITTING on the office floor surrounded by memories, Christian heard his cell ringing upstairs. He could bet it was Luke; he didn't seem like the type of guy to give up so easily, despite the cruel words Christian had spoken to him last night.

Just when he thought he couldn't slide any further to the bottom, something else came up. In the space of a day, he had found out Luke had Conrad's heart, he had fucked Conrad's best friend, and found out Eban had fucked Conrad. It would be funny if it wasn't so goddamn tragic. If it wasn't the ruins of Christian's goddamn *life*.

He glanced at the phone on the desk. There was one very obvious person he could call about this, but he had never made use of the fount of empathy which was his mother because he was too embarrassed to show the extent of his grief to her. He never bothered to answer the house phone and she left constant messages asking him to call her. The only time he spoke to her was when Eban answered and forced him to.

Unlike Conrad's parents, his mother, who only had one child, had seemed to take Conrad as, not so much the instrument of never having grandchildren, but more the addition of a son, and she loved him as one. The first time he had taken Conrad to stay in Florida, he had expected to have separate rooms, but no, the guest room with double bed was made up, a box of chocolates sitting in its center. Christian's father accepted Christian's sexuality, and Conrad, a little more slowly, greeting Conrad gruffly, giving him a firm handshake as though expecting Christian's partner to be a delicate little flower in pink, grudgingly smiling when he found Conrad was all man. A few years down the line and Christian's father was slapping Conrad on the back when he met him, thrusting a beer in his hand and leading him as soon as he could to the chessboard. He had not been dry-eyed at the funeral.

Christian's mother was devastated by Conrad's death. She had spent most of the funeral crying on Eban's shoulder, who she was also a big fan of. Eban had a certain way with women and was able to reduce Christian's mother to blushing putty with a smile and an easy word. *If I call her now, I can't tell her about Conrad and Eban. It would sully both of them in her eyes and it would be unfair to them, no matter what they did. But Eban said it was just once. Maybe my mother wouldn't see that as some grand act of betrayal the way I do.*

He got up, took the phone and dialed. "Hey," he said when the phone was picked up.

Christian's mother gave a sigh of relief. "Oh, Christian, it's so good to hear your voice. How are you?"

Christian closed his eyes and bit his lip hard. His throat was choked with tears.

"What's wrong?"

"Something really bad's happened." Christian's voice trembled.

"Oh, what, my darling, tell me."

"I met someone...."

"Sweetheart, that's not a bad thing."

"No, listen. I went out with him twice and then I arranged to meet the guy who got Conrad's heart and it was him. It was *him*."

"Oh, Christian."

Christian started to weep. He hated crying in front of his mother. But now he'd started he couldn't seem to stop.

"Listen to me. Did he know? That he had Conrad's heart?"

"No," Christian said. "But I blamed him anyway. I said some really cruel things to him. I hurt him so much."

"You can make it up to him; he'll understand."

"I can't. I can't see him again. It hurts too much." Christian broke into sobs, with his mother trying her best to comfort him.

Finally when his tears eased a little, she said, "I want you to come down here and stay with us a while. We can talk about this. You can think about what you want."

Christian agreed with alacrity. His mother told him she would book him a ticket for the next day and call him back. After many more words of love, she hung up.

Christian wiped his face and replaced the phone. His cell was ringing again upstairs. He left the mess on the office floor and went up to his bedroom. The phone stopped as he reached it. He scrolled through the missed calls. Eight of them. All from Luke.

EBAN drove to Damien's with a red mist over him. He wondered if he would be able to control himself once he got there. Why had Damien been vindictive enough to choose to drop the bombshell that day of all days? Eban was going to make him sorry he had ever been born.

He hit Damien as soon as he opened the door, sending him sprawling onto the floor of his hallway. As Damien tried to get up, Eban kicked the door shut and got down on his knees, dragging Damien to him, yelling into his face.

"Why would you do that to him, you mean son of a fucking bitch? You can do what you want to hurt me, but why must you get to me through him?"

"Because I heard you last night," Damien cried. "I heard that bastard begging you for more while you fucked him." His lip was split, oozing blood down his chin.

Eban let go of him abruptly and stood up. "You're not even worth my time," he said contemptuously as Damien slowly got to his feet. "Know what

I realized today when you kicked Christian even further down? I realized I don't love you anymore. And you know what? I'm not sure I ever did."

He turned around and put a hand on the door handle, trying to ignore the anguish he had just seen in Damien's eyes at his words.

"Like I didn't know that all along," Damien spat behind him. "Like I didn't know you were in love with *him*. I bet the two of you had such a good laugh at me."

Eban stopped in his tracks. He turned around slowly.

"Say it, before you go, let me just fucking hear you say it."

"I don't know what you mean," Eban said.

"Say it," Damien yelled. "Say you were in love with Conrad!"

"No, because it's not true."

Damien lunged forward and shoved Eban into the door, gripping his wrists, pinning him there, kissing him hard and subduing him effectively. Damien's kisses had always subdued him. Their tongues battled, both tasting the desperation in each other's mouths.

Damien drew back and stared into Eban's eyes. "Say it. I know. *Everyone* knew, Conrad fucking knew, and deep down I bet *Christian* knew too. Now fucking *say* it."

Eban shook his head.

Damien kissed him again. It had Eban moaning and licking the blood from his lips, his hands moving under Damien's shirt, seeking the soft skin. Damien unfastened Eban's belt in record time, making short work of the button and zip, drawing Eban free from his boxers.

Eban's head fell back against the door as Damien started to jerk him off roughly with his face pressed against his neck.

"Say it," he said, teeth nipping at Eban's skin.

"No," Eban groaned, trying weakly to push Damien away and having negligible effect. Already he could feel his orgasm rising beneath Damien's talented fingers.

He gasped and cried out as Damien brought him rapidly there with every stroke. As he clung to Damien and felt the orgasm almost upon him, Damien's hand abruptly tightened, clamping hard around the base of his shaft.

Eban's mouth opened in a silent *O* of protest, and he found Damien's cold gray eyes fixed on his.

"Say it. Say you were in love with him and I'll let you come."

Eban shook his head with a moan of frustration.

Damien loosened his fingers and gave Eban another jerk; the orgasm rose again and for a moment Eban thought he was going to come. Again, Damien's fingers tightened, and he let out a howl of frustration.

"Say it."

Eban stared at him with tears silently filling his eyes. He shook his head again.

"I swear to God, Eban, I will give you the worst case of blue balls," Damien hissed, his grip growing ever tighter.

Eban remained still in his grip, eyes swimming, tears slowly leaking down his face. Damien let go of him and stroked him a couple of times. Before Eban could even moan again, Damien gripped him once more, preventing the orgasm.

Eban's eyes fell closed. He bit his lip hard as he silently cried, head turned away. Damien bit him on the neck and tongued the bruise almost gently. "Say it," he whispered. "I have to know."

Eban let out a sob and finally, after fifteen long years, he broke.

"It's true, it's true. I was in love with him."

The rest of that day flooded every cell of his brain now, the memory searing him in its intensity, every single image of it still as potent as it was two years ago. When Conrad had come around to his house yelling that Damien had been to his office threatening to tell Christian. When he had pressed him to the wall and begged him not to tell Christian. The scene had not ended there. It was just that Eban had blocked it out of his mind for the good of his sanity. He had refused to ever revisit that day again.

As he had stood there in the silence following Conrad's exit from the house, trembling, his fingers touching his lips, the taste of Conrad's thumb still upon them, his gaze had focused on his driveway through the window. Conrad's car had yet to move from it.

Eban moved on almost numb legs to the door and saw the shape of Conrad through the frosted glass, back turned and head bowed. With heart in his mouth in dread of what was to come, Eban opened the door.

Conrad turned around, his eyes alight with passion. Eban lurched back as his friend abruptly stepped back into the house, moving toward him with intent. He collided with the wall, staring up at Conrad wide-eyed as he advanced on him, stopping short of actually pressing his body to his, only their clothing touching, one hand on the wall above Eban's head, effectively pinning him in place.

Eban couldn't breathe, his nostrils full with Conrad's scent, his eyes fixed on the green eyes and the dilated pupils of his best friend. He was rock

hard, his entire body pulsing and tingling and screaming to be touched. He remained motionless, glued to the wall.

Conrad held his gaze unwaveringly. There was absolute silence, broken only by stilted, heavy breathing from both sides as they stared into each other's eyes.

"I can't touch you," Conrad said suddenly. "I can't be unfaithful to him."

Eban didn't speak, but inside he howled with need, with regret, with anguish. Conrad bent his head, coming closer, lips seeking his, until they were only an inch apart and Eban could feel his breath on his mouth, could almost taste Conrad.

Conrad's gaze was downcast, fixed on Eban's mouth, and his thick lashes trembled as did his lips. Eban closed his own eyes, embarrassed at the shameless desire Conrad must have seen on his face.

"Open your pants," Conrad said.

Eban's eyes opened in shock. With trembling fingers he did as his friend asked, not taking his eyes from his.

"Take it out."

Eban took himself free, almost moaning at the sensation of his own hand around his desperate flesh.

With his mouth almost against Eban's, Conrad whispered, "Jerk off for me."

Eban gave a whimper of torment. He found the idea both hot and repulsive. He wanted so much more than this.

He tightened his hand around himself and started to slide his fingers up and down, his cock brushing the front of Conrad's shirt with every movement. Conrad bowed his head and watched, while Eban watched the dark crescents of lashes against his cheeks and the way Conrad sucked on his bottom lip as though desperately trying to control himself. Eban didn't want him to control himself. He wanted to be taken right here, right now.

He was going to come way too soon. How could he not, with Conrad standing watching and making him hotter than he had ever been in his life? "Do it too," he gasped out. "Please, Conrad."

Conrad lifted his head to look at Eban. In an instant he was tearing his pants open and freeing himself, and Eban was staring at the instrument which had taken his virginity and seemed much bigger than he remembered.

Eban moaned overtly as Conrad started to jerk himself swiftly, still bracing himself against the wall with one hand above Eban's head, but tilting his pelvis back slightly so their cocks would not collide as they simultaneously masturbated.

Inside, Eban was weeping for everything he wanted and was being denied as he and Conrad stared into each other's eyes, panting for breath as they came closer, their mouths an inch apart.

Eban whimpered a little as he felt the orgasm upon him. Still he kept his eyes open, needing to see the desperation in Conrad's, needing to see how beautiful this man was when he came.

The orgasm washed over Eban like a tidal wave. He heard something which sounded like a sob come from his own throat as he came and he clutched hard at Conrad's shirt with one hand, pulling him closer, so he felt hard muscle against his needy body.

Conrad's eyes closed, and he began to shudder. Eban felt wetness on his T-shirt. "Eban," Conrad said in a ragged voice, "oh fuck, Eban, you have no idea...."

Conrad's body fell abruptly against his, pinning him to the wall, hands on either side of Eban's head. His friend's scorching breath burned his neck, but Conrad didn't kiss it, even though Eban arched back to give his mouth access. He only rubbed his nose and his cheek compulsively and desperately against Eban's sensitive skin, moaning softly with what sounded like despair.

Eban's arms wrapped around his neck, holding him close. Conrad might have not been able to touch him, but he was damn well going to touch Conrad as they came down from this shocking and illicit high. Conrad made no protest, only pressed even closer to him, so their two bodies felt like one. It felt more right than anything had ever felt before in Eban's life. There in his arms was everything he would ever want and would never have. And until that moment he had never known.

They stayed that way for a full five minutes, the heat of Conrad's body searing Eban's as he tried to imprint every single curve and contour of the form against his into a memory which would have to last the rest of his life. Finally, Conrad lifted his head to stare into Eban's eyes.

Eban opened his mouth to beg Conrad to leave Christian, then closed it again when he saw the look in Conrad's emerald eyes. He knew every thought in Eban's head. There was nothing Conrad didn't see when he looked into his eyes. Maybe his face had always been an open book and Conrad had seen the love written on it for so many years. Now his eyes warned Eban not to speak, not to ask for something Conrad couldn't give, because speaking the words aloud would make them both come undone.

Conrad broke away, trembling hands quickly fastening his pants. He moved swiftly to the door and then stopped with his hand on the handle. His head fell forward with a bump against it and he stood there with shoulders visibly shaking, not making a single sound.

Eban stayed still behind him, with tears burning his eyes.

"I love him," Conrad said, his broken voice barely audible. Then he wrenched open the door and slammed it behind him before Eban could make a move to follow.

In the silence which followed, Eban lowered his head to look at the white stains on the front of his shirt. Gathering some of the substance on his index finger, he brought it to his mouth and sucked it off.

Nothing was supposed to hurt like this and nothing ever would again.

Damien relaxed his fingers abruptly and jerked Eban to a rough climax. Even as Eban was still coming, Damien let go and moved away. Eban immediately slid to the floor with his head buried in his knees, weeping.

"Did he love you too?" Damien asked from where he sat at the bottom of the stairs.

"I don't know. He loved Christian," Eban said.

"I know that. That's not what I asked you."

"I don't fucking *know*, Damien."

"Because when he nearly strangled me in his office when I threatened to tell Christian, he sure acted like he loved you."

Eban lifted his head slowly. All he could remember was the feel of Conrad inside him fifteen years ago, the feel of his breath on his face two years ago, and the feel of his mouth under his seven months ago as his soul slipped away. All he could feel was numb horror at what he had just admitted to Damien.

"Are you going to tell Christian?"

Damien didn't reply to that. He merely watched Eban as he stood up and dressed himself. Eban turned to the door, opened it, then paused with his back still turned. "I never want to see you again as long as I live, Damien."

DAMIEN sat on the bottom of the stairs, crying, for a long time. When Eban was all he had ever loved and ever wanted, he was not sure why he had forced him into that admission, which had only hurt him more than Eban, or why he had told Christian about Eban and Conrad, when hurting Christian only forced Eban further away. When he and Eban were as smashed to pieces as it was physically possible to go, why was he intent on making things worse?

Why had he done this to himself? If Eban loved Conrad, then it meant he had never loved Damien. The last five years had all been for nothing. Damien had always intended to take Eban back. He had always thought he could have him back whenever he chose, once he had punished him enough.

Now there would be no point in even *begging* Eban to come back. Because he had never loved him.

And yet.... Damien still wanted him, because he would never love anyone again the way he had loved Eban. The well had dried up and become disused once Eban had gone. It would never flow again.

EBAN only got two streets away before he had to pull over to the side of the road. There he let his head fall heavily against the steering wheel, setting off the horn in the process and scaring a cat which was strolling past.

Conrad. *I was in love with Conrad. Did I even know the truth of it until I admitted it to Damien? I don't think I did. But did Conrad? He said, "I know" as he pressed me to the wall. He knew. Even though I didn't know myself, Conrad had gone to his grave knowing I was in love with him. Did he love me back? Could I infer that from the way he acted at my house two years ago? The way he said I had no idea? Was he about to tell me so as he died with my kiss still warm on his lips?*

Eban was not sure that he wanted Conrad to have loved him in return. It would be wrong and unfair to Christian. He would never recover if he were to find out such a thing. But he never would because there was no proof to be had. Whatever secret Conrad carried—if he loved Eban or not—had died with him.

Chapter 22

CHRISTIAN got dressed and went to work, bypassing the coffee shop, walking on the other side of the street from it and keeping his head bowed. In the office, Jack did a double take when he saw his face.

“What’s happened?”

Christian sank into his chair. “The guy with Conrad’s heart... it was Luke.”

Jack looked like his eyes would fall out of his skull and bounce onto the desk in horror. “Are you for fucking real?”

Christian nodded. “There’s more. Damien came to see me this morning and informed me that Eban screwed Conrad.”

He saw the immediate shifting of Jack’s gaze, the flush which came over his cheeks. “You knew.”

“Shit, Christian, it wouldn’t have done any good to tell you.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since I slept with Eban.”

“How many times did they do it?”

“Once. When they were sixteen.”

“That’s what he said. Did you believe him?”

“Of course I did. Why wouldn’t I?”

Christian shrugged. He switched on his computer and adjusted some pens on his desk.

“So... what?” Jack demanded. “What are you thinking here? That Eban and Conrad did it more than once?”

Christian didn’t reply.

“I don’t know why you’d think that. Eban was absolutely wasted when he told me that. If it had happened more than once, I swear he would have confessed it; he was too upset to hold anything in that night. I believed him and you should too.”

Marcus’s office door opened just then. “In here now please, Jack,” said his boss.

Jack did as he was told, leaving Christian thinking over what he had said.

MARCUS was sitting back behind his desk when Jack walked in and took a seat. "What's going on out there?"

"Fuck," Jack sighed. "Luke's got Conrad's heart."

"What? You fucking *what*?" Marcus started to cackle in high amusement.

Jack frowned. "It's not funny."

"Oh my God, you couldn't even *write* it!" Marcus laughed, with tears in his eyes, "Christian should take this shit on Jerry Springer!"

"Shut the fuck up, Marcus. He also found out Eban slept with Conrad."

"Oh my fucking word." Marcus virtually spilled from his chair onto the floor. "It never rains but it fucking *pours* in Christian's life."

Jack jumped up furiously and stalked around Marcus's desk with fists clenched. "You are the most hard-hearted, self-centered son of a bitch I ever met in my entire life," he spat. "Is there nothing that touches you? Is there nobody you care about other than yourself?"

Marcus blinked a little in surprise at the outburst, the smile wiped off his face. Jack steeled himself to be asked to take a memo, at which point he was pretty sure he would lose the plot and punch his boss.

Instead, Marcus replied in a low voice, "Yeah. *You*." And he pulled Jack down onto his knee and into his arms.

OUTSIDE, Christian's cell was ringing. He cut the connection without checking the caller ID and switched off his phone. He picked up the phone and called his boss rather than having his retinas seared once more with whatever went on behind its door.

"This isn't a good time, Christian," Marcus groaned into the phone.

"I know, when is it ever?" Christian replied tetchily. "Can I take a week's vacation? Starting tomorrow?"

Marcus hesitated. In the background, Christian heard the hiss of a voice. "Say yes and I'll let you come."

"Yes, Christian, yes...", Marcus moaned and the phone was fumbled down.

EBAN didn't dare go home when his shift finished at nine. Instead he went to Jack's house. Over large shots of JD, when he tried to tell Jack the latest developments, Jack held his hand up and said he knew everything.

Eban stared at him a moment with blood heating his face. *Everything?* Even that night in the park?

“It was going to come out sooner or later. You know that.”

He was talking about Eban and Conrad. Maybe that was all he knew. He didn’t intend to apprise Jack of the rest. Jack thought he was a big enough whore as it was.

While Eban drank in silence, Jack said, “What’s he going to do about Luke?”

“He says he never wants to see him again. Thing is, I know he’s already half in love with him.”

Jack nodded. “He’ll come around. He just needs time.”

CHRISTIAN was relieved to find the house empty when he got home. He kept his cell switched off and checked the answering machine messages on the home phone. His mother had not been able to get a flight for him to Miami until Saturday morning. He called Marcus at home, who didn’t answer, and left a message saying he would be in to work tomorrow after all.

He woke up slowly at dawn and lay there with eyes fixed on the opposite wall asking himself if the last two days had really happened. His body ached as he dragged it into the shower, washing his hair and scrubbing the hands from his body which shouldn’t have been there.

He didn’t know which fact he felt less like dealing with—the fact that Luke had Conrad’s heart or the fact that Eban had had Conrad’s cock. Or even the fact that he’d cheated on Luke with Eban.

Eban’s room was empty, his car still gone from outside. Christian wondered idly whose bed he was in. He set off to the cemetery.

A light shower had just ended. The grounds were radiant with color as summer drew to a close. Once at Conrad’s grave, he sank onto his knees. “Oh my God, I don’t know where to start to tell you all this.” His eyes fixed accusingly on the black marble. “But why did you never tell me about Eban? Why? Why must I find out when you’re not even here to explain yourself? What did you do with him? You were sixteen and you only did it once? What if he’s lying? Maybe you did it for years under my nose, and I never knew anything about it. Why didn’t you tell me? I thought I knew everything there was to know about you and I find this out when you’re dead.”

He rested his face against the cold stone. “I slept with Eban. Why did he sleep with me when he’d done it with you too? How could he do that?”

He sat back heavily on the grass, fingers touching the gold letters of Conrad’s name. “Luke’s got your heart. What am I going to do about that?”

What would you think about what I've been doing with him? Would you hate me for the way I've betrayed you?"

The only sound was the distant calling of seagulls and the swell of the ocean below.

Christian's gaze focused on the water-laden petals of the flowers adorning the grave. He had been too preoccupied to think to bring any that morning and he felt bad now, but Conrad's grave was always full of flowers regardless. He reached idly for the card on the red roses at the front.

I'll see you again some day. Adam.

He cursed softly under his breath. "Another fan," he said, his voice laced with bitterness. "Everyone wanted to sleep with you, Conrad, didn't they? With all the temptation around, I'm surprised you were faithful to me for ten years."

He stood up abruptly, hating himself for speaking such words, words the likes of which he'd never spoken to Conrad in all their time together. Conrad wasn't here to defend himself. Christian had no right. He walked away from the grave without looking back.

"HAS he been at your place?" Christian asked Jack without preamble when he got to work.

"Yeah," Jack said. "He stayed last night. Don't be mad at me. I wasn't going to have him going to a hotel."

"He's got plenty of fuck buddies who would put him up," Christian said sardonically.

Jack sighed. "Listen, it was once. Conrad didn't cheat on you. You should forgive him. Even though you have nothing to forgive him for."

"They deceived me."

"They didn't. What would have been the point in telling you? Seriously, he's fucking *broken* by this. If he could turn back time so it never happened, he fucking would."

"It hurts so much to think of them together." Now he knew what Eban was like sexually, he could only imagine what a good time he must have shown Conrad.

"They were sixteen. Did Conrad give a fuck who *you* slept with when you were sixteen?"

Christian didn't reply. Because Conrad had been his first and last until Luke and Eban.

“You should be concentrating more on what you’re going to do about Luke.”

“Luke who?”

“Come on, don’t,” Jack protested.

“He’s history, never mention his name again to me.”

“Don’t. He must be fucking gutted.”

“I don’t give a shit about him. Worry about me, not him. I couldn’t care fucking less about him. I wish he was dead and I could take that heart back.”

Jack shook his head sadly. “You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?”

“Conrad saved Luke’s life. Of all the people that heart could have gone to, Christian, and it goes to the guy you’re infatuated with. Don’t tell me that wasn’t meant to be, because it gives me goose pimples just thinking about it.”

Christian glared at him before stalking off to the bathroom.

EBAN plucked up the courage in the afternoon to call Darius. The other cop answered his cell with a sullen, “Yeah.”

“I guess you’ve already been apprised of the heart situation.”

Darius didn’t reply.

“I want Luke’s number. I want to speak to him.”

“I don’t think so,” Darius said. “He doesn’t want to speak to you. By all accounts you were an asshole when he met you.”

“And I’m sorry for that. But he was an asshole to me too. I just... want to try and heal things between him and Christian.”

“I’m not giving you his number,” Darius said firmly. “I’ll give him yours. If he wants to speak to you, he’ll call you.”

Eban sighed in frustration. “Okay.” Before he could say anything else, Darius hung up.

Eban pocketed his phone. The sound of Darius’s voice had given him goose pimples, oddly enough, despite his hostile tone. He had a sudden urge to jerk off, but sitting in his patrol car while Aaron was in the store buying a Coke probably wasn’t the best place.

Besides, thinking with his dick didn’t soothe his tortured mind at all. Eban was utterly tormented by the confession he had made to Damien. There was not one single minute that he didn’t think about what he had said out loud for another living soul to hear.

ABOUT half an hour after he had called Darius, Eban's cell rang with an unknown number.

"What can I do for you, Eban?" came a cool voice.

Eban sighed almost in relief. "Listen, I'll start by saying I'm sorry for all the shit I gave you when I met you. It was wrong."

Sounding taken aback, Luke said, "Thank you. Same here."

"I'm calling about Christian."

Luke was silent.

"He needs some time but he's going to come around."

"Is he?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because... I know him. And I know how he feels about you. This is real, Luke. It's the same as he felt for Conrad. I know it."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"It's going to be okay, I promise you. But listen..." Eban hesitated.

"What?"

"There's something else. Another reason why Christian might need you at the moment."

"Go on."

"When I was sixteen, I slept with Conrad. Damien chose yesterday to tell Christian that."

"Jesus. But that was it, right? You and Conrad didn't..."

"No, that was all, just once." The shameful secret he had admitted to Damien before he had even admitted it to himself would stay buried if Eban had his way. "Christian is finding it hard to handle, though, on top of, you know—"

"I understand," Luke murmured. "Tell me where you live, Eban. I can come see him."

"I think he'd be really angry with me if I did that. Just give him time. I'll persuade him to come to you."

"Tell me where he works, then. I won't go see him, I swear, I'll just send a letter. I promise."

"You better not, Luke," Eban warned. "Because I know where you live." He reeled off Christian's work address, and Luke thanked him.

"Eban."

"Don't say it."

"You already know what I'm going to say?"

"Yes. *Darius*. I'm sorry. If he would only listen to me, I'd tell him."

"Try harder, then." Luke hung up.

OUTSIDE in the main office, a delivery boy entered just before going home time, carrying a long black box tied with red ribbon. "Is there a Christian Seymour?" he called, when people noticed him.

"Yes," Christian said in surprise, lifting his head.

"For you." The boy placed the box on his desk.

Christian stared down at it, noticing the card nestling under the ribbon, his name hand-written neatly on the front, as he was asked to sign. He did so, then turned a little around in his chair, moving the box from the prying eyes of his colleagues as he untied the ribbon and lifted the lid.

Inside was a single red rose. Christian stared at it a moment before taking the card from the lid and opening the envelope.

If I had only known, I would have told you. But we can be stronger now because of this. I don't want to lose you when I have only just found you. L.

ON HIS way home, Christian's cell rang. He took it from his pocket, glancing at the caller ID. Luke. His heart lurched up into his throat. He pressed cancel and thrust the phone back into his pocket. After a few moments, it rang again. This time he turned the stereo up loud and ignored it.

When he got inside, there was a text from Luke. *Please come over and talk to me tonight. We can work this out. I'm sorry and I miss you.*

Christian tossed the cell aside. Deep down, he knew it was ridiculous that Luke was apologizing. What did he have to be sorry for? He didn't know he had Conrad's heart, did he? It wasn't his fault Conrad had died, so why was Christian blaming him for everything?

EBAN showed his face later than night. Christian was lying in front of the TV with a few empty beer bottles in front of him, channel surfing. He tensed when he heard Eban coming down the hallway.

"You haven't had the locks changed, then," his friend remarked.

"Don't fucking tempt me," was Christian's surly response as he sat up.

“Look, I’m sorry, I don’t know how many different ways I can say it to you. I didn’t sleep with Conrad knowing that in fifteen fucking years’ time my best friend would be heartbroken over the fact.”

“How many times?”

“I told you, once.”

“How many times in the session?”

“Just once, Christian.”

“Did he make you come?”

“What? Of course he did.”

“Did *he* fuck *you*?”

“Yes.”

“What position?”

“Stop right now, man.”

“What fucking position!”

“Oh Jesus Christ, me on top.”

“Hmm, he always liked that. You must have given him the liking for it.”

Eban reddened furiously and turned away.

“Did you like it?”

“Please, Christian.”

“Did you?”

“Of course I did. It was my first time, there was nothing *not* to like.”

“Was he good to you?”

Eban sighed, eyes shut, head bowed. “Yes.”

“Yes,” Christian said, half to himself. “He was always so considerate, I guess he was like that with everyone, not just me.”

“Don’t say everyone like he screwed half of Orange County, Christian. He was faithful to you for ten fucking years. Be grateful for that instead of dwelling on one teenage fuck he had.”

Christian was repentant. His lip trembled and he bit it.

“Forgive me?” Eban said in a whisper. “Please?”

“You and he should have told me this a long time ago. Before he died.”

“I know.”

“I don’t get why it was a big secret and yet Damien knew and fucking Jack knew.”

Eban was silent, offering no explanation. He moved over to the couch and sat down next to Christian. He put his hand out and laid it on Christian's, fingers softly stroking.

"Did you want to sleep with me because of him?" Christian asked with his gaze fixed on Eban's hand.

Eban shook his head. "I just... wanted you, Christian. I'm sorry. If I could make it so I'd not slept with either of you, then I would."

Christian was silent a moment. When he spoke it was to say, "I'm going to Florida tomorrow."

"What?" Eban asked in astonishment. "To your parents?"

"Yeah."

"Is Marcus okay with that?"

"Yeah."

"How long for?"

"I don't know. A week at least."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, when you come back, are you going to keep on avoiding Luke?"

"Me and Luke are finished, Eban. We never even started." Christian got up and headed into the kitchen, taking a beer out of the fridge and offering it to Eban. Eban nodded, and Christian reached for a second, flicking the caps off both, handing one to Eban.

Eban's gaze strayed to the table and rose in a vase. "Where did that come from?"

"Luke. He sent it to the office. I don't know how he got the address. Do you?" He looked hard at Eban.

"Yeah, I gave it to him," Eban said nonchalantly. "I'm not going to make it easy for you to do this to him."

"What are you doing with his number?"

"Darius gave it to me."

"So...."

"No. I called him to ask for Luke's number, that's all. I wanted to apologize for your shitty behavior, Christian."

"I don't know how you fucking dare," Christian seethed, "after everything you've done."

"You know what, it took two to tango on Wednesday night. I didn't make you do anything you didn't want to do. You were desperate for it. So

don't blame me for that. And don't blame me for losing my virginity to my best friend, either."

Christian stared at him for a moment, red-faced with anger.

"Did Luke send you a note with the rose?"

Christian pulled it from his pocket and handed it over.

Eban perused it and handed it back.

"The guy really, really likes you. I could tell that when I met him. And he was so hurt when I spoke to him today. Don't throw it away. Some people never get a second chance, Christian."

Maybe he was talking about himself. Damien was never going to take him back now. Christian stewed in his own miserable thoughts.

"What's time your flight?"

"Nine."

"I'll take you to the airport."

"It's from LAX."

"So? I'll take you. It's not that far."

"It's fine. I'll catch a cab."

"Christian, let me take you. Please."

Christian nodded finally. "We better leave at six, then. I'm going to hit the sack."

"Okay," Eban said. "Give me a shout when you get up."

Christian moved past him, heading toward the door. Eban's voice stopped him. "Are we okay?"

Christian, with his back still turned, paused for the longest moment, then nodded curtly. He went up the stairs without another word.

Chapter 23

CHRISTIAN dragged himself tiredly from his bed at five and made some coffee. He took a cup into Eban, waking him up with a brusque hand to his shoulder. Eban had evidently had a disturbed night, pillows lying on the floor, covers half off the bed. He blinked at Christian before sitting up and mumbling thanks.

Leaving his room, Christian felt unutterably sorry for him. He didn't know how he could, after everything he had found out. But he only had to remember that night they had left the hospital after Damien had been shot. The words Eban had spoken: *I've given you so much; I don't know how much more I can give you. You've bled me dry. There's nothing left.*

And yet Christian continued to take and give nothing back in return, when Eban had been the only one to hold him up after Conrad's death.

THEY were mostly silent in the car on the way to Los Angeles, using loud music to fill the gaps, Christian leaning over to skip any song with too much resonance to its words.

When they pulled up outside LAX and Christian had lifted his suitcase free, the two of them standing outside the automatic doors, Eban spoke softly. "Before you go, I need to know you've forgiven me."

"Didn't I say I had last night?" Christian kept his gaze averted.

"Not exactly. See, what it is, Christian, is, if I don't have you, I don't really have anyone."

Christian was relieved they both wore sunglasses because he didn't want to look into his friend's haunted eyes. The words rattled him. He became more sorry and more afraid for Eban than he ever had. He moved closer to his friend and put a hand on his arm. "I think I should be taking you with me rather than leaving you here alone."

Eban shrugged. "I wouldn't be able to get the time off."

"You'll be okay?"

Eban nodded. "Sure."

Christian scooped him suddenly into his arms, holding him tight. "The answer's yes, I forgive you. I don't want to lose you."

“You won’t lose me.”

TO EBAN’S utter shock, Damien called him that afternoon as he was leaving for work.

“Can I see you?” he asked without preamble.

Eban unlocked his car and got in. “Which part of ‘I never want to see you again’ don’t you understand?” He was confused and unsettled by the request. Damien had refused to speak to him for six months, he had almost split him and Christian apart with his maliciousness, and now he suddenly wanted to see Eban? When he had told Damien that he was no longer in love with him and maybe never was, he had thought he was speaking the truth. Now he was not so sure. It still hurt to breathe when he thought of Damien.

“Please,” Damien said. “I need to say sorry. I need you to forgive me for everything I’ve done.”

And Eban *wanted* to forgive him, no matter what he had done. He needed Damien. He needed a body warm beside him at night. He needed someone to save him.

“I’ll meet you later,” he said.

“Where?” Damien asked with relief in his voice.

“On the pier. At seven.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then. And thank you.”

DAMIEN was there when Eban arrived at seven thirty, deliberately late. The evening was a beautiful one, the sea breeze on the pier fresh and blowing Damien’s blond hair across his pale face.

“Hey,” Damien greeted him in a subdued tone, sounding nervous.

“Want to get to the point?” Eban asked stiffly.

Damien nodded. “I wanted to give you this.” He drew a piece of paper from the back pocket of his jeans and handed it to Eban.

Eban took it, staring at it. It was a check for a substantial amount of money. “What’s this?”

“Your half of the house. I’m sorry for not giving it to you sooner.”

Eban, taken aback, pocketed it.

“What I forced you into admitting, I’m sorry about that too. I’m sorry for everything I’ve put you through.”

Eban looked at him cynically. “What do you want?”

Damien sighed. “Don’t be like that. How long were you in love with Conrad?”

“Oh Christ.” Eban stalked a few paces away, looking out over the ocean which glittered in the evening sun, still dotted with surfers and swimmers. “I didn’t know I was until you made me admit it.”

“Come on,” Damien snorted.

“Fuck you,” Eban spat. “You know what, Damien? We’re not together. I don’t even have to justify anything to you anymore. I’m telling you how it is. I don’t give a shit whether you believe me or not.”

“Did you fuck him? When we were together?”

“No.”

“Did you... do *anything*?”

Eban hesitated. “No.”

“You don’t seem sure.”

“I *am* sure, and like I’d tell you anything when you would use it as yet another weapon to hurt Christian with.”

Damien hung his head. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You’re sorry?” Eban demanded. “What made you do it? Why would you tell Christian about me and Conrad when he’s not even here to defend himself?”

“I wasn’t thinking straight. I was angry that Christian had you. You’re not his to take.”

“Well, I’m certainly not *yours* anymore,” Eban shot back.

“You *feel* like you’re still mine,” Damien said in a low voice. “I still carry you within me.”

Eban’s eyes abruptly swam with tears. “You need to apologize to Christian. For everything.”

“I will,” Damien said immediately.

“He’s gone to Florida. As soon as he comes back, I want you to do it. I mean it, Damien.”

“Okay.”

There was a long silence.

"I had time to think while I was in the hospital. All that shit I said to you about never loving you, it was only to hurt you. I've loved you since the moment I first saw you and I never stopped loving you, through Conrad and through Jack. I've always wanted you back. *Always*."

Eban stared at him, lost for words.

"I want to take you out to dinner," Damien continued. "I want to build some bridges with you."

"I'm not sure there's anything left to build."

"I know there is," Damien insisted. "I know it. Let's go now, come on."

Eban hesitated for the longest while, and then, when Damien started to walk, looking behind him to make sure he was following, Eban did so.

He was relieved he was driving that night, so there would be no alcohol-related mistakes, so things didn't get confusing with Damien and he let the bastard off easy. That wasn't to say he wouldn't end up fucking him though, because he probably would. He had no willpower that way.

THEY went to a restaurant Eban and Damien had haunted with Conrad and Christian many times. The owner greeted them in delight, asking where the other couple was. When he saw Eban's face, Damien gently suggested he go to the table while he got some drinks at the bar. There, Eban watched Roberto's face fall as Damien obviously told him that their number had fallen by a quarter. He busied himself with the menu, biting his lip and trying to remain in control until Damien sat down opposite him and reached out, laying his hand over Eban's.

Eban snatched it back instantly, not one for public displays of affection. He took his Coke and drank some while he cursed himself for having to stay sober tonight when he just wanted to get wasted out of his mind to make their first date in over five years a little easier.

His first date with Damien had been the day after they'd met up at a club, gone back to his place, and fucked all night. The date almost seemed redundant when you knew every inch of someone's body intimately beforehand. So they had made a pretence of eating, playing footsie under the table, only managing one course before getting the check and fucking in the alleyway behind the restaurant.

The waiter brought their food, pasta for both of them, and Eban couldn't eat, all churned up inside. When he raised his head to look at Damien, he saw the same thoughts in the eyes of his ex. Damien sighed and

put his cutlery down, pushing his plate away. Eban did the same. "Want dessert?" Damien asked. Eban shook his head. "Want to get the tab?"

Eban nodded. When they were together, Damien asking him if he wanted to get the tab usually meant Eban was in for the time of his life within the next half an hour. Now he felt no corresponding wrench of desire with these words, only sadness.

Damien had walked to the pier that night, and so Eban drove him home, stopping outside and letting the silence descend on them with the engine still running. *What a disastrous night. All the things we have to say to each other and we can't.*

"I love you," Damien said abruptly.

Eban didn't reply.

"I know you said you were in love with Conrad, but I need to know. I need to know if you ever had any love left over for me."

Eban sighed. "I *did* love him, but I loved you too, Damien. I never knew it was possible to love two people at once, but I did." *And maybe Conrad did too.* He turned his head to look at Damien.

His ex's gray eyes were impossibly soft in the darkness, the way Eban had not seen them for so long. Damien reached across and stroked soft fingertips down Eban's face. Eban remained still, eyes falling shut, waiting for Damien to kiss him.

Damien didn't disappoint him. He pressed his lips to Eban's tenderly, his hand sliding around to the back of his neck, fingers lightly caressing his hair.

Eban's mouth opened up with relief as their tongues tangled and he tasted the man he had spent five years with. Tears of regret and longing pricked his eyes as they kissed long and deep, and he tried to hold Damien as close to him as it was possible to get in the confines of his car.

He put the palm of his hand on Damien's chest with fingers outstretched, for a moment feeling the steady beat of his heart, before moving it down over his abdomen, over his belt and into his groin, massaging a very prominent erection before Damien suddenly pulled away.

"I'm not doing this out here in front of my neighbors like some sort of fucking sixteen-year-old."

Eban blinked at him a moment as the lust cleared from his mind. "Then let's take it inside."

Damien shook his head. "No. I want to make this up to you properly. I want to get to know you again. I'm sick of sex complicating it all."

Eban looked at him in dismay. *Fucking tease.*

Damien was already opening the door. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said as he closed it behind him. Eban watched him walk up the path to his house and disappear inside before he started the engine.

ONCE Damien got inside he realized he had made the wrong move. He wanted Eban so much it hurt. He had to fight with himself not to call his ex and beg him to come back, reasoning that Eban would be angry and feel slighted right now and would most likely tell him to fuck off.

EBAN drove all the way home with an infuriating hard-on and entered the empty house, taking a beer and throwing himself onto the couch. He didn't know what sort of game Damien was playing. He was the one who wanted to say sorry and wanted to build bridges, and yet, when it came to it, he was the one pushing Eban away instead of giving him what he wanted.

That fucker.

Eban stroked himself idly through his pants. He didn't want to jerk off. He was sick of jerking off. He wanted a body warm against his for the rest of the night. He didn't want to wake up alone. He was so sick of being alone. He had wanted Damien that night, and Damien had gone and crushed his hopes once more.

But Damien wasn't the only man in this world, and Eban wasn't so without ego that he didn't know he could get someone to lie next to him that night with very little effort. But a stranger wasn't what he wanted.

He pulled his cell out and called up the address book, thumbing through it and connecting to the number he wanted. When it was answered, he heard loud music and a hard voice.

"What do you want?"

"Can I see you?" he blurted out, already shriveling with shame at what he was doing.

"Are you serious?" Darius's voice was scornful. The music became a little lower and muffled as though he had closed a door behind him.

"Yeah."

"Go fuck yourself." The line went dead.

Eban stared at the phone for a moment in shock. Maybe he had expected Darius to be ridiculously grateful for Eban throwing him some crumbs from his table. Maybe he expected Darius to have no pride. But then Eban had only called him with the intention of fucking him that night, not with the intention of ever making a go of things with him, and that fact had obviously shone through loud and clear.

I am a horror of a human being. The urge to cry was almost too strong. I'm done with crying. I'm done with being weak. It has to end. But I haven't been weak at all. All I've been is strong for Christian and I'm sick of it. I want to take what I want. I'm done with being rejected. I'm done with wasting emotion on people who don't care.

He called a cab on his cell and then got up, going upstairs to the bathroom to inspect his hair and brush his teeth. Then he made his way downstairs when he heard a horn beep.

EBAN didn't do gay bars. His secret was carefully guarded at work, as the force was rampant with homophobia. He only went to straight bars, which never resulted in much action, but then he hadn't been looking for five years, anyway. Tonight was different, because he needed it as soon as he could get it and he was not prepared to wait until the end of the night.

He went to a notorious, but classy, gay bar on the seafront, immediately a little uncomfortable by how much attention he attracted as soon as he walked in. He went to the bar and sat down, waiting to be served, looking around for suitable candidates. *I can't look too desperate. Even though I am.*

He knew what he wanted that night. He wanted someone tall and muscular who was going to hold him down and make him shriek. He wanted someone big and powerful and dominating.

As his drink arrived and he handed over a bill, Eban saw him. A man sitting two seats up from him at the bar, staring down into his glass like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. A man in a tight black T-shirt, with tattooed arms and bulging biceps, a mohawk and a chiseled jaw. A man who looked a little dangerous. He looked up and caught Eban staring. Eban held his gaze for a second calculatedly, before averting his eyes. He stared into his own drink now and waited.

But the man didn't join him immediately, as he had expected, and when Eban looked up again, he had resumed his staring into his glass as though it contained the answer to all the mysteries in the universe. Eban sighed, not

used to this, and got down off his stool, walking up to the empty one next to the stranger and perching himself on that.

“Who are you drowning your sorrows over?”

The stranger lifted his head. His eyes were pitch dark and intense. He looked away, a muscle in his jaw twitching, and shook his head, saying nothing.

Eban felt defeated already. *I’m rusty. I haven’t done this for five years. What an idiot I am.*

“Want a drink?” he asked, already signaling the bartender.

The stranger nodded. “Jack and Coke.”

Eban ordered two. When they came, he paid, and then turned his attention back to his quarry. “Eban,” he said, holding out his hand.

The stranger lifted his head. “Adam,” he replied and took Eban’s hand, holding it a moment too long, their eyes meeting.

Eban’s flesh tingled. For a moment he remembered feeling the same way when he had shook Darius’s hand on their first date. They had only lasted one drink in the first bar, before agreeing to move onto another. Once they were outside, they had ducked into a doorway, lips connecting as they fell against the door, grappling with each other. That had been some first date, leading as it had to Darius sucking him off in the alleyway.

Adam downed his drink and picked up the one Eban had bought him. “I’m having trouble at home,” he said. “My partner doesn’t want to move in with me. He’s afraid. He says it’s too soon.”

Eban nodded in understanding. He had felt the same when Damien had first broached the subject with him.

“What’s your tale?”

Eban sighed. “I went out on a date tonight with my ex. I wanted to spend the night with him and he wouldn’t let me. So I’m pissed at him.”

“Why’s he your ex?”

“Because I screwed someone else,” Eban told him frankly.

Adam didn’t comment, only finished off his drink. “Want to go someplace else?”

Eban slid off his stool immediately.

ADAM was good, Eban thought, as the man held him by the hips and hit the right spot effortlessly with every thrust. Eban groaned, face buried in the pillow, hand jerking himself off, willing the thoughts away from his treacherous mind of other men and other times.

This time he failed, though, realizing he was too exhausted to turn off his memories anymore. He allowed himself to go back to that bedroom, sitting on Conrad's lap with their mouths caught, their bodies fused together. He wondered if there would ever be a time when he didn't think of sixteen-year-old Conrad with his sixteen-year-old self while another man was fucking him. He wondered if he would go to his grave thinking of Conrad and what could have been.

"YOU know, you look kind of familiar." Adam spoke when they were lying side by side, not touching.

"Do I?"

"Yeah. Were you a friend of Conrad's?"

Eban turned his head to his, mouth open in shock.

Adam laughed softly. "Everyone knows everyone else around here, don't you know that?"

Eban couldn't speak.

"I think you came into my shop with him a few times. The ice cream place near the pier?"

"God, yes," Eban said in astonishment.

"That guy sure liked his ice cream. I think my profits went down twenty percent when—" Adam stopped abruptly when he caught the look in Eban's eyes. He rolled over, lying half across Eban, resting a hand on his shoulder. "I think four of you came in one time. Would that have been your ex?"

Eban nodded.

"I remember now," Adam said. "Conrad ignored him the whole time. He had it bad for you, didn't he?"

Eban craned his neck to look at him, startled. "Who? Conrad?"

"Sure," Adam said.

"I don't think...."

"Come on. I people watch and I'm good at it. I watched Conrad a lot because he was fucking hot. He didn't touch you and he barely spoke to you,

but when he looked at you, there was a certain something in his eyes. Something pretty fucking deep.”

Eban stared at him. He could not speak for fear his voice would betray him.

“I’m not saying he made it obvious in front of Christian, but I saw it,” Adam continued. “Have I upset you?”

Eban turned his head to one side, eyes closed. “It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry.” Adam moved up his body sinuously and pressed a kiss to his temple, smoothing rough fingers across his cheek.

“Want to crash here tonight?” Eban tried to make the question casual, keep the hope out of his voice.

“Sure,” was Adam’s easy reply, and he turned onto his back, drawing Eban into his arms and holding him close.

In blessed relief, Eban allowed his eyes to close, thinking of what a perceptive man he had chosen that night. That he seemed to know that Eban’s search for sex was never about sex at all.

Chapter 24

EBAN awoke with Adam lying next to him, watching him. *What have I done?* He had slept with a phenomenal amount of men in the aftermath of Conrad and before Damien, but he had thought all of that was behind him. He had no desire to engage in cheap sex. It made him feel dirty and unloved, and right now, he needed loving very much. He had moved from Damien to Darius, then back to Damien, then on to his best friend, most regrettably of all, and now to a stranger just because Damien wouldn't give him what he wanted. He despised himself. These days you couldn't afford to sleep around the way Eban did. Who knew when a condom might break and lead to his worst nightmare?

He flinched a little as Adam stroked his cheek softly, his dark eyes tender. "I have to go. Thanks for a nice night, Eban."

Eban was taken aback. He hadn't been thanked in a while. But then he rarely gave people chance to wake up before he was sneaking out the door. Adam leaned over and kissed him.

Eban watched him put those tight black clothes back on that Eban had been so desperate to get him out of the night before and he thought of the way Darius had told him to go fuck himself.

At the door, Adam paused. "If you... come into the shop for ice cream," he said hesitantly, "you'll be discreet, right? It's just Tom, my partner, he works with me."

"Of course."

Adam nodded. He gave a small smile and closed the door behind him. Eban fell gradually back into sleep once he had heard the front door close.

CHRISTIAN awoke late in Florida, sun dappling his bed, birds singing outside in the garden. His dreams had been filled with Luke. Luke, who he missed as though a piece of him had been amputated. How could he not, when he had slept beside him twice now and felt as fulfilled by him as he had by Conrad?

He glanced over at his cell sitting on the bedside table, switched off. He wondered whether if he were to switch it on, he would find voice and text messages from Luke.

He got up and showered before making his way downstairs and finding his parents having breakfast in the kitchen. His mother had picked him up late from the airport and his father had been asleep when they got back. Christian's father stood up immediately when he saw his son and embraced him fiercely. Christian returned it, thinking as he had so many times before how lucky he had been when fate had dealt out his parents.

He sat down, and his mother moved to get him some breakfast, dropping a kiss on his head as she passed. His father eyed him. "How are you?"

Christian took a moment to reply. At the airport last night, spotting his mother on the other side of the barrier, he had broken down like a child and fallen into her arms. It was not how he wanted to behave in front of his mother, but the relief of being here, of being submerged within her unconditional love, of not having to pretend anymore, the way he often did for Eban's sake, overwhelmed him. He was home.

"I'm okay," he muttered in a low voice, avoiding his father's gaze, pouring some orange juice.

"And how is Eban?" his father asked. He was almost as fond of Christian's best friend as he had been of Conrad.

Christian sighed. "He's... we're... much the same. Struggling, I suppose would be a good word."

His father touched him on the shoulder, squeezing lightly. "I'm glad you've come home Christian."

AFTER Christian's father left for work, Christian and his mother packed up some things and went down to the beach. It was some time of aimless chat and sipping cold drinks under an umbrella before his mother got down to the nitty-gritty.

"Want to tell me about this man, Christian?"

Christian took a moment to compose himself. "His name's Luke. Luke Morgan."

"Luke's a lovely name," his mother murmured.

Christian felt saddened. He could not help but think his mother was already thinking of the Christmas presents she would buy Luke that year. Maybe Conrad had been a replacement for the grandchild she would never have, or the other child she would never have after Christian's sister had died before birth, taking with her any hope of another pregnancy.

"How old is he?"

"I don't know," Christian said in surprise. It was not something he had thought about. "Early thirties, I guess."

"And where did you meet him?"

"In my coffee shop. He smiled at me across the room and then he came over and asked me if he could buy me a cup of coffee. And I was rude to him."

His mother squeezed his hand. "But he must have persevered with you."

Christian nodded.

"That's because he knew you were worth it."

Christian smiled. "You would say that." He proceeded to relate Luke's admission to the ICU, moving on to their two dates, his finding out of the identity of the recipient of Conrad's heart, and that night he had got so drunk, the words he had said to Luke.

He could not look his mother in the eye when he told her exactly how he had wished Luke dead if it meant the return of Conrad. Tears of shame streaked his cheeks as he told her he had ignored all his calls and how Luke had sent a rose to his office.

"He knows you didn't mean it," his mother said softly, stroking his hand.

"No, he doesn't. Because I *did* mean it."

She was silent. "There's more," Christian said. Because once he had started getting this misery out, he could not stop until it was all purged.

"Go on."

"I found out Conrad and Eban slept together when they were sixteen."

His mother gave a sigh.

"And I sort of got obsessed with the idea that they were having an affair, even though Eban swore they weren't. I accused him of all sorts of things. I went looking for evidence."

"Oh, Christian. Conrad loved you."

"I know." He held his hand up to show her the ring. "Look at this. It was in his pocket on the night he died. It cost him two grand. Eban helped him pick it."

His mother took it when he held it out and turned it around in her fingers a moment, admiring it before handing it back. "It was just once? When they were sixteen?"

Christian nodded.

“Conrad was allowed to have a past. You can’t think badly of him just because it happened to be someone you know that he slept with. It wasn’t wrong of him.”

“I know. I was just... jealous.”

“And that’s understandable. But don’t let it poison what you have with Eban.”

If only you knew what I had with Eban, that night against a tree in the park, drunk and desperate to forget.

“So, after your second date with Luke, had you made plans to see him again, before you turned up to the meeting and found out who he was?”

Christian shook his head as the misery of that morning overwhelmed him. Where Luke and Eban had spat venom at each other and then Luke had said they were moving too fast. *I think we should take a few days. Just to think about what we’re doing and what we want.*

“Those two dates,” he said with eyes averted. “I spent both nights at Luke’s apartment. It was too much for us both, and he wanted to slow down. He said we should take a few days and to call him. That’s how we left it. Until I saw him standing there in the transplant coordinator’s office.”

“And how do you feel about him?”

“I feel like he’s got inside me and wrapped himself around my heart. I couldn’t extricate myself even if I tried.”

“So there’s your answer about what you’re going to do.”

Christian shook his head. “I can’t see him again. I can’t.”

“And what’s the real reason for that? Because he has Conrad’s heart?”

“No,” Christian said in anguish. “Because I’m scared he’ll die at any moment, and I couldn’t bear it.”

LUKE looked astonished when he opened the door.

“Hey,” Eban said.

“Come in,” Luke said after a moment’s hesitation.

Eban followed him into the spacious living room, stopping short when he saw Darius sitting on the couch wearing pajama pants, shirtless, eating a bowl of cereal. Eban’s eyes swung suspiciously to Luke, but Luke appeared not to notice.

Darius glared at Eban. Eban hovered, uncomfortable.

“Sit down,” Luke directed. “Can I get you some coffee?”

Eban wanted some coffee very much, but there was no way he could sit drinking coffee with Darius and Luke, not when Darius’s bare chest was threatening to give him a hard-on and his eyes were threatening to burn Eban alive. He shook his head. “I was just passing by,” he lied, “and I wanted to tell you that Christian’s gone to Florida.”

Luke’s face fell immediately. “Oh, right.”

“To stay with his parents,” Eban qualified.

“Did he say how long he’d be?” Luke tried to sound casual but the hurt on his face was unmistakable.

“Maybe a week. That’s what he’s taken off work, so I guess he’ll have to be back after that.”

Luke nodded and tried to smile. Darius looked at him in silent concern. “Are you sure you don’t want coffee?” Luke asked again.

“No,” Eban said.

“Okay, well, I’ll just get one, excuse me.” And he hurried off to the kitchen, leaving Eban and Darius in uncomfortable silence.

“Shit,” Eban said.

Darius sighed and shook his head.

“I didn’t mean to....I just thought he should know. Christ, I want to get them back together.”

Darius didn’t speak. Eban sat down opposite him, surveying his tousled hair and sleepy eyes. *Shit, I fucked Christian, maybe Darius shows Luke comfort the same way.* “Listen,” he said. “About last night...”

“At a loose end, were you?” Darius virtually snarled.

“No, I just... wanted to see you. I’m sorry. I know you hate me, but... would you let me make it up to you? Take you to dinner?”

“Not a chance.”

“Come on.”

Darius shook his head.

Defeated, Eban averted his eyes from Darius’s intense blue gaze. “I *am* sorry,” he said. “I know you don’t believe me, but I am.” He got up and headed through the door he had seen Luke disappear through.

Luke was standing at the kitchen counter, leaning on it, head bowed.

“I’m going,” Eban said. “I’ll see you soon, Luke.”

Luke turned around, dry-eyed, to Eban’s relief.

"If you want to talk. I'm a good listener." Which was an understatement. *All my life I've listened and never spoken. Never spoken when I should have. Never acted when I should have. Never told Conrad he needed to leave Christian to be with me.*

Luke nodded. He didn't smile, only watched Eban from those pale, crystalline green eyes.

"Luke," Eban said abruptly. "I need you to do something for me."

"Go on."

"Can I..." Eban hesitated, searching for the right words, finding they still came out wrong. "Touch you?"

Luke arched an eyebrow. "What?"

"I didn't... I mean..." Eban stammered. "Please, can I just... feel Conrad's heart beating? Just once? Please."

Eban didn't really think about how he had given himself away effortlessly with this request. He only thought of his own desperation and how warm and pink with blood the man standing before him was—all because of Conrad.

Luke watched him intently with knowing eyes so Eban could barely meet his gaze for shame. To his surprise, Luke stepped forward and started to unfasten his shirt.

Eban stared at the scar.

Luke reached out, took hold of Eban's hand and guided it inside his shirt, pressing it flush against his left breast, holding it there.

The two stared at each other while Eban felt the slow, steady *thump, thump, thump* of the heart beating against his palm. His eyes welled up uncontrollably. He tried to carefully arrange the expression on his face. Tried to pretend he was blasé, but he didn't move away, he didn't let go. He couldn't.

The lump of muscle he felt working away under Luke's ribs once powered the body of the man he had been in love with. He remembered the way Conrad's heart had pounded against him as he pressed him against the wall two years ago. It might have been going slower now, but he swore he could recognize its rhythm, a rhythm uniquely Conrad, a rhythm you could write music to if you were feeling romantic enough.

Eban's thoughts destroyed him. He longed to sweep Luke into his arms and cling to him until every last tear was shed and his body was filled with the slow reverberations of the last remaining part of Conrad. He longed for Luke to save him.

When Luke finally let go of his hand, after what seemed like an eternity, Eban stepped back. He looked into the other man's eyes. Luke was attractive, but Eban had had no sexual feelings toward him while he touched him. He had only thought of him as the host of a part of Conrad. He needed Christian and Luke to be together, so that Luke would remain a part of Eban's life.

He smiled sadly and turned around. He made his way back down the hall to the front door without saying goodbye to Darius.

Chapter 25

IT WAS Damien's first day back at work on Monday. As soon as his eyes opened, ten minutes before his alarm went off, a black cloud enveloped him. *I can't go back there, it will kill me the way the bullet didn't.* Somehow he dragged himself into the shower, drank a cup of coffee, and drove as slowly as he could to work, still making it in time.

In the staff room, there was a banner up—*Welcome back, Damien*—and a cake, doctors and nurses coming forward to kiss him and shake his hand. Damien was pretty sure he was going to start bawling like a baby. He cut the cake and someone dished it out, and he ate a piece without tasting anything.

Then he was out there, taking the first card from the box, reading the triage nurse's notes. *Lump on neck for six years. Not seen own doctor. Reports increased pain this week.* He sighed. Yes, he was back. On his most sarcastic days, he would ask the patient, "What about this is an emergency, exactly?" Today he didn't even have the energy to waste his breath.

BY ONE o'clock, things had heated up. Already they had had a heroin overdose and a fatal stabbing. Damien ate his lunch, trying hard to answer questions about his health politely, while thinking about Eban and wondering why he hadn't had his ex in his bed all weekend. He was dragged unceremoniously off his lunch by his chief resident, who needed a team for an emergency call which was, to all intents and purposes, a sudden infant death.

Damien didn't like children. He hated old people, he hated adults, he hated drunks and junkies, but most of all he hated children because they were the only ones who made him actually feel something. He hated the way a child in pain could provoke an instant rush of compassion. He hated the way a dead child gave him nightmares for weeks on end.

He stood there at the door to the resus room, gloved and gowned, watching the paramedic running toward him with a bundle in his arms. *Not today, I don't want to do this today.* The blanket was stripped back and a tiny form was laid out on the stretcher. As Damien moved to seal the mask around the lips and squeeze the bag, he remembered that kiss in Eban's car on Friday night. A kiss which had seemed to awaken him from the dead.

ONCE the baby was pronounced dead, and after Damien had told the parents, forcing himself not to tell them that their baby's blanket had stunk of cigarettes and probably contributed to its sad exit from this world six weeks after it was born, he went back to his lunch.

His sandwich tasted like ashes in his mouth, and he threw it in the trash. Across the table, Isabelle looked at him with concern.

"Okay?"

Damien nodded, sucking on a Coke, eyes averted. A straight part of him, buried somewhere beneath years of homosexuality, had always found Isabelle attractive despite the fact she was married. He was sure she felt the same way.

"How's Eban?"

Damien bit his lip. "I want him back but I think he should work for it. I don't want to make it easy on him."

"And I think you should give the guy a break."

Damien lifted his head in surprise. Isabelle had never voiced this opinion before.

"You've tortured him for nearly eight months. I think that's more than enough. He's not going to do it again. Now take him back."

"I took him to dinner on Friday and kissed him in the car. When he wanted to come in, I said no."

"That was cruel of you."

Damien nodded in agreement. "It was. And it was only cutting my nose off to spite my face. I wanted him just as much."

"Why don't you call him and ask him to come over tonight?" Isabelle suggested gently.

"I might." Damien stood and threw his can in the trash. He squeezed Isabelle's shoulder as he passed her.

He went straight to the men's bathroom and took out his cell. He tried not to see the image of the dead baby as the number rang.

"Hey."

"Hello." Eban's tone was a little frosty, which was fine because it wasn't as though Damien wasn't used to it.

"Can I take you out again tonight?"

Eban hesitated. "Yeah."

"Shall I pick you up?"

"Sure. Eight?"

"Okay. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Anywhere."

"All right. And Eban?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry. About Friday night. I should have asked you to come in."

"It's fine."

"See you tonight, then."

"Bye." Eban hung up.

AT WORK, Eban glanced sideways at Aaron as he put his cell away.

"So," Aaron said, "you got your ticket to the cops' ball yet?"

"What cops' ball?" Eban asked, feigning ignorance when he knew all about it, seeing as he had attended the last nine.

"The social event of the year," Aaron said sarcastically. "Next Saturday."

Eban shrugged. "I'll pass."

"You can't. They're presenting the bravery awards. You're up for at least half a dozen."

"I'm not."

"Well then, one that I know of, when you saved all those people at the ER."

"I didn't save them," Eban muttered, "I had Jamie Smith with me. It was a joint effort."

"Whatever. All I know is that if you're not there, it'll be severely frowned upon by the department."

Eban sighed.

"There's an open bar," Aaron added with a smirk.

Eban perked up, because there hadn't been an open bar in the previous nine years. "Is that so? Well, I could show my face for a couple I guess."

Aaron smiled. "You'd better get your date sorted out, then."

Eban frowned a little. "I don't think so."

There was the rub. For the first four years, he had attended the event with whatever willing woman he could find at the time. For the past five years, he had gone alone, unwilling to make a statement by taking Damien. To Damien's everlasting chagrin. He had always been insulted and cheapened at Eban's refusal to present him to his colleagues, instead preferring to carry on living a lie. It had been a source of yearly friction between the two, Damien putting up a fight every year and going to stay with friends for two

days, until Eban begged him to come back and Damien did, the ball swept under the rug for another year.

The sad thing was that Eban more than understood why this pissed Damien off so much. *If Conrad had ever left Christian for me, would I have been so happy and proud that I would have taken him to the cops' ball and fuck what everyone thought?*

"Are you back with Damien?" Aaron broke into his thoughts.

"Not exactly."

"But you could take him?"

Eban shook his head. "I'm not... *out* at work. I couldn't turn up with Damien on my arm and don't tell me you're going to do the same."

"No," Aaron said, "I don't think you'd appreciate me turning up with Damien on my arm."

"That wasn't what I meant," Eban growled humorlessly.

"Sorry. I'm not seeing anyone, but if I was, I would take him."

"You would?"

"Yeah. And there's at least three guys at our station who are taking their male partners with them and at least four women who are taking their female."

"Is that so?"

"It is. I think you should take Damien. This is the twenty-first century, dude, no one's going to shout *queer* at you over the hors d'oeuvres."

"Thanks for that."

DAMIEN arrived promptly at eight, solicitously holding the car door open for Eban as he got in. *This is like the early days, where Damien was kind and good and fun, because he wanted something from me. Later on, he didn't want much at all.*

They drove in silence, heading toward the beach. "Where shall we go?" Damien asked, resting his hand on Eban's knee.

Eban put his own on top of it lightly. He thought of being naked and sweaty beneath Adam. "I don't know."

"Me either. Shall I drive aimlessly around?"

Eban laughed a little. "Sure."

After another few minutes, Damien said, "We could go swimming."

"What?" Eban asked in surprise, thinking of how long it had taken him to style his hair. "It's dark."

"So? It's still warm," Damien said with a grin. "I haven't forgotten how you like your evening swims."

Eban smiled. "I haven't any shorts," he said coyly.

"No, but I bet you have your best boxers on, right?"

Eban flushed a little and didn't reply because obviously, everyone always wore their best underwear on a date, whether they were intending to get laid or not, and Eban was no exception.

The two men caused quite a stir among the evening strollers and dog-walkers by stripping off their clothes, leaving them in a heap at the shoreline and running into the empty sea in their underwear, plunging beneath the waves in glee.

They came up laughing, racing each other to a distant buoy, Eban winning because he was stronger and more fit, turning to grin at Damien, who came up panting behind him, droplets of water gleaming on his lashes, his blond hair plastered to his skull. The two treaded water for a few moments before Damien put an arm around Eban's neck, almost dragging them both beneath the surface as he gave him a salt-water kiss.

Eban loved swimming, felt uninhibited and free and something approaching happy while he was immersed in the water. He knew the feeling wouldn't last.

Going back to Damien wouldn't be so easy, no matter how he desired it. They hadn't been happy in so long before they broke up. He was afraid things would simply fall back into the static rut they had been in before Eban had screwed Jack just to make Damien take some notice of him.

But the kiss deepened, bodies molding together beneath the surface, legs kicking in tandem to keep them afloat, hands gripping wet skin a little desperately. Eban was oblivious to anybody on the shore who might be watching, only wrapped up in this moment which he thought would never happen again and which he wanted never to end.

Only when they had both sunk below the surface and come up spluttering, and Damien had started to grope Eban below the water, did they part, swimming slowly back some yards to where they could stand up. Once they could just about put their toes down, they embraced again fiercely, Damien drawing Eban free, sliding his hand rapidly up and down his shaft, while Eban panted a little and looked around with paranoid eyes. But they were still far from shore and there were no other swimmers around.

"Fuck..." he moaned, burying his face in Damien's neck while releasing Damien, too, from his boxers and starting to jerk him off.

Damien groaned and clutched a handful of Eban's wet hair, dropping kisses on his forehead, eyes closed in rapture.

Eban came first, his hand tightening on Damien as he gasped against his neck, his other arm around his back, nails digging in.

Damien came a moment later, groaning his appreciation, thrusting hard into Eban's willing hand. "I love you," he moaned, "I love you so much."

They swam back to the shore in silence and sat there just out of reach of the advancing tide while they dried off. Finally, they pulled clothes onto still-damp skin, and taking their shoes and socks in their hands, made their way back to Damien's car.

DAMIEN was feisty and demanding beneath Eban that night, begging him for more with every kiss and every caress, causing Eban to remember just how good it had once been.

Afterward, they lay sweatily entwined for the longest time before Damien spoke.

"I want you back."

Eban moved onto his back. "I don't know what changed your mind when you said you'd never forgive me. When you said you didn't love me anymore. When I told you I was in love with Conrad." He turned his head to look into the gray eyes of his lover.

"I know," Damien said. "But I'm a liar. I'll always love you and I'll always want you back."

"But you don't forgive me."

Damien didn't reply.

"Do you want me back so you can continue to punish me for Jack?"

"No," Damien said immediately, a frown furrowing his brow. "That's done. I mean it."

Eban sighed heavily. "But what's changed? You're still in a job that makes you miserable and you'll still take it out on me."

Damien shook his head. "I've changed. I know it was all my fault. And I want to spend the rest of my life making that up to you."

Eban regarded him intently. "Quit your job," he said boldly.

Damien stared at him. "Quit yours too," he shot back.

Eban shook his head. "Oh no. The difference is that I *like* my job. I'm not going to quit it just because *you* don't like it. Whereas your job has made you miserable for years. It broke us up."

"Your inability to keep your dick in your pants broke us up," Damien responded acerbically.

"There you go again." Eban moved to the edge of the bed, looking around for his clothes.

"Don't go," Damien said behind him. "I'm sorry. You can gag me for the rest of the night."

Eban sighed. "Don't give me ideas." He lay down and put an arm around Damien.

"Say you'll come back," Damien said in a small voice, a more desperate voice than Eban had ever heard before. "*Please.*"

Eban looked down at him. He wanted this. He only had to say yes and he had his life back, he had a body warm beside his at night and someone who still loved him no matter what.

He nodded mutely and watched the smile which lit up Damien's face, the rush of grateful tears to his eyes. He smiled, too, threading his fingers through Damien's soft hair, glad that he had made someone else happy for once in his miserable life.

He ignored the fact that the smile on his face stretched his mouth uncomfortably.

Chapter 26

EBAN stayed at Damien's for the rest of the week. Damien worked early shifts and Eban worked late shifts. Damien woke him with a kiss in the morning, showered and dressed, then kissed the still-slumbering Eban again before he left. When Eban got home, he would find dinner on the table at nine thirty and Damien obediently on his back by eleven.

Eban didn't call Christian. The way he saw it, Christian had earned a well-deserved break from him over the last eight months. He did text him. *Hope you're okay. I miss you.*

Christian replied a few hours later. *I'm okay and I miss you too. Back Saturday three thirty. Can you meet me?*

Eban replied that he would, relieved that Christian really was coming back after a week.

Damien tiptoed around him on eggshells, pandering to his every whim, asking him if he needed anything, if he was feeling okay, how work was, was he tired or would he like to watch TV a while?

By Friday evening, Eban felt exhausted. This was not Damien. Damien was an inconsiderate asshole, only concerned with how the weight of what he saw at work dragged him down beyond despair. A leopard didn't change its spots.

When Damien got up to clear the dishes after a superlative meal, mumbling about dessert, Eban gripped his wrist roughly, keeping him in place. "I don't want fucking dessert. I want you to quit this act, because you don't fool me."

Damien, standing staring down at him, abruptly burst into tears.

Eban, startled at this outburst of emotion, pulled him instantly onto his knee and held him there.

"I'm just trying..." Damien sobbed, "I want to be perfect for you."

"Christ," Eban muttered, stroking his hair. "I don't want you to be perfect; I just want you to be *you*. Bring the old Damien back."

"Oh, you don't want the old Damien back." Damien lifted his head, sniffing, wiping the back of his hand roughly over his face. "There was nothing about that bastard to love."

Eban smiled gently and wiped the tears clinging to Damien's lower lashes. "You're wrong."

Damien buried his face against his shoulder again, shaking his head.

Eban looked around for a way to placate him and pulled a rabbit from the hat. "Want to come to the cops' ball with me tomorrow?" He saw this taboo subject as a way to really make a statement to Damien. Tears always worked with Eban, always made him promise the crier the earth.

Damien raised swollen eyes to Eban and stared. "Are you serious? You want to take me?"

Eban nodded.

"And who will you introduce me as?" Damien asked a little cynically.

"Damien the asshole?"

Damien pulled an angry face but lowered his face to Eban's shoulder anyway, holding him tight. The two exchanged no further words before they made their way upstairs, undressed, and slid beneath the covers.

CHRISTIAN looked a little tanned as he appeared through the gates pushing a luggage cart with his bags on it. Damien was off work all day, but Eban told him he would go home with Christian for the afternoon and then pick Damien up later for the ball. He made no further comment about Damien apologizing to Christian, because he felt no need to. But he did leave Christian's number written on a scrap of paper on Damien's bedside table before he left.

"Hey," he greeted Christian with a smile, moving forward to embrace him, hoping he wouldn't be rejected. But Christian returned his hug hard, which made Eban's bleak heart sing with relief.

The two got in Eban's car and set off through the weekend traffic, a CD playing, the air conditioning on full. Eban tried to think of a way to broach the subject of Luke.

"Was it a nice break?"

"Yeah. My parents asked about you."

Eban smiled wryly. "And what did you say? That I'm falling apart?"

"Something like that. How's it going?"

"I'm back with Damien."

"Oh."

Eban sighed. "It's okay. If it's a mistake, you can tell me you told me so."

"I wouldn't say that, Eban. I don't want you to get hurt again. That wouldn't give me any sort of pleasure."

Eban concentrated on the road. "What about Luke?"

"What about him?"

"Have you come to a decision?"

"I came to a decision before I went to Miami," Christian said brusquely. "You know that."

"And I also know you didn't mean it and that you've spent a week thinking about whether you made the right decision or not."

Christian was silent.

"Have you changed your mind?"

"No."

Eban sighed. "I don't believe you."

Christian didn't reply.

HIS friend was clearly taken aback when they got home and Eban announced he was taking Damien to the ball. Christian knew only too well how this had been a source of friction between the couple for five years running and was amazed that Eban had finally given in.

Later, as he stood tying Eban's bow tie, he remarked, "I guess this means you really want to make a go of it with Damien, if you're actually coming out to your colleagues after ten years."

Eban didn't reply to this because his stomach was too consumed with anxiety and he felt like he would puke at any moment. Instead, he said, "I need a drink. Come and have a beer in the garden with me."

It was still hot out as the two of them sat on the swing chair, watching their resident bold-as-brass squirrel come to feed at the bird table right in front of them.

"I went to see Luke," Eban said quietly.

Christian almost spat his beer out. "You did *what*?"

"Calm down. I wanted to tell him where you were. So he didn't worry."

"You don't have to inform him of my whereabouts like he has some fucking right to know."

"Whatever. If you could only see what you've done to him."

Christian didn't reply. He turned his face up the sinking sun and closed his eyes.

EBAN took a cab to Damien's and told the driver to beep his horn while they waited outside. The door to Damien's house opened within a minute, and Eban stared as something he had never seen before swept down the drive to the car. Damien in a tuxedo.

Eban's jaw hung open as Damien opened the door and climbed in and the driver stepped on the gas. Damien, blond hair gelled severely into place, bow tie slightly crooked, smelling strongly of cologne, whistled at Eban. "Wow."

"Wow yourself," Eban croaked, thinking of fucking Damien fully dressed later on.

"You seriously deprived me for five years by not letting me see you in a tux."

Eban's face fell as he remembered the endless fights over the cops' ball. And how he had never once thought to back down. He knew now that Damien had always held that against him, seeing it as an example of Eban's lack of commitment. He bit his lip and looked out of the window, but he didn't say sorry. The time for that was long past. And besides, he had bigger things to worry about, like which other cops would be at the ball.

HE KNEW it was a mistake from the moment he entered the function room, Damien walking close beside him but not touching him after a stern no *public displays of affection* talking-to from Eban. Damien was notoriously free with his hands after a drink, and Eban didn't want the entire department thinking he was the world's biggest fag, even if it was true.

The evening soon went rapidly downhill. Seated at his table was Aaron. Eban had not had reason to speculate that he would be at their table because in the past years, he had rarely been seated with his partner. The fact that he was tonight caused him unnecessary anxiety as Aaron looked up and smiled, greeting Eban, his eyes flickering nervously to Damien, giving him a nod.

Damien was the calmest of the three. "Hi there," he greeted Aaron with the most flirtatious smirk Eban had ever seen. Eban's blood boiled and he longed to drag Damien outside right then. Damien put his drink down and then boldly took the seat next to Aaron.

For a moment Eban stared in disbelief. What was this? Some sort of cunning plan by Damien to rub his face in the fact he had screwed Aaron who knew how many times? Was that what tonight was about?

"Move," he said between his teeth.

Damien looked up at him in surprise.

"That's not your seat," Eban hissed. "Yours is over there." He pointed to the opposite side of the table, having read the place cards as they approached.

Damien shrugged, not looking fazed, but avoided eye contact with Eban as he took his drink and moved to the opposite side of the table. Aaron looked uncomfortable and was relieved when someone stopped by to talk to him.

Eban sat down. He leaned toward Damien. "You do that again, you'll be picking your teeth up later."

Damien didn't reply, only kept his eyes fixed on the table. Eban sat back and looked around, wondering if he was being gossiped about already, but no one seemed that interested in his choice of date that evening. Apart, that was, from one man, two tables away.

Eban's stomach lurched up into his mouth. If he had thought Damien in a tux was hot, then this effect was tenfold. He felt sick, sweaty, and dizzy all at once. He felt drunk with lust and started to stiffen immediately. Oh Jesus, Darius in a tuxedo, what image could be hotter than that? For a moment he imagined himself lying handcuffed to a bed, with Darius slowly stripping in front of him. It was all he could do not to groan.

Darius felt his gaze suddenly. He looked over, glancing at Damien and back to Eban before turning his back resolutely.

Eban stood up and moved to the bar.

Jamie Smith was at the bar with his girlfriend. "Hey, man," he greeted Eban, slapping him on the shoulder. "Nice to see you brought Damien finally. I didn't realize you two were back together."

Eban smiled wryly. Jamie was one of the few people who knew about Eban and he had met Damien several times. "Yeah. I *had* to this year," he tried to joke, his eyes straying back to the table and watching Damien in conversation with Aaron.

"Well, I'd say he's the one who wears the pants in the family, except that doesn't really work in this situation," Jamie teased. "You having some champagne?"

Eban took the proffered glass with relief and downed half of it, looking first at Damien, then over at Darius, who was looking his way again.

With a start, he realized Luke was sitting next to him, ivory pale against the black of his hair and tuxedo. Eban frowned. What was this? Luke was Darius's *date*? He felt an unreasonable jealousy spear his bitter little heart. Luke looked undeniably good in a tux. *I should take a picture now and send it*

to Christian; it would have him running over here with his tongue out in an instant.

"We're at your table," Jamie said to Eban, startling him out of his introspection, following Eban's gaze to see what was so interesting. "Put your eyes back in."

Eban flushed.

The conversation between Damien and Aaron ceased as Eban arrived back. A few more colleagues were joining their table now, greeting Eban, looking curiously at Damien, whom Eban made no effort to introduce.

Damien cleared his throat. "I couldn't help noticing when you were at the bar, that guy over there keeps looking at you."

Eban poured himself another glass of champagne.

"Do you know him?"

"Never seen him before in my life."

To his relief, the appetizer arrived at that point.

EBAN was drunk by the end of the main course and relaxing a little despite the triple stressors of Aaron, Damien, and Darius, and despite the fact Damien was constantly looking over at Darius.

"He's still fucking looking," Damien said angrily as their plates were cleared away.

"No, he's not, give it a rest."

"He is, I'm going to have to say something in a minute."

"Get a grip," Eban hissed. "I won't have you making a scene in front of my goddamn colleagues. Leave it the hell alone."

Damien lasted until dessert, his body getting tenser and stiffer until finally he exploded. He was up from the table, muttering, "That's fucking *it*," under his breath before Eban could even react.

He scrambled up, knocking over his glass, too late to stop Damien from arriving at Darius's table and furiously confronting him. Darius lowered the spoon from his mouth in surprise as Damien loomed over him.

"You need to stop looking at my partner right now before I knock you the fuck out!"

Darius arched a brow and responded coolly. "Partner? Ah, you must be the famous Damien."

Eban arrived and grabbed hold of his arm.

“*What?*” Damien demanded, whirling to face Eban. “You said you didn’t know him!”

Eban’s eyes met Darius’s, glittering like sapphires with sardonic amusement and something else—pain.

“Oh, he knows me all right,” Darius said, laughing at Damien. “Is that what he told you?”

“Leave it,” Eban growled, fingers tightening on Damien’s arm, glowering at Darius.

“I won’t fucking leave it.” People at the table were standing up now, in case this degenerated into a free-for-all.

“Hey, little man,” Luke drawled suddenly from Darius’s side, “go back to your table; you’re putting me off my cheesecake.”

Damien lunged abruptly at him, and it took every ounce of strength Eban had to drag him back. He bundled Damien roughly away from the table, glaring at Luke and Darius.

He marched Damien straight into the bathroom, shoving him roughly inside, starting to yell the minute the door closed behind them.

“What the fuck are you doing? Why are you so intent on ruining tonight?”

“You fucked him!” Damien screamed back at him, blood-red in the face.

“Yes, I did. I wasn’t with you. I don’t have to answer to you. He was one of fucking many.”

Damien slapped him hard across the face, stunning him. Eban stared at him for a moment before responding. “You still fight like a chick. Didn’t I teach you anything in self-defense lessons? No wonder you got fucking shot.”

“You shit,” Damien spat. His eyes were gleaming with tears. Abruptly he stalked from the bathroom.

Eban remained where he was for a few minutes, bending over the sink, his cheek flaming where Damien had slapped him, trying to resist the urge to punch his fist through the mirror. The door opened behind him, and he looked up slowly at the reflection of the man behind him.

Chapter 27

EBAN groaned. "If he saw you coming in here..."

"He didn't," Darius replied. "He's gone outside."

Eban shook his head, lowering his gaze to the sink again. "You need to go right now."

"I'm not going anywhere." Soft fingertips slid onto the back of Eban's neck.

Eban flinched as though burned, bumping his head against the mirror, turning around quickly. "Don't. Don't make things worse."

Darius shook his head. "How could they be any worse? Are you back with Damien?"

"Yes," Eban said, looking him in the eye, not liking the obvious hurt this word inflicted.

Darius was silent a moment. "Why?"

Eban frowned at him. To his surprise, an answer was not readily forthcoming.

Darius looked at him almost sympathetically. He moved forward suddenly so he had Eban crushed against the sink. In an almost whisper, ocean-blue eyes intent, he said, "I could give you so much more than he could ever give you. I could give you the love he's clearly not given you for so long."

Eban's eyes abruptly welled with tears. He tried to shake his head, but Darius already had his fingers tangled in his hair and was kissing him like he had a point to prove, like he was a contestant in the world kissing championships and this was the final.

Eban melted into submission. His arms went around Darius's neck, pulling the other man to him, returning his kiss desperately.

Eban was the first to drag Darius to a cubicle by the hand. Darius tried to protest. "I don't want you this way," he said, his words smothered by Eban's mouth as he locked the door behind them and pushed Darius against the wall.

Eban ignored him as he fumbled anxiously with Darius's pants, freeing him before sinking to his knees and taking him in his mouth.

LUKE sat unnoticed and alone at the table, certainly having more fun than he would have had at home. He had almost been up for a fight with Damien to relieve some of his anger and frustration. The guy seemed like an asshole. He wondered why Eban preferred him when he could have had one of the nicest guys in the world instead.

He had watched Damien stalk from the bathroom and noticed the blond-haired guy from Eban's table get up and follow him outside. Interesting. He glanced at Darius, who then got up abruptly and disappeared into the bathroom himself.

Luke sighed, pouring himself another glass of wine. He had agreed to accompany Darius here tonight for moral support in case he bumped into Eban, but he had had an ulterior motive of his own. He really hoped they did bump into Eban because he needed to ask him if Christian was back from Florida. He glanced toward the bathroom again. Now was probably not the time to ask that question.

WITH back turned and hands spread against the wall, Darius moaned as Eban rocked slowly into him, taking his time, his mouth leaving urgent marks on Darius's neck beneath the stiff collar of his shirt, breath rasping against his ear.

Eban tried to dismiss the thought that everything about this felt so right and perfect as merely champagne-induced euphoria. If this had been Damien against the wall, he would have felt exactly the same, he reasoned to himself. But Darius's body, the same size and the same height as his, seemed to welcome him like no other, seemed to stretch around him as though Eban belonged there. He was a fool. In the morning he would be sober and facing the very real prospect that he had cheated on Damien again within a week of getting back together with him.

At the moment he couldn't have cared less. The only thing that existed for him right now was the heat of Darius surrounding him and the solid muscle of the body he was pressed against.

Darius shuddered in delight and grew louder. Eban reached around and put a hand across his mouth. "Shush," he said with a smile, while his other hand jerked Darius off smoothly.

Darius panted against his hand. "Fuck," he moaned almost incomprehensibly, "please, Eban, make me come."

Eban bit his earlobe lightly with a sigh. "You are so beautiful," he breathed as he felt Darius start to come, and it triggered his own climax.

It was truly an incredible orgasm. Eban saw stars behind his closed eyes, which didn't happen to him an awful lot. He fell against Darius, pinning him to the wall, dimly aware of the way his lover still writhed against him, the mouth under his hand crying out.

AFTER a few moments of silence, Eban moved away and started to dress. Darius did the same, keeping his face turned away. When Eban went to unlock the door, Darius gripped his arm.

"Don't," Eban said, gaze averted, "don't say anything. Please." He shrugged free, opened the door, and moved to the sinks, dumping his condom in the trash and washing his hands, splashing a little water on his face.

"You can't just fuck me then ask me not to say anything," Darius said in a low voice behind him. "I want you to think about what I said. I made you an offer. I want to be with you."

Eban shook his head, drying his hands on a paper towel, avoiding Darius's reflection in the mirror. "I'm with Damien. I'm *always* going to be with Damien."

"See, that's strange," Darius said, "because I keep getting the impression that Damien wasn't the one you were in love with."

Eban's startled eyes jerked to his in the mirror, effortlessly giving Darius the answer he sought.

Darius nodded. "Thought so. You poor man."

Eban was taken aback. A treacherous lump enveloped his throat. He was getting sympathy from someone for the despicable fact of being in love with Conrad?

He turned around, opening his mouth and then closing it again, afraid.

"Tell me," Darius said gently. "If you want to tell me, I'll listen."

Eban bit his lip. "I never spoke to anyone else in my life before about Conrad."

"That must have been terrible for you, never being able to share your feelings," Darius responded, dark blue eyes tender.

Eban swallowed. "I slept with him only once, when we were sixteen. He told me after that we shouldn't do it again. I waited so long for him to change his mind. And then he met Christian. And instead of giving up, I kept on waiting. I waited half my life for him and then he was gone and it was all for *nothing*. Do you understand why I don't see the point in carrying on?"

Darius's face settled into a frown. "This can't go on. You need to speak to a bereavement counselor, Eban. I can get you a phone number."

“Fuck that. I’m not some sort of basket case.”

“I never said you were. What about Damien?”

Eban turned away again. He hung his head, leaning over the sink. “I did love Damien. I still do. But I loved Conrad, too, maybe in a different way, maybe in a way I’ll never love anyone again.” He felt like a part of the lead weighting his heart was lifting as he spoke these words.

He felt Darius’s hand on the back of his neck, fingers stroking. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” Eban’s voice trembled. “If Christian ever finds out....”

“Who’s he going to find out from? Not from me.”

Eban turned around and held Darius tightly.

AARON had tried to placate Damien outside. It resulted in a hard kiss around the back of the restaurant, one which stunned both men a little, before Damien pulled away and headed back inside.

The first thing he saw was Darius moving back to his table. The second was Eban exiting the bathroom. Damien put two and two together and came up with four. A red mist descended on him. Darius never even saw the punch coming before he was on his back in a shower of glass and plates, the table collapsing beneath him, women screaming as their ball gowns were splashed with wine and coffee.

“You fucking bastard.”

Darius got to his feet and hit Damien right back, sending him into the table behind him, knocking glasses over and shattering a vase of flowers.

Eban ran over as the two men fell to the floor, grappling violently, landing blows on each other. Jamie was there first, hauling Darius off the top of Damien and dragging him to his feet, while Damien was pulled unceremoniously to his feet by a disgusted Eban.

“He’s not yours,” Damien yelled at Darius, trying to break free of Eban. “Why don’t you stick to Goth-boy over there?”

Luke, who had remained seated amidst the wreckage of the table, watching the fight with amusement, bristled at this and stood up, regarding Damien haughtily. “Outside, now.”

“My fucking pleasure.” Damien’s lip was split and his eye already swelling. He broke free of Eban and stalked toward the door, glaring at Darius as he did.

Eban turned around and placed a firm hand on Luke's chest as he made to follow. "You're not fighting Damien," he said in a tone which brooked no arguments.

"He's asking for it," Luke growled.

"And he fucking *got* it from Darius; now leave it."

People were drifting back to their conversations after having been riveted by the fight, waiters coming over to clear away the broken dishes.

Eban looked over at Darius, who had a cut along the line of his eyebrow which dribbled blood steadily. Luke went over to him, handing him a handkerchief.

"Is Christian back?" he asked Eban.

Eban nodded.

"Has he said anything?"

"No." With one last regretful look at Darius, Eban left the room.

There was no sign of Damien outside, which Eban was inordinately grateful for. It was likely he would have beaten him to a pulp if he had been. But then he looked at it from Damien's point of view. He had obviously realized Eban and Darius had been going at it in the bathroom. Could Eban blame him for being murderously jealous?

He guessed he couldn't, but still, his insides burned with anger at the fact Darius had been hurt.

He loitered outside on the street a few minutes, pacing angrily, trying to compose himself, telling himself he wasn't going to go around to Damien's and knock seven shades of shit out of him when all this was his own damn fault.

Footsteps behind him distracted him, and he turned to see Darius and Luke. "We're going," Luke said. "Want to come with us for a drink?"

Eban was taken aback by this generosity. He nodded as Luke flagged down a cab, the bravery award he was supposed to be getting now forgotten.

INSIDE Luke's apartment, Eban and Darius sat opposite each other trying to ignore the tension rising between them yet again while Luke made coffee and Eban wondered what Luke would say if, on his return, he had Darius on hands and knees on one of his expensive rugs. It was fair to say he was insatiable for Darius. Every time he looked at him, he was desperate to possess him.

Luke came back with three cups of coffee on a tray and some cookies. He put them down on the table before taking the stereo remote from the arm of the couch and pointing it over to the system in the corner.

"So," Luke said, sitting next to Darius and taking his coffee, a false smile stretching his lips, his eyes too bright. "Good night, then?"

Darius snorted with sardonic laughter. He reached out and squeezed Luke's knee comfortingly.

"Frankly," Eban said. "If there's not going to be a good fight at the end of it, I don't see any point in going out."

All three men laughed.

Luke stood up with his cup. "I'm going to bed. There's a spare room if you want to stay, Eban. But keep it quiet, I don't need you reminding me of what I've lost." He walked out of the living room.

Eban and Darius looked at each other.

"Are you staying?" Darius asked.

"I can't. If I do, I'm only going to go back to him in the morning. I need you to know that."

"Then if this is the last time, let's make it good."

Eban looked at Darius sadly. He moved to sit beside him, running fingertips down his soft cheek. "Why didn't I meet you years ago?"

There was a heavy silence as the two men leaned toward each other and kissed. When they parted, Darius led Eban by the hand into Luke's spare bedroom.

Darius took his time unfastening Eban's bow tie, his hands trembling as he popped the buttons of Eban's shirt open and slid it off his shoulders, the two of them laughing a little as his hands got caught in the cuffs. Instead of tugging and pulling in desperation, Darius worked his cufflinks free slowly and patiently. Then he brought both Eban's hands to his mouth one after the other and kissed the insides of his wrists before linking them around his own neck and moving into Eban's semi-naked body, seeking his mouth.

They kissed and touched for so long that it was another half hour before they were both naked on the bed. They had never had this luxury before, this shameless exploration of each other's body where each touched and memorized every curve, every inch of skin, every mole and freckle, and every scar. When Darius pressed Eban onto his back, he didn't complain. He lay there and tried his best to stifle his cries of pleasure as Darius moved inside him, mouth never leaving his.

EBAN awoke at six thirty, the darkness in the room still absolute, the man beside him breathing softly. He slid from Darius's embrace and got up, searching the floor quietly for his clothes, dressing slowly.

On the carpet by his foot, he noticed something. Crushed and wilted, it was the blood-red rose Darius had worn in the buttonhole of his tuxedo. Eban stooped down, plucked it up from the floor, and brought it to his nose, inhaling deeply as though it carried Darius's scent.

He placed the flower carefully into his pocket and walked back to the bed. Leaning down over Darius, he murmured, "I'm sorry."

As he pressed a kiss lightly to the sleeping man's lips, Darius's eyes flickered open. His lips moved under Eban's, and an arm went around his neck, trying to pull him back into bed. Eban resisted, returning the kiss but putting a hand to Darius's wrist, removing his arm firmly. He drew back, brought his lover's hand to his mouth and kissed the palm, looking down at him.

"Goodbye."

Darius didn't reply. He was ghostly pale in the darkness, his eyes black, the whites gleaming and wet. Eban stepped back, and their hands slid slowly apart. Even as Eban left the room he felt like an invisible thread still joined them.

HE FOUND Christian in the garden, smoking a joint he had clearly stolen from Eban's room. Christian jumped and cursed as Eban appeared at the French windows. "Shit, what are you doing back? I thought you were staying at Damien's?" His gaze ran over Eban's disheveled form, taking in the missing bow tie, the unruly hair.

Eban sank down next to him and took the joint from him. "I fucked Darius. In the bathroom at the ball." He took a drag on the joint and handed it back.

"Fuck!"

"And then Damien and Darius had a fistfight...."

Christian's jaw was literally hanging open.

"Then I went back to Luke's and fucked Darius again."

Christian's mouth closed. His eyes glistened in the light of the gathering dawn. "You were at Luke's?"

"He was with Darius. He asked me to come back with them for a drink. He said I could stay the night."

Christian lowered his head, looking at his hands which were clutching his knees. "Did he...?"

“Yes, he did, of course he did. He asked if you were back. He asked if you had said anything about him. I told him no. He asked me and Darius to keep it down so we wouldn’t remind him of what he had lost.”

Christian’s head snapped up. His lip was caught by his teeth but still trembled.

Eban put a hand on his. “I don’t believe you haven’t changed your mind about him. I know you still want him.”

There was silence.

“Say it.”

Christian shook his head. “I can’t.”

“But I know it’s true.” Eban said in frustration.

“It’s true,” Christian said in a barely audible voice. “But I *can*’t.”

“Because you’re scared.”

The first tears started to leak from Christian’s eyes. He nodded wordlessly.

“I *know*.” Eban leaned close and swept a thumb over Christian’s cheek. “Because I feel the same.” He put an arm around Christian’s shoulders and drew him against his chest.

EBAN didn’t sleep, only lay in his bed, holding the crushed red rose in his hand in quiet contemplation until ten when it was time to get up and make amends. He sat at the kitchen table while Christian made him coffee and eggs, then he put his sunglasses on, stepped out of the house, and got into his car. With A/C on full and a heart-rending ballad on the stereo, he drove over to Damien’s.

JUST after Eban had left, Christian’s cell rang and with a start, he saw Damien’s name on the caller ID.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Christian, it’s Damien,” came an awkward voice.

“Hi, Damien, what can I do for you?”

Damien sighed. “This is so hard.”

Christian didn’t reply. Whatever it was, he hoped his silence made it harder.

“Eban demanded that I make an apology to you.”

Christian, taken aback, said, "Don't be forced to say anything you don't want to."

"No," Damien interjected. "I do want to, Christian. It was so wrong of me. I used you as some sort of pawn to hurt Eban. I never should have told you about him and Conrad."

"What did they do?" The words came out of Christian's mouth before he could stop them.

"What?"

"Conrad. Did he... have an affair with Eban?"

"No. Jesus, no, Christian. It was one time. Hasn't Eban told you that?"

"Yeah, but..."

"That was it."

"There was nothing else? No... secret meetings or...?"

"No, Christian. I was with Eban for five years. Don't you think I would have known?"

"Was Conrad in love with him?"

Damien paused a moment. "No, Christian."

"You don't sound sure."

"I *am* sure. He was in love with *you*. For ten fucking years. There was no one else. You were the love of his life and you know it. Stop looking for reasons to taint your memories of him just because I put this poison in your head."

Christian sat down at the kitchen table, eyes closed.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"Okay."

"Bye, Christian."

"Goodbye."

AT HOME, still curled beneath the covers of his bed where he had spent a lonely night, Damien sighed with relief that Christian hadn't asked him that question the opposite way around. Was Eban in love with Conrad? Because he doubted even *his* ability to lie was that good.

EBAN knocked nervously at the door and eyed the scruffy shape that opened it. Damien looked hung over, blond hair hanging over his bloodshot eyes, wearing a T-shirt and boxers. He regarded Eban stonily. Eban didn't even know where to start.

"Did you fuck him?" were Damien's first blunt words.

Eban felt he had no choice but to lie. To tell the truth would mean he would be banished from Damien's life forever, a thought he couldn't bear. "No. He's just... someone I saw a couple of times while me and you were apart. That's all." He looked steadily into Damien's gray eyes.

I am despicable. I am a worthless specimen of humanity.

When they were seated on opposite couches with cups of coffee, Eban said, "You shouldn't have done that last night. He didn't deserve it."

"Why are you defending him? You should be defending *me*; I'm your partner."

"Damien, you launched an unprovoked attack on him. We were over weeks ago. I'm going to be gossiped about from now until Christmas at work."

Damien shrugged. "The only thing worse than being talked about is *not* being talked about."

"Fuck off with the Oscar Wilde. It might be easy for you to be as camp as a row of fucking tents in the ER, but things are a little more macho with the big boys."

Damien looked repentant. "Who was that smart-ass he was with? Jesus, I would have loved to knock him the fuck out. Was that his new fling?"

Eban shook his head, almost smiling at the memory of Luke's big mouth. "That was Darius's friend Luke. He's Christian's new man. Sort of."

Damien's jaw dropped. "Christian's got someone new?"

"Well, he did have. Then he found out Luke got Conrad's heart transplanted into him."

Damien's eyes were like saucers. "You are fucking *shitting* me."

Eban couldn't help but smile. At times like this, he was reminded of how adorable he had once found Damien. "I know, tragic, isn't it?"

"So... what's the deal?" Damien was clearly distracted from his own problems by those of someone far worse off.

"He wants to be with Luke but he's scared. He went around to Luke's drunk after he found out about Conrad's heart and really laid into him. Said some awful shit."

Damien shook his head, clicking his tongue. "And this Luke is an okay guy, is he?"

“Yeah.”

Damien studied him intently. “And how do *you* feel about him having Conrad’s heart?”

Eban lowered his gaze abruptly. “Don’t.”

Damien was silent. He came over to sit beside Eban and drew his head onto his shoulder. Closing his eyes and relaxing into his touch, Eban was relieved that he was back where he belonged and the turmoil was over. But his thoughts drifted back to last night and he knew the sting of that memory would last forever.

Chapter 28

CHRISTIAN awoke way too early for work, lying staring through the window he had not bothered to close the curtains over, watching the coming dawn for the longest time before he realized there was only one logical place to go.

The grass was wet with dew as he walked across it, the graveyard deserted at this ungodly hour. The magnolia tree shading Conrad's grave was no longer in bloom but still green with life as summer came to an end and autumn waited in the wings. Christian remembered how the delicate pink petals had been shed onto the ground that May and how the spring rain had made them cling wetly to Conrad's headstone, as though they wrapped their beauty around the beautiful bones lying beneath.

He fell to his knees, oblivious of the wetness seeping through his pants, and let his forehead rest against the cold marble, one arm wrapped around it as though he could hold Conrad to him again. "My love. What am I going to do? I want him back. How can you forgive me for falling for someone else so soon after you? I thought our love would last forever. And then once you were gone, I thought no one would ever take your place. Until *he* came along."

Hot tears burned his eyes, and he squeezed them shut, trying to hold them back. "What can I do? I'm sorry for sleeping with Eban because I'm sure you would hate me for that, but I'm not sorry for sleeping with Luke. I *can't* be sorry; I needed it. I *still* need it. I feel like he's brought me back to life."

He groaned loudly. "Fuck, *you* were the one to bring Luke back to life. You saved his life. Was it always meant to be? Did I need to lose you in order to find him?"

The tears flowed down his cheeks, try as he might to prevent them. "I want you back. I would take you over him, you know I would. Oh Jesus, I want you back..." He wept loudly, oblivious to his surroundings.

Behind him he heard a rustle of clothing, and startled, he lifted his tear-streaked face to see Conrad's mother standing behind him.

He blinked in confusion and then rubbed an embarrassed hand over his wet face, standing up on unwilling legs.

"Hello, Christian," Mrs. Muller said, oddly without that edge she had always had to her voice when addressing him.

He didn't reply. He only braced himself with his hand on Conrad's headstone possessively, as though his mother had come to snatch him away.

“How are you doing?”

“Like you care,” the acerbic reply spilled from his tongue before he could stop himself.

She shook her head. “Conrad loved you very much, Christian, try as I did to stop him.”

Christian remained silent.

“I was wrong to blame you for his death. I’ve been wondering how you are, now you’re all I have left of him.”

Christian was astonished. But his eyes narrowed quickly and his tone was hard. “You don’t have me. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“Listen... I’m sorry. I need you to forgive me. I treated you so badly when he was alive, and he loved you so much. I was frightened by how fiercely he loved you.”

With a lump in his throat, Christian clutched tighter to the headstone.

“I need to make my peace with Conrad because I feel like he’s cursing me from wherever he is. I see him standing at the end of my bed at night, watching me silently....”

Christian groaned, turning his head away. “I don’t want to hear this.”

“You must. He can’t forgive me for what I’ve done to you. I *need* him to and I need *you* to. I beg you, Christian. I buried my only son. My life is *over*. I will never recover.”

Christian bit his lip hard. All the way through his grief, he had never spared Conrad’s mother more than one bitter thought. What was it like to bury your son? For him to be obliterated from the face of the earth at thirty-one while you, at twice his age, carry on living?

Conrad’s mother had the same emerald eyes. They flowed wet, carrying mascara-black tears down her cheeks. She held a tiny hand out to Christian.

Christian took it. He moved closer, drawing the woman to him and into his arms.

When they parted, Conrad’s mother fumbled in her bag for paper and scribbled an address on it, telling him she had moved and he needed to visit. Christian took it, wondering why she had said “I” and not “we,” wondering if she had left Conrad’s father. He took her pen at her request and put his cell phone number on it. In ten years with Conrad, she had never once asked for his number.

“I have to go,” he said, pocketing the paper and gratefully taking the tissue she offered him.

She smiled at him, the same dimples as Conrad around her mouth, and Christian's heart clenched. She leaned up to him and kissed his cheek. Then she moved around him to the grave and he left her standing there, walking away with only one destination in mind now.

EBAN woke in Damien's arms. For a moment he fought the urge to unwrap Damien from him and move to the far side of the bed. He felt hot and irritable, and the embrace stifled him. He had lain beneath Damien the night before, and thought of the way he had lain beneath another man and wept like a child for something he would never have again.

"Are you okay?" Lips ghosted over his temple.

"It's kind of hot in here, Damien," Eban responded, wriggling free and moving to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Is it? I hadn't noticed."

"Is your air-conditioning broke?"

"No. I was actually cold last night."

"Yeah, well, you've always been cold-blooded."

Damien was silent a moment. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"What did I do?"

"Nothing." Eban sighed and stood, dragging on a pair of boxers, then making his way to the bathroom, where he locked the door firmly behind him, precluding Damien from joining him in the shower.

CHRISTIAN couldn't get there fast enough, walking the half mile swiftly, almost breaking into a run as he rounded the corner and came upon the coffee shop. Standing across the street, he stared through the window, searching the faces of those sat at the nearest tables, finding with a jolt like a bolt of lightning through his heart the one he wanted.

Luke was reading, his head lowered, one hand cradling his chin, his black hair falling over his face. Christian wondered if Luke had been sitting here at the window patiently every day they had been apart. How long would Luke come here before his hope ran out and he admitted defeat?

Christian stood and stared. Now he was here, he could not find the balls to cross the street and take what he most needed. And then Luke sensed his gaze and lifted his head.

Everything seemed to recede as their eyes met: the traffic on the street, the heat of the sun on the back of Christian's neck, everything he was and everything which had passed between them. All that remained was the strength of the feelings in his heart, which rose up to consume all else as they should have done so long ago. He felt his heart begin to wrestle control from his mind, and he fought blindly against it with his last remaining willpower, terrified of giving in.

Luke reached into his pocket and brought something out, looking down at it for a moment. Then he lifted it to his ear. A few seconds later, Christian's cell started to ring in his pocket.

With trembling fingers he drew it out and flipped it open.

"Hello," came a soft voice, as though Luke was right beside him and not across the vast chasm which currently divided them.

"Hi," Christian replied in a choked voice, heart in his mouth.

"How was Florida?"

"It was fine."

"Get much thinking done?"

"Too much."

There was silence. Luke broke it first. "Won't you come in?" It was a plea, in a desperate voice.

Christian, staring across an ocean of regret, shook his head so Luke could see him from his position at the window.

"Then why are you here watching me?" Luke's voice quavered with emotion.

Christian had no reply, not even for his own voices, which asked him the same question. The silent line echoed with the sound of coffee machines and cups clattering, the chatter of many voices which weren't enough to drown out Christian's own clamoring demons.

Luke spoke again, another plea. "I need a favor from you, Christian."

Christian stood stock still, staring across the miles which separated him from the man who could be to him what Conrad once was, if only he would let him.

"Give me one last kiss," said Luke.

Christian drew in his breath sharply as a world of hurt flooded his senses. He saw Luke standing outside La Dolce Vita with the wind blowing

his hair. He felt his mouth part in shock as he covered it with his own, and he felt velvet softness and tasted passion and desire and all those things he thought were buried with Conrad.

His eyes brimmed swiftly with tears, and he stepped back from the edge of the pavement, shaking his head, a hand over his mouth as though he could keep his emotion inside.

He turned away from Luke, as though he would see the tears streaking Christian's face from such a distance. But he still had the phone against his ear as he leaned against a tree, hiding his face from curious passersby and from Luke, and trying unsuccessfully to stifle wrenching sobs.

"Don't," Luke breathed. "*Don't*. I'm coming. Wait there."

"No...", Christian tried to say, rubbing his hand roughly across his face, but the phone had already gone dead.

He peered around the tree and immediately saw Luke on the other side of the road, looking for a gap in traffic. Panic seized him. He bolted down the street, heading back toward his home, fleeing blindly as though Luke were some sort of dangerous felon who, if he caught Christian, would take his heart hostage the way Conrad had and never let it go.

When he glanced back, Luke had made it across the road and was already gaining on him, much to his astonishment, sprinting like an athlete. A different kind of anxiety gripped Christian—namely that running would cause an asthma attack and Luke would drop down dead right there in the street.

He moaned to himself, torn between stopping and carrying on, and instead swerved into an alleyway, hoping to lose Luke. He knew this place; it had a wrought iron gate at the end which was usually open, and he could use it as a shortcut home. Luke didn't know where he lived. He could disappear into his house and cower in his room like the yellowbelly he was.

Even as he darted past dumpsters, skirting cardboard boxes and broken glass, he could see the gate was closed. His mind wouldn't let him believe it was locked, though, until he threw himself against it with both hands, rattling it hard against the padlock and chain which secured it.

He sensed Luke behind him before he heard him speak. "Christian, *please*."

His head fell against the gate. He gripped its bars hard, eyes squeezed shut, praying for courage.

"Just give me that last kiss I asked for and I'll go away."

Christian groaned in torment. He bit his lip hard as the tears streamed down his face. "I can't, I *can't*..."

He heard Luke suck in his breath. "If you would just..." he began, stumbling over his words, stammering. "Give me a sign that one day you might... want me, I would go away and I would wait forever for you, Christian. *Forever*."

"Oh Jesus, don't," Christian said, weeping, face against the gate, knuckles white. "Don't."

"I'm telling you the truth. I swear it. I would give anything for this cruel coincidence not to have happened, for me not to be carrying Conrad's heart, but I am and I can't do anything about it. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." His voice was choked with sobs now.

"Don't apologize." Christian clung to the gate with all his will as his body tried to turn him in Luke's direction. "You've nothing to be sorry for. Those things I said to you...."

"It doesn't matter."

"It *does*. Of *course* it matters. I wished you dead, and Jesus, I don't want you dead, Luke. I want you *so* much it fucking hurts."

He heard Luke's breath hitch in his throat.

"I'm so scared. I can't... *lose* you the way I lost him."

"Oh, Christian," Luke breathed. "This is *Conrad's* heart inside me. It beats differently than the way my own used to beat. I can *feel* how strong it is. It's not going to let me down, just like it never let *you* down. I *know* that. I'm strong, Christian, he's *made* me strong. And I'm strong enough to carry both of us whenever you need me to."

Christian's head lifted from the gate at possibly the most profound thing anyone had ever said to him. He didn't feel the need to scoff at Luke's statement despite his obviously frail physical health because he *believed*. He believed Luke was emotionally and mentally stronger than *he* would ever be, stronger now for carrying Conrad's heart. He believed Luke really *could* be the one to hold them both up above the waves while Christian floundered. Believed he was the one to save him, and most of all, believed that Conrad's heart would stand this test of strength. It had never let Christian down before so why should it let Luke down now?

Christian turned around and threw himself into Luke's arms.

Luke enveloped him instantly, cradling Christian's head against his shoulder as he wept, hand stroking his hair tenderly, murmuring words of reassurance.

When Christian finally lifted his head, their mouths met, and Christian tasted both their tears. They clung together for long moments, lips caressing

desperately, breathing heavily, hands touching the other's face, smoothing tracks of wetness away, communicating comfort and reassurance.

"Oh Jesus, Luke." Christian drew back, looking into swollen green eyes. "This is all or nothing. I can't take any less from you. I want *all* of you and I want you for the rest of your life."

Luke smiled serenely through his tears. "You had all of me the moment our eyes first met. I just never thought I'd ever be enough for you."

Christian shook his head. "I'm the one who's not enough. I'm broken, I'm needy, you deserve so much more than me...."

"No. You're everything I need. I never felt so complete before as when I'm with you. I feel like..." Luke flushed and looked bashful, "you're the other half of me."

Christian was undone again. He drew Luke fiercely against him, holding his head, his face buried against silky hair.

And he understood what Luke meant, but that didn't explain why he had also thought *Conrad* was the other half of him. How was it that things could change so fast? How could he lose one half of himself and then find the other within eight months? And he started to believe what he had thought at the grave, that maybe he had to lose Conrad in order to find Luke. That maybe this was all written in the stars, that it was some sort of terrible karma. And he wondered if a part of Conrad's soul now resided inside Luke with his heart and that was why Christian was so drawn to him.

He didn't want to think this way. It was almost disrespectful to Luke, who deserved better, but how could he not? Conrad would never be truly gone; Christian would mourn him a lifetime, but maybe he could bear the pain by thinking about Conrad and Luke being two people amalgamated into one. The thought was shameful and he knew it.

But he smiled against Luke's hair, and he felt warm inside as he imagined that he held both Conrad and Luke in his arms.

He brushed Luke's hair back from his forehead and kissed the soft, pale skin, moving to his eyebrows, lifting his head and kissing his closed lids and their long, wet lashes, moving down to his nose and finally Luke's lips as they parted tremblingly for him. The kiss was a deep one, tongues touching, hands gripping clothing tight, bodies pressed together.

They both drew back breathlessly and stared into the other's eyes. "I'm late for work," Christian said. "Walk with me."

They shared one last kiss and one last touch before they left the alleyway and emerged onto the busy street.

They walked close together, their shoulders brushing, their hands by their sides, not-so-accidentally touching from time to time, casting looks at each other frequently and smiling secretly, as though the rest of the world didn't exist. They didn't speak until they arrived outside Christian's office building and loitered awhile by the door.

"I'm so late," Christian said, making no move to enter the building. "Marcus is going to kill me."

Luke smiled. "Not when you tell him why you're late. And if he has a problem with that, tell him to call me."

Christian chuckled. He moved closer to Luke so they stood almost eye to eye. "See you tonight?"

"Yes. I'll pick you up."

Christian nodded. "Five thirty."

Luke leaned forward so his lips almost brushed Christian's and his breath floated across his mouth. "Bye."

"Bye." Christian brushed his fingers against the back of Luke's hand as he turned away. The heavy glass door fell slowly shut behind him, and he turned at the stairs to see Luke still standing outside.

All the way up to the office, he had a bittersweet ache of joy inside him and his heart wept with happiness at finally taking control.

Chapter 29

DAMIEN had few close friends. All his school friends had moved gradually away from the city leaving him alone, which suited him fine as he grew more antisocial with every passing year. When he met Eban, he didn't need anyone else. Eban's friends became his, apart from the enigmatic Conrad, of course, who hated his guts for daring to stake a claim on Eban, the man whom he held dangling on a string for half a lifetime, as Damien saw it. Damien could never bring himself to hate Conrad too much in return. How could he hate someone Eban obviously saw so much worth in? How could he hate the man he aspired to be like, just so Eban would love him the same way?

After Conrad had nearly strangled Damien in his office that day, he had behaved differently toward him. Wary, his manner more gentle, as though he realized he were treading on eggshells around Damien and his leaky mouth. Damien would never have told Christian the truth, not for any money in the world. Doing so might have been the catalyst for Conrad leaving Christian and taking Eban from Damien. He was more than happy to keep his silence about their teenage screw.

On the evening of the day he had tangled with Conrad in his office and lost, he had returned home late as usual to find Eban buried beneath the covers, his body trembling with every stifled sob. This was something Damien had rarely seen and the cause for it was clear. There were tire marks on the lawn, made by someone clumsily reversing down the driveway, marks that hadn't been there that morning. He wondered how far Conrad and Eban had gone that day and thought with relief that if Eban was crying, it was evidently not far enough. That no matter what might have happened in their home, whether Conrad had had Eban in their bed or not, clearly Conrad wasn't leaving Christian.

He had slid naked into bed behind Eban, pressing his face into his back, trying to communicate comfort rather than anger and jealousy. Eban took hold of his hand, squeezing his fingers hard. In the darkness, they made love, both of them uncharacteristically silent, the tears hot on Eban's face. And as Damien lay holding a sleeping Eban later, he thought to himself, *I've lived to fight another day against Conrad*. Because a war was what it was. In the same way that Eban would have waited a lifetime for Conrad, Damien would have waited a lifetime for Eban to belong to him and him alone.

Work that Monday was even more unpleasant than usual. It was barely ten a.m. when the first few victims of a five-car freeway accident arrived.

Whether the paramedics thought it was funny to bring a decapitated man to the ER, both head and body covered with a sheet, instead of taking him straight to the mortuary, he wasn't sure. Either way, Damien wasn't in the mood.

He yelled and screamed at them. He hadn't seen a headless corpse since medical school and was surprised to find how much it rattled him, he who had seen everything there was to see. Eban had seen the same. They had spoken once of horrific sights they'd seen on the job, and Eban had told of decomposing corpses, decapitated bodies, and babies who had been beaten to a pulp by their parents.

He remembered how Eban had been called out to Conrad's virtually lifeless body at the side of the road, of how he had done CPR on his friend while waiting for the paramedics. When Damien had taken Eban home that night after the two of them had put Christian to bed with a strong sedative, Eban had wept so hysterically for so long, that Damien had guiltily taken back his initial thought on hearing of Conrad's death:

Good. He belongs to me now.

Because he knew that would never be true. Eban belonged to Conrad, even as Conrad lay in his grave.

The day went from bad to worse, three patients dying within two hours, until there was light at the end of the tunnel. Assisting the obstetrician delivering the baby from a dead mother, Damien was overjoyed to see her take her first breath after many minutes of resuscitation. His joy turned out to be short-lived when he phoned the neonatal ICU an hour later only to be told she had just died.

Hot tears stung his eyes, this man who never cried at work because nothing was worth wasting a drop of emotion on in this shitty world, in this shitty job. But suddenly everything seemed so unfair, that this baby had breathed in air for just one hour before she lost her life.

He pushed his chair back from his desk and ran blindly to the bathroom, locking himself into a cubicle to spend his anguish in private. He longed for Eban, and he knew he could never speak of his awful day with him. Because it was his job which had split them apart. Eban wanted him to quit and Damien still hadn't. If Damien even gave the impression that work was causing him major psychological stress again, Eban would probably leave him. He was filled with bleakness. Even with the love of his life back, he was still truly alone.

CHRISTIAN did negligible work that day, his mind possessed with Luke, his body craving his touch. Arriving at work red-eyed, he told Jack that he had made up with Luke. His friend's face lit up in such a smile of delight that Christian almost burst into tears again. Jack then dragged him into the office and told Marcus with breathless excitement.

Marcus found it in his heart to get up from his desk and embrace Christian, telling him it was a relief that he might start to actually pull his weight around the office and reminding him that a new memo had gone out that morning. Jack rolled his eyes and retorted that it would be heading straight for the shredder as soon as he found it, much to Christian's astonishment.

Jack then pointed out again that he had promised some time ago to bring Luke for dinner. Christian groaned and acquiesced, telling him he would arrange something.

He went back to his desk while Jack stayed in Marcus's office for the longest while. He found the memo in his in-tray soon enough.

To the workers (and I use the term loosely),

It has come to my attention that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark. I refer of course to the fact that every day we offer astronomical book deals to these piss-poor so-called "writers" who send their half-assed attempts at "novels" to us. We make these talentless fucks rich men and women while my own fantastically good novel lies forgotten and rejected under a pile of dust. There is something very wrong about this. We must unite and overthrow the fascists who run our publishing industry! If you are with me, raise your hand, throw off your shackles, hurl your computer from the nearest window and declare yourself my loyal subject!

N.B I am talking metaphorically. Any damage to business property will result in your instant dismissal.

Fondest expressions of evil, Marcus Edwards.

Christian was taken aback. Since when had Marcus written a novel? He could just bet it would be some drug-fuelled pornographic romp through the darkest and most depraved corners of his boss's imagination. He shuddered at the very thought.

As he continued to stare at the memo in disbelief, his cell chirruped with a text message. He opened it, holding his breath when he saw it was from Luke.

Can't wait for tonight.

He smiled and replied, *Me either.* Those words would keep him warm all day long.

LUKE was waiting outside in a black BMW when Christian exited the building. Smiling, his heart hammering, Christian opened the passenger door and climbed in. "You sure know how to arrive in style," he remarked as he fought the urge to kiss Luke's face off right there on the street, with children passing by.

Luke smiled. His eyes danced with such joy that Christian felt a stab of amazement at being the cause of it. Luke leaned over and squeezed his knee, a silent greeting, and then started the engine, pulling away from the curb.

Christian didn't ask where they were going because he didn't care. His hand crept onto Luke's knee as he handled the big car expertly, and he rested it there, needing some form of contact. Luke rested his own over the top, fingers entwining with Christian's.

When Luke drove through the gates of his apartment complex and pulled up in a slot, he switched off the engine and turned to look at Christian. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"I saw my doctor today." Christian's stomach tensed for an emotional blow which never came. "And he said I could go back to work."

Christian smiled.

"So I called them and they want me to head up a new research project, starting Monday. I'll be working at the university and going out on field expeditions." He was breathless with excitement.

"Oh, Luke," Christian said. "I'm so happy for you. What's the project?"

"The migrating habits of the great white," Luke said, eyes gleaming.

Christian's smile dropped. "As in shark?"

"Yeah."

Christian was filled with terror. As if it wasn't bad enough that he had chosen someone who could be taken away from him any day if Conrad's heart failed, now this man was gallivanting with further danger. "You go out to the ocean and study them?"

"Yeah," Luke said. He looked miserable now.

"Do you... swim with them?"

Luke nodded.

Christian turned his head away so Luke couldn't see his face.

“Hey.” Luke gripped his chin and forced Christian to look at him. “I’ve done it a hundred times before. I know what I’m doing.” Christian stared into his eyes with anguish. “Come on,” Luke said softly, hand caressing his cheek. “It’s okay. I can take you with me if you like. Show you there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Yes. I wouldn’t mind you doing it as long as I was by your side. Because I would die happy next to you. “Sorry,” Christian said. “I don’t want anyone or anything to take you away from me.”

“I know.” Luke leaned forward and brushed his lips over Christian’s.

Putting an arm around his neck, Christian clung to him, deepening the kiss.

When they parted, Christian smiled. “So to celebrate, I’m taking you to the best restaurant in town.”

Luke smiled a little shyly. “Actually, I was hoping to be alone with you.”

Christian grinned. “Okay then, take us to the best pizza place in town, and we’ll eat dinner in bed.”

LUKE only just managed to lay the pizza boxes on the floor before Christian grabbed him in the hallway and pulled him into a passionate kiss. They fumbled their way to the bedroom, undressing en route, rolling across the bed in bliss, fighting for dominance, each wanting to possess the other that evening.

Luke won, Christian surrendering beneath him, thighs hard around his back as Luke penetrated him, pressing kiss after kiss to his needy mouth.

They moved together as one, soft moans and cries punctuating each thrust, the rhythm building to a crescendo which shocked them both in its intensity. Hands gripped skin hard, bones and muscle strained against each other, and mouths locked as Christian and Luke came together and despair and loneliness and desperation dissolved into the darkness along with their cries.

FINALLY they got up to reheat the pizza and pour the hundred-dollar bottle of champagne they had bought. They sat on cushions by the coffee table, *Fuse* on the TV, turned down low. They ate hungrily, making toasts to sharks.

“I’ve got to tell you something,” Christian said finally as he licked his fingers clean. “My boss and his boyfriend are very keen to meet you.”

Luke groaned. “I don’t do that kind of shit very well.”

“Me either. But they really want me to bring you to dinner.” He blushed a little. “And I kind of want to show you off.”

Luke cocked an eyebrow. “I’m worth showing off?”

“Fuck yes.”

“Fine. I’ll let you show me off. But we have to have dinner with Darius one night.”

“Sure,” Christian agreed. He knew that this mention of Darius was inevitably going to lead the conversation to Eban.

“How is he?” Luke asked.

“He still seems fucking miserable even though he’s back with Damien.”

Luke clucked his tongue. “That’s because he and Damien are over and done with. He needs to move on.”

“To Darius?”

“Obviously.”

Christian smiled.

“You have some sauce just there,” Luke said, gesturing with his finger to his own bottom lip.

Christian put his tongue out and licked at the corner of his mouth.

Luke shook his head. “Still there. Allow me.” He crawled forward to Christian and put his own tongue out, sweeping sensually at Christian’s mouth until Christian gripped him hard and turned his mouth to his, pushing him onto his back.

Luke ended up riding Christian right there on the wooden floor. Only in the morning would Christian find bruises on his knees that Luke never once complained about.

THE bedroom was dark, Eban buried beneath the covers motionless. Damien undressed as quietly as he could. It was only nine p.m., he wasn’t sure why his partner was in bed at this time, but nonetheless, after a fourteen-hour shift, Damien was ready too.

He put an arm over Eban’s hip and pressed against him, inhaling the scent of his skin. It was warm and dry and obviously fresh from the shower.

Its familiar scent made him stiffen with longing instantly, but he tried not to press his erection too firmly into Eban's back, not wanting to wake him up.

Nonetheless, Eban stirred. Slowly he turned over, seeking Damien's lips in the darkness. Damien clutched him in gratitude, gathering him closer, sighing into the kiss. Eban drew back, teeth gleaming in the dark as he spoke. "Hard day at the office, dear?"

Damien took a moment to reply. "It was just fine," he lied, remembering himself on his knees in the bathroom cubicle praying to an end to the misery which was his life.

"Good. Too tired to show me some love?"

"Never too tired for that," was Damien's response. "But I'll have to shower first."

"You smell just fine," Eban said, nuzzling his neck, gripping his buttocks and gyrating his pelvis into Damien's, making him groan. "And you'll only need to do it again when I've finished with you."

"No, really, I need to..." Damien was a bit sensitive about personal hygiene. It wasn't like Eban didn't know that Damien wouldn't touch him until he'd showered the filth of the ER off him.

"Come on." Eban's warm hand encircled his cock teasingly.

"If you want it, you need to let me..." Damien said breathlessly, trying to push him back.

"Oh, whatever." Eban abruptly let go of him and rolled onto his other side, back firmly turned. "Maybe I'll be asleep when you get back."

"Don't be an asshole," Damien said softly in disappointment.

"You're the asshole. Good night."

Damien huffed in frustration and climbed from the bed, slamming the door to the bathroom.

DAMIEN was gone when Eban awoke. *He didn't kiss me before he left, unless I was more deeply asleep than normal. He must be really pissed at me.* Last night had been petty and stupid. *I was an asshole.* He lay looking at the ceiling wishing Damien was still there so he could apologize. From the bedside table his cell rang, startling him.

He reached over and picked it up, his heart lurching in shock as he saw the caller ID. *Darius.* He answered nervously. "Hey."

"Hey." Darius sounded the same as Eban felt. "I just wanted to... see if you were okay. After Saturday."

“Yeah.” He didn’t know why he should be surprised that Darius was still thinking of him, much less that he was calling. “Listen, I thought we, you know, agreed. You shouldn’t be calling me.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I was worried. Some of the stuff you said to me, I thought....” He gave a sigh. “I didn’t want you to do anything stupid.”

Eban swallowed a lump in his throat. “I thought about that once, man, but I won’t. I mean, if you blow your head off, you can’t have an open casket, can you?”

He heard a shocked intake of breath on the other end of the line. “Don’t even fucking joke about that shit,” Darius said with uncharacteristic sharpness.

“I’m sorry,” Eban replied, chastised.

There was a long silence. “I have to go,” Eban said, which he didn’t, it was just that the longer he hung on this line, the more confused he got about something which was supposed to belong to the past.

“Goodbye, Eban.” Darius hung up.

ON THE other side of the city, in Damien’s car going to work, an almost identical conversation was taking place. “I wanted to see how you were. After Saturday.”

Damien sighed. “You shouldn’t be calling me, Aaron. If he found out....”

“I know, it’s just.... Did you make up?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. So you’re okay?”

Damien was confused. Why did Aaron care how he was? The way he saw it, no one in the world cared how he was, least of all Eban. He didn’t want Aaron’s pity, if that was what it was. “Yeah.”

“That’s great, okay then.” Aaron hesitated. “Bye, Damien.”

“Bye.”

He didn’t disconnect immediately and neither did Aaron. Damien listened to the empty line buzzing before he closed up his cell slowly.

During work, this conversation haunted Damien’s thoughts. He thought of the two nights he had spent with Aaron, good sex but with no particular feeling behind it. And yet... he remembered the look on Aaron’s face when he had left that last time, when Aaron had said he couldn’t do this again

because of Eban. The cop had looked really fucking disappointed. *Did he like me? Did he actually like me?* He remembered standing behind the restaurant at the cops' ball after he had slapped Eban in the bathroom and tried to fight both Darius and Luke. He remembered the way Aaron had come out, tried to calm him down and failing that, kissed him breathless. Their lips had parted slowly, and Damien's eyes had opened, staring up into pale brown eyes, a strong hand still around his neck, fingers stroking. Damien had tried hard not to dwell on the kiss since Saturday, but try as he might, his thoughts came right back, time and time again, to the enigmatic Aaron.

AT HOME, Aaron climbed into the shower, preparing himself for the awkwardness of seeing Eban again, and the guilt he would feel about kissing Damien on Saturday. But it was that kiss which had prompted Aaron to call Damien. He had been jerking off over that last sex session with Damien for longer than he cared to admit, and the kiss had just been the icing on that little cake of torment.

Damien in a tux. He shivered beneath the hot water just thinking about it. His thoughts about him may have been purely sexual right up until the moment he had grabbed Damien and kissed him. When those lips had melted beneath his and a hand had gripped his jacket hard, Aaron had felt something more for Damien than he was ever supposed to, considering the man belonged to another.

Chapter 30

DINNER at Marcus's was planned for that weekend, which seemed far too soon to Christian, who was more concerned with spending every moment he could in Luke's bed and not sure he was ready to venture out for an evening where he would have to share his lover's attention and time.

He discussed with Jack the possibility of inviting Eban and Damien, of turning the dinner into a kind of celebration that the two couples were together, thinking that not inviting them might seem like a giant snub to Eban when he had been so happy for him and Luke, happier than Christian had seen him for months and months. Since Conrad's death, to be exact.

Jack discussed this matter long and hard with Marcus in his office, as evidenced by the sounds of shouting and things being broken, before the moans started and Jack emerged triumphantly to say that yes, Eban and Damien were invited.

Eban was both surprised and a little grateful when Christian told him. He didn't have a problem facing Jack, but thought things might be a little uncomfortable with Marcus, while worrying Damien might start something with Jack.

Damien took a moment to decide when Eban asked him if he wanted to go. He thought of Jack and how he would most likely knock him out if he saw him and then he remembered that Eban was his and Jack had only ever been a tool for Eban, one of the many men he had used along the hard road to happiness, which sadly, Damien knew in his most frank moments, was still being traveled, even with Damien by his side.

He agreed, hoping to at least build bridges with Christian and the man with the smart mouth whom he had almost started a fight with at the cops' ball.

CHRISTIAN chose Thursday night in bed to tell Luke. His lover looked thoughtful for a moment. He had told Christian every detail of the cops' ball, and Christian was well aware that Damien and Luke had almost come to blows. Finally he spoke up, one hand trailing lazily across Christian's shoulder. "Is it important that Eban comes?"

Christian nodded.

“Okay then,” Luke said, teeth bright in the darkness as he smiled. “I can be on my best behavior.”

CHRISTIAN went home to get ready after work on Friday, then drove to Luke’s. He was nervous for a myriad of reasons, chief among them being presenting Luke to Jack and Marcus, but also the powder keg of emotions which was going to be trapped beneath Marcus’s roof that night. Namely the situation between Damien and Jack, the situation between Damien and Luke, and the situation between Marcus and Eban. His head ached when he thought about all the things that could go wrong. He imagined a food fight in the dining room, with Damien being the chief cake-flinger, the man who would probably feel more wronged than anyone at the table.

Luke opened the door wearing a black suit with a black shirt beneath and smelling strongly of cologne, raven hair gleaming and falling across his bright eyes. For a moment Christian stared, until Luke smiled self-consciously and told him to cut it out. Christian presented his bouquet of roses, a mixture of yellow and white, and Luke’s smile turned winsome. He drew Christian into the apartment and into his arms.

THEY arrived first at Marcus’s, Christian only just managing to stop himself ravaging Luke, limiting it to a hasty blowjob on his knees in the hallway, refusing to let Luke return the favor, even though it meant he would be desperate all night now. Some things were worth waiting for.

Something smelled good as Jack opened the door, was introduced to Luke, and ushered them inside with a grin, claiming Marcus was slaving over a hot stove, which Christian didn’t believe for one moment. Indeed, when he popped his head into the kitchen he saw the only thing Marcus—dressed in an outlandish crushed purple velvet suit like some sort of seventies pimp—was slaving over was a hot joint, which he eagerly toked at the French windows, a variety of catering dishes and boxes open on the table.

Christian rolled his eyes and stepped inside, leading Luke behind him by the hand. “Hey, man. Here he is.”

Marcus coughed a little and switched the joint to his left hand, holding it out of the window behind him and holding his right hand out to Luke, eyes perusing him greedily, a half-stoned grin on his face. “Very nice, Christian, very nice.”

“Shut up.” Christian looked apologetically at Luke, who merely smiled.

“Nice to meet you, Marcus,” he said graciously. “Christian’s told me a lot about you,” he added, and his foot slyly poked Christian’s so Christian nearly dissolved into fits of laughter as he remembered the way he had told Luke that week about Marcus’s memos and his loud office-fucking, and how Luke had howled until he cried.

“What’s so funny, Christian?” Marcus asked with a mock-glare.

“Nothing,” Christian replied, “why don’t you give me some of that?” And he took the joint and moved to the window.

Marcus laughed and reached for a bottle of wine from the fridge. “I got to say, man,” he told Luke conversationally as he uncorked it, “Christian said you were a serious piece of ass, and I didn’t believe it, but I should have known, going off his track record. I mean, he *always* had serious pieces of ass, you know what I’m saying?”

He only turned around after a few seconds when the silence went on too long, studying Christian’s horrified face behind him. “What? What did I say? Shit, the doorbell. Jack! Get the fucking *door*!” He charged out of the kitchen, leaving Christian and Luke looking at each other.

“Luke,” Christian began in a low voice after a gulp of pot smoke, “I swear to God I did not describe you to Marcus as a serious piece of ass. I would never talk about you so disrespectfully.”

Luke smiled and moved to him, putting his arms around his neck. “I believe you. Now I’m disappointed that you don’t think I’m a serious piece of ass.”

Christian stumbled over his words, trying to formulate a hasty reply, until Luke broke out laughing and kissed Christian silent.

Christian held onto him, his tension about tonight, which had grown steadily all week, beginning to ease, trying not to think about how Marcus had said he had always had serious pieces of ass and wondering what Conrad would make of being described thus. He was pretty sure he would have found it as amusing as Luke did.

They drew back from each other and looked toward the living room as they heard voices. “Come on,” Christian said, throwing the joint outside.

IN THE living room, Damien loitered by Eban’s side, dressed in red and black, Eban’s nervousness rubbing off on him. Christian came in, and the look of relief was obvious on Eban’s face.

Christian smiled moving forward. “Hey,” he said, holding his hand out to Damien.

Damien smiled and shook it, eyes flickering behind him to Luke.

"This is Luke," Christian said. Even though they had already met, their first greeting had been along the lines of Luke calling Damien out.

Luke came forward, his hand out, and Damien took it, trying to return Luke's smile for Eban's sake.

Luke and Eban shook hands. Damien noticed Eban seemed more fond of Luke than he himself was.

Christian threw an arm around Eban and drew him into a hug. "My impressions are that you need a good stiff drink," he muttered into his ear.

"Your impressions are fucking right."

Christian laughed. "Come on." Keeping his arm around Eban, he led him into the kitchen, leaving Damien feeling awkward and alone.

"Okay, come on." Marcus seemed to belatedly remember he was the host. "Damien, sit there, what are you drinking?"

"I don't drink," Damien said, taking a seat on the couch.

"Oh." Marcus looked at Jack in confusion and something resembling horror.

"Coke, Damien?" Jack asked smoothly, while gesturing to Luke to sit on the other couch. "Cranberry juice? Orange juice? Grape juice? Just about every goddamn kind of juice under the sun seeing as Marcus likes to have a choice with his vodka."

Damien smiled a little, as well as he could at the man who had screwed the love of his life. "Cranberry, please." He wondered whether his inner agony showed on his face.

Jack nodded. "Luke?"

"Beer, please," Luke said.

Jack nodded again and took his leave. Marcus stood a moment looking at Luke and Damien in terror before scuttling after his lover.

"Is he always like that?" Luke asked Damien.

"I haven't seen him for a while and I can't say I ever called him a friend, but yeah," Damien drawled. "He's fucking one of a kind, Marcus."

Luke snorted with laughter. Silence settled. "How're you doing, Damien?"

Damien shrugged. "I'm okay," he lied because he didn't think Luke would be interested in listening to how he felt like he was slowly falling to pieces once more, just like those dark days after Conrad's death, but with Eban by his side again.

Luke looked at him a little too closely, like he knew every thought in Damien's head, and Damien was discomfited.

"You?"

"I'm great," Luke smiled.

Yeah I bet you are, Damien thought savagely. You've got a new heart, a new man, and Christian's friends fawning over you like you're the fucking Messiah. Even Eban clearly fucking loves you, but we know why that is, don't we?

In the silence which followed, he wondered if he had spoken his words aloud by accident. He lowered his eyes from that clear, crystal-green gaze and tried to get a hold of himself. Tried to stop himself calling after Jack and asking for a shot of something really fucking strong to numb the pain of tonight.

"Listen, about last week..." Luke said cautiously.

He's really trying, which is more than I'm doing. Maybe Christian's had a stern word with him. Or maybe Eban has.

"I hope we're... okay," Luke finished.

Damien looked up. He smiled, even though it hurt his mouth. "Sure we are, Luke," he said. "We're practically family now, right?"

Luke frowned a little, as though trying to work out if Damien's words were meant sarcastically, which they weren't. They were only uttered in tired relief. Damien didn't want to fight with anyone anymore. He didn't have the energy. Luke smiled a little sadly, as though he continued to read Damien like a book.

"Sure," he said. "You and Eban will have to come to dinner at my place." He gestured with his head over his shoulder. "Jack's okay, but we can dump the freak."

Damien burst into almost hysterical laughter, which somewhat startled Luke. "Don't talk about Christian that way," he cracked in return, which amused Luke no end.

"THEY'RE laughing in there," Eban said in a low, astonished voice as Christian poured the wine in the kitchen.

Christian grinned. "So they are."

OVER by the window, Marcus had another joint lit and was sharing with Jack, who was berating him in an undertone. "It's bad form to refer to someone's partner as a piece of ass to the aforementioned someone."

Marcus shrugged. "It was an accident."

"Fuck off. Might I remind you of the topics I told you were off-limits tonight?"

"Sure," Marcus said. "You screwing Eban. *Conrad*. Eban screwing Darius. *Conrad*. Damien getting shot. *Conrad*. Eban screwing Conrad. Eban being in love with Conrad. *Conrad*. Conrad's *heart*. Conrad's fucking *cock*. And oh! Did I mention *Conrad*?"

"Shut the fuck up, dickwad."

"Well, you *asked*! I'm just letting you know that I know I'm not supposed to mention... *fucking Conrad*!" Marcus hissed, so both Eban and Christian glanced over at him.

Jack smiled. "Why don't you gather your other halves up and go into the dining room. We're going to serve the appetizer now."

Eban and Christian nodded, taking their drinks and moving out of the kitchen, Christian looking back at Marcus warningly.

"Man," Marcus told Jack, "this dinner is going to be the subject of a memo on Monday morning."

PLACE cards were set out on the dining room table. Luke and Christian were seated next to each other, with Eban and Damien opposite, Marcus at one end and Jack at the other.

Jack gave Luke and Damien their drinks while Marcus brought out their appetizers, holding three at a time.

"What is it?" Christian asked, looking at the colorful little dish with interest.

"Fucked if I know," Marcus replied.

Jack glared at him. "It's avocado with smoked salmon and tiger shrimp."

Christian and Luke exchanged smiles. Christian couldn't wait to get home so he and Luke could roll around laughing at this evening.

UNDER the table, Eban felt for Damien's hand. Damien studied the men at the table as Marcus brought the last of their appetizers and bade them all eat. *Everyone in this room hates me*, Damien thought as Eban kept hold of his hand, squeezing it in encouragement.

Marcus and Jack kept up a steady stream of chat, constantly filling everyone's glasses, getting Christian and Luke to join in, leaving Damien and Eban as the only ones who were somewhat withdrawn, only speaking when spoken to, despite Christian's constant looks of reassurance.

Marcus only lasted until nearly the end of the main course before he caused uproar. "So, Damien," he said. "How're you feeling now?"

Damien lifted his head from studying his plate and blinked, confused. "What do you mean?"

"You know," Marcus said, waving his fork, "since...." He got a warning look from Jack which he ignored.

"Since what?" Damien looked at Eban, then back at Marcus.

Marcus sighed. "Dude, since you almost bought it. Did you forget? Ask Luke, he was fucking lying next to you." He cackled at his own wit.

"Marcus," Jack said loudly.

Everyone was staring at Marcus.

"I *have* to see your scar," Marcus said. "I never met anyone who got shot before."

"I got shot," Eban said coldly. "Don't I count?"

"Sure you do, but you're a cop, it's almost a given. Damien's a real guy. Well...." he looked thoughtful. "Scratch that. Doctors aren't real people." He looked around the table. Luke and Christian looked horrified, and Eban looked furious. Damien wished the ground would open up.

"Let's see yours, then, seeing as Damien's shy," Marcus continued.

Eban shook his head. "It's on my shoulder, I'd have to strip."

"And?" Marcus smirked.

"Marcus," Jack said again.

Marcus ignored him. "Come on, guys, we've all got our scars, it's just some of us wear them on the *outside*, don't we?" He looked pointedly around the table.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Eban hissed, slamming his fork down.

Marcus shook his head, ignoring Eban. "I mean, look at this." He put his leg up on the table, almost knocking his glass over, drawing up his trouser leg to reveal a skinny limb with a scar down the side. "Did this skateboarding

at fifteen. Man, I actually cried at that one. And I know you got that great one, Christian, from where you fell on that glass when you were drunk. What about you, Luke?"

Silence greeted him. "Oh," Marcus said redundantly, "I bet you've got a good one."

Christian groaned and put a hand over his eyes as Luke lowered his gaze to his plate.

"You need to shut up right now," Jack said.

"Blow me," Marcus retorted, standing up. Right before their eyes he lost it. Those who knew him at the table had seen him mad before but not like this. Damien couldn't quite believe what was happening.

"You don't fucking tell me to shut up in my *own* house at my *own* fucking dinner table. You don't tell me what I *can* and *can't* talk about." He turned his attention to his guests and mimicked Jack's accent to a tee.

"Don't talk about Eban screwing me, Marcus; don't talk about him screwing Conrad, either! Don't talk about the fact that everyone at this table has screwed everyone else. Don't talk about the *heart*, and most of all, don't talk about fucking *Conrad!*"

He stared at his horrified guests. "*Conrad! Conrad! Conrad!*" he yelled, red in the face. "I'm done with the amount of misery he's caused and how you are all wallowing in it like the bunch of fags you fucking are! Grow up and *grow* a pair! He's *gone!* He's fucking *dead!* And I'd like a dinner here without someone fucking *crying* about it!"

Chairs were overturned as both Christian and Eban leaped to their feet. It was almost comedic the way they fought to reach Marcus first, Eban winning, driving his fist so hard into Marcus's face that he was knocked unconscious immediately, falling back into his chair.

Jack jumped up and rushed around the table, slapping Marcus's face, instantly turning to look at Damien beseechingly. Although Damien had got to his feet, like everyone had, he wasn't so inclined to take on the patient. He stood watching.

Christian cursed. With difficulty, he and Jack moved the lanky man out of the dining room and into the living room, laying him on the couch. Damien and Luke followed, and Damien reluctantly moved forward and bent over him a moment, saying to Christian and Jack, "Put him on his side."

They did as they were told.

EBAN grabbed a beer from the fridge, ran his bruised knuckles under the tap and opened the windows, stepping out into the yard and sinking down on a wooden bench.

“Hey,” a voice said behind him.

“Hey, Luke.”

“Are you okay?”

“Oh sure, apart from the fact I just knocked out the host of the dinner party.”

Luke shrugged. “He kind of deserved it.”

“Yeah, he did. He shouldn’t have said that shit. Your scar and Conrad’s... I mean, *your* heart...” He trailed off, embarrassed. *I must stop calling it Conrad’s heart. It’s Luke’s.*

“Tell me you didn’t hit Marcus on my account.”

“I hit him on Christian’s account. And Damien’s. And yours. And most of all, my own.”

Luke nodded. Eban didn’t like the sage look in his eyes. He fell silent, gulping his beer, hoping to grow so drunk Damien would have to carry him to bed.

“How’s Darius?” he asked abruptly.

“How do you think he is?”

“Oh come on, Luke.”

“What do you expect me to say? Damien’s an okay guy but he’s not right for you. He’s got too many issues of his own for him to be dealing with *yours*. Namely Conrad.”

Eban’s gaze jerked to his. “You know, don’t you?”

“Of course I know. How could I not? I’m pretty sure the scars someone’s wearing on their sleeve was a reference to you.”

Eban bit at his lip, averting his eyes. “Are you going to tell Christian?”

“Why would I do that? It would break his fucking heart.”

“I’m sorry.” Eban’s voice trembled.

“What for? For being in love with Conrad? That’s not a crime, Eban. Look at me.” Luke lifted Eban’s chin with his fingertips and looked into his eyes. “We can’t help who we love. I’m not blaming you for anything, here. Did you... was Conrad unfaithful to Christian?”

Eban shook his head. “There was this one time.... I wanted him and... he couldn’t... we just... jerked ourselves off while we watched each other. That’s all we did while he was with Christian. That’s all....” His voice broke,

and tears started to streak his cheeks. "I loved him. I loved him so much. I wish he was still alive. If he was, I'd beg him to leave Christian for me now. I'd fall at his fucking feet and beg him..."

Luke put an arm around him, burying Eban's face against his shoulder, murmuring comforting words.

After a few moments, Christian appeared at the door, with Damien behind him. "Are you okay?" he asked his best friend.

Eban sat back from Luke in embarrassment, wiping his eyes roughly. He had been only too well aware of that heart beating against him as he had been held by Luke. "Just... give me a minute."

Christian nodded. He gestured for Luke to come with him.

There was silence, Damien loitering at the window. "Can I sit down?"

Eban responded by holding his hand out. Damien took it and sat beside Eban on the bench, the two embracing.

"WHAT was he crying about?" Christian asked Luke in the hallway.

"Mainly Darius," Luke replied.

"Jesus," Christian groaned. He put an arm around Luke. "I'm so sorry about Marcus. Please forgive me for inflicting him on you."

"You're not responsible for Marcus." Luke drew back to look at Christian. "And I still had a good time because I was with you."

Christian smiled in relief. "You're so amazing," he said, brushing the hair out of Luke's eyes. "When I get you home, I'm going to show you the time of your life."

Luke grinned. He leaned forward and kissed Christian.

Someone coughed behind them. "Anyone for dessert?"

They both turned their heads to see a grotesquely bruised Marcus leaning on Jack.

Jack dug him angrily in the ribs. "Say it."

"I'm sorry," Marcus said. "You know I am. Come on guys, let's have a drink."

"You've had enough," Christian growled. "We're going."

"Christian," Marcus said, eyes bloodshot and beseeching. "What can I say? I'm drunk, I'm stoned, I'm an asshole. I just want you to give Conrad up and get on with fucking this hot piece of ass, here."

Christian grabbed Marcus by the collar of his shirt, shaking him hard. "That's just what I'm doing," he snarled. "I don't need you to tell me that in front of him."

"Christian," both Jack and Luke said, trying to pry his hand off Marcus.

Christian let Marcus go and turned away. "Let's go," he said to Luke.

Luke murmured a goodbye to Jack and followed Christian to the door.

Outside the air was humid, the sky heavy with thunderclouds. Christian heaved a sigh and slung an arm around Luke's shoulders as they walked away.

LATER that night across town at Damien's, Eban stood naked at the window in the dark watching the thunderstorm, while Damien lay silently in bed waiting for him to join him. The rain pelted the windows, ominous shadows of swaying tree branches painted across the walls, lightning flashing every twenty seconds, the thunder rolling hot on its heels.

"Are you thinking about Conrad?"

Eban nodded wordlessly. He pressed a hand against the window and then lowered his forehead to the glass. "I don't know what to do. I think I've been unfair to you coming back to you. I don't think I should be with anyone at the moment."

"Don't say that," Damien said immediately, deep anxiety in his voice. He slid from the bed and approached behind Eban.

Eban closed his eyes, lightning flashing behind the lids. "I'm sorry. I'm glad you're here, Damien. I love you. I'm so sorry I took you to Marcus's."

Damien put his arms around his waist and pressed his face into his shoulder. "I love you too. Don't give up on us. *Please*. We can do this."

Eban remained still. *I don't think we can. I really don't think we can.* He turned around and led Damien to the bed, where some frantic lovemaking went on until Eban was so exhausted the thoughts that weighed him down were gone into the ether and he slept in Damien's arms.

Chapter 31

WITH Damien gone to work many hours ago, Eban sat silently in the kitchen, watching the September rain running down the windows. The storm had ended sometime in the early hours but the rain continued relentlessly. *Like my life.*

He picked up his cell for the fourth time and once more called up the name from his address book. This time he connected to the number and put the phone to his ear, his heart beating hard as he waited for it to ring.

It was answered after four rings, just as Eban was about to give up.

"Hello," came a deep, familiar voice.

"Hi, Darius."

"Hi. How're you doing?"

"Oh, you know..."

"I believe you attended a disastrous dinner party last night."

"Doesn't take long for bad news to get around," Eban remarked. *I have a spy in the camp. Darius can find out every detail of my pathetic life through Luke.*

"Are you okay? Sounds like Christian's friend was pretty hard on you. You did well to knock him out."

"I'm okay," Eban muttered. "I'm kind of calling for a favor."

"Go on."

"I wondered if you... when you offered me the number of... someone... I wondered if you still had it."

Darius was silent a moment, as though confused. Finally he said, "You mean the bereavement counselor?"

"Yeah." Sitting at the table, Eban had his eyes closed, his face hot with humiliation even though Darius couldn't see him.

"Get a pen."

Eban did so, finding the corner of a magazine and taking the number Darius gave him.

"His name is Robert Bramwell; he works exclusively for the department. He comes highly recommended."

"Okay."

"Eban, I'm so glad you're finally doing this. I'm sure he can help you."

"Someone has to help me, Darius. Thank you."

"It's okay. Will you call me after your first session? Let me know how it went?"

"I shouldn't be calling you at all."

"I know. But please?"

"All right, I will. Bye."

"Bye, Eban."

Eban hung up. He looked at the number a moment and then before he lost his nerve, he dialed it. A female voice answered. "Mr. Bramwell's secretary."

"Hi, can I make an appointment?"

"Sure. Do you work for the department?"

"Yes."

"What's your name and badge number?"

Eban told her, listening as she recited the number back to him as she took it down. "Okay, Eban, what's the best time for you?"

"I guess he doesn't work weekends?"

"He does, actually. Are you free this afternoon?"

Eban was taken aback that it could be this easy. That he wouldn't be waiting two weeks for the privilege. "Yeah."

"Okay then, why don't you come in at three for his last appointment?"

"All right. Where's he based?" He was a little disconcerted to find the counselor was based in Darius's precinct and yet not surprised, seeing as the other cop had known all about him. He wondered if Darius had ever had recourse to use him.

EBAN was ushered into a plush office at three promptly by the secretary. A man of average height came around from the desk with hand held out. "Hi," he said in a drawling Southern accent, "I'm Robert Bramwell."

Eban shook his hand, taking in cropped red hair and a rather striking face, the lips thin, the eyes large and pale blue. *He looks like a good listener.* He wondered if the guy was actually a shrink masquerading as a counselor, and if he was being analyzed already. "Eban Crane," he said.

"Take a seat, Eban, would you like some coffee?"

Eban shook his head and the secretary left the room, closing the door behind her. Eban took a seat on the leather sofa Robert had directed him to and watched as he took a chair opposite. He wore jeans and a black long-

sleeved shirt. "Are you warm enough? Some of my clients have complained recently that the room's a bit cold since the weather cooled down."

Eban shook his head. "I'm fine."

"Okay, then." Robert leaned back in his chair. "Where shall we start?"

Eban gave an uncomfortable laugh. "I actually don't know where to start."

"All right. So, you've had a bereavement recently."

"My best friend died eight months ago. He was thirty-one."

"What was his name?"

"Conrad."

"And how did Conrad die?"

"A car crash. I was on duty. I was called out to him. I gave him CPR at the roadside."

Robert blinked a little in surprise. "That must have been deeply distressing for you."

Eban nodded. "I was in love with him."

"I see," Robert said.

"I'm *still* in love with him. I can't forget him."

"Go on."

"He had a partner of ten years, Christian, who's my friend. He doesn't know any of this."

"Did Conrad feel the same about you?"

Eban laughed and put a hand over his eyes. "I don't know."

"Is that one of the worst things about Conrad being gone? That you'll never know?"

Eban, with tears stinging his eyes, looked at the counselor and nodded. The rest of the story came out in a tumbling mess before he could stop it. "My partner, Damien, left me two weeks after Conrad died because I screwed someone else. We recently got back together but... it's hard, it's so hard. Damien is... I don't know... depressed, I guess. His work makes him that way but he won't quit. He got shot not so long ago and he still didn't quit."

"Do you love Damien?"

"Yes."

"Does he know about your feelings for Conrad?"

"Yes. He won't let me forget that he knows. I'm terrified that if I do something wrong, he'll tell Christian."

"Is that why you're with him?"

"No. He wanted me back."

“And what did *you* want?”

Eban hung his head. “I was... sleeping with someone before I got back with Damien. He wanted to be with me. I treated him badly. I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

“What’s his name?”

“Darius.” Eban saw the counselor blink a moment before his face became calm and placid once more. “You know him. Has he been to you?”

“Come now, Eban,” Robert chided. “You know better than that. So, are you still seeing Darius?”

“I...” Eban averted his eyes. “Slept with him a week ago. Then I went back to Damien and lied about it.”

“So you find it difficult to let go of Darius even though you’re with Damien.”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t answer my question. About Damien. What did *you* want?”

“I wanted him back every single day that we were apart.”

“And now you’ve got him back?”

“Now I feel... desolate.”

“Why?”

“Since Conrad died, I’ve felt like I’ve been sinking beneath the surface. I’ve been looking for someone to save me and now Damien’s back, I’m clinging to him like he’s my life raft, but he can’t even see it, because he’s swimming in even deeper water than I am.”

“That’s a very powerful analogy, Eban. What does Damien do?”

“He’s an ER doctor.”

“I see. And he doesn’t want to leave?”

“No. I think he’s afraid of not being able to find another job. Which is bullshit. The real reason is he’s afraid of change in his safe, cozy little world. I think that’s why he stayed with me five years.”

“So you think he would have left you before Conrad died if he’d had the courage?”

“Yes.”

“So why does he want you back now?”

“He loves me.”

“Is that enough?”

“What, for me or for him?”

“Both.”

“I don’t think so.”

"So where does that leave you?"

"Afraid I'm going to go under and never find my way back."

He lowered his head and tried to compose himself. Robert pushed a box of tissues silently across the table to him. Eban took one gratefully and blew his running nose. Robert gave him time, saying nothing.

Only some minutes later when he was more calm did Robert say, "Do you want to leave Damien?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I *can't*. I remember what he was to me for five years. I can't let that go. What if no one else ever loves me like that again? I need him. He knows me inside out. He comforts me. He lies next to me at night and holds me."

"So are you saying that being with Damien is better than being alone?"

"No, I'm not trying to say that. I love him; it's not like that, it's just...." Eban sighed. "I don't know."

"You're very unhappy," Robert said. "Would you say that was mainly down to your loss of Conrad or mainly down to your confusion over Damien?"

"Conrad. I've always been alone grieving over him. I've never been able to talk this way about him to anyone, least of all Christian."

"Is there anyone else you can talk to? Your parents?"

"My parents are in Canada. I don't speak to them anymore. Not since I came out and they disowned me."

"And there's no one else?"

"No."

"Could you speak to Christian about it now? Could you lean on him a little?"

"No. Christian has done all the leaning on me. And now he's got somebody new and he's getting over Conrad."

Robert remained silent, so Eban continued. "Conrad's heart was transplanted into a guy named Luke. Christian is now with Luke."

Both Robert's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. Eban actually chuckled a little. "I know."

"Was that difficult for you? Meeting the man who has Conrad's heart?"

"Yes. But I'm glad I did. He's a great guy."

"Are you saying that because he has Conrad's heart and you feel some sort of connection to him?"

"You're too shrewd, Doctor," Eban said in amusement.

"Robert, please. I'm not a doctor."

“Sorry. And of course I do, but no, he’s great, really. And he loves Christian.”

“Are you jealous?”

“What?”

“Are you jealous of the fact that the man who should have grieved the most over Conrad is happy with someone else already while you, who had to grieve in silence, are left all at sea?”

Eban lowered his head again in shame. “You know my fucking rotten little core way too well already,” he murmured.

“I don’t think you’re rotten in any way, Eban. I think you’re a man still grieving over a love he never got and looking desperately for some help from someone.”

Eban lifted his head. “Who’s going to help me?” he asked plaintively, like a child.

“*You* are,” said Robert. “With a little help from me.”

LUKE and Christian hadn’t managed to get dressed that day. A leisurely breakfast had moved from the kitchen to the living room, and Christian now had Luke beneath him, legs around him, holding himself away at arms’ length so he could look down into that ghost-pale face.

The thick lashes lifted slowly and revealed the lust-clouded crystal-green eyes. A slow smile crept over Luke’s face as they watched each other. Christian rocked into him gently, smiling in return. There were words on the tip of his tongue, fighting for release as he looked down at his lover, but he forced them back, locked them away for later, for much later, when he didn’t feel quite so disrespectful to Conrad.

Luke craned up against him and kissed him. Christian’s arms buckled, and he sank onto him. He slid an arm under Luke, lifting him, making Luke groan as he was penetrated deeply.

With face buried against a sweat-dewed neck, Christian started to come. He heard his cell ringing from somewhere far away but it wasn’t enough to put him off. He sighed softly and tasted the moistness of the skin below him.

“I’m sorry,” was the first thing he said when he regained his senses, because it wasn’t like him to be so selfish as to come first. Luke, who shuddered a little against him with need merely held him, not saying anything. Christian finally gathered the energy to slide down his body and suck Luke off until he cried to God for more.

The cell was still ringing, but Luke wasn't listening, his hands gripping Christian's hair, his head back in rapture, and Christian wasn't listening because this was the only sound he needed to hear.

EBAN went straight to a bar for a drink when he left Robert's. Once he was settled in a corner, promising himself he would only have one, he took out his cell and called up Darius's name.

"Hey."

"Hey, Eban, how did it go?"

"Great."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad. Are you seeing him again?"

"Yeah, on Monday."

"Good."

"Thanks so much."

"That's okay."

"Listen, are you at work?"

"No, I just got home."

"I'm having a drink, want to join me?" Even as the words left his lips, Eban furiously berated himself. What the hell was he doing?

Darius was silent for the longest while. "I shouldn't."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," Eban said quickly. "Forget it. I just... wanted to thank you in person."

"By sticking your dick in me?" Darius asked cynically.

Taken aback, Eban stumbled over his words. Now he had so many images of Darius in his head that his pants became unbearably tight. "No," he choked out.

"Come on, if me and you had a drink together, we would end up fucking in the bathroom, are you denying that?"

Eban couldn't speak any more. He put a hand over his eyes, trying to blot out his mental pictures. "I'm sorry. Thanks again." He hung up.

WORK had been so terrible that day that Damien hadn't eaten anything since seven that morning and had had only two cups of water all shift, so his head thumped with dehydration. He entered the silent house at eight p.m.,

disappointed to find Eban not home, immediately suspicious and then instantly castigating himself. Eban was entitled to go out without Damien thinking he was screwing around.

He went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. From his jacket pocket he took a small vial of clear liquid and stood looking at it a moment before he hid it carefully right at the back behind some jars. He didn't want Eban asking why Damien kept insulin in his fridge when he wasn't diabetic, and he didn't want to be honest and say he was keeping it for a rainy day.

A rainy day in the not-so-distant future where the thunder raged and the lightning flashed and Damien disappeared below the surface of the flood without a trace.

Chapter 32

"I'M AT Christian's. I'm going to crash a couple of nights here."

Damien was silent for a long while, eyes squeezed shut, standing in the kitchen leaning against the wall. "Why?"

"Just... I don't think we should spend every minute together. I don't want to kill it before it's even started again. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Damien hated how childlike and disappointed his own voice sounded.

"Good. I'll call you tomorrow, then." Eban hung up.

Damien switched his cell off. He opened the fridge and reached behind the jars at the back, taking out the vial. He looked at the clear liquid for a moment, watching how it trembled in his hand, then he replaced it and closed the door, turning the light off and making his way upstairs to bed.

CHRISTIAN nursed a coffee opposite Eban. "Leave Damien," he said quietly.

"No."

"Leave him," Christian repeated, his voice louder. "Stand on your own two feet and take care of yourself. Damien isn't the one to do that for you."

"Aren't you going to tell me to go to Darius?" Eban asked cynically. "That's what you normally do."

"No. This isn't about Darius, it's about *you* and the fact that you need to help *yourself*."

"Strange, my counselor feels the same way. He's kind of hot."

Christian groaned. "Why is everything always about sex with you?"

"Is there anything else?"

Christian watched him closely. Eban became unsettled by the knowing expression on his face. "I know why you do it," he said, holding Eban's gaze steadily.

"What?"

"Why you sleep around. I felt it when you had sex with me."

"Felt what?" Eban asked uneasily.

"The way you let yourself go, the way you seemed to disappear like you were far, far away."

Eban lowered his head.

“You think about the best sex you ever had in your life every time you’re with someone new, don’t you?”

Eban’s hands clenched around his coffee cup. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t,” Christian murmured. “I think this subject can keep till another day. Good night.” He patted Eban fondly on the shoulder as he stood up and walked away.

Eban followed him with horror-stricken eyes all the way to the stairs.

JACK wasn’t at his desk when Christian arrived on Monday after dropping Luke at the university, wishing his lover luck on his first day and kissing him goodbye. Luke had rolled his eyes when Christian presented him with a packed lunch and told him, “You’re not my goddamned mom,” but Christian knew he was secretly thrilled.

Luke didn’t have a mom. He was an orphan, something he had revealed to Christian in bed over the weekend, and his only living relative was an aunt in New Zealand. Christian had been heartbroken by the revelation and it had merely set his resolve stronger. To be Luke’s everything. Forever.

It was strange that Jack wasn’t here yet, because he was never late. He looked toward Marcus’s firmly closed door and dreaded a further confrontation with him after Friday night.

There was a memo in his in-tray.

To all staff

Alcohol is no good for you and neither are drugs. Remember that.

Your boss.

Christian nodded in satisfaction that maybe Marcus had spent a weekend of introspection after the alienation of all his friends, but knew it was more likely that he had spent it shit-faced and this memo was a product of that. He threw it in the trash and booted up his computer.

BY TEN, Jack still hadn’t arrived and Marcus hadn’t been out of his office to harass anyone. Christian was beginning to wonder if his boss was even in there. His thoughts were preoccupied, though, with the conversation he had had with Eban the previous night. He was sure he had had some sort of revelation when he had looked into Eban’s eyes. Too many thoughts which made an awful lot of sense had run through Christian’s head. He had remembered that night they slept together; he had remembered Eban’s

desperation, and suddenly everything about Eban and his continuing grief had slotted into place.

It wasn't like Christian believed anymore that anything had happened between Eban and Conrad. What he did believe, though, was that deep, unrequited love had happened. For fifteen long years.

He analyzed his conversation with Eban and came over and over again to the same conclusion. He didn't know how to feel. He was surprised to find that his overwhelming emotion was pity. Pity that Eban never got to experience what Christian had for one third of his life. He refused to dwell too much on what Conrad's feelings might have been. *I'm strong now. Luke has made me strong, and I won't continue to sully Conrad's memory by wondering if he returned Eban's feelings or not. The fact is he was mine for ten years. He never gave me the impression that he was thinking about anyone else. He never gave me cause for suspicion, he never loved me less than one hundred percent. That has to be enough for me. I can't go on the way I have been doing.*

He looked up as Marcus's office door opened and was taken aback by the state of his boss. Marcus looked like he hadn't slept all weekend, his eyes black underneath and bloodshot, his shirt stained and wrinkled, his tie askew, his sleeves rolled up. A cigarette dangled between his lips despite the office's no-smoking policy.

"Where's Jack?" Christian asked warily as his boss approached his desk.

"Jack's gone. He quit."

"What? You can't be serious. Didn't you..."

Marcus held a hand up. He leaned forward over Christian's computer monitor and said slowly, as though he were mentally challenged, "Jack's *quit*, Christian. Get over it."

Christian stared at him until Marcus stalked away and slammed his office door behind him, leaving a trail of ash on the carpet.

Christian reached for his phone and dialed Jack. There was a sleepy grunt on the other end.

"Man, what are you doing? You can't fucking quit."

"I already did."

"But..."

"But nothing, I can't work for that dick anymore."

Christian shook his head. "Listen, man, if you saw him. He's a fucking wreck this morning and that's obviously down to you."

"Good. I hope he goes to his grave remembering what he's done to me."

"Look, he did it to all of us. And I didn't quit."

“Obviously you’re a masochist, then. I don’t need that shit anymore from him.”

“But I thought....” Christian hesitated, lowered his voice. “I thought you were in love with him.”

“You must have mistaken me for someone else.” Jack hung up.

FUCKING assholes, Damien thought derisively about his colleagues when he got into work that morning and found himself the only doctor on shift. One had phoned in sick, another had crashed her car, and a third had had a family bereavement. *Well, fuck that. I had a bereavement before me and Eban even started. My partner’s in love with a dead man, beat that! When I fuck him, he thinks about a man who is nothing more than a pile of bones and maggots. Is it any wonder my self-esteem is down the john?*

He became even more pissed off when the nurse in charge told him it was too busy for him to take a break. “Fuck this,” he told her, “you nurses do our job so much better than us half the time anyway, you fucking hold the fort.” He stalked off. In the staff room he drank as much water as he could, knowing it could be another twelve hours before he got anything. Then he spotted Isabelle sitting silently in the corner.

“Okay?”

Damien nodded.

“Have you seen my tourniquet? I lost it on Saturday. I thought you had it last?”

Damien shook his head. Fact was, Isabelle’s tourniquet was at home along with the syringe he had stolen. He didn’t have the world’s greatest veins and as he didn’t have a tourniquet of his own, he had decided to steal Isabelle’s to help him along with the injection of insulin. He felt kind of bad about that. Imagine knowing your tourniquet had been used in a suicide. But then he reasoned Isabelle wouldn’t be the one finding the body anyway, so hopefully she would never find out what happened to her tourniquet.

“You always borrow shit off me and never give it back,” she chastised him. “Sure it’s not in your locker?”

“Positive.”

“It was my scissors last week, I chased you about them for three days, Damien.”

“I haven’t got your fucking tourniquet,” Damien yelled. He threw his cup down and stormed from the staff room.

The day only got worse now Isabelle wasn’t speaking to him. A steady stream of patients and Damien the only doctor until lunchtime when some

incompetent child straight out of medical school arrived, having the nurses rolling their eyes and showing him how to do his own medical procedures.

Damien became steadily more harassed, thinking of how he had woken up alone this morning and cried for the slow loss of Eban. A couple of days, his lover had said he was staying at Christian's, so that meant another night alone tonight. He couldn't bear it. He felt so lost he didn't see in which direction he could turn.

I'll do it tonight.

"Doctor."

Damien looked up at the man he had just been treating. Obnoxious and noxious-smelling, he had become angry when Damien had told him the ER was not the place to get methadone. Damien, to buy some time, had responded that he would look into it. He had then gone and sat at the nurses' station writing his notes with his head down, telling himself that if he stayed there long enough, his patient would wander off as they usually did.

"Doctor!" the man cried again, leaning over the partition which separated them. "What the fuck are you doing? Give me my fucking methadone, man."

"Want me to call security?" One of the nurses asked Damien in an undertone.

"Yeah," Damien replied.

"Fuck security, you fucking pussy! Why do you need security to deal with me?" The man stormed around the desk.

Damien stood up quickly. Memories flashed through his mind of Eban restraining him in moves Damien could never get out of, the two of them tumbling to the floor laughing. Then he remembered Eban telling him he still fought like a chick and no wonder he got shot.

As the man lunged at him, Damien grabbed his arm and twisted it backward, spinning him around, shoving him face down on the desk. The man was subdued but Damien hadn't gone far enough this time. With grim determination, he pulled his arm even further back until he heard the shoulder dislocate with a satisfying pop. Only then did he release the man with a smirk.

The nurses were staring at him as security rushed in and picked the howling man up off the floor. His eight-year-old doctor colleague was staring at him in admiration. "You did that on purpose," someone said.

"I did," Damien said. "It felt good."

"You can't just do that, you basket case," said someone else.

"Can't I? I just did."

"My office now," said the nurse in charge.

Damien shook his head. He threw his stethoscope down even though it had been an expensive one, because he knew he would never use it again. “I quit.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I’m done.”

“You can’t...”

“Can’t I? Watch me.”

“You can’t leave me here on my own!” wailed the rookie doctor in terror.

Damien turned to look at him. “I feel sorry for you.” He turned to walk away. Inside, for the first time in many, many years, his heart sang.

I’ve done it. I’ve done it. When I get home, I can throw away the insulin. I won’t need it because Eban and I are going to be all right. When I tell him what I’ve done, he’ll be so happy he’ll probably fuck me all night until I beg for mercy.

He cleaned his locker out, got changed, and hurled his scrubs into a linen basket. Then he kissed Isabelle on the cheek as he passed her and winked. “I’ll call you from Hawaii.”

All the way home, he had the radio blaring heavy metal and his heart was free.

Chapter 33

"I'M STAYING back at Christian's," Eban told Robert.

"Why?"

"I want to be away from Damien."

"Obviously. Why?"

"He stifles me."

"How is he stifling you?"

Eban shrugged. "I don't know."

"He loves you."

"I know."

"And you love him."

"Yes, I do."

"But he's not giving you what you want." It was a statement not a question.

"I don't even know what I want."

"To be saved."

"Yeah."

"Do you think Damien can't save you?"

"Damien needs saving himself."

"Does he?"

"Yes. I... fear for him."

"In what way?"

"Fuck, I don't know. He seems... desperate. I think he's going to lose it."

"How do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"Then he needs to talk to someone. You could both come here together if you like. I'm a qualified couples' counselor too."

Eban shook his head. "I need to sort out my feelings for Conrad. Damien doesn't want to listen to me do that."

"If you came to terms with your grief over Conrad, do you think you and Damien could make this work?"

"Yes."

"Do you love him the way you loved Conrad?"

"No."

"Do you think that's the problem?"

"I'm *never* going to love anyone the way I loved Conrad. What can I do about that?"

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Unburden yourself about Conrad to me. Tell me everything. Tell me your deepest thoughts about him. Ones you've never shared with anyone else."

Eban glanced at the clock over Robert's desk. "I doubt you've got the time to listen."

Robert kept his eyes on Eban. "I have."

Eban began to talk. He told Robert about that day in Conrad's bedroom, reddening as he described the sex. He told him about Conrad meeting Christian, about him graduating from the academy and Conrad virtually throwing him off the premises when he arrived in uniform. He told him about the long, desolate years he had waited for Conrad. He told him about that day two years ago in the hallway of his home when he and Conrad had come together. And he told him about the last kiss they had shared as Conrad breathed his last. He told of his realization about his love for Conrad as Damien forced him to admit it. Then he told of his conversation with Christian last night, and how his friend had clearly accused him of being in love with Conrad. There was nothing he did *not* tell Robert about the things which had broken him for as long as he could remember.

CHRISTIAN picked Luke up from work at five thirty, and they drove home with Luke chattering excitedly about the research project and the astronomical funding the university had been given for it.

When they got back to Luke's, he started to pull food out of the fridge, then glanced over at Christian, who had sat down at the table.

"This morning, you were kind of distracted."

Christian nodded.

"Want to tell me?"

"Eban was at home last night, hiding from Damien."

"Go on."

"We had words. And I realized something about him. Something that maybe I've known all along and I've not been ready to accept until now."

Luke didn't speak. Christian kept his eyes on the table. "I'm pretty sure Eban was in love with Conrad."

"Why do you say that?" Luke asked.

"It would explain his grief."

"Conrad was his best friend all his life, wouldn't you expect that level of grief?"

"No."

Luke shook his head. "I have to disagree with you there."

Christian shrugged. "It's what I think." He looked at Luke for a long moment and noticed the way his pale skin flushed a little and the trouble he had maintaining the eye contact. *Jesus Christ*. He opened his mouth to speak the words—you knew, didn't you?—and they died on his tongue when he saw the look of absolute terror in Luke's eyes.

He thinks I'm going to dump him because he knew. He actually thinks I would do that again to him, when we're together forever and nothing he could do could ever make me leave him. Christian's heart melted into tenderness. He got up from the table and took Luke in his arms, feeling the tension in the smaller body as he held it.

"What are you cooking?" he asked. "I'm starved."

When Luke drew back to look at him, his eyes were still wary but he smiled, a smile, it seemed, almost of gratitude that Christian had let the matter go.

WHEN Eban had finished, his appointment had run over by more than an hour and it was growing dark outside. He blinked a little and looked at the crumpled tissues on his knees, realizing his tears had dried.

Robert smiled at him. "How do you feel now?"

"Unburdened," Eban murmured. "As you suggested."

Robert nodded. "You've done well. I'm proud of you. When do you want to come again?"

"As soon as I can."

Robert looked at his appointment book. "Thursday? At four?"

"Yeah."

Robert penciled his name in and closed the book. "How about I buy you a cup of coffee across the street? They also do a rather nice apple pie."

Eban smiled and nodded. He felt exhausted as he stood up, his limbs weak. He pulled on his jacket and waited for Robert to collect his own, taking some keys from the drawer of his desk and flicking off the light. The two

stepped out into the hallway. As Robert was locking the door, Eban looked up and saw a familiar figure walking toward him in uniform.

Darius was looking down at his feet and almost collided with Eban as he stepped in front of him.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Darius said, glance flickering to Robert, the two nodding a greeting to each other.

“I’ll wait downstairs,” Robert said, and the two watched him walk off down the corridor.

“You’ve been crying,” Darius said. “Told you he was good.”

Eban smiled self-consciously. “He knows you. How?”

“I came up in conversation?”

“Yeah. I can’t talk about my problems without you being a part of them,” Eban said uncomfortably.

“I’m one of your problems?” Darius looked disappointed.

“Don’t take offense. So... you didn’t answer my question.”

Darius hesitated. His dark blue eyes moved away, searching the prints lining the walls as though they held the answer he was looking for. “I saw him professionally, obviously.”

“I know that,” Eban said. “Why?”

Darius shuffled his feet and looked down at his highly polished shoes. “My mother died a few months ago.”

Eban drew in his breath and cursed softly under it. He reached out to touch Darius’s shoulder and drew his hand back quickly when another cop walked past.

“I’m sorry,” he said in an undertone.

“I have to go.”

He was gone before Eban could even speak.

AFTER dinner, Christian spoke up as they were loading the dishwasher. “Want to go to my house?”

Luke looked up at him in surprise, poised with a plate in his hand.

“It’s about time you saw where I live, I can’t keep staying here and eating your food, you’ll have to start charging me rent.”

“I like having you here,” Luke said.

Christian looked at him a moment, then moved to kiss him. “Maybe we should talk about our living arrangements, then.” Even as he said it, terror at

making such a huge step and a huge commitment rose to consume him, but he smiled bravely for Luke's sake and continued to load the dishes.

"THINGS seem a little clearer in my mind now," Eban said as he stared down into his coffee. His head ached, and he longed to crawl into bed and sleep himself oblivious.

"Such as?"

"What I want to do about Damien. How to face my grief."

"I'm glad for you, Eban."

"I still have a long way to go but I feel like...." Eban laughed a little uncomfortably. "Don't laugh."

Robert frowned. "I wouldn't."

"I feel like... I was underwater. My mind was hazy and I couldn't think straight. Now I can focus more. It feels sharper."

Robert nodded.

"Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense."

"I can see that I really can help myself. That I don't need the savior I've been looking for."

Robert nodded again.

Eban smiled. "Is the pie good?" he asked, because he had refused a slice.

"Try some," Robert said. He held a piece out on his own fork.

Eban hesitated because it seemed such an intimate thing. Then he leaned forward and took the fork in his mouth, holding eye contact steadily with his counselor.

Robert sat back when Eban had taken the bite, pale blue eyes lowered. "Do I need to be wary of you, Eban?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. You forget you've already told me all about the way you behave. I'm straight. Does that make any difference to you?"

Eban shrugged. "Not much. I like a challenge."

Robert put his fork down with a clatter.

"I'm sorry," Eban said quickly, holding a hand up. "It was a joke, come on." When Robert continued to study him with an angry, wary expression on his face, he sighed. "Really. Come on. I wouldn't."

"I couldn't counsel you any more, Eban, if you started having ideas."

"I won't, I promise you. I'm focused now. I don't need to start thinking that way," Eban said, even though he had been thinking what color those eyes would darken to with orgasm.

"You're a sex addict," Robert remarked, his face serious.

"Sure," Eban said. "But, dude, it's better than heroin."

Robert smiled.

WHEN Eban got in his car, darkness had fallen and the evening was chilly. He had switched his cell off during the counseling session and now, when he put it back on, he found he had a voice mail. He hoped it wasn't from Marcus again, who had left a mumbled apology which Eban had angrily deleted. He found it was from Damien, sounding so happy that Eban wondered suspiciously if he was drunk.

"Don't go back to Christian's tonight, just come home; I need to tell you something. You'll be really happy, I promise you. I'm so excited; I can't wait to tell you. I love you."

Eban sighed and headed in the direction of Damien's house, which had been his intended destination before listening to his message anyway. He also had something to tell Damien.

Chapter 34

DAMIEN was waiting anxiously by the living room window, twitching back the curtains several times a minute waiting for Eban's car. The syringe and insulin were nestling in the kitchen trash, and Isabelle's tourniquet was in a Jiffy bag waiting to be mailed back to her. Sudden headlights illuminated the dark, and Damien ran to the door.

IN HIS car, Eban switched off the engine and sat for a moment with his head against the steering wheel, praying for the strength to do this. When he got out, his legs were leaden and his stomach boiled with acid, threatening to reject its contents.

The front door opened, and when he saw the unusual smile on Damien's face, his heart was constricted in a vise. Damien ran to him in a few steps and threw himself into Eban's arms, laughing.

"Your neighbors," Eban murmured in protest, keeping himself stiff, putting his hands up to Damien's wrists to release them.

"*Fuck* the neighbors!" Damien snorted. He drew back to look at Eban. "I quit my job! I fucking *did* it! All for you! Now I'm taking you to Hawaii, and fuck it, let's go somewhere legal and get married too!"

Eban stared at him. "You quit?"

"Yes!" Damien laughed. He put his arms above his head and yelled dramatically, "I quit my job and I love you!"

Eban grabbed Damien's arm hard and dragged him into the house. "Stop making a fucking scene."

In the hall, Damien's exuberance died quickly. He wrenched his arm away from Eban, glaring at him. "I thought you'd be happy. I thought this is what you wanted."

"I'm happy for you, Damien, but it makes no difference to us," Eban said. "I came here to finish it."

The look on Damien's face was something that he never wanted to see again as long as he lived. It was perhaps the same look Eban had had on his face when Conrad had told him that they must never sleep together again. That look that tells you that you have just crushed someone's hopes and

dreams under the heel of your cruel shoe and that person will never recover for the rest of their life.

"But..." Damien stammered. "I did it for you. You wanted me to do it. I thought we'd be happy if I did it...." He looked desperately confused, gray eyes brimming with tears.

Eban shook his head. "It's not about your job anymore. It's about Conrad. I can't be with you. I'm sorry."

"So this is temporary, right? When you've sorted through your grief over Conrad, you'll come back, right?"

Eban shook his head. "No. This is forever."

"No," Damien cried, grasping his shoulders. "You don't mean that. I love you!"

"I love you too, Damien," Eban replied. "I'll always love you, but I can't be with you."

"Are you leaving me for *him*?" Damien demanded.

"Who? You mean Darius?"

Damien nodded wordlessly.

"No, I'm not leaving you for anyone."

Damien's face crumpled again, and he started to sob loudly. Eban stepped forward and took him in his arms. Damien clung to him hard, weeping his heart out, and Eban was so distressed that he almost took it back. *Almost.*

He tried to ease Damien away from him, but Damien responded by grasping his face and pressing his lips to his. Eban drew in his breath but he didn't try to fight it. He wanted one last kiss from Damien. He *needed* it.

He kissed Damien back, a hand holding his head tenderly, tasting the salt of his tears, his heart so stricken over what he had just done that it seemed to slow and weaken with regret.

"I'm sorry," he said against Damien's mouth before drawing back, looking at the tears streaking his face, at the red, swollen eyes and the trembling lips. "I love you. I'm so fucking sorry."

Damien kissed him again. It spiraled into desperation, both of them clinging to the other. They stumbled back against the wall, Eban pinning Damien there, his hands sliding beneath his shirt to touch his skin for the last time. Damien shuddered against him, moaning, one hand gripping Eban's hair hard, pressing his pelvis deliberately against him.

Eban groaned, listening to the sobbing moans which spilled from his lover's mouth, eyes closed as Damien pressed his face into his neck, covering

it with kisses, breath hot and wet against his skin. Eban felt tears slowly tracking their way beneath the neck of his shirt, seeming to brand his skin.

Awash with guilt, he put Damien away from him with firm hands. "I promise you I'll always love you," he said in a voice thick with tears. "You didn't do anything wrong. This was all me, and I'm sorry. You should never have gotten yourself involved with me, I'm damaged fucking goods. I don't know how to love properly when all my love got buried with a dead man."

Damien's hands slid up to his cheeks, and he held Eban in place with such resignation in his eyes that Eban remained still, giving Damien this, for one last time. Damien leaned forward and placed the lightest of kisses on his lips, holding it, so the two swapped breaths and tears for many seconds, before Eban moved away, pulling open the door, Damien's hand going into his, their fingers claspings hard and then parting, slowly, as Eban stepped outside, pulling the door closed behind him.

He got in his car and set off down the street with the stereo on loud. He knew his next destination and the next thing he had to accomplish that night before he could rest, and he tried not to let thoughts of Damien steer his mind away from what he had to do. But he couldn't help it. Poor Damien. He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve to be thrown away so casually. What was he going to do all alone at the house? Who would he turn to? Eban's breath caught suddenly in his throat and his foot shifted to the brake, intent on doing a U-turn. But the moment passed and he controlled himself. No. No matter what paranoid thoughts he now had in his head, he could not go back to Damien tonight. Doing so would only result in them sleeping together, making it even harder to leave in the morning. He had to focus on his next task, a task that was possibly even harder than the one he had just undertaken.

CHRISTIAN opened the door and stepped back to let Luke go in first. He closed the door and tossed his keys onto the table in the hall. He called Eban's name, expecting his friend to be home, but got no reply. "Okay, then," he said, turning to Luke with a smile. "Guided tour."

Luke returned it a little hesitantly, obviously reading Christian's nervousness. "Kitchen," Christian said redundantly. He pointed through the windows to the dark patio beyond. "Backyard."

Luke was uncharacteristically silent. Christian turned and led him back out and into the dining room, then the living room. When they came back into the hall, there was only one room left unexplored. Christian pushed the door open just a little, so Luke could see a cascade of papers and boxes covering every inch of the floor of the small room.

“Office,” Christian explained, his face heating. “I went a little crazy and wrecked the place. It’s all Conrad’s stuff, really.”

“I could tidy it up for you,” Luke said, putting a hand on his arm. “I don’t mind.”

“Maybe. Come on.” Christian led the way upstairs. He showed Luke the bathroom, the spare room, Eban’s room, and paused finally at the end of the landing.

“And our... *my* room,” he said, pushing the door open.

Luke lingered with him on the threshold. “I don’t have to go in.”

“No, go in,” Christian said, gesturing, following when Luke stepped in.

The place was a shrine to Conrad, his clothes still in the closet, the shirt under the pillow that Christian clutched tight at night, the picture of the two of them on the nightstand, Conrad standing behind Christian, an arm around him, grinning, emerald eyes glittering, dimples predominant. Christian cringed a little when he saw Luke’s gaze move over the picture, linger, and move away.

“I like your color scheme,” he offered.

Christian smiled wanly. “I’m sure you understand that I won’t be asking you to stay here,” he said, with eyes averted almost in shame that Luke had to witness this room. “Not that you’d want to, anyway.”

“I wouldn’t want to.” Luke’s voice was gentle. “This is yours and Conrad’s bed. It would be wrong of me to sleep in it.”

Christian sat on the edge of the bed. “I need to sell the house. I can’t live here anymore with his ghost around every corner.”

Luke moved over, one hand stroking Christian’s hair. “There’s no rush. Just take your time.”

Christian put his arms up to Luke’s waist and drew his lover to stand between his knees, pressing his face into his chest, eyes closed.

There was the sound of a key in the front door suddenly, then footsteps on the stairs. Christian moved to the door as Eban appeared on the landing. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Eban said. He looked shifty, his eyes swollen.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve finished it with Damien.”

“Jesus,” Christian said.

Luke appeared behind him silently, and Eban nodded to him.

“It was what I needed to do.”

"How did he take it?" Christian asked.

"Not very well."

"I guess you're back here for a while, then."

"Well...." Eban looked awkward. "I'm getting away for a few days."

"Oh. What about work?"

"I'll call in sick. I've just come for some stuff then I'll be off, but before I go, I need to talk to you, Christian. I need to tell you something."

A heavy silence hung over the three of them. "I'll go wait in the car," Luke said quickly.

Christian reached behind him and took his hand. "No," he said, with gaze still fixed on Eban. "Get your stuff then come downstairs, okay?" he told his friend.

Eban nodded and went into his room.

Christian and Luke went downstairs. When they reached the kitchen, Luke said again, "Listen, I can wait...."

"No." Christian got three bottles of beer out of the fridge. "When he tells me, I need you here."

"You don't know that he's going to...."

"But I do."

Luke looked more terrified than Christian felt. He put a hand on the back of his neck and stroked. "Whatever he tells you, Christian, I'm here."

Christian kissed him and moved to the table, flipping the tops off the bottles and putting the beers down. Eban was only a few minutes. Luke and Christian were sitting together at the table when he entered, sat opposite, and took his beer with thanks.

There was silence.

"When I tell you this, Christian, you won't want me back here in your house," Eban said finally.

He looked so miserable that Christian's heart went out to him even though it beat sickeningly fast with what was coming. He reached across the table and took Eban's hand in his. As he did, he remembered their ten-year history together. He remembered how Conrad's best friend had moved effortlessly into his role as Christian's best friend. He remembered how Eban had held him up above the waves while he sank below them himself. And he realized he had been pulled out of the water by Luke, leaving Eban to drown.

"Nothing you could tell me would ever stop me loving you," he told Eban.

Eban shook his head. "You're wrong. I swore I'd never tell you this. But I've seen the way to go, the way to help myself. And that way is to be alone and to unburden myself of all the shameful secrets I've been carrying, and this is the biggest of all."

Christian kept his eyes fixed on his friend's. "Go on."

Eban drew his hand away. He took a drink of beer, glancing at the silent Luke.

"I was in love with Conrad for most of my life."

Christian lowered his head, eyes closed. He felt Luke's hand on his knee under the table.

"I know you hate me now, and you might never want to see me again as long as you live, but I need you to know, Christian, that I never told him, I *swear* I never told him. I never asked him to leave you; I never did anything with him. He was never unfaithful to you, Christian, I swear on my life. This was just something I carried. I never tried to get him to act on it. I wouldn't have done that to you."

Christian took a deep breath and looked up at his friend. "Were you in love with him when you slept with him?"

Eban nodded, biting his lip.

"Then why didn't you tell him so at the time? Why did it only happen once?"

"He didn't want to let it happen again," Eban said in a small voice. "He said it wouldn't last as long as our friendship would, and we would just ruin it all pointlessly."

"But... that was five years before he met me," Christian said. "You had five years to tell him. Why didn't you?"

Eban hung his head and put a hand over his eyes. "I don't know. I was always too afraid. I kept quiet and waited for him to come to me. And he never did."

"Oh Jesus." Christian couldn't feel anger at this pathetic tale of unrequited love which was spilling out before him. "You poor fucking bastard." Eban's head snapped up, wet eyes scanning Christian's in confusion. He shoved his chair back from the table and fled from the kitchen.

Christian charged after him, catching him by the front door, putting his hand over Eban's shoulder to slam the door closed before he could get out. "Wait."

Eban whirled around to face him. "I don't understand! You should be breaking my face for this! I don't want your pity, Christian!"

He tried to resist as Christian dragged his body to his and enclosed him in his arms. "You've got it," he muttered as he held the trembling man to him.

Eban slumped suddenly against him, his bones like jelly in Christian's arms, his hands clutching at his back like a drowning man. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he repeated over and over again, until Christian shushed him, stroking his hair.

Finally, Christian lifted Eban's head, holding his face, making his friend look at him. "Listen to me. You've done two really good things today, letting go of Damien and letting go of your secrets. You can move on now, Eban, do you hear me?"

With eyes closed and tears trickling from beneath his lashes, Eban nodded, his lips trembling. He eased himself free from Christian's arms. "I need to go."

"I don't think you should drive in your state. Stay here with us."

Eban shook his head. He turned away and fumbled the front door open, picking up the bags which sat there. "I'm sorry," he said again as he slipped through.

In the silence which followed his exit, Luke came out of the kitchen. "I'm so proud of you," he murmured behind Christian.

Christian turned around into his arms, holding him fiercely, laughing a little through the tears which welled in his eyes.

"Are you going to call up your best friend now and tell him the most eligible man in Orange County is up for grabs again?" he asked when they drew apart.

Luke laughed self-consciously. "Would that be bad of me?"

"No."

Luke smiled. His fingertips traced Christian's cheek.

"Call him. I'm getting some stuff together," Christian said, kissing him and moving toward the stairs.

In his bedroom, he sank down on the bed and took the photo of him and Conrad in his hands. *You could have had the beautiful Eban, and instead, you still chose me. I'm even more lucky than I ever knew.*

LUKE went back to the kitchen table, reaching his cell from his pocket, calling up the number from the address book and waiting for his friend to answer.

"Hi, Darius."

“Hey, man.”

“What’re you doing?”

“Surfing the net, checking out some porn.”

“Anything good?”

“No. I can’t even pop a boner.”

“I might have some information that could help you with that.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Eban broke up with Damien.”

There was such a long silence that Luke thought Darius had hung up.
“Darius?”

“Are you sure?”

“From the horse’s mouth not half an hour ago.”

“Fuck,” Darius cursed.

“And he told Christian he was in love with Conrad too.”

“*Fuck!*”

Luke laughed. “He’s gone away, but he’s coming back, and when he does....”

Darius cut him off. “I can’t, Luke. Whatever you want me to do, I can’t.

“But....”

“Luke, figure out how bad Eban is feeling right now. He’s thrown Damien away and told Christian his biggest secret. What would it say to him if I called him now? It would say, come and fuck me, Eban, and leave me again in the morning. And he would do it and he would fucking break me. *Again*. Do you see? He has to come to me.”

Luke sighed. “I see.”

“Good. I’m not going to call him, but you let me know when you hear from him, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. And thanks, Luke. You made my day.” Darius hung up.

EBAN’S cell rang as he got into his car and drove away from Christian’s house. He put it to his ear without checking the caller ID, dreading that it would be Damien.

“Hey, man,” came a familiar voice.

"Hey, Aaron," Eban said in surprise.

"How're you doing?"

"I've been better."

"What's wrong?"

Eban hesitated before he said, "I broke up with Damien."

Aaron was silent a moment. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said, sounding genuine.

"It was for the best."

"I called to see if you wanted to grab a beer tonight, I take it you're not in the mood now?"

"Sorry, I'm getting out of town for a while. I'm on my way now."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'll see you when you get back. Take care now."

"Thanks, man, see you."

Eban closed his phone and put it on the passenger seat. He headed through Costa Mesa to join the San Diego freeway, trying not to let everything that had happened today overwhelm him for fear he would crash his car and never make it out alive.

AT DAMIEN'S, the kitchen trash was all over the floor after a fierce scrabble for the lost things, and Damien was sitting in the middle of it with the tourniquet over his knee, drawing up a full syringe from the vial, flicking the air bubbles from it and laughing to himself, because it didn't exactly matter if he had an air embolism or not, that would just add to the fun. He rested the syringe on his knee and clipped the tourniquet around his left arm, pulling it tight, inspecting the crook of his elbow and waiting for the veins to pop up. He always had shit veins; he never would have made a good junkie.

He palpated a spot with the tip of his finger and found it reasonably spongy. It would be funny now if he missed, if he had to try five times to kill himself. He only hoped he could get one on his left arm because there was no way he could try to inject himself with his left into his right; he simply didn't have the dexterity in his left hand. This vein would do. He took the syringe and looked at it. Then he put it down and looked around the kitchen. The note he had written to Eban was propped up by the coffee machine, some bullshit about how he loved him.

He didn't want to think too deeply about how his suicide might affect Eban, because while he believed Eban still loved him, the way Damien saw it, he obviously didn't love him enough to have stayed. It was really only Eban

who would be bothered. Damien had not seen his family in years and couldn't care less, adopted at birth by a couple who were not even interested in him and gave him to a nanny at every opportunity. After he had left home for college, he had never gone back.

Everything always came back to Eban, the only person who would mourn him. He thought briefly of the other person who had recently piqued his interest but dismissed him just as quickly.

He picked the syringe up again, his hand trembling as he held the tip of the needle to his skin. Slowly, he slid it a little way into what he hoped was his vein. With his heart hammering hard, he stopped and pulled the plunger back slightly, hoping for a flash of blood.

It never came. Damien cursed. He pushed the needle in further and drew back again. Still nothing. He pulled it back until it was nearly out and drew back again. Still no blood. "Fuck it." He withdrew the syringe, leaving a bubble of dark blood oozing from his pale skin. He examined a spot a half inch to the left of his first attempt, pressing, feeling a vague little something under the skin.

The needle was blunt now, and it hurt going in but he had only stolen one, it not occurring to him that he would need more than one try. He knew he could inject the insulin in other ways—under his skin or into a muscle—but he preferred this swift approach. He wanted this done quickly. He wanted to inject the drug in his veins and then to climb the stairs and lie down in his bed until sleep took him.

The needle was in, and he drew back and watched as the blood swirled into the syringe, tinting the clear liquid pink. Damien was overcome with terror, the syringe trembling violently in his grip, barely able to hold it in his vein. This was it. He was a second away from achieving his death. His thumb was on the plunger, resting there, exerting the faintest of pressure, not yet enough to make the syringe move.

A knock came at the front door. Damien lifted his head in shock. He didn't make a move. The knock came again. What if it was Eban, come to tell Damien he'd made a huge mistake? He couldn't take the chance it *wasn't* him. He pulled the needle from his arm and unclipped the tourniquet, not noticing the dribble of blood which ran straight out of the puncture site. He put the syringe, the vial, and the tourniquet on the kitchen counter and went to the door, wiping his tears as best he could.

Pulling the door open with pathetic eagerness, the light above it shone onto blond hair and brown eyes.

"Aaron," he stammered in surprise.

"Hello."

“What are you doing here?”

“I spoke to Eban. I came to see if you were okay. I thought you might need a friend.” His tone was so compassionate that Damien burst into tears.

“Hey,” Aaron said, reaching a hand out, stopping abruptly. “You’re bleeding.”

Damien looked down and saw a thin track of blood running from the injection site, veering off his elbow and dripping on the floor. He clapped his hand over it quickly and bent his arm up tight.

“What are you doing? Are you injecting drugs?”

Damien shook his head, trying to get it together. “You need to go.” Quickly he ran back down the hall and into the kitchen, hoping to get to the evidence before Aaron did. Even as he reached for his syringe, Aaron was behind him, gripping the vial, taking it out of reach.

“Are you diabetic?”

Damien’s momentary hesitation was enough.

“Oh, Damien,” Aaron said shaking his head, “oh no, Damien.”

“You need to go and let me do this, Aaron,” Damien said in a trembling voice.

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Leave *now*, Aaron.” Damien blindly tried to fumble the still-loaded syringe into his arm again but Aaron grabbed it and hurled it away, then gripped Damien’s shoulders hard when he tried to dodge past him.

“*Listen* to me.” His hands moved to cup Damien’s face and turn it up to him. “Listen to what I’ve got to say and then tell me if you still want me to leave.”

The fight went out of Damien. He clutched at Aaron’s arms.

“You’re not alone,” Aaron said, eyes never leaving his. “You think you are, but you’re not. As long as you want me, I’m here. Now tell me you want me to leave.”

Damien stared. Abruptly he slid to the kitchen floor, and Aaron went with him, gathering him into his arms.

IT WAS less than a hundred miles to San Diego but Eban was soon too tired to focus on the road. He pulled off the highway and stopped at a motel for the night. He checked in and took his bag to his room. Then he sat down in a pleasant half-empty dining room and ate a solitary dinner before moving on to the bar and drinking to falling-down status.

"Hello, gorgeous," a voice said next to him when he was on his sixth shot of JD. He turned his head to see a stunning woman, with short, dark red hair and blue eyes, on the stool beside him. "Are you drowning your sorrows?"

"Something like that."

She laughed a little. "You look kind of familiar, have I seen you somewhere before?"

"I have a twin. You're probably thinking of him. He's better looking than me, though."

"I doubt that," she purred, putting a hand on his arm. "What are you having?" She signaled the bartender.

"Same." Eban held up his glass. He studied the woman's profile as she leaned toward the barman. She was older than him, in her late thirties, he would have said, and slender, wearing a gauze-thin black dress, her arms like pale, delicate twigs. Her perfume intoxicated him. She turned to him and smiled when she caught him staring.

Eban grinned self-consciously and took his drink with thanks, pouring the remains of his last one into it.

"So what are you doing here?"

Eban shrugged. "Taking some time out."

"Where are you from?"

"Newport Beach."

"Where are you headed?"

"Mexico, maybe."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a cop."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's very hot. I have a stack of unpaid parking tickets in my glove box. I hope you won't take me into custody for it."

Eban rolled his eyes, smiling. "I don't have my cuffs on me."

"Now that's too bad."

Their eyes met.

"What's your name?"

"Eban."

"Hello, Eban, I'm Candy."

Eban shook hands with her politely. He could see what she wanted and he wanted it, too, but leaving home had not been about screwing his way across California. That was behind him now and there was no reason to behave the way he usually did just because he'd had a drink.

"So, are you going to tell me your story?"

"How long do you have?"

"All night."

Something in her manner when she said those words made him stiffen in suspicion. "Ah, I see. You're a hooker, right?"

"That wouldn't be the word I would use," she said.

"Sorry. No disrespect, but I really don't need to pay for it."

"I didn't ask you to."

"So you're giving away your time for free, are you?"

"We're only talking."

Eban laughed and shook his head. He pulled a bill out of his pocket and put it down on the bar. "For the drink," he said as he got off his stool.

She shook her head. "I bought you that."

"I wouldn't want you to be out of pocket," was Eban's reply as he walked away.

IN HIS hotel room, he looked at his hard-on with amusement as he undressed. He'd thought Conrad had killed his attraction to women for good at sixteen. Conrad had consumed his life to the exclusion of everyone else.

Eban washed his face and cleaned his teeth and crawled naked between the cool sheets of his bed, with the ceiling fan turned down low.

Staring at the blades rotating, his hand moved down to himself. *I better get used to this, because this is how it's going to be until I'm better, until I can respect myself and others again and stop sleeping with anything with a pulse.*

His mind drifted to suitable masturbation fantasies as he slid his swollen flesh through his fingers. Damien. Perhaps not. His thoughts moved to Darius, and he was surprised to find how much the image hurt. He remembered the last time, with Darius's hand over his mouth as he cried out. This was no good; he was wilting here under his own ministrations because every fantasy was fraught with too much guilt.

Until one image rose above the others, as it always did. He heard a sound and his eyes snapped open.

Someone stood at the end of the bed.

Eban tried to sit up, his limbs heavy with alcohol. The figure was tall and naked, the moonlight outlining every muscular curve of his body, the eyes glowing green as he put one leg up and crawled onto the bed, moving up over Eban's body.

Eban whimpered in horror, shaking his head, hands out to push the specter away. "You're not real."

"Aren't I?" came an amused voice. "Feel me and see." Two large, strong hands gripped his and brought Eban's palms up against a solid, burning hot chest. "Do I feel real to you?"

A sob burst from Eban's throat. "Please, Conrad, please don't do this to me...."

"Shh," the ghost said, cupping Eban's cheek in his hand, straddling his body, leaning down to kiss him.

Eban moaned as the kiss seared his lips, frozen stiff beneath the body on his, too terrified to respond. The ghost sucked gently on his bottom lip, pulling at it. Eban's hands moved up to clutch at broad, hard shoulders.

"That's right," the ghost said against his lips. "Love me. I've waited so long for you."

Eban began to weep, and the ghost soaked all these tears up, kissing them away, wiping them with fingertips, murmuring soft words of reassurance, taking Eban in his arms, soothing every drop of emotion away until Eban was lying spent beneath him with his tears drying on his face.

When he opened his eyes, he expected to find himself alone with the memory of his dream, but the ghost was still lying on top of him. He stared up into crystal-green eyes, which looked down at him tenderly. Slowly, the ghost drew the sheet away from Eban's body and lowered himself down so their hot skin was pressed together.

Eban drew his breath in. His hands clutched Conrad's hips as Conrad took him in his hand, stroking slowly. He moaned, head back, praying to God that this dream would never end. He felt a mouth on his throat, teeth bared, sucking a bruise to the surface of the skin, and his nails dug into Conrad's flesh hard.

He opened his eyes as Conrad sank down onto him. Eban cried out in utter joy, his spine arching, his hands gripping muscular thighs fiercely. The man straddling him laughed softly. "*Love me,*" he said again, fully impaled on Eban, leaning forward to kiss him.

Eban returned it desperately, moaning. Conrad moved on him, hands braced on his chest, his delicious weight something Eban had only ever been able to imagine.

He kept his eyes open, fixed on the ghost's beautiful face as they came together to effortless orgasm. As Eban felt it build, sweeping relentlessly through him like it came from his very blood, he put his hands up to touch Conrad's face.

"I love you," he said as he bucked up into his lover's body, spilling every drop, "I love you."

He watched Conrad put a hand to himself and jerk a puddle of semen onto Eban's chest which seemed to scald him like boiling water. Conrad fell forward, his weight crushing Eban, his lips against his ear. "I *know*. Find the letter."

"What? What did you say?" Eban gripped Conrad's head, lifting it to look into the beloved eyes. "*What* letter?"

Conrad put a finger on his lips, silencing him. Then he lowered his sweet mouth and kissed Eban tenderly. "Sleep," he said, and in an instant, Eban was heavily asleep beneath him.

Chapter 35

EBAN awoke to the shrill ring of the telephone with a start, flinging an arm out and fumbling the receiver off its hook. He put it to his ear, unable to formulate a response until someone said, “Your wake-up call, Mr. Crane.”

“Thank you.” The receiver fell to the bedside table. How drunk had he been last night? His head pounded like someone had taken a baseball bat to it, and his mouth tasted rancid. Suddenly, like a lightning bolt through his heart, he remembered the dream.

He moaned, rolling over to bury his face into the pillow. He stiffened suddenly and lifted his head at the scent coming from the fabric of the pillowcase. He could smell Conrad. He put an arm under the pillow, holding it close to him. This was it. This was him finally losing his mind.

He got up and made his way to the bathroom. He turned on the shower, looking at himself in the mirror as he waited for the water to warm. On the right side of his neck was a dark bruise. Eban frowned, leaning closer to inspect it, his fingertips tracing it. It was not possible for a ghost to leave a mark. Had he slept with the woman from the bar and not remembered?

He climbed into the shower and stood beneath the spray. The words flashed into his mind.

Find the letter.

He went down to a solitary breakfast, then he called in sick, telling his superior he would not be in for a week. The captain knew all about his counseling sessions, so he probably assumed Eban was having a nervous breakdown. As he sat there on his bed, he contemplated calling Damien. But he couldn’t afford to do that, for his own sanity. Damien would be in a desperate state and beg him to come back, and Eban would feel sorry for him and return, and they would be right back where they started. Poor Damien. He didn’t deserve this. His thoughts drifted to Darius. He couldn’t call him, either. Calling him the day after he had broken it off with Damien would only send the wrong signals. Right now Eban had to be alone, with no complications. That was the only avenue open to him.

He called Robert, not expecting the counselor to be in his office so early, expecting to get away with leaving a message, but the counselor answered.

“Robert Bramwell.”

"Hi, it's Eban...." Eban hesitated nervously. "Eban Crane."

Robert chuckled. "I know it's you, I'm only seeing one Eban at the moment."

"I wanted to tell you that I can't make our next session. I'm away."

"Oh? What's happened?"

"You don't have to counsel me out of hours, I'll come to you when I get back," Eban said uncomfortably.

"Eban," Robert said, as though he hadn't heard, "what's happened?"

Eban sighed. "Anyone ever tell you you're too nice for your own good?"

"Plenty of people," Robert said dryly. "Now out with it."

Eban told him the sorry tale of yesterday, of Damien, of his confession to Christian, and where he was now.

"And how do you feel now?"

"Better," Eban said. "At least until I dreamed Conrad made love to me last night and I woke up with a hickey on my neck."

There was silence. "I don't know what to say about that. Maybe you... pinched yourself in your sleep."

"Maybe, yes. There's something else. He told me to find the letter."

"What letter?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever had prophetic dreams before?"

"No."

"Do you believe there's a letter?"

"Shit, I don't know. But... I *want* there to be."

"Are you sure? What if it's something you don't want to hear?"

Eban thought for a moment. "I want one last thing from him, no matter what it is. I want to see my name written by his hand. I want something by him that I can keep for the rest of my life."

"I understand. When are you coming back?"

"I don't know. A few days."

"Are you going to take steps to find the letter when you get back?"

"Yes. I think I know where it'll be." He thought of the boxes Christian had tipped onto the floor of Conrad's office in a jealous rage and how easy it would be to go through them while Christian was at work.

He was on the freeway by eleven, a beautiful autumnal day blowing away his hangover and doing much to dispel the dream which still lingered in his head. He drove into the center of San Diego, and there, he did what he often did at times of great stress. He found the most expensive-looking salon in the city and got his hair done.

LUKE and Christian lay in Luke's bed watching each other in silence. Christian spoke up. "I don't think it would be right for me to move in with you just yet. Do you?"

Luke gave a little sigh, fingers playing with Christian's hair. "I guess not. Whatever you want, though, you know that."

"Let's just see how it goes. I'll stay here a few nights a week. Okay?"

Luke nodded.

"When you offered... about Conrad's office...."

"I'll do it."

"You don't mind?"

"Why would I?"

"Because it's full of pictures of us and letters from me."

"So?" Luke shrugged. "I won't read them."

"You can do more than tidy it up, though. You can throw most of the stuff away, like his business shit...." Christian averted his gaze, cheeks growing hot. "But if you would just keep the... personal stuff. There's a box with my name on...."

"Okay."

"And then maybe soon I'll go through his other stuff and give that away." Tears welled in his eyes at the prospect of this. What about the shirt under his pillow that he had held close for so many lonely nights? How exactly could he get rid of that?

Luke's hand stroked his cheek. "There's no rush."

Christian turned his gaze to Luke's. "I want to ask you something." He drew his left hand from beneath the covers, holding it up so Luke could see it. "Do you want me to take this off?"

Luke's eyes flickered to the ring, looking at the shining metal with its sparkling diamonds. "I would never ask you to do that, Christian."

"That wasn't my question. Do you want me to?"

Luke hesitated again, looking torn. Finally, mutely, he nodded. Before Christian could speak, he burst out, "I'm sorry, that makes me so selfish."

"No." Christian smoothed Luke's hair back from his face with a tender hand. "It doesn't make you selfish that you want me for yourself."

His started to pull the ring off, finding it fit so snugly that he had to tug.

"Don't," Luke protested, "you don't have to...."

But the ring came off, and Christian leaned over to place it on the bedside table.

"There," he said, smiling even though the ring had taken a chunk of his heart with it. He pulled Luke close, exchanging a kiss, and when he found the emotion became too much for him, he pressed his lover onto his back and slid beneath the covers.

"Wait," Luke said as Christian started to kiss his way down his torso.

"I don't have time to wait if I want to give you something to keep you warm at work all day."

Luke groaned, his fingers tangling in Christian's hair, and Christian was relieved that the subject was closed and he could spend a few minutes under the dark duvet where Luke couldn't see his face. He wanted to put the ring back on.

JACK awoke to a loud banging on the door on his second official day as an unemployed man. Grunting in annoyance, he pulled a T-shirt over his pajama bottoms and made his way barefoot downstairs. There was a man in a dark blue uniform holding an enormous bouquet of red roses. Jack opened his mouth to say there must be a mistake when the man spoke.

"Jack Summers? Sign here."

Perplexed, Jack scrawled his name and gripped the flowers. He took them through to the kitchen, wondering if he even owned a vase, and laid them on the table, pulling the card from the paper wrapping.

Forgive me, said the familiar handwriting.

Jack sighed. He had told himself that the three days' silence meant Marcus didn't give a shit, but the flowers said differently. He ran some water into the sink and thrust the bouquet into it. Then he went upstairs and crawled back beneath the covers.

DAMIEN awoke lying next to a warm body, an arm over his hip, his face pressed into the curve of a neck, his mouth drooling ever so slightly onto it. He lifted his head, disorientated, his heart singing for just the briefest moment before he remembered.

He opened his eyes, looking up at Aaron, the other man's pale brown eyes fixed on his. The cop smiled, and his fingertips brushed Damien's face. "How are you feeling?"

Damien took his time to reply, because he was not sure. He thought back to him and Eban clinging together and crying, to himself on the kitchen floor desperately searching for and locating that vein.

After Aaron had picked him up from the floor, he had carried Damien upstairs to bed. There he had undressed him, tucked Damien into bed, and brought him hot milk, holding it for him and tilting it to his lips when Damien's hands trembled too badly to hold the mug.

Then he had laid Damien down, stripped down to his boxers and climbed into the bed, turning the light off and drawing Damien into his arms, holding him close as he sank quickly into sleep.

He tried to smile at Aaron. "Thank you."

Aaron shook his head. "There's nothing to thank me for. I'm a little attached to you, Damien. Since that night I kissed you outside the restaurant, I've been thinking about you way more than I should. If you had... done what you were going to do last night..." He stopped, his fingers still tracing Damien's cheek and the line of his jaw.

Damien kept his eyes fixed on Aaron's. "I don't know how I'm going to carry on."

"But you will," Aaron said, "with me beside you." He tilted Damien's chin and swept his lips very gently across his. When he drew back, Damien pressed forward, keeping their lips locked together, sighing as he savored the taste of Aaron's mouth and the passion it held for him.

The kiss never moved beyond tender and chaste, and Aaron held Damien while his heart beat hard, regret at the ruins of his life clawing at his throat.

JACK was awoken again by a loud knocking. He snarled with anger, flinging the bedcovers back, only becoming sheepish when he glanced at his clock and saw it was one o'clock in the afternoon. He went downstairs and saw a

postman with a letter requiring his signature. He dutifully signed and went back in, frowning as he ripped open the envelope.

He pulled out a sheet of familiar paper, anger rising in him as he recognized the letterhead and then the dreaded word:

MEMO

But his anger faded quickly at the rest of the words.

To Jack Summers

I love you

Marcus Edwards

Jack stared for the longest while. Then something made him open the door again. Sitting across the street in his car, looking his way, was Marcus. Jack, frozen to the spot with a thousand warring emotions inside him, didn't know what to do. But his ex-boss and ex-lover eased his lanky frame from his low-slung sports car, looking for traffic before crossing the street, trotting up Jack's driveway to his front door.

"Don't say anything," Marcus held his hand up. "Let me show you." And he stepped inside, swung Jack up into his arms with ease, kicked the door shut, and set off up the stairs.

JACK was lying drowsy and satiated in bed, while Marcus stood in his usual after-sex position—smoking at the window. "See, dude, I can do romance," he drawled around his cigarette, referring to the way he had made love to Jack more tenderly than anyone ever had. "I can beat Christian and Conrad's big fairy-tale romance any day. And Christian and Luke's, for that matter. You want me to buy you a two-grand ring, I'll buy you a two-grand fucking ring. You want me to send you roses every day, I'll do it. Anything you want, fucking name it."

Jack regarded him lazily. "Take me away."

"Anywhere," Marcus said. "I'd take you to the North Pole if you wanted."

"Paris," Jack said.

Marcus smiled. "Now who's the romantic? I can do Paris, no problem. When do you want to go?"

"As soon as possible."

"Fine."

Jack smiled.

ONCE Luke had made Christian dinner that evening, he spoke up over coffee. "Want me to clean up Conrad's office tonight?"

Christian looked at him in surprise clearly not expecting Luke to act upon the idea quite so soon.

"Sure," he said with a halfhearted smile.

Luke drove them to Christian's house later, and Christian got two beers out of the fridge. Christian took a few sips and then reached a roll of trash bags from under the sink and handed them to Luke.

"You know what to keep and what to throw out, right?"

Luke cupped his cheek and kissed him. "I won't throw out anything of sentimental value," he said. "Trust me."

"I do, Luke," Christian replied with eyes fixed on his. "With my life." He pulled Luke close and they embraced for a few seconds.

"Okay," he said when he drew back, clearing his throat. "I'm going to give the grass its last cut of the year while you're doing that."

Luke nodded.

"Shout if you need anything." Christian unlocked the French windows.

Luke, armed with beer and trash bags to throw away the remains of a man's existence, retreated into the office and pushed the door closed.

For a moment he surveyed the mess with a heavy heart. The box files spilling paper all over the room were clearly pulled down from the shelf on the wall in a terrible fit of rage.

Luke put his beer on the desk next to the computer and knelt down in the middle of the room. Then he took one of the boxes and tipped the remaining papers from it, glancing at its spine, noting the words "*Work shit.*" He smiled to himself because he had a similar box himself.

He sat back cross-legged, pulled a pile of papers to himself, and scanned them, finding architecture plans and documents and placing them back in the box to be thrown away. Outside, the drone of a lawnmower started up, and he wondered if Christian would become so sweaty at his task that he would have to take his shirt off.

A lascivious thrill went through him at the thought of going out into the yard and taking advantage of a half-naked Christian. Then he remembered whose house they were in and it was enough to dampen him down.

Luke had sorted through the contents of half a dozen boxes and replaced the contents of the one marked *Christian box* half an hour later. He had found dozens of photos of Conrad and Christian and stacks of letters addressed to Conrad. He had not felt the urge to read them because he was not a masochist. He didn't want to read ten years' worth of Christian's love for another man, and if that made him a jealous bastard, then Luke would accept that with no problems.

He threw some papers into the sack and dragged the final box to him, this one still closed, looking at the spine: *Misc. shit*. It contained nothing but a large manila envelope.

He put his hand in and pulled out glossy paper. It was a photo of a younger, less muscular Conrad, still with that gleaming, dimpled smile, with his arm around the shoulders of a smaller man, holding him against him. This man wasn't smiling quite so broadly. He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. On the contrary, he looked stricken. His hair wasn't quite as artificially black as it was now, didn't have quite such an expensive cut. *Eban*.

Luke glanced guiltily toward the door before pulling out the rest of the photos and sifting through them. More photos of Conrad with Eban. Some shots of Eban in shorts at the beach carrying a surfboard. One shot of Conrad sitting between Eban and Christian at a Halloween party, all holding drinks. Oh, the irony.

Conrad was dressed as a vampire with his dark hair slicked back severely, Christian as some sort of devil with horns, and Eban as a priest with an upside-down crucifix. They all smiled, but Eban had that same look on his face. Like he would rather be anywhere but here. And rather than leaning toward Christian, a casual observer would not have known Conrad was with Christian, for he had an arm around both men possessively. Luke studied this picture for a long while. *Did you have a divided heart, Conrad? Does half of this heart which beats inside me belong rightly to Eban?*

He started to put the photos back in the envelope. Christian would have to see these. Luke couldn't throw them out, but nor could he hide them and give them to Eban. There was no reason for Christian to be bothered by Conrad storing photos of himself with his best friend, anyway. Under the last few photographs was a small, white envelope, facedown. Luke picked it up, noticing it was sealed, turning it over to look at the front.

Eban was written there in a scrawled hand.

Luke stared, turning the letter over in his hands, checking again that the seal was definitely intact, holding it up to the light so he could see the single sheet of folded paper inside.

Oh fuck. From far away, the lawnmower shut off. Luke looked again at the letter. What was the right thing to do? All his life Luke had tried to do the right thing and treat people the way he expected to be treated himself. He had never lied, cheated, or hurt anyone. No living soul had ever shed tears over something Luke had done to them. When he died he hoped he would go to heaven without a blemish on his soul.

And despite the fact that he had never deceived anyone in his life, as Christian's footsteps sounded in the hall, Luke shoved the letter into his back pocket, smiling at his lover from his seat on the floor as Christian pushed open the door.

Chapter 36

IT WAS the next night when Luke slipped away to see Darius. He was ushered in and surveyed the sad reality of Darius's life for a moment—some dire show playing on TV and a few empty beer bottles strewn on the floor. It wasn't fair. How come Luke had ended up with so much and Darius got so little?

"I need to talk to you." He followed Darius into the kitchen and accepted a beer from him. The two made their way back into the living room and sat down, Darius turning the sound down low on the TV.

"What's happened?"

"This." Luke produced the envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket, smoothing it out and handing it over to Darius, so he could clearly see the name scrawled on the front.

Darius took it, examining it, turning it over and inspecting the seal.

"I found it in Conrad's office when I was tidying it for Christian."

"Shit. Does Christian know?"

"No. I stole it. I'm not proud of myself."

"It's for Eban, though. It's not really Christian's business."

"So you don't think I'm a bad person?" Luke asked hopefully.

Darius smiled. "You haven't got a bad bone in your body."

Luke returned his smile ruefully. "It didn't feel right to let Christian see this letter. He might open it and who knows what it could contain. Probably something that's going to make him very unhappy. He doesn't need this. And I'm sure Conrad never intended for him to see it."

Darius nodded.

"So you agree with me?"

"Completely."

Luke gave a sigh. "I've been so scared having this in my apartment, thinking Christian might find it. I feel so bad for doing it."

"Don't. Now you have to decide whether to give it to Eban or not."

Luke frowned. "You're thinking I shouldn't?"

Darius looked at the letter again. "At the moment, he's even more fragile than Christian. What happens if this letter contains something he doesn't want to hear? It could tip him over the edge."

Luke bit his lip anxiously as he thought. "Fuck, I don't know what to do now."

Darius handed the letter back after they were both silent a while. "Give it to him," he said. "Conrad wanted him to have it. Who are we to stop that happening? It wouldn't be right."

Luke nodded. "Okay. But listen, keep the letter here for me, please? If Christian finds it, we'll be finished."

"Sure." Darius took the letter again and laid it on his knee, looking down at it thoughtfully. "I hope it's a love letter," he said, "as much as I would feel sorry for Christian, I really hope it's a love letter."

Luke didn't reply, mainly because he was thinking the same thing. Poor, broken Eban deserved this. He deserved to have been worshipped in return the same way he had worshipped Conrad. He deserved for all his love not to have been in vain.

WHEN Luke got back home, he paced his living room while looking at Eban's number called up on the screen of his cell. He debated for a few minutes before putting it away. He couldn't call Eban and ask him to come home because he had needed that space, had needed to get away. It wouldn't be right of Luke to cut this break short for a letter he didn't even know the contents of. Who knows if it didn't contain the most devastating thing Eban would ever read?

AT HOME, Darius sat in his living room nursing a beer and holding the letter in his hand. No matter what it said, it would be bad news for him personally. A declaration of love from Conrad would probably have Eban even more grief-stricken than he was now. A declaration that he never loved Eban would probably have him suicidal. Either way, this was a lose/lose situation for Darius, who still clung to the belief that Eban felt more for him than he had ever admitted and would one day come to him. Now he wasn't so sure. He had expected a call from Eban after he had broken up with Damien. Even if it was just so he could get a pity fuck. The fact that he hadn't called had surprised and unsettled Darius. Maybe he had it all wrong. Maybe he was only ever something for Eban to get Conrad and Damien out of his system.

He put the letter down on the coffee table and got up, clearing up his beer bottles, checking the back door was locked and turning out the kitchen light. He went upstairs and slid between the cool sheets of his bed.

IT TOOK a few days of haunting every bar in San Diego and turning down every piece of ass offered to him on a plate night after night before Eban made the decision to return. Despite the fact that the dream obsessed him and he jerked off over it drunkenly every night, he was terrified at the prospect of returning home and coming face to face with the letter. At times he was only half convinced it existed and thought that he was out of his mind. In which case, he needed to return home anyway to allow Robert to put him back *into* his mind.

He arrived back on Monday evening, hoping Christian would be staying over at Luke's, anxious to get straight into Conrad's office and begin rooting out the truth. But as he pulled into the driveway, Christian's car was there and lights shone from the living room and hall. His heart sank at facing Christian again after his confession, but he was tired from his trip and knew he would get the opportunity to search the office for sure in the morning. There was no rush to hold that thing in his hand which had the potential to damage him beyond all repair.

He opened the door and carried his bags in. Christian appeared in the hall with a surprised expression on his face. Before Eban could even speak, he embraced him hard. Eban returned it in astonishment, smiling hesitantly at Luke over his shoulder, who loitered in the kitchen.

"Christ, I was scared you weren't going to come back," Christian muttered, drawing back to look at Eban.

Eban smiled wanly. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

"Like I'd want to. Come on. Nice hair, by the way." He put an arm around Eban's shoulders and led him toward the kitchen.

As they passed the office, Eban's eyes were drawn magnetically through the open door and into the room to survey it. The place was virtually empty save for the desk and computer, all the papers gone off the floor.

Eban's heart plummeted. Christian entered the kitchen first and went over to the table, where his houseplants were set out, the table covered with newspaper, soil, and dead leaves.

"We're just re-potting these," he said, "then I'm heading off to Luke's for the night."

Eban nodded, although he didn't even hear. "Did you... clean up the office, then?" he tried to ask casually.

"Yeah," Christian said, moving to a pan on the stove. "Well, Luke did it. Want some cocoa?"

Eban glanced at Luke. The other man met his gaze for a mere second before reddening and dipping his head, his hair falling across his face. Eban frowned in confusion, his skin prickling with unease.

“Was that a yes?”

Eban blinked and looked at Christian. Luke had thrown everything away. Nothing remained, not even his hope.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m kind of tired. I’m going up to bed.”

Christian nodded. “I’ll be back tomorrow night. I’ll cook for you.” He smiled bashfully.

Eban rolled his eyes. “No, I’ll cook for *you*. See you then.”

“Yeah.”

“See you, Luke,” Eban said.

Luke lifted his head finally. “Bye, Eban,” he said with such deep anguish in his pale green eyes that Eban stared at him once more before leaving the room, mounting the stairs swiftly, his brain on fire with confusion.

CHRISTIAN and Luke left at ten. Eban lay in bed alternately telling himself Luke had thrown the letter away or he had kept it himself. The latter thought led to the question that maybe Luke had read it and had no intention of giving it to Eban ever. Another possibility was that he had given it to Christian. But if he had, then Christian was a very good actor. Although maybe it had something so benign in it that Christian had been satisfied with it. Maybe it had said, *Eban, I know you always loved me, but I never loved you back*. Yes, Christian would be satisfied with that, all right.

His head ached with his anxiety, and he trembled with cold in his bed despite throwing an extra quilt on. Finally, he got up at six and made his way downstairs, making coffee before tackling the office.

He pushed the door open wide and stood a moment in the middle of the room fearfully. There were a couple of box files left on the shelf, one marked *Christian box*, the other marked *Misc. shit*.

With an unsteady hand, he reached the second one down and took out the manila envelope he found there, extracting all its contents. The top photo of him and Conrad seared his eyes and made his heart contract violently. He looked at the next one. Himself with a surfboard, younger and skinnier than he was now. The next one, himself and Conrad, and the next and the next.

Eban sank down in Conrad’s chair as he came to the final photo, the Halloween picture with Christian. He couldn’t believe Conrad had this collection of pictures, most of which Eban didn’t remember being taken. Had Christian seen them and what had he thought? He was grateful Luke hadn’t thrown them out. Was Christian going to offer them to him? He couldn’t

bring the subject up, much as he wanted to. He could hardly explain why he had been in here looking at these pictures. Could he steal them? Would Christian ever know? He reached back into the envelope with futility for any scrap of paper which might be lurking in its depths. Then he sat staring at Conrad's computer screen as a long-buried memory came back to him.

Him and Damien over for dinner with Christian and Conrad. Christian in the kitchen trying his best while Conrad had yet to appear, closeted in his office. Eban had opened the door after ten minutes and stuck his head in. "Hey, wasn't it you as well as Christian who invited us tonight or shall we just serve your meal on a tray in here?"

Conrad smiled, dimples on display, and then hissed in a low voice, "Shh, shut the door and come here."

Eban did as he was told, standing behind Conrad, a hand on the back of his friend's chair, fingers just barely brushing his back, looking over his shoulder at the screen. "Look at these." Conrad drew his attention to an Internet page open at thumbnail pictures of rings. "Is this the one you liked?" His long finger pointed to one with three diamonds.

"Yeah."

Conrad nodded. He reached behind him suddenly and gripped Eban's hand, swinging his chair around.

"What are you...."

"Let me look." Conrad held Eban's palm against his own, examining his fingers.

Eban stared down at the thick lashes veiling his friend's eyes, his palm becoming damp at the contact with Conrad's. "Hmm, I think his fingers are thinner than yours. Know what size your ring finger is?"

Eban snatched his hand back. "Why would I know that?"

Conrad looked up at him with a frown, his green eyes glittering with golden sparks in the sunlight which brightened his office. "What's wrong?"

Eban took a step back. "Nothing, I just...." He couldn't bear to look into those shimmering crystalline eyes, so his gaze strayed to the computer screen, noticing a second tab open at the top of the browser which stated, Pretty Boys.

He smiled in spite of himself. "So you've been surfing porn in here as well as looking at rings."

Conrad grinned self-consciously, that innocent, boyish smile which never failed to undo Eban. Eban moved around past his chair to grip the mouse.

"Don't," Conrad protested, and Eban smacked his friend's hand out of the way, laughing as he clicked on the tab.

The image he saw was a medium-sized fairly built man in a cop's uniform, brandishing a baton, pants undone and prodigious hard-on enclosed in his other hand. The model had black spiked hair and pale skin, a slight smile on his pretty face.

Conrad almost shoved him back from the computer, jabbing the off button on the monitor, standing up so he and Eban were too close for comfort, and Eban moved back.

"Conrad, I know you have a uniform fetish, but really—" Eban stammered, his face hot.

"Shut up," Conrad snarled, eyes flashing, pale skin crimson, one hand making contact with Eban's shoulder, pushing him aside, "shut the fuck up."

Eban stumbled back in astonishment as Conrad made it to the door and almost collided with Christian. "What's wrong?" Christian asked, his hand on Conrad's bicep, preventing him leaving the room, his eyes flickering behind him to Eban, concern furrowing his brow.

"Nothing," Conrad said in a low voice, the intimate, respectful voice he used toward his lover. "I don't feel so good; I'm going to lie down."

Christian stepped aside to let him pass, disappointment on his face, retreating back into the kitchen.

Eban stood still in the office, his legs like jelly beneath him.

Conrad was gone for two hours as Christian gamely served the dinner up and tried to be the life and soul of the evening. Eban had been struck mute, Damien having to kick him several times under the table. When the three finally moved out into the garden, and Damien and Eban got the swing chair while Christian sat on the edge of the fountain, Conrad appeared, his silhouette menacing against the lit French windows before he stepped down to Christian and dropped a kiss on the top of his head before sitting beside him, an arm around his shoulder, leaning in to press a lingering kiss to his neck.

Christian asked softly if he was okay, and Conrad nodded, looking over toward Damien and Eban.

"I'm sorry, guys. I had a stomachache. It's better now." He had a beer in his hand. His eyes met Eban's for only the briefest of moments, his expression unreadable before he turned his attention back to Christian and started nuzzling his neck. "I'm sorry I missed your amazing cooking, sweetie," he said, tongue firmly in cheek so Christian punched him in the arm and pretended to be offended, causing Conrad to drop kisses over every bit of skin he could reach, apologizing profusely.

I'm going to vomit, Eban thought and wondered if he had spoken the words aloud when Conrad's gaze turned to him.

Eban held his friend's gaze for a second before turning his attention deliberately to Damien, placing a hand on his knee, and leaning in to bury his head in his shoulder. There was no way Damien could be oblivious to the atmosphere crackling between Eban and Conrad, even if Christian apparently was.

He pressed his lips to Damien's ear and whispered, "I want to go home."

Damien nodded. He faked a yawn and said, "We're going to make a move, Christian. Thanks for a nice night."

"It's early," Christian said in surprise, prying himself away from Conrad, who continued to look at Eban.

"Damien's been up since five." Eban stood up. "He's had a hard day."

Christian stood too, pulling Conrad to his feet. The two showed their guests to the door. After Christian had embraced him and Damien, Eban hesitated, looking at his best friend, but Conrad only paused a moment before he took him in a tight hug, lips brushing his cheek ever so slightly, the last hug he would ever give Eban before he died.

"Are you going to tell me what went on between you and Conrad tonight?" Damien asked when they were undressing in their bedroom.

Eban shook his head.

"No," Damien said thoughtfully, almost to himself. "I didn't think you would." He climbed into bed and waited until Eban joined him. The love they made that night was almost frantic, the two covered with scratches and bruises when they had finished, the ache in Eban's chest far from sated.

Eban got a call on his cell at work the next day. "I owe you an apology," Conrad said in a low voice.

"Yes, you do," Eban said.

"I'm sorry."

"Okay."

There was silence.

"Eban," Conrad spoke up finally. "Thanks for not asking me to explain." He hung up.

In the office of a dead man, Eban sat staring at the blank computer screen. That was just his problem. He never once asked Conrad to explain. Even when confronted with the evidence just a week before Conrad died that he liked to jerk off over him, still Eban never asked him to explain.

He leaned down to switch on the computer with a trembling hand, an idea coalescing in his mind. While it booted up, he looked at the photos again. Finally, Conrad's desktop appeared, a picture of him and Christian at the

beach, both shirtless. Eban opened Microsoft Word first and scanned the titles of the documents, finding them all business related apart from one, titled "E." With his heart pounding, he opened it.

Dear Eban

Eban scrolled down and found the page blank. He became wild with rage. He shoved the chair back from Conrad's desk and jumped up, yelling to the heavens, "Fuck you, Conrad! Fuck you if you're listening to me! You think you can do this shit to me even when you're gone? You tell me to find the letter and this is fucking it? Two fucking words!"

He scattered the photos across the floor with a furious brush of his arm. "Fuck you! I *hate* you, I fucking hate you!"

He stormed from the office and into the kitchen, where he paced furiously with fists clenched and tears refusing to fall from eyes that were full to the brim. He swore, he ranted, he raved, he threw glasses and plates off the draining board to smash against the opposite wall and then he moved into the lounge and hurled himself on the couch, lying there in a stupor for the next two hours.

When he had finally composed himself, all tears dried, his head aching, he got up and methodically set about the task of cleaning up Christian's kitchen and picking up the photos from the office floor, putting them back in their envelope, relieved his rage hadn't extended to him butchering them.

Then he sat down at Conrad's desk and sorted quickly through his folders, looking at pictures. Pictures of Christian, some a little too undressed for comfort and those same pictures of Eban as were in the envelope. There was one of himself he hadn't seen and he didn't remember being taken. He was lying on Conrad and Christian's back lawn at dusk with his eyes closed and one arm above his head, face turned toward the camera, serene in sleep.

Hovering over the photo, he found the date taken. The picture was over eighteen months old. He right clicked to get the last time Conrad had accessed the picture.

The day he died.

Eban sat there a long moment staring at the date. Finding nothing else in Conrad's documents, he closed them. He opened a browser and looked through Conrad's bookmarks. EBay and Amazon, a few music and DVD places, the site where he bought Christian's ring, some architecture sites, and there, nestling under P, *Prettyboys.com*.

Uneasily, Eban opened the site. It went straight to a video, which started playing automatically. Eban recognized the star as the man he had seen Conrad looking at that time he had caught him on this site, the one who looked like Eban and wore a cop uniform. This man was trying to arrest a

taller guy with dark hair in a suit, who struggled with the cop for a few seconds before overpowering him, spinning him around and shoving him face first over a table, leaning forward to palm his crotch so the cop moaned in reluctant pleasure.

Jesus. Eban stared at the malicious smile on the face of the man in the suit as he started to undo his pants. It was him and Conrad starring in their own porn flick. If he thought Conrad had such contacts and such money he would swear he had commissioned this little clip himself for his own titillation. He watched the man in the suit fuck the cop over the table to both their heart's desire, jerking him off at the same time so the cop came noisily a moment before he did, the man in the suit pulling out at the moment of orgasm for the obligatory come-shot over the buttocks.

Just as he thought the scene was at an end, the man on top pulled the cop to his feet, turned him around and kissed him tenderly. The camera caught a close-up of their melded lips, their closed eyes, before the suited man put his arm around the cop and led him away, the camera following their progress into the distance.

The screen went dark. Eban sat trembling in Conrad's chair. He signed in to his emails, pasted the link to the video in a message and sent it to himself at his second address. He wondered if Christian had had Conrad's computer on at all since his death. Surely it would kill him to witness this video? Decisively Eban deleted the bookmark and that day's history, and then he switched the computer off.

He went upstairs, turned on his own laptop, found the link to the video and watched it again.

It was some time after ten and he was lying beneath the covers, dozing with the tracks of dried tears on his face, when his cell rang. He reached across to the bedside table and brought it to him, looking at the caller ID. *Luke.*

He frowned, his pulse quickening for some unknown reason. He cleared his throat before answering, but his voice still sounded cracked and hoarse, just like he'd been crying all morning. "Hi, Luke."

"Hey." Luke sounded nervous. "I need to see you."

Eban digested this a moment while he thought back to the way Luke had looked at him the previous evening. "What's up?" His skin crawled with unease.

"I can't tell you over the phone. Can you come to my apartment at twelve?"

"Okay," Eban acquiesced in surprise. "But...."

"Don't ask me any more, just come. You remember the address, right?"

“Yeah.”

“Right, and Eban? Not a word to Christian. Swear to me.”

Terror seized Eban. It was the letter. It had to be the letter. “Okay.”

“See you then.” Luke hung up.

Eban threw back the covers, intent on getting up to shower, but found himself trembling so violently that he lay back down. *Don't jump to conclusions. This could be anything. This could be Luke asking what Christian's favorite meal is so he can cook it. It could be him asking what he should buy Christian for Christmas.*

No matter how many reasons he gave himself for Luke's call, it always came back to the same thing. Luke had the letter and wanted to give it to him.

Chapter 37

AFTER Luke's call, Eban called work reluctantly to tell them he would be resuming tomorrow morning. His superior gruffly accepted this, informing Eban, "By the way, Crane, you have a new partner."

"What?"

"Jamie Smith's your new partner. Aaron Bailey applied for a transfer to another precinct."

"What?"

"You need a thesaurus."

"What the hell's going on?"

"I have no clue. Take it up with him." The line went dead.

Eban dialed Aaron's number immediately.

"Hey, Eban," came Aaron's soft voice, a hint of embarrassment in it.

"What the fuck are you doing? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything."

"Oh no? That's why you don't want to work with me anymore?"

"It's not that, I just think we have a... conflict of interests at the moment. It's easier this way."

"What do you mean?" Eban said uneasily, although he already knew.

"Damien."

There was silence.

"You and him? Fuck, he gets over me easily."

"No, he doesn't," Aaron said, "far fucking from it. Don't be angry with me. I'm just trying to pick up the pieces you left, that's all."

"Is he okay?"

"No he's not."

Eban bit his lip. "Tell him I'm sorry. I never meant for it to go this way."

"Take care, Eban, I'll call you." Aaron hung up.

LUKE had only been home for five minutes after driving to Darius's to retrieve the letter. He had taken a two-hour lunch from work, citing an important appointment with his doctor. Maybe he should have been having that appointment after all, because he had felt twinges of chest pain all morning on and off, made even worse by climbing the stairs to his apartment. He reasoned that it was the stress of this day, that once he had the letter out of his possession, he could relax. But he didn't feel relaxed at the prospect of doing this to Eban. What if the letter contained the most terrible thing imaginable, and Luke was responsible for killing Eban with its contents? He had gone over each scenario in his head a hundred times. He didn't see that anything the letter could contain could possibly work in Eban's favor, so why was he giving it to him? Because it was his duty. Conrad wanted Eban to have it and from the evidence he had seen so far, Conrad was an okay guy, even if maybe he had been a little tormented over where his affections lay.

At the knock on the door, he left the coffee brewing in the kitchen and made his way down the hall to answer it. "Hey," he greeted Eban softly and noticed how ashen he was. *He knows. How can he know?*

Eban mumbled a greeting and followed him into the living room.

"Sit down," Luke said. "Can I get you some coffee?"

Eban shook his head, taking a seat. "Out with it, Luke."

Luke took the couch opposite Eban and gave a tortured sigh, wondering how to start this.

"What?" Eban asked, a little impatiently.

"This is so very difficult. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing."

Eban waited, gaze fixed unblinkingly on his.

Luke reached behind him and pulled the envelope out of his back pocket. He held it up so Eban could read the name on it, but not close enough that he could have snatched it from his hand.

Eban grew even paler.

"You knew, didn't you?"

Eban nodded, eyes fixed on the letter. "I dreamed that Conrad made love to me, last Monday night. He told me to find the letter."

"Jesus. You need to listen to me, Eban, before I give you this."

Eban's gaze flickered up to his, amber eyes glazed with tears.

"I stole this from Conrad's office. I didn't think Christian should see it but I'm not entirely convinced that you should see it either. But that's your choice. I give it to you on the understanding that you never, *ever* tell Christian

what's in it or that I gave it to you. If you do, he and I will be *over*, do you understand?"

Eban nodded, eyes moving back to the letter. He seemed entranced.

"I mean it, Eban," Luke said more forcefully. "I'm risking my entire future with Christian, here, just to give you this, just because Conrad wanted you to have it. Swear to me, no matter what it fucking says, you never mention it to him."

Eban nodded. "I swear, Luke," he said in a trembling voice. "And I can never thank you enough for keeping this letter for me."

Luke was satisfied. He held out the envelope. Eban took it. Instead of tearing it open greedily, he sat with it on his knee, one finger running over his name etched on the front, staring at it for the longest time.

"Do you want me to go in another room while you read it?" Luke asked gently. "Or are you taking it home?"

"I'll... read it now," Eban said, sounding like he didn't really want to read it at all. "If you could just give me five minutes alone."

Luke nodded, getting up. "I'll be in the kitchen." As he passed Eban, he patted him comfortingly on the shoulder, praying that in five minutes, Christian's best friend wasn't reduced to suicidal rubble there in his living room.

THIS is it. Eban sat staring at the letter. *This is what Conrad wanted me to read, when he lowered himself onto my body there in that hotel room and told me he'd waited so long for me.* He was afraid, he was so mortally afraid of the words he would find inside this envelope. He knew what words he wanted, the words he craved, but why would an admission of love on Conrad's part make his grief any easier? What if the letter was cruel beyond belief? What if Conrad told him he had only kept him around as a friend to laugh at Eban's pathetic hope that one day Conrad would come to him? No, he knew his friend better than that. One thing this letter would not be was intentionally cruel. The most likely scenario was Conrad telling Eban enough was enough with the secret desire and the puppy-dog eyes. He needed to control himself around Christian before he got wind of it and Conrad got into a whole heap of trouble. The letter would carry a veiled threat. That Eban either toned down his need or Conrad ended the friendship for the good of his relationship with Christian.

Eban's throat ached with tears. His index finger slipped under the flap of the envelope and he ripped it open in a neat line. Slowly he slid the single

sheet of white paper out of the envelope, looking at the black ink he could see through it.

Then he took a deep, shuddering breath as he unfolded the piece of paper and started to read the slanted, barely legible script.

Dear Eban,

When you get this letter, I'll be dead or incontinent in a home someplace because there's no way I would ever have the guts to let you read this while I'm still alive. I know you will never forgive me for that in the same way you will never forgive me for not leaving Christian for you.

I know you're waiting for that and I know that you'll wait forever and never say anything and it breaks my heart that I've done this to you.

I need you to know that I love you, that I've always loved you, that I will go to my grave loving you.

I need you to know that I will regret for the rest of my life that I told you we couldn't be together. Looking back at it, I don't know why I did it, but it eats me up inside every single day. There's not one minute of any day that I don't think of what could have been, that I don't think about how you could have been mine for the last fifteen years.

I'm not trying to say that my life with Christian is all a façade, because it's not. I love him too. I love him as much as I love you. I don't love one of you more than the other but I love you both in different ways. I've wished many, many times that I could have you both, live with you both and have you both lying next to me at night, but that's the greedy man in me who can't make a choice and who wants to have his cake and eat it too.

I don't know what else to say. I always intended to confess to you one day, but I know I never will.

Unless you ask me, that is. If you said, "Conrad, do you love me?" I would have no choice but to answer that I love you endlessly, that I love you until the day I die. If you asked me to leave Christian I don't know what I'd do. I would never leave him under my own steam, but if

you were to ask me, I don't know. I don't think I could deny you anything.

We'll never know because you'll read this when I'm dead, and I'm pretty sure you won't have asked me if I love you and you won't have asked me to leave Christian for you. Which makes you just as bad as me, I guess, because maybe I'm waiting for that.

I love you,

Conrad

IN THE kitchen, Luke heard the cry, and although he had expected such a reaction to whatever the letter contained, the sound of pure and soul-destroyed anguish curdled his blood nonetheless. He ran into the living room, convinced he would find Eban about to hurl himself from his balcony.

But Eban was down on the hard floor, having slid from the couch, the letter lying on the floor next to him, his head down, fists clenched, weeping loudly and pitifully, crying, "*No, no...*" over and over again.

Luke got down on his knees and pulled him into his arms, holding his head close against his chest. Eban clutched him with desperate hands like claws, sobbing hysterically and choking out incoherent words.

As he held him tightly, Luke looked over Eban's heaving shoulder and down to the letter on the ground, reading it. Oh Jesus, Conrad loved him, he actually loved him, and Eban spent half his life not knowing that. His fingers tangled in Eban's hair, stroking, his throat tight with tears of empathy. Despite the bad start he had got off to with Eban, Luke had grown to like this desperate, grieving man. Just as he knew he would be with Christian for life, so he knew he would be friends with Eban for life. To see him like this tortured Luke.

His cell vibrated suddenly against his leg, and he tried to ignore it, cursing the caller for choosing this inopportune moment. But the vibration continued, and Luke slid the phone out of his pocket as unobtrusively as he could.

It was Christian. Luke hesitated. Deceiving Christian like this was bad enough, but there was no way he could ignore his call, too, and no way he wanted to. He gently untangled himself from Eban, murmuring that he would be back, even though Eban barely noticed but merely fell forward, almost hitting his head on the coffee table as he slid to the floor.

Luke got up quickly and left the room, pulling the door shut. He cleared his throat before answering. "Hey, babe."

"Hey, you," Christian said. "You free for lunch?"

Luke groaned inwardly, wanting nothing more than to be with Christian at that moment, glancing back toward the living room, wishing so much that he could share this problem with him. Because Christian would know what to do. He would come over to Luke's and take Eban efficiently in hand, soothing his tears away and making him better. Luke felt worse than useless at being able to do this, but he knew it was him or nobody. He couldn't share this with Christian. At that moment, he felt very alone.

"I can't. I'm... in a meeting."

"Oh," Christian said, clearly disappointed. He was silent for a moment before speaking again. "Is there something wrong?"

"No. I'm okay." If Eban went home in this state, Christian would end up getting the truth out of him that night. "Change your mind about staying at home tonight?"

Christian hesitated. "But I stayed with you last night."

"And you're allowed to stay with me for more than one night in a row." He lowered his voice to a purr. "I miss you."

Christian sighed. "Fuck, I miss you too. I miss you every single minute I'm not with you."

Luke smiled to himself, even though his heart felt like lead at what he would have to face the moment he hung up the phone. "Can I pick you up at five thirty?"

"Yeah," Christian said. "What's that noise?"

"What noise?" Luke moved down the hall a little.

"It sounds like someone crying."

"Oh, that'll be the people on my project; I just kicked their lazy asses. I have to go, I'll see you later."

"Okay." Christian sounded dubious.

"Bye," Luke said and hung up. His heart was only warm with Christian's voice for a moment more before he pushed open the door to the living room and it broke into pieces at the miserable figure there on the floor.

He managed to half drag Eban to the couch and get him to lie down, his limbs weak and uncoordinated, still crying, and crying so hard that Luke was afraid that this was truly it, that this was Eban's breakdown and that he would have to call a doctor and get him sedated. First, though, he had to try again

with his own brand of comfort because Luke was one of those people who others always turned to in their hour of need, and he always tried his very best to be that rock they needed.

He lay down on the couch with Eban and pulled him into his arms, so the two of them were on their sides and Eban's face was pressed into the left side of his chest. Deliberately on Luke's part, of course, because this was what Eban needed, to feel that strong, steady beat beneath his ear. He didn't notice the pains in his chest so much, either, with Eban lying there, so the arrangement was mutually beneficial.

"Listen to me," he said, when they had been lying there a few minutes and Eban seemed to have cried himself out, his chest shuddering with each breath. "Conrad *loved* you, do you understand that?"

He took Eban's face in his hands and lifted his head, looking at the swollen, puffy eyes and the tear-streaked cheeks. "He loved you. And you can let that thought keep you warm for the rest of your life, rather than stewing in regret over what could have been, because do you think he would have wanted that? Do you think he would want you grieving for him for the rest of your life when he loved you as much as he did? It's over. Conrad's gone, but he loved you, and you'll never forget that. You can move on now, secure in the knowledge that the love of your life loved you back. You can give all that love to someone else now because Conrad has set you free."

Eban's glazed and anguished eyes focused on his more and more with every word he said until by the end of his speech, he was staring at Luke. He gave a low, almost hysterical laugh.

"He loved me. All this time, and he loved me the way I loved him."

"Yes, he did."

Eban pressed a hand against Luke's chest, over that left side, his hand hot through Luke's shirt. "Half of that heart was mine."

Luke nodded. "Yes."

WHEN the time got to almost two o'clock, Luke pulled his cell out and called work. Speaking in a quiet voice so as not to wake Eban, who had fallen into uneasy sleep by his side, he spoke to one of his colleagues and told them he wouldn't be back for the rest of the day, as the doctor wanted to run some tests on him.

He hung up and gently stroked Eban's hair. The pains in his chest had completely gone.

HE WOKE suddenly as he felt Eban shifting by his side. The sun cast long shadows through the windows, clearly late in the afternoon. He opened his eyes to see Eban looking at him, a crease mark down one side of his face from sleeping on Luke, his eyes still red. He gave a small, forced smile.

Luke looked at his watch. "Shit, it's five. Listen, I'm getting Christian from work in half an hour and he's going to spend the night here, because I think you need some time alone. I don't want him to see you in such a state tonight and wonder what's going on."

Eban nodded, sitting up. Luke climbed off the couch and searched for his keys and his jacket. "Are you going home now?" he asked, pulling his shoes on and tying them.

"No, I'm going to the cemetery."

"Come on, then, let's go." Luke stooped to retrieve the letter and folded it neatly, placing it back in its envelope before pressing it into Eban's hand.

Eban's car was parked beside Luke's BMW. The two lingered. "I'll call you tomorrow," Luke said.

Eban nodded. As Luke turned to his car, Eban gripped his wrist. "Luke."

Luke looked back questioningly.

Eban embraced him fiercely. "Thank you."

They parted. Despite the devastation the letter had wrought, Luke saw light at the end of the tunnel for the first time for Eban. He saw Eban moving on, not leaving his grief—and Conrad—behind, but learning to live with it, carrying a little part of him inside for the rest of his life, the way Christian would.

Luke's thoughts turned with guilt toward Christian. Poor Christian, he had only ever had half of Conrad's heart, but Luke couldn't help but wonder if Christian knew that deep down anyway and had accepted it on the night he accepted that Eban had been in love with Conrad. He doubted he would ever know because he could not imagine, as close as they might ever grow, that Christian would ever voice these words aloud to him. Doing so might mean admitting them to himself.

LUKE waited ten minutes for Christian outside, but he didn't become impatient, because Christian was worth any amount of time, and besides, his thoughts were too occupied with appeasing his own conscience over his deceit. His eyes were closed, his hands resting loosely in his lap, trying to relax and breathe deeply, when Christian opened the car door.

Luke turned his head and smiled. Christian's beloved face was split by a grin, perfect white teeth on display, reaching for Luke and hugging him hard.

"I missed you," he said against his neck, planting a lingering kiss.

Luke's skin erupted in goose bumps as it always did from contact with Christian. He drew back to look at him.

"What's wrong?" Christian asked, smile shrinking a little, one hand smoothing over Luke's cheek.

Jesus, when did I become so transparent? "Nothing," Luke said cheerily.

"Are you sure?"

Luke nodded.

Not looking convinced, Christian said, "How about I take you out to dinner?"

Luke smiled. "That sounds great."

"Cool," Christian said, "and oh, before you drive, I need to tell you something." Unwanted butterflies churned Luke's stomach as Christian leaned forward, hand on the back of his neck, lips pressed right to his ear. "I've been hard for you all day."

Luke's eyes fell shut. A slight moan slipped from his lips. Christian's hand touched his thigh, stroking, burning his skin through his pants.

"And I'm not sure I can sit through dinner without getting my hands on you," Christian continued, that hand making Luke stiffen effortlessly even though it didn't move much further beyond his knee.

"So... what are you saying?"

"Drive somewhere, Luke. Now," Christian said urgently, "and I'll show you."

Luke wasn't one for public sex. It wasn't that he was a prude, far from it, it was more that he had had very few partners, and the ones he had, he had been so respectful of, he hadn't wanted to sully them by suggesting anything as sordid as public sex. He was led by his dick as well as his heart when it came to Christian, though, and he knew without a doubt that he would agree to anything Christian wanted to do sexually. He wasn't afraid that Christian's

and his wishes wouldn't tally on that score, however, because they seemed to be perfectly suited in the bedroom.

As Luke drove down into the back streets, searching for a secluded parking spot, a tent in his pants, he thought of Christian and Conrad doing the same thing, grappling in the back of that car of Conrad's which had ended up smashed beyond repair like its owner. Clearly Christian liked public sex and had done this kind of thing many times, and Luke wondered if he should feel cheapened by the fact that Christian would remember every time he had fucked Conrad in the back of his car as he was fucking Luke.

But Luke didn't feel too cheapened; he only felt desire for sexual satisfaction as soon as possible. The sky was dull that day, speeding toward dusk far too quickly, and Luke parked in the shadows of a deserted building, looking around for security cameras before switching off the engine.

Christian swung his briefcase out of the backseat and opened it, taking out a tube of lubricant and pulling a condom from a hefty packet. "I went out to get these at lunch time."

Christian tossed his case back and pushed his seat backward as far as it would go, patting his lap with a lascivious smirk at Luke before unfastening his pants and starting to roll the condom on immediately. Luke almost groaned. Before he moved, he pushed his own seat back, kicked his shoes away, and took his pants and boxers off before climbing onto Christian's lap, looking around anxiously before their lips met.

Christian's mouth was hot with need and the hands on Luke were desperate. His body seemed to communicate something beyond desire to Luke.

Luke had the craziest notion for a moment that Christian *knew* all his deceptions. That he knew all about the letter, that he knew all about Conrad's divided heart. With a moan, Luke pulled Christian's face against his neck and held his head there, where Christian couldn't see his tortured expression.

Christian's fingers felt for him, wet him, and then he guided himself into Luke and Luke sank down, impaled, head back and eyes closed. He thought of Conrad and Eban and the fact that if Eban had asked Conrad to leave Christian and Conrad had done so, then maybe that night, he wouldn't have been out driving in his car and wouldn't have died. Luke would never have gotten his heart transplant and would have died before meeting Christian. But all this seemed so fated, so written in the stars, that just maybe, if Conrad *had* left Christian, Luke would have met Christian somewhere along the line anyway. With or without the heart.

He stared up through the sun roof at the indigo of the swiftly gathering twilight, stars glittering like silver sequins on a bed of velvet.

"I love you," he said helplessly as he came.

THE graveyard looked beautiful with twilight falling over it, the air turning a little sharp, the sky violet and dotted with stars as Eban knelt down before Conrad's grave and arranged the red roses in the urn.

"You loved me," he said, sitting back to look at the headstone, one hand tracing the letters of the beloved name. "You actually loved me, all this time. When you died, when you said my name, you were going to tell me right then, weren't you? You were finally going to tell me."

He smiled through his tears. "I know I'll never love anyone again the way I loved you, but I don't feel as... *lost* anymore, now that I know. I don't feel so desolate. You loved me and I loved you, and I'll see you again one day." He leaned forward, pressing his lips to the cold marble. "I love you, Conrad."

Chapter 38

Three months later

IT WAS Christmas Eve, and Luke had chosen that day, after long weeks of rehearsal, to take Christian out to the ocean.

In general, Christian was a man without fear—not of heights, of spiders, of the dark—which didn’t explain why he trembled so much now as he got up and flopped clumsily to the edge of the boat in flippered feet, weighed down by the equipment, scanning the ocean’s almost translucent depths below him.

“Hey,” a soft voice said beside him, and his attention was arrested by the figure in the black wetsuit, every curve of his delectable body outlined for Christian’s attention, so he longed to peel it slowly from him and take him right there on the slippery deck.

Christian smiled, his lascivious thoughts calming his fear a little. “Anyone ever tell you that you have a great ass?” He reached out, fondling one aforementioned cheek gently.

Luke laughed a little and moved to him, laying a kiss on his lips, sea-green eyes sparkling. “I hope you’re going to concentrate on what I taught you now and not on my ass,” he reprimanded.

“No,” said Christian, “I’m going to concentrate on your ass. Thoughts of it always get me through dark times.”

“Dick.” Luke rolled his eyes and pushed Christian down to sit on the edge of the boat, back turned to the ocean. He crouched down before him, pulling his mask down over his face, making sure it pinched his nose closed, reaching for his breathing tube, adjusting the straps on the oxygen, doing his best to make Christian comfortable.

“Okay. Ready?”

Christian nodded, eyes fixed on Luke’s as he put the mouthpiece between his lips, his teeth holding it in place.

“Slow, steady breaths,” Luke said over the rasp of Christian’s breathing. “Remember what I said. Any time you want to come up, you tell me so.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Christian’s forehead before pulling his mask down and fitting his own mouthpiece. Then he sat down next to Christian on the edge of the boat and took his hand. Their eyes met as Luke

held up three fingers, counting swiftly to zero as he leaned backward, overbalancing them both, taking Christian down into the ocean with him.

Christian's body righted itself quickly, sinking rapidly into the depths, Luke's hand lost, his lover falling below him, black hair streaming out behind him, his body graceful in descent, each limb coordinated. He reached the bottom and looked up at Christian, waiting, hands held out to him, gathering him around the waist as he fell, pulling him close, one hand taking his as he turned and swam along the sea bed.

Gripping Luke's hand hard, Christian kicked his flippered feet behind him and tried to keep pace. As he looked around his environment, he started to relax. The bottom of the ocean was crystal clear, dotted with rocks, sea anemones waving gracefully in the current.

They swam through shoals of brightly colored fish, Christian's skin prickling as they brushed against his wetsuit. Luke pointed out an octopus to him, lying almost camouflaged between two rocks, long tentacles spread out, large eyes watching them suspiciously. They swam beneath a black-and-white-spotted stingray and then a shape loomed up, and Christian almost laughed in delight as he recognized a familiar smiley face. He put out his hand to touch the side of the dolphin as it swam close by them.

He turned to Luke, but Luke was looking away, his hand tightening on Christian's, and Christian saw the object of his fascination. Sinister and slow moving, but majestic and utterly beautiful, the shark approached as Luke and Christian stood still on the bottom, everything about Luke's posture calm and collected while inwardly Christian screamed and his legs trembled, his hand gripping Luke's hard.

Luke squeezed his hand in reply. He pulled Christian very slowly toward him and slipped in front of him, bringing Christian's arms around his waist, holding his hands firmly, so they were pressed together like some strange, four-legged black beast, and Christian faced the shark with Luke shielding him.

He saw this as symbolic. Time and time again, Luke had been his shield, his armor, his sanctuary. Christian faced the world with Luke's strength protecting him, and little by little, he grew that bit stronger.

The snout of the shark passed within a whisker of his lover's body before the fish swam off, lazily flicking its tail from side to side. Christian gulped down a huge gasp of his oxygen supply. He pulled Luke around to face him and pointed frantically to the surface. Luke nodded. His green eyes were solemn. Christian moved to encircle Luke's waist with his hands while Luke put his arms around his neck. Slowly, the two kicked toward the surface, holding onto each other. As their heads broke the surface, they fumbled their

mouthpieces free and pushed their masks up, their mouths latching together desperately, tasting the sea water on each other's lips. Christian felt the winter sun on his face, the water lapping gently against his chin and the moist inside of Luke's mouth. And he felt free and alive, with the despair of the past no longer weighing him down.

When they drew away from each other, both were breathless and smiling, eyes shining. Something caught Christian's attention. A shark's fin, circling a few meters away. He turned his gaze back toward Luke's. He wasn't afraid anymore, just like he wasn't afraid of the new chapter in his life which was beginning. Conrad was gone, and while Christian would forever carry him in his heart and he would be in every thought and every breath for the rest of his life, the man in his arms was his present and his future, his love, his hope, and his soulmate.

He kissed Luke again. As he did, something rough brushed against his side, like sandpaper and he flinched a little with pain, looking down, confused to see a cloud of red coloring the water around him.

Luke's eyes darkened in consternation, and his lover said urgently, "Swim. Now."

He let go of Christian and struck out strongly, turning his head back, making sure Christian was following him. The boat was a hundred yards away but it felt like a hundred miles with a tank of compressed air on his back. Christian was a mediocre swimmer at best, and was soon falling behind. Luke slowed a little. "Come on!" Christian glanced behind him and saw the fin almost upon him.

He was pretty sure he was going to piss himself. He kicked his legs viciously, knowing he was merely attracting the shark's attention even more, gasping for breath as he continued to throw himself forward.

Up ahead, Luke reached the boat and clambered up the steps, hanging over the side, hand outstretched, begging Christian to hurry.

Christian was still out of touching distance. He cried out for Luke to stay on board as his lover jumped back into the water. Luke surfaced in front of Christian and grabbed his arm hard, dragging him to the side of the boat, their combined efforts merely making them more clumsy so Christian slid under the water several times, breaking the surface coughing up water and gripping a rung on the ladder.

He couldn't hear Luke's words for the water in his ears, all he knew was that Luke was screaming and shoving him bodily up the steps. His legs refused to work. He couldn't get his flippered feet on any of the rungs, instead straining every muscle in his strong arms to drag himself up the steps to the top, heaving himself head first over the side. He scrambled up immediately

and looked over, just as he saw the fin and Luke's head disappearing below the surface.

Christian cried out. The water went crimson. A tail broke the surface, flicked once lazily and disappeared again as the fin retreated from the boat.

With the contents of his stomach coming back up his esophagus, Christian fumbled the tank from his back, threw off his mask and flippers and jumped back into the water, just as Luke's head popped up next to him.

He clutched Luke to him, the other man's body cumbersome beneath the weight of its diving apparatus.

"I'm okay, I'm okay." Luke put his arms around Christian's neck, his lashes fluttering closed, his face a ghastly gray color.

Christian, seconds away from puking, maneuvered him to the boat and fumbled Luke's feet onto the rungs, standing behind him, pushing with his hands on Luke's backside, encouraging him up the steps. Luke climbed slowly and lethargically. As his legs came out of the water, Christian saw it, a huge rent in his wetsuit the length of his entire thigh, the skin split open and bleeding copiously, the teeth marks actually visible in the flesh.

He dragged himself onto the steps with shaking limbs and supported Luke's weight all the way up. When Luke finally made it over the side, he slithered to the floor. Christian grabbed a towel from the bench nearby, tying it tightly around Luke's thigh. Luke lay motionless on the deck, exsanguinating despite the towel, the deck running with blood like a river.

Christian ran below deck and grabbed a couple of blankets and his cell. Back up top, he stripped Luke of his oxygen equipment, goggles, and flippers, and wrapped him tightly in the blankets. Then he lifted Luke into his arms and carried him down the stairs and into the cabin. As he laid Luke down, he realized he had lost consciousness. With his heart like a lead weight in his chest, Christian listened at Luke's mouth for breath and took his pulse. Both were feeble and shallow, but present.

Christian called 911 hurriedly as he climbed back up to the deck to power the boat up. As he steered the boat toward shore, he prayed to God that Luke was not dying alone below deck.

He only became aware of the pain when he noticed the blood on the deck around his feet and he saw the tear in his own wetsuit, the layer of skin sheared from his side by the caress of the great white.

He allowed himself a moment to lose control finally and leaned over the side of the boat, retching until no more of the delicious breakfast Luke had made him that morning would come up.

EBAN'S cell vibrated in the locker room as he buttoned up his uniform, and a pang of anxiety went through him as he saw Christian's number displayed. Eban had been unhappy about the dive that day. He didn't want to lose either Christian or Luke to a shark attack, and the fact that Christian was calling him now when he should be swimming with fishy predators several dozen feet under made him nervous.

"What's up?"

"Eban."

And Eban's heart was immediately paralyzed with terror at the sound of Christian's voice. "What's happened?"

"It's Luke...."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the hospital."

"On my way." He flipped his phone shut and slammed his locker, charging out of the room only for Jamie to run after him, calling for him to wait.

Eban jumped into his patrol car and started the engine, just as Jamie got in after him. "What the fuck's up?" he demanded, grabbing Eban's hand to prevent him shifting the car into drive.

"There's been an accident," Eban muttered, sitting back and running a hand over his face, trying to compose himself. "Christian's at the hospital."

"Then get out and let me drive," Jamie said immediately. "You're not in a fit state."

Eban did as he was told, swapping seats with his partner. As soon as they were buckled in, Jamie pulled out into traffic, engaging the sirens and putting his foot down.

THE first thing Eban saw when he pushed the door open was Christian bending over a figure lying snow white under the covers. Christian straightened up and came to him quickly, throwing his arms around Eban's neck, holding him close. Eban held him in return, eyes drifting to the figure in the bed: Luke, lying with eyes closed, so still that Eban wasn't sure if he was dead or not. The bag of blood hanging on an IV stand and running down a line into a cannula in the crook of Luke's right arm told him he was alive, because as far as Eban knew, they didn't give blood to corpses.

Then his eyes drifted down Luke's left arm to the hand which was held enclosed in someone else's, his dark head bowed low, straight white teeth biting at a pink lip.

Darius.

Eban tried to push his disordered thoughts back to Christian as his friend drew back from him, swiping tears from his eyes. "He's going to be okay. He got a chunk bitten out of his leg by one of his fishy friends." He sat back beside Luke, taking his hand.

"Hey, Luke," he said, leaning over him.

Eban moved over, gaze straying back to Darius.

"He's out of his head on morphine at the moment," Christian said almost apologetically. "Luke, Eban is here."

Luke's thick lashes fluttered up. "Eban," he drawled, so stoned, his pupils pinpricked, that for a moment Eban was terrified that he might say something terrible. Something to do with Conrad.

But Luke merely smiled. "This is a temporary setback," he slurred. "You're still coming to dinner at my place tomorrow."

Christian laughed a little and leaned down to kiss him.

Eban smiled. "I'll hold you to that, Luke. Christian tells me your cooking is the stuff of legend."

Luke laughed and then a moment later, his eyes rolled back and he emitted a snore. Darius stood up. "I'm going to get going, Christian, will you call me later?"

"Yeah," Christian said, also standing. "Thanks for coming."

Eban stepped aside to let Darius pass, his head bowed, not daring to make eye contact until he had left.

As soon as he had, Eban swore under his breath and ran a hand agitatedly through his hair. He caught Christian looking at him sympathetically. "Go after him," his friend said.

Eban darted out of the room. He looked both left and right, finding the corridor empty. He sighed, going back in, sinking down into the warm chair Darius had just vacated. He looked down at Luke's ashen face. *Fuck. What would I have said to him, anyway? How do I begin to apologize for three months of silence?*

"I'm sorry," Christian said.

Eban shook his head, trying to will away those suffocating thoughts and concentrate on the man who needed him.

"You must have been so scared."

"I thought he was going to bleed to death on the deck of the boat. But it's been stitched up, and he's having this unit of blood and they say he'll be fine."

Eban smiled with relief. "And you?"

"I have my own little souvenir." Christian pulled up his shirt to show the dressings on his torso.

"Shit."

"He's determined tomorrow's not going to be cancelled."

Eban smiled. "It won't be cancelled, even if we have to bring Christmas dinner to his bed."

Christian chuckled a little.

"Are you staying here with him?"

"He's going to go upstairs soon," Christian replied. "I'll go up and stay as long as they let me."

Eban nodded. "Why don't I get us some coffee?" He got up and went out into the corridor, digging in his pocket for change. He stared at the coins in his hand for a long while. Then he put his hand up against the machine to steady himself and lowered his head, eyes closed. Why did seeing Darius again hurt so damn much just when he was getting his life back together and learning to accept that Conrad was gone finally?

He was still seeing Robert, the sessions with his counselor going great, but Darius wasn't the only one who he'd had no contact with, because he hadn't spoken to Damien, either, since that night he had finished it between them, and he wondered about him constantly.

He had always meant to call Darius, but the time had never seemed right. Or rather it was that the longer time went on, the more terrified Eban became at contacting him out of the blue. He was sure Darius would have moved on, would have gotten over whatever crush he had on Eban, would be happy with someone else and he would laugh in Eban's face for daring to think he could walk back into his life whenever he pleased. Eban was getting better and better every day, and the closer he came to letting Conrad go, the more he mourned the loss of Darius.

Am I going to miss my chance the way I did with Conrad? Am I going to let this happen to me all over again just because I haven't got the balls to take what I want? He hung his head, defeatedly feeding coins into the slot. *Probably.*

IN LUKE'S room, Christian bent over him, brushing the black hair from his eyes. "Luke."

He was rewarded by the flickering of lashes, by those glazed eyes focusing on his. "Hey," Luke said, lips curving into a smile.

"Luke," Christian said again, leaning closer so their noses almost brushed, a hand caressing Luke's cheek, "I love you."

Luke's smile widened and his eyes moistened. "Will you still love me even though I have another scar to add to my collection?"

Christian groped for and squeezed his hand hard. "Yes. I would still love you even if the shark had bitten your leg off and taken it with him for breakfast."

"Hmm," Luke said, as though he was pondering this. "I never would have kept up with all your athletic lovemaking positions with one leg. We could have had maybe a special sling built that I could swing in...."

"Shut up, idiot."

Luke smiled sleepily, eyes closing in contentment. "Why don't you kiss me, Christian?"

Christian did as he was told, leaning over him, wary of the IV line, even warier of the heavily bandaged leg. Luke put an arm around his neck, pulling him closer as their lips met. When they parted, Luke said in a murmur, "I love you, Christian. I've loved you for such a long time," before he sank back into sleep.

EBAN heard these words as he pushed the door open and witnessed Christian moving back from Luke. He thought again without malice how lucky Christian was, that not only had he won the fight over Conrad hands down—a fight he never knew he was having—but he had a second wonderful man in love with him within the year. While Eban had lost everything he once had and ended up alone. A lesser man would be bitter, but Eban didn't begrudge Christian anything, and besides, he had no one to blame but himself.

Chapter 39

EBAN usually arrived fashionably late for everything and today was no exception. He took his time to climb the steps to Luke's apartment, in no rush to go inside. Christian had left the house at ten that morning to pick Luke up from the hospital and asked Eban to be at his apartment by one for dinner. Eban knew, though, that Luke was planning on serving dinner at four, so he had no intention of arriving at one and sitting through the discomfort which was going to ensue.

When Luke had invited him weeks ago, Eban had not been able to voice his question about Darius's attendance, but he knew the answer to it, anyway. He didn't need anyone to tell him. He just had to turn up, eat, and make his excuses as soon as he could. He could do this, he could get through it and then go home and be miserable. He had all his presents in a large plastic sack. Knowing everyone who was going, he had bought presents for all, including Darius. How could he not?

He heard music as he sat down on the top stair a moment, unwilling to go in, and high-pitched laughter he recognized as Marcus's. How exactly had that freak wangled an invite after all he had done to them the last time they had got together? And how was Eban going to be civil to him for however many hours he had to face this ordeal?

He sighed, burying his face against his knees. They were supposed to be his friends and it was Christmas Day. It shouldn't be any sort of ordeal, and yet his anxiety was at fever pitch, despite the three stiff Scotches he had downed before coming here, having to call a cab rather than drive when his head began to swim. He had three joints rolled in his top pocket, for emergencies, and he took one out now, scanning the ceiling for smoke detectors before he lit up.

After he had left Christian at the hospital the day before, he had gone for an appointment with Robert, surprised when he had booked it that the counselor would be working Christmas Eve. But he was, and Eban was never more grateful as he arrived in a state, spilling his guts about Luke's accident and Darius's appearance at the hospital as soon as he stepped in the door.

Once Eban was calmer about Luke, the conversation had moved to talking about Darius at length, still often a topic of conversation three months into Eban's therapy. Robert had tried to reassure him about Darius being at the Christmas Day dinner. He had asked Eban what he wanted, whether he

wanted Darius. He had been asking him that question all along, and still Eban didn't have an answer to it. Maybe he would once he stepped into Luke's apartment that afternoon.

Luke's accident had actually worked in his favor last night, because instead of spending a lonely Christmas Eve, Christian had been home with Eban, although listening to his friend cry after too much eggnog about how scared he had been that he was going to lose Luke had just made Eban maudlin over Conrad.

He took his cell out as he dragged on his joint and thumbed through the phone book for a moment, knowing he had to make this call, *needing* to make it. The phone rang five times before it was answered.

"Hello."

"Hi, Damien," Eban said nervously. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Eban." Damien's voice was barely audible.

"How're you doing?"

"Oh... you know."

There was a silence. "If you wanted to..." Eban burst out, stammering, "have a drink, I'm at Christian and Luke's. I'm sure they'd like to see you." He hadn't exactly thought that offer through seeing as Darius would be there, too, but Eban always got way too charitable and way too guilt-ridden at Christmas.

"I'm out of town," Damien replied.

"Oh. Where are you?"

"Hawaii."

"Oh. Are you with Aaron?"

"Yeah."

"That's great," Eban said, with an enthusiasm which hurt him even though it *was* great. "I'll see you when you get back, maybe." Which he doubted because he and Damien seeing each other and trying to be friends would probably be one of the worst ideas ever.

"I'd like that," Damien said.

"Have a nice Christmas, Damien, and I'll call you."

"Thanks for calling."

Before he could hang up, Eban said, "I'm sorry."

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. "I know you are. Are you with Darius?"

"No. I'm not with anyone."

“Okay,” Damien said. “Bye, Eban.” He cut the connection.

Eban put his cell away, distressed to find he had tears in his eyes and his palms were a little damp. He sucked hard on the joint. This day was only going to get worse.

DAMIEN replaced the cell on the bedside table and looked over his shoulder at the man curled behind him. “Your ex has the worst timing ever,” Aaron protested, kissing him. “The first time I’m about to make love to you, and he calls. He must have gaydar or something.”

Damien smiled half-heartedly. “Let’s resume from where we left off,” he said, and Aaron, who had been buried inside Damien all the way through his conversation with Eban, thrust forward into him, making him groan.

The ceiling fan spun in the pale room and the balcony windows were open, the light breeze disturbing the filmy curtains, the sound of the ocean loud as the tide came in, the beach golden beneath their room. They had arrived the day before, Damien maudlin at this time of year but determined to get the vacation in Hawaii he had wanted since he quit his job. They had kissed a little beneath the covers, their intimacy not extending beyond blowjobs so far in the three months they had officially been together, before falling asleep in each other’s arms, where they had awoken that morning and Damien had known, staring at Aaron’s face—a face that was becoming so dear to him—that he was ready that Christmas morning to give himself again to Aaron.

It had been so long that he welcomed the pain of Aaron inside him with a kind of joy, lowering his face into the pillow, his partner’s lips on his neck, kissing at the light dewing of sweat, trying not to think of that once-beloved voice on the phone and concentrating on this man behind him who had brought him out of the darkness and worshipped Damien the way Eban had been unable to do.

Aaron’s hand slid off his hip and into his groin as he rocked into him, sliding Damien through his fingers, making him gasp. Already he was so close, suddenly there on the brink as Aaron hit the right spot, and he almost cried out.

Aaron groaned in delight at Damien’s reaction, driving harder into him, holding him so tight, mouth against his ear. “You know I love you, right?” he whispered, breath hot with need. “I need you to know that.”

Damien sucked his breath in, head falling back, whimpering Aaron’s name as he came uncontrollably, images flashing before his closed eyes. For

some reason, he thought of Conrad, the big man pinning him down on the drawing table in his office, snarling at him over Damien's threat of telling Christian. He remembered the livid green eyes, and he saw them now for what they were, filled with fear and desperation and the knowledge he would never get what he wanted, *ever*.

And Damien had time and sympathy now in his healing heart as Aaron came inside him and held him close, panting a little, dropping kisses on his neck, to think to himself, *Poor Conrad, poor Eban*.

CHRISTIAN opened the door after Eban had to knock twice to be heard over the music and general merriment coming from inside the apartment. He took the bag of presents from him and embraced him, wishing him a merry Christmas before drawing back to look at him suspiciously.

"You stink of pot. And you're drunk. Way to make a good impression."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Eban demanded, pulling away from him. "Who am I supposed to be making a good impression on, Christian? *Luke*? That dude's seen me at my lowest for the last few months. And I'm not fucking drunk, I just had a couple at home, is all."

Christian grabbed him abruptly and pulled him into the bathroom, slamming the door behind them.

"I'm talking about Darius," he said as he started to run water into the sink.

"The time to make an impression on *him* is way past," Eban remarked, spluttering as Christian put a hand to the back of his neck and shoved his head over the sink, using his other hand to splash cold water on Eban's face.

"Watch my fucking hair," he complained, struggling.

"The time is *not* past for making a good impression on Darius at all. The time is *now*." Christian allowed Eban up, thrusting a towel into his hands.

"You and Luke have planned all this, haven't you?" Eban snapped, glaring and drying his face. "I don't need help with my sex life from you, Christian, I'm doing perfectly well on my own."

Christian's face softened. "I know you are," he said, a hand on Eban's shoulder, "and you have no idea how proud I am of you. But... you have to understand. I see Darius two or three times a week, and he still pines over you like some sort of lost puppy."

Eban averted his eyes quickly. "Don't tell me that."

"I have to tell you that. I'm not trying to force you into something with him, I swear, not when you need this time on your own, but if you would just take one step, just form some sort of friendship with him. I'm sure you and he could one day have something far more meaningful than you and Damien ever had."

Eban stared at him. Christian smiled. "Lecture over. Now come here." He picked up some cologne of Luke's and doused Eban's clothes in it before thrusting a toothbrush into his hand.

THE first thing Eban saw as Christian led him down the hall and into the living room was Jack and Marcus standing in the middle of the floor, kissing furiously, Marcus actually holding Jack several inches off the floor in order to avoid a stiff neck. A little discomfited, Eban wondered why they had chosen such a place and why they couldn't do it quietly in the corner like other people. Then he looked up at the light fixture they were standing beneath and saw the distinctive white berries of mistletoe.

He felt a sharp pang in his chest as he remembered the previous Christmas.

"Come here," Conrad growled as Christian passed him on his way into the kitchen, grabbing his wrist and pulling him toward him. "Sit on my knee below the mistletoe and tell Santa what you want for Christmas."

It was barely three o'clock and Conrad was drunk, with Eban not far behind him, Damien leaning sleepily against his shoulder because Eban had also been so drunk the previous night he had kept Damien up until all hours.

Christian curled an arm around Conrad's neck and placed himself on his lap, protesting, "The dinner's burning."

"Fuck the dinner," Conrad said, lips nipping Christian's neck, making his head fall back.

While Eban remained silent, Damien groaned, "For fuck's sake, get a room, guys. But feed us first; I'm starving."

Both Conrad and Christian laughed, and Damien nudged Eban, telling him he was using the bathroom, getting up and leaving the room. Christian also left the room at the same time, to check on dinner. Conrad picked up his beer and took a drink, before slouching back on the couch and fixing his gaze steadily on Eban.

"What?" Eban asked after a few seconds of silence.

"Nothing," Conrad said, and he gave a tender, almost sad smile, the one which lit his eyes to emerald and showed his dimples. Eban's heart

contracted hard as Conrad's eyes strayed upward, to look at the mistletoe tied on the light fixture above them and then moved back to Eban, the smile fading a little, becoming tinged with something else.

Eban heard his heart beating in his ears, his gaze fixed on Conrad, his breath almost stifled in his lungs as his friend stood up. Eban's gaze swept up that tall, muscular body as Conrad crossed the gap between them in two steps, glancing toward the kitchen as he did. Eban was rooted to the spot in terror as Conrad slowly sank to one knee before him, kneeling between his legs.

"Merry Christmas, Eban," he murmured, reaching out, cradling Eban's head in one large hand and bringing his mouth to his.

Eban kept his eyes open until he saw Conrad's lashes veil those beautiful green eyes, and then his own closed and he submitted to the feel of lips on his, lips which melded to his in one kiss and one kiss only, but a kiss which remained pressed there several unmoving seconds before Conrad broke it.

Eban hadn't even opened his eyes before Conrad was standing up and moving away toward the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind him, leaving Eban once more with that taste of regret deep in his throat.

And even after that, he thought, as Marcus and Jack moved back and he saw Darius sitting on the couch behind them, I still doubted that Conrad loved me. His eyes met Darius's and for a second he fell deep beneath further waves of regret.

"Hey." Luke's voice interrupted his misery, and Eban turned his attention to his host, who hobbled over on crutches, wearing knee-length shorts, his right leg bandaged thickly from thigh to ankle, smiling, managing to put one arm around Eban's neck for a hug.

A package had arrived for Eban by special delivery on Christmas Eve morning at the precinct, before Luke had gone swimming with his sharks. A note inside the bubble envelope had said, This is your real Christmas present, not the one I will give you tomorrow. For reasons you will see, I had to send it to you this way. Merry Christmas Eban. Love, Luke.

*Eban had unwrapped the shiny paper with trembling hands and taken out a slender black photo album with the word *memories* inscribed on the front in silver. He opened it with a hard-beating heart and found every single photo of Conrad and himself that he had seen in the dead man's office stuck there behind plastic.*

Standing there in the locker room, he had known that this book was about to become the most treasured thing he had ever owned.

Eban held Christian's lover close for a moment, communicating his thanks wordlessly before Luke said, "Come on, now you're here we can open the presents."

Christian guided Luke solicitously toward the huge Christmas tree in the corner, done up in red and silver with winking white lights, helping Luke to sit on the floor, taking his crutches from him. The others made their way over, Marcus and Jack joining Luke on the floor, reaching for presents, reading the tags on them, passing them around.

Eban sat down on the couch behind Christian, looking at the presents he himself had brought, which Christian had already laid under the tree.

Christian knelt behind Luke, both of them busily unwrapping something. Eban jumped a little when Marcus reached back and thrust something onto his knee. He looked at the tag and found it was from Luke.

He ripped open the gold paper and found a box of expensive hair-styling products. He smiled, bent down over Luke and kissed him sweetly on the cheek, murmuring his thanks.

Another present found its way into Eban's lap, and he read the tag: *Love from Marcus*. He ripped it open and found a black book with gold lettering on the front.

Desire by Marcus Edwards.

Eban lifted his head, staring down at the untidy head bent in front of him, opening Eban's own sarcastic present, a memo pad and a set of fountain pens, just as a yell of shock came from Christian and Eban saw he was holding the same book open on his lap.

"Fuck *me*, Marcus!" Christian cried as Marcus started laughing, along with Jack.

"Yeah, okay, it's true. I got published," Marcus said. "I only told Jack, I wanted it to be a surprise. So I got you all a copy, lame, I know, but you tightwads wouldn't have coughed up for your own."

Eban looked down at the book in his hands again, truly stunned. "Well done, Marcus."

Marcus turned to him, eyes a little wary, then relaxing as Eban held his hand out and the history between them was forgotten as they shook hands.

Christian, Luke, Marcus, and Jack jabbered animatedly about the novel, and Eban's gaze slid sideways when he felt eyes upon him and his gaze met Darius's, who had Eban's present open on his knee. Remembering the many books Darius had had at his house when Eban had visited all that time ago, he had bought him a set of gift cards for the city's best-stocked bookshop.

“Thank you, Eban,” Darius said. “This is for you.” He held out a gold envelope, tied with ribbon.

Eban took it and slit the paper open with one finger. He pulled out several pieces of paper and read them quickly. They were gift certificates for six months’ worth of free haircuts and colorings at the most prestigious salon in the city.

Eban lifted his head, staring at Darius. “This has to be the most amazing present I ever got in my life,” he said, conveniently forgetting the photo album from Luke.

Darius reddened a little, mumbling something about it being nothing. Eban, though, leaned toward him, hesitating when he got there on where to place a kiss until Darius solved his dilemma by turning his face away, presenting his cheek to Eban, which Eban kissed, sadness rising within him at the snub.

He sat back, his heart racing, his palms damp, and accepted another present, this time from Jack—another box of hair-styling products. He was starting to sense a theme because Christian had bought him some too. Was this what everyone thought of him? That he was obsessed with his hair? He was almost offended except he knew it was true.

When the presents were all open and Marcus was laughing at the fact that Christian had bought Luke scuba equipment—“let me get this straight, man, you bought your boyfriend a tank of air for Christmas when he breathes it for fucking *free* every day?”—Luke excused himself to check on dinner.

Christian, still protesting to Marcus, helped him stand and gave him his crutches. As they passed beneath the light fixture, he tugged Luke to a halt and kissed him below the mistletoe.

“You can’t make this up to him with kisses, Christian,” Marcus cackled, “you bought him a tank of air.”

“Shut up, dickwad,” Christian growled, “I bought him other shit too.”

Eban smiled and averted his eyes from the kiss, aware of Darius leaving the room, going out into the hall.

Luke and Christian went into the kitchen, and as Marcus and Jack got up, Christian called to them, “You two, come in here a minute, we need some help.”

Marcus frowned. “Christian, there’s no way I can help you with anything culinary related.”

“Just come in here.”

Jack nudged Marcus hard and shoved him toward the kitchen.

Eban, left alone in the living room as the kitchen door slammed, was only confused until Darius re-entered the room and took the couch opposite him. *Of course.*

Darius looked nervously at him and then at the closed kitchen door before lifting his beer from the coffee table and taking a long drink as though he needed it. Eban watched the bobbing of his Adam's apple a moment as he swallowed, the graceful curve of his pale neck, and then lowered his gaze quickly, twisting his hands together hard in his lap and praying for the strength to get through dinner.

When he finally lifted his eyes, he was arrested by the sight of Darius glancing up at the mistletoe, before his gaze came to rest back on Eban. Eban's heart seemed to stop at the sense of déjà vu that overwhelmed him.

No, please.

For a moment, he saw Conrad sitting before him. Conrad, who was about to stand, walk over to him, kneel between his knees, and kiss him before walking away.

He blinked and saw dark hair, closely cropped, and blue eyes, not green. He lifted his head, paralyzed with anxiety as Darius stood up. Eban had a split second to act and prevent this from happening all over again.

Chapter 40

THIS was another test, a year after he had failed the first one so miserably. When Eban should have kissed Conrad in return before drawing back, looking into those green eyes, and saying, *I love you. Leave Christian and be with me.*

And he hadn't. Instead he had wasted yet another opportunity to be with the man who had kept his heart beating for perhaps all his life. Now the only thing which kept it beating was the *memory* of that man, but Eban had the chance, if he dared, to let someone else be in charge of his heart, or at least part of it.

His brain screamed at him to move, and he stood up on rubbery legs a split second after Darius did, stepping forward at exactly the same time, seeing the desperation in Darius's eyes a moment before they were in each other's arms and Eban was clinging hard like Darius was his lifeline.

He felt the warmth and muscle of the body against his as he buried his face in a soft, cologned neck, and Darius's arms held him hard. Eban groaned softly in delight at this unexpected feeling of safety and love and pressed a light kiss to Darius's neck.

He felt Darius shudder, and a moment later he lifted Eban's head with both hands and pressed his lips to his.

Fireworks exploded behind Eban's closed eyes as his mouth opened and he surrendered himself to the kiss which was still so familiar even after three months. Darius kissed him tenderly, fingers caressing the contours of his face as he did, like a blind man trying to imprint Eban's features on his memory for all time.

Darius didn't use his tongue, content to restrict his activities to the outside of Eban's mouth, his kiss so innocent that it melted Eban to his very core. The kiss continued for some minutes, until finally, the sound of clinking plates and dishes as their friends started to carry food into the dining room distracted them.

Darius smoothed fingers delicately over his cheek. "I missed you so much," he whispered.

Eban stared deep into those hypnotic eyes. "Everything I ever did to you, Darius, I'm so fucking sorry. I always... felt something for you. I need you to know that. It wasn't just sex, like I said it was."

Darius didn't speak, only continued to touch his face, his fingers soothing and calming Eban.

"Do you...." Eban hesitated, turning to look over his shoulder, lowering his voice even further. "Know about the letter?"

Darius nodded.

"Conrad will always have a piece of my heart. I know that you know that. But in writing me that letter, he released me a little. He made me realize that I have some of me left over, some love I can give to someone else, and, Darius...." He smiled, taking Darius's face in his hands. "I *do* have an awful lot of love to give somebody. I don't want to scare you with that fact."

Darius spoke in the shyest, most hesitant voice Eban had ever heard him use. "Is it me that you want to give it to?"

Eban held his gaze for a long moment before he spoke. "Let's continue this conversation later before Luke drags us in there by our hair." He leaned forward and brushed his lips lightly over Darius's.

The dinner was already in full swing, Marcus and Jack wearing paper hats, Luke passing dishes to everyone, Christian's hand firmly on his knee under the table. Christian turned to look at the new arrivals. "Oh, at last," he said sardonically, "I thought we'd have to send a doggie bag in." But he smiled at Eban as he moved past him, taking the empty seat next to Luke, while Darius took the seat on his other side.

Eban's head was spinning with what he had just said. He hadn't planned any of this. He hadn't known whether he had wanted something serious with Darius before he had arrived there that afternoon, and he was afraid of the words which had come spilling out of his mouth and which seemed to have been him making a suggestion and a promise that maybe, with his track record, he couldn't keep.

Was he so drunk or stoned that he didn't know what he was saying? Or was it merely a case of his heart speaking over his head as it should have done fifteen years ago? Either way, he was terrified of what he had done, even more so that it could have given Darius false hope and would only end in him being hurt once more.

He cursed himself, tossing half a glass of wine back and piling his plate with food as the dishes were passed to him. When everyone was served, Luke coughed. "Shall we have a toast, then?"

Everyone nodded and Luke lifted his glass. "To absent friends."

Eban dipped his head before he could meet Christian's gaze, biting his lip hard, lifting his glass but unable to speak. He heard glasses clinking together, a murmured repeating of the toast from everyone at the table apart

from himself. For a moment he was so overwhelmed by the realization that this was his first Christmas without Conrad that all the hurt of the previous eleven months came flooding back.

Underneath the table, a hand rested on his, and he found his own fingers curling around it, holding onto it hard as he fought the lump in his throat which threatened to kill him right there in front of his friends.

“So, Marcus,” Christian spoke up first, clearing his throat, his voice unsteady, “how much fucking exactly is in this novel of yours?”

“Dude, I can’t even describe it,” Marcus said. “Ass-fucking on every page, bucket-loads of jizz, whips, leather, handcuffs...” His eyes slid sideways to Eban and Darius, and a sly smirk crossed his lips.

“I swear,” Eban said, “if I’m in your book...”

“There are a couple of hot cops in there,” Jack spoke up, nodding authoritatively. “They get fucked with a baton.”

Darius choked on his carrots and reached for his wine quickly, while Eban glared at Marcus.

“Relax,” Marcus said airily, waving him away, “I wrote this novel years ago.”

Eban glared. “And you knew *me* years ago.”

“But I didn’t know the lovely Darius,” Marcus said with a smirk.

Eban bristled further.

“Marcus,” Christian said in a warning tone. His friend had probably already been fully briefed on making trouble with Eban.

“You’re so easy to rile, Eban,” Marcus said, laughing and reaching for more wine. “Why don’t you read it first? If you want to sue my ass, be my guest.”

“You can fucking count on it, Marcus,” Eban growled, “and before I sue it, I’ll put my baton in it.”

Marcus laughed uproariously.

“So, anyway,” Luke said quickly. “What movie are we watching after dinner? *It’s a Wonderful Life* or *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“Seriously,” Marcus said, “how *gay* are we?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty fucking gay,” was Jack’s reply.

Marcus smirked. “I know you are, munchkin.” He leaned over and kissed his partner’s cheek. “I’ve seen those ruby slippers in your closet.”

Eban wasn’t listening. He didn’t taste the food so much, nor the copious amounts of wine he gulped down with it. He only went over and over the

words he had spoken to Darius, until they whirled around his head like a tornado of emotion and lost all sense. What the fuck was he doing? He couldn't play with Darius the way he had done previously. He couldn't give him hope only to dash it once more.

He looked up and found Christian smiling fondly at him, returning it halfheartedly. He put his knife and fork together and glanced around, realizing everyone had finished. Luke started to get to his feet, and Eban took it as an opportunity to escape, grabbing his crutches and helping him up before Christian could. Once Luke was up, Eban helped Christian clear the plates, following him into the kitchen.

Luke was taking a cake from the oven when he arrived. "Are you okay?" he asked Eban as he put the dishes down on the side.

Eban nodded. "Is it okay if I smoke a joint at your window, Luke?"

"No, it's not," Christian snapped, "he's asthmatic."

"Shush, baby," Luke remonstrated with him softly. "Does this really help you out, Eban? Getting so drunk and stoned that you can't even talk to him?"

Eban lowered his head and bit on his lip. Luke moved past him to the window, unlatched it, and motioned to Eban to stand there. Eban did so gratefully, taking a lighter to one of the joints and sucking in a lungful, trying to avoid Christian's disgusted stare.

"What was the kiss about if you're hiding in here from him?" he asked Eban.

"I don't even know," Eban admitted. "I know I can't give him anything he wants. I'd be wrong to even try."

"Why do you say that?" Luke asked.

"Look at my track record."

Luke shook his head with a sigh and started to pour cream into a jug. "Darius knows everything there is to know about you, Eban, and he still wants you. He still thinks you could make him happy, and more importantly, he's willing to let you *try*, even after everything."

Eban didn't reply. Luke was always the voice of reason. He always made everything sound almost easy. He bent his head a little to look out of the window. Below him on the street there were a couple in their thirties, the woman drunk and giggling, the man with his arm around her, nuzzling her hair and telling her he loved her. As he watched, the man fell to one knee and proposed to the woman. Eban smiled. *I would have proposed to Conrad given half the chance. I would have taken him far, far away and married him, and I*

would have kept him forever. If he had been with me, he wouldn't have gone out alone that night and died. He blew another cloud of smoke from the window.

When everything went quiet behind him, he turned around to see his hosts sharing a hug, Luke's face hidden against Christian's shoulder. Eban's eyes met those of his best friend's, and everything which had passed between them flashed before his eyes for a moment.

It had been a long and painful road to get this far, but he knew he was nearly there now. He smiled at Christian and his friend returned it, his antagonism of a moment ago forgotten. Eban stubbed his joint out and threw it from the window. He moved silently past the two lovers and down the hall, re-entering the dining room.

Darius sat staring down at the tablecloth, toying with a spoon in his hands while Marcus and Jack talked quietly at the end of the table, Marcus's hand resting over Jack's.

Darius looked up when Eban entered the room, his gaze following Eban's progress silently around the table, head lifting further to watch him as Eban bent over him, held him by the neck with one hand and kissed him. Darius's lips parted under his, and Eban tasted all that this man had to offer him, if only he would take it.

"Get a room," came an amused voice, the *déjà vu* of this statement making Eban almost flinch. He lifted his lips from Darius's and spared a sideways glare at Marcus before resuming his seat and taking Darius's hand under the table, stroking his fingers. Darius smiled wistfully at him, and in that moment, Eban knew. Knew that it was time, knew that he could do this. They sat there hand in hand, not exchanging a word as the dessert was served along with coffee and liqueurs, because no words were needed, not when they both knew.

AFTER dinner, the six men retreated to the living room. Luke and Christian got one couch, and Marcus and Jack got the other, which left an antique rocking chair. Eban went to it, sat down, and held his hand out to Darius silently. With arms around him and chin on his shoulder, the weight on his lap comforting, Eban geared up for their after-dinner movie.

It was *It's A Wonderful Life*, by unanimous decision. Eban paid particular attention to it as he remembered his own dark thoughts. He held Darius closer to him in the bleakest parts, imagining for a moment Darius standing at his grave the way Eban had stood at Conrad's many a time. It

wasn't nice to be the person left behind. If he had done the thing he had thought about doing, some people here might never have recovered.

He glanced around the room as the film came to an end. Marcus was asleep on Jack's shoulder, and Christian and Luke were cuddling. Darius shifted on his knee, turning toward him, cradling his head, pressing a kiss to the top of it.

"DARIUS is staying in the spare room tonight," Luke murmured to Eban as he helped him in the kitchen later. "You're welcome to stay with him."

"Thanks," Eban said in reply, and with Luke's words he realized that not once that day had he thought about Darius in sexual terms. He hadn't even got an erection with Darius sitting on his lap. He smiled to himself. *I really am getting better.*

In the living room, Marcus and Jack were gathering their presents together in a bag and putting their coats on, declining Christian's offer of the couches, Marcus explaining that not only would they keep their hosts up all night but he didn't want to be responsible for staining the expensive fabric.

Christian just rolled his eyes and walked them both out into the hall, along with Darius. Luke and Eban came out of the kitchen, and hugs were exchanged, Marcus grinning at little ruefully at Eban and announcing the New Year's Eve party would be at his house.

Once the door was closed, Christian followed Luke into the kitchen, saying loudly, "Bed, Mr. Morgan, right now."

Luke had discharged himself from the hospital against the wishes of his doctor and against Christian's wishes, insistent on going through with the dinner he had planned. Christian had begged him to reconsider, telling him he would cook the dinner himself and bring it to the hospital. Luke had told Christian he would rather stick pins in his eyes than eat a Christmas dinner his lover had cooked. Christian was offended, as Luke had been pretending to like his cooking since they had first gotten together.

"The dishes..." Luke tried to complain, only half the dishwasher stacked.

"Well, let's see, you've got a choice," Christian said, "you come to bed or I take you over the table in front of our guests."

Luke hurriedly gathered his crutches and moved. "Turn the tree lights off when you go to bed," he told Eban and Darius, who were standing in the hallway.

"Thanks for a lovely day, Luke," Eban said, moving to embrace him.

"You're welcome," Luke said. "I didn't expect it to go so well. I was worried you might knock Marcus out again."

Eban smiled. As the two men retreated down the hall to the bedroom, Christian turned back and winked at Eban.

"MARRY me," Marcus said to Jack the moment they got out of Luke's apartment building.

Jack froze on the spot, turning around slowly to look at him. "What?"

"You heard me," Marcus repeated, moving closer, putting a hand to Jack's neck, leaning down to kiss him.

Jack shrugged away, laughing. "It's not legal."

"It is in Massachusetts," Marcus said, following him down the street as Jack set off. "Let's go to Boston and get fucking married."

Jack shook his head. "You're drunk."

"So? Drunk or sober, I still love you."

Jack smiled, because this Christmas had been a better one than usual. One which wasn't quite so lonely, one which was filled with the promise of new beginnings for everyone concerned.

"You don't believe me," Marcus slurred, pouting furiously. "Why don't I show you?" He produced a small box from his pocket, and Jack's jaw fell open. "Now," Marcus said, opening it, taking out a ring and sliding it onto Jack's hand. The ring was far too big for his third finger.

"Fuck it," Marcus cursed, "fucking *fuck* it, this is Christian's fault. *Fuck* that dude...."

Jack wasn't listening. Too big or not, he was mesmerized by the winking diamonds in the white gold band. He lifted his head, pulled Marcus's face down to his, and kissed him.

The deal was sealed this way for many minutes, until Marcus lifted Jack onto his back and carried him, drunk and staggering, all the way home, singing loudly.

"LUKE asked me to stay," Eban said in the deadly quiet living room. "If you want me to."

Darius nodded. He really was a man of few words that day.

Eban put a hand to his face and stroked, tracing Darius's features. "I'm yours," he said. "If you still want me."

Darius's reply was to get up and switch off the tree lights before taking Eban by the hand and leading him to Luke's spare room. The curtains were open and the bed was awash with moonlight. The two stood undressing each other in silence, kissing and touching exposed skin as they went along, making their way to the bed, lying down on top of the covers so they could see each other in the silvery light.

There was no lubricant, but both were used to that with the amount of impromptu, frantic lovemaking they had done in the past, and neither dared to knock on Luke's door to borrow some, not with the sounds coming through the wall. Darius had a condom, however, so all wasn't lost. Eban lay between his lover's legs, mouth around him as he probed him gently with wet, unpracticed fingers.

Darius responded with such fervor, his body arching sensually into Eban's mouth and hands as though it had been as long for him as it had been for Eban, that Eban selfishly hoped it had. He hoped Darius had been saving himself for him, that no other man had had their hands on him, because he intended to make it more than worth the wait.

He sucked Darius to fever pitch, until he moaned at Eban to stop and grabbed at his hair. But Eban didn't stop, only drew back, flicked his tongue over the head of Darius's cock a few times and pressed his fingers firmly into just the right spot before putting his mouth back and swallowing as Darius erupted with a gasp.

Eban gave him precisely five minutes to recover before he sat up and maneuvered him astride his lap, holding Darius's hips as he sank onto Eban.

Darius panted a little, clutching hard at Eban's shoulders, hard again within seconds, thrusting himself into Eban's waiting hand.

They moved together with mouths joined. It was no coincidence that Eban had chosen this position, this favorite of his ever since Conrad had made love to him this way, but Conrad was only distantly at the back of his mind now, rather than at the forefront as usual, because he focused on the writhing ball of bliss on his knee, hands touching soft skin over hard muscle, lips tasting wine and coffee and something more, something he knew without doubt Darius felt for him. As he was about to have confirmed.

Darius gasped his name, head falling back so Eban buried his mouth against his throat, leaving unintentional marks in his passion.

"I love you," Darius moaned suddenly. "I have to tell you that. I'm sorry."

Eban closed his eyes against his lover's neck.

IN THE room next door, Luke and Christian were beneath the covers with the light on, Luke moaning as Christian moved into him.

Luke had bought him a mountain of presents, but the most thoughtful of all had been nestled inside a tiny silver box; a key to his apartment. Christian had kissed him until Luke begged for mercy.

"Open your eyes," Christian said, so his lover did as he was told, unveiling those stunning crystal-green eyes which Christian had fallen deep into on that very first day at the coffee shop. He leaned down to kiss Luke. "I love you."

Luke bit his lip. He arched up against Christian, hands gripping his back hard. "I love you too," he groaned, eyes falling shut again in bliss.

Christian smiled. He remembered last Christmas. He remembered witnessing through the open door of the kitchen, the distinctly unfriendly kiss Conrad had given Eban in the living room. And although he now knew, had maybe *always* known, he wasn't angry. Because he had had Conrad's heart, at least for the most part, and those memories of being loved so ardently were enough for him.

Now his new life had begun, and he knew he would not be sharing Luke with anyone. That Luke was his and his alone.

"I DON'T seek to replace Conrad in your heart because I know I never will," Darius said in a whisper as they lay on their sides watching each other, breathing slowing. "Only, love me for *me* and not as a substitute for him."

"I once thought I was the unluckiest man in the world," Eban replied. "Now I know I'm the luckiest, because I've got a second chance, when I fucked up my first one so badly. I won't let you down, I swear I won't."

Darius smiled, adoration written all over his face. "Promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"That you'll be here in the morning when I wake up."

“Oh shit,” Eban said, taking him fiercely in his arms, “of course I will. You don’t have to worry about that.”

EBAN awoke some time later, confused and blinking in the light of the bedside lamp, seeing Darius sitting up beside him, reading a black-covered book.

“What are you doing?”

“Reading Marcus’s book,” Darius replied. “It’s a love story, that lying bastard.”

Eban lifted an eyebrow in astonishment. “Really?”

“Really,” Darius said. “There’s no whips and leather and ass-fucking on every page like he said, just this really sweet love triangle. I can’t think where he got the inspiration from.” He smiled as Eban reddened. “There *are* two hot cops fucking each other with batons, though. But he even does that in a romantic way.”

Eban growled a little in displeasure because he knew he was in Marcus’s book, without doubt, and he knew being fucked with a baton could never be considered romantic.

“Hope you’re not getting ideas,” he told Darius.

Darius smirked. “Maybe we’ll talk about it in a few months.”

Eban couldn’t help but smile, unable to keep himself from remembering the more salacious aspects of his sex life with Damien, where most parts of his uniform had been employed to good use.

“So, why are you reading Marcus’s book at”—he glanced over to the alarm clock on the bedside table—“four a.m.?”

Darius shrugged and averted his gaze. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Darius.” Eban slid up in the bed, so he lay across Darius’s torso. “If you’re still awake to make sure I don’t creep away.”

Darius’s reddening face told him the truth. “I was just watching you sleep.”

“Listen to me,” Eban said firmly. “This is it. Me and you. I’m going nowhere. Believe it, even though I’ve never been believable in the past.”

Darius looked down at him with those beautiful, ocean-blue eyes. Slowly he nodded, drawing Eban up his body to his mouth, where they sealed their new life with a kiss.

LUKE awoke in the early hours of the morning, disoriented for a moment after a nightmare of sharks and hearts. He reached for Christian in the darkness, just as his lover was drawing him close, still awake, clearly having been watching the tormented expression on Luke's face as he dreamed.

"Are you okay? Bad dream?"

Luke nodded, his heart slowing a little as he held Christian. He turned his eyes to the wall for a moment as something thudded against it before there was a stifled moan and the sound of bedsprings began in earnest.

The two of them smiled at each other. "Didn't you warn those two against breaking your bed?" Christian asked sardonically.

Luke shrugged helplessly. Neither had heard Eban and Darius the first time, engrossed as they were with each other. Now Christian trailed a hand down Luke's torso, over his hip and onto his backside, drawing him closer. "I think we better drown them out," he whispered, pressing his lips to his.

"Totally," Luke mumbled against his mouth.

Only when Luke had Christian on his side, moving into him from behind, limbs entwined, dropping kisses on the back of his neck while Christian gasped his pleasure at every thrust, did he speak the words he needed to.

"Christian."

Christian turned his head a little over his shoulder, seeking a kiss which Luke provided.

"I want to tell you something."

Christian clutched at the hand which was around his cock, groaning loudly, seconds away from coming.

"I want you to know," Luke said, carrying on regardless, "that when Conrad had this heart, it beat only for you and that hasn't changed. Now I have it, it *still* beats only for you."

Christian's eyes closed, and his face fell against the pillow as he came.

IN THE long, long silence while they both recovered, Christian lay still, digesting Luke's words. He knew now that the heart inside Luke hadn't beat only for Christian alone, but regardless, if he hadn't thought before Luke's statement that he and Luke were fated to be, he knew they were now. He knew he had been born to love Luke, just as he had been born to lose Conrad.

Luke pressed sleepy kisses to his shoulder, one hand moving up over his torso to press against his chest. Christian felt his heart beating hard against his back.

Conrad's heart and Luke's heart and my heart. It belongs to all three of us. And yes, if it must, it belongs to Eban too. A four-way split. He put his hand over Luke's, entwining their fingers. As he drifted away held in Luke's arms, his thoughts were clear.

Conrad's heart is like a fist drenched in blood.

It survived his death and it lived to fight another day inside Luke.

Conrad will be forever in my own heart and he shares that place with Luke.

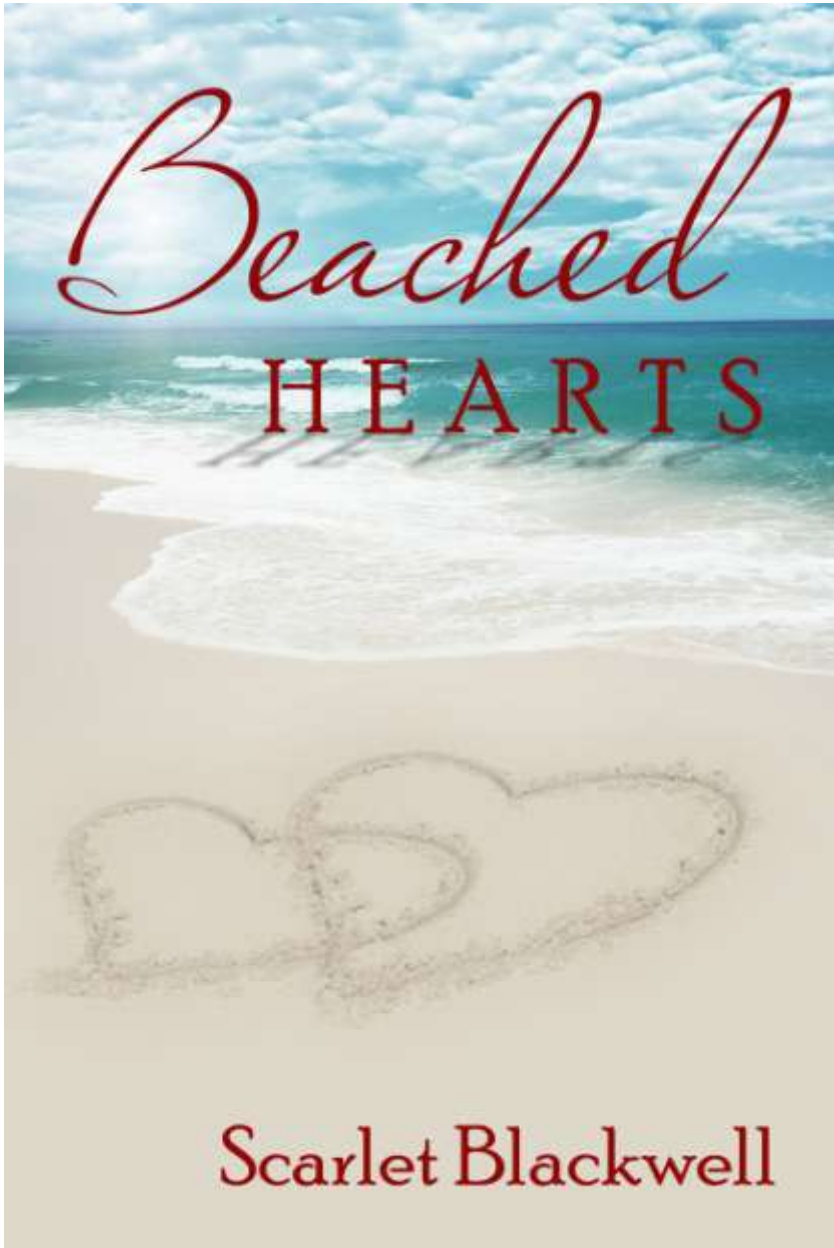
I will love these two men until I draw my very last breath.

And then I will go to my grave happy.

SCARLET BLACKWELL likes cats and hats and firmly believes that the only thing better than one attractive man is two attractive men.

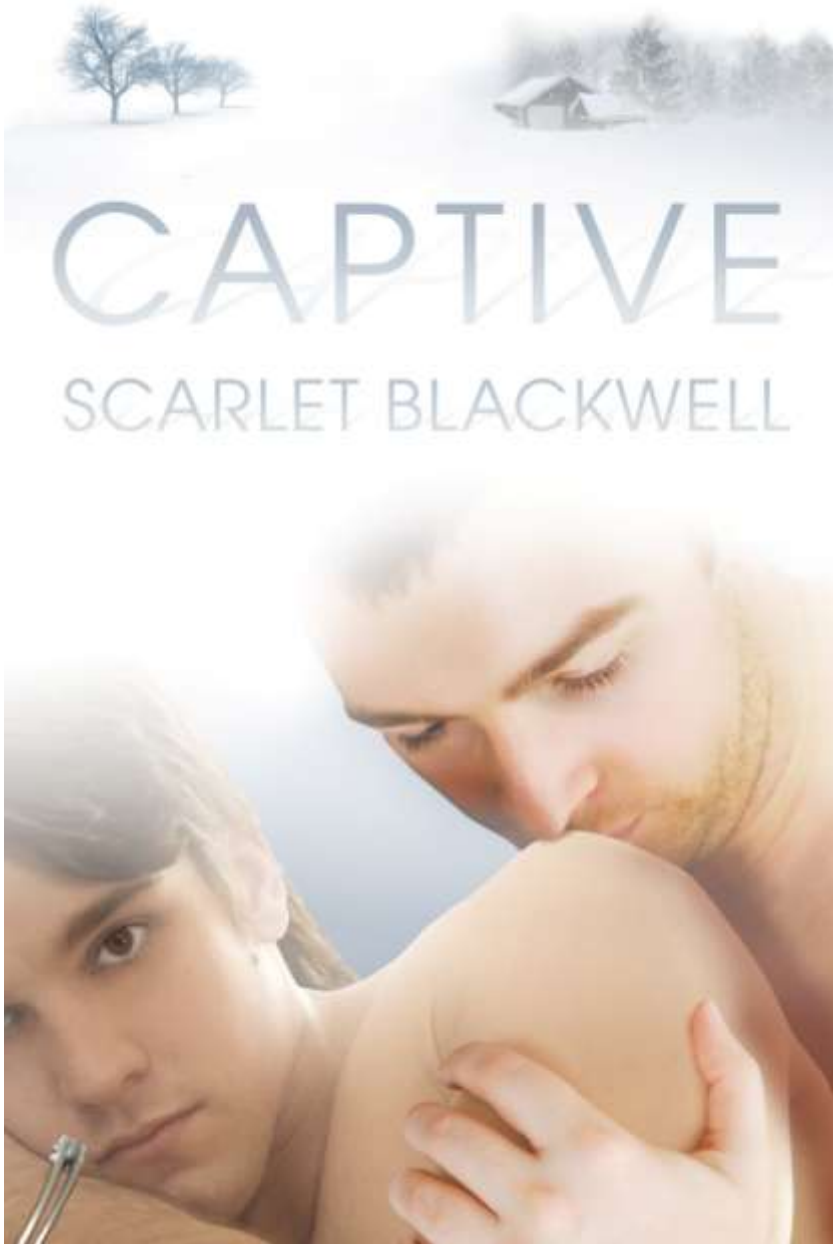
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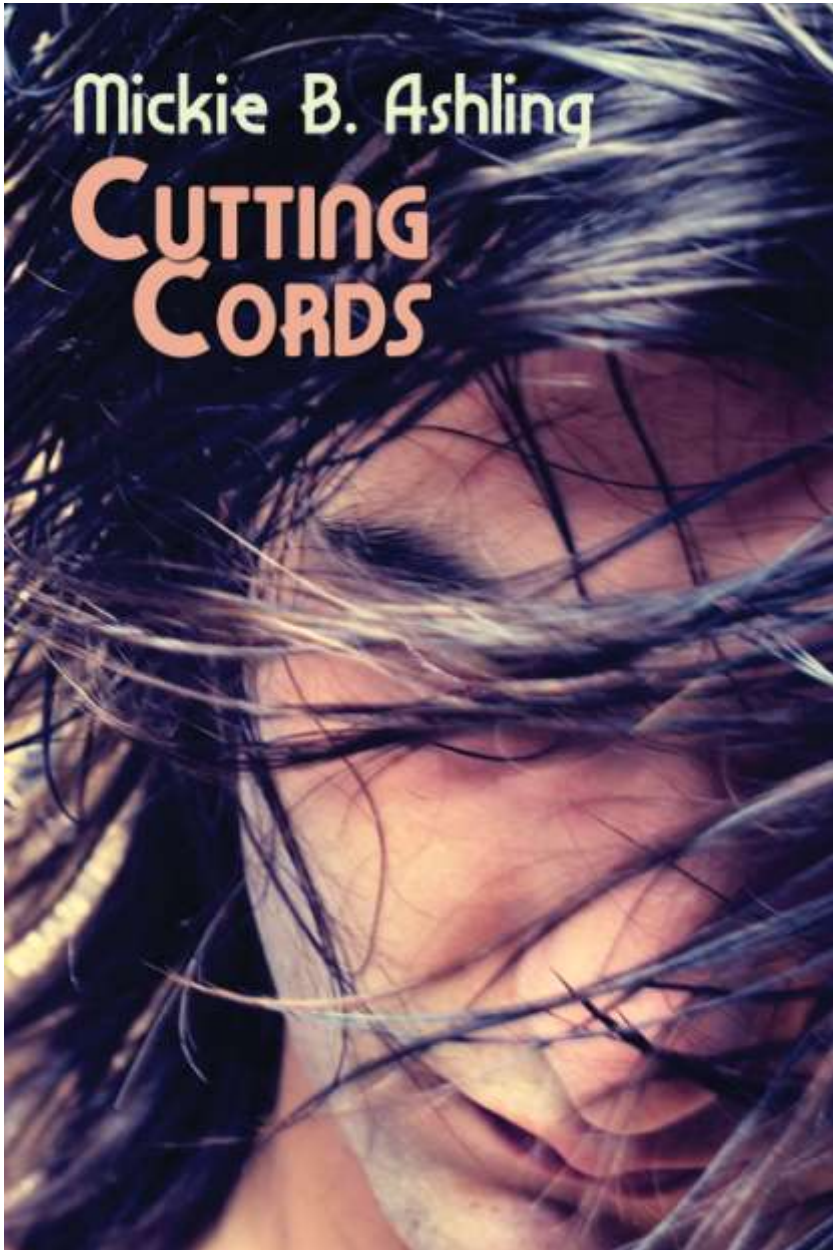
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The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of two men's heads and shoulders in profile, facing each other in a close, intimate pose. In the upper left corner, there is a white diamond-shaped logo containing a black spiral. To the right of this logo, the text "dreamspinner Press" is written in a white, elegant script font.

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