

## Chapter 1

ALEX was so glad to be getting home he could cry. His feet hurt, his head hurt, and he had that sterile hospital smell about him that was so unpleasant. Better than smelling like vomit, he supposed, but still, not great. Unfortunately, today hadn't been the first time he'd been thrown up on. It wasn't even the fifth. As a male nurse, not only did Alex have to contend with witty, stereotypical, emasculating jibes from his annoyingly straight friends, but finishing a shift with spatters of blood, vomit—and even, on occasion, shit—on him was a regular occurrence. But hey, it was a small price to pay for saving lives on a daily bas—oh wait, no, that was the doctors.

No, Alex Tanner was a twenty-seven-year-old male nurse who earned eighteen grand a year, lived in the crappiest flat in Camden Town imaginable, and had never really saved anybody's life. But if you needed a catheter inserted or your balls shaved, he was your guy.

"Ugh, shower, shower, shower...."

He was pretty sure he'd washed clean at the hospital, but he still had that lingering disinfectant scent on him, combined with the stale, muggy, pollution-like odor that was unavoidable when taking the underground. A shower first thing when getting in from work was a strict part of his routine, a routine he rarely deviated from.

He dumped his backpack on the kitchen counter (if a nook with an oven and microwave counted for a kitchen) and pulled the scrub shirt off over his head as he headed to his bedroom. There, he stripped off the rest of his clothes and shoved them into his bathroom hamper. Turning the nozzle to the shower, he stepped under the water that alternated between scalding and sub-zero, sighing as he dipped his head back and wetted his hair.

What a day. What a fucking day. He'd started the day out okay enough, not too tired, and early enough to make himself a coffee and to find fridge space for his cream cheese bagel, but it had kind of gone to shit after that. A little boy had come in with a broken wrist after falling down the stairs; he'd been trying to cheer the little guy up when he noticed how stiffly he was sitting. A quick look under his Pokémon T-shirt revealed a large boot print that, if he remembered correctly, seemed to look about the same size as the father's DM's. The kid had cried like his heart was broken when Child Services intervened.

"Crazy Bitch" in the mat unit had taken being very pregnant and uncomfortable out on him at every available chance. He'd managed to make himself look like a simpleton in front of one of the doctors by clumsily bumping into him and spilling his tea. Then there'd been the vomit which... never mind. And worst of all, "Old Guy" on 3Z had refused to have his blood drawn by a "poof", afraid he'd get "those nasty Aids". The head nurse had told him to shake it off and not to mind the cranky old git, which he'd appreciated, but it had made him no less pissed.

He hated that there was something about him that announced he was gay. He wasn't effeminate, but he couldn't really claim to be particularly macho, either (so what if he'd seen Pride and Prejudice twelve times?). And that bugged him. It bothered him to be perceived as such, because that was the kind of guy that he personally just wouldn't be attracted to. He liked the Matthew Macfadyens out here. The Clive Owens, the Gerard Butlers and the Russell Crowes (despite the latter being a bit of a twat). But buff guys attracted other buff guys and... guess what? He wasn't buff.

Alex stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. Absently rubbing his head dry, he looked in the mirror. Oh please, buff? He should be happy with whatever he could get. Or so his oh-so-sensitive mates kept telling him. Fuckers.

No, he was hardly the depiction of masculine beauty, which made him feel like a hypocrite for setting his own standards so high to begin with. He flung the towel into the hamper, looked at his reflection with a sigh, and then snorted. His hair stuck up in thick tufts gone dark with the damp. Dry, his hair was a light blond, which didn't look like it'd be receding any time soon. Thank God for small mercies. He considered himself to be pretty plain. Blue eyes, a scattering of light freckles across the bridge of his nose that made him feel like he was thirteen, and a somewhat shy smile that hid teeth that could stand to be a little straighter.

He'd have loved to have broader shoulders and thicker biceps, but lifting weights bored the hell out of him. He'd like to be a little taller than his five foot eight inches, but Cuban heels made him look daft. He'd swap his slight belly for a sixpack any day, but simply could not be bothered to get his arse down to the gym. He turned to his side and sucked in

the curve of his stomach, then let it go with an unhappy grumble. He touched his stomach and looked down at his toes.

"Well, as long as I can still see my dick when I look down, I guess it isn't too bad."

He pulled on his sweats, padded back into the living room, (a whole three feet away) and threw himself onto the couch. He shimmied into his favorite corner, and pulled his feet up under him. Reaching for the remote and flicking on the TV, he pulled a cushion to his chest and went through his TV planner.

"I've been yelled at, embarrassed, and regurgitated on today. God help my Sky planner if it hasn't recorded *Grey*'s *Anatomy* again."

Finding the show in question, he settled down to watch before going off to bed to rest up for another fulfilling day of being underappreciated and underpaid. Roughly twenty minutes later he hit pause and went to pour himself a well-deserved glass of very cheap wine. Curling back up on his spot, he reached for the remote and took a sip of his Lambrini.

"They should so make Shepherd gay; they'd earn themselves a whole new demographic."

"I always liked O'Malley, personally."

"Oh please, why wo—" Alex froze.

He looked to the end of the couch where the voice had come from, and very nearly swallowed his tongue in shock. Sitting there, casually watching his TV was... some guy. Just... some guy. Sitting there on his couch. He tried to speak, to say something, but could only stare wide eyed at

the sight of the complete stranger so casually sitting there beside him. The man sitting on his couch glanced at him briefly and then back at the TV, and then snapped his head back at Alex.

They both let out terrified yells of surprise and scrambled off their respective ends of the couch. The stranger stood against the wall, his shoulders sagging as he clutched at his heaving chest. "Oh God, you scared me!"

"W-What... what...."

"So you can see me now?" He didn't finish his sentence and instead winced as Alex suddenly remembered how to speak.

"What the—who the—what the fucking *fuck*?" Alex yelled and backed further away, shaking and holding his now empty wine glass in front of him like a weapon. The guy was big, a good foot taller than Alex and a perhaps a little on the podgy side. He stood with his hands out in front of him, looking equally as startled. He had on thick-rimmed glasses and had his hair tied back; he wore a ratty T-shirt, checked PJ bottoms and—of all things—big fluffy bunny slippers.

"Oh wow, you really can see me, can't you?"

And he apparently had a Bristol accent. Alex squeezed his eyes shut and quickly rubbed his free hand over them.

Nope, still there.

"How the fuck did you get in here?" Alex managed to get out, only sounding slightly less like a hysterical woman.

"Ah, well, I don't rightly know that."

"I—I've been here all evening. How'd you sneak in?" he demanded, edging away and toward the phone, but keeping his eyes on his unexpected guest.

"I—I just kind of appeared, odd as it sounds. Been here since last night, actually."

"What?"

The guy winced, and took another step back, his shoulders hunching slightly. "I tried to talk to you, say hello," he gave a silly little wave, "but you couldn't see me."

"Are you fucking crazy?"

"You sure do swear a lot when you're surprised."

"Have you been stealing from me?"

"What would I steal?" The guy frowned, and then sputtered on quickly, "Not that your home isn't lovely...."

"You've got ten seconds to explain yourself before I call the police!"

"Uh, well... let's see, where do I...."

"Five seconds!"

"I'm dead!"

Alex gaped at him for a second, and then dropped his glass to dive for the phone. He couldn't get his hands to stop shaking enough to hit the nine.

"No, no, please don't do that," the guy implored. "You'll just embarrass yourself and then I'd feel dreadfully guilty." He approached Alex.

Alex saw this and backed up against the wall, pointing the phone at the man. "Back up! Back the fuck up! I—I know jujitsu!"

The man held his hands out in front of him. "Maybe if we could sit and talk, take some deep breaths...."

Alex reached for the nearest object, a snow globe, and threw it at the guy. The man ducked out of the way and the globe smashed against the wall. Alex went for the next nearest item and the guy gasped.

"Oh no, not the flowers, they're lovely. Throw a shoe or something, if you have to."

It was at that moment that Alex lost the feeling in his fingers, and the vase of lilies crashed to the floor. The man winced.

"G—get out of my flat!"

"I can't do that, I'm so sorry."

"Oh God." Alex's hand went up to his throat. "You're going to kill me; you're going to kill me and chop me up into tiny pieces and use me for potpourri, aren't you?"

"What? No!"

"You're some mental patient that's followed me home from the hospital and been hiding in my closet. Oh, God. Oh, Christ."

"Honesty I'm not. I'm just..." The guy bit his lip anxiously and shrugged. "I'm a ghost, I think."

"Oh for—just take what you want and get out! I won't report it to the police, I promise, please just get out!"

"I told you I can't, I'm...." He gave Alex an apprehensive look, and walked over to the low coffee table that had a lamp sitting on it. "Look." He swiped his hand straight through the lamp. "See? I can't hurt a fly. I also can't go anywhere."

Alex stopped breathing. He'd just watched a man put his hand through a solid object. Now that he looked at him, he looked a little... translucent-ish. As soon as he was able to draw breath again he ran to the door, bending and nearly falling over as he snagged up the nearest shoes and grabbed his parka before whipping open the front door.

"Wait!" the man called.

Alex slammed the door closed, and dashed down the stairs and into the street. If he received any funny looks whilst running down the street in his crocs, his sweats and parka, and nothing more, then he didn't notice. By the time he got to his friend's front door, which was, thankfully, only two streets away from his own, he was panting and as wild eyed as a startled animal.

"Andy! Andy, open up, open the fucking door!" He banged his fist against the door, and nearly stumbled as it whipped open to reveal a very rumpled and annoyed looking man.

"Alex... what the fuck, man?"

Not pausing to give any sort of explanation, Alex shuffled him back and closed the door.

"Alex you know I'm on early shifts; I was fucking sleepi— What the hell?" He broke off, looking at his sweaty, slightly hysterical looking friend. "Alex, you're not even wearing a shirt!"

"Andy y—you're not going to believe... there's... he's... and... fucking bunny slippers!"

"Have you finally lost it?" He looked down at Alex's feet "Are those crocs you're wearing? Christ, you really are gay—"

"Listen to me!" Alex took him by the arms and shook him; Andy easily pulled out of the grip and glared at him.

"No, you listen, you crazy shit! I have to be at work in less than three hours to take over the security shift at the—"

"Andy!" Alex yelled, wringing his hands a little. "Please just listen to me!"

Andy gave an almighty sigh. "This better be worth it. I mean it, Alex, I'm dead on my feet. Make it good."

After wincing at his choice of words, Alex took a steadying breath, and pressed his still trembling hand to his chest. "Andy," he began, "there is a ghost, in my flat."

Andy stared at him, and for a second he thought he was about to be taken seriously, but then he was being shuffled back towards the door.

"I'm serious!" he nearly shrieked.

Apparently the hysterical note in his voice gave Andy pause, and the taller man sighed and ran his hands through his already mussed hair. He seemed to notice something, and his eyes narrowed as he looked down at Alex's pants, he leaned close and took a sniff.

"How much have you had to drink?"

"I'm not drunk," he protested indignantly.

"Well, either you've been slinging back a few, or you've pissed your pants."

"Oh fine, I had one glass of wine before noticing the ghost sitting on the couch beside me!"

Andy gave him a disbelieving look. "What was it doing, then?"

"He was watching TV with me."

"What were you watching?"

"Grey's Ana—what does it fucking matter what we were watching?!"

Andy snorted, finally seeing some humor in the situation. "Alex, mate, any chance you got a little tipsy and nodded off?"

"This was not a dream, and I have a broken snow globe to prove it."

Andy shook his head and made to escort Alex out the door, but Alex pushed his hands angrily away.

"I did not imagine this!"

"Oh my Christ, you did *not* just stamp your foot. And in pussy Croc shoes, no less...."

"Andy, be a fucking friend and give me the benefit of the fucking doubt!"

"Kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Andy!"

Andy looked at him evenly, and then sighed as he walked down the short hallway. "Come on."

"What are we doing?"

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, I'm standing here in my boxers, and you..." he glanced back over his shoulder, "...look mental. I'm getting us some clothes, and then we're going over to your place so I can check for ghosts and then tuck you into bed like a good little retard."

Andy gave an "oof" as Alex threw himself at his back, wrapping his arms around his middle in a tight hug. He grinned begrudgingly and patted the arms around his middle. "Alex?"

"Yeah?" He sounded oddly choked up.

"What did we say about the spontaneous hugging thing?"

Alex pulled back and sniffed. "Right."

Andy couldn't help but snort in amusement, and turned to pull Alex into his bedroom. "Come on, I'd rather not confront Casper in my underpants."

"KEYS." Andy held his hand out to Alex who shuffled nervously behind him as they stood outside his flat door.

"Um...."

"What?"

"Well, I was kind of in a rush...."

"You left your door unlocked? Alex, come on, that's just asking for it!"

"I wasn't wearing a shirt, what made you think I'd have my keys?" He was still wearing his sweats, parka, and yes, his Croc shoes, and Andy had lent him a sweater that looked ridiculously big on him. He didn't think it made him look any more presentable, but... whatever.

"You know what the crime's like in this area; my mate John got his place broken into not a week ago, and he lives... what, ten minutes away? You gotta—"

"I don't need a lecture, Andy."

"Sounds to me like you do!"

"Well forgive me for not setting the alarms and sprinklers before leaving, but there was a fucking poltergeist in my living room!"

"That's a bit overboard isn't it?" Andy laughed.

"It was scary!"

"I thought you said it was wearing bunny slippers?"

"Still scary!"

"Pussy."

"Fuck you."

"I can leave, if you like."

"Please don't."

Andy grinned and opened the door. "You bell-end." he chuckled, and walked through to the living room. "What the hell did you do?" He stepped carefully around the broken glass and lilies on the floor.

Alex sighed. "Dropped it, I was going to throw it at him."

"What, and then you remembered what a massive homo you are and that you can't throw worth a shit?" Amused by himself, Andy gave him his best shit-eating grin.

"You know the gay jokes are extremely offensive."

"To anyone else, yeah."

"To me too!" Alex replied tersely, surveying the room carefully as he dared to edge closer to the couch.

"Nah."

"What do you mean 'nah'?"

"It's your own fault. We're mates, so I get to be as offensive as I like."

"And if we weren't friends?"

Andy pulled back a curtain, and then turned to bend and look under the coffee table with exaggerated caution. "Well then I wouldn't dream of speaking to you in such a way."

"That's fucked up."

"It's me being affectionate, actually."

"That's even more fucked up."

"Do I need to remind you of why I'm here?"

Alex crossed his arms and remained quiet. He looked around him. His TV was still on, and the wine glass he'd been drinking out of lay on its side on the floor. Other than the broken glass from the vase, and the mark on the wall from where the snow globe had smashed, it all looked normal. He was beginning to feel mighty foolish.

Andy came back out of the bathroom. "Not in the shower." He gave his head a scratch and turned to Alex with an eyebrow raised.

Alex sighed and flopped down on the couch, dejected. "I swear it was real. I saw something, I know it."

Andy sat himself on the other end of the couch. "Had a tough day?"

"I guess. Though it's never made me hallucinate before."

"What happened?"

Alex groaned and waved his hand at him in a dismissive gesture. "The usual. I got puked on again."

Andy laughed and then quickly smothered it. "I think getting chucked up on, on a regular basis is enough to make anyone lose it."

"Some old guy was... never mind." He shrugged. It wasn't like it mattered.

"What?"

"He called me a poof."

"You've been called a lot worse," Andy joked, shrugging.

"Thanks for the support."

"Ah, come on. Old people can be like that some—"

"He wouldn't let me touch him. He didn't want to get Aids."

The teasing grin slowly disappeared. "Oh, I see." Andy shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "Well, fuck him—old bastard. He doesn't know you."

Alex shrugged his shoulders again. "It doesn't matter." He played with the sleeves of Andy's sweater where they overlapped his hands. "It was just embarrassing—made people look at me differently." Alex looked to his side at Andy when he heard him clear his throat.

"You need like... a hug, or something?"

Alex snorted and shook his head, going back to fiddling with his sleeves. "That's alright; I'm a big boy and all."

Andy sighed again. "Oh, for fuck's sake, come here."

"What?" Alex asked in amusement.

"We're hugging." He shuffled closer to Alex, slung his arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. "You like this hugging crap, and I'm trying to be a good friend, so just go with it."

Alex laughed as he received the manly thumps on his back. "Thanks, man, I know what a sacrifice this is."

Andy ruffled Alex's hair roughly, and let his arm fall away to rest on the back of the couch. He looked around the room, and then back at Alex. "Alex, there's nothing here, mate."

"So what does this mean?"

"I guess it means you're bat shit crazy."

"Ah, crap."

"Yup."

"Maybe... I mean it was a long day-"

"And you did get puked on again." He pointed out helpfully. "I'm surprised you haven't gone on a killing spree, to be honest."

"What an interesting insight into the way your mind works."

"Hey, I couldn't do your job. There's a reason I like to work night shifts as a security guard."

"Minimal excretion of bodily fluids?"

"That and I'm an anti-social bastard."

"You're not anti-social."

"Oh, but I'm a bastard?"

"Yeah, but in an oddly likeable way."

"That's something, I guess. If you could just let everyone else know I'd be awfully grateful."

"Other people...." Alex began to object, then paused, squinted and then shrugged. "Some people like you."

"If you could just tell the ladies, then."

Alex nodded in agreement. "You do need a girlfriend."

"So do you—evil homosexual."

Alex shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, I like the cock."

Andy winced and then laughed, shoving Alex—who was grinning proudly—by the shoulder. "Man, it's like there's nothing different about you, then you go say some shit like that that totally throws me off." He laughed. "Fucking funny." He sighed, wiping tiredly at his eyes.

"Ahh, the enlightened twenty-first century heterosexual."

"That's me; just don't try and talk to me about taking it up the jacksie."

"You're the most politically incorrect person I know."

Andy puffed out his chest. "That makes me so proud."

Alex snorted and shook his head; he looked at Andy thoughtfully for a second, a small smile playing across his lips. "You know, you should meet my friend Jackie."

"She politically incorrect too?"

"No, but she is single, and wonderful, and—"

Andy held up his hand to stop him. "She sounds fat."

"What do you mean she sounds fat?" Alex asked, affronted.

"Well, if she was a looker, that's what you would have started off with."

"Jackie is pretty, and she's smart—"

Up went Andy's hand again. "Whoa there, strike two."

"Oh so now you don't like smart women?" Alex asked, exasperated.

"They're okay, but now you're just compensating for the fat. Unless there's something else wrong with her. What is it, bad teeth? Annoying laugh?"

"You know what? Forget it. You're not good enough for her."

"Probably." Andy laughed, and then grinned crookedly. "Hey." He shoved Alex's shoulder gently.

"Enough with the fucking shoving," Alex snipped.

"Oh come on. I'm sure she's real nice, but do you really want to try and fix her up with someone like me?"

"When you're not being a dickhead, you're a nice guy, and she's a great person." He shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to fix up two people you care about."

"You care about me, huh?"

Alex shrugged begrudgingly. "Despite common sense, yes."

"And not in the 'I wanna make friends with your balls' way?"

"I might have thought you were semi-good looking when I first met you."

"But...."

"But then I got to know you." Alex laughed. "That killed any potential attraction."

"Thanks, buddy."

"Any time."

Andy swiped his hands over his face and looked around the place. "What time is it?" He craned his neck to look at the clock on the wall behind him. "Shit, I've gotta be at work in like an hour, I better get going." He looked at Alex, actual worry showing in his expression. "Are you going to be okay?"

Alex sighed, "Yeah, I'll be fine. I'm sorry for being a massive freak."

"Don't worry about it. Kind of why I like you." Andy patted his shoulder and stood, stretching his arms over his head.

"Bed," he ordered, and Alex raised an eyebrow in question. Andy pulled him up by the arm and pointed him in the direction of the bedroom. "I can hang around for a few more minutes. Or long enough for you to fall asleep, anyway. Go on."

Touched, Alex said his thanks, and fought the compulsion to hug him again before heading off to bed. Knowing his friend was in the other room somehow put the evening into perspective. He had no doubt that his fear had been real, but whether or not it had been brought on by a long, crappy day and nodding off in front of the TV, or early onset dementia, he now found it difficult to believe that he had run from his apartment in a blind panic. Thinking about that and knowing that the sounds coming from his living room were of Andy sweeping up broken glass, his weird and terrifying evening didn't prevent him from dropping off the second his head hit the pillow.

Andy discarded the broken glass, and dumped the now dead flowers into the kitchen bin. He glanced again at the time and silently tiptoed to Alex's bedroom door. Hearing soft snores, he let himself out of the flat and made it halfway down the hallway before mentally slapping himself. Going back to the flat, he let himself in and quickly scanned the place. Finding Alex's keys on a worktop in his tiny kitchen, he quietly closed the front door behind him, tested it to make sure it was securely locked, and then posted the keys back through the letterbox.

Back in the flat, when all was quiet save for the sounds of Alex's breathing, the ghost heaved a sigh of relief.

## Chapter 2

"IT'S a keep busy day today, Alex," he said to himself. "Can't go crazy if you're too busy."

After last night's events, he was feeling ever so slightly on edge and was especially grateful to have the next week booked off as holiday from work. Generally, this was how he tended to use his annual leave. He could never afford to go abroad, (and didn't relish the idea of going away on his own) and usually spent the time watching movies or reading books.

Alex flipped the switch to his kettle, and was hunting through the biscuit tin for a Jaffa cake when he heard the voice speak.

"Um... excuse me?"

He didn't scream this time. He went completely stockstill and immediately began to perspire.

"I really don't want to upset or alarm you...."

"Oh God. Oh God oh God." Alex slowly began to turn and looked around the kitchen. There was nothing. "I've gone insane. I've actually gone completely mental."

"You really haven't, though I utterly understand why you might think...." the voice paused, "Can I please come out? It's really cramped in here."

"But... but you're not real. I had a bad dream, and too much to drink and I fell asleep and... and I had a bad dream—"

"You barely had one glass, and you didn't fall asleep. And from what I've seen so far, you don't seem crazy. Just very, very startled." The voice became somewhat shy. "You seem quite nice, actually."

That Alex was standing there talking to a bodiless voice, a voice that seemed rather timid and thought he was "nice," struck Alex as suddenly ridiculous. He burst into a nervous, almost hysterical laugh that verged on tears as he ran both hands through his hair.

"Y... you're not going to throw things again, are you?"

"Where were you last night?" Alex suddenly demanded, taking deep breaths.

"Well, I didn't know what would happen and... I panicked and hid."

"What do you mean, 'what would happen'?"

The kettle began to whistle, and Alex reached over to turn it off, his hands noticeably shaking.

"I didn't know if your friend would be able to see me or not."

"Well if I can—"

"You only saw me for the first time yesterday. I've been here two days. What if you started screaming and pointing at me, but he couldn't see me? You'd look crazy."

"Oh, yes, because I otherwise seemed completely in control of my senses."

"Your friend seemed pretty understanding. I don't think he's about to commit you, at any rate."

"Andy's a good guy." Alex nodded.

"Have you two been friends long?"

"For a couple of years, yeah. We met in a pub; he was one person short for his team for the pub quiz, and I'd just nipped in to use the loos and—"Alex paused. "I'm sorry. Disembodied voice in my kitchen, but can we get back to the matter at hand?" Alex shook his head slightly, amazed at his ability to be so easily sidetracked.

"Right! Right, sorry."

"Weren't you...." He sighed. "I mean, you were a guy last night, where uh... where'd you go?"

"I'm still here."

Alex frowned. The voice sounded almost sheepish.

"Well, I don't see you."

"I told you. I'm hiding. I didn't want a repeat of last night; you might have a heart attack or something."

"Yeah, 'cuz just the voice puts me much more at ease."

There was a brief silence between them.

"You're being sarcastic, aren't you?"

"Yes." Alex ran his hands over his face and leaned against the counter. "Yes, I'm being sarcastic to the ghost in my flat. Christ." Alex swallowed. "So where are you?" He couldn't believe he was asking this—couldn't believe that he was having a conversation with his ghostly intruder rather than running away and screaming like a girl.

"I'm, ah... I'm in your fridge."

"My fridge," Alex repeated, looking at said fridge.

"Yes." The voice cleared its figurative throat. "Your milk is past its sell by date, by the way."

Alex stared at his fridge—his not very big fridge—and frowned. "How is that even possible?"

"Ghost, remember?"

"But—but you're a big guy, six seven, at least."

"Well... I didn't say I was comfortable."

Alex stood straight and took some deep breaths. "Okay, you can come out."

The ghost was quiet for a few seconds. "Are you sure? You won't... faint or anything?"

"Nope." Alex bounced on the balls of his feet, preparing himself as best he could. "I'm not going to cry or scream or anything."

"Well... if you're sure?"

"Just get out here already."

"Okay, here I come."

"Okay-no! Wait!"

"What? Are you alright?"

"Ah...." Alex looked down at himself. "Can you just hang on a few more minutes?"

"Why? It's kind of cold in here."

Alex cocked an eyebrow. "You can feel the cold, but you can't hold a lamp?" he asked in surprise, referring to the shocking demonstration of the night before.

"Pretty much. I can't touch anything, but I can feel hot and cold." He paused. "In hindsight, hiding in the fridge was a little stupid."

"That's really weird."

"It's insane. How do you think I feel?"

"Disorientated, I should think."

"Disorientated and chilly. Can I come out now?"

"Um, just give me a few minutes. I'm...." He blushed faintly. "I'm only in my boxers." He shrugged as if to apologize.

"Oh. Well... I've been here a few days, Alex."

He wasn't sure why, but he had to fight a silly, bemused smile from spreading across his face when hearing his name said in that oddly endearing accent. When had he stopped being terrified? How had he gone from screaming and running away, to "come out of my fridge and let me see you?" He was still somewhat unhinged and thrown by the entire situation, but now he—wait a minute.

"What are you saying?" Alex frowned, and then narrowed his eyes as he crossed his arms over his chest and hunched his shoulders self-consciously. "Have you seen me in my underpants already?"

"Um...."

Alex gasped. "Have you seen me naked?" He glared and then pointed at the fridge accusingly. "You bloody Peeping Tom!"

"It's not my fault!" the ghost implored. "Honestly! I was just sitting watching the TV you'd left on, minding my own business, and in you walked, starker's!"

Alex flushed alarmingly. "I... I didn't know... it's my flat!" "It's not like I went out of my way to see you naked!"

Alex recoiled a little. "What does that mean?" he asked snippily, hating that he sounded offended.

"Just that... I only meant... I didn't mean you're not worth—"

"You know what?" Alex snapped. "You can just... you can go... shut up!" Alex stormed out of the kitchen and yelled over his shoulder. "You can climb on out now; I'll be in my bedroom getting dressed so as not to offend your delicate sensibilities!" He slammed the bedroom door behind him.

A pitiful whimper of frustration came from the fridge.

ALEX angrily yanked on a T-shirt and pulled on his jogging bottoms. He sat with a huff on the side of the bed and crossed his arms. He couldn't have described how he felt if he tried. Was he afraid? Worried? Nauseous.... Hurt? He let out a breathless little laugh in exasperation. How shallow could a person be? There was a ghost, a spirit from "the other side" in his flat, trying to speak to him, and here he was, with his stupid feelings all hurt. He rested his elbows on his knees and hid his face in his hands. Of all the things to focus on, Alex.

He stood up and glanced at his reflection in his bedroom mirror. He grabbed the sweater he'd borrowed from Andy the previous night, and pulled the sleeves that were inside out the right way as he left the bedroom. As soon as his head popped through the sweater he gasped in surprise. The ghost was sitting on his couch; exactly where he'd first seen him, looking rather glum. Alex almost smirked; he looked like a large, guilty puppy.

"Hello, Alex." The ghost gave him a small wave, and then let his hand fall back between his knees.

"Hi... ghost." Alex pulled the long sleeves over his hands, not quite ready to be friendly.

"Sid."

"Huh?"

"Do you want to sit down? And I have a name—" He frowned. "Had a name." He shrugged unhappily. "It's Sid."

Feeling reluctantly sorry for him, Alex sat on his corner of the couch, facing him. He pulled his feet up under him, and when the silence between them became awkward, he gave a nervous little smile despite himself. "Déjà vu."

Sid smiled sadly, and then seemed to struggle with what it was he wanted to say. "You look great naked," he suddenly blurted.

That surprised a laugh out of Alex, and if it were possible, he would bet money that the ghost—that Sid—would be turning purple with embarrassment.

"I mean, um, you're a very attractive man. I didn't... you didn't... you got the wrong—"

"Sid? Pick a sentence and go with it."

Sid smiled in embarrassment, and Alex couldn't help it, he felt a little bit of his reservation melt away despite his better judgment.

Sid pushed the glasses up along his nose, and sighed. "I just mean to say that, if I were alive? You'd be the sort of guy I'd go for."

It was impossible not to be flattered, and Alex shrugged uncomfortably, offering a small smile that was something like a peace offering. "I'm your O'Malley, huh?"

Sid actually laughed at that and nodded. "Yes, I suppose so." He gestured over his shoulder with a thumb, "All that in there? That was me just not knowing how to talk to a cute guy."

"So now I'm cute?" Stop fishing Alex, this is still fucking weird.

"You're always cute," Sid said quietly, "from what I've seen." He shrugged, and then cleared his throat (which was surely just something out of habit?) "I'm sorry I saw you naked...." An almost playful grin touched his lips. "Or rather, I'm sorry you *know* I saw you naked."

Alex did laugh nervously at that, and then gestured with a wave of his hand. "Alright, alright, forget it. I'm sorry for the embarrassing hissy fit. It's just all very...." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he gestured with his hand in front of his chest. "You know?"

"I know. I apologize for haunting you."

Alex smiled uncertainly and shrugged. "I guess, as far as ghosts go, you're rather friendly."

Alex looked at Sid properly for the first time. He'd been in too much of a hysterical panic to really take in what was sitting at the end of his couch before. The first noticeable thing about Sid was his size; he realized that when last night he'd thought him podgy, he'd been mistaken, he was simply very... big. It wasn't a mass of muscles that made up his size, but his height and broad shoulders that led to a waist that, although it was thick, was made to look average by those strong looking shoulders and arms. Alex had always been a sucker for thick forearms. He shook his head minutely.

"What?" Sid asked curiously.

"Nothing, just looking at you for the first time."

Sid gave him a lopsided smile. "Not much to look at I'm afraid—at this end of the couch, anyway."

"That's not true," Alex said quietly, surprising himself.

Sid quirked an eyebrow. "Thought you only liked the McDreamys out there?"

Alex rolled his eyes and Sid laughed quietly at him. Alex watched as Sid pushed his glasses up his nose and then realized with a start that he couldn't tell what color his eyes were. "You're not in color."

Sid blinked in surprise. "I'm not?" He looked down at himself. "I hadn't even realized."

"What color are your eyes?"

"They're... they were hazel."

"Hair?" Alex tilted his head to the side as Sid reached for the small ponytail at the base of his neck to examine.

"Brown, dark brown." He shrugged.

"Huh. The slippers?" Alex felt himself smile a little when Sid groaned.

"I... I have no excuse for the slippers. I just liked them."

"They're ah... cool," Alex teased.

"Oh shut up," Sid groused.

"No, really. Sexy, man."

"If I could have somehow foreseen that I was going to die wearing these, I never would have bought them, I assure you."

Alex's teasing grin slipped away. "How did you die?" he asked gently.

All humor and playfulness left Sid at once to be replaced with a look of utter loss. "I have no idea, I mean...." He looked down at himself. "I'm guessing it was either at night, or very early in the morning, but other than that...."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Sid frowned in deep thought, as though the memories were difficult to retrieve. "I came to London to see an art exhibit. I don't usually treat myself to days out, but I'm self employed and the exhibit's just opened, so I thought, what's the harm?" He laughed humorlessly.

"That is painfully ironic." Alex conceded. "What do you do?"

"I'm an accountant, or I was. I worked privately, and I was a good one, too, very reliable." He sighed.

"How much does an accountant make?" Alex asked curiously.

"I took home around forty K."

"Forty!" Alex sputtered.

Sid laughed, "That's actually pretty average for accountancy. I've been offered jobs before, headhunted by the big boy companies to work for them, but there's something to be said for working privately and choosing your own clients."

"How much does an accountant make who doesn't work privately?"

"Well, it varies, but the starting salaries can be anywhere close to sixty-five K, depending on the company."

"Holy shit!"

Sid seemed a little uncomfortable at Alex's reaction, so he made an effort to tone it down. "I mean...." But he couldn't, it was sixty-five grand for fuck sake. "I mean... shit!" He laughed. "You want to know how much I earn?"

"Not enough, I'd guess."

Alex was thrown by the reply. "Huh?"

"You're a nurse, right?"

"Yeah?"

"I saw the scrubs," Sid clarified.

"You didn't think I was a doctor?" His grin made it obvious that he was kidding. As if a doctor would live in a crappy flat in Camden.

Sid smiled. "No, you're too nice for that. I'd guess you make around... nineteen K?"

"Eighteen."

"Really?" Sid asked in surprise, and then shook his head in what seemed disgust. "It's always amazed me how people with the most taxing and important jobs earn the least."

"Important?"

"Yes," Sid said firmly, as if it were something he felt strongly about. "Nurses wade through crap and vomit every day to help patients and doctors. You guys don't receive even a fraction of the recognition you deserve."

Alex blinked in surprise, finding himself utterly charmed. "That's... *thank* you," he said with feeling.

Sid shrugged. "One of my foster mothers was a retired nurse. I admired her a lot."

"You were in foster care as a child? That must have been tough."

Sid shifted uncomfortably. "Not tough," he said quietly. "Just... lonely, at times. I went through several homes. They were good people, but not family, if you understand me."

Alex couldn't really understand it, having grown up in a large family, but he nodded anyway. "So... the last thing you remember is traveling down to London?"

Brought back on track, Sid sighed heavily. "That's it. One minute I'm on the train, the next I'm here, desperately trying to get you to notice me whilst simultaneously having a nervous breakdown."

"Can ghosts have nervous breakdowns?"

"This one can."

"Man...." Alex shook his head, "Do you have... like...." He cleared his throat and felt himself flush a little. "Unfinished business... or something?"

Sid frowned. "I don't know."

"And you can't leave?"

"Nope, what's more, when you're not here, I disappear."

Alex frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean when you step out the door, I don't exist."

Alex felt a sudden urge to comfort him, his wariness temporarily forgotten. Sid seemed so sad, so lost, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out how to do it without touching him. He wasn't sure what to think about that.

"It's like going to sleep and not dreaming. There's nothing. I know nothing until you come back through the door." He frowned in thought, and pushed his glasses up his

nose in what Alex was beginning to notice must be a familiar habit of his ghostly companion's. "It's strange. I can't touch anything, and I know, for example, that right now I'm sitting, but I can't feel the fabric, I can't feel anything physical. But I can feel the hot and cold, and whenever you walk toward that door, I can feel this...."

Alex swallowed thickly as a look of utter helplessness and fear crossed Sid's features. It didn't seem to fit, that someone so large and... dead, could seem so gentle and vulnerable. It was beyond Alex's experience.

"I feel this... this *dread*. This panic and sickness—knowing that in a few seconds, I'm about to disappear, maybe for good." He looked at Alex. "You're the only person in the world that knows I still exist."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, feeling at once both very small and insignificant, and as if a heavy weight had settled on his shoulders. "I'm sorry this has happened to you."

Sid snorted sadly. "I'm sorry you're stuck with me in your home."

"Maybe I can help you somehow?"

Alex was sure he saw a flare of what seemed like hope flash behind those thick lenses, and he found that he genuinely wanted to help. Not so much to just get rid of his uninvited guest, but to help this—all freakiness aside—nice guy. "You've only been here two days, right? I can maybe find out what happened to you, tell some of your friends or family?" Alex asked hopefully, though he thought it perhaps the wrong thing to say as Sid's enthusiasm considerably dimmed.

Sid shook his head and offered him an awkward but polite smile. "No family."

Alex could have slapped himself. "Oh, of course, I'm sorry," he said meaningfully. "Well, friends, then?"

Sid gave a small, self-conscious shrug that made itself a home, right there in Alex's heart. "Not many of those, either, I'm afraid."

"I'm sure that's not true, you're...." Sid looked at him, and Alex swallowed nervously, distantly aware that his cheeks were beginning to flush. "Now that I'm not terrified of you, you seem quite pleasant," he tried to joke. "How could you not have dozens of friends?"

Sid's smile was small, just a lift at the corner of his lips, but his colorless gaze was surprisingly warm. "I guess I wasn't the most outgoing of people." He stared at Alex, and spoke quietly. "You're a nice guy, Alex. I would have liked to have been your friend when alive."

So far Alex had sat at the opposite end of the couch, huddled in his corner as if not fully willing to admit that he was accepting that this was happening—that there were such things as ghosts, and that he could see and speak to one. He gave up that pretense and fully immersed himself into what was either a fantasy, or a once in a lifetime connection to another person. He shuffled over onto the middle seat of the couch. He couldn't touch Sid, but he could show that he wasn't afraid.

"But there is something I can do, isn't there?"

Sid's brows drew together sadly and he took a deep breath and let it out quickly as he faced forward, away from Alex's intent gaze. "It'll sound pathetic." "Hey." Alex tried to catch his eye, "I don't mind. What can I do to help?"

Sid met his eyes hesitantly, and licked his bottom lip. "Could you... could you find someone for me?"

"Okay." Alex nodded. "Who is it? Are they in Bristol?"

Sid nodded, and gave a humorless laugh. "He's probably the one thing I love most in the world."

Alex was surprised at the sudden feeling of disappointment, as if he'd been stopped short. "Okay, is he...." Alex scratched the side of his cheek. "Is he your boyfriend? Can you give me his number?"

Sid shook his head. "No there's no number, he's...." He shot Alex a quick, embarrassed glance. "It's Baldrick, my cat."

## **Chapter 3**

LIVING in London did not automatically make you a wiz with navigating the tubes and trains. At least it hadn't made Alex one. He stared up at the departure board at Kings Cross station, the times and destinations of the trains slowly crawling from right to left in its orange, matrix dot text. As usual, Alex found himself intimidated when faced with traveling beyond his comfort zone.

He had hesitated on buying the ticket, unsure if he should go for an open ticket, a return, or a single. Seeing as he had no idea when he'd be heading back (he had to first find the apparently skittish cat) he decided to go with the cheapest option and bought the single. He'd just have to buy another when he headed home (whenever that would be.) With his network rail card it came to a tidy thirty-one pounds; money he would have otherwise wasted on takeaway, he told himself.

He hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder, and began to push his way through the unmoving and impolite crowd that was the London commuters. It was a half hour trip on the Tube from Kings Cross to Paddington, and then an hour and forty-five minute stretch to Bristol. He rummaged through his backpack for his iPod, and the thirty minutes by Tube bled away as he went through his various play lists.

He was relieved when his train pulled into the platform and he walked all the way down to the end of the train. He didn't even glance at the pretentious first class seats (seriously, who would pay that much extra for a serviette and a cup of tea?) Hitting the circular button that opened the doors, he found himself a window seat, making sure he'd chosen one that meant he wouldn't be traveling for nearly two hours facing backward, and dropped his backpack on the seat next to him, glad to be on his way.

He leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. What the hell was he doing going to Bristol? Now that he was away from Sid—Sid the ghost, for fuck sake—he was beginning to question his sanity. He was traveling... what? A hundred and twenty miles, or there about, to rescue the cat that belonged to the ghost in his flat. What the hell was wrong with him? He knew that this was crazy, and yet... here he was, doing it.

Alex scrubbed his hands over his face; he knew why he was doing it. He was doing it so that the next time he saw Sid, he wouldn't feel overwhelmed with sadness for the guy. He wanted to bring him some sort of comfort, and if he had to do something that questioned his very sanity to accomplish this, well sod it, he was going to do it. A small smile pulled at his lips as he thought about the conversation that had led to his little jaunt away from home.

"Baldrick?" Alex asked, fighting against a smile and, oddly, relieved that it was a cat they were talking about. "As in, 'I have a cunning plan' Baldrick?"

"I take it I'm in the presence of a Blackadder fan?"

"That you are." He nodded proudly.

"Then you'll understand when you see him how aptly named he is." Sid's expression sobered. That's if... if you'll go get him for me?"

Alex ran his hand over the back of his hair, unsure how to answer. "Ah...."

"Please, Alex?"

It was said softly, and so earnestly that it was obvious to Alex how much it cost Sid to ask. He was clearly embarrassed, at the end of his tether, and in need of something from home—something he loved.

"I know how ridiculous it sounds, and what a waste of your time it is, but... I was only supposed to be gone for one night. I've been gone three nights now and he'll be completely out of food."

"Don't you have a cat flap? Can't he hunt?" Alex asked, out of curiosity.

"I do, but... he can't really hunt."

"How come?"

Sid groaned. "It's a long story, and it doesn't really paint me in a good light."

"Now you have to tell me."

Sid sighed. "He only has three legs."

Alex had meant to ask why, but all that came out was "Aww."

Sid laughed. "And one ear. And no tail."

"What?" Alex laughed. "What the hell? Is he Rambo kitty or something?"

"No it's... it's my fault," Sid said guiltily. "I was driving home one day, and then suddenly this streak of black and white fur darted over the road. I slammed on the brakes but it was too late."

"Kitty down?"

"Oh yeah. I wrapped him up in my jacket and drove into town" He shook his head. "I must have looked crazy, sticking my head out of the window and yelling at pedestrians, asking them where the nearest vet was."

Alex covered his smile with his hand.

"I took him in and they said they'd have to amputate his leg, ear and tail. But seeing as he had no collar or chip, and that his recovery would be extensive, the 'kinder thing to do may be to put him down'." Sid looked at Alex and shook his head. "Well, I couldn't let that happen, seeing as it was my fault. I told them I'd be happy to pay the bill and that I'd take him home and look after him afterward."

Alex's brows drew together and he chuckled in amusement. "That's so sweet."

"Ugh, not you too." Sid's barely there smile was both selfdeprecating and a touch embarrassed. "Both the receptionist and vet looked at me like I was this big, sweet idiot."

Alex looked at him from head to toe. "I guess you do have that gentle giant thing going for you."

"I've heard that before, believe it or not. It always makes me feel like Lennie. You know, from Of Mice and Men?"

Alex laughed loudly. "No rabbits around here to tend."

"Yeah, thanks." They were quiet for a moment, and then he looked at Alex with a hopeful expression. "He's no trouble. He's ugly as hell, but an absolute sweetheart, I swear. His purpose in life is to eat, sleep, and cuddle." Alex looked around him. "This isn't a first-floor flat, he couldn't go outside here."

Sid shook his head. "He doesn't like to go outside; he gets run over when he goes outside."

Alex bit his lip, "Maybe... maybe I can go to Bristol.... But wouldn't a cattery be a better idea?" he asked gently. Alex had never had a pet, and as much as he felt for Sid, this was all getting a bit much. Going to Bristol on behalf of a ghost is one thing, but bringing his cat home was another.

Sid looked away from him in disappointment and his shoulders dropped slightly, but his tone was still respectfully thankful. "Yes, it probably would be. I appreciate you going Alex; it's very kind of you."

"I'm... I'm sorry, Sid. I just think that perhaps it'd be best for him if—"

Sid shook his head, "No, Alex, it's fine. It was an imposition to ask in the first place."

Well that made him feel like an absolute shit, but really, what could he do?

"Could you do something for me, though, when you take him in?"

Alex felt horrible, the man looked genuinely upset. "Of course."

"He has a blanket... well, it's actually an old T-shirt of mine, but he always sleeps on it; it's in his bed thing. And he has a little mouse; it's all ratty and jingles when you shake it." He gave an affectionate little shrug. "I guess he loves it because he's so crap at catching the real ones. If you can't find it, it'll probably be under the couch in the living room." He

pushed his glasses up along his nose, and cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. "And if you could... um...."

"What? It's okay...." Alex reassured gently.

"If you could just give him a little cuddle from me before you take him in? He's shy of new people, shy at first, at least, but friendly nonetheless." He shrugged "He gets lonely." Sid gave a half-hearted smile. "Kind of like his owner."

I am a fucking monster. "Perhaps... I don't have to take him to—" Alex began, feeling positively evil, but Sid held his hand up.

"No, Alex, it's alright, honestly. I'm incredibly grateful that you're going at all, and he'll be taken care of at a cattery. Thank you."

"I'll pay for him to stay a few weeks and leave a false number. When I don't return, I'm sure he'll go to a shelter or be adopted by a little old lady who lives in the country. Not a car in sight." Alex smiled gently.

"That's perfect, Alex. Thank you."

And here he was, ten minutes away from pulling into Bristol's Temple Meads train station. He sat forward so as to reach into his back pocket for the directions he'd written down. It seemed long-winded but it was actually only a twenty-minute walk to Southville centre, and from there it was a bus journey and a short walk to Sid's house. He also had contact numbers and directions to the closest cattery in the area.

Sid had told him to use the car that was sitting, unused, in his garage to take Baldrick to the cattery, and then to drive home to save himself the train fare. But Alex had quickly pointed out that when the authorities figured

out where it was Sid had lived (if they hadn't already) it would look very bad and suspicious for his car to be missing. Really, it wasn't a good idea for him to be going there at all, but the prospect of living with Sid, knowing that he'd left his cat alone at home to starve was not even a remote possibility. Instead, he'd done his research. He'd called the UCLH, where he worked, or more precisely, the morgue, to ask if they had had a Sid Jones, or any John Doe's that matched Sid's description within the last week, but no luck. He'd called every other hospital in London, but again, came up with nothing. He was at a loss as to how to help Sid, other than by what he was doing now. Still, he wouldn't use the phone; turn on a light, nothing. Nothing that would show up on an electricity bill, after the date Sid Jones had supposedly died.

The directions were easy enough to follow, and in no time at all, he found himself standing outside of Sid's house. It was damn nice. It had an old, Victorian vibe to it. It was detached, and a quick look around the back revealed a large garden and patio that was fenced off and surrounded by trees.

"Not bad, Sid."

Not wanting to be seen loitering around, he retrieved the spare key concealed beneath a small, hidden flowerpot. He grinned and shook his head—Andy would have had a fucking snit over that—and let himself in.

THE place was nice. All high ceilings and polished floors, the rooms were spacious and had artwork displayed on most

walls. He didn't feel it was his place to touch anything, but he had no choice but to check all the rooms; he had to find the damn cat.

It was well furnished but not overdone. There was space, but only one bedroom and a spare room, one bathroom and an en suite. It was a cozy but stylish house, and despite the fact that Alex had only ever seen Sid in his PJs, he could tell that the place suited him. It was sophisticated, but down to earth.

Whilst looking around, it occurred to him that something seemed... off. Not weird, just off. It was while admiring a painting of irises that it occurred to him what it was. There were no pictures of people. There was framed artwork and photography, but no pictures of friends or family. It made him inexplicably sad.

The sound of a small bell, a jingle that was only ever heard on the collar of a cat, caught his attention, and he strolled through to the kitchen. He heard a soft "mew" and smiled. Found you!

"Baldrick?" He'd laugh at the sheer absurdity of it all later. "Here, kitty." Had that ever worked? He heard another soft mew that sounded like a kitten's cry, and frowned as he bent to look under the kitchen table.

"Holy shit, you are ugly."

Under the table, crouched low on a chair and looking small and pathetic was the least cute cat he had ever seen. It was black, but its paws, underside and part of its upper lip were all white. As if the cat didn't have enough working against it, the section of white lip gave it the appearance of having a cleft palate. There was indeed only one ear, and though he couldn't see where a leg was missing, or the tail,

he could definitely see that this cat had been named appropriately. The poor thing was ugly, small, and looked utterly incapable of fending for itself.

He mewed again, and Alex stood up straight with a sigh. He walked around the table and slowly pulled back the chair that it was sitting on. Alex winced when he heard a thud, assuming that it was Baldrick's less than graceful attempt at fleeing, and couldn't help but snort in amusement as the little creature tried to make a dash that was more like an embarrassing hobble behind the kitchen door.

"Okay, maybe the three-legged thing is sort of sweet."

He slowly pulled back the kitchen door, and smiled as big eyes blinked up at him. "He should have called you 'Puss in Boots'."

He knelt down and picked him up, realizing that it was the right hind leg that was missing when he cupped the little bottom and held him against his chest. He couldn't help but smile affectionately when feeling the almost-unnoticeable nub where a tail should have been. He scratched gently behind the one ear Baldrick did have, and when the little guy looked up at him, right at him, and mewed that baby meow, the smile slid from his face.

"Oh my God. I love you."

He stroked under that little chin, and knew immediately, as Baldrick began to purr, that he had suddenly become the owner of the ugliest, and most adorable cat he'd ever seen.

"Oh, shit. I mean... shit."

He sat down with a sigh on the kitchen chair he'd pulled out, and only became further ensuared by the weird, ugly cuteness when Baldrick seemed happy to remain in his lap, just looking up at him.

"So...." He looked down and petted the small, scruffy head. "How'd you feel about London, Baldrick?" When met with a less cute and a more—what he was sure was—an annoyed meow, he suddenly remembered that this was one hungry kitty. He put him down on the kitchen floor, smiling when Baldrick remained in place, only crouching low to the floor as if ready to bolt at any moment, as Alex searched through the cupboards for cat food.

"Cat food, cat food... ah hah!"

As soon as he flapped the sachet and ripped off the top, his ankles were suddenly surrounded by loud purring kitty. He knelt down and squeezed the food out into one of the small bowls he assumed belonged to the cat. He smiled as Baldrick began to lap it up before he'd even completely emptied the foil. He picked up the second bowl and swilled it out under the tap before filling it and putting it back down next to the other. The cat didn't so much as pause or look up, but continued to eat its fill. He couldn't blame the poor thing.

Alex decided to go in search of a few things to take back whilst Baldrick ate. He found the T-shirt Sid had mentioned easily enough, and the ratty mouse was under the couch just as Sid said it would be. The bed would have to stay, and so would the litter tray; his hands would be full with the cat box as it was. So after stuffing the T-shirt and mouse in his backpack, he emptied the cabinet of all cat food and filled his pack to the brim.

He wondered for a moment if he could perhaps bring a few more items back for Sid, maybe his books, but then, how would he read them? Sid seemed to have a pretty eclectic collection of movies; including every series of *Red Dwarf* (if he had met Sid when the man was alive he swore he could of loved him like no other for his taste in movies alone) but they were all Blu-ray discs. Alex only had a standard DVD player. There was also what appeared to be a crystal board displayed in the living room that had the draughts pieces on one side, and chess on the other. Alex daren't touch it, knowing instinctively he'd damage it somehow within seconds.

No. He was sure the cat would be enough to please Sid for now, seeing as he hadn't planned on bringing him back at all. Alex rooted through a coat closet to find the cat box; it was exactly where Sid had said it would be. He smiled, knowing that he was going to make someone a very happy ghost.

As nice as Sid's home was, he really didn't want to stay there any longer then he had to. He'd considered staying the night and going back in the morning, but long day or not, it didn't feel right to be there when it could be looked at suspiciously if he was seen.

He set the spare key, his back pack, and the open cat box on the kitchen table, and tried to determine how to stuff the cat in there in a manner that would be the least traumatizing for the both of them. He looked down to where the cat had been, and then groaned at seeing that Baldrick was no longer there; only his empty food and water bowl remained. Should he take them too? Alex sighed and put them on the "to buy" list he was forming in his head, and set about finding the adorable little monster.

"Come on, Baldrick, if we leave now we can be back by tea time."

Nothing.

"I'll buy you treats?"

Again, nothing. For a second Alex worried that Baldrick had used the cat flap, and that he'd be sitting waiting for his return until tomorrow—something that struck him as beyond ridiculous—but then, thankfully, he heard the small bell on the cat's collar. He followed the sound toward the back door where he found Baldrick covering up his business in a litter tray.

"Fuck." That had not occurred to him. What if the little guy needed to make a call of nature whilst they were on the train? On the Tube? Wait... he couldn't take a cat on the Tube, could he? He thought again of Sid's offer to take his car but immediately dismissed it as too risky. It was times like these he wished he had a car again, but when living in London with the Tube on your doorstep, it didn't make much sense. He sighed. This was getting complicated.

"Well, if I'm going to take you, I'm going to have to do it now, aren't I?"

Reasoning that the cat was watered, fed, and had just relieved itself; there was no better time to get him in that box and to the train station. He'd figure out what to do next when he was back in London.

GETTING Baldrick in the box wasn't as difficult as he thought it might be. He'd had a rare brainwave and pulled Sid's T-shirt out of his pack to make a comfy looking bed

inside. When he'd picked the cat up and gently set him down in the box, he'd been pleased to see the little guy turn a few times, and then settle down to wash himself. Alex had found it strangely hilarious to watch him lick his paw and then clean his one remaining ear.

Public transport had been another matter entirely. He'd felt himself flush at the glances he'd received on the bus when Baldrick had protested at the motions of the large vehicle and the sounds of the engine. However, he'd been slightly more receptive to the train back to London, and had even nodded off to sleep at one point. Now, Alex stood at Paddington station, holding the cat box against his chest with a frightened cat inside, deliberating over his options.

He could walk, it was certainly the cheapest route, but that'd take an hour at least, and he was starting to flag after having spent most of the day traveling. The Tube was the most convenient. He'd need the Circle Line to Kings Cross, then a change to the Northern Line to Camden Town. From there it would be a meager five-minute walk. Alex frowned as he felt Baldric moved in the box, stretching a paw up through the little bars and crying pitifully. He supposed all the noise and new smells might be particularly frightening to a cat. He sighed. The Tube wasn't an option, then. It would be packed and hot, and the motions would be even worse than the bus had been. The bus, then? Alex dismissed that instantly, remembering how much his new cat had hated his previous trip on the bus.

All this fuss over a cat, Alex? But it wasn't just a cat; it was Sid's, and now his cat. And he really wanted Sid's sad expression to be replaced with a smile—why that was so important to him, he decided to not question.

That left the most expensive option then. Taxi. It wouldn't take more than ten minutes to get home, and what was another ten pounds or so added to what this trip had cost him thus far? With that thought in mind, he decided a detour to the nearest supermarket was in order. He knew as soon as he got home he'd want to get into his comfiest clothes and collapse on the couch; he would be in no mood to go back out and stock up cat-like supplies. And there was no way in hell he was having a cat in his flat without there being a litter tray close by.

To begin with he'd attempted to carry the cat box in one hand, and a shopping basket in the other, but this had quickly proven to be stupid when he'd accidently banged the cat box and startled his new pet. He soon discarded the basket in favor of a trolley, and placed Baldrick carefully in the end of it and made his way to the pet isle.

It had never been his intention to fill the trolley quite as much as he had, but who knew cats could have so many accessories? He'd stocked up on a little more food, a litter tray with accompanying litter, a cat comb, a scratching post, food bowls, a spare collar and various toys.

"Alright, no more," he told himself, but then paused when noticing a small selection of cat beds. He sighed and leaned down over the trolley to look into the cat box. "What color?"

With no answer forthcoming, Alex chose a small, blue bed with paw print motif. He made room in the trolley, moving aside some cereal and a folding draughts board made of card he'd spotted in the toy isle, and made his way to one of the tills.

"Okay, home time for both of us."

HE'D found a taxi almost immediately and was standing in front of his building not ten minutes later. Shuffling out of the lift with his bags, Baldrick, and his keys in hand, he made his way down the hall to his flat, and let himself in. He put the bags down, and when he looked up, Sid was standing before him. He jumped slightly, and covered his chest with his hand as he let out breathless chuckle.

"You surprised me."

"Ghost's prerogative, I guess."

Alex smiled to himself as Sid looked down at the bags, having apparently not noticed the cat box behind them, and shucked off his coat.

"Been doing a spot of shopping, I see."

"I had to get a few bits, yeah." He let out a deep breath as he hung his coat up, and then came back to stand in front of Sid, a happy anticipation curling in his stomach.

"So... how was your trip?" Sid asked carefully.

"Tiring," he answered as he stood on the heel of each shoe to take them off. "You have a nice house by the way."

"Thanks," Sid replied absently, clearly wanting to know about Baldrick, but somewhat reluctant to ask the question out right. "How'd it go?" he finally ventured.

Alex looked at him and smiled gently. "It went okay," he laughed softly, "you named him perfectly."

Sid smiled sadly and nodded.

"Kind of ugly, but strangely adorable...?" He stepped over the bags and then lifted the cat box, craning his neck

forward to look inside. "I think that describes this little guy down to a T."

He looked up to see Sid also stretching his neck forward to look into the box with an expression of obvious surprise that slowly changed into a look of pure delight. Alex knew the second he saw Sid smile that the entire journey had been worth it.

"You brought him here." Sid crouched in front of the box. "Hi, baby." He laughed, not the slightest bit self-conscious. He shook his head and stood, and reached out to touch Alex's cheek, surprising them both, before remembering that such a thing was not possible.

"Alex...." He shook his head. "This is inordinately kind."

Alex shrugged, feeling quite pleased. "There was no choice really, I held him once and that was it. I couldn't *not* bring him home."

"Thank you, Alex. I had no idea you...." He shook his head again and petered off as he searched for the right words.

"You had no idea what?"

"I think I might have liked you near enough straight away, but...." He bit his lip for a moment. "I had no idea you were such a good guy."

Alex wasn't sure how to reply, and he caught himself staring for a second, before a quiet meow made them both look down. "Oh Hell, let's get you out of there." He knelt down and placed the box on the carpet, and lifted the top. "Poor guy's been in there more than two hours."

He lifted Baldrick out, and cuddled him to his chest. "Perhaps I should have brought him home first before shopping."

"I don't think he can see me."

Alex looked up, and despite the fact that Sid seemed fine, merely curious, he felt suddenly, and dreadfully guilty for some reason. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sid. I didn't even think of that." Sid looked at him in surprise, and an emotion Alex couldn't quite discern flickered in those ghostly eyes.

Sid smiled affectionately, and Alex, unsure why, felt a nervous flutter in his stomach. "It's fine, Alex. I just hated that he was alone in my house; now he's safe here with you."

Unsure as to how to respond, Alex bent and set Baldrick down and watched as the cat hesitantly explored the living room. When Sid spoke next, Alex couldn't quite make himself face the ghost and kept his eyes on Baldrick.

"I'd probably kiss you right now, if it were possible," he said softy, but without a trace of uncertainty.

"I'd probably let you," Alex responded, just as quietly, shocking himself. He looked at Sid, and the ghost's gaze was so intent, so filled with longing, that Alex had to look away quickly and let out a deep breath. He bent and picked up the bags, taking them to the kitchen.

"I took the cat food from your kitchen cupboards, but went and bought some more anyway. I stuck to Whiskers...." He was looking through the bags. "Where is it?" he muttered to himself.

"What are you looking for?"

Alex nearly jumped, hearing the voice from just behind him. "I'm looking for... this." He pulled out the small litter tray and bag of litter.

"Seems you thought of everything."

"Yep, hope so anyway. There's no way I'm going back out now; I'm pooped."

He noticed as Sid peered into the bags, a somewhat sad smile touching the ghost's lips.

"You didn't have to do all this, Alex."

Alex was kneeling as he filled the litter tray, and shrugged. "I know that. I guess I couldn't help myself. I got his mouse from under your couch, and that T-shirt is in his carry box, but I couldn't carry anything else back with me." He stood and moved to look in the living room for where Baldrick was, and grinned when he found him sniffing his Croc shoes. He picked him up and then sat him next to the litter tray. He pointed at his little nose, and Baldrick sniffed the tip of his finger.

"Now you remember where that is, you hear me?"

Alex smirked in satisfaction when Baldrick climbed straight in to make use of it. He stood and looked at Sid as he wiped his hands down his jeans proudly. "Clever little guy."

Sid laughed. "He is, yes." Sid looked at the bags. "You must have spent quite a bit." There was a note of concern in his voice.

Alex shrugged. "I got him another bed, some toys, stuff like that." He shrugged. "It's okay, Sid, I just won't have any take out for a while. I should break even," he joked.

"So... you're honestly happy to keep him?"

Alex felt as if there was a question hiding within a question there somewhere, but for the life of him he didn't know what it was. He answered truthfully. "He can stay; I think I'll like having him around." He looked at Sid, shrugging one shoulder. "You too... maybe."

Alex was expecting Sid to show some sort of relief, perhaps some small reaction to his not being averse to Sid's company. Instead the ghost seemed thoughtful, as if contemplating how to ask an awkward question.

"And when I'm gone?" Sid asked carefully, not wanting to be ungrateful or insulting.

Alex frowned. "You can't leave."

"I don't know how this works, and neither do you. But if one day you wake up and I'm not here... unfinished business—poof—done kind of thing?"

"Oh." He had honestly not even considered that. "I'll look after your cat. I'll make him my cat."

And there was the relieved smile he'd been waiting to see. He looked away, taking what he'd bought and opening up a cupboard to put it away, unable to look behind him.

*Not even twenty-four hours.* 

"And I'd miss you, I think," he added quietly, not daring to turn around.

Sid said nothing, and to Alex, his not saying anything, said everything.

## **Chapter 4**

IT WAS a nice, warm day, though if Alex had been at work, he probably would have been unhappy about that. He wouldn't have been warm—he'd have been too hot in his uniform, and annoyed at being cooped up inside. As it was, he was inside, but it was a good day. It was a lovely day.

He was nearly at the end of his week off, and he hadn't done anything out of the ordinary, in fact, he hadn't left his flat. They'd fallen into a routine of sorts. Alex would wake up, leave his bedroom, and be greeted by Baldrick, hungry and circling his ankles. He'd look over at the couch and Sid would be there, ready with a smile and a "Good morning."

He'd feed the cat, feed himself, and join Sid on the couch. That was about as far as his day went. He had become an absolute lazy arse over the past few days, and didn't feel the slightest bit of guilt for it. It was both comfortable and comforting—his doing nothing with Sid. They'd talk or they'd be happy not to. He'd asked Sid about himself, about who he was, or had been. Sid hadn't wanted to say much on that, but seemed more than content to listen to Alex drone on about his own life. They'd spent another day watching all four series of *Blackadder*, back-to-back, throwing quotes at each other and laughing like a silly pair of sods.

Today, Alex sat in his kitchen, eating his favorite food for tea... appetizers. Honestly, take him to a restaurant, and he'd be happy to order nothing but starters—a mini selection of everything. Today, he had duck rolls, king prawn butterflies, prawn toast, and shrimp dumplings. Yum. He'd save as leftovers what he didn't eat, but he wished he could be sharing it with Sid.

Sid was staring at the board, only glancing up at Alex and grinning at him and his mini selection of food every now and then. With the kitchen window open, the sounds of Camden Town flittering in, the radio playing on the kitchen counter, and Baldrick curled up asleep with his ratty mouse, Alex decided that it was a fine way to spend his short break.

"That one, there." Sid pointed, and then smirked. "King me."

Alex swallowed his mouthful, and groused playfully. "You're going to beat me again."

"Yep."

Alex moved the piece and placed another on top. The board was cheap and made of a cardboard only slightly more sustainable than that of a cereal box, but when he'd mentioned to Sid what he'd picked up from the supermarket, you would have thought he'd invented the game, the way Sid had looked at him.

"Oh my God."

"What?" Alex looked up, licking sweet and sour dip from his thumb. "You okay?" He frowned at the odd look on the other man's face.

"Do you... it's alphabetical, isn't it?"

Alex stared and then groaned, rolling his eyes and blushing faintly. "It's not that weird."

"Not that weird," Sid repeated and then snorted.

"Shut up." Alex laughed self-consciously.

"I didn't notice at first, but then, it's like a pattern... a duck roll, a bite of king prawn butterfly, some prawn toast, and then a shrimp dumpling. You even leave the sweet and sour sauce until last. I can't believe I've only just cottoned on to it. You eat in alphabetical order."

"Look, I just...." He shrugged, playing it off as nothing at all. "My mum would get on my case when I was a kid about being more organized; I was a real spaced out kid, in my own little world kind of thing? I started doing this to annoy her, and it just... stuck—kind of an OCD thing."

Sid groaned and then reached under his glasses to rub his eyes. "You've no idea, have you?"

"I know it's a little odd...." Alex defended.

"No." Sid shook his head, giving a helpless shrug. "You are so cute."

Alex was thrown at how pleased that made him and was unable to hide his suddenly embarrassed smile as he looked back down at his plate and picked at the edge of a duck roll.

"I'm sorry," Sid spoke, pushing his glasses up, though he still had a look on his face that said he was more amused than anything. "I probably shouldn't have said that, I don't want to make things awkward."

Alex shrugged. "I like it when you do that," he said quietly.

"What?"

In answer he ran the tip of his finger along the bridge of his nose and smiled. That surprised a laugh out of Sid, and Alex glanced up to see him looking at him in such a tender way that he couldn't hold his gaze for more than a few moments.

"Guess it's my move, huh?" Alex said, looking back at the board.

The sound of Alex's mobile vibrating against the kitchen counter drew their attention, and Alex picked it up to look at the screen.

"If that's your friend Jackie, you should probably answer it."

Jackie had called and left a message on his answer machine yesterday. At the time he and Sid had been splitting their sides with laughter as Alex toyed with the cat, watching the adorable freak ungracefully chase after and pounce on his ratty mouse. He'd been too lazy to move so he'd let his machine pick it up. He'd been meaning to return the call, and he would, but it wasn't Jackie who was calling now. He set the phone back down.

"It's not Jackie."

"Oh?"

"Hmm." Alex didn't really want to explain who it was, but he could feel Sid's interest, though the man was too polite to come right out and ask. Alex sighed. "It's my ex."

He looked up to see an unreadable expression on Sid's face, and immediately wished that he hadn't said anything at all.

"Oh. So... you're not on speaking terms?"

"Why would you think that?" he asked as he moved a piece. "Your turn." Then he realized how stupid his question

was considering he'd just ignored Trevor's call. He looked at the phone and then grinned at Sid. Sid smiled at him.

"We're on speaking terms, it's just.... it's complicated."

"I see." Clearly he didn't.

Alex looked at Sid whilst the ghost seemingly studied the board, and tried to guess at what he was thinking. "He calls for sex," he admitted, and Sid looked up, blanching slightly.

"Oh," Sid practically croaked.

"He's kind of selfish and up his own arse, that's why I broke it off. But every now and then, when he's got nothing better to do, he calls me up. He comes over, fucks me and eats all my food, and then he leaves. I always feel pathetic and angry afterward, but...." He shrugged. "I do it to myself, I tell him he can come over, so it's my fault."

"Why do you let him do that?" Sid asked softly.

Alex stood and took the plate of left over appetizers to the counter, fishing some cellophane out of a drawer to cover it. He shrugged. "I get lonely." He looked at Sid, and gave a brief grin. "Not to mention horny."

"I know the feeling." Sid smiled, but otherwise looked uncomfortable. "You deserve better than that."

"Well it's not like the offers are pouring through."

Sid sighed. "Tell me, what does this ex of yours look like?"

"Trevor."

"What does Trevor look like, is he a good-looking guy?"

Alex wasn't sure, but Sid's tone may have had a slight clipped edge to it. "He's ah... yeah, he's kind of gorgeous."

"Do you always go for that type?"

"Why?" Alex asked, an edge to his own voice now creeping in.

"Do you?"

Alex let out a harsh sigh. "Yeah, I go for good-looking guys. I'm such a freak," he snapped sarcastically. "Why do you ask?"

"Maybe if you'd broaden your horizons a bit, you wouldn't feel so used."

Alex narrowed his eyes a fraction, feeling stung. "You're saying I should aim lower?"

"No, that's what I'm getting at. You should aim higher."

"What are you on about?" His nice day was steadily starting to go downhill.

"Do you ever go for anyone who's less than perfect? In appearance, I mean."

"What kind of question is that?" Alex crossed his arms, touching his elbows. He felt rather bewildered as to where this firmer side of Sid had come from. "I'm not *that* shallow."

"I know. I just think...." He trailed off and sighed. "I'm sorry; this is absolutely none of my business. You should just...." He sighed in frustration and looked away, back at the board. "You should be adored. That's all."

Alex stared at him for a few seconds, his brows drawing together sadly. "How do you do that?" he asked quietly.

Sid met his gaze; he seemed oddly resigned. "Do what?"

"You just... get to the meat of it, don't you? You go right down to the bone. You say something honest that might hurt, but then you make me feel like I'm amazing, or something. Did you make everyone you knew feel special?"

Sid swallowed. "I didn't know a lot of people."

"That's a tragedy, Sid."

"No, a tragedy is you selling yourself so short."

Neither of them said anything; they didn't know what to say. Alex looked the other man up and down; wishing things could be different, then suddenly let out a startled laugh.

"How did I not notice that before?" He laughed, amazed, and pointed at Sid's T-shirt.

Sid looked down, and then groaned, pulling his T-shirt out in front of him to look down at the design. "Oh, don't… I know it's bad." Despite the previous conversation, Sid managed to smile at the absurdity of it.

"I know it's faded, but to not see the Ghostbusters T-shirt my ghost is wearing...." Alex lost it and laughed in earnest.

Sid narrowed his eyes playfully and let his shoulders slump. "I wish like hell I hadn't died in my PJ's—you've no idea," he moaned.

"Aww, Sid. What am I going to do with you?" The compulsion to hug another person had never been so strong; it was frustrating as hell. But another glance at the T-shirt made him snort and brought on another bout of downright girly giggles.

Sid sighed, smiling at him. "The irony isn't lost on me, Alex, trust me."

His emasculating giggles turned into a belly laugh that had Sid laughing with him. He had never been able to laugh this much, or touch on such sensitive subjects as he did with this person. This person who, in a way, was already gone. Alex's laughter petered off, and he wished that he could somehow convey those feelings to Sid, but it was all too complicated, and the words wouldn't come.

They both looked down when hearing a jingle, and saw Baldrick circling Alex's ankles.

"You want your tea, too, huh?" Alex asked, picking him up, cuddling him to his chest.

"I bet he doesn't even remember me now," Sid said, though he seemed perfectly happy to just sit back and watch.

"I'm sure that's not true, is it?" he asked, rubbing under the cat's chin.

"Nope, I'm not even a memory. Look at him, he's bewitched."

"Well the feeling's mutual." Alex looked at Sid, and the ghost was looking right back at him.

"He's crazy about you," Sid said softly.

Alex swallowed, and put the cat down. "Better feed him," he said to himself.

He fed the cat, and when he stood again, it was undeniably a tad awkward between them. Alex glanced at the forgotten draughts board. "I think you've pretty much won that one."

"Yeah." Sid sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "So what was that, five to one?"

Alex grinned. "Ah, shut up, cocky bastard."

At the sound of Baldrick's bell, they both looked down and burst into sudden laughter as the cat toppled while attempting to scratch itself with its one hind leg.

"Oh God," Alex laughed. "I'm fucking evil for laughing at that."

"It's okay, I used to laugh at him all the time," Sid chuckled. "I swear he forgets that he's missing a leg."

"Oh, hey." Alex pulled his jeans up near the knees and crouched by the cat who appeared nonplussed at his little tumble. He picked up the tag that was supposed to be on the collar. "His tag thing came off."

"Oh yeah?" Sid looked over his shoulder at the tag. "Well, he's chipped, so I wouldn't worry too much."

Alex sat at the small round kitchen table. "What's this little tube?"

"That's just me being overly cautious. His tag is to make him look pretty." Sid grinned when Alex snorted. "He's chipped in case he ever loses his collar, and the tube has a bit of paper in it with his name and address on it."

Alex unscrewed the tiny tube and pulled out the rolled up piece of paper. He smiled softly, unable to help himself, and ran his finger slowly over the small, neat handwriting. "This is your handwriting."

Sid didn't say anything, and when Alex looked up he smiled faintly in apology. Sid didn't smile back; he looked heartsick.

"Sorry." Alex whispered, not entirely sure why he was apologizing. Perhaps it was simply for the unfortunate, unfair situation they were in.

Sid shook his head. "Don't be. Neither of us can do anything about it." Sid seemed to take a deep breath, and ran both hands over his hair and ponytail whilst taking a step back. "I wish I could go for a walk, or outside somewhere."

Alex stood. "Come on." Unthinkingly he held his hand out for Sid to take, and then winced, quickly pulling his hand back. "Shit, sorry."

Sid gave a small, humorless laugh. "Don't be, it's a sweet thought."

"Let's... let's go watch some TV—watch some Discovery channel. You can't go out, so we'll pretend we're in Africa, or something."

Sid smiled sadly. "Thank you."

THEY watched something about lions, and talked about all the places they'd like to see—Sid wanted to go on Safari; Alex wanted to go to New York. Sid expounded on his wonder when it came to the wild animals and the sights, but always with a hint of sadness. Because it was all purely rhetorical, Sid would never see any of it. They talked until Alex fell asleep. He awakened to the sound of Sid's voice, soft and affectionate. He opened his eyes and there Sid was, sitting close and smiling softly at him.

"Go to bed, Alex."

He sat up, smiled sheepishly, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "What time...?"

"Late. Go on, off to bed."

"Hmm." But he didn't move straight away, he sat there, blinking a little sleepily, and looking over at Sid. Where he should have felt awkward, he felt melancholy, because in the space between them, in the quiet, was where a goodnight kiss should have undoubtedly been.

"The news?" he asked quietly.

"Please."

He turned the station to the news, as he did every night so that Sid could sit there, waiting and listening loyally for any hint as to what might have happened to him. And he'd gone to bed, wishing that he could give Sid some answers. He wished for a lot of things.

THIS time it was the worried, almost urgent tone of Sid's voice that awoke Alex, he groaned groggily, reached to turn on the bedside lamp and lent up one elbow. "Sid? What's going on? What time is it?"

"Shh, listen."

Alex listened and jumped slightly when hearing muted shouting followed by a thud from the flat next door, as if something large had been pushed into a wall. "What's going on?" He sat upright and quickly rubbed his face, frowning.

"I heard screaming." Sid frowned. "It was muffled, but it was a woman screaming and crying. Do you know your neighbors?"

"It's not really that kind of neighborhood, honey—uh...." Alex stuttered to a surprised and self-conscious halt. Alex didn't use endearments, had certainly never called Sid by

anything other than his name. Looking at Sid, he felt himself begin to flush, but then Sid's expression hit him like a wall. He looked surprised, yes, but vulnerable too. This big man, this ghost—he looked as if he were caught between either a cautious smile, or bracing himself for disappointment. As if no one had ever been close enough to call him anything other than his given name.

"Um...." Alex was saved from having to think of anything to say by the loud thud that sounded as if it were coming from his own living room. "Shit." He pulled back the covers and hastily stood, padding into the living room with Sid close behind.

"How long has this been going on?" Alex asked as he pressed his ear to the wall.

"Only a few minutes."

"Do you think I should go over there?"

"No!"

Alex was surprised by Sid's adamant reply and turned to face him, shivering slightly as he belatedly realized he was in nothing but his boxers. Again. "You don't think it's safe?"

"I've no idea, and neither do you. Call the police, Alex."

Alex didn't hesitate and picked up the phone. He watched as Sid stood staring at the wall, as if he were itching to do something. Alex sat on the couch after hanging up. "They'll be here in a few minutes. Sit with me."

Sid sat, and they both glanced at the wall again when hearing what sounded like a loud slap and the cry of a woman. "Shit." Alex stood up. "How am I supposed to just sit here?"

"Alex," Sid said warningly, coming to stand between him and the wall. "They'll be here in a few minutes. It's not your place."

Alex ran his hands through his hair, looking at the wall again when hearing indistinguishable raised voices. He'd never really been the type to involve himself in any conflict that didn't involve him directly, he was the put-your-head-down-and-mind-your-own-business type, but it was different when it involved a woman—it always was. You didn't need to be some macho guy to feel that particular urge; it was a moral thing with most men, he thought. Perhaps it wasn't the most PC of instincts, but if someone smaller, helpless, or female was being threatened, it just went against the grain of any decent guy. He heard another slap and began to pace.

"Shit." He ran his fingers through his hair again. "Where the fuck are they?"

Sid cautiously followed him as if to block his exit, as if ready to catch him, as if such a thing were even possible. "Alex, the police will be here soon, just—"

Another startled cry came from next door, and Alex was moving without even realizing it. "I'm sorry, I gotta—" Alex turned to see Sid's anxious expression, his arm outstretched.

"Alex don't—"

Alex closed the door on him, cutting the ghost's words in half, and immediately went to his neighbor's door, banging once before letting himself in.

WELL, that went spectacularly.

Alex looked up sheepishly as he re-entered his flat, seeing Sid reappear in the same spot he had vanished the second he'd foolishly walked out the door. He winced when taking in Sid's startled, then very annoyed expression, and was almost relieved that the ghost immediately retreated to the bedroom when an officer quietly followed him in and closed the door behind him. They still had not tested whether anyone else could see Sid, but now was definitely not the time to find out.

He was acutely aware of the fact that Sid could hear everything they were saying, and felt apprehensive when the officer finally got up to leave. He was saying goodbye, and chewing over what to say to Sid—he felt as if he needed to apologize, but couldn't quite pinpoint why—as he closed the door. When the door was closed, he turned and nearly jumped out of his skin to find Sid standing not even a foot away from him, looking distinctly aggrieved.

"Sid...."

"You could have gotten yourself killed."

"I'm fine."

"Fine?" Sid grumbled and reached out to touch the purple bruise blooming under Alex's right eye, his hand hovering near the tender skin for a moment, before dropping back down to his side. He sighed. "That doesn't look fine, Alex."

Alex sighed and crossed his arms over his chest, shuffling his feet uncomfortably. "Don't pretend that you

wouldn't have done the exact same thing if it had been possible."

Sid opened his mouth to dispute him, then sighed and let his shoulders slump. "Alright, perhaps I would have, but I'm a damn sight bigger than you, Alex, and—"

"I don't care if you're bigger! I'm still a man, and if I hear some asshole beating up a woman, then I'm gonna do the man thing and beat the shit out of him!"

Sid raised an eyebrow and looked at his black eye pointedly.

"Alright, then I'm gonna do the man thing and get punched in the face until the cops arrive!" he amended.

Sid couldn't help the brief affectionate smile that touched his face as he sat back on the couch with a sigh. "Do you have any idea how frustrating that was?" he groaned.

"What?" Alex sat beside him.

Sid looked at him sadly. "I couldn't stop you. I could see you were going to do it no matter what I said, but I just wanted to grab you... keep you from getting hurt."

Alex shrugged. "I'm sorry. But you would have—"

"I would have done the same." Sid nodded, and looked at him. "But... still...."

Alex bit his lip. "Sorry."

Sid shrugged. "You're a brave guy. Shouldn't apologize for that." He tipped his chin at Alex's bruise. "Does that hurt?"

"What, this?" He grinned. "My big manly war wound?" Sid snorted.

"Yeah, it does. Makes me feel kind of butch, though."

"Says the guy wearing smiley faced boxers."

Alex looked down. "Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding."

"You look cute," Sid tried to reassure.

"I spoke to cops wearing my smiley pants?" Alex sighed, and smirked. "Could have been worse. I could have been wearing bunny slippers."

"You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"No. Probably not."

"How... ah... how's the woman?"

Alex sobered. "A bit of a mess. Hysterical and beaten up."

"Damn." Sid shook his head unhappily. "I hate people sometimes."

Alex wasn't sure how to respond to that. He'd found Sid to be a genuinely friendly, sweet guy thus far. It wasn't like him to sound so hateful, despite the situation.

"Was he an intruder or boyfriend or...."

"Boyfriend. Or hopefully now ex-boyfriend."

"I hate people who take advantage of those weaker than them. I hate it. I hope he gets what's coming to him."

Alex cleared his throat uncomfortably; Sid seemed to notice and looked at him.

"Sorry, Alex. I was... ah, just around that a lot when growing up."

"Oh," Alex said softly, feeling a compulsion to wrap the big guy up in his arms—a compulsion that was making itself more known each day.

"You've really never spoken to your neighbors?"

Alex shrugged. "Like I said, it's not that kind of neighborhood." Alex flushed slightly, recalling the endearment that had slipped past his lips the last time he'd said that.

"That's a shame."

Alex shrugged. "Maybe." A yawn caught him by surprise. "What time is it?" He turned and looked at the clock.

"Are they going to need to speak to you again? The police, I mean."

Alex shook his head. "No, I told them everything right then and there, so hopefully not. I don't really want to become any more involved, but if she needs me to press charges to help, I will. They know where I am if they need me, anyway."

"Then perhaps you should put some ice on that and head on back to bed."

"Good idea." Alex stood and stretched, walking over to his kitchen, and came back to the couch with a bag of frozen peas gingerly held against his bruise.

He winced and sighed as he readjusted the bag against his tender eye. The silence in the room seemed to alert him to something; he glanced at Sid, and caught him looking at him. Not looking, but *looking*. He became distinctly aware that he was still in his underwear and nothing else. Over the past few days he'd more or less ceased all self-consciousness around Sid, due perhaps mainly to how quickly he'd become comfortable around him. But now as he watched Sid's gaze rake over his thighs, his stomach, with a look that was

impossible to misunderstand, he thought that maybe it would be best if he still held on to a little bit of the reservation he'd had to begin with—that it might be the kinder thing to do.

He swallowed as Sid's gaze traveled up his chest. Sid's eyes suddenly met his, and darted away just as quickly. Alex could practically feel Sid closing in on himself. His hands knotting together in his lap as he stared resolutely forward at the TV Alex left on for him every night.

"Sorry," Sid whispered, and Alex thought his heart might break a little.

"It's okay, Sid," he said gently.

A humorless little laugh left Sid's lips, and he shook his head once. "You should be able to sit in your own flat without being perved on by some... some great big, dorky idiot...."

"Hey now." Alex frowned, dropping the bag of peas onto the coffee table and scooting closer on the couch. "You're not any of those things, don't be silly."

"Oh come on, Alex. I'm not blind."

Alex frowned. "What are you on about?"

"You're... you know." When Alex didn't reply, Sid shifted uncomfortably, shrugging one shoulder as he glanced at him sideways. "You're just all... you're beautiful."

Alex's brows drew together sadly. If anyone else had said that to him it would have sounded... corny? Coming from Sid, he was touched. More than touched.

"And I'm just... I'm this old pervert who can't stop looking at you."

"Sid, you're only a couple of years older than *me*," Alex said firmly. "And you're not a pervert! I guess I'm just so comfortable around you now that I don't think twice about swanning around in my underpants." He tried to smile, to inject a little humor, but it fell flat.

"You should be able to wear what you like. It's your home; you shouldn't be stuck with a big, stupid, ugly ghost—"

"Hey!" Alex raised his voice. "I don't want to hear you talk like that, do you hear me?"

Sid shook his head, and Alex stood as Sid did, dismayed to see that he looked alarmingly close to tears.

"I'm ah... I'm gonna go... I'll be in the fridge until you go to sleep, okay? I'll be in the fridge."

"Aw, Sid, honey," the endearment didn't even register with Alex that time, "you don't have to do that. Come on, come back here."

It was no good. He watched as Sid crouched low and disappeared into the fridge. Alex thought distantly that such a sight should scare the living *shit* out of him, but he found himself more concerned than anything. He followed, and stood in front of his fridge, oddly reluctant to open the door to the tiny bit of space and privacy Sid had allotted for himself.

"Sid, sweetie?" he said softly, and swallowed when Sid's answering voice held a wobbly note to it.

"I'm sorry, Alex," he laughed sadly. "This is quite embarrassing."

Alex sighed and sat cross-legged on the floor. "You don't have to be embarrassed," he said gently, straightening a Garfield magnet on the fridge door.

"I'm not usually so emotional."

"Sid," Alex said firmly. "You...." He sighed, gentling his tone. "You died. You died recently, and until now, you've made no emotional outburst whatsoever. Don't you think that perhaps it's all just built up and... and...." He trailed off, frustrated.

"Culminated into one big, teary, hissy fit?"

Alex let out a brief laugh, swamped with affection for his ghost, and laid his palm flat against the fridge door. "I wouldn't have said hissy fit."

"It has been quite a night, I suppose."

"You've had quite a disruptive week, Sid."

Alex heard a jingle down at his side, and pulled Baldrick into his lap. "Hey, did we wake you up?" He fussed the scruffy cat.

"Alex, I'm... I'm real sorry."

"It's okay, it's okay to look, Sid."

"No, I mean... I'm sorry for invading your home."

"Stop it." He set Baldric down. "Just stop saying sorry." He heard Sid take a deep, shuddering breath.

"I hate it, Alex." His voice was rough, unsteady. "I hate being dead."

"Sid." Alex whispered, a lump forming in his throat. "Don't."

"It isn't fair. I know that's childish to say, but it isn't bloody fair."

"I know," Alex managed, swallowing hard.

"I'd treat you so well, Alex. God, I'd make you my entire world."

Alex felt a tear trail down his cheek, and resolutely wiped it away, "Shh, it's alright, everything's going to be alright."

"How can it be alright? How can anything ever be alright when I can never tell you, never touch...?"

"It just will!" Alex snapped, his voice cracking. "Sorry," he said immediately, his voice gruff. He touched the door again, palm flat. "I'm sorry, but you just have to.... please have some sort of faith, Sid. You're too good for this to be your lot. You're too good. I can't believe that, I won't."

He heard Sid take a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"I ever tell you why I came to London, Alex? Did I tell you why?"

Alex sniffed and wiped quickly at his nose. "Yeah, some art exhibit?"

"That's right," Sid said softly, now the comforter. "Have you ever felt as if a song had been written, or a painting was painted, just for you...?"

# Chapter 5

AT SOME point he'd pulled the old shawl that had belonged to his grandmother from the back of the couch and one of the large cushions from a chair to curl up with on the floor. It hadn't occurred to him to ask Sid to come out of the fridge again; he didn't want him to stop talking. He'd come to love listening to that deep voice with its oddly pleasant accent.

Sid had wanted to see the Van Gogh exhibit at the National Gallery. It was showing in London for a few months, and Sid had planned on spending a single day and night in London on his rare day off to take in the sights, and to stand a matter of feet away from the paintings he'd admired for so long.

"There's this one painting, 'the Irises', it's usually kept in the J. Paul Getty Museum in California, but it was shipped along with various other Van Gogh pieces such as 'Starry Night', 'The Café Terrace', and—"

"'Starry night', that's the really pretty one, isn't it?" Alex flushed faintly a moment later, and laughed quietly. "Ah, I just sounded like a five year old, didn't I?"

Sid laughed. "No, it is pretty; it's beautiful. But my favorite is 'the Irises' by far."

"Wait, Van Gogh's the one who went mental and hacked off his ear, right?"

The smile was evident in Sid's voice, "That's him. He spent his later years in an asylum, and killed himself when he was only thirty-seven."

"So... one of those tortured artists, then."

"Evidence would indicate so, yes."

"Poor guy. At least he was famous."

"Only after his death."

"Rich, then?"

"Nope. His paintings are worth millions today, but when he was alive it was rumored he only ever sold one painting."

"Well... damn."

"Seems to me it's just how it goes. It's a nice thought, though, to leave a fingerprint. To leave your mark on the world and on so many people's lives when you're gone; kind of gives meaning to whatever the hell you've gone through in life."

Alex sighed softly and adjusted the pillow under his ear. "What?"

"Nothing," he said quietly. "Just... I like the way you say things. I like your voice."

There was no response forthcoming from the fridge, and Alex stifled a yawn. "Tell me about the Iris painting."

"It's my favorite. He was in an asylum when he painted it; he called it 'the lightning conductor of my illness', because as miserable as he was, he felt that in painting, he kept himself from going mad—or so he claimed.

"Anyway, the painting has three prominent colors, violet, red, and yellow. The flowers grew in the asylum's gardens in those groups of colors, and amidst them you have this one, single, white iris."

"Why is there only one?"

"Well, many critics or fans of the piece have different theories. Some thought it was a level of acceptance he found in the asylum, the white iris sandwiched between the two groups of colored irises? Others thought that the white iris represented Van Gogh himself, a single sane and misunderstood man amongst the insane."

"And what do you believe?"

"I think... I think he was just lonely."

Alex frowned, unsure as to whether he wanted to know the answer to his next question. "So are you a white iris?" he asked quietly.

"Maybe. Yes."

Alex swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Then so am I," he said resolutely. "We'll be two white irises in a sea of colored and otherwise insane irises." He toyed with a frayed edge of the shawl. "You can't be lonely if you're not alone."

And for the third time that night Alex was awoken by Sid, kneeling down beside him, calling his name.

"Hmm?"

"Alex, wake up."

Alex yawned and rolled onto his back to rub his hands over his face, remembering with a wince that he had a black eye. He made to sit up and became suddenly aware that he was not in bed.

"Ah crap, my neck." He groaned, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I didn't mean to let you sleep on the kitchen floor."

Alex glanced at Sid. "What?" he asked worriedly, seeing a rather spaced out, confused look on the ghost's face, something very unusual for Sid. "What is it?

"I wouldn't have just let you sleep there on the floor...."

Alex frowned and sat up, pulling the shawl up over his shoulders. Sid moved from his crouch and sat beside him, looking at nothing.

"Where did I go?"

Alex felt a sudden stab of fear. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Sid looked at him. "Alex, I wouldn't let you sleep on the floor," he repeated, his voice firm. "Where did I go?"

"I don't understand."

"It was like when you leave, except you didn't...." Sid ran his hands over his hair, taking a deep breath; he looked two seconds away from hyperventilating. "Oh God...."

"Sid, you don't know. You don't know what it means...."

"What if that's all there is? Nothing, there's nothing, I'm going to disappear...."

"Sid! Look at me." Alex kneeled up in front of him, and if he could have, he would have held Sid's face in his hands. "That is not all there is. And you're not going anywhere yet."

"You can't know that."

"Yes I do! And you know how I know? Because you're still here. You can't just... you're not bad reception for fuck's sake; you can't blink in and out of existence. You're either here, or you're not. And you're here, Sid. You're bloody well here."

Sid seemed to calm down slightly, but he was rubbing his left arm, and frowning as if trying to remember. "My arm aches. And there was a... it was really bright."

Alex felt bile rise in the back of his throat, his mouth suddenly dry. "What do you mean?" His voice had lost its assertiveness.

"I remember bright lights, in my eyes, like someone was shining a flashlight." He turned to Alex. "That's a good thing, right?"

Alex sat down on his rear with a defeated thump. He didn't know what to say, he didn't know how to feel.

"Alex...." Sid's voice was soft.

Alex shook his head, unaware he was doing so.

"No, you were right the first time, Alex; we don't know what it means."

"That's right." His voice sounded small, even to himself. "We don't know what it means." He looked at Sid, and thought for a moment that perhaps he was disappearing right there before him. He sniffed and blinked a few times, realizing that it was the stinging in his eyes that made the image of Sid swim before him. "No." He shook his head, feeling an irrational anger toward Sid. "No! You're not leaving!"

Sid flinched in surprise, a look of utter sadness and compassion flitting across his features. "Alex," he said softly. "You must know that I don't want to—that I'd never voluntarily—"

"No!" Alex practically shouted as he stood up, holding the shawl tightly around his shoulders and distantly aware that he was acting unfairly. "Just don't do that, okay? Don't you go and leave me alone! We're white irises, okay? The two of us... we're...." His voice cracked, and he smothered down what felt frighteningly close to a sob.

"Oh, sweetheart...." Sid lifted his hands to Alex's face, and then balled them into fists of frustration as he let them drop to his sides.

Alex knew Sid wanted to touch him, and Alex needed it, more than anything, but it wasn't possible. Keeping the edges of the shawl in his hands, he sighed and rubbed his face, having forgotten about his bruise again and muttering a quiet "ouch" when grazing over it. His shoulders slumped. He knew he was being childish. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, feeling exhausted.

Sid was shaking his head no. "You don't have to apologize to me."

"I think," Alex heaved a heavy sigh. "I think I'm gonna go grab a shower. Get dressed. Then... coffee. God, I need coffee. I'll be more normal with coffee." He sniffed softly and draped the shawl over the back of the couch.

"Are you alright?"

Alex snorted and shrugged. Any analyzing of feelings was beyond him at that moment. It was insane, it was all insane, and his heart was breaking over a dead accountant from Bristol.

Shower.

Caffeine.

"Just... just do something for me," he said, turning as he walked clumsily backward toward the bathroom. Sid stared at him.

"Don't go anywhere whilst I'm in the shower?"

Sid let out a surprised and sad laugh, shrugging helplessly.

"And stay the hell away from any bright lights."

Sid nodded obediently, but Alex knew he was being humored.

"You see a bright light, go in the opposite direction."

"I'll do my best."

Alex nodded. "I'm gonna...." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder, and Sid nodded as Alex turned, and closed the door behind him.

ALEX had only just stepped out of the shower when he heard the knock at his door. He quickly wrapped a towel around his waist, one hand holding it closed at the hip as the other ran through his sopping wet hair. He gave his head a quick shake, sending water droplets flying. He gave Sid a quick glance as he headed to the door and called ahead.

"Who is it?"

"It's the sexiest bastard in the world."

Alex smirked and gasped theatrically. "Colin Farrell?"

"Second sexiest bastard in the world."

Alex snorted and looked over at Sid. "You want to give it a go?" he asked quietly.

They'd yet to test the waters when it came to other visitors. Alex had it in his head that no one else would be able to see Sid, as it seemed Baldrick couldn't, but you never knew.

Sid stood and pushed his glasses up along his nose, straightening his T-shirt. Alex smiled, and the ghost nodded, looking nervous.

"You look fine," he said quietly to Sid.

"Hey, are you going to let me in or what?" Andy called.

Alex unbolted the door (damn straight he was keeping it locked after last night), and stood back to let Andy in. Andy strode past him without a glance.

"So you're still alive then, haven't been gobbled up by the monsters under your bed or the ghosts on your couch?" He was riffling through the inside pocket of his banged up leather jacket (Alex was pretty sure he'd never seen him wearing anything else) and Alex knew he was looking for a lighter and cigarette.

Andy plunked himself down on the couch without so much as a glance up. Both Sid and Alex looked at each other in question. Well, could he? But surely.... Sid was standing right there; it was hard to miss him, really, in all his six-foot plus glory and shoulders a mile wide. Not to mention the PJ's and disastrous choice in slippers. He looked at Sid and shrugged, it seemed they had their answer. Sid sat beside Andy and watched him with a bemused smile. Alex tightened the towel around his waist, and was walking past them toward the bedroom to throw on some clothes when Andy's exclamation made him jump.

"Holy fuck!"

Alex came to an abrupt halt, taking a step back as he quickly glanced between Sid and Andy, "What?" But Andy wasn't looking at Sid, he was looking at him.

"Your eye, where'd you get the shiner?" Andy quickly stashed his lighter back in his jacket and moved to stand in front of him, bending his knees slightly and craning his neck to get a good look.

Alex felt a laugh bubble up and his shoulders slump in... relief? Disappointment?

"Lemme see." Andy grasped his chin gently, and then yanked it to the side roughly. "Shit, who've you been pissing off?"

Alex smiled, pushing Andy's hand away, "I'm fine, doesn't even hurt that much," he lied.

Andy frowned. "Was this a gay thing?"

"What?" Alex frowned, not following his train of thought at all.

"Was it that twat at the pub that always calls you a fairy?"

"No! It was—wait, some guy at the pub calls me a fairy?"

"Don't you worry about it, mate." Andy was reaching into his jeans back pocket, fishing out his phone. "I'll get Deano and John Boy down here; we'll go sort it out. John Boy's one of them liberal blokes, thinks you're all brave and shit, so this'll piss him off." He gave a quick one shouldered shrug as he scrolled through his phone. "Deano just likes a good fight—"

"Andy!" Alex interrupted him with a laugh. "It wasn't anyone at the pub!"

"Oh."

Alex could swear he looked disappointed.

"So... What? You ran in to a wall or something?"

"Of course you would think that. If it wasn't some guy at the pub then I must have run into a wall, like a retarded cartoon."

"What happened then?"

Alex crossed his arms and shuffled uncomfortably. He shrugged as he traced the pattern of the carpet with his big toe. "My neighbor punched me."

Alex looked up and glared when hearing the sudden snort of laughter from Andy, and raised an eyebrow when seeing Sid quickly smothering a grin.

"I'm sorry, Alex, it's just the way you say things." Sid almost whispered. Why he was whispering, Alex had no idea.

"Why the hell did your neighbor punch you?" Andy laughed. "You steal his paper, or something?"

"No. I heard him arguing with and hitting his girlfriend." He puffed up his chest comically, "So I went over there and set him straight."

"You mean you went over there and got punched in the face." Andy winced. "I bet you were polite, weren't you?" He snorted. "Excuse me, but would you mind keeping it down?'."

"I'll have you know I burst in there—well I knocked once, out of habit—but yeah I burst in there, and distinctly remember yelling, 'Hey, motherfucker!'."

Andy laughed, and gave his shoulder a little shove of approval. "Well check you out, Rocky."

Alex shrugged modestly, but was unable to hide his proud grin. "I did call the police first, and they showed up pretty quickly and interrupted the pummeling I was getting, but... yes, I was awesome."

Andy ruffled his damp hair. "Well then, we should go celebrate you being a thug."

"I wouldn't say I was a thug-"

"Alex, shut up and get dressed." Andy laughed. "You're still off work, yeah?"

"I go back tomorrow." He nodded.

"Well, seeing as I haven't seen or heard from you since you so rudely interrupted my beauty sleep a week ago, I thought I'm come grab you for some lunch down at the pub with the lads."

Alex smiled. Andy was a good mate.

"And they'll get a good laugh out of that black eye." He grinned.

Alex glared; Andy was a dickhead.

"What do you say? Come on, I'll buy you a pint, killer."

Alex sighed and ran his fingers through his damp hair as he glanced at Sid.

"Go have a drink," Sid said quietly. "I promise I'll be here when you get back."

"Alright," he said to Andy, "give me a minute?"

"Yeah, go on." Andy sat himself back on the couch, reaching for his phone again.

Making sure Andy wasn't looking, he gave a discrete nod to Sid, who then stood and followed him into the bedroom. Alex closed the door behind them.

"So it's just me that can see you then," he whispered.

Sid shrugged. "Apparently."

Alex grabbed a pair of boxers out of a drawer and pulled them on under his towel. "That doesn't bother you?" Sid shrugged. "It wouldn't change my situation."

"I guess not." Alex opened his wardrobe and pulled a random T-shirt from a hanger.

"Alex...," Sid said softly.

"Hmm?" He was looking for a clean pair of socks.

"I'm sorry if I've kept you here."

"What do you mean?" Alex frowned as he sat on the end of his bed to pull them on.

"You haven't left your flat all week; you've spent every moment with me. I hope I haven't somehow guilted you into thinking that you have to spend every second with me."

Alex smiled softly. "Sid, I'm honestly just not that social. If I've been here with you all week, then that's where I've wanted to be, okay?"

Sid's answering smile was a touch uncertain but pleased, which was damn adorable. "Okay."

Alex smiled. "You're good company, Sid. Not to mention a damn efficient alarm system," he joked, and Sid laughed.

"Alright, have a good time."

They went back into the living room where Andy still sat texting on his phone. "Let me just grab my keys and wallet."

"kay" Andy mumbled distractedly.

"Who are you texting?" Alex called as he went through his jacket pockets, looking for his keys.

"I'm not, I'm playing Trace."

"Am I the only person in the world who doesn't have an iPhone?"

"Yep."

"I thought you might be texting some lucky lady."

"Nope. Playing Trace. It's good stuff."

Alex snorted as he stuffed his wallet into his back pocket. "Loser."

Andy grinned over at Alex and put the phone away in his jacket pocket. "I did have a date—recently too."

"Oh yeah, how'd it go?"

"It was shit."

Alex laughed and Andy grinned, watching as Alex lifted magazines and cushions in search of his keys. "She was this hostess person at the hotel I work at, all refined and posh. I guess she thought she'd try slumming it and agreed to go out with me." He groaned. "It was so boring. She didn't like the restaurant—we went to Antonio's, that cool little place in Covent Garden, with the really good cannelloni?"

"Oh yeah?" Alex nodded, it was a nice place, not expensive but kind of quaint. They did great starters.

"She complained about the waiter, her food was cold, they didn't have the wine she liked, blah, blah, blah...."

"So you had a real good time then."

"I ended the date, and then she got all prissy, saying I wasn't any sort of a gentleman for not seeing her home. Honestly, she was a grade A bitch; I don't care how pretty a woman is, I can't stand it when they're rude."

"Wait... not seeing her home? Andy! You didn't make her walk?"

"Of course not...." He fought a smirk. "I put her on the bus."

Alex shook his head in resigned disapproval, as Sid gave a sudden burst of shocked laughter; he had to concentrate so as to not look at him. "Oh my God, Andy." He shook his head. "You are shameless."

"Like I was going to pay for a taxi at ten p.m.! Do you know how much they cost at that time of night?"

Alex started chuckling as Sid's belly laughs continued. "Man, I'm glad I didn't introduce you to Jackie." He sucked in a breath as soon as he said it and slapped his palm to his forehead. "Shit! I meant to call her before I went back to work."

"Jackie? Oh! The smart, fat girl?"

"She is not fat!"

Andy snorted and stood up to help look for Alex's keys. "If you say so, mate."

"She's... okay she's a little curvy, but she isn't fat! And I'm bloody glad I never set you up." He shivered. "I'd never hear the end of it if you put her on a bus." He couldn't help it, he started laughing again.

Andy stood, grunting in agreement, and then snorted. "Seriously, Alex, where are your fucking keys?" He laughed.

"I don't bloody know, just keep looking. Here—pull up the couch cushions."

Sid hastily got up and Alex sent him a quick wink as they started pulling up the furniture cushions.

"You're a lost cause, Alex. I swear."

"I could do with a drink actually, especially after last night— Ah hah!" Alex stood straight and held up his keys triumphantly.

"Well the pint's are on me."

"Who are you, the Milky Bar kid?"

"Shut up."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind a Malibu and coke."

"You're having a fucking pint."

"Is my choice of drink too gay for you?"

"Malibu and coke is a pussy drink. Last I heard you were strictly anti-pussy."

Sid started laughing again. "Seriously, this guy is too funny," he said between chuckles as he cocked a thumb over at Andy.

Alex sent Sid a withering look as he straightened up the furniture. "Are they meeting us at the pub?"

"John Boy's already there, losing all his money on the fruit machines most likely. Deano'll come down when he finishes work."

"It's kind of nice that you were ready to get the lads together for a good old fashioned brawl on my behalf."

"Well, you may be our little gay mate, but you're still one of the boys."

"Little gay mate'?" Alex said indignantly. "You make me sound like a mascot!"

Andy shrugged, a teasing grin tugging at his lips. "That's as good a description as any, I guess."

"Oh you're gonna get it!" Alex lunged at Andy's middle, trying to tackle him. Andy easily caught hold of him, and the two of them began to wrestle, attempting to put each other in headlocks.

"Oh ho! One black eye, and he thinks he's Mike Tyson!" Andy laughed.

They tussled for a few seconds until Andy collapsed back on the couch, pushing Alex away. "Alright, alright," he panted. "Are we going out or what?"

Alex was running a hand over his hair in an attempt to flatten it into something presentable. "We could stay in, order food; call the other two over and watch a movie?" He glanced over at Sid who was watching them both with amusement. He didn't want to leave him.

"Oh, fuck that. Last time we did that you made us watch *Father of the Bride.*"

"It's a touching film!"

"It's bollocks!"

"You guys have no taste."

"No, we're just not as in touch with our sad loser side as you are. If you seriously expect three straight guys to sit still for a few hours to watch a movie, then it needs to have explosions, at least a glimpse of tits, terrorists...." He ticked them off on his fingers.

"I'm not watching Die Hard again."

"How about Die Hard 2? He dies harder."

"I'll watch Die Hard 2 if you watch Father of the Bride Part II."

Andy actually winced. "There's a sequel?" He suddenly burst into short laughter. "How can the same shit happen to the same guy twice?" he said in his best Bruce voice.

Alex snorted and shook his head. "I'll never understand your hetero man crush on Bruce Willis. Although he is hot...." He glanced at Sid and smothered a laugh when he saw the ghost nodding in agreement.

"John McClane speaks to the fucked-up action junky in us all." He glanced at Alex. "Well, apparently not *all* of us."

Alex stood up with a slap to Andy's knee. "Come on then, let's go."

Andy stood. "About time, I'm gasping for a—fuck!" He grabbed Alex by the arms and pulled him in front of him. "Rat!"

"What!" Alex practically squealed and tried to move behind Andy, but he was held fast by the arms. "Fucking let go!" He pulled free and stood up on the couch, where Andy joined him a millisecond later. "Where?"

"There!"

He looked to where he was pointing, and his shoulders sagged in relief. "You moron, that's my cat!"

Andy frowned and cautiously stepped off of the couch; he squinted and looked closer. "Are you sure?"

"Oh shut up." He looked over at Sid who was splitting a side laughing and rolled his eyes.

"Seriously... that's a cat? When did you get a cat? That's a cat?"

Alex went over and picked up Baldrick, who was sitting unobtrusively amongst Alex's shoes with his ratty mouse close by to keep him company. "I got him a week ago, I found him, he's uh... he was a stray." He looked at Sid who just shrugged back at him whilst continuing to giggle stupidly.

"Oh man, Alex. That's sad. Seriously, mate, go get yourself laid."

"What?" He gave Baldrick a quick kiss on his little head—he didn't care how stupid he looked, he loved his ugly cat—and put him down on his kitty bed in the corner. "Isn't that what single sad people do—get cats when they've given up on human companionship?"

"Fuck you!" He laughed, and glanced in Sid's direction. He snorted quietly, well at least Sid wasn't laughing at him anymore.

"Seriously, call up that tosspot you used to date and get laid."

"Alright, shut up now, let's go." He didn't want to talk about Trevor in front of Sid.

"What, you guys fall out again?"

"No, I'm just.... not interested in him anymore." He couldn't look at Sid, but he could feel him staring. "Come on, I want a pint."

He shuffled Andy toward the door, and glanced back over his shoulder. Sid was watching him with an utterly indefinable expression. He left before he could examine it further.

IT WAS just beginning to get dark by the time he got in. What had started as a quick pint and lunch at the pub had tuned into a celebration of his black eye, many pints, and an impromptu darts tournament between the four of them. He'd had a good time, but as the day had progressed, a little melancholy had wormed its way in. He wished Sid could have been there. He'd have liked to introduce him to his friends, to have them be Sid's friends. He was more or less positive they'd like him; he was a kind, decent bloke with a grounded personality that was so easy to like. He was sweet,

considerate, caring, and he was also, as Alex had steadily become more aware of, an attractive man.

Alex wondered at that. At first—if he were to be honest with himself—he wouldn't have rated Sid or have considered him in that way. At a first glance he was perhaps a plain, average-looking man who wouldn't draw much attention if it were not for his size. But now, Alex found himself alarmingly attracted to his quiet nature, his generous outlook, and the somewhat unsure-of-himself smile that twisted something in Alex's chest every time he saw it. He'd never found a lack of confidence attractive, still didn't to an extent, but with Sid, God, he just wanted to comfort him, kiss him, and tell him not to be silly. It wasn't a turn off; instead it tugged at his heart and made him wish he could make Sid see how much it was he actually had to offer... or used to.

Alex was also steadily beginning to appreciate the size of him. It was obvious now, after having lived with Sid for a short while, that the guy was fully aware, perhaps even selfconscious of his size. His shoulders had a tendency to hunch and he was naturally a slow moving—as if not wanting to startle-and quiet man. But for Alex, what had first been intimidating was now reassuring. It was comforting in a way Alex didn't quite understand, but it was there—a safe feeling when he was with Sid-regardless of whether they could touch or not. And if he allowed himself to delve into his baser desires, he'd have to admit to himself that Sid's size appealed to him sexually. In short, he liked to bottom; he liked it very much, and the thought of being held down by that weight, of having those big but gentle hands move him into position to be taken sent shivers down his spine. Actual shivers. Sid as a stranger was alright to look at. Sid as his

Sid, as the loveliest man he'd ever met, was fucking beautiful.

Alex hesitated outside his door, keys in hand. There was a problem here that he'd have to face sooner or later. Sid, a man who was utterly out of his reach, was quickly becoming not only a firm fixture in his life, but was making Alex want him in a way that was doing him no favors. He was making Alex want to say things that he should not say, and whether he liked it or not he was emotionally involved. That ship had pulled up anchor and sailed long ago. The urge to curl up next to him, to hug and kiss goodnight, was strong and felt as natural as breathing, but no matter how much he wanted those things, they were not, and would never be possible.

Over the past week Alex had abstained from taking himself in hand. He'd attempted to jerk off a few times, but it was far too awkward knowing that Sid was present somewhere in the flat and he'd quickly lose his nerve. It wasn't that he thought Sid would spy, or listen in; in fact Sid had made a point of keeping a polite distance from Alex when the ghost deemed it appropriate. This included an unspoken rule of his bedroom being a no-go area for Sid. But despite that, Alex still hadn't had the nerve to wring one out, and that was partly due to what he knew he'd be thinking about as he did so.

Alex rested his forehead against the door for a moment, his eyes closed. There was a way around this. Sid knew nothing when Alex left. Time didn't exist without his presence and it was no more than a split second between Alex leaving and returning again, even if he'd been absent for hours. So in theory, Alex could go anywhere, do anything,

and Sid wouldn't have to know about it. Andy had told him to get laid....

He pulled his head away from the door with a huff, fiddling with his keys. Even contemplating sneaking away for sex made him feel guilty, and in turn that made him bloody angry. There would never be anything between him and Sid—could never be anything, other than a very unique, very special friendship that was dear to his heart. He owed Sid nothing, but the thought of him seeing someone else didn't feel quite right to him, and the thought of Sid being aware of it, having to live with it, in a manner of speaking, filled him with sadness. He knew how Sid felt about him.

Alex shook his head, and pushed his key into the keyhole. "This is getting far too complicated," he muttered, and then let himself in.

He closed the door behind him, and turned to see Sid standing just where he'd left him. A warm smile touched the ghost's lips.

"Hey," Sid greeted quietly.

Alex knew right there and then that he'd always want to see that smile. This friendship between them was so much more than bizarre, but it was also the most unexpected, and the most wonderfully natural of connections he'd ever had with another person. It was an anchor to everything good he hadn't even realized he'd been missing.

It was right; and he would be a happy man if he could make Sid the one constant in his life, if he could be welcomed home by this person for always. No other would do now, and his heart was breaking; it had taken only a week for him to love a person he could never have.

"Sid," he sighed. "I missed you."

# Chapter 6

THEY were both quiet as Alex ate his cereal. He sat in the kitchen, eating his breakfast, but not tasting it, as he glanced over to where he could see Sid, or could see the back of his head, where he sat quietly in his spot on the couch, not saying a word. It had happened again, and neither of them knew how to act.

He'd woken up that morning to find that he was alone, save for Baldrick, with Sid nowhere in sight. He'd been startled by the panic that gripped him as he tore through the flat calling for Sid, and he'd sat there, stunned into silence for the sudden loss he felt. It was Sid's voice, so painfully distant, that made him snap his head up with a gasp.

"Alex?" He'd looked confused as he stood there, a deep frown on his brow and his right hand absently rubbing his left arm. "Did it happen again?"

And Alex hadn't been able to stop himself, he'd burst into frightened tears. He'd cried long and hard and he'd worried Sid something awful. The big ghost had hovered around him, trying to calm him, speaking softly and dying to touch him. Alex had stopped eventually, and taken himself off into the bathroom—for some reason locking the door behind him—and spent a good ten minutes washing his face whilst attempting to get himself under control. His reaction wasn't fair and he knew it; he'd chastised himself for losing it

so utterly and completely in front of Sid. Whatever he was feeling had to be a drop in the ocean to what Sid felt.

He'd apologized, and the ghost had shrugged helplessly, sitting himself on the sofa with a weary sigh that spoke of having the weight of the world on his shoulders. They were at a loss as to how to feel or what to say, both anxious and helpless.

"I'll be late for work if I don't get going soon," Alex said softly, though he didn't move.

"You should get going then."

Alex sighed, walked over to the couch, and sat at what had become his end. "Sid," he said softly.

The ghost sighed. "Can you blame me for being a little scared here?"

"Not one bit, no."

Sid finally glanced his way. "Scary for you, too, huh?"

"Well... yeah, I don't want you to go anywhere, but I know it's nothing compared to how you must.... my feelings don't matter here, Sid. I'm worried for you, not myself." Perhaps a small part of that was a fib.

"It'd be okay if you were worried for you, you know. In fact, I'd be flattered."

Alex gave a small, halfhearted smile. "Alright, maybe I'm worried for me too. I'm kind of attached."

"Glad it's not just me." He frowned, pushing his glasses up the length of his nose. "I wish Andy could have seen me, this would probably be so much easier for you if you could talk to someone about it."

"Maybe. Or he'd just have me sectioned."

"Not if I did my party trick and put my hand through wall."

"He'd have himself sectioned."

"Oh. Then it's just as well he didn't see me, I guess." He glanced at Alex almost hesitantly. "What would you have said then, if he'd seen me?"

Alex shrugged; he glanced at Sid and couldn't help but snort softly in amusement. "Well, considering your get up, I'd probably have told him you were my boyfriend or somebody I was seeing—at least until I got up the nerve to tell him the truth."

Alex saw the beginnings of a pleased smile tug at the corner of Sid's lips before the ghost stopped himself and cleared his throat.

"Do you honestly think he would have believed that?"

Alex frowned. "Yeah, why not?"

Sid shrugged, as if he didn't want to admit why. "Didn't you say the last guy you dated was gorgeous?"

"Yes...." Alex drawled, not entirely happy with where Sid was going.

Sid snorted. "Well, wouldn't I be a bit of a step down from the hunky Trevor?"

Alex narrowed his eyes playfully; this was clearly a touchy subject for Sid. "Not this again, Sid."

Sid shrugged in defense. "I'm just asking if it would have been believable. I mean, I'm not your type, am I?"

Alex wanted to lie, but knew it would sound patronizing if he did. He sighed. "First impressions... no, not really."

Sid didn't seem upset by this; he merely nodded his head and glanced away.

"But if I had gotten to know you, Sid, if we'd become friends, and I knew you alive like I know you now, then I can promise you there'd be a serious crush developing on my part."

This surprised a reluctant smile out of Sid. He frowned, but there was a small smile there. "Really?" He winced, and then laughed at himself. "God, I'm being needy, aren't I?" He shook his head. "Sorry."

"There's nothing wrong with fishing every now and then, Sid. And yeah...." He waited until Sid looked at him. "Really." Alex half groaned, half laughed. "Sid," he moaned. "You are so lovely." He laughed, shaking his head. "The fact that you can't see that just makes you oddly adorable."

"Oddly adorable," Sid repeated, as if it were the most roundabout compliment he'd ever received. "I'll try and take that as a compliment." He nodded, but Alex could tell he was begrudgingly pleased.

Alex bit his lip, glad that the atmosphere was changing to something more lighthearted. "And then you've got the whole size thing going on for you."

"You... like big guys?" Sid looked honestly perplexed. "It doesn't bother you? I mean, you don't mind guys a little, you know...." He cleared his throat. "Chunky?"

That surprised a genuine burst of laughter out of Alex. "Chunky?" He laughed, leaning forward and looking at Sid from head to toe. "Show me the chunky. I see no chunky."

"Well I'm pretty big, I mean... ah...." He trailed off uncomfortably.

"Aw, Sid, you're a big guy, yeah, but it's the height and the broad shoulders that do it. I know for a fact from the way you carry yourself that you don't see it, but...." He grinned.

"The height and size, combined with the well spoken, sweet, intellectual thing you've got going is actually kind of hot."

Sid cleared his throat, smothering a smile as he leaned back against the couch. "Okay then," he said with the smallest hint of pride; had it been anyone else, Alex would have found it to be a bit smug. With it being Sid, it just pushed all of his "this man is adorable" buttons.

"You know what I think of you," Sid said quietly, his gaze particularly warm.

Instead of answering, Alex tucked one of his legs beneath him and bent the other so that his elbow could rest on his knee. His hand curled closed by his mouth, partially hiding a grin that was mostly out of embarrassment. "You know what I like...?" he said quietly, and bit his lip as a faint flush crawled up his neck. "I like...." He snorted at himself and shook his head. "Argh, never mind."

"No, what?" Sid grinned. "I don't care if I'm blatantly fishing now. Tell me." He laughed.

"No, ignore me, I'm acting like a teenage girl. I should be ashamed, really."

Sid's eyes narrowed playfully. "You were going to ask if I'm all in proportion, weren't you?" He grinned.

Alex laughed at that, shaking his head. "No." But now that it was out there he had to physically force himself not to look at the general vicinity of Sid's groin. "Though *now* I am."

Sid laughed. "The tone of this conversation has drastically lowered in the last ten seconds."

"And whose fault is that?" He glanced down at Sid's lap and looked away quickly. "Dammit!" He laughed again.

Sid laughed, and cocked his head, looking at Alex curiously. Finally he smiled, and cleared his throat. "Alright, I'm by no means the bragging sort, but what I lacked in twenty-twenty vision I made up for elsewhere. I'm not giving your measurements."

Alex groaned. Embarrassed at where their conversation had taken them. "Well it's alright for some."

"Hey, it's not like you don't hold your own in that department."

"Oh, God, shut up, shut up." He winced good-naturedly, not wanting to be reminded of when Sid had seen him prancing around naked.

"My apologies." Sid laughed affectionately. "But back to our original PG13 conversation... you were saying you liked something."

Alex chuckled, cringing a little and squeezing his eyes shut for a second. Opening them, he saw Sid smiling at him. "It's gonna sound dumb now but... I like your arms." He shrugged.

Sid raised an eyebrow in surprise. "My arms," he repeatedly flatly.

"Yeah." Alex shrugged and gave a crooked smile. "You have nice forearms. I know that sounds weird but...." He hunched his shoulders and stroked his own upper arm. "Looks like it'd feel nice to have them 'round me," he admitted quietly.

Sid's smile dimmed, and he looked away. Alex knew why, and swallowed hard. "I'd best be going."

"Have a good day, Alex."

ALEX paid for his food and then quickly scanned the room for a particular redheaded nurse whom he hadn't seen yet that morning. His lip caught nervously between his teeth as he stood there like a lemon with his tray in his hands. He felt like the unpopular kid in a school canteen. Instead, he was the relatively forgettable nurse in a hospital's canteen, the one who had been a shitty friend recently. He scanned the room, and spotted her through the large glass doors that led to a patio of sorts. Jackie sat at one of the picnic tables, eating a jacket potato whilst flicking through what looked like a trashy magazine.

"Hi, Jackie."

She glanced up, and Alex knew immediately that he was in trouble.

"Hello, stranger."

Alex winced. "I know, I know, we haven't spoken in a little while, and I've been a crap friend—" He set his tray down and started to sit, straddling the bench, but Jackie's hand, held palm forward, stopped him awkwardly.

"I meant that literally, strange man whom I do not recognize."

Alex sat with a huff, giving her an exasperated look as he settled both feet under the table. It was a good thing he'd come prepared. "I brought a peace offering." He took the blueberry muffin from his tray and plonked it down on hers, going so far as to utilize his kicked puppy face.

"Oh, why, thank you. Empty calories. You shouldn't have."

Alex rolled his eyes; it seemed he'd need to go for broke. He pulled the small "Get well soon" teddy he'd purchased out of his pocket and held it in front of his pouting face, waving a small bandaged paw. He grinned when he saw her purse her lips in an attempt to not smile.

"That's what I'm worth? A two ninety-nine bear from the gift shop?"

"One fifty, actually, they're on sale."

"Oh, well, even better then."

Alex sighed and put the bear down on the table. "I'm sorry. I meant to call you back but I got distracted. I am shit and you are fabulous, please forgive me."

She narrowed her eyes for a moment, tilting her head as she poked at her baked potato with her plastic fork. "I suppose." She huffed dramatically. "But never make me feel anything less than the most important person in your life ever again. Okay?"

Alex nodded. "Deal."

"And tell me I look pretty today."

"You look fucking gorgeous."

"Now that just sounds insincere."

Alex pressed a hand to his chest in feigned offense, "Hey now, I would do you in a heartbeat... if I wasn't terrified of vaginas."

Jackie snorted and slapped his forearm. All was forgiven. He saw her glance at his bruised eye, and knew that she was dying to ask. He decided to put her out of her misery.

"I can see you checking out my war wound," he said with a hint of pride as he picked up his bread roll and tore off a small piece.

"You run into a wall or something?"

"Why does everyone automatically assume I ran into a wall?"

Jackie laughed, and Alex couldn't help but smile along begrudgingly. She really did have the prettiest laugh. "I'll have you know I got into a slight altercation with my neighbor."

"Your neighbor punched you?" she asked in obvious surprise. "Why? You're one of the politest people I know."

Alex shrugged one shoulder casually as he crossed his legs. "I heard him hitting his girlfriend, so I called the cops and then went over there to stop him. Man to man." He looked at Jackie, unable read her expression. "Fist to fist.... all... manly, and stuff."

"Alex, you idiot!"

Alex blinked in surprise. "What?" he asked snippily.

"You could have gotten yourself killed!"

"Don't be so dramatic. I can look after myself."

Jackie opened her mouth to say something, but stopped herself. She sighed and put down her fork. "I suppose that's pretty brave."

"I was fucking awesome, thank you very much."

She smiled, and then gestured for him to turn his head. "Let me see it," she ordered.

Alex did as he was told even as he complained. "It's fine. I am a nurse also, you know."

She touched the bruise gently. Seemingly satisfied with its healing, she tugged Alex's arm. "Okay, come here, I need to hug you."

Alex laughed softly as he was pulled into her arms. He smiled as her arms circled his shoulders, and he rubbed her back comfortingly. "You give the best hugs ever."

"That's because I'm made of sugar and spice and all things nice."

"Does that mean I'm made of frogs and snails and puppy dog tails?"

"That's what the straight boys are made of." She let him go, crossed her legs, and pulled her lunch back in front of her.

"And we bent ones...?" He raised an eyebrow and opened his prawn cocktail crisps.

She seemed to mull it over as she chewed, the beginnings of a grin tugging at the corners of her red painted lips. "I'm not sure, but I bet it'd include Gucci shoes and being fabulous." She chuckled.

Alex's eyes narrowed playfully. "No muffin for you." He snatched it back, making her laugh.

"Hey, gimme back my bribe."

"No."

"Give it or I'll slap you."

Alex scowled and placed the muffin between the two of them. "You would as well, wouldn't you?" He tore off a small piece and popped it in his mouth. "We can share, but only because my pretty face can't take any more of a battering. I bruise like a peach, a big gay peach."

Jackie smiled at him with genuine affection. "So, did you have a nice week off? Do anything interesting?"

A hysterical giggle threatened to burst out but he smothered it, only just. "Not really. Did some reading, watched some movies...."

"I thought you said you were distracted?" she said suspiciously.

"Uh, yeah well... I did some stuff...."

Jackie raised one delicately shaped eyebrow, and he panicked. "I went to Bristol." He offered, immediately regretting it.

"Bristol? Why would you go to Bristol? Who goes to Bristol on their time off?"

Alex shrugged one shoulder and shoved a piece of his roll into his mouth to buy time to think of something that wouldn't sound utterly stupid. "I was bored and just hopped on a train. I felt like being spontaneous."

"Yeah but... Bristol?"

"They have a good shopping center." Whether this was true or not, he had no idea.

"Really? I didn't know that. We should go sometime then."

"Yeah, sure." He munched on a crisp. "Oh! I got a cat!"

"What? That's.... well, that's spontaneous alright. One begs the question.... Why?"

"He was a stray, and all small and alone, so I adopted him. He has three legs, one ear and no tail."

Jackie's face contorted "Aww," she laughed. "That's adorable."

Alex smiled proudly. "He is. His name's Baldrick."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh my God, Alex, you and that show."

"Hey, *Blackadder* taught me half of my vocabulary, not to mention how to enunciate properly. You know, Rowan Atkinson actually spoke that way because he—"

"Yes, yes, to hide a stutter, you've told me that a million times already. I still can't believe you named a cat after a TV character."

"Wait until you see him; he's very aptly named."

She smiled. "I suppose he must be. You sound like a proud parent."

"I know. I love him. This cat is my child." He grinned as Jackie laughed. She was always so easy to amuse, and it was one of the many things he really liked about her. He pinched another small piece of muffin.

"So you went to Bristol," she counted off on her fingers, "read some books, watched some movies, and adopted a cat."

"Yes, busy week."

"That's still not a good enough reason to ignore my call."

"You've already forgiven me for that," he pointed out.

"So I did. Well there's no reason not to reiterate what it is I'm forgiving you for."

Alex squinted, going back to his roll. "That makes no sense. What you in fact mean is that you don't forgive me at all."

"You're eating my muffin! The muffin bought to win back my affection." She laughed.

Alex held up the small teddy. "Uh... hi?"

She snatched the teddy away from him. "What I meant is—Alex!" she said in pure exasperation. "Seriously, the food thing? Bread, crisp, muffin. Bread, crisp, muffin. It's weird!"

He pursed his lips and fiddled with his crisp packet. "I'll have you know some people find it cute."

"What people?" She narrowed her eyes.

"Just... some people." He shrugged. He glanced up when no reply was forthcoming; She looked distinctly suspicious.

"You've bloody well met someone, haven't you?" She grinned. "Why didn't you just say that to begin with? It's more believable than the Bristol-cat story."

"I did go to Bristol, and I do have a cat!" It was no good. He recognized the look in her eyes and knew that she wasn't going to let it go.

She smiled smugly and shook her head. "That may be, but you've met someone as well, you busy little bee. Who is it? Come on."

Alex felt alarmed; she was like a gossiping ninja, nothing got by her. He swallowed and tried again to go on the defense. "Look, I wish I'd have met someone but—"

"Then why are you blushing?"

"I... well you.... Shut up."

"Wait, it's not that tosspot Trevor again, is it?"

"What? God, no."

"Ah hah!" She clapped her hands excitedly. "But there is someone? What's his name? Give me a name, right now. Name. Name. Name!"

"Oh my God, you psycho! Si-Simon! His name's Simon!" He wasn't sure where "Simon" had come from, but he

couldn't tell her Sid's name. He didn't want to say it out loud to anyone else.

"Simon and Alex sitting in a tree, F U C K I—"

"That's not how the song goes."

"It is if it's going well. So," she enthused, shuffling closer along the bench. "Details, give me details."

Alex swallowed; he didn't have a clue how to proceed. "You know what? It's actually a little complicated at the minute."

Jackie's happy expression dropped. "Oh no. In the closet? Married? Tiny penis?"

He managed a small laugh, and shook his head no. "No, well... actually, maybe. I don't know. He... he may not be available, and I'm not crossing any lines, if you know what I mean." It wasn't exactly a falsehood, he told himself. Sid, in an unorthodox way was *not* available.

She touched his forearm and stroked gently. "Oh, I see. Well that's good, Alex." She nodded. "Are you giving him like... breathing room, or something, to figure it out?"

He felt like a shit for lying, but there was absolutely no way to make anyone else understand. "That's right, yeah."

She reached and gently wrapped one arm around his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. "You are such a good guy. And you know, this way—letting him figure it out for himself—well if it does work out, then there won't be any doubt on his part as to whether he did the right thing. And you're doing the decent thing by this guy's boyfriend, or girlfriend, whoever they are, in not jumping in head first when the lines are still so blurry."

"Yeah, that's me, the good guy." You're a dickhead, Alex.

"Why don't you tell me about him?"

"I'm not entirely sure what my own feelings are to be honest."

"No, not the complicated stuff. Tell me about the little things, the good things that you like."

Alex looked at her. He so desperately wanted to talk about Sid, even if he couldn't say his name out loud to anyone and was passing it off as something else completely. His feelings were eating him up, and he just needed to talk.

"He's kind of down to earth and quiet, he can be really funny, but painfully shy too." He laughed suddenly. "He's so polite and sweet; he has this intellectual gentle giant thing going on, it's so adorable." He bit his lip. "And he's sincere; it's like he has no shield from others and will just give you the truth or anything else you ask for. He'd never hurt a fly and he thinks the world of me."

"Wow," Jackie said quietly, frowning.

"What?"

Jackie shook her head slightly. "Sorry, it's just that anytime I've ever asked you about a guy you're seeing; it's always been 'he's so gorgeous, he's so fit' kind of thing. I've never heard you talk like that."

Alex thought about it, and could only agree that it was most likely true. He'd never really looked any further then the exterior of other guys. But then the guys he usually went for... well they'd never been the type he could spend days lounging around with, just talking and laughing. They'd never been the type he could connect with; they'd never been able to make him feel anything other than arousal. Sid... now Sid he felt attached to, as if there was an invisible tether

tied between them. He'd never really felt a genuine vulnerability around someone else as he did now, and over the past week he'd found the ability to adore, to need and desire, to love another person for all of their imperfection and idiosyncrasies.

Oh God.

"Alex? Alex sweetie, are you alright? I'm sorry; you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

*I love him. Oh God.* "I'm alright," he lied, his voice stronger than he felt. "It's just... it's not going to work out, Jackie," he said with absolute certainty.

"You don't know—" She immediately began to protest.

"No, Jackie. Trust me; it's never going to work out." And he realized that up until that point, the small part of him that perpetually rooted for happy endings had actually held out, believing that somehow, it would magically work out. But with what felt like a brick in his stomach, he was right there now, grounded and completely aware of the reality, of the sad reality. He felt Jackie stroking his arm again and met her worried gaze. Somehow he managed to dredge up a genuine, if not shaky, smile.

"It's alright." He nodded. "It really is. He's one of the few people where you're just honored to have met them. As long as he's safe and peaceful, then everything is alright, it really is."

She frowned, obviously unsure of what he meant, but not wanting to say the wrong thing. She nodded and hugged him again. Alex sniffed loudly and took a deep breath. He gave himself a brief shake and looked at Jackie.

"No more serious stuff. Come on, what have I missed in my week's absence?"

Jackie sighed and crossed her legs. "Nothing much, I don't think. Patients are still sick, still cranky. Mrs. Alderman on 3Z pulled out her IV again and had to be moved...."

Alex snorted. Same old, same old. In a way, he found it comforting being back at work. This was the every day, the normal. He could let his mind go blank for a little while as he settled back into a familiar routine. It was going home that would be difficult. He knew what it was he wished he could go home to. To be able to open the door and see Sid sitting on the couch, cat on his lap and flicking through the channels of the TV, only to have him look up, stand and hug Alex now that he was home. That was what he wanted. To see Sid sitting at the kitchen table, laptop open as he worked, a smile being his greeting as he's told to take a load off, that they'd order in and cuddle up on the couch. That was what he wanted. He knew he needed to get such thoughts out of his head; it would help no one to torture himself like that, and it was time for the bubble he'd been living in for the past week to burst.

"—is encouraging, he's showing strong signs of—Alex? You're not even listening, are you?" She laughed.

"Hmm? Oh!" He closed his eyes and shook his head briefly. "Shit, sorry, you were saying about your patients?"

Rather than getting annoyed as she usually might, Jackie gave an understanding, if not sympathetic smile. She looked at her fob watch. "Come on; sick people are a-waiting. Time to get back to reality."

"I'm not sure I'm ready," he said with a sigh.

# Chapter 7

"EXCUSE me!"

"Oh! I'm sorry. Here let me—" Alex knelt down to help pick up the shopping he had inadvertently knocked out of the little old lady's hands whilst stepping off the Tube.

"Ouch! What the hell?" He looked up from his crouched position just in time to see the elderly woman swing her handbag at his head again, and managed to block the hit. "I said I was sorry!"

"I had eggs in there!"

"Jesus, lady, I'll buy you new eggs." He stood and shied away from a blow to his arm. "Would you stop that already?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed in what Alex thought was with an overexaggerated show of helplessness as the doors to the train swung shut. "I've missed the train!"

"Well, there'll be another one in two minutes, they're pretty regular like that, so...." He shrugged apologetically.

This was apparently the wrong thing to say, the old woman swung her handbag at him again, her wrinkled face contorting with anger.

"You rotten little shit!"

Alex's mouth fell open like a character from a comic. He looked around at passersby to see if anyone else had heard

the five-foot nothing, one hundred pounds of elderly fury swear at him like a sailor.

"We're not exactly in a short supply of eggs, you know!"

"They were free range eggs! They're expensive!"

"No, they're not; they're like thirty pence more or something."

"Every penny counts!" was her prim reply.

Alex couldn't help but crack a smile at that. "My Nan used to say that."

"Oh! You...." She swung again with her handbag and Alex lurched away. "Just piss off!"

Alex was stunned. What a mean old woman. "You know manners don't cost *anything*!" he threw back pathetically as he turned and walked quickly—he refused to run—to the winding stairs that would lead him to fresh air. He ignored the small group of teenage boys laughing at him and pulled the earphones to his iPod out of his pocket. He chose a loud Foo Fighters track and dug his hands deep into his pockets as he put his head down and made his way home.

"SID, I'm home," he called. He was distantly aware that he shouldn't be calling out a greeting to his ghost when he stepped in, as if he were his husband or boyfriend, but it tickled him to do so. He dumped his backpack and shucked his jacket. "Sid?"

He looked up and around the living room, and his heart immediately dropped. "Not again. Sid, honey? You here?"

He sat himself on the couch with a sigh, and toed off his trainers. It had happened again two nights ago; he'd come home and it'd been a good hour before Sid had appeared, looking dazed and confused and rubbing his arm. He'd managed not to cry like a hysterical woman that time, but it'd still scared the shit out of him.

"He'll show up," he reassured himself. He went to the bedroom and changed into his sweats, made himself some tea and settled down on the couch to watch some TV whilst munching on a bowl of cereal. He was going through his planner to find the latest *Grey's Anatomy* episode when Sid's voice from the opposite end of the couch startled him.

"Alex?"

"Jesus fuck!" Rice Krispies went flying as Alex jumped. His lap was now damp with spilt milk. His hand clutched at his chest, and he smiled in relief as he looked over at Sid, a breathless little laugh escaping him. "Christ, you scared me."

"I'm sorry; I probably should have found a more subtle way of making my presence known by now."

"I should slap a bell on you or something. Are you alright?"

Sid pushed his glasses up the length of his nose and shrugged one shoulder. "A little dazed, there were lights again."

They looked at one another for a quiet moment until Alex glanced away, down at himself. "I should go change."

He stood to go change just as the phone began to ring; he glanced at it for a second before dismissing it. "Machine'll get it."

"Do you always screen your calls?" Sid called.

"No," Alex drawled, stripping off and dumping his clothes in the linen basket. He had to push down on the pile of clothes before the lid would shut; it seemed he'd have to do some washing pretty soon.

"Gah, I hate washing." He decided a pair of black boxer briefs and an old T-shirt would do, Sid had certainly seen him in a lot less.

"Who was it?" he asked as headed to the kitchen, he was still hungry.

"Andy. He was calling to make sure your shift was seven in the morning to three tomorrow, and said something about going out with the lads. Oh, and he called you a homo sissy boy, which was nice."

Alex laughed. "He's the only person who can say that without it being offensive."

"There was a certain affectionate tone to his voice." Sid nodded.

"He means well." He sat down on the sofa with a new bowl of cereal.

"How was work?"

"It was okay, didn't get puked on, which is always a plus."

"I'd have to agree with that."

"But I did get yelled at by a pensioner with a blue rinse."

"What?" Sid snorted quietly. "I suppose you have to deal with unfriendly patients all the time?"

"No, this was on the Tube." For some reason this made Sid bark with laughter, and Alex grinned around his mouthful of cereal. "I bumped into her and made her drop

her shopping and miss the train. She hit me with her handbag, we had a nice discussion about eggs, and then she called me a 'rotten shit' and told me to piss off."

Sid was shaking his head, chuckling quietly. "You just attract the weirdo's, don't you?"

Alex gave him a cocky side glance. "Well, I certainly can't seem to get rid of you."

Sid laughed loudly again, and Alex just watched, thinking how handsome he looked when he smiled like that. A knock drew his attention to the door, and Alex sighed as he set his bowl down on the coffee table and stood to answer it. He was still smiling back at Sid as he opened the door.

"Hello?" He turned and the smile dropped from his face. "Trevor."

"Hey, Alex. Long time."

Alex automatically stepped back as Trevor let himself into the flat. Alex closed the door and looked at Sid as Trevor threw himself onto the couch, his booted feet resting on the coffee table with a thunk. Sid stood and moved away from the couch, a look on his face of pure distaste.

"I called you a little while ago and you never got back to me." Trevor glanced up at Alex with a sly, knowing look as he leaned forward and shucked his jacket down his arms and threw it at the end of the couch, in Sid's spot. "So I thought I'm come and see how you were doing."

"I'm just fine, Trevor; kindly get your feet off my table."

Trevor chuckled and lowered his feet, his legs spreading as he slouched. The man knew exactly how good-looking he was, and it annoyed Alex to no end. He glanced in Sid's direction and felt a tug in his chest at the deeply unhappy

and uncomfortable look on his face. Trevor drew his attention back by patting the seat next to him.

"Take a load off with me, Alex. We should catch up."

"I don't agree. In fact I think you should go. I was actually... uh, I was in the middle of something, so...." He nodded.

Trevor snorted. "No you weren't." He looked around the room. "Your place never changes; I like that." He patted his stomach. "You know, I missed lunch today. You couldn't rustle up some grub, could you?" He toed his boots off, letting them fall haphazardly onto the floor, and grinned up at Alex.

"This guy really is a tactless prick," Sid muttered, his arms crossed defensively over his chest.

Alex didn't acknowledge Sid but couldn't agree more. Trevor was a good-looking guy, sure, but why the hell had he ever tried to make it work with him? "Trevor," he sighed heavily. "I'm not interested, alright? Just go, please."

"You're always interested." Trevor smirked. "That's what I like most about you; your reliability."

"Alright, dickhead, get out." Alex scooped up his boots, slung them out of his front door, and held it open for Trevor to make his exit. "Out."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Trevor frowned as he stood. "What, you're suddenly too good for me?"

"There's nothing sudden about it, now go."

Trevor smirked and shook his head. "Fine," he spoke as he headed to the door, "Time to say goodbye?"

Alex nodded nervously, feeling uneasy with Trevor hovering so close. "I think that's best."

"Alright," he sighed. "Goodbye, Alex."

Before Alex could get a word out, he found himself pressed firmly against the wall, his mouth taken in a hard and unfriendly kiss. He sucked in a breath and Trevor's tongue slid into his mouth, making his toes curl. This was something that Trevor had always been good at, and damn, it'd been a while since he'd been kissed. His hands balled into loose fists as they pressed halfheartedly against Trevor's chest, a groan slipped out as strong hands slid down to his backside. He gave in for a second, just a second, and kissed him back, but a strangled grunt brought him crashing back to reality. He pulled away from the kiss, and Trevor, thinking he was good as gold, dropped his head to nuzzle and kiss his neck. Alex saw only Sid's back and slumped shoulder's as he disappeared into Alex's bedroom.

"I think I like this hard-to-get act you got going," Trevor husked against his neck, his hands dipping into the back of Alex's shorts. "You laying down for me straight away was getting a little boring."

"Trevor, stop." He frowned and pushed hard against his chest, causing the man to stumble back a few steps. "Get the hell out. Now." Without looking back to see if Trevor had done as requested, he headed to his bedroom, closing the door behind him and moving a chair under the handle—it'd always worked in the movies.

"Sid, honey, it's alright, he's going."

Sid stood with his back to Alex, arms still crossed and his shoulders slumped as he shook his head unhappily. He let out a humorless laugh. "Oh God, don't call me 'honey'. Don't patronize me."

"I'm not," Alex urged unhappily as he moved to stand in front of Sid. "I gave him his marching orders."

They both looked at the bedroom door when the handle was tried and then a knock sounded. "Alex," Trevor drawled, and Alex's face twisted in annoyance. "This was cute to begin with, but it's starting to border on annoying."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Alex growled.

"Funny, it doesn't sound like he's taking you too seriously, but then if you'd kissed me like that I probably wouldn't either."

"He kissed me."

"Yeah, and you put up a real fight."

"This is ridiculous." Alex laughed helplessly, shaking his head as he shrugged.

"Oh that's right." A flash of hurt crossed Sid's features. "Go ahead and laugh at me. Laugh at the geek who has a crush on you."

"Sid," he practically groaned. Another knock came from the door, and with a growl of frustration he headed out of the room.

"Why don't I leave?" He headed past Alex toward the door. "And give you two some privacy?" he said sarcastically.

"Oh for the love of—" Alex bit out angrily. "It's not like we're a couple!"

Sid paused, and looked back at him with a hurt expression. "I know that." He tried to shrug it off, but looked desperately uncomfortable.

"Do you? Because here I am, sending home a sure thing even though it's been forever since I've gotten any action—"

"Uh... Alex?" A now hesitant voice called from behind the door, "Are you talking to me, or yourself?"

Alex continued as if Trevor wasn't there. "—even though I haven't had any action in months, for a guy who I can't even touch!" He ran his hands through his hair agitatedly. "I mean, is this my fault? Did I make you think this would somehow magically work out? Because it's not going to! Alright? It's not! You're dead, Sid! You're dead!"

Alex was breathing heavily, not even aware of the fact he'd raised his voice alarmingly at Sid. All the frustration and disappointment that came with the beginnings of a broken heart had just spilled out and taken aim at Sid, who looked like he'd been told to get lost by the one person he loved most.

"Fine," Sid croaked out. "I'll get out of your way." He turned to walk through the door, but paused, and turned back Alex. "I'll leave..." he bit out again, a bitter twist to his lips. "And you can go be someone's cheap *fuck*."

"Sid." Alex breathed in shock, the comment stinging him deeply. Unconsciously he took a step backward.

"Even though I've tried to tell you again and again that you are so much better than that." Sid held his hands up nonchalantly. "But whatever, you want to cheapen yourself like that, go ahead. What do I know; I'm just a dead guy."

"Sid," Alex urged, his voice breaking as he started after Sid, hastily moving the chair and whipping the door open and pushing past a weirded-out-looking Trevor. "Sid I'm sorry!"

Sid looked at him, his expression softening slightly at Alex's vulnerability.

"Uh, Alex? Have you cracked? You're starting to scare me a little."

Sid looked at Trevor and growled. He looked back at Alex, his sympathy gone. "I'll be in the fridge."

"Aw, Sid, no! Not the fridge!" He followed Sid but daren't open the fridge door. "I'm sorry."

"Um.... okay, I'd better get going," Trevor pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "I've got to... bye."

Alex sighed and knelt down next to the fridge, relieved when the door shut behind Trevor and not at all bothered by how undoubtedly mental the guy must now think he was. "He's gone," he said softly, waiting for a reply. None came.

"Sid, I am so sorry; I should never have raised my voice like that."

Still no response.

Alex swallowed, a lump forming in his throat. "When I said nothing would ever come of it?" He shook his head mutely. "That's not because... I only meant in all practicality, realistically—" He sighed. "I never said that was the way I wanted things. The feelings are real, alright? I know how you feel about me, because I feel the same." He shook his head. "But nothing will come of it," he said resolutely, "and we need to acknowledge that—to accept it."

When he was met with only silence, he rested his forehead against the door. "Please say something."

"Alex," was Sid's muted reply, just his name on a breath.

Alex opened the door to see a very scrunched up Sid, his arms wrapped around his knees, and his feet disappearing through the side of the fridge where he didn't fit.

"I am so sorry," Sid said meaningfully. "I am so, so sorry for what I said."

"It's alright."

"No it's not, and you're right. We both need to face this and stop pretending this is some domesticated oasis."

"I guess this was a long time coming, huh? Us snapping at each other?"

"You didn't deserve that. You are nobody's cheap fuck."

"Thank you," Alex whispered.

"I hate myself for saying that."

"You don't have to; really, I know you didn't mean it. I know you."

Sid smiled sadly. "You're probably the only person who does—who ever has."

Alex nodded, and rested his cheek against the side of the fridge door. "I wish it was real. I'd be so happy to make a life out of what we have."

Sid moaned, dropping his head to his crossed forearms resting on his knees.

"I'm sorry; I'm just making it harder by saying stuff like that."

"Yeah." Sid nodded. "But it means the world to me. You mean the world to me."

His vision swam and his eyes stung. "You love me, don't you?" Alex said thickly.

Sid took a breath, and whispered a quiet "yes."

Alex nodded, and quickly wiped his cheek as a tear escaped. "Me too."

"I almost wish you didn't."

"Too late." Alex sniffed and dashed the back of his hands over his eyes. His voice was stronger when he spoke. "Sid, it's cold as hell, get out of the fucking fridge."

Sid barked a sad, quiet laugh, and left the fridge when Alex moved back. Alex closed the door when Sid was out of the way, and turned to look at him. They both seemed at a loss as to what to say, but this time it wasn't awkward.

"I am suddenly tired as hell."

Sid nodded. "Why don't you head on off to bed, get an early night?"

"I think that's a good idea."

"You know where I'll be."

Alex rubbed his upper arm, feeling cold, and looked toward the bedroom. He didn't really want to be alone, and it felt wrong to leave Sid on the couch watching the news all night after that evening's events. There had always been an unwritten rule between them about his bedroom being a no go area. But he wasn't quite ready to say goodnight to Sid yet.

"Come lie down with me?"

Sid regarded him for a moment. "On your bed?"

Alex snorted quietly. "It's not like I have to worry about you taking advantage." He crossed his arms tight, almost hugging himself. "Please, just lie with me?" He licked his dry bottom lip. "Talk to me until I fall asleep?"

"Of course."

ALEX was woken by Sid's deep but soft voice. He'd fallen asleep whilst listening to Sid talk; they'd spoken about his childhood, and about all the different foster homes he'd been in. They'd shared the small things usually deemed either too foolish or intimate for daylight, such as how he used to be afraid of the dark when he was little, how many bones he'd broken in his life and how he'd broken them. He'd told Alex how, for the longest time, as a child he'd believed that when you died, you turned into a cloud, and that secretly he'd loved for that to be true. His voice had lulled Alex to sleep. He'd painted a picture of his earlier years, and Alex had fallen asleep, imagining the quiet, sweet, but lonely child Sid must have been.

"Alex, you need to wake up."

"Hmm? What's time?" he mumbled, blinking awake as he rolled over and looked at his alarm clock. It was nearly four a.m., a quick look out his bedroom window through the crack in his curtains showed that it was still dark, save for the faint glow from a half-moon.

"It's still early.... Alex?"

Alex rolled back over and smiled sleepily at Sid, he liked waking up like this. Maybe he could convince Sid to do this more often. "Is something wrong?"

His sleepy smile began to dim when he noticed the sad, worried, *pitying* emotions in those colorless eyes. Alex immediately began to sit up, his stomach plummeting as an inexplicable dread settled over him. "What, what's happening?"

"Lie back down with me," Sid requested, swallowing hard. He patted his hand close beside him, and Alex scooted as close as he could, lying back down to be eye level with him, but far from relaxed.

"Are you going again?" Alex whispered. Terrified of the answer, because he knew, he just knew that this was different, that something was happening.

The ghost nodded, his gaze averted. When he forced himself to meet Alex's worried eyes, he reached out a hand as if to somehow comfort him when Alex immediately began to shake his head no. A soft cry caught in Alex's throat.

"No." His voice broke, and his brows arched upward sadly as he shook his head. "Please don't go. Please...."

"Shh, it'll be alright, Alex," Sid tried to comfort.

"You'll come back."

"I don't think so."

"You could come back! You've always come back!" Alex cried, not even attempting to hide his tears.

"It's different, Alex; I don't feel like I'm even really here. I'm being pulled away."

"Then fight it, just stay with me, it'll just be the two of us, please—"

"It can't be like that, that's not how it's supposed to be." His own deep voice began to tremble. "Oh, please, don't cry, please...."

"I don't want you to go. You're my friend; you're more than my friend. Come on, I love you. Please, Sid...."

"It's not even a choice, Alex; this is the last time I'll be here. I'm not even afraid, this is what's supposed to happen, it just... feels right somehow."

"Leaving me feels right?" He tried to be angry, anything other than helpless and pleading.

"No, leaving this... whatever I am, feels right. Leaving this in between I've been stuck in feels right...." He reached to ghost his fingers along Alex's cheek, almost but never touching. "Loving you, feels right." He licked his lips. "I think that's why I'm going. Maybe you were right—maybe there was something I had to do. Maybe I had to love someone before I could go; maybe I needed to be loved by someone."

"I don't want you to go," Alex croaked. "Please stay with me. Come on, please."

"It sounds so trite." Sid shook his head against the pillow with a somewhat humorless laugh. "But I know part of me will always be with you. My life didn't get good until I died, Alex. The very best part of it has been here in this flat, with you."

"Then just stay, it can always be like this."

"You said so yourself, we can never be more than this. You need more, Alex, but it can't be with me. I think I just needed to realize that."

Alex clutched desperately at the duvet and pillow. "It isn't fair."

"No, it's not. But, Alex, look at me...." Alex opened his eyes that had closed tight to stave off the tears. "Alex, you know what I said before? When we were talking about Van Gogh, and his paintings?"

Alex nodded.

"That it was his way of leaving a fingerprint on the world?" He swallowed. "Well that's you. You're my

fingerprint, Alex Tanner. And I am so grateful to have known you—to have been given the chance to love you."

Alex choked back a sob. "Oh God."

"I'm not scared, Alex, it's alright."

"I am. I am scared."

"You're going to be fine, I promise. I don' know how I know that, but I do, alright? You are too good to not get everything you deserve."

"I wish I could touch you, just once," Alex whispered, his voice hoarse. "You're going away; I can barely see you." He blinked heavily, inexplicably tired when moments ago he'd been wide awake.

"Go to sleep, sweetheart. Please, go to sleep for me."

Alex frowned as he fought to keep his eyes open. "What's happening?" he mumbled, his eyelids too heavy to stay open.

"I'm going. And I love you. I love you forever."

Alex tried to speak, but all that came out was a mumble of the same promise, and then he was blissfully unaware.

ALEX woke slowly. As soon as he opened his eyes he knew something was different. He frowned and began to sit up, then, with a gasp, he knew with absolute certainty that he was alone in his flat. That there was no one else there, save for his cat. Sid was absolutely and irrevocably gone.

He was gone.

A strangled cry left Alex's throat, and he turned to press his face hard into the pillow to smother the loud noise trying

to make its way out. It wasn't quite a scream, it wasn't a groan. It was something guttural and terrible. It was loud and it hurt his throat. He lifted his head to take a breath and spittle clung like a spider web between his mouth and the damp pillow.

He cried long and hard, smothering the sound and pain as best he could. There were no words, just noise. His hands clutched the pillow, his knuckles turning white and the seam tearing. Sid was dead. He'd never honestly thought of Sid as dead until that point; he'd been able to speak to him, he'd been able to get to know him and care for him. Now Sid was no longer in the world and that was what made the gravelly, unpolished cry of grief erupt from him. The world, his world, had been robbed of this wonderful person. He'd now only be a part of the past, which made the present unbearable and the future a sick joke. Sid was dead.

Sid was dead.

ANDY was making coffee when he noticed the blinking red light on his answer machine. The odd shifts he worked as a security guard tended to make him crash hard when he got in. A herd of elephants wouldn't wake him up, let alone his telephone. He hit the play button, and nearly choked on his coffee when hearing Alex's voice, hoarse and frantic.

"Andy, Andy what do I do? He's gone. He's gone! I can't stand it what do I do?"

Andy immediately poured his coffee down the sink, feeling genuinely shaken up by the desperate note in Alex's voice. He picked up the phone and dialed Alex's number; he

cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder as he pulled on his jeans. He frowned when it went to answer machine.

"Alex, mate? You there? Come on, buddy, pick up if you're there." He spoke gently as he pulled a sweater out of a drawer. "Okay I'm coming over, yeah? And you can tell me what's going on. Don't go anywhere okay? I'm coming right over."

He hung up, and quickly checked what time Alex had left the message. He'd left it at six a.m. Four hours ago. With a worried curse, he quickly pulled on some shoes and grabbed his keys. He damn near ran to Alex's apartment. He'd never heard him that upset before, and as much as he teased Alex, he loved him with equal measure. He was a good guy and funny as hell. It tore him up to hear him sounding that frantic.

He was breathing a little heavily from legging it up the stairs to Alex's flat, and knocked on the door quickly. "Alex? It's Andy, let me in." He waited a second and then knocked again. "Come on, mate, whatever's going on we'll get it sorted, you'll see."

He frowned and then tried the door. He rolled his eyes when it opened up and immediately let himself in, calling out to Alex again. The living room and kitchen were empty. He quickly went into the bedroom and that, too, was empty.

He scratched the back of his head, and then glanced at the bathroom door. He felt bile rise in the back of his throat and with a curse he rushed to open the door, terrified at what he might find.

Nothing.

Alex wasn't there and everything seemed normal. Had he imagined the whole thing? Had he still been half asleep when listening to his message? No, he hadn't imagined the frantic sound of Alex's voice, no way is there any imagining that. He pulled his mobile out of his pocket and hit "call." He waited, glad that he couldn't hear the familiar Beyonce *Single Ladies* ring tone that he constantly ribbed Alex about, which hopefully meant Alex at least had his mobile on him.

He sighed in frustration and left a message on the voicemail to Alex's mobile and left the flat. He hated to leave it unlocked, but he didn't want to lock Alex out if he came back. He looked at his watch, it was nearly ten thirty. Perhaps he'd gone to work? He couldn't imagine that he had, not when he'd sounded that upset, but looking around the flat, he didn't know what else to do.

ALEX had studiously avoided any odd looks sent his way. He knew his eyes were bloodshot and his cheeks blotchy and puffy, but he didn't care. He had gotten on the Tube in Camden that morning and traveled the Underground, the swaying of the carriages, the low buzz of conversation, and the stale air not even registering as he sat in a daze. Nearly forty minutes later, he stood alone, his hands deep in his pockets and his jaw clenched as he fought back tears. He stood in the National Gallery, in front of Van Gogh's "The Irises." And he couldn't move.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Alex was pulled out of his reverie by the question, and glanced at the man standing beside him looking at the

painting. He must have been in his early forties; he wore a cable knit polar neck sweater, had short dark hair and wore thick-rimmed glasses. Alex swallowed hard, wondering if he'd ever be able to speak to anyone wearing glasses again without wanting to slap them off of their faces.

"It is, yeah." He spoke quietly.

"Are you an admirer of Van Gogh's work?"

"Um, not particularly." Alex looked back at the painting.

"Just this one, then?"

"My friend used to like this painting." His voice broke slightly, and damn it, his eyes were stinging again.

"You know, Van Gogh was actually in an asylum when he painted this piece. He called it 'the lightning conduct—"

"The lightning conductor of my illness'," Alex finished, a small, sad smile pulled at his lips. "I've heard of that before." He nodded.

The guy smiled at him. "Some critics say that the groups of flowers, in their three vibrant colors and single white iris represented Van Gogh's acceptance into the asylum, and that—"

"No." Alex shook his head. "He was lonely." He looked at the man. "He was just a lonely guy."

The man regarded him for a moment, before holding out his hand. "I'm Tom."

Alex took the outstretched hand out of politeness. "Alex," he replied.

"Alex." He smiled. "I hope I'm not being too forward, but would you perhaps like to get some coffee with me?"

Alex blinked in surprise, and slowly pulled his hand back. "I'm sorry, but I have to be going."

He saw a quick flash of disappointment, but then the older man smiled and nodded. "Sure."

Alex began to walk away and then paused. "It was nice to meet you, though, Tom."

He left the gallery.

"UH, EXCUSE me." Andy stood at the nursing station, feeling completely out of place. An older woman with a clipboard glanced at him.

"Sir, visiting hours are between two and eight. I'm afraid you can't be here right now."

"Oh no, I'm not visiting anyone. I'm just looking for my friend. He works here, Alex Tanner?"

As harried as she seemed she actually put down the clipboard and pulled off her glasses, letting them hang from the small chain around her neck. "You're a friend of Alex's?"

"Yeah, I'm Andy. Is he in? Can I speak to him?"

"No, I'm afraid he didn't come to work today, in fact, he didn't even call in."

"Shit."

The nurse raised an eyebrow. "I had assumed that perhaps he was a little under the weather and had over slept." She tilted her head, "Is he not at home?"

"No, I mean... um...." He really hadn't meant to get Alex in trouble.

"I see," her lips pursed.

"Hey now." He pointed one finger at her, but awkwardly dropped it a second later under her withering look. "I got a voicemail from him this morning and he sounded devastated about something, he was in goddamn tears. I can promise you he's not pulling a sicky, there's something actually wrong."

He'd expected her to get into a huff but instead her expression became worried. "Oh, the poor lad, and you haven't heard from him since?"

Andy shook his head.

"Wait one second."

She walked around the station desk and picked up the phone. Andy watched, mystified as she dialed a series of numbers, and hung up again without saying a word.

"I've just beeped nurse Cousins. They're good friends, perhaps she might know what's happened."

"Oh, that's great, thank you!"

"Not a problem, in fact here she is now."

Andy couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the curvy redhead that approached the front desk. She glanced at Andy and then back at the other nurse. She had light blue eyes, a rather open, friendly face... and fantastically large breasts.

"Hi, you paged me?"

"Yes. Jackie, this gentleman here is a friend of Alex's; he has some concerns as to where he might be."

"Jackie?" Andy practically guffawed. "You're Jackie?"

Jackie frowned. "Yes, what's this about Alex? I texted him earlier when he didn't come in, but he hasn't replied."

"Seriously, you're the Jackie he wanted to set me up with?"

Her frown deepened. "What are you on about?"

Even that cute frown is turning my crank. Andy shook his head minutely. "Uh, it doesn't matter. Listen, I got a voicemail from him this morning—"

"Oh!" She stepped forward and unconsciously touched his forearm.

He couldn't help but look down at where her cool, smooth hand touched him, and glanced up again into those rather alarmingly pretty blue eyes.

"Is he alright? Is he ill? He's quite prone to every bug going around, and he does work in a hospital so—"

"He's not ill, he's just upset. He was saying something about someone being gone, and that he didn't know what to do?"

Her shoulders slumped. "Oh no."

"Was he seeing somebody then? He didn't mention anything to me, and usually he can't wait to tell me shit like that, despite how much I beg him not to."

She nodded her head sadly. "He wouldn't really go in to any details—" She gave him a small smile, "And I *do* like shit like that. But he did mention someone called Simon, and that he may be... I don't know, either closeted, married, or already in a relationship."

"Aw, Alex," Andy muttered sympathetically.

"But he seemed to have come to terms with it, you know? He said he knew it wasn't going to work out, and that he wasn't going to cross any lines." She gave him a sad shrug of one shoulder, an action Andy found rather

endearing. "I was actually very proud of him, when he told me that."

"So... this guy, Simon. You know him? Know what he looks like? Where he lives? Because I kind of wanna go make him cry like a little girl."

She smiled at him. "Okay, now I know who you are." She nodded. "Alex talks about you quite a bit. Affectionate yet insulting? Fiercely loyal?"

He shrugged modestly. "Sounds like me."

"And he's not at home? Didn't tell you where he was going?"

He shook his head. "No. I went to his place, all looked normal, but he wasn't there. I've left messages on both voicemails."

She sighed unhappily. "Then we'll just have to wait until he calls back."

"I don't know." He frowned in concern. "He sounded really upset; I'm kind of worried."

She stroked his arm. "He's a big boy. Perhaps he just needed to get some fresh air. He'll call one of us when he's ready." She nodded.

"I just hope he isn't playing chicken with the trains at the Tube station."

"Don't say that." She shook her head. "No matter how upset he is, he'd never do anything like that."

Andy nodded. "Why don't we swap numbers?" She raised an eyebrow in response, and when her hand fell away from his arm, he quickly hurried on. "You know if he calls you, you can let me know he's okay, or vice versa. I can call you...." He petered off.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, but her lips pressed together in an attempt to not smile. "Alright. Let me grab my mobile and I'll meet you outside to swap numbers." She pointed to a sign over his shoulder that banned the usage of mobiles in the hospital.

"Yeah, sure, I'll be at the entrance."

He waited only a few minutes and then she was there, walking toward him with a friendly smile. She was turning her phone on, and he smirked to see it was the same iPhone he had—further reiterating that Alex was indeed the only person left still using a brick for a phone.

"Make sure you tell him to call me if he does contact you first."

"I will." He nodded.

"And tell him that I love him."

He smiled. "I will."

"And that I'm going to kill him for worrying me."

He laughed softly. "You'll have to get in line, but yeah, I will. Okay, go ahead."

She reeled off her number and he put it in his phone, reading it back to her to make sure he had it right. He gave her his, and then there came an awkward moment of saying goodbye.

"So, um. I'll call you, when I hear from Alex."

She nodded. "Thanks."

"Or... maybe I'll just call you."

She smothered another smile, looked him up and down, and shrugged. "That might be alright."

Uncaring as how simple it may have made him look he smiled brightly, causing her to laugh softly and to glance away almost coyly—he got the impression that "coy" was definitely something this woman wasn't. He liked that. He held his hand out, and she took it to shake. Distantly he was aware he should feel guilty that he was so delighted with meeting Alex's friend, when Alex himself was missing in action... but, goddamn.

"Well, I'll see you around." He looked down at their joined hands, and spoke without thinking. "God, you have nice hands." He looked up at her surprised bark of laughter, and grinned. "And that sounded creepy. I'm going to go now before you delete my number."

"It was nice meeting you," she said, laughing softly. "It's a shame it couldn't be under better circumstances, but...." She shrugged, a worried frown marring her brow.

"Hey, like you said, he's probably out getting some fresh air. He'll call."

She nodded, seemingly reassured. "Yeah, yeah he will. I'll talk to you soon."

He nodded, and then he watched her walk away. Why the hell hadn't he let Alex set them up?

Alex....

He frowned, and left the hospital entrance. He wasn't due into work until later that night. There was plenty of time for Alex to call.

ALEX let out an exhausted sigh as he entered his flat. Stupidly, he'd stood outside for a small while, hesitant to go

in and not see Sid. But he had to face it; he had to get over it. He dropped his keys on the coffee table, biting back tears at how silent his surroundings were. It felt like a dream, like it had been nothing more than his imagination, but one look at the cat curled up asleep amongst his shoes confirmed for him that it hadn't been. He'd had a chance to know an extraordinarily wonderful and beautiful person; and for that he was grateful. He just hoped that sometime soon, his gratitude would be enough for him, and the almighty feeling of loss would at some point let him breathe again.

"Hey, you," he said quietly, sniffing softly as he picked up the sleepy cat from amongst his shoes, and held him to his chest. "Sorry to wake you, gorgeous." He smiled when a soft purring was his response as he sat on the couch. He tickled under the cat's chin, smiling when Baldrick stretched his neck and closed his eyes in contentment. The bell on his collar jingled, and Alex's fingers touched the small tube that hung next to it. Carefully, he untwisted the end of the tube, and took out the small slip of paper inside. He bit his lip as he stroked along the neat handwriting, and then carefully rolled it up and put it back.

"He belonged to us. He'll always belong to us." He kissed the top of Baldrick's head, and then set him down on the cushion next to him when feeling his phone vibrate in his back pocket.

Looking at the screen, he could see Andy's number flashing, and with a sense of guilt for having left what must have been a hysterical message for his friend, and then ignoring him all morning, he answered. "SO WHEN you said 'he's gone, I don't know what to do'... you meant your *cat*?" Andy asked in disbelief.

"Yeah," Alex lied, sounding sheepish. "He got out when I left the front door open. I tried to find him in the building but I couldn't, so I left you that stupid message in a panic and then went out to look for him. Took me a while but I found him. I'm so sorry to have worried you."

"Worried me? Alex, I've sprouted gray hairs because of you!"

"You can pull off gray," Alex said affectionately, "like George Clooney."

"Stop trying to flatter me. You're really okay?"

"I'm fine."

"So... it didn't have anything to do with this Simon guy?" he asked hesitantly.

Alex frowned, and was about to ask who Simon was when he recalled his conversation with Jackie the other day. "You spoke to Jackie?" he asked in obvious surprise.

"You scared the shit out of me! I went to your place but you weren't there, and you wouldn't answer your messages so... I went to the hospital to see if maybe you'd gone in."

Alex smiled despite himself; Andy could be such a good guy sometimes.

"I may have dropped you in it with the bossy old nurse with the clipboard, though."

Alex sighed, Andy could be such a prat sometimes, but this was undoubtedly his own fault. He had played hooky of his own accord and would most likely get a dressing down if not a warning when he got back to work tomorrow.

"And uh, yeah, I met Jackie." The smile was clear in his voice, and Alex smirked knowingly. "She seems... nice."

"Nice, huh?"

"She's fucking gorgeous, Alex. Why didn't you ever set us up?"

"Uh, hello? The smart fat girl?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Clearly he did. Alex rolled his eyes. "She, uh, mentioned this Simon guy?"

Alex sighed. "Oh, that. Well that's just... it's over now. To be honest it never had the opportunity to start." He shrugged unconsciously. "Nothing to say really, it didn't work out."

"You didn't mention him to me...."

"It was complicated at the time. Jackie kind of dragged it out of me, but it's done with. It's done."

"Okay, well...." Andy cleared his throat. "You know you can always talk to me about that shit—stuff. That stuff."

Alex snorted. "Thanks, man."

"Are you going to be alright? Do you want me to come over?"

"Nah, I'm fine. And you've got work in a few hours, so...."

"I can, if you want me to. You know... if you need a hug, or whatever," he teased.

Alex's laugh was genuine that time. "I thought we'd talked about the spontaneous hugging thing?"

"Exceptions can be made when you've had a shitty day."

"You're a prince, Andy, I mean it. But I'm alright. Thanks for calling me back. And for trying to find me at the hospital."

"That's cool. Um... you know I can give Jackie a call to let her know you're okay and stuff, if you like—if you're tired, or what have you."

"Nah, I should call her back myself."

"Aw come on, give me an excuse to call her, be a mate!"

Alex laughed, surprised. "You have her number?"

"We swapped numbers, yeah, just in case one of us heard from you."

Alex swallowed around the sudden lump that had formed in his throat. He'd spent the day feeling lost, and most of all, alone. He wasn't, though, clearly.

"Just give me two minutes to tell her I'm fine, and then I'll hang up and you can call her and ask her out."

"Yeah, yeah alright. Any advice?"

"What do you mean?" Alex wasn't used to giving tips when it came to other people's love lives. Christ, look at his own. Again, he felt a sharp twist in his chest.

"Well you know her, how can I impress her? Tell me what she likes so I can lie and say I like the same stuff, that kind of thing."

Alex snorted. "As trite as it sounds, just be yourself and you'll do great. I'm the one who wanted to set you up in the first place, remember?"

"Alright," Andy sighed, disappointed. He hesitated. "You're going to be okay, yeah?"

"I'm fine," Alex said, exasperated, and suddenly he felt tired, knowing that he'd probably have to go through the same thing with Jackie. "Don't worry Andy, I'm sorry about today, but I'm alright. Now let me hang up so I can call Jackie. Give her a bell in about ten minutes."

"Yeah, yeah alright."

Alex had an image of Andy jumping on the spot, stretching his muscles and preparing for the conversation, and couldn't help but smirk.

"If you get a chance, tell her that I'm smart or—oh! Tell I'm great in bed!"

"Ah... I'm not sure she wants to hear that from me."

There was a pause down the line, and then Alex could hear Andy laughing as it clicked.

"Aw, Alex," he sighed. "You do make me laugh."

"Goon," Alex muttered with a crooked smile.

"Poof," Andy replied, equally affectionate. "Wish me luck."

"You don't need it."

ALEX was surprised at the mild dressing down he received at work. He miraculously managed to avoid giving details whilst keeping his job. He couldn't tell them the real reason as to why he was absent the previous day, and he certainly wasn't going to tell them it was because of his cat. He'd bluffed his way through the informal chat with the head Sister, blaming his absence on a sudden family emergency that, although it was now all sorted, was too personal to speak of. Alex was

pretty sure that this wouldn't have flown if most other nurses had attempted it, but seeing as his attendance record until that day had been spotless, he felt he'd been given a little extra leeway and was extremely grateful for it.

His first day back, and he felt as if he were moving through quick sand. A little over three weeks had passed since that evening where Sid had first appeared on his couch, scaring the living shit out of him. Yet it felt as if it had been months ago. He kept his head down, did his work, and ignored the dull ache behind his eyes and in his chest. He was certain life would return to normal for him. And that very thought terrified him.

"You're not listening to a word I'm saying, are you?" Jackie asked in exasperation.

Alex shook his head minutely, standing straight from where he'd been leaning against the nurses' station, day dreaming whilst on his short break. "Sorry, love, what were you saying?"

He'd called Jackie last night, too, but he'd kept it short and sweet. Predictably, she'd ripped him a new one once confirming that he was safe and of a sound mind. He'd reassured her that his mini breakdown had not been over the fictional Simon, and that he'd never scare her like that again. Knowing that Andy was sitting in his flat, nervously cracking his knuckles as he rehearsed what to say over the phone, he'd let her go, gone to bed, and fallen into an exhausted sleep.

JACKIE sighed. "I was asking you if you'd spoken to Andy recently."

She bit her lip, which Alex secretly took a perverse pleasure from. It wasn't often Jackie was the insecure one of the two of them. He picked up a clipboard and chart, purposefully acting distracted and oblivious. "I told you, I spoke to him last night, right before he spoke to you." He flipped through the pages, trying to not smile.

"Okay, I was just wondering if perhaps you'd spoken to him since then—if maybe I'd come up in conversation, but whatever." She shrugged, as if it were no big thing.

Alex snorted, dropping the chart at the reception desk and leaning against it with his hip and elbow. "He did ask you out, right?"

"Yes."

"And you said...."

"Yes. Obviously."

"Obviously?"

She pressed her lips together, her cheek dimpling. "Alex, he was so ridiculous...."

"Ridiculous?"

"In a bloody adorable way, yes."

"Hi, Andy, it's Jackie—no! Wait—fuck! It's Andy," He laughed self-consciously, mild panic in his voice. "It... um... hhello, Jackie, it's Andy, but I suppose you've gathered that by now." He sighed. "I've fucking fucked up already, haven't I? I'll just... can I hang up and start again?"

"Hello, Andy, how are you?" She laughed.

"A bit embarrassed, if you really want to know," came the sheepish, yet pleased, response.

Alex stared wide-eyed at Jackie, a hysterical laugh threatening to rip through him. "You are *kidding* me?" he said slowly. "He's usually not so... weird." He shook his head. "Man, I knew he thought you were gorgeous, but I didn't realize he was that nervous."

A delighted—and a touch smug—smile crossed her lips. "He said I was gorgeous?"

Alex rolled his eyes. "Ah shit," he laughed. "Don't let on that I told you that, he'd be pissed."

"I won't—oh, thank you," she said as another nurse handed her a transparent bag with a few indiscernible items inside. It was one of the bags used to store a deceased patient's items in before passing it to the grieving family. Alex frowned; all he could see was white fluff.

"We're going to Antonio's; it's a lovely little place in Covent Garden. Apparently it does great cannelloni." She practically beamed, but Alex wasn't really listening any longer. His head was cocked to the side and he touched the bag, turning it to glimpse at a familiar-looking googly eye.

"What the hell is that?"

Jackie turned the bag in her hand, looking at the googly eye and shaking it, making the iris jiggle in its plastic socket. "Oh, I know. Weird, right? Especially for a grown man, but there you go. Anyway, he told me about this great little coffee shop where—"

But Alex was shaking his head, his heart suddenly beating a million a minute. He took the bag from Jackie's hands, opened it and pulled out... a pair of bunny slippers.

"What... where...." His voice seemed to disappear, and he fought back the grief that had only briefly receded, waiting only to pounce on him.

He knew those slippers; they were Sid's. Sid's body was in this hospital, in the morgue in a separate wing, a couple hundred yards away. His Sid. The entire ordeal suddenly felt one hundred percent more real. He had to see him. He had to touch his cold hand, just once.

"Alex," Jackie asked quietly, alarm showing clearly in her eyes. "What on earth is the matter?"

Perhaps they weren't Sid's, perhaps someone else...."Nothing I... I just thought I recognized those, I think I may have known someone who had a similar pair."

Jackie frowned. "Of size twelve bunny slippers?"

Oh God. "Name?" he asked, voice unsteady.

Jackie touched his arm. "Alex, what's wrong?"

"That patient's name, Jackie," he asked again, a touch more firm.

"Jones. A Mr. Sid Jones."

All the air left his lungs. They'd found him. Oh, Sid.

"Alex, what's going on?" Jackie guided him to chair behind the desk and made him sit, she pulled up a chair to face him and took his hands in hers. "Alex, you're scaring me. You're as pale as a ghost."

A hysterical bubble of laughter burst out of him, and he covered his mouth with his hand and shook his head. He took a few deep breaths, attempting to compose himself. "Tell me? How did he... what happened?"

"The patient?"

Alex nodded. "Sid Jones." It felt good to finally say his name out loud to another person. "Tell me what happened."

Jackie pushed her hair behind her ear and watched him worriedly. "He was staying at a bed and breakfast here in London—"

The last thing Sid had remembered was being on the train traveling to London. Alex had no way of knowing if Sid had made it to a hotel, or if the accident that had killed him happened beforehand. It was something Alex had pondered over constantly.

"The owners couldn't tell the police why he was in London, and after identifying him they discovered he had no family to inform of the accident... bit sad really."

"What happened?" he repeated, closing his eyes.

"Well, apparently it was late; the lift was out of service so he was taking the stairs down to the reception desk. A maid was going up the stairs with a large stack of towels, or something or other that clearly didn't comply with health and safety regulations. You can bet that someone's lost their job over this—"

"Jackie, please...."

She shook her head. "The story we got from the police was that the patient moved aside for her, but she dropped some of the towels and nearly toppled over trying to catch them—"

"But Sid tried to catch her," he guessed, his voice flat as he nodded. "He tried to catch her and fell himself."

Jackie nodded her head. "That's about it, yeah."

"Did...." He swallowed. "He broke his neck, didn't he?"

Jackie shook her head. "No, he took a severe knock to the base of his skull, dislocated his shoulder and broke his left arm in two places. Poor bloke, he took quite a fall."

Alex suddenly frowned. "Wait a sec; this happened in a bed and breakfast, why has his body only just come to the UCLH? Were there legal issues, or something?"

Jackie frowned herself, and then looked down at the bag. "Oh! No, Alex. He's not dead, he's awake."

Alex stared, he could hear a faint ringing in his ears and his vision became tunneled. He took deep breaths, aware that he was about to pass out. "C-can you say that again?"

Jackie's frown deepened, his response worrying her. "Alex? Shit, deep breaths, come on." She rubbed his arms and then leaned forward, touching his knee. "Do you know him?"

"Just say it again," he gasped.

"Alex," she said softly. "He had a head trauma, he's been unconscious for more than three weeks, he came to two nights ago."

His head was spinning; a sudden loud laugh left his lips, which he quickly smothered with a hand over his mouth. He'd checked the morgues in all of London; he'd called and used every contact he could, limited as they were, (he was only a nurse, not a detective) regularly checking for a Sid Jones or a John Doe that matched his description, but with no luck. He'd never checked the wards, never considered he was alive! And why would he? When his spirit—his ghost—when *Sid*, was in his flat, sitting on his couch, talking away to him?

A shaky smile touched his lips, but then his medical training kicked in before he could allow himself false hope. "TBI?" Alex knew that awake could mean a number of things. If Sid had suffered from a Traumatic Brain Injury, then conscious could mean only that—conscious. He may not be able to speak, move, he may not even be Sid, anymore.

But he's alive.

Jackie shook her head. "He should make a full recovery. We had some success with the caloric reflex test...."

Alex nearly gasped. A caloric reflex test was used to test the vestibule-ocular reflex (VOR)—his eyesight. It involved cold or warm water being irrigated into the external auditory canal. It was one of many tests used to test for brain stem death. Cold and warm water—he was able to feel the hot and cold.

"There was no vestibular damage, no cerebral damage, he reacted positively. Verbal skills are intact, though obviously his speech was slow to begin with, but he's now fully orientated."

"Motor?" he asked almost desperately. Can he move?

Jackie nodded. "He can obey simple commands, with the exception of moving his left arm, which is in a full cast, of course." She frowned. "I told you about this patient."

"No, you didn't!"

"I did, you just weren't bloody listening! You never listen!" She frowned, "Alex, what's going on?"

He ignored the question. "He's going to be okay?"

"Couple of weeks to recuperate and he'll be up and doing the Charleston in no time. He's going to be *fine*," she soothed.

Alex let out a small sob, dimly aware of the wetness that trailed down his cheeks. "He's really okay?"

"He's lost a little of his body mass and he's a bit shook up, but yes, he's fine. He's a nice guy actually, if not a little on the shy side, bless him."

Alex let out a watery laugh, and covered his face with his hands. His shoulders shook with quiet laughter and tears of absolute elation and relief. Unknowingly to him, Jackie moved her chair around to block him from view of any nurses who may pass the thankfully quiet station, and she rubbed his back.

"There's something going on here that you're not telling me. You know him, don't you?"

Alex couldn't deny it, he'd look mad if he did. "I think I might." He sniffed and wiped his cheeks dry. "I think I may have. He's a lovely guy, you know?" He smiled shakily. "People get upset when bad things happen to good people." He shrugged helplessly, hoping that the weak excuse may be enough for her, but he could see by the way that she narrowed her eyes that she knew there was more to it.

"Can I go see him?" He brightened exponentially at this thought. "Where is he? What ward? What room?"

"I don't know, Alex." She shook her head.

He sniffed loudly and rapidly wiped away any dampness from his cheeks. "I'm fine, honestly, I'm good."

"I was thinking more about the patient, actually."

"I'm okay, Jackie, honestly." He nodded, trying not to sound as desperate as he felt. "You know I'll just go find out for myself if you don't tell me."

She bit her lip. "Alex," she began hesitantly. "What are you to him?"

That gave Alex pause. Would Sid remember him? What had actually happened? He hadn't died, so... was it some sort of exaggerated outer body experience? What Alex did know was that it didn't matter. The absolute surreal and spiritual weirdness, the heartache and grief he'd experienced, the potential awkward questions and the possibility of Sid not even recognizing him—none of it mattered. Because Sid's heart was beating and he had the rest of his life to love this incredible, beautiful, alive and breathing man.

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "He may not remember me. But I need you to be my friend." He spoke softly. "I need you to not ask me any more questions for now, and tell me where he is. Please, Jackie."

She sighed, completely at a loss, but apparently his frank and quiet request had appealed to the part of her that desperately adored him. "Alright."

HE WAS asleep, a healthy, natural sleep. He'd lost weight, too, but that was to be expected. He still maintained his broadness, which came from the wide set shoulders and the sheer length of his tall body. Alex tilted his head to the side and smiled gently, seeing that Sid's feet reached all the way

to the end of the bed, his toes very nearly poking out of the sheets.

His hair was loose; Alex had never seen it like that before and thought it unbelievably handsome. His glasses sat on the bedside table, and his large hands lay folded over his stomach. Alex glanced back at the blinds he'd closed, and quietly stepped closer to the bedside, hardly daring to breathe. He reached out, and with trembling fingers, he brushed Sid's warm hand. Alex closed his eyes, and let out a quiet laugh/gasp. He rubbed his thumb over Sid's knuckle, and willed himself not to cry, it wouldn't do for Sid to wake up and see him crying.

Unable to stop himself, he gently traced his hands across Sid's brow, and then ever so softly stroked his hand over his hair. He had dreamt of this—had wanted it so desperately, and now he had it.

Forgetting all propriety, he leaned closer and ghosted his lips over Sid's, which were dry and slightly chapped, and it hit him like a hammer on steel.

This man was his, and he was never letting him go.

He pulled back and gently touched the man's cheek. He nearly jumped when the prettiest damn hazel eyes he'd ever seen opened and blinked up at him sleepily with a hint of surprise.

It's you in color, Sid. It's you alive, and you are so completely and utterly mine.

"Hello, doctor." His voice was rough, his body still weak from its long sleep.

"Nurse, actually." Alex replied. Giving what he was sure was in an inappropriately doting smile. God, he'd missed

that voice, it hadn't been two days but he'd missed that deep, gentle voice with its endearing accent terribly. "But you can call me Alex."

"Hi, Alex, I haven't seen you before. Does that mean I'm getting better or worse?" Sid joked, his voice a little weak but his gaze steadfast on the man beside his bed.

That was Alex's questions answered in one. He didn't remember, but it didn't matter. They could start again. "It just means that I've been off and I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you yet."

Sid blinked in surprised, and a faint blush graced his cheeks at what he took for as Alex's friendly interest. "It's very nice to meet you, Alex," he replied quietly, shifting slightly on the bed to reach for his glasses, and then wincing.

"Careful," Alex urged, reached to move a pillow to a more comfortable position for him, and then passing him his specs. He glanced at the full cast on Sid's arm, and he smiled sympathetically. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm alright, just a little stiff, I think. The doctors and nurses have been very encouraging."

"I hope hospital life isn't getting you too down." He said it in jest, but he was partly serious. An extended stay in hospital could be depressing, particularly if you had no family to come visit you.

"Oh, I'm fine. I feel like an awful pest actually."

Alex couldn't help but laugh a little. Trust Sid to feel like a nuisance for having been in a coma and broken his arm. "You're not, you're one of the more popular patients, trust me." "I am?" Sid laughed, breaking off to cough slightly.

Alex nodded as he poured some water into a plastic cup that had been kept on the bedside table. He helped Sid take a sip. "Yes, you are polite, no trouble at all, and rather easy on the eyes."

Sid damn near sputtered, and Alex quickly took the cup away as Sid wiped at his chin. "I think that might be a slight exaggeration." Sid looked down at his hospital gown and wiped where it was wet whilst his cheeks flamed red.

"Which part?" Alex smiled.

"Well... I've been told I'm polite, but I doubt I'll be winning any beauty contests any time soon" He looked down at his stomach and to the end of the bed where his feet lay covered by the blankets. He frowned. "How can somebody be huge and scrawny at the same time?" he asked, referring to his slightly malnourished yet lanky looking frame.

Alex chuckled, grabbing a paper napkin from a small pile beside the water jug. "How can someone be so handsome and self-deprecating at the same time?" he countered, smirking knowingly as that gorgeous blush intensified.

"You know, you're alarmingly cute when you blush, Mr. Jones."

Sid blinked at him in surprise, and a small, pleased and utterly bemused smile touched Sid's lips. "Uh... you can call me Sid, if you like," he said quietly.

"Okay, Sid."

"Are you going to be coming in and checking on me?" Sid asked hesitantly, almost hopefully.

"This isn't actually my ward," Alex replied, and was gratified to see Sid's barely hidden disappointment. "I was

dropping this off for nurse Cousins who was otherwise detained." He held up the clear bag that contained Sid's personal effects, and of course, his bunny slippers. "Nice slippers."

"Oh." Sid blanched, obviously embarrassed. "They were an impulse buy." He shrugged, his smile a self-conscious one.

"They have character."

"I suppose." Sid licked his dry bottom lip. "Thank you for bringing them to me."

"Not a problem." Alex glanced at the clock. "You know, I usually take my lunch break about now, would you care for some company?"

"I... I'd like that, very much."

Alex smiled, and pulled up a chair beside the bed.

HE SPENT the next hour getting reacquainted with the voice he loved more than any other. And much like the first time they'd gotten to know one another, Alex found himself doing most of the talking, where as Sid seemed content to sit and listen, and just take Alex in.

"Oh, I'd like that," Sid agreed, smiling at Alex.

"Great." Alex nodded. "I have a board at home; it's just a cheap cardboard thing, but it does the same job as any other draughts board."

"No, I'd like that very much, just as long as I'm not pulling you away from anything else more important."

"Maybe I'll even pop down here when my shift ends, if you're awake that is."

"Oh, you can wake me, it's fine," Sid reassured, perhaps a little too adamantly as that familiar and lovely blush that had never really disappeared in the last hour made itself known again.

"Great." Alex filled Sid's cup again and placed it within easy reach of his one good arm, and then stood. "Okay then...." He rubbed his hands nervously against the sides of his legs, not wanting to leave, but he did have to get back to work.

"I'll see you later."

Alex made it to the door, hesitated, and then quickly strode back to Sid's bedside when an idea suddenly came to him. "Do you like art? Van Gogh?" He knew the answer, of course.

Sid blinked in surprise. "Wh—yes," he laughed, "it's actually why I came down to London in the first place."

"Then you know there's a Van Gogh exhibit at the National Gallery."

"There is," Sid hedged hopefully.

Alex smiled happily. "Well it's running for a while yet, perhaps... when you're better, we could go together?"

Sid seemed almost stunned, and Alex felt himself hold his own breath, but when a delighted, wide smile crossed Sid's lips, he grinned back, relieved.

"Um... well yeah." Sid gave a small laugh, shrugging. "Yes, that'd be lovely," he enthused. "I'd like that very much."

"Great!" Alex grinned, there was no more stalling, he had to go back to work or he really would get fired. "Um,

here." He reached for the pillows behind Sid, carefully plumping them up. "Let me get that—make you comfy."

He gently fluffed the pillows, and couldn't help but seek Sid's eyes out with his own, their faces closer than what would be deemed necessary. His hands stilled, either side of Sid, and he glanced quickly down at Sid's lips. Sid noticed this and seemed ever so slightly amazed—going completely still. Amazed but willing.

Regaining some semblance of professionalism, he pulled back a scant amount, and held his right hand out for Sid. With some confusion Sid took the hand.

"Hello, Sid, I'm Alex Tanner, I'm twenty-seven, I'm a male nurse, I'm gay, and I have a very inappropriate crush on you."

Sid laughed quietly, both surprised but pleased. "Hi, I'm Sid Jones, I'm an accountant, thirty-one, gay, was recently in a coma, and the feeling's utterly mutual."

"Oh, thank goodness." And he wasn't just saying it for effect. A part of him had worried that they wouldn't be able to recreate the relationship or attraction they had built under such extraordinary consequences, but he wasn't worried now. He looked forward to starting again—devoid of all paranormal, spiritual, ghostly weirdness.

Sid laughed quietly, a strand of hair falling into his face. He blew at it, and tried to shake it away.

"Here," Alex said quietly, brushing it out of the way. He tucked the hair behind Sid's ear, and though he knew he shouldn't push for too much too soon, rather than pulling his hand away, he let his thumb gently trace the shape of Sid's cheek, before gently cupping the heated skin in his

palm. His felt a healthy pang in his chest as Sid took a shallow breath, his eyes falling closed for a moment before opening to regard him with a mix of bewilderment, curiosity, and the very beginnings of infatuation.

"I'd better...." Alex absently threw a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the door.

Sid nodded. "Yes. Thank you for...." Sid paused, licking his dry lips. "For bringing me my slippers."

Alex laughed, walking to the door and resting his hand on the handle. "I'll see you later." He turned, opened the door, and then just as quickly closed it. "Sod it." He strode back over to the bed, bent down to kiss Sid, his hand resting beside Sid's head, and paused, looking into those hazel eyes he already loved so much.

"Can I? Please?" he whispered.

"Can you please what?" Sid breathed, still uncertain of what was happening even as Alex leaned in closer.

With an almost agonized groan he gently cupped Sid's cheek and kissed him as he'd longed to ever since his feelings for this person had taken over everything else in his life. He was gentle, easing off slightly when Sid gasped, and poured all his affection for Sid into the kiss.

He pulled back reluctantly, breathing heavily and his eyes were unwilling to open. He didn't want to open them to see shock, or even offense in those eyes. He reminded himself that Sid as a ghost would have wanted his kiss, but Sid alive, who didn't know him.... Eventually, he opened his eyes and was filled with relief. There was no reproach, simply shock, and passion.

"I could get fired for that," he whispered.

Sid shook his head; seeming taken aback and dazed, which was sexy as hell in Alex's eyes. "I won't tell anyone, promise."

"Thank you."

Alex stood straight, and Sid's hand moved to grab his forearm to stall him, but he managed to stop himself, still unsure of himself and the entire encounter. "You're coming back later?"

Alex nodded. "I'll be back later. I promise."

Alex managed to make himself leave the room, absently wondering if all the drastic shifting of emotions he had experienced over the last several weeks would not leave some sort of lasting effect on him. He decided he didn't care.

It was just as he was allowing himself to truly believe that all was well, and that he would have his goddamn, happy, fucking ending, when a sudden alarming thought struck him. He stopped still.

"Shit. How do I explain Baldrick?"

# **Epilogue**

"WE'RE late."

"And whose fault is that?" Sid asked, slipping his hand into Alex's and entwining their fingers as they neared the pub.

Alex had to concede to that point; he couldn't very well blame Sid for their tardiness when it had been him who had pounced on the man. But could he really be blamed? Sid had left his bathroom—or what had temporarily become their bathroom—in nothing but a towel. Dripping wet and clutching said towel with one hand as he quickly riffled through the ironing basket for his clean jeans.

He'd asked if Alex knew where they were, which to Alex translated into "please jump my bones." In answer, Alex had whipped away the towel with a cheeky grin. Sid gave chase, which had resulted in them furiously making love on the couch. Alex could still feel the pleasant ache of where Sid had been inside him, and there was honest to God, no better feeling. No better feeling than that of having Sid's beautiful thick cock buried inside of him, his legs wrapped high around Sid's waist as the man drove into him, husking his name into the side of his neck and sending a trail of goose bumps in its wake. There was no better feeling than riding on top of him, watching as Sid groaned and gripped his hips tight enough to bruise as he thrust up hard into him. There was no better feeling than lying collapsed, sweaty, and

breathless, utterly sated and comfortable in the arms of the man he loved to distraction.

"If you could keep your hands off of me, we'd be on time for once."

"This is probably true," Alex laughed, opening the large door to the pub and glancing over his shoulder with a grin when he felt Sid's hand gently ghost over his behind.

"Sid, mate! Over here," Andy called, waving them over to a table for six, where only he and Jackie presently sat.

"Hey." Sid clapped him on the shoulder, and then sat beside Jackie, leaning to kiss the cheek she pointedly offered.

"Hey," Alex greeted, sitting beside Andy, giving him a nudge.

"Hello, twinkle toes."

Alex sighed. "You know, you never greet Sid with insultingly bigoted remarks."

Andy snorted. "That's because he could sit on me and kill me. However, you, princess—" he pinched one of Alex's cheeks and then slapped it, "—are an easy target."

"You suck; go buy me a Malibu and coke."

"Fuck you, you're having a beer." He stood and went to get a round in. "Sid, you want a pint, mate?"

Sid paused in his conversation with Jackie to smile over at Andy. "Yes, thank you."

"Coming up. Where are the other two?"

"Deano's arguing with the bartender, again," Jackie replied, pointing over to the bar, "and I believe John Boy's skinting himself on the fruit machines, as usual."

"Pair of Muppets," Andy muttered. "Just an orange juice for you, love?" His voice was notably softer when speaking to his pregnant girlfriend, Alex noticed, and it made him smile contently and glance over at Sid. Sid winked back at him.

"Oh! Some crisps?"

"Prawn cocktail?"

"Yep, thank you, handsome."

With his chest puffed out in manly pride, Andy strode over to the bar to first disengage the undoubtedly pointless fight Deano was involved in, and then to get the order in.

"He's so proud that he impregnated you." Alex laughed, and moved to sit beside Sid, leaning into him. Sid casually laid his arm along the back of Alex's chair, his fingers lazily tracing invisible patterns up and down Alex's upper arm.

"I know, it's adorable, isn't it?" She chuckled.

"I'm hesitant to call Andy adorable, though I do think he's going to be a stellar father."

"And you're going to be a great uncle." She glanced between them. "Uncle Sid and uncle Alex."

They both grinned happily.

"I'm gonna spoil the shit out of that kid, I can't wait." Alex grinned, practically rubbing his hands together.

"Oh, God, please control him." Jackie looked at Sid.

Sid grinned back, "We've already bought the little sprog a rocking horse."

Jackie laughed and affectionately pushed at Sid's shoulder.

"So what were you two talking about whilst your boyfriend was insulting me?" Alex asked.

"Houses." Sid replied as he moved some empty glasses aside as Andy came back with a small tray carrying their drinks and Jackie's crisps. "Plonk it here."

"Cheers," Andy said, passing Jackie her food and drink first.

"Sid says you've found a few possibilities." Jackie continued for Sid.

"A couple, yeah," Sid replied, giving Alex a quick look and his arm a gentle, confident squeeze. "But we've got the time to have a good look around and give it some real thought. We're fine where we are until we find one that's perfect."

"Your house was perfect," Alex pointed out.

"But it would have meant you moving away from your friends and family, *and* finding a new job." Sid rubbed his back and leaned to kiss his temple before reaching for his drink. "I can work anywhere."

"He's too good for you," Andy said with a smirk, taking a sip of his pint.

"Shut up." Alex laughed.

"We're fine as we are for now."

Alex leaned into Sid's side, his hand resting on his thick thigh, and decided that, yes, they were absolutely fine as they were for now. He never had told Jackie, or anyone for that matter, about how he and Sid had really met. He'd manage to come up with an inventive, if not slightly farfetched story as to how he'd acquired Baldrick, saying that under the circumstances (knowing that Sid did not have any biological family) he had acquired access to his property via the police (completely untrue) to take the pet into his care on Sid's behalf until he was better.

Sid had apparently been so upset after waking and realizing how long he'd been away from home that the first thing he'd asked was if he could use the phone. It was Jackie, funnily enough, who had looked up his neighbor's number in the phonebook, called, advised them of the key under the flowerpot, and asked them to nip over to his house to check on his cat. It had been to Sid's extreme upset that the neighbor could find no trace of the three-legged animal.

He had worried about the possibility of sounding like a bunny boiler and suspected that Sid never truly had believed him—and so he shouldn't, it was complete bollocks—but other than the fact that there really was no other viable explanation as to how he attained Baldrick, Alex thought that, perhaps in the budding romance of their relationship, Sid had not wanted to question it, and so never had. He had been merely grateful and utterly relieved that the cat was alive and well.

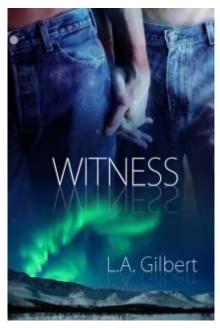
Jackie was not so easy to pacify. There would be times where Alex would catch a glance from her, a somewhat questioning look which asked how the connection he shared with Sid was as rock solid as it was in so short a time. Alex had no way of answering this, and after a while, not even a year later, they were looking for a permanent home for the both of them (three, including the cat). Those questioning looks had eventually stopped altogether, because there really was no challenging that they unequivocally belonged with one another. Regardless of the illogical and unreasonable circumstances that had brought them together, Sid was with him for always now, and that, in Alex's opinion, made life exquisite.

L.A. GILBERT currently lives in a small British town where not much of anything ever really occurs. Jumping from job to job, she has no real qualifications in anything and is blithely proud of it. Between spectacularly failing driving test after test, she generally spends her free time reading about beautiful gay men, if not attempting to write about them. She is perhaps not the most outgoing of people, but is certainly one of the most cheerful.

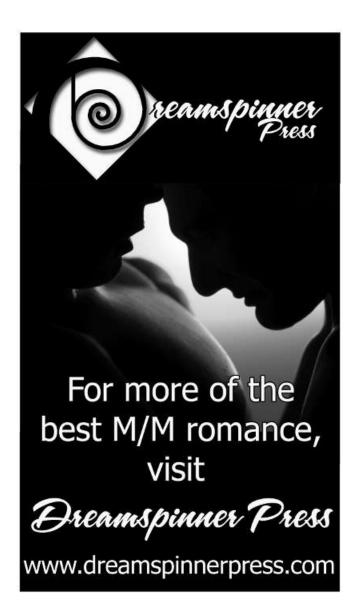
Her aspirations are to eventually leave England and see a real, live whale (London's zoo is poorly lacking in that respect) and to perhaps one day hold in her hands a published copy of her own work.

One down.

Also by L.A. GILBERT



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