



INTO THE LIGHT

CLEAR WATER CREEK CHRONICLES, BOOK 1

SCARLET BLACKWELL



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Into the Light

Clear Water Creek Chronicles 1

Scarlet Blackwell

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Sean was quiet that night, and Paul eyed him curiously as he stirred a pan at the stove. This was their regular Monday night get-together, where Paul cooked because Sean couldn't and would probably live on take-out otherwise. Not that anyone would know it to look at his fantastic body. Six feet three inches tall, the Sheriff of Clear Water Creek usually cut the arms off t-shirts because his biceps were so big. He had his own gym in the basement of his house and could be seen jogging through town as much as five times a week or swimming in the lake or one of the natural pools in the woods. Local girls had been known to spy on Sean from the trees once word got around that he didn't normally take any shorts with him, but he remained oblivious.

When Sean strode out of his patrol car to attend to some trouble—usually something along the lines of Mrs Belmont's cat stuck in a tree or old man Jones causing trouble at Bluey's bar—people sat up and took notice. Paul imagined certain people's knees trembled when they saw Sean in uniform, shirt stretched across his broad chest and shoulders, cuffs and gun rubbing his lean hips, and tight pants which advertised his bulge just right. Paul wasn't gay, but he understood any hot-blooded human wanting to fuck Sean. Who wouldn't?

He glanced once more at Sean, who sat at the kitchen table with his chin resting on his hand, staring out of the window over the garden. His profile was strong, no hint of stubble on his smooth jaw, his mouth wide and sensual. His lashes were thick and long over startling indigo eyes, a blue so dark that sometimes they appeared black depending on Sean's mood. His hair was cut regulation short. Dark brown, verging on black, it was styled neatly, teased into spikes. He always smelled good too. If Paul didn't know any better, he would swear the immaculately coiffured Sean was gay. He smiled to himself.

"You going to tell me what you're brooding over?" Sean was a fantastic brooder, and it was best to leave him alone when he was in a dark mood. This wasn't an option when he was brooding at Paul's house though.

Sean sighed. He took a drink from his bottle of beer and put it down, fingers toying with the damp label, peeling it back a little. He looked up at Paul. "I saw Eden today."

Paul frowned. "Eden who?" He already knew which Eden Sean meant. It was hardly a common name.

"You know which Eden I mean," Sean growled. "He's back. I pulled him over for speeding."

Paul stared in disbelief because Sean had not set eyes on Eden Gray in eighteen years and had never expected to again. "What did he say?"

"He was flippant and arrogant just like he always was. Some people never change. He knew my guilt would prevent me giving him a ticket, and he gloated over the fact." Sean's hand tightened around the beer bottle. "He's still a fucking asshole."

Paul was silent. Sean was showing the familiar resentment and hatred he had once shown towards Eden in high school, the feelings which had sparked a tinderbox of fury one night and led to something terrible. Paul had not expected Sean to be angry if he ever ran into Eden again, but rather, contrite and ashamed. For a moment, he was disappointed in his friend, before he remembered that Sean had anger management issues and usually displayed this emotion far too readily in order to conceal others.

"What's he doing here?"

"I didn't ask. It wasn't exactly a homecoming reunion. But he had his car loaded up with boxes and suitcases, so I'm guessing he's here to stay."

"Shit." Paul's anxiety rose. "What are you going to do?"

Sean shrugged. "Avoid him," he said casually, which was a joke because nobody avoided anyone in this town. "I always knew he'd come back sooner or later. I've been preparing myself for this for eighteen years."

Paul didn't speak. He only took the pan off the heat and started to serve the food.

* * * *

Paul only lived a ten-minute walk away which was good because Sean wasn't in any fit condition to drive home when he left some time after midnight. The night was clear and warm, a full moon hanging low over the trees, illuminating the dirt track down to Sean's house, which stood alone in a clearing overlooking the lake.

Sean still counted his blessings that he had been lucky enough to get this job after what had happened at high school. If his role in that night ever became public though, he doubted he would be Sheriff of Clear Water Creek much longer, and he had lived in fear of discovery since he had first trained as a police officer all those years ago.

He reached his house, which he had left unlocked as he usually did, and went up to his bedroom. There, he stripped naked and pulled on a pair of pyjama bottoms before he took a beer outside onto the porch and sat facing the water.

His mind went relentlessly back to earlier that afternoon, as it had a thousand times, and the black Porsche speeding on the main road into Clear Water Creek. He had eased out of the side road, put his foot down and gave his siren one burst, flashing his lights at the offender.

The driver responded soon enough, pulling over to the side of the road and sitting there waiting as Sean put his hat on and climbed out of his patrol car. His jaw tightened in grim anticipation of seeing whichever rich boy was driving it and giving him a ticket, maybe even arresting him. He took note of the licence plate as he walked up to the car should the joker inside decide to speed off. The car was fairly new and well cleaned, its back loaded with boxes and suitcases as though the owner was moving house.

Sean had stepped up to the open window and bent down to look inside. He almost reeled back at who he saw inside, the ghost from the past in the driver's seat making his heart pound wildly and his lunch threaten to come back up.

Eden Gray turned his head to look at him. He looked much the same except that he was more attractive—less the boy and more the man. His hair, which had gone through various red, black, and blue shades during his Mohawk phase at school, was its natural shade of chestnut brown with hints of deep red. It now skimmed his collar, falling untidily over his face. His eyes were as unsettling as they had always been, a vivid topaz, animal eyes, kaleidoscopic and changing colour with the light.

He was clean shaven and his skin, which had always been pale porcelain in winter, was lightly tanned with a sweep of freckles over the nose. The lines of his profile were graceful and his mouth small and pouting.

He smiled slowly, showing perfect white teeth, not looking remotely surprised or fazed. "Hello, Sean."

On the roof of the car, Sean's fingers curled against the paintwork, holding him there as though he would pass out. His legs were weak with fear, something he had not felt in many years.

"Do you know how fast you were going?" he asked stiffly, his voice cold.

Eden shrugged, feigning boredom. "Forty? Fifty?"

Sean's teeth clenched. "Fifty-nine," he said between them. "I caught you on radar."

"It's a fair cop," Eden said airily, holding up his hands. "Want to cuff me now, *Officer?*" His eyes held Sean's steadily, a provocative look in them.

"Licence and registration," Sean barked, ignoring him.

Eden rolled his eyes. He leaned over to the glove box and produced his papers, handing them to Sean who scanned them without reading a word and dropped them back into Eden's lap.

"Step out of the car."

"Come on." Eden's casual manner evaporated and irritation edged his tone.

"I said, *step out*."

Eden sighed loudly. He swung the door open violently—narrowly missing Sean as he stepped aside—and slammed it hard, putting his back to it to face the Sheriff. He had grown tall, only a few inches shorter than Sean, his body lean and toned. "Well, aren't you going to ask me to bend over the hood? That's the position you prefer me in, isn't it?"

Sean's jaw twitched, the only outward sign of his inner turmoil. "You were driving dangerously in a small town at a time of day when children are crossing the road. I should arrest you now and let you spend the night in the cells."

Eden stared at him sullenly. "You won't though, will you?" He lifted one eyebrow sardonically, letting the unspoken threat hang in the air between them. Sean had the sudden violent urge to grab him by the hair and slam his head into the car door.

Eden smiled slowly, his eyes cold and sparking with hate. "It was nice to see you again, Sean. I'm disappointed I don't get a homecoming hug though." He turned around, wrenched open his door and climbed back in. Sean turned away and started to walk back to his car, his fist clenched.

He climbed in and started the engine, staring ahead, waiting for Eden to move. The Porsche set off at a sedate speed, and the horn blared before a hand came out of the driver's window, middle finger extended.

Sean clenched his jaw so hard his teeth hurt. His hands clutched the wheel, leaving damp marks. He was overwhelmed with such emotion that he trembled violently. Pure fury streaked through him at Eden making a mockery of him, along with anger at himself for not having the balls to give him a ticket, and sheer terror that the time had finally come for Eden's retribution after all these years. He lowered his head onto the wheel, eyes closed, and told himself to get a grip. He had gone completely to pieces and this was not a familiar way for him to behave. He felt weak and afraid. He guessed now the shoe was on the other foot and finally, he knew how Eden must have felt that night.

Sitting on his porch now, staring out over the water, drinking his beer, Sean reluctantly allowed his thoughts to drift back even further, to his shameful secret.

He hadn't been a very nice teenager. He was a bully at school, always angry, always looking for someone to take it out on. He and his jock mates terrorised weaker boys, the geeks, the metal-heads, the queers. As far as Sean could see, Eden was all three, and his attitude inflamed Sean further. Eden kept his pride. He was arrogant and cool and never let his fear of the bullies show, even when the four boys of Sean's gang roughed him up, spat at him, and intimidated him. He was clever and sarcastic and usually got his own back in class, showing up the bullies for what they were—meatheads who would never amount to much.

Things had come to a head one day after Eden had been a little too clever for his own good. Sean had been talking with Max Silver, the ringleader of their gang, at the back of the class and their teacher sharply suggested Sean read the next passage from the French text of *Le Grand Meaulnes*.

Sean, in an atrocious accent, drawled and stumbled his way through the first paragraph and stopped short when he heard Eden sniggering in front of him. He lifted a foot and booted the back of Eden's chair, hissing at him to shut the fuck up.

"Sean," the teacher thundered. "Eden, do you think you can do better?"

"Yes, sir," Eden responded smartly and launched into the paragraph again, accent impeccable.

Behind him, Sean was red-faced and glaring as the rest of the class laughed at the difference between the two accents. He came out of the class fuming, grabbed Eden by the collar of his shirt and slammed him against the wall. "You're a dead man," he told the other boy before stalking away.

In the cafeteria at lunch, he gathered his cronies around him, Max, Damon Morris, and Allan Johnson, and told them they were going to get Eden back for showing him up that day. The other boys had smirked at Sean's embarrassment in class, but they seemed keen to mete out justice to Eden regardless, which he knew had more to do with the fact that they hated the geek and not out of any love of Sean's honour.

Sean got up from the table, swaying as he went back into the house. He wouldn't think any more about that night. Not now.

Sean woke up with the hangover from hell, the sun streaming through the thin curtains to rouse him from where he lay naked, tangled in the sheets of his bed. He dragged himself from his pit and made it to the bathroom where he peed and then drank copiously, straight from the tap. Once he made it to the kitchen, he brewed some coffee and swallowed some Tylenol. A run before work was out of the question. He sat squinting on the bench in his back garden, watching the birds alight at their feeding station. The way he was feeling, even *work* might be out of the question.

His mind was no less disordered than the previous night. Thoughts of Eden consumed him, and his head banged like a road crew were jack-hammering it. Had Eden returned for revenge or not? Why else would he come back home after eighteen years? He was going to walk in and destroy Sean's life, ruin his standing in the community, and take his job from him. What other purpose could he have? The question was, what was Sean going to do about it? Was he going to confess or wait for Eden's first move? Confessing wasn't an option. He had been a coward then and he was a coward now. He should have confessed at the time, and maybe his conscience would have been eased by enduring whatever punishment the authorities saw fit. He should have sought Eden out and begged his goddamned *forgiveness* for his terrible sin. Instead, eighteen years down the road, he had so much more to lose. He could do nothing but wait and see how Eden intended to bring him down.

Sean's deputy, Jonah Mitchell, was behind his desk typing furiously at his computer when Sean got in. "What time do you call this?" he asked sarcastically.

Sean looked at his watch. "Nine forty-five." He sat down, eyeing the stack of mail in his inbox with displeasure.

"Rough night?"

"Had a few beers at Paul's," Sean muttered. He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Fuck, my head feels like it's going to explode."

Jonah snickered. He and Sean had a mutually ribbing relationship, but they worked well together and Jonah was a good guy. "You should try an early night for once," he remarked, because he was married with a new born baby and did nothing but stay at home and get no sleep.

Sean glared at him. "I will be, tonight." He let his head fall onto the desk.

He only lasted half an hour before he told Jonah he needed sugar and grabbed his keys, heading out of the station. It was roasting hot outside, and it only made Sean crankier. The Tylenol had long worn off and there was an ache between his eyes which could only be lessened by narrowing them to slits. His mouth was bone dry, and his stomach churned empty. He drew up outside the main store and got out of his car.

Inside, the air-con made the room ice cold. Sean gathered a box of doughnuts, a bag of potato chips and two one litre bottles of water. He paused at the fridge, looking over the sandwiches. His eyes glazed, and he'd just decided he would have to go home and crawl back into bed when a presence next to him distracted him.

"You'll get fat eating all that junk food."

Sean's gaze swivelled; an icy hand crawled down his back. Eden wore tight jeans and a t-shirt which clung to every curve of his muscular torso. Only a blind man could fail to notice Eden's physical attributes were many. He had blossomed into a stunning man.

Sean regarded Eden with distaste. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"My grocery shopping," Eden shot back. "Call me old-fashioned."

"You know what I mean," Sean growled. "I mean *here*."

"I've come home," Eden said flippantly. "I did leave in quite a hurry, you may remember, and I missed the place. I'm here to stay." He smiled a no-teeth smile, his eyes flat and cold.

Sean bit the insides of his mouth. "And what are you doing?"

Eden lifted one eyebrow. "I know you're a cop, Sean, but I'm pretty sure I don't have to answer your twenty questions until I've committed an offence."

Sean stared at him for a moment and then dropped his goods on the chest freezer nearby and gripped Eden by one bicep. He dragged him away from the fridge and into the canned food aisle where he pushed him against one shelf. "What I seem to recall is you breaking the law yesterday," he hissed under his breath. "So how about you answer my question and tell me what work you're going to be doing."

Eden regarded him laconically. "You broke the law eighteen years ago when you were an accessory to a *crime*, Sean. Now, I don't go shouting about that in the grocery store do I? Oops sorry, just did."

Sean's hand tightened on his arm. He pressed Eden hard against the shelf with his body, staring down into the topaz eyes. Eden eyed him back just as furiously before he said, "I'm the new vet at the practice." He smiled lazily. "If you have any pets, Sean, bring them to me. I promise they'll get extra special treatment."

Sean let go of him abruptly and stalked back to the freezer where he reclaimed his food and drink. He took it to the counter and tried his best to make conversation with the owner, whom he knew well, as he paid. With his purchases in a paper bag, he hurried outside and drove away, tyres squealing.

There was no doubt about it. Eden was here to bring him down.

Sean sat at his desk and ate half a box of doughnuts and downed a litre of water before he felt any better. He'd always known Eden had the brains to end up doing something really dynamic with his life. He just had never imagined Eden would want to come back to the town that had caused him so much misery to throw down with Sean.

The list of places in town Sean was safe from Eden probably boiled down to two—here at the station, and in his house. He was going to have to hide out like a fugitive in his own goddamn town.

* * * *

Paul was as hung-over as Sean. He worked in the library, just as he'd wanted since he was little, and on days like this he was grateful for it. Pure solitude and quiet, the best thing for his aching head. Apart from dealing with customers that was, and one stood at the desk now.

Paul went over reluctantly because none of his colleagues were in sight. The man standing there was a shade under six feet with dark hair, dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt with a rock band's logo splashed in white across it.

"Hey," he greeted Paul cordially.

"Hi, what can I do for you?" Paul asked.

"I'd like to join."

"Sure, no problem." Paul reached for a form from under the counter. "Just fill this in." He pushed a pen towards the stranger.

"Thanks."

"You new in town?" Paul watched the man write.

"Yeah. I was born here, but I moved away a while ago."

Paul tried to place his face, wondering if he had known him, but the stranger didn't seem familiar. He glanced down at the form, reading the man's neatly printed name upside down. Eden Christopher Gray. Paul's blood ran cold.

The man glanced up at that moment and frowned when he saw Paul's shocked face. He regarded him a moment before his face relaxed. "Ah, don't tell me. My reputation precedes me. You're a friend of Sean's. I guess he has to have some."

Paul bristled instantly even though he had always felt sorry for the faceless victim of Sean and his gang's crime. Something about Eden's cocky attitude didn't sit well with him. Wasn't this man supposed to be scarred for life, a timid, reclusive victim of a heinous crime? "Yeah," he said stiffly.

"And I just bet he's told you lots and lots of terrible lies about me." Eden watched his face closely.

Paul shook his head. "No." Sean had always spoken about Eden in the most vitriolic of tones, but he had never tried to explain or justify why he bullied this man at school. Perhaps Sean himself knew there was no rationale for his behaviour. After confessing his crime to Paul, he had never said another bad word about Eden, until last evening.

"Whatever." Eden went back to the form. Paul stared at his bowed head a moment. Irrationally, he hated Eden at first sight. More than a little.

* * * *

Paul called Sean just after lunch. "Hey, how's your head?"

Sean leaned back in his chair, relieved to be distracted from the report he'd been writing. "Terrible. Yours?"

"Like Metallica's playing a gig in there."

Sean smiled.

"Listen, I met Eden this morning. He came by the library to join."

"Oh. Did he... say anything?"

"No. He knew that I knew about it though."

"I see."

"He's moved into the Parsons' old place."

Sean was silent. The house was right across the lake from him. He had seen a light on the porch last night. Had Eden been sitting there watching Sean drinking on his own porch?

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Listen, do you want me to talk to him? Find out what..."

"No. Stay away from him, Paul."

"But if I could explain how much it traumatised you, how sorry you are..."

"Leave it alone." Sean hung up and put his head on the desk.

Paul was his childhood friend. The two had not gone to the same school and for that, Sean was grateful. At that time, he often wondered which side he would choose if Paul came to his school because Paul wouldn't fit in with Sean's gang. He wasn't an obvious choice as a friend of Sean's at all. Rather scrawny and geeky back then, he liked comic books and computer games and was bright as a button. Sean's bond with Paul was strong and always would be. He was just glad he had kept Paul away from the people with the power to ruin other's lives. At the time, Sean tried not to dwell on whether Paul knew the extent of his school activities. He knew Paul would think the worst when he arrived that night, darted up the stairs, and threw himself sobbing on Paul's bed, begging him not to say anything if the police came for him.

Perhaps because to think the worst of Sean in those days was very easy. He *was* the worst of the worst.

Paul had eyed him in alarm and come over to sit on the end of the bed. "Jesus, what's happened? What have you *done*?"

Sean lifted his tear-streaked face. "Swear to me Paul. Swear you'll tell the police I've been here all night."

Paul hesitated a moment and then nodded, his face tight and unhappy, and Sean had felt even more of a shit than he already was.

He pushed his chair away from the desk. It was time to leave the office and go on patrol. He couldn't hide away from Eden forever.

* * * *

Paul went back to stacking books on the shelf after the phone call to Sean, still thinking about Eden, what a cocky bastard he was and how pointless it would

probably be to try and mediate between the two men. Eden had stayed fifteen minutes after joining the library, taking two paperbacks—one by Dostoevsky and another by Brett Easton Ellis. When he brought the books to be checked out, he nodded at Paul and muttered thanks before leaving.

Paul had once felt sorry for Eden, but after meeting him now, he felt less so. Maybe he had deserved it. Brought it on himself. Instantly he felt ashamed at such a thought, but still, Sean was his friend and despite his crime, Paul wanted to protect him. Perhaps he could cultivate a friendship with Eden and find out what he intended to do if anything, to avenge himself on Sean. Of course that was laughable, because Eden would never trust him, being a friend of Sean's.

That night passed through his mind. He recalled Sean's red eyes and snotty face as he wept and begged Paul almost hysterically not to tell the police anything. In the end, Paul hadn't needed to do anything because the police hadn't come and Eden had disappeared like a wraith and was never heard from again. Paul couldn't forget how disgusted and disappointed in Sean he'd been when told how his friend had stood by and watched his three friends commit that heinous crime. He had wondered how he could continue to be Sean's friend after, but when he had seen Sean's true remorse and watched that night haunt him for the rest of his life, he knew Sean had received punishment enough, even if he had never had the courage to give himself up to the police. The past was the past and Paul couldn't allow Eden to destroy Sean. Not now.

Chapter Three

Sean had joined the police force hoping it would make him a better man. He had perhaps looked at putting away people who commit crimes in order to make up for not ratting on the boys who'd perpetrated the one against Eden.

He was a far better man than he'd been a boy. He was no longer that cruel bully. He protected the weak, he didn't discriminate against anyone, and he was careful about other people's feelings.

He was looked up to in the community, Sean knew that. Everyone knew his name and he was welcome at every house. He had a regular supply of baked goods from the elderly women of the town and received huge boxes of fruit and vegetables from those gardeners with prize-winning allotments. He was asked to judge competitions and pageants, and he was consulted on all things as though he were an expert on everything. From what Sean could see, he was only an expert on standing by and watching while another person's life was ruined. What would these good people think if they knew the ugly truth about him?

After work that night, he went to Bluey's for a hair of the dog. Sitting on a stool at the bar he ordered a beer and felt better after a couple of swallows. He nodded at some guys he knew playing pool. Apart from Paul, Sean kept to himself. This no doubt boiled down to paranoia on his part. The more people who knew him intimately, the more likely he was to be found out. That meant no close relationships of the other kind too. Sean had two or three women whom he went to on a semi-regular basis to satisfy his needs and who understood the arrangement. He tried not to pick up one-night stands in the bars because in a town as small and insular as this one, word would get around and besides, he knew most everyone in the town anyway and there was no fun in shitting on your own doorstep.

Sean tried not to analyse his reluctance to get involved with anyone, but deep down he knew it had something to do with that night. With the stain on his soul from his involvement in the crime, how exactly could he ever give himself to anyone else? He was marked for all time, not to be trusted, a destroyer of life who had yet to be punished. This seemed to be the only way to punish himself, by not allowing himself to be happy or get close to anyone.

He guessed Eden had shaped the man Sean had become, but he doubted the man would listen to Sean's heartfelt apologies and see how Sean had changed for the better. He drank his beer and told himself he would only be having two or three before he went home and got an early night.

A body slid onto the stool next to him, and Sean's heart sank. "Well hello there, Sean. You buying? I've got a thirst on me like I don't know what."

Sean clenched his teeth. He nodded to the bartender. "Get this guy whatever he wants."

"Beer, please." Eden remained silent until the bartender poured his drink and then he turned his attention back to Sean. Sean cut in, however, before he could speak.

"You've got your drink, you can leave now."

"I'm fine where I am thanks." Eden tipped his glass and took a hefty swallow of the beer. Sean's gaze slid down his throat, watching it undulate smoothly. Eden put his glass down and licked the foam off his lips slowly with a deliberate smirk.

To Sean's horror, something ignited in the pit of his stomach, something which burned him in a far more shocking way than indigestion. "There's a lot of hot guys in here," he said with distaste. "Why don't you run along and see if you can get a bed for the night?"

Eden smiled. His topaz eyes were molten with heat, fixed firmly on Sean. "You're the hottest guy in this place hands down. I don't need to look anywhere else."

Sean stared at him. "I don't know what game you're playing. . ." His voice was unsteady, lacking its usual confidence.

Eden's hand slid onto his thigh, travelling upward, fingers squeezing. "No game," he said. "Just that the one guy I would have been interested in taking it from that night didn't give it to me."

Sean's mouth dropped open. He recoiled as though burned, almost falling from the stool in his haste to get away. He left his beer half finished on the bar and rushed out the door with Eden's laughter ringing in his ears.

He made it to his car and jumped in but found his hand trembling too much to get the key in the ignition. He sat back a moment, eyes closed, taking deep breaths, his cock half-hard in his pants. What the hell had just happened back there? What the hell had Eden just *said* to him? Oh Jesus no, the man had looked into his eyes and saw just what Sean had tried to suppress all these years. He *knew*.

He slammed both hands hard against the steering wheel, anger overwhelming his fear and anxiety now. He started the engine and tore away from the bar.

He sat on the porch with a beer when he got home. Across the lake, Eden's house was dark inside, a light illuminated on the porch. Evidently he was going to stay at the bar and try his luck as Sean had suggested. He stared up at the stars in the night sky and bit his lip, telling himself no, he wouldn't think about that night. He *wouldn't*.

Sean and his three friends had caught Eden on his way home from one of his friend's houses that night. Eden always seemed very close to this friend at school, and Sean's gang had no doubt the two were something a little closer than homework buddies, which drove their distaste for him even further.

Eden was taking a short cut over some deserted scrub land when the headlights of Max's car illuminated his slender figure, and he looked over his shoulder with fear on his face. That was the first time Sean had seen the boy look scared, and it was like a red rag to a bull. He felt excitement in the pit of his stomach, some kind of blood lust, and he shouted at Max to drive faster. He knew something bad was going to happen. He knew Eden was going to get seriously hurt this time, and he *wanted* it.

There were two derelict buildings up ahead and Eden darted behind them. Max slammed the brakes on and left the engine running and lights on, such was his haste to scramble out of the car. Allan Johnson and Damon Morris raced after him, with Sean unfolding his long legs from the back of the car and bringing up the rear. By the time he got to the gap between the two buildings, Damon and Max were dragging Eden out, struggling furiously, held by his arms and the scruff of his neck.

Sean stood and smiled in delight as Eden's eyes met his. The boy still looked defiant even with the fear on his face. Max thrust Eden forward at Sean. "Hold him," he directed. Sean grabbed his nemesis hard and turned him around, one arm around his throat, the other around his waist.

Max punched Eden in the face and he sagged back against Sean, who held him tighter. "Stand up and take it like a fucking man, you fucking little queer," he growled into the boy's ear. Those words would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Fuck you!" Eden cried, and this time Allan stepped up and hit him. Eden's legs buckled. His head fell back against Sean's shoulder and Sean furiously dragged him upright noting the blood on Eden's face and the instant swelling to his cheek which suggested something was broken. He shoved him across to Max.

"My turn," he drawled before he punched him too, a punch with all the hatred and malice he felt for Eden behind it. He knew deep down in the bottom of his psyche what this hatred and malice was about, and he hoped that beating it out of Eden would beat it out of himself.

Eden slumped in Max's grip, and the leader of the gang shouted furiously and dragged him bodily over to his car, throwing him face down over the hood. "You're such a fucking pussy," he said in disgust. "We're going to have to have ourselves some fun here."

Allan and Damon started to smirk as Max reached underneath Eden for his belt and unbuckled it quickly before wrenching open the buttons to his jeans. Sean watched silently, frowning, unsure where this was going. A spanking? A mutilation? Eden was semi-conscious and made only mild sounds of protest as his pants and boxers were wrenched down and his ass was bared, snowy white against the shiny black paint of the hood.

Max was grinning. He unfastened his own pants just enough to pull his cock through the slit in his boxers. He was half-hard and he pulled at himself firmly, growing erect in his grip. He glanced at his friends. "Any of you guys got a rubber before I catch something from this fag?"

Damon and Allan shook their heads. Sean stared at his friend. "What are you..." he began, sure he must be misreading the intent on Max's face.

Max ignored him. "Just have to fill his tight little ass full up, won't I?" He smirked and slapped Eden hard on the ass so the firm muscle vibrated slightly. This brought Eden back to consciousness, and he started to thrash wildly on the car and curse foully.

"Hold him," Max directed Damon and Allan, and they did as they were told. Allan gripped Eden's wrists and pinned them down while Damon slammed his face into the hood, holding him hard by the back of the neck. Max spat on his hand and rubbed it along the length of his cock. He repeated it until the head was slick and shiny. Then he kicked Eden's feet apart roughly. He spread the boy's buttocks apart with both hands and rested his cock between them. Then he gave a grim little smile and holding Eden by the hips, he thrust forward.

Eden howled. Sean stumbled back against the wall of the building and turned his face away.

Grunting and sweating with exertion, Max held Eden tighter and thrust further inside him until he was buried to the hilt and then he started to move with hard, jerky thrusts. Thrusts designed to hurt as much as possible. "Oh yeah, oh yeah..." he groaned, slapping Eden on the ass like he was riding a bucking bronco. "You're tight, boy, not the little slut I thought you were."

"You fucking bastard," Eden spat, face crushed against the paintwork, totally immobilised, gasping for breath.

Max laughed. His fingernails dug cruelly into Eden's hips and left bleeding welts. Sean was watching again, unable *not* to watch. Max came to a loud climax, panting in ecstasy. "Fuck yes," he groaned as he withdrew and slapped Eden's ass once more. "He's fucking good. Who else wants a go?"

"Damn straight," Damon said, letting go of Eden's neck and already unfastening his jeans and drawing out his erection.

Eden cried out.

"No." Sean stepped forward.

Max turned his head to regard him with disinterest, tucking himself away. "Shut the fuck up, Sean, you little pussy. You can have him last, when we've broken him in nicely." He gripped Eden by the hair and slammed his head into the hood of the car. "Any more noise from you then we kill you when we're done fucking you. Your choice."

Damon spat on his hand and guided himself to Eden's ass, thrusting in. There was a stifled sob for breath. Eden was crying. Max cackled in delight and urged his friend on. "Come on, fuck this bastard."

Sean watched silently. It was over very quickly from Damon, who cursed and grunted as he came, pulling out to spurt semen over Eden's backside.

Max let go of Eden's neck, who barely moved, to applaud sarcastically. "Way to go, minute man," he said. "Look at that nice mess he's left you," he told Allan.

Allan glared at Max. "I resent getting sloppy seconds," he said as he took his cock free. "Just so you know."

"Sloppy thirds," Max corrected him. "Think how poor Sean's going to feel with sloppy fourths." All three men glanced over at Sean who had backed away again and had his arms around himself as though this might ward off being tainted with the crime he was watching. His wide eyes didn't move from the scene. This wasn't happening, he told himself. Soon he was going to wake up from this nightmare.

Allan didn't spit on his hand. He merely thrust into Eden, whose body jolted on the car as though electrocuted and then went still, the fight completely gone from him. Allan rode him hard and fast and Max and Damon urged him on with loud chants and jeers. Damon still held Eden by the wrists but Max didn't bother holding his neck now because Eden didn't move. He only wept silently, a pool of tears and drool on the paint beneath his mouth.

Sean stepped slowly backwards, torn between wanting to run and feeling too guilty to. He collided with the wall and slid down it until he sat there with his knees up, his arms around them. His horror had been replaced by a kind of numb shock now at what he was witnessing.

Allan came to a swift climax too. His clenching hands added to the bruises and scratches already on Eden's hips. He withdrew, panting for breath and fastened himself back up. "Come on, Sean," Max told his friend.

Sean didn't move from the ground. He could not speak.

Max's lip curled in distaste. "Stay a virgin the rest of your life then," he said and Damon and Allan cackled. Damon let go of Eden's wrists and got off the hood of the car. The three boys stood there a moment looking at Eden in silence. Then Max kicked him cruelly in the back of the knee, so his legs buckled. "Get up off my fucking car," he snarled.

Eden lifted his head slightly. His fingers clawed at the paint for purchase. Max huffed in annoyance. With Damon, the two gripped Eden under the arms, pulled him up and tossed him face down on the ground. Then they went to get into the car, Allan following.

"Come on," he told Sean.

Sean still didn't move, frozen to the ground.

"Fine," Max shouted. "Walk home, asshole."

The car's lights illuminated Eden's prone body one last time as it backed up, turned and then sped away, leaving the scene in darkness.

The silence was complete. Sean stared across at Eden. The boy lay motionless on his face, seemingly unconscious, pants still around his ankles. Sean slowly moved from his spot, crawling across the grass on hands and knees.

He looked down into Eden's bruised, bleeding face which was streaked with tears and snot and with the pads of his fingertips, he patted his cheek lightly. "Come on," he said, his voice trembling. "Wake up."

Eden's lashes fluttered. He opened his eyes, golden brown in the darkness.

"Get yourself dressed and go home," Sean directed him quietly.

Eden's legs moved half-heartedly and then stopped. He appeared too exhausted to do anything. Sean rolled him over onto his back. Then he stooped over him and grabbed the boy's hands. Eden allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, helping minimally. Sean bent and yanked the boy's boxers and pants up.

"Fasten up," he said.

Eden looked down, his hands fumbling at his pants, leaving his belt unfastened before he pulled his hoodie down over it.

Sean gave him a little shove. "Go home."

Eden looked up at him a moment, his face expressionless. Then he turned and stumbled away towards the lights in the distance, walking with a limp.

Sean watched him go, following the progress of the boy he would deny his feelings for until the end of time.

Sean's beer was empty. A light had come on downstairs in the house across the lake. He took his empty bottle into the house and for the first time in a long while, he locked the door behind him before he switched off the porch light and went upstairs to unhappy dreams.

Chapter Four

Sean wasn't much in the mood for compulsory firearms training down at the rifle range next day, but he had no choice in the matter. It was all just an exercise as far as he was concerned anyway. He could probably count on the fingers of one hand how many times he'd had cause to draw his gun, let alone fire it, in the course of the last few years.

Side by side with his deputy, he went through the motions, hitting all his targets in the heart or in the head, his mind far away, going back time and time again to those topaz eyes on his last night and that hand on his thigh.

His weapon empty of bullets, he turned around to reload, stopping as he felt the guy in the next lane watching him. His blood turned cold.

"I'm beginning to think you're stalking me," he told Eden icily.

Eden gave his usual arrogant smirk. "You're paranoid, as a man with secrets should be. I'm just here to learn how to defend myself. What's wrong with that?"

Sean glared at him. "I'm not over-fond of the public handling guns. I think they should leave it to the professionals."

Eden eyed him with distaste. "You'll protect us all will you Sean? Because you did such a good job of that eighteen years ago when you stood watching, getting your rocks off."

Sean lunged forward, blind with rage, oblivious to the fact that the both of them held guns. He gripped Eden by the shoulder, pushing him back against his lane marker. "That didn't fucking get me off," he said in a harsh undertone. "It disgusted me."

Eden looked up at Sean, those cat-like eyes fixed on his. "Sure. That's why you intervened so quickly. Now if I were you, I'd step away, seeing as my gun is pointed right at your heart. Just think, if it went off accidentally, they'd say I was a novice and I'd get away with murder." Eden smiled sweetly without showing his teeth.

Sean stared at him. Just then, his deputy intervened. "Sean, what are you doing? Come on, break it up before there's an accident." Jonah man-handled Sean away from Eden and Sean stalked away, glaring back at his nemesis.

"What the fuck was that?" Jonah followed Sean into the locker room. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Sean didn't say anything, he only banged his locker open and wrenched off his shirt.

"Who is that guy?" Jonah persisted.

"Someone I went to school with," Sean muttered. "We have history."

"Then settle it some other way, not on the firing range. Jesus." Jonah went to his own locker, shaking his head.

Sean didn't speak; he carried on changing and gathered his stuff together as quickly as he could before Eden came in from the range.

Sean had not seen Eden again at school after his friends raped him. He didn't show up for school next day, and Sean went around with a cold lump in the bottom of his stomach for days, not eating, not sleeping, convinced the police were going to show up and arrest him for being an accessory to the crime. There was only Eden's word against his and with the physical evidence of rape on his body, Eden could probably say Sean had raped him too and he would be believed. Then he imagined all the DNA the cops could get from the three lots of semen and knew he was in the clear on that count. Of course, if Eden wanted him convicted so badly, he could say Sean used a condom. Eden could fuck him up if he wanted to and Sean wouldn't blame him if he did.

His friends whispered in corners, and the news was spread from people who knew Eden that he and his parents had upped and moved to another state, just like that and they weren't coming back.

"He hasn't told on us," Max told the rest of his gang. "That pussy was too scared to. We're in the clear."

Sean didn't feel like he was in the clear. Eden's silence had condemned Sean to a lifetime of guilt and misery.

He started making excuses not to hang around with Max, Damon, and Allan. He avoided them after school and tried not to sit with them in class. He couldn't bear to look any of them in the face, but he reserved most of his vitriol for Max because he felt that without the ringleader's encouragement, Damon and Allan would never have gone so far on their own.

Things came to a head a month later. Max cornered Sean against his locker as he came out of the shower after Phys Ed, a towel around his waist. "What's the deal Sean?" His expression and body language was confrontational. Sean had never been afraid of Max though. He had only ever hung around with the gang because he probably would have been on his own otherwise. Perhaps he never would have become the bully he had if he had never met these boys.

"What do you mean?" he asked. He reached into his locker for some deodorant and Max leaned forward swiftly, slamming the door, pushing Sean against it.

"What I mean is you walking around with a face like someone died for the past few weeks. What's the matter, miss your boyfriend?"

Sean clenched his teeth. He stared into Max's malicious grey eyes, body tensed and ready to fight. "You shouldn't have done it, Max."

"Done what?" Max countered. He pushed Sean back again, hard. "Say it, Sean."

Sean looked around, glancing at Damon and Allan who looked like they scented the blood of a weaker opponent. But Sean wasn't Eden, and he'd take on all three of them if he had to with no second thought. "Raped him," he said in an undertone, keeping his eyes fixed unblinkingly on Max. "You *raped* him."

Max stepped closer so his nose almost touched Sean's and Sean smelled garlic on his breath. "And you stood there and watched. You let it happen. If you go to the cops, you go down too."

Sean didn't speak. Max laughed, glancing at his cronies. "And besides, that's a harsh word you used. He wanted it."

"What? How exactly do you work that?"

"He's a fag. Fags always want something in their ass. Bet he's never had anything as big as me in there before though."

From what Sean could remember, Max was a little on the under-endowed side. He shoved his friend back furiously. "What you did to him disgusts me," he cried, giving little thought to the other boys standing around watching. "I can't sleep at night for seeing him on that car. Me and you, we're done."

Max's lip curled. "I was so right about you. You don't have any balls at all."

Sean lunged across the distance which separated them, shoving Max into the opposite lockers with a crash. "I don't have any balls because I didn't rape another guy?" His voice was loud and he didn't care. He suspected most of the boys in this locker-room knew what had gone down anyway. "Jesus, how did you get this way? How did you get to the stage where you thought it was okay to gang-rape someone?"

Max punched him in the stomach, sending him reeling back. "Fucking fag. Always knew you were hard for that little queer."

Sean leapt forward. He sent Max to the floor with a punch to the face and the two grappled furiously on the cold tiles with other boys chanting and cheering around them until their gym teacher broke it up. After that day, Sean never spoke to Max, Damon, or Allan again. The rest of his time at high school was very lonely.

Sean was due to take a statement from the owner of the general store regarding a shoplifter. He sat outside thinking about Max and how he had allowed his association with him to go so badly off the tracks and into such dark water. He'd always known this would catch up with him sooner or later; how could it not? He was as much to blame as the other three because he *watched* and did nothing. In fact, sometimes he thought he was *more* culpable than Max, Damon, and Allan.

Once or twice a week he had the same nightmare. Being back on that empty lot watching as his friends raped Eden. Often he awoke shouting, begging Max to stop. Sometimes, rarely, he turned the nightmare around. He dragged Max off Eden, punched him, beat his head against the ground until he was unconscious. Seeing their leader fallen, Allan and Damon fled, leaving Sean alone with Eden. Sean then helped Eden dress. He sat on the ground and held Eden in his arms, comforting and soothing until Eden stopped crying and Sean could lift him up and walk him home. At the end of that dream, Eden and he were reconciled, forever.

The exchange on the gun range almost frightened him. It didn't seem to be just a case of Eden coming back to ruin Sean's life now, but more a case of him coming back to *take* Sean's life. The threat had been implicit. And yet, that was something Sean would have to accept. His inaction had wreaked devastation the like of which he would never know. He deserved all he got from Eden.

* * * *

Eden came back to the library that day, returning one of his books. "You read quick," Paul remarked coolly as he took the book and scanned it.

"Yeah well, not a lot to do around here at night is there?" Eden replied, his tone a little flippant.

Paul steeled himself, already bristling. "Listen, can I have a word? I get off for my break in ten minutes. Maybe I could buy you a coffee?"

Eden looked at him hard for a moment. "Well, let me see, you're either coming on to me or you're interceding on Sean's behalf, which one is it?"

Paul reddened. "The latter," he muttered with a glare.

"I'm almost disappointed," Eden said. "I'll be outside."

Ten minutes later, Paul took a few deep breaths as he grabbed his coat and wallet and went outside. There was only one thing he felt like doing to Eden and it wasn't talking. He felt like smashing his pretty face in.

Eden was waiting at the bottom of the steps, and the two set off walking down the main street, Paul leading the way into his favourite café. Eden sat opposite him at a table by the window and watched Paul unblinkingly from those unsettling yellowish eyes of his.

"Two coffees," Paul ordered from the waitress and then turned his attention to Eden and began his pitch.

"Look, I know you've come back to make Sean's life hard and I just want to say, you can't do anything to him that he hasn't already done to himself these past eighteen years. He's been crippled with guilt. It's blighted his entire life."

Eden regarded him a moment and then fury crossed his face and he leaned forward over the table. "Sean's life has been blighted? *Sean's* life? Did he tell you that I was held down while three men queued up and raped me one after the other? Did he mention that fact?"

Paul lowered his gaze. "Yes, he did. He came to my house the night it happened, sobbing his heart out over what he'd seen. And he's never been the same since. He's waited for you to denounce him all these years and he knew it would happen. He's ready for it and he'll accept it, but I just want to beg you, as his friend, to please have mercy on him. He's suffered enough."

Eden's lip curled scornfully. "I haven't even started." He pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. "Nice try though. I almost felt sorry for him." He left the café without looking back.

"I think Eden's stalking me," Sean mumbled into his coffee when Paul came over that night. "And I think he... came on to me last night at the bar." Blushing, he recounted the incident and then mentioned Eden at the shooting range earlier.

Paul regarded him and then chose his next words carefully because he was starting to get a much clearer picture of what had once gone on between Sean and Eden, even if neither of them would be putting it into words any time soon. "Did you... *want* him to come on to you?"

Sean's head jerked up, his eyes wide with confusion, an objection forming on his lips, which was gone just as quickly. He let his reddening face drop onto his hand, hiding it as though ashamed. He was silent for a long, long time.

"Sean," Paul said gently. "I'm your best friend. I know everything about you. There is nothing you can't tell me, and if you once had some unrequited feelings for this guy, then say so. Do you really think it makes any difference to how I think about you?"

Sean swallowed. He licked his lips in a nervous fashion. "You already think I'm the lowest of the low, Paul," he said in a murmur. "How would you feel about me if I told you everything I put that guy through was in order to deny my own feelings for him?"

Sean had never told Paul why he bullied Eden. It was just a fact, and Paul had never questioned him further. But now he saw what he had never seen before. He felt confused and exasperated and not a little disappointed that Sean would have some sort of crush over someone as unpleasant as Eden. "Then God, Sean, why didn't you stop it? You cared about him and yet you watched him get raped." It was the first time he had ever thrown the accusation in Sean's face and he saw it traumatised his friend.

Sean shoved his chair back from the table and started to pace the kitchen. "I don't know. I don't know if it was because I was scared or if it was because if I made myself watch, then any feelings I had for him would be gone. He would be tainted in my eyes once my friends had had him, and I wouldn't want him anymore." He stopped and turned to look at Paul, his eyes full with tears. "What kind of man am I, Paul? Now do you understand why I'll never be free of this the rest of my life?"

It was some time later, after a couple of drinks, that Sean was calmer. The two of them sat on the couch in front of the TV, the lights turned down low, talking quietly. Paul was both surprised and yet not by Sean's revelation. Something about Sean's reluctance to have a long-term relationship with a woman had always made Paul wonder if he was gay and yet, he had never shown an interest in another man, ever. Could it be possible that Sean had held a torch for Eden, and Eden alone, all this time?

Paul found this idea difficult to accept. He did not like Eden. He didn't want Sean having anything to do with the bitter and twisted victim of his crime.

He steered the conversation back to what Sean had started to tell him happened the night before, in the bar.

"So. Last night. Eden came onto you?"

Sean nodded. "He told me I was the hottest guy in the place. He put his hand on my leg." He stopped and sighed. "Paul, I've got three women on speed dial I could go over and fuck six ways to Sunday if I wanted to. Any or all of them would probably come over and suck my cock right now if I asked them to. And honestly, I can say that the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me in my life before was when Eden put his hand on my leg last night."

Paul was astonished. He felt a little stab of revulsion. "You've got it bad man," he murmured. "Even all these years later, you still feel the same?"

Sean ignored the question. "I don't think he meant it," he said, eyes on the TV. "He was teasing me. Maybe he knows I always harboured feelings for him and this is part of his revenge." He smiled a little sadly. "Maybe he plans to seduce me."

Chapter Five

The weekend finally came and with it Sean's days off. He had successfully avoided Eden for the rest of week. How he managed in a town this size was a mystery, but he had worked hard at skulking in the shadows and staying at home and it had paid off.

On Saturday afternoon Sean went down to the lake carrying a bag containing his towel, sunscreen, and a novel, together with his lunch. He intended to stay there as long as the heat would allow or until he got bored. He headed to the usual spot where the water was shallow. The path led to the top of a hill which then gently sloped down to the banks of the lake, the water hidden from view until one had crested the summit.

Bag over his shoulder, Sean descended towards the water, stopping dead as a gleaming Adonis rose dripping and naked from the lake like a water god. Eden stopped, hands lifted to brush his wet hair back from his face. Frozen to the spot. Sean's eyes dropped unbidden down his body. Eden was tanned all over, his skin like honey, his torso and biceps rippling with muscle, his stomach lean and his thighs strong. He had no hair on his chest, only a narrow, dark trail leading down to his groin. Between his legs swung heavy balls and a cock which even flaccid was thick and long.

Sean dragged his gaze reluctantly back up to Eden's. Eden smirked slowly. He stood where he was, making no effort to cover himself, not looking remotely embarrassed. "See something you like, Sean?" he questioned. Sean wore a cut-off t-shirt and his swimming shorts, and Eden's eyes roamed lazily over his muscular chest and arms.

Sean swallowed. He tried to speak, wanting to tell Eden angrily to put his clothes on but his throat was too dry. Rivulets of water were tracking a path slowly down Eden's chiselled torso, and suddenly Sean was parched. He imagined drinking the water from this man's body with his tongue.

Eden continued to smile. "You shouldn't look at me that way. You make me excited." And his hand moved into his groin, in a shy parody of covering himself when in fact, as Sean's eyes followed his progress, he actually cupped himself and slid himself through his fingers, fondling deliberately.

Sean stared. Eden was growing hard before his eyes. He felt that same heat ignite in his stomach the way it had when Eden touched his thigh in the bar. His shorts started to tighten unbearably. He dragged his gaze away and forced himself forward on leaden legs, intending to brush rudely past Eden.

But Eden caught him by the arm hard and held him in place. "Where are you going?" he asked in a silky voice. "You've got me all worked up now and I'm pretty sure the feeling's mutual." His other hand slid into Sean's groin before he could stop it, fingers seeking and squeezing the bulge in his flimsy swimming shorts.

Sean gasped. He tried to jerk away, but Eden still held him fast by the arm and the desire flooding Sean's body left him weak as a kitten.

Eden's voice dropped, and his breath tickled Sean's ear. They were face to face, their hips pressed together. "I need to get off," he whispered. "Any idea who could help me out with that?"

Sean shook his head dumbly and tried again to pull his arm away. Meanwhile Eden's fingers nimbly massaged his growing hard-on before moving down to fondle his balls. Sean's breath hitched in his throat. The heat of the sun and the wet nearness of Eden's body conspired to make him feel faint. Eden pressed his erection against Sean's hip, and the solid feel of it shocked him.

Eden smiled at the expression on his face. This was all so familiar to Sean. Eden had behaved like a slut at school, always hanging around with different boys, always flirting and coming onto the straightest of boys. Nothing had changed with him. He seemed to have only one facet to his personality. Where was the man who was damaged and broken by rape as he should have been? Why did the fact that Eden refused to act like a victim bother him so much?

"Why don't you get your fucking fag hands off me?" Sean demanded, shrugging free of Eden's grip.

Eden's lip curled in derision, his eyes knowing. "You can drop the hate act. You want me," he stated boldly.

Sean gripped Eden's arm suddenly in return, the muscle of his biceps hard, the skin damp and soft. "Maybe just once if you showed me the real you, I wouldn't hate you so fucking much."

The smirk dropped from Eden's mouth. He looked like he had been slapped in the face, and Sean saw it. He saw finally what Eden had never let him see once all the time he had tormented and abused him at school. He saw the real Eden. He saw anguish, fear, and anxiety. He saw a lifetime's worth of pain and destruction. He saw what he and his friends had done to this man. He saw Eden's inner scars.

And Sean's stomach lurched with something more than desire. He felt a pain in his chest like he was having a heart attack, and he was afraid. It was a bittersweet ache of blind need and desperation, the urge to protect and provide comfort, the thing he had tried so hard to block out during his school days. Suddenly his arousal faded into the background because now his seldom-troubled heart had become involved, and it superseded all. Suddenly this was deadly serious. He let go of Eden's arm and stalked down to the lake.

He dropped his bag to the ground and kicked off his shoes before stripping off his t-shirt. Hurriedly he waded into the water and launched himself into a fast crawl, making for the opposite bank. His heart pounded in his ears. He almost expected to hear a splash of water behind him, for Eden to be following, another confrontation inevitable.

But he didn't, and Sean stopped half way across the lake to tread water, turning his head to look. Eden was gone.

"Sean, sorry to bother you on your night off, but I really need you to answer this. I'm at an RTC up on the highway and I can't leave."

Sean sighed inwardly. It rarely happened that he was called into work, but on the night it had to happen, it was typical he had already downed two beers. Still, it could have been worse. If Jonah had called a couple of hours later, Sean would probably have been too drunk to stand up. That had been his plan for the evening. "I've had a drink, Jonah," he said.

"How much?"

"Two."

"Doesn't matter. No one'll notice where you're going. Bluey called me from his bar. Eden is there, wasted off his face and causing trouble."

Sean closed his eyes, holding the phone tight. Anything but this. "Can't Bluey throw him out?"

"He's an old man, Sean. He needs some help."

"Yeah, all right. See you later." Sean hung up. He went upstairs to change his clothes.

Sean stopped his car outside the bar. He sat a moment, steeling himself, and then he reached into his glove box for his cuffs because he fully intended to arrest the son of a bitch if it meant shutting him up.

He slammed his door and waded purposefully into the bar, jaw set. The music and heat hit him in a wave. The place was packed, and most of the eyes in the place were fixed on that evening's entertainment.

Eden was atop a pool table, gyrating furiously like he thought he was in a lap dancing club. He wore tight jeans and a t-shirt which rose above his lean hips and abdomen as he swayed with arms above his head, undulating with blatant sexuality, alternately thrusting his groin and ripe backside. He was being heckled by a group of burly guys who were threatening to drag his 'fag ass' off the table and he was yelling in turn, "The Sheriff is a personal friend of mine. And I mean *personal*. I wouldn't touch me if I were you."

Sean stopped and stared a moment. He wanted nothing more than to turn around right now and leave this scene. He just knew he was asking for trouble. He waded through the bodies to the table.

Eden had his back to him when Sean grabbed him around the waist and dragged him bodily off the table. He kicked out a moment and swung his arms, so Sean held him tighter against his body, and then Eden turned his head and his body relaxed. "Oh, it's you," he said in relief, slurring his words. He turned around and linked his arms around Sean's neck, grinding his pelvis blatantly against his. "Shall we dance, Sheriff?"

Sean felt his face heat with the fifty pairs of eyes watching him with interest. Someone shouted something about the two of them making a great couple and asked when the wedding was.

Eden turned his head and yelled over his shoulder to the guys who had been baiting him. "I told you he was a personal friend of mine. Now I'm going to take him out back and suck his cock."

Sean gripped Eden's arms, spinning him around, viciously twisting both wrists up behind his back. "Move, asshole," he growled loudly enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear—although most of them were looking way too amused—and shoved Eden forward.

Eden stumbled all the way out of the bar, alternately cursing and laughing to himself. Outside he started to struggle, and Sean shoved him against the side of his car.

"You going to come quietly or do I have to cuff you?"

Eden let out a little moan. He pushed his backside against Sean's groin. "I never *come* quietly. And I *love* to be cuffed." He held his hands up in submission.

Sean dragged him angrily back from the door, opened it and shoved him inside. He went around to the driver's side with the blood boiling in his veins. He wanted to beat Eden. He wanted to cuff him and beat all the sluttiness out of him. He wanted to hit him until Eden became the man he had seen at the lake earlier that day. The victim. His shame at his thoughts knew no bounds.

He set off from the bar, driving with reckless speed and heading away from town.

"You taking me to the woods to have your wicked way with me?" Eden cackled from by his side, head lolling back against the seat. "I've got a rubber and lube in my pocket. I was hoping to get fucked tonight."

"Shut the fuck up, whore," Sean spat. "I'm taking you home."

Eden clicked his tongue. "I know you're still wondering what it feels like to be inside me after you missed your chance," he said in a low, mocking voice. "I bet you still think about me spread-eagled and open on that hood, don't you, with my ass dripping..."

Sean slammed his brakes on, the car squealing to a halt on the road leading up to Eden's house. "Shut up, you fucking slut!" he cried. "You deserved it, you fucking deserved it! Get the hell out of my car." He leaned over Eden and shoved the door open, then he bundled the man violently from his car.

Eden fell into the dirt in a heap. Sean hastily turned his car around, and Eden climbed to his feet and pulled his pants down, mooning him as he drove away.

Sean was filled with a rage so violent he could barely drive the car. He wanted nothing more than to go back and pulverise Eden's face into a pulp. He wanted to sate all the anguish of the last eighteen years on this man who refused to play the victim. He reached the crossroads which would take him around the lake and glanced in his rear-view mirror.

He could see Eden's house in the distance behind him and on the porch steps before it, a figure on hands and knees, head hanging down. Sean's foot eased off the accelerator. He looked again and then he shifted to brake and stopped the car, watching intently in the mirror.

The figure slowly slumped forward until his head rested on the ground. His body fell to one side and he curled up into a tight foetal position. Sean's anger drained and left him trembling.

He shifted to reverse and started to back up the road. His heart beat faster and faster the closer he got. Finally he came to Eden's house and stopped, getting out of his car. A light rain had started to fall. Eden was weeping as Sean approached the steps, his sobs soft, his body curled up into itself as though to protect him from the outside world. Sean was taken back to that night on the empty lot, the fading lights of the car illuminating the broken figure on the ground.

He went over to the steps and climbed up behind Eden, crouching down. "If I thought saying sorry would mean anything at all, then I would," he said quietly.

Eden's breath hitched. "It won't, but I still want to hear you say it."

"Oh Jesus, I'm sorry, you know I am. If I could go back, if I could just..." Sean trailed off. He hesitantly placed his palm on Eden's back, rubbing softly.

"I can't go on," Eden said in a broken voice, turning his head. "It doesn't get any easier, and I thought it would. I tried to kill myself last year and I failed. Someone found me in my car in the garage."

Sean's heart clenched and stuttered. He shook his head. "No Eden..." he said helplessly. His hands moved to Eden's shoulders, attempting to lift him from the ground.

Eden turned over onto hands and knees. He started to fumble at his belt. "Here," he said, "this is what you want. Take it." He dragged his pants down.

Sean's hands stopped him before his boxers could come down too. "Don't."

"Take it," Eden repeated. "I know you want it."

Sean gripped him by the elbows and pulled him to his feet, yanking his pants up. "Let's go." The rain was growing heavier, and thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. The clouds above matched Sean's mood just fine. There was that ache in his chest again and he felt perilously close to crying. He pushed Eden towards his door and reached around him, patting his pockets. "Where's your key?"

Eden swayed in place. "Here," he said, gripping Sean's hand and forcing it into his crotch.

Sean drew his hand away with a sigh of exasperation.

"It's open, asshole," Eden told him. "I always leave it unlocked in the hope someone will come by and murder me while I sleep."

Sean pushed him inside. Eden kicked off his shoes, swaying and holding onto the wall, and then he fell to his knees inside the living room doorway and started to cry again.

Sean moved swiftly forward and crouched before him. Without hesitation he took Eden in his arms, holding him hard. Eden tried to push him away for the briefest moment and then he held onto him, hands clinging to his shirt, face buried against his shoulder. Sean's hand smoothed Eden's damp, unruly hair back. He nuzzled lightly at the other man's forehead with mouth and nose, trying to communicate comfort. In turn though, holding Eden this way comforted Sean. It comforted him beyond belief. The solid feel of Eden's body against his made him feel *complete*. He was terrified by his thoughts.

He touched his mouth to Eden's eyebrow and eyelid. He tasted the salt of his tears. Eden's head lifted. His lips brushed Sean's neck. Sean flinched, and his skin burned. His hand tightened in Eden's hair. His eyes closed as he felt the light touch of Eden's mouth on his cheek, moving across it, zeroing in.

Sean's mouth parted and he waited. Eden kissed him softly and hesitantly. His mouth, rather than devouring as Sean might have imagined, seemed innocent. Sean would have thought Eden had never been kissed before. But then Sean had never kissed a man before and never thought he would. He had never wanted to kiss any man but Eden. His sweet kiss made Sean burn for more. Maybe that was Eden's intention, maybe the kiss was carefully calculated to seduce. But with lips damp with his own tears and his tongue firmly kept to himself, this seemed anything but.

Sean's hand curled around Eden's neck and held him close. Kneeling face to face on the carpet they continued to kiss. Sean's entire body was inflamed. He burned with a passion he had never known before in his life. He thought he would moan aloud in bliss. He felt like he would lose control. He pushed Eden back, but he was careful about it, not so far gone that he didn't remember this man's history and that he couldn't allow himself to use any roughness which might be construed the wrong way. His hands went beneath Eden, lying him down carefully on the carpet. Eden moaned softly as Sean's body covered his. His fingers dug into Sean's shoulders through his shirt. One of Sean's hands found Eden's stomach, pushing up his shirt, touching the firm, bare flesh, stroking and seeking. He felt Eden quiver under his touch, and he asked himself wildly how far this was going to go. All the way? Was he going to finally live out his deepest, darkest desire, the one which had plagued him for half his life?

He sat up on his heels. Eden lay looking up at him, eyes red, mouth lusciously and sensually swollen, his chest heaving. Their gazes met intensely, topaz and blue. For a moment they were still. Sean tried to read Eden's thoughts through his eyes. Did he want this? Did he want Sean to take him right here on the carpet? Because God, Sean wanted it. Eden reached out. He ran both hands up Sean's thighs, his right one dipping into his groin, fingers tracing the bulge in his pants slowly and firmly.

That was the green light. This was it.

Sean pushed Eden's shirt up his chest with trembling hands. He lowered his mouth to his chest and pressed a line of kisses down the centre of it, working his way down his torso. One hand played with Eden's nipples while he kissed, one after the other, squeezing them gently to stiff peaks, feeling Eden shudder under his touch.

Eden's pants were still unfastened. Sean reached the waistband of his boxers and looked at the bulge outlined below the thin material. He pressed his mouth to it. Eden caught his breath. Sean started at the root of the shaft and dragged his lips slowly up it to the head, leaving the cotton damp. He closed his lips over the head, nuzzling, sucking through the boxers, noting how this teasing drove Eden wild.

He stroked the thick length through Eden's underwear. Eden shifted below him, hands touching Sean below his shirt, making his skin burn. Sean's thumb stroked the bulbous head and ran over the slit. He watched a damp spot blossom on the boxers. He lowered his head and probed firmly with his tongue, wetting the boxers further. Eden let out a moan.

Sean hooked his finger under the top of the boxers and pulled them back enough that the head of Eden's cock was exposed. Eden almost whimpered with need as Sean lowered his head. Putting his tongue out, he ran it slowly over the exposed flesh, tracing circles, leaving the rosy head glistening. He was delicate about it, almost afraid at this intimate foreplay but wanting and needing to touch Eden this way.

Eden's back arched below him. Sean's tongue flicked wetly over his slit and his partner gasped and caught Sean by the hair. Sean felt his own cock throb in response. He couldn't help but put his hand down and rub himself through his uniform pants as he licked Eden's cock.

His lips nibbled at the head and he swept his tongue over and around it, dipping time and time again into the slit. He felt Eden shudder and start to tremble suddenly below him and Sean lifted his head in surprise because surely—

Eden let out a loud groan. He bucked his hips up and as Sean took his mouth away, Eden came, spurting semen onto his own stomach. Sean watched, both disappointed and violently aroused. He let his head drop down onto Eden's thigh and lay still as Eden collapsed onto the carpet motionless. He knew without doubt that the fun was over.

Eden lay silently with chest heaving for long seconds. When he spoke, his voice was icily composed. "Get out of my house."

Sean lifted his head. "Eden..."

Eden drew his legs up and away from Sean. He crawled unsteadily to his feet, fastening himself up. "I said get the fuck out," he growled, turning his back, heading for the kitchen.

Sean followed him in there, finding him rubbing at the fluid on his stomach with a handful of tissues. "Are you still here?" Eden asked in irritation. "Fuck off."

"Listen to me..."

"I'm not interested in anything you have to say," Eden said. "You got me off. You can go. I don't need anything else from you."

Sean regarded him. He felt angry and used. He didn't want to leave it like this. "Do you always have such lack of self-control?" he asked derisively, unable to help

himself being catty.

Eden's head turned to his, eyes glowing angrily. A grim smirk twisted his mouth. "You're just pissed that I didn't let you fuck me."

Sean flushed. He stared Eden hard in his cat-like eyes. He wanted to burst forth with his feelings. He wanted to make Eden see that oh God, it was so much more than that. Sean wanted to fuck him, of course he did, that was not in doubt, but did Eden know just how deep the waters ran? That there was more than Sean's dick involved here? That Eden made his heart beat faster and he always had?

Even at Sean's most cruel, Eden had always been in control of him, body, mind and soul. And here, now, he still controlled him.

"Don't pretend to know me," he told Eden coldly. "You know nothing about me." He turned to leave.

"I know *plenty* about you," Eden cried, chasing after Sean as he wrenched open the front door and stepped outside onto the porch. "I know you're a bully who made my life a misery for years and I wished myself *dead* just so I could escape you! I know it was you who instigated what your friends did to me!"

Sean stopped, face turned away. He felt hot tears at the back of his eyes and blinked them away. Why on earth did Eden think he had instigated *that*? But then he had to look at it from Eden's point of view. Sean had told him after that French lesson that he was a dead man. He could see why Eden would think the rape was Sean's idea even if he hadn't participated. He turned to look at Eden. "I'm not that guy anymore," he told him, his voice low and regretful.

"Yes, you are," Eden shouted. "A leopard doesn't change his spots. You *are* that guy."

Sean regarded him in silence for a long moment. There was nothing else he could say in his defence. It was all so pointless. He got into his car, started the engine and drove away.

Chapter Seven

Sean thought he would lose his mind in the coming days as he went relentlessly over that night, time and time again. He felt himself sprawled over Eden's body, between his legs, licking and sucking at his cock, making him come. He felt those sweet, soft lips on his and then he heard the angry voice of recrimination, telling Sean he would never change.

What could he do to make Eden believe that he *had* changed? What could he do to make him believe that he was sorry? He burned with the need to see him and feel him in his arms one more time. He thought he would go insane with his desire, reliving that half naked body lying in submission below his, ripe for the taking.

Finally, enough was enough. He got in his car one night after dinner and drove around the lake to Eden's house. When he drew up outside with his heart racing wildly, he noticed there was another car parked next to the Porsche and he was crushed with disappointment. Eden had visitors. Any chat they might have had was down the drain. Nonetheless, a glutton for punishment anyway, he got out, climbed the steps to the door and knocked.

He turned away and looked out over the lake towards his own house. Twilight was descending rapidly, the air filled with the sound of crickets, peaceful and tranquil as always. He turned around as he heard the door open. Swallowing, he composed himself and almost instantly lost that composure.

Eden stood there in a pair of tight, white boxers which outlined the thick shaft of an erection, a startling bulge against the material. Suddenly Sean's hands were twice as damp and his own cock was twitching.

Eden smiled sweetly. "Yes, Sean?"

All Sean could visualise was his own tongue running wetly over the head of that cock, leaving it gleaming. He couldn't speak.

"Who is it, babe?" came another voice and startled, Sean saw another man approach behind Eden, bare-chested and wearing a pair of jeans. One hand slid around Eden's hip, stroking it.

Eden smiled at Sean. "This is Sean," he told the man behind him. "He's an old friend."

"Hello, Sean," Eden's guest replied. "I'm Harrison." He was taller than Eden, almost as tall as Sean and blond, his eyes a pale blue, bordering on silver. He was tanned and freckled and his body was well muscled.

Sean nodded stiffly. His gaze strayed to the hand on Eden's hip and watched as the fingertips glided down and blatantly strayed over the bulge in Eden's boxers. Sean flushed angrily. He wanted to punch Harrison's lights out. Eden's smile became even more amused. "So what was it you wanted to talk to me about, Sean?" he questioned, waiting patiently in the ensuing silence.

Sean glanced at Harrison. "It can wait."

"Are you sure?" Eden taunted him.

Sean nodded tersely. He turned and walked away. When he climbed in his car, he looked back to see Eden and Harrison lip-locked on the doorstep. Such hurt and pain blossomed through his chest that he couldn't breathe. Eden belonged to another man.

The next few days were agony. Sean stayed at home when he wasn't at work, terrified of encountering Eden with his boyfriend somewhere in town. Why hadn't Eden told him? Why had he allowed that night on the carpet in his front room to go so far when he had a boyfriend? Because he was fucking with Sean, obviously. Because he wanted to seduce Sean and discard him and leave him hurting and broken the way Sean's friends had once left Eden.

He thought back again to what Eden had said about attempting suicide the previous year. What if Eden had accomplished this? It would have been Sean's fault and he never would have been able to live with this extra guilt.

"What's going on?" Paul asked as soon as they were settled in the living room with beers the next Monday night. Sean had been avoiding him and not returning his calls.

Sean swallowed. There was no point in being coy with Paul any more. His friend knew he wanted Eden.

"I was called out to Bluey's bar last week. Eden was there, drunk and causing a commotion. I dragged him out and took him home. We exchanged some nasty words and then we sort of ended up on the floor and..." Sean turned his head away, blushing in discomfort.

"Did you...?"

Sean shook his head. "We didn't get all that far. Eden was a little premature." He smiled grimly. "Then he threw me out of the house. I went back to see him a few days later and he had some guy there feeling him up."

Paul nodded. "I saw him with a guy in the store this morning."

Sean bit his lip.

"He's a slut," Paul said. "Putting it about town with anyone who asks."

Sean's head jerked up. He stared at Paul, dumb-struck. "Paul..." he tried to say because he was uncomfortable with Paul behaving the way Sean and his cronies had used to behave towards Eden.

"We need to get rid of him," Paul talked over him. "He's going to ruin your life, Sean, and you can't let him."

Sean felt like someone had walked over his grave as he looked into his friend's eyes. Something about them was all steel and hardness, way more serious and determined than Sean had ever seen him before. Something about Paul at that moment scared him. He didn't want to confront him though. He didn't want to hear the reasoning behind his friend's behaviour.

"I can handle him, Paul," he murmured limply.

The next time Sean saw Eden was in the woods a week later. Out for a walk and going down to one of his favourite secluded spots, he stopped short when he heard voices raised in anger.

"I don't believe you."

"I don't give a damn what you believe. You don't get to question me this way. You never wanted to come here. You still don't want to be with me, so what I do here is none of your fucking business."

There was a growl of anger. Sean stepped forward to see Harrison, bare-chested and wearing swimming shorts, pinning Eden to a tree by both shoulders. Eden's hair was wet and he too wore nothing but a pair of shorts. He struggled with Harrison, hands gripping his shoulders in return.

"Take your fucking hands off him right now," Sean said in a deadly tone of voice.

Harrison turned around in surprise. "Well, well, well, if it isn't your not-so-secret admirer," he addressed his lover.

Sean moved closer. "Step away."

Harrison's eyes narrowed. "Or what?"

Sean stayed still. "Or I arrest you for assault. I'm Sheriff of this town in case he hasn't told you."

Harrison's lip curled in distaste. "Oh, he told me. He told me you weren't fucking him either, which I didn't believe."

Sean remained calm. "As Eden said, I don't give a damn what you believe. You take your hands off him right now or you and I are going to have a problem."

Harrison stepped back. He shot a venomous look at Eden. "Your hero. You always did get hard for powerful men, didn't you?" He bent down, retrieved a bag off the ground and stalked away through the trees.

Eden was flushed with anger, and he fixed flashing topaz eyes on Sean. "You're eighteen years too late. Don't think you can come in here on your white horse now when you should have done it then. Do you think that little display is going to have me falling into bed with you in gratitude?"

Sean regarded him coolly. "I'm not trying to get you into bed," he kept his voice low. "I just won't have anyone hurting you is all."

Eden shoved him backwards furiously with a hand to the chest. "And you didn't care about that eighteen years ago! What's changed now?"

Sean kept his eyes on his. Eden's display of emotion unsettled him. "I have," he said quietly. "I told you that the other night."

"And I didn't believe you. Leave me the hell alone."

Sean grabbed Eden by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back as he tried to walk away, pushing him back against the tree. "If you wanted me to leave you alone, why did you come back here? *You've* opened up this can of worms, not me, now deal with whatever's happening between us."

Eden stopped struggling abruptly, eyes wide and fixed on Sean. Sean cursed himself for being so honest. A moment later, whatever he had seen in Eden's eyes disappeared and his gaze was back to being icy and shuttered. "There's nothing between us," he said coldly. "I was drunk that night on my floor. You took advantage of me. It told me what I always knew though, that you bullied me at school to hide your attraction to me. Right?"

Sean reddened. The two stared at each other in silence. He let go of Eden and stepped away. Eden snorted in derision and muttered "pussy" under his breath, before he walked away.

Sean hurried in the opposite direction towards the lake, his head whirling and his heart beating hard. Jesus, if Eden wasn't going to be the death of him. He affected Sean more and more with their every confrontation. He wished Eden would just go away for good but then he remembered why Eden was here in the first place: to punish him. Sean deserved that punishment and he had two choices: either confess to an authority higher than himself and lose his job and maybe his liberty or accept whatever punishment Eden wanted to dish out. He would rather settle for the latter. He was a pussy, just like Eden said.

* * * *

Paul was just coming back from a trip to the dentist two days later and heading back to work when he saw Eden coming down the steps of the library, two books under his arm. He hurried to catch up with him as Eden headed towards a Porsche parked out front.

"I want to speak to you," he said, not bothering to try and be friendly, not now.

Eden turned around looking like he would rather have his teeth pulled out by pliers than speak to him.

"I want you to stop whatever campaign you've got going to crucify Sean. Leave him the fuck alone," Paul warned in the most menacing voice he could muster.

Predictably, Eden sneered at him. "Are we going to do this again? He deserves it."

Paul lost his temper as Eden tried to get into his car. He caught him by the shoulder and spun him around. "Listen to me, you son of a bitch," he snarled. "Sean wasn't the one who raped you. Try looking for the guys who did. You're blaming the wrong person. It would have happened whether he was there or not. The only thing he did wrong was not stopping it and I promise you, he's destroyed himself over that fact for eighteen years. It can't go on. Give the guy a fucking break."

He stopped, breathless, as the anger drained from Eden's face and his eyes grew shiny. Eden swallowed. Wordlessly he turned away and got into his car.

Chapter Eight

Sean was sitting on the porch after work. Looking across the still lake to the house on the other side, he could see Eden's Porsche outside. Harrison's car was gone. Sean's heart lifted at this even though he told himself firmly it meant nothing. Harrison could be anywhere, and he could be coming back at any time. Nonetheless, he sat silently in the gathering twilight, watching as the bedroom light came on and the curtains were pulled across the window.

He imagined Eden in bed, lying naked beneath a single sheet, the ceiling fan stirring his unruly hair, drying the sweat on his body. He remembered Eden rising dripping from the lake, tanned and gleaming, and his cock stiffened uncontrollably.

I need to accept it, he told himself. *I'm queer*. He trembled at the thought, his pulse rising steadily. He needed only one thing—to get close to Eden again. It would be either the greatest experience of his life and confirm his homosexuality or it would revolt him and save him from the dark side. He smiled grimly to himself. Eden would never allow Sean to put his hands on him ever again.

Across the lake, the curtains twitched back. A silhouette stood bare-chested at the window. Sean's mouth went dry.

He held his breath as Eden watched him motionlessly from across the expanse of lake. The night seemed to grow silent around him. Still Eden didn't move, and neither did Sean. They seemed to stare each other out for an endless amount of time. Then Eden moved. He pulled the curtains closed, and a moment later the light went out. Sean's heart sank in disappointment until he saw the stairway light come on. Sean continued to watch, waiting to see which room Eden was moving to. A shadow passed by the frosted glass of the front door, lingering.

The door opened, and Sean's heart leapt into his throat. Eden paused on the threshold, looking over at him before he switched the light off and pulled the door closed.

Eden descended the steps, crossed to his Porsche and got in. He turned it around and drove away up the lane. Sean rested back in his chair. He could see the Porsche disappearing up the lane almost to its end before trees hid its lights from sight. Sean waited. He told himself fiercely and angrily that what he hoped and wished for wasn't going to happen and yet nonetheless, his eyes darted constantly to the end of his own road, seeking lights.

He saw the lights before he heard the Porsche's purring engine.

His heart surged, and his palms became damp. He didn't move from his chair until the car bumped down the road all the way to his porch, and then he stood up slowly as Eden got out of the Porsche.

He wasn't sure whether to expect a fist in the face or a kiss; he only knew his stomach was in knots of agony. When Eden slammed his door shut and hurried across the few feet separating them, Sean saw by his face that he was to expect the latter.

He put his arms out quickly as Eden came up the steps and virtually fell into them. Eden clutched at Sean's neck and started to cry loudly and Sean was broken. He scooped Eden closer, holding his head, murmuring platitudes as best he could, afraid of the intensity of Eden's sorrow.

Eden lifted his tear-streaked face abruptly. "I hate you, I hate you, you destroyed my life," he cried before he gripped Sean's face and kissed him almost savagely.

Sean melted into astonished submission. He returned Eden's kiss, but he did so tenderly so the anger and fire died from the other man and his head fell against Sean's shoulder.

"Take me to bed," he mumbled. "Please."

A fire lit in Sean's stomach. He put his hands under Eden's backside and lifted him easily. Eden held onto his neck with legs around him as Sean carried him up the stairs. In the bedroom, he didn't put the light on, just allowed the moonlight to illuminate the scene as he lay Eden down on the bed. He bent and pulled Eden's shoes and socks off, then knelt over him and unfastened his shirt, baring his chest. Eden sat up and shrugged his arms out of it. Sean tossed his own shirt away. Eden reached for Sean's belt and unfastened it. Sean shuddered with excitement as Eden's nimble fingers opened the button and drew down his zipper before his hand slid inside his boxers.

Sean bit his lip to stop a moan coming out as Eden's fingers curled around his hard flesh. He leaned down and kissed him and Eden gasped softly into his mouth. Sean pulled back, climbed off the bed, and stripped out of the rest of his clothes.

Eden did the same. Before he threw his pants away, he took two things from the pocket—lube and a condom.

Then he put his arms out to Sean and welcomed him on top of his body. They kissed eagerly, passionately, their lips fitting together perfectly as they rolled across the bed, touching each other and rubbing their bodies together, both desperate and breathless.

Eden was evidently in a rush even though Sean would have been happy with more foreplay. He ripped the condom open with his teeth and rolled it onto Sean. Then he stroked some lube over the latex. Sean knelt between Eden's legs. He held his hand out as Eden squirted some lube onto it. He'd done this a few times with girlfriends in the past but he was far from being an expert. He'd seen how not to do it eighteen years ago when his friends had raped Eden. He was terrified he would hurt him and bring back unwelcome memories.

He rubbed the lube up over two fingers and probed gently between Eden's spread legs, finding his way between his buttocks and stroking the lube softly around. Eden caught his breath as Sean located his entrance and massaged it, waiting until Eden opened up for him so his finger sank into tight warmth.

Eden gripped him by the shoulders. "Please..." he moaned. His cock lay hard and leaking against his belly and Sean dipped his head and ran his tongue right over the slit, collecting Eden's taste.

"Fuck..." Eden swore. He pulled Sean's hair. Encouraged, Sean took Eden into his mouth as far as he could and worked a second finger into him. Eden writhed beneath him, gasping for breath and groaning. "Oh Jesus... please..."

This man could command Sean however he wanted tonight. Sean would have done anything for him. He took hold of himself and moved closer to Eden, kneeling. Eden lifted his legs and wrapped them around Sean's back. Sean rested his cock between Eden's cheeks and rubbed it slowly against his entrance before he started to push. He took hold of Eden's hips and pulled his lover forward onto him, and he felt Eden open up and engulf him.

Eden cried out. His nails dug into Sean's back, and his thighs gripped him hard. All the way inside, Sean stopped and lay himself down on Eden, face against his neck, breathing hard.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," Eden panted. "Please..." He threw his head back with a moan, and Sean covered his throat with kisses as he started to move slowly.

Eden writhed and undulated beneath him, noisy in his pleasure, eyes closed, hands holding hard onto Sean's ass, urging him on.

The pace became frantic. They kissed desperately, and Sean put his hand down to stroke Eden to completion. Eden was there in minutes. He tightened around Sean in waves, the sensation exquisite, before Eden spurted over his own stomach and chest in long white ribbons, gasping loudly.

Sean wasn't far behind. As Eden collapsed into almost semi-consciousness beneath him, Sean gripped his hips and used him mercilessly for another few thrusts before he was finished. He lay on Eden and closed his eyes, breathing heavily.

He had almost fallen asleep when Eden spoke. "Can I use the bathroom?"

"Sorry." Sean immediately shifted off him, rolling onto his back. Eden got up and Sean's gaze followed his naked form into the ensuite. Sean rolled his condom off and tied a knot in it. He placed it gingerly on the nightstand and then he lay in contemplation. He'd had sex with a man. But Eden wasn't any man; he had never been just any man to Sean. He had been *Eden*.

It had been possibly the most amazing experience of his life.

He longed for Eden to come back so they could do it again. The sound of running water in the bathroom stopped, and Eden exited. He came towards the bed, plucked his boxers from the floor, stepped into them and pulled them up.

"Where are you going?" Sean asked in surprise and disappointment.

"I have to go home." Eden turned his back, pulling his jeans up.

"Why?" Sean sat up. "I thought..."

"I made a fool of myself," Eden talked over him, his voice harsh.

"What? Why do you say that?" Sean moved to the edge of the bed. He reached for Eden's arm, but Eden pulled away.

"I came here and threw myself at you. I'm such a prick."

"Oh no." Sean stood up. "Listen to me; I *wanted* that, I promise you."

Eden turned around and squared up to him, his voice raised suddenly. "And I didn't want you to have me! Not after what you did to me. I lay there and let you fuck me even though I *hate* you."

Sean recoiled from the venom on his face and his flashing eyes. He stood there watching as Eden dragged the rest of his clothes on and hurried out without another word. Sean stood at the bedroom window as Eden's Porsche roared away and wondered just who the fool was here.

Chapter Nine

Paul played his confrontation with Eden over and over again in his mind. Clearly some of what he had said had penetrated the guy's hard shell because he had looked unsettled as he drove away, but Paul hadn't received any reassurances from him about Eden doing the right thing and letting his vendetta against Sean drop. There was only one thing for it. Paul would have to have a repeat meeting with Eden, and he'd have to be a little bit more explicit about what he wanted from him this time.

He reached for the loaded gun in his nightstand and took it out to his car with him, placing it in the glove box. He'd had the gun for a few years, and while it made him nervous to handle it, he always slept well knowing it was in the house.

He stopped some distance from the house by the lake, hiding his car in the bushes before he tucked the gun in his waistband and continued on foot. Eden's Porsche wasn't there, and Paul cursed softly to himself, hesitating a hundred yards from the porch. Lights suddenly illuminated the ground before him, and Paul darted into the trees with his heart hammering.

An engine purred past him and fell silent. The lights went off, and a door opened then slammed shut. Paul stepped out of the trees. He waited until Eden was up on the porch, unlocking and opening the door, then he moved forward to the bottom of the steps, drawing his gun as he did.

"I want to speak to you."

Eden whirled around with a start. His eyes, which were red and swollen, narrowed at the gun. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"We didn't finish our business the other day. I felt like this might be the only way to make you listen."

Eden eyed him warily. "You're fucking crazy."

Paul climbed the steps. "No, that's you. Get inside." He pushed Eden, forcing him into the house. Paul followed him, glancing at the house across the lake. Sean's bedroom light was on. He hoped his friend didn't choose that moment to glance from the window. He closed the door behind him, then turned to point the gun at Eden.

"Put the fucking gun away, Paul."

"Shut up." Paul moved closer, levelling the gun at Eden's chest. It was important he kept the upper hand here, important Eden thought he wouldn't mind using his gun. "It's not like I haven't given you fair warning twice, but you don't seem to listen, Eden. This is about the only way I can think of to make you realise I'm serious. Stop harassing Sean."

Eden looked at the gun and then at Paul. "Or what? You'll shoot me?"

Paul pressed the barrel against Eden's shirt, noticing then that the material was wrinkled and the buttons were fastened up wrong, like it had been put on in a hurry. He frowned, not liking the direction of his thoughts.

"Yeah, Paul," Eden said as though he read Paul's mind. "Sean's not interested in how I punish him anymore. He's only interested in what's between my legs."

"What?"

"I've just come from his bed."

"Jesus."

"So I'm guessing he didn't send you over here to do his dirty work. You took that responsibility all on your own shoulders."

Paul stared, unable to process this information. Eden lashed out at him while he was distracted, knocking the gun from his hand and sending it skittering across the wooden floor. Paul lunged for it at the same time as Eden did and their heads collided with a sickening thud that made them both groan. Paul scrambled to the bottom of the stairs where the gun lay and closed his hand over the butt before Eden's hand gripped his, trying to pry the gun away.

Paul drove his elbow back into Eden's side. The other man grunted but kept his hand over Paul's. The two struggled; Paul brought his hand up and shoved Eden back.

The gun went off with a deafening bang, the bullet hitting the banister, ricocheting off it to smash into the wall. Eden fell back with a cry of fright and Paul, just as shaken, grabbed the gun and, standing over Eden, pointed it at him.

Sean's tormentor was white and trembling, lying on the floor in submission, staring up at Paul. For a moment Paul felt pity. This must have been how Eden looked while he was being raped. But he was done with that pity. Eden's actions towards Sean had beaten that from him.

He bent, placing the barrel of the gun against Eden's throat. "Stay away from Sean. Do you hear me?"

Eden nodded without hesitation, not taking his gaze from Paul's. Paul turned and opened the door, closing it quietly behind him. On his way back to the car, he glanced across at Sean's house, wondering if his friend had heard the gunshot. But the ensuite light was on. Paul had been lucky. Sean must be in the shower. His hand trembled violently as he pulled his car door open and slid behind the wheel. Christ. That badly orchestrated confrontation could have just ended in his own death. What an idiot he was.

* * * *

Eden lay on the floor of his hall for the longest time. When he finally dragged himself to his feet with the aid of the banister, his legs were so weak he almost crawled up the stairs to his bedroom. He slumped down on the bed trembling violently. Jesus Christ, he'd almost been shot. Reporting Paul wasn't an option because he was Sean's friend. Even if Sean hadn't sent him, and Eden doubted he had, he would nonetheless cover for Paul. He turned onto his side, pulling his knees up to his chest and closing his eyes, rocking himself slowly. He was filled with self-loathing over falling into Sean's bed that night. He was filled with self-loathing that he had behaved so despicably that Paul felt the need to threaten him with a gun. He felt so alone. Harrison had gone back to the city earlier and would not be returning. Eden had left all his friends behind in the city and besides, none of them knew his secret shame as a rape victim.

For a moment he remembered how tenderly Sean had held him on the front porch before they went upstairs. Sean's feelings for him had always been an open

book as far as Eden was concerned, but he hated himself for allowing his own repressed feelings to come flooding to the surface. He hated the man. He *hated* him. Sean had ruined his entire life.

He hated himself more than he hated Sean though. That self-disgust had permeated everything and led to Eden never having any self-respect. He had slept his way through more men than he cared to count, but now, lying here holding himself as though he could take away the pain, the only one he could remember was Sean. The only one that *mattered* was Sean.

He opened his eyes, crying softly, gaze alighting on the bottle of pills on his bedside table. Last year's suicide attempt with the car exhaust hadn't been the first, only one of many. He'd tried hanging, he'd tried jumping from a bridge —something he'd changed his mind about when he was up there— and he'd tried multiple overdoses. He sat up, shuffled his way to the bedside table, opened the drawer, and withdrew the gun from within. If he had been carrying this tonight, his confrontation with Paul would have been a different story. He rested the gun on the bed and then took the bottle of pills, putting them next to the gun. He looked from one to the other. Decisions, decisions.

Sean spent a sleepless night brooding. He had never been party to such a rejection in his life, and it hurt him more than he would have thought possible. Eden couldn't hate him. It was impossible to let someone fuck you whom you hated. That only left one alternative. That Eden loved Sean but the idea repulsed him.

He got up, showered and dressed, then changed the bed sheets. He phoned Jonah, asked if he was busy and when told no, said he was taking a half day. Jonah told him to take the day off, that he would call Sean if he needed him. Sean was grateful. Perhaps something in his tone told Jonah how desperately he needed it.

He drank coffee on the porch, watching the house across the lake. The curtains in the bedroom remained resolutely closed and it was a work day. When there were no signs of movement by eleven, Sean became concerned. He got in his car and drove around the lake.

He didn't knock, only tried the door and let himself in. "Eden?" he called as he walked through the empty hall, looking in the kitchen and living room. Receiving no answer, he went back out into the hall. As he prepared to climb the stairs, he stopped, frozen in place. Slowly he stepped over to the wall, running his finger over the bullet embedded in it. Jesus Christ, what had happened here? His heart in his mouth, he called Eden's name in rising panic, climbing the stairs swiftly.

The first door on the left was closed and he pushed it open slowly. The room was in darkness, the curtains closed. A shape lay motionless beneath the covers. Sean went around the side of the bed and stopped when something crunched against the wood floor beneath his shoe.

Lying empty was a small brown bottle. Scattered around it were a handful of tiny, white pills. Sean snatched the bottle up. Eden's name was printed on the label, directions to take one at night and avoid alcohol, a warning the medication could make one drowsy.

He stumbled to the bed, shaking Eden's bare shoulder. "Eden, what are these? How many have you taken?"

Eden opened his eyes, muttered something, tried to turn away from Sean. Sean shook him hard again. "Answer me or so help me, I'll stick my fingers down your throat. How many have you taken?"

Eden grunted. He turned onto his back. "Just two, okay?" His voice was thick with sleep. "I wanted to take them all, but I didn't have the balls."

Sean knelt down. He let his head fall onto the mattress, weak with relief. He felt for Eden's hand, squeezing it. "That you didn't take them doesn't make you a coward, it makes you strong. For carrying on, no matter how much you're hurting."

Eden didn't pull his hand away. When Sean lifted his head, Eden was watching him, eyes brimming with tears.

"Listen to me," Sean burst out because it was now or never. "What you said, that day at the woods, that I only bullied you to hide my attraction to you. You were right. I never felt this way about anyone in my life, except you. There'll never be anyone for me but you, I want you to know that. And if you would just tell me what I can do to make it up to you, I'll do it. I'll do anything for you. You have to believe me. I'll spend the rest of my life doing whatever I can to heal you, that's a promise."

Eden leaned forward as tears spilled down his cheeks. He put an arm around Sean's neck. "I want you to confess," he said in a whisper. "I want you to confess and take your punishment like a man."

Sean swallowed the lump in his throat, closing his eyes to steel himself against his fear. "All right." He pulled back to stand up, but Eden hung onto him.

"I don't want you to do it yet. I want you to take your clothes off and get in my bed first."

One last fuck to keep Sean warm while he was in jail. He stood up and kicked off his shoes, unbuckling his belt. Eden slid across the bed, leaving room for him, watching Sean strip.

Once Sean was naked, he crawled into the bed and into Eden's arms, their lips meeting. Eden's skin was warm and so soft. His hands on Sean were as desperate as last time, his kiss needy, the kiss of a broken man, a man Sean would now never get the chance to heal.

He pulled Eden onto his body, hands running down his curves, groaning softly at the way Eden undulated against him, pressing their erections together. They kissed for some time before Eden moved down Sean's body, kissing and stroking, mouth leaving a wet trail down his belly to his cock.

"Get a condom from the drawer," he told Sean before he swallowed him down, making him gasp.

Sean leaned over, eyes on Eden's mouth around him, opening the drawer and feeling around inside it. His hand closed over something cold and hard with a familiar shape. He sat up suddenly with a jolt and peered into the drawer.

"What are you doing with a gun?" He remembered the bullet in the wall downstairs. Just what had Eden been doing? Had he tried to kill himself down there?

Eden lifted his head. He rested his chin against Sean's thigh, fingers stroking his side softly. "I bought it before I came back here. I intended to kill you with it."

Sean sat frozen in place. "And would that make you feel better?" he asked finally. "Could you rebuild your life if I was dead?"

Eden swallowed audibly and shook his head, his eyes full. He let his face drop onto Sean's thigh and sobbed almost silently.

Sean reached over to the drawer and drew the gun out. He emptied the bullets from the chamber and laid them down on the nightstand. Then he gripped Eden under the arms and pulled him up his body, cradling him close.

"Don't cry," he whispered. "It's finished."

He left Eden asleep in bed two hours later and drove away from his house, heading towards town. He was tired and sated. His body ached with exertion. Eden had pleased him effortlessly over and over and even now Sean could still taste his mouth, feel his warm skin against his. He would never know it again.

He stopped in front of the county magistrate's large white house and turned off the engine. He wiped his damp hands on his jeans before he got out of the car. He let himself in through the gate, walked up the path and rang the bell. Then he turned around and looked over the lake towards Eden's house. This was it finally and he couldn't bring himself to feel anything other than relief.

"Sean, what a nice surprise. I thought we were going to play golf soon?" Judge Simmons pumped his hand enthusiastically.

"Can I talk to you?" Sean asked and the judge's smile was soon replaced by a frown. He ushered Sean inside.

Sean declined his offer of iced tea when they were seated in the library, the judge's face expectant. Sean sighed. He pressed his hands together in his lap. "I'm

here to confess a crime I took part in when I was seventeen, Judge."

"Whoa there." Judge Simmons held up his hands. "Not sure this is something I want to hear, Sean. Whatever you've done, that was a long time ago now and you've got a position of responsibility here. A position you were elected into by the good people of this county."

"No one would want me in the job anymore if they knew what I had done," Sean said softly, head bowed. "So let me speak."

Judge Simmons sighed. "Fine, I'll listen, but whatever catharsis you've come here for today, I'm not saying it's going to go further than this room."

Sean swallowed. "At high school, I knew a boy called Eden Gray who's just moved back here."

"Yes, I know him, nice young man."

"When I was seventeen, I hung around with three other guys in a gang and we all bullied him. One night, my friend Max decided to take a beating one step further. He and the other two guys raped Eden one after the other."

"Jesus Christ." The judge's voice was thick with revulsion.

"I stood there watching. I couldn't move. I let them do it."

"You didn't take part?"

"No. I punched him during the beating beforehand. Apart from that I didn't touch him."

Judge Simmons stood up and started to pace the library. "So this was how long ago Sean?"

"Eighteen years."

"So why now?"

"Eden asked me to confess."

"And you carry such a weight of guilt around over this that you agreed to ruin your entire life for him?"

Sean looked up at him. "I ruined my entire life when I was seventeen, Judge Simmons. If I could take that night back, step in and save him from that, then I'd do it. But I can't. I can only take what's coming to me."

Simmons sat down again. "Sounds to me like you've suffered enough without adding a prison term to it."

Sean shook his head. "I want everything I deserve."

The judge sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Just so you know, Sean, I think this is bullshit and I don't want anything to do with it. But I'll speak to a few people and make my decision. I'll see you tomorrow. Don't hold your breath on getting arrested because if it's left up to me, that's not going to happen."

Sean stood up, unsettled, not sure if he should be grateful or not. Judge Simmons put a friendly arm around his shoulders as he walked him to the door. "People are talking about you and him, saying there's some history between you, that Eden moved away from town suddenly when he was younger. I had no idea this was it. There has to be a better way to deal with him than this though, Sean."

Sean didn't say anything else. He only shook the judge's hand and went back to his car.

His cell rang as soon as he got in. Paul's name displayed. "Where are you? Eden came into the library to get your cell number from me. He says he needs to talk to you urgently."

"Let me speak to him," a voice said in the background, and Sean's guts twisted.

"Hang on," Paul said and there was a muffled exchange.

"Sean," came Eden's voice. "Don't do it, please, I changed my mind. Say you haven't."

Sean sank back against his seat, eyes closed. "I've been to the magistrate's house and told him like you wanted me to do."

"Oh Jesus, no, no... I don't want it, not now. Go tell him you made a mistake."

Sean laughed shortly. "A mistake? You don't get to play God with my life Eden, no matter what I said I'd do for you. You wanted this, you got it. I can't take it back now."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Eden was crying and evidently Paul snatched the phone back. "What's going on?"

"Eden asked me to confess my crime, so I did. Now strangely he wishes I hadn't."

"Oh fuck, why did you do that? Don't listen to this asshole, he's punished you enough."

"Fuck you," spat Eden in the background.

"Get the hell out of here," Paul growled menacingly, and Sean heard sounds of a scuffle.

"Look, leave him alone, Paul. It's done." Sean hung up.

He trembled as he sat staring from the window over the lake. Why had Eden changed his mind now that it was too late to spare him?

* * * *

Paul shoved his cell back into his pocket. They were standing in the narrow passageway between the library and the adjacent store. He gripped Eden by the throat and threw him against the wall.

"What have you done?" he cried, molten with fury.

Eden struggled furiously, grabbing handfuls of Paul's jacket. "I don't have to explain anything to you. I needed Sean to do this. I need an end to it."

"You make me sick." Paul shook him hard. "Everything he said about you was right, you know that? He said you were a filthy slut who got everything he deserved. I bet getting raped was your wet dream come true, you dirty little whore. I just don't know why Sean wants to risk his dick rotting off by sticking it into you."

His poisonous lies worked just fine. Eden went pale as a corpse. His oddly-coloured eyes gleamed with self-pitying tears. Paul's lip curled. He hurled Eden back

into the wall, listening to the satisfying crack as Eden's head struck the bricks, and he left Sean's tormentor there on the ground as he walked away.

When he got back into the library, Paul couldn't think of anything else but what Eden had done. He paced behind the counter, grinding his teeth, his fists clenched. That poisonous little bastard was going to ruin his friend and send him to jail. Paul couldn't allow that to happen. If Eden couldn't stand up and say it was so, then no one else would convict Sean. The solution was simple. Paul found his co-worker in the non-fiction section and feigned illness. Within five minutes he was on the road back to his house, plans formulating in his mind.

Chapter Eleven

It was Eden's day off, and it was with relief that he drove home, arriving angry and trembling after his confrontation with Paul in the alleyway. He kicked his shoes off in the hall and made his way to the kitchen, taking a cold beer from the fridge. His head ached and still oozed with blood. Jesus, he had handled Sean badly. Of course he'd always wanted him to confess his part in the crime and yes, he'd fantasised for years about being at Sean's trial and laughing as he was sentenced, but God, not like this, not anymore. His feelings for Sean ran too deep to see the man behind bars. He had fallen again and fallen hard in the short while he had been back in town and seen the man Sean had become. A man nothing like the cruel boy he remembered.

What was he going to do? He couldn't see Sean in jail. Not now, after what they had shared. Even the memory of being in Sean's arms made him heat all over. God, Sean was so... tender. So gentle yet passionate. He touched Eden with such reverence and Eden guessed, sadly, that Sean's every touch was influenced by memory. That he was afraid to touch Eden in the wrong way, to hurt him, to add more misery to his already ruined life.

Eden slumped down at the kitchen table with his beer. This would be between them forever, no matter what. But he *wanted* Sean. He wanted him.

A knock sounded at the door, and Eden jumped in his seat, heart racing. *Please let it be Sean, please.* He rushed into the hall just as he heard his visitor letting himself in at the front door.

He stopped dead as he faced Paul, brandishing a gun at him yet again.

"What is it that you didn't get about our last conversation regarding Sean?" His face was deadly, his eyes ice-cold. Paul meant business this time. Eden darted for the stairs. The least he could do was to try to get to his own weapon for a fair fight rather than stand here like a lamb to the slaughter. A bullet whistled through the air, grazing his shoulder, smashing into the wall at the top of the stairs. Eden, bent double and gasping, hurled himself through his bedroom door, wrenching the drawer clean out of his bedside table in his desperation to get to his gun.

Footsteps sounded behind him. "I won't let you send Sean to jail."

It felt suddenly like something had punched him hard in the back of the thigh. Eden's legs no longer supported him. He fell over the bedside table, grabbing, upsetting the furniture, the lamp crashing to the floor.

In desperation he twisted, half-sitting, bringing the gun up, fumbling at the safety catch and he saw Paul right behind him, gun levelled, his eyes manic, barely recognisable in his frenzy. Eden closed his eyes, teeth gritted and wincing as he squeezed the trigger, firing blindly.

He didn't want to kill Paul. He only wanted to live despite his long-held desperation to take his own life. He was shocked at this sudden sense of self-preservation. Why now when he had a quick, welcome death staring him in the face? Why take the gamble of living when it was likely he and Sean could never work out their issues and be together? But God, he wanted to try. He thirsted for Sean like no other man he'd ever known. This was it; he'd always known Sean was the one, even as far back as school and even during everything Sean did to him. That hadn't changed Eden's feelings for him, only imbued half his love with hate so sometimes he couldn't distinguish one from the other. So sometimes his hate and love rose up so strongly as one that he couldn't breathe with need.

The explosion was deafening. A cloud of blood blossomed from the centre of Paul's chest, and Eden felt it hit his face, hot and wet. He slid to the ground, losing his grip on the gun. He watched as Paul staggered back, still holding his gun, looking at the wound in his chest with shock and then at Eden with disbelief.

Eden was frozen in place with horror. Oh Jesus, what had he done? He tried to move to help Paul but his wounded leg wouldn't co-operate. Paul sank to the floor, his face chalk white, a puddle of blood spreading slowly around him.

* * * *

Sean's head snapped up at the bang from across the lake, the sound unmistakeable. He jumped to his feet, heart racing, eyes straining, and then he noticed that while he'd been taking a shower, Eden's Porsche had arrived back at his house and behind it, was Paul's car. Oh God, please no.

Sean took his gun from its holster and grabbed his keys. He charged from the house, leaving the front door open in his anxiety. As he started the engine, he heard the second shot and his blood ran cold with terror.

* * * *

"Eden?"

The front door was open and Sean went in with gun drawn, surveying both rooms on the bottom floor quickly before he moved to the stairs. He heard the sound of soft crying as he climbed, and his stomach plummeted. Without seeing anything, he knew for sure that someone was mortally injured, and he asked himself in that moment who he would prefer to see survive; his oldest friend or the only person he'd ever loved. He had not come up with an answer by the time he found himself standing at the bedroom door surveying the ruins of his life and of those he loved.

Paul lay in a pool of blood, arms thrown out by his sides, staring at the ceiling with eyes wide open. Across from him, bleeding copiously from a wound to his thigh, huddled against the bedside table and ashen with shock, was Eden.

Sean walked into the room on legs which threatened to fold beneath him, and pushed his gun into the back of his jeans. He knelt by Paul's head, lifted his chin and extended his neck. Then he bent and listened for sounds of his friend breathing, fingers to his neck to feel a pulse. Paul was dead, he knew that already, but nonetheless Sean sealed his mouth around his and breathed twice, drawing back each time to watch Paul's mortally wounded chest inflate before he pressed his hands into the blood, arms straight, fingers interlocked and massaged Paul's dead heart pointlessly. The heart which somehow had become confused over its duty to Sean and had seen removing Eden as the only way to go. At least Sean presumed that was what had happened, but then again, Paul was the one dead and Eden was the one alive. A part of Sean was gone forever. Unforgiveable.

His hands were wet with blood and sank into the wound with every compression. After thirty times, he breathed twice more for Paul and went back to his chest.

He looked at Paul's face, the colour of it familiar to Sean, that colour which indicated life was never going to come back, the colour he had seen at the roadside when he'd pulled bodies from cars and laid them down on the asphalt for pointless resuscitation.

He sat back on his heels and reached to his pocket for his cell, connecting to the station. "Jonah, send an ambulance to the Parsons' place. Paul's been shot."

Jonah was cool enough not to panic in a crisis, or maybe he just knew that Sean's history with Eden would only ever end up one way. In blood and death. "On its way." He hung up.

Sean pushed his cell back into his pocket. He unfolded his legs so he sat down on the hard floor against the bed and then he lifted Paul's lifeless body and pulled him into his arms, cradling his head against his chest.

When he bent his head and touched their foreheads together, he felt how cool and clammy Paul's skin was. He brushed damp hair back from his friend's face. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Renewed sobbing a few feet away attracted his attention. He lifted his head and glanced over at Eden. Eden clutched at the wound in his thigh, attempting to stem the bleeding, his face almost grey, a sheen of sweat on his upper lip. This was about to become a double murder, Sean thought. Eden was going to die. Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to care after what Eden had done to Paul.

He returned his attention back to his friend's lifeless body and held Paul in his arms until he heard the sirens.

Chapter Twelve

Sean sat on the front porch with his head between his knees. People walked up the steps carrying equipment— crime scene officers drafted in from the city. The ambulance had long gone, taking an unconscious and critically injured Eden to the hospital.

"Come on, take some deep breaths." Jonah's arm was around his shoulders. "You're a shocking colour."

"I'm okay." Sean had vomited in the bushes by the porch, a thin liquid coming up from his empty stomach.

"You're not okay. You should have gone to the hospital."

Sean shook his head. "I just need to go home. Have a lie down."

"Come on, I'll drive you."

Sean's keys were still in the ignition of his car. He got into the passenger seat and looked back at the scene of the murder as Jonah drove him away.

Sean lifted his head groggily at the banging at the door. He blinked in the semi-gloom, his head aching. The clock by the bed said eight p.m. He rose from the bed, wearing just his boxers after stripping his bloodied clothes off in the kitchen and throwing them in the outside trash. He pulled on a hooded sweatshirt and made his way downstairs.

Outside on the porch stood Judge Simmons.

"Sean," he said grimly without smiling. "I've been over to the scene. Terrible business."

Sean nodded, lip caught between his teeth.

"Do you know what happened?"

Sure. Paul went over to commit murder, Eden killed him in self-defence. But Sean couldn't denounce his best friend, no matter that he was dead and beyond the law's reach. He preferred to denounce the living, the one who had always been an easy target. "Eden killed Paul," he murmured.

Judge Simmons nodded. "We've got men at his bedside. He's under arrest as soon as he's fit enough to be read his rights. But listen, that's not just why I'm here. Although all this is tragically interlinked."

Sean waited.

"Well, I spoke to the people I needed to speak to, and I'm not going to tell you who, because if you see those people in the future, I've no doubt you won't be able to look them in the eye. Anyway, the upshot was this. They're not interested in indicting you for any crime."

"That's it?" Sean asked. He was too numb to feel any kind of relief.

"That's it. Let the past lie. I think what Eden's done today kind of absolves you from your crime." Simmons turned away.

Sean closed the door. Was Simmons right? Sean had stood by and watched Eden raped. Eden had murdered Paul. It was a kind of terrible revenge, even if it had been unintentional. They were equal. Sean had paid for his crime by losing his best friend. He should no longer flagellate himself for what he had done to Eden. His guilt should be at an end. He owed Eden nothing anymore.

Chapter Thirteen

Sean didn't visit Eden in the hospital. He couldn't bear to. He attended Paul's funeral and then he took a leave of absence from work, the talk of the town, and grieved privately at home. His feelings for Eden ranged from hatred to ambivalence. He felt the hold Eden had had over him dissipate into that loathing he had once felt so strongly as a boy. He did not allow reason to temper his judgement. He did not want to think about Paul going to Eden's home with murder on his mind. He only wanted to think about the outcome— Paul lying in the cemetery and Eden arrested for murder. This was the only way to keep his mind and heart safe from the ever-present threat of Eden.

Eden left the hospital and was allowed out on bail to convalesce at home. Home was no longer the house across the lake though. Eden rented another house a half mile away, deep in the woods and away from any close neighbours. He was hiding from his shame, Sean thought cruelly, as well he might.

It was six weeks since Paul had died, and the eve of the opening of Eden's trial when Sean went down to the lake to swim. It was late evening, the lake deserted, a peaceful sunset looming. He tried not to look at the dark house opposite as he put his bag down and stripped down to his swimming shorts. As he straightened up, he was startled to realise he was not alone.

Sitting almost hidden in the entrance to the trees a dozen feet away was Eden. He wore jeans and a t-shirt, his arms hugging his raised knees as though cold. He was pale, his eyes haunted, his misery almost palpable.

"Hello, Sean."

Sean considered his response. He tried to ignore how his heart lurched and told himself it was hatred he felt beating hard in his breast, as always the master of self-delusion.

"I don't want to speak to you."

"Sean."

"Go to hell." Sean strode towards the water. Eden rose to his feet, caught Sean by the arm before he could enter the lake.

Sean turned, pushed him back hard so Eden stumbled, lost his footing and fell onto the grass.

Sean loomed over him and gripped Eden by the front of his shirt. "Is that how you take your final revenge on me?" he snarled. "By murdering my best friend?"

Eden's topaz eyes were wide, his pupils large. "Sean, he came to kill me. He shot me first. I didn't mean to kill him. As God is my witness. I was only defending myself."

Sean gritted his teeth against the ache in his jaw, his eyes burning. "If you hadn't have had that gun to kill me in the first place it wouldn't have happened. We're equal now, Eden. I don't need to feel any guilt over you anymore."

In the gathering twilight, Eden's eyes gleamed unmistakably. "Forgive me, Sean," he said in a whisper.

Sean let him go. "Not ever," he snarled. The voice of his conscience protested as he turned and waded swiftly into the cool lake before diving beneath the water. How ironic that Eden now begged him for forgiveness when previously it had been the other way around. And how did Sean dare to make that response after what he had done? He had ruined Eden's whole life, driven the man to numerous suicide attempts, and almost got him killed at Paul's hands and yet somehow, he absolved himself from everything and blamed Eden completely. What a horror of a human being he was.

He rose gasping from the water, eyes stinging. A pain in his chest threatened to split him open. How was he ever going to come to terms with Paul's death and realise his current feelings for Eden were covering the real issue? Namely that his love was Eden was forever, no matter what.

He turned around as the placid surface of the water was disturbed behind him. Eden had stripped and now swam towards him.

Sean threw himself into a swift crawl, making for the rocks on the opposite side. He did not want this confrontation. Not now. He felt mentally broken into pieces. He could not bear to even set eyes on Eden.

He turned when he reached the rocks, gripping the jagged surface with one hand, hoping Eden would have given up but no, he was right behind, coming to rest breathlessly, the water lapping around his naked chest.

"Sean."

"No, Eden. No." Sean lifted himself onto the rocks. Eden gripped him around the waist with both arms, pulling him back into the water.

Sean fell, splashing, lashed out violently at Eden, his fist colliding with his jaw. "Get your fucking hands off me," he yelled. "I don't want to listen to anything you have to say. Not now, not ever. You killed Paul."

Eden stood there in the water with his cheek swelling and blood on his mouth. "Everything I am is down to you," he said quietly. "You destroyed my life and now I want you to put it back together. I'm yours. I always have been. I love you and always will. That will never change, even though I hate you too."

Sean sagged back against the rocks with tears streaking his cheeks. As Eden waded forward, Sean pulled him into his arms. "I love you. Oh God, I love you."

They held each other, standing in the lake until it was dark and owls hooted from the woods. Shivering with cold, Sean climbed onto the rocks and held his hand out to Eden to help him from the water.

They walked around the lake to the other side, to where Sean had left his bag and he retrieved his towel, draping it around Eden and rubbing him dry. Eden moved over to his clothes and started to dress while Sean pulled on a t-shirt and some dry shorts and put on his shoes.

Eden followed him up the bank, through the trees, eyes still wet and gleaming in the dark, his chest hitching. At the top, Sean put his arm around him. They walked in silence to Sean's house.

At home Sean turned the water to hot and ushered the shivering Eden into the shower. He joined him there and beneath the spray, he explored Eden's body with mouth and hands. No part of him escaped Sean's attention. No inch of skin was left uncharted or unknown by his seeking fingers. He kissed the scar on his thigh from the bullet wound. He finally turned Eden to the wall, spread him open, touched him there, watched and listened to Eden's reaction before he put his mouth to him, licking delicately until Eden came violently, loudly.

Sean climbed from the shower and handed Eden a towel. He brushed his teeth and dried himself, then he went out to the bedroom and climbed beneath the covers, waiting for Eden to join him. He was hard with the excitement of what he had just done to Eden, but he was tired too. If the evening ended now in sleep, it wouldn't matter to him. Not with Eden by his side.

Eden slid into his arms, still damp. He sought Sean's mouth, kissing him tenderly. Sean's fingertips smoothed over the bruise on his cheek. Eden moved down his body, kissing, touching. He took Sean in his mouth, tongue fluttering against him, and Sean stifled his sounds with a hand.

Eden lifted his head before Sean could come. "Do you have a condom?"

Sean sat up. He delved in the bedside drawer and came out with a foil square and a tube of flavoured lube that a girl had once brought around with her. Eden smiled as he took it but made no comment. He rubbed some over Sean's shaft, then licked it off with slow, broad strokes.

"Not bad."

Holding the condom, he knelt astride Sean's hips. "Listen. How about... I wear this?" He seemed to hold his breath, awaiting Sean's reply in the silence.

Sean considered his request. Rarely had bedroom play got anywhere near that area for him. But he would do anything for Eden. That was not even in question.

He manoeuvred Eden off him and turned over, onto all fours, and there he let Eden touch him until he was ready.

Eden took him on his back, Sean with his knees open and legs hooked around his lover's waist. Every smooth slide against his insides seemed to imprint Eden more deeply onto him, seemed to bond them ever more closely. Eden's mouth stayed glued to his, breath mingling with his own. A hand between their bodies stroked Sean to easy completion.

He was still shuddering, hands gripping to Eden's back when Eden came and Sean looked up at the ecstasy on his partner's face, the flush of blood over his chest and his cheeks. And he remembered how many times he had wished for this when he was in bed with someone else. How many covert fantasies he had punished himself for and how much yearning had driven him out of his mind.

He lay silently while Eden got up to use the bathroom and when his lover came back, Sean curled wordlessly into his body and held him.

"Are you okay?" Eden planted a kiss on his lips.

"Yeah."

"What are we going to do if I go to jail?"

"You're not going to go to jail."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'll testify in your defence."

Eden stared at him, eyes dark in the dim glow from the bedside lamp. "I don't expect you to do that."

"I'll do it."

Eden buried his face against Sean's neck. He didn't say anything else. Long after his lover was breathing softly in sleep, Sean lay awake. He had what he'd always wanted here with him. He needed to make sure no one ever took Eden away from him. Not now. Not after this long road they had travelled to get here.

Chapter Fourteen

Eden's trial opened with the prosecution stating they would show he had bought a gun deliberately and come to town with the express purpose of shooting Sean, but Sean's loyal friend Paul had got in the way, and Eden had opened his account by killing him first. They would prove he was mentally unbalanced, with a history of suicide attempts and a long-seated obsessive grudge over an incident eighteen years old.

In the public gallery, Sean sat with the sweat ice-cold on his back. The prosecution *knew*. They were about to expose his crime for the whole town to hear. He stared at Eden sitting in the dock until Eden looked away, his face pale and drawn. Had Eden told his lawyer or told the police when he was interviewed? Naively, Sean had never expected it to come up in court, but how could it not if they were presenting the reason for Eden shooting Paul?

The defence said they would prove Eden carried the gun for protection, that he had shot Paul in self-defence only *after* Paul had almost killed him. They would put it to the jury that the unbalanced one was Paul, Sean's misguided friend who had thought getting rid of Eden would keep Sean's terrible secret.

Sean sat with his head bowed, feeling the eyes of those he knew upon him. Both the defence and the prosecution intended to use Eden's rape, intended to expose Sean for what he was. An accessory to a crime. And even though Judge Simmons had said he wouldn't be indicted, who said that public outrage at their Sheriff's heinous crime wouldn't be so great that people would *demand* Sean be punished?

Sean went home and hid away in his house. He lay in bed with eyes open staring at the wall and thinking of Eden. He had been willing to testify readily for the prosecution and now would be forced to. Anything he said in Eden's defence would probably carry no weight at all. After all, who would listen to Sean once they knew what he'd done?

He stood in the witness box in suit and tie, hair neatly combed into place, trying not to look at Eden. His heart beat sickeningly hard as he felt the eyes of his peers on him and waited for the prosecution to cross-examine him.

"Sheriff Keller. Please state your relationship with the defendant."

"We... knew each other as children. We went to school together."

"Were you friends?"

"No."

"Enemies?"

Sean hesitated. "Yes."

"Is it true that as a direct result of what happened at school, the defendant bought a gun and came here with the express purpose of killing you?"

Sean looked down at the hands folded in his lap.

"Sheriff Keller?"

"I don't know."

"You do know, because Mr Gray told you himself didn't he?"

Sean's head jerked up. He glanced at Eden. Trying to conceal anything was pointless. It was all going to come out. All of it. "Yes."

"Yes. And now won't you tell the court why Mr Gray wanted to kill you."

The cruelty of it, making Sean confess like he was the one on trial here. He would have preferred to sit in the gallery and be talked about rather than have to admit it himself.

"When I was seventeen, some friends of mine raped Eden."

A murmur went around court. Eden bowed his head.

"I see. And you were there?"

"Yes."

"You watched?"

"Yes."

"Did you take part?"

"No."

"Did you stop it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"You must have been enjoying it too much then."

"Objection your honour!" The defence lawyer rose to his feet.

"No." Sean shook his head furiously. "No I wasn't."

"Sustained," said the judge. "Jury, you will disregard that remark. Counsellor, watch yourself."

The prosecution looked amused rather than chastened. "So you didn't enjoy it?"

"No."

"You don't think he deserved it?"

"No."

"So why did you stand watching?"

"I... couldn't walk away and leave them doing it to him. They might have killed him."

"So you would have intervened if they'd tried to kill him?"

"Yes."

"But rape was okay?"

"No."

"Objection!"

"Withdrawn. So, you must have been upset when the defendant came back to town."

"Yes."

"How did he seem to you?"

"Angry."

"Did he make threats against you?"

Sean hesitated, glancing at Eden once again. "He... said he wanted to make me pay."

"What did you take that to mean?"

"That he was going to expose my crime."

"Did you fear for your life?"

"No."

"But he had a gun."

"A lot of people have guns. I'm not afraid of people who have a gun. I have one too."

A titter went around the courtroom. The DA scowled. "Sheriff Keller, did you feel that the defendant was mentally unbalanced?"

"No."

"But he told you he'd had numerous suicide attempts, didn't he?"

Sean was wary. He knew what was coming. His crime was exposed already. This was going to be followed swiftly by his relationship with Eden. "Yes."

"Isn't it true you found Mr Gray's gun yourself while you were at his house?"

Sean nodded, fists clenched in his lap, gaze not straying to Eden.

"Speak up for the record."

"Yes. I found it."

"Tell the court where he kept it."

"In his bedside drawer."

"And how did you happen to come across it?"

"I was looking for something."

"What?"

Sean lowered his head, mumbling. "A condom."

"Speak up."

"A condom."

"You were looking for a condom?"

"Yes."

"You were in bed with Mr Gray?"

"Yes."

A loud ripple went around the public gallery. There was Sean's career and personal life gone within seconds.

"Perhaps you'll explain to the court just how that came to happen because I'm having trouble accepting it," the DA said with an air of disgust. "This man's life had been ruined by you, you'd stood there and watched while he was raped and then he took you to his bed."

"I don't know," Sean said, his face hot with shame, tears pricking his eyes.

"You don't know how it happened?"

"He... said he loved me."

"He loves you?"

"Yes."

"And you love him?"

Sean nodded tightly.

"Speak up Sheriff Keller."

"Yes."

"But he came to kill you. Doesn't that bother you?"

Sean shook his head. "I deserved it."

"So you wouldn't have minded if he'd killed you?"

Sean regarded the DA sullenly.

"Well?"

"I would have deserved it," Sean repeated.

"You carry a large burden of guilt then?"

"Yes."

"And yet you never tried to make amends with him. Why is that?"

"I don't know."

"Fear?"

"Maybe."

"Yes well, maybe your friend would still be alive today Sheriff if you'd manned up and done the decent thing years ago."

"Objection."

"Overruled."

"I know that," Sean said. "You don't need to tell me that. I hate myself for the way this has gone."

"So. Eden killed your friend, Paul. Did Paul deserve that too?"

"That was an accident."

"Come on. He buys a gun to kill you. He kills your friend instead, who had taken a dislike to him and warned him off several times, hadn't he? Didn't you worry you might be next?"

"He killed Paul in self-defence."

"Please," the DA said contemptuously. "He shot him at close range in the chest, in cold blood. With the gun he had bought to kill you. The man was traumatised for life after a gang-rape to which you were an accessory. He had been in therapy for eighteen years and on a stack of anti-depressants. He came to seek revenge, and he started with your nearest and dearest. Be thankful he was arrested in time, Sheriff Keller. No further questions."

Sean sat seething in the witness box. He glanced at Eden who still sat with head bowed, hands folded in his lap, perfectly still.

Eden's lawyer stood up. A smart man in his mid-thirties, he was from an exclusive practice in the city. Sean had faced him in court numerous times. "Sheriff Keller, may I start by offering my condolences on the death of your friend?"

"Thank you."

"What's your assessment of what happened that night?"

"Paul was upset with Eden. He was worried Eden was going to bring me down. He must have gone to his house to talk to him."

"Had he already previously tried to warn him off?"

"Yes."

"Your honour," the lawyer addressed the judge, holding a bag. "Exhibit A, a bullet taken from the wall in the hallway of Eden Gray's house, matching the gun found by the body of Paul Lee."

Sean's mouth fell open. The bullet he had seen with his own eyes the morning when he had thought Eden had tried to kill himself.

"Do you know about this bullet Sheriff?"

"Yes. I saw it in the wall."

"On the day Paul Lee was killed?"

"No. The day before. I went to Eden's house and found him in bed. As I went up the stairs, I saw the bullet in the wall."

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, here you have it. A bullet from Paul Lee's gun was found in the wall of Eden Gray's house the day *before* Paul Lee was shot. I put it to you that Mr Lee threatened the defendant the day before and then came around again the following day to make good on his threats. He shot the defendant in the leg and Mr Gray used his own gun to defend himself." He turned back to a stunned Sean.

"Did you know your friend had threatened the defendant with a gun?"

"No."

"Would you have arrested him if you'd known?"

"Yes."

"You don't believe Mr Gray wished your friend ill?"

"Eden was at home when Paul went to him and threatened him with a gun. He shot Eden in the leg. Eden shot him in self-defence before Paul could kill him. That was the evidence I saw at the crime scene."

"Thank you, Sheriff. No further questions."

Sean walked from the box with his head down and left the court. He could not bear to stay any longer. He drove home and poured himself a large glass of bourbon before sitting at the table overlooking the garden. He was ruined, just like he always knew he would be once he set eyes on Eden again. And what if Eden was convicted? Sean would be an outcast in town and he wouldn't even have Eden by his side. He had no doubt that the prosecution possessed plenty more ammunition to throw at the jury. Probably an odd shrink or three who would testify to Eden's murderous thoughts and precarious state of mind. And what about Eden himself on the stand? Would he take it? Would he stand up there and talk about that thing which had ruined his life and made him what he was?

Sean couldn't take anymore. He wanted to hide until it was all over.

Chapter Fifteen

Jonah called Sean to tell him Eden was taking the stand. He thought Sean would want to know and Sean did want to know, but he wasn't sure if he was brave enough to listen. But listen he had to because he owed it to Eden. It was his duty to sit there and listen to what Sean had put him through. The final catharsis for them both.

He sat in the gallery as Eden walked to the witness box, sat down and put his hand on the bible. His unruly hair was neatly combed back with gel. He wore a black suit and tie with a white shirt. He looked like he was going to a funeral. He stated his name and then fixed those pale topaz eyes on the DA unblinkingly.

"Mr Gray, did you have murderous thoughts towards Sean Keller?"

"Yes."

Sean groaned inwardly. Eden did himself no favours admitting this.

"How long for?"

"Since school?"

"And you bought the gun to kill him?"

"Yes."

"And do you believe you would have carried that out?"

Eden hesitated. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because I love him." Eden glanced across the court at Sean.

"So your desire to kill him ended once he had bedded you, did it?"

"It wasn't like that," Eden said coldly.

"No?"

"No. I thought I could kill him, but when I saw him again, I remembered how I felt about him."

"You had no such feelings for his friend Paul though."

Eden glared and said nothing.

"You killed him."

"He came into my house and shot me. I'm pretty sure that the law says you can use reasonable force to defend yourself."

"*Reasonable* force, Mr Gray. You *killed* him."

"I grabbed the gun and shot. I didn't know where I was aiming. I was losing blood and I was scared. Can you understand that?"

The DA's lip curled. "He'd threatened you the day before."

"Yes."

"So you were ready for him when he came back."

"No. He'd scared me off. I didn't think he was going to come back and try and kill me."

"What was he so angry about?"

"That I'd made Sean confess his crime."

A furious ripple went around the courtroom. Just wonderful, Sean thought. Now everyone in town would be angry that Judge Simmons had known about this and chose to ignore it.

"You made him do it?"

"He agreed to it. I didn't force him. He wanted to do it."

"He wanted to destroy his life for you?"

Some of Eden's composure slipped away. He lowered his head, biting at his lip. "He thought it was what he deserved."

"And did *you*?"

"Yes."

"So let me sum up, Mr Gray. You carried a pathological hatred of Sean Keller. You bought a gun to kill him. You traded on feelings he'd harboured over you for some time. You seduced him and while under your influence, he agreed to confess his crime and take his punishment."

Eden shook his head all the while.

"You locked swords with his friend who understandably wanted to protect Sean from your plan to destroy him and when he came to your home to discuss it with you, you shot and killed him."

"No," Eden said furiously. "I told you what happened. He came to kill me and I defended myself. This has nothing to do with Sean. I would have done the same to any man who had come into my home and shot me."

"Would you have done it to Sean?"

Eden hung his head. "Yes."

"No further questions. The prosecution rests."

Eden wiped the back of his hand roughly over his eyes. Sean's throat was tight as he watched him. Eden's lawyer stood up.

"Eden, help the court to understand just what your life has been like since that night. Tell us in your own words what happened."

Oh Jesus no, what was this? Sean closed his eyes, his fists clenched. Was this the defence's way of humanising Eden? Of getting a not-guilty verdict by getting the

jury to feel sorry for his suffering? Oh God, Sean didn't know how he was going to listen to this.

Clearly, Eden had been expecting this question but nonetheless, he paled and sat looking at his hands for the longest time.

"I was coming back from my friend's house when they followed me across some spare land in a car. They caught up with me, roughed me up a bit. Max—he was the, like, leader—he hit me. Sean hit me. I felt my cheekbone break."

Sean kept his head down. His cheeks were streaked with tears.

"Two of them pinned me down on the car while Max raped me. Then the other two took turns. It hurt a lot because nobody had ever... I was... you know, a virgin."

Sean lifted his head and stared. He put a hand over his mouth.

"They thought I was a slut because I put it about a lot. Flirted with the boys, didn't make a secret of my sexuality. But I couldn't get laid. Even the boys I was sure were gay lived in fear of coming out. So I'd never done it. I guess my own behaviour got me raped really. That's why they hated me so much. That's why they did it to me."

"What did Sean do?"

"He didn't do anything. I couldn't see him from where I was. I guess he was watching. When Max finished, he asked who else wanted a go, and I heard Sean say no. Max told him to shut up and then the other two had me. After that, they told Sean again to do me but he didn't reply. I think I might have passed out because then I was on the ground and they were gone."

"Sean was gone?"

"No. Sean pulled me up off the ground and dressed me."

"Were you afraid he was waiting until his audience had gone before he did the same to you?"

"No. I wasn't afraid of him at all."

"Why?"

"Because I looked into his eyes. He was horrified. He looked like he was going to cry."

"So you knew he was sorry."

"Yes."

"But you still blamed him, it seemed, more than the others. Why did you come back here looking for him and not the ones who raped you?"

"Max was killed in Afghanistan a year ago. Damon's in jail for assault. Allan lives in Australia."

"So Sean was an easy target for your anger."

"Yes. It took me eighteen years to get to the stage where I wanted revenge. I ended up focusing it all on him."

"Was it just that he was an easy target?"

"No, it was that I'd never once stopped thinking about him."

"In what way?"

"In a romantic way. I was sure Sean had once felt the same about me. I needed to come back to see what was between us once and for all. But I got caught up in my hatred and my despair and I behaved terribly. I was wrong to blame him. I only needed to blame myself. It was all my fault."

Sean lifted his head. Their gazes met across the courtroom.

"It was your fault you got raped?"

"Yes." Eden hung his head and cried.

"Eden, a lot of rape victims end up blaming themselves, and it's not right. You didn't ask for that."

His lawyer waited for Eden to regain some semblance of composure. Sean wept openly. He wanted to go across the courtroom and hold Eden in his arms.

"How did that night affect your life, Eden?"

"It made me sexually promiscuous. Forever looking for something I couldn't find. I disgusted myself with the things I did. I was terrified if a man became too rough with me or held me down in bed. I'd start screaming. My relationship with my parents fell apart because while they supported me when I was raped, when I told them a few years later that I was gay, it put a different slant on it. I tried to kill myself at least once a year. I spent time in a mental hospital. I've worn out everyone's sympathy now. I'm all on my own."

"Do you feel like you've achieved any catharsis since Paul Lee died?"

Eden lifted his head, wiping at his eyes. "Yes. Sean and I... there's no more bad feelings between us now. There's only what I always wanted for us. He blamed me for Paul's death, but he knows now that Paul came intending to kill me. I only did what I had to do." He laughed softly. "I don't even know why I tried so hard to save myself. Not when there's nothing worth saving."

Sean swallowed. He shook his head at Eden. Eden looked away.

"Thank you, Eden. The defence's case rests."

Sean got up. He left the courtroom and headed straight into the restrooms.

* * * *

Eden sat in a room with a guard and his lawyer while the jury deliberated. He blew his nose with the tissue he was offered and composed himself. He drank some coffee, but refused food. Some of those things he'd said had hurt Sean terribly. Eden had seen him crying. He felt like he'd emptied himself out on that witness stand and there was nothing left. He felt numb, like he had initially after his rape. He was ambivalent about a conviction. He didn't much care. He cared that he wouldn't see Sean

again, of course he did, but Sean was better off without him anyway. Eden only wrecked people's lives, as far as he could see. Perhaps a suicide attempt would be easy in prison. Bed sheets, that kind of thing. Done quickly, as soon as his sentence began, it would give Sean chance to start to heal, to forget everything Eden had done and the shadow he'd cast over Sean's life.

He looked at his lawyer blankly. Nothing mattered anymore.

Chapter Sixteen

Sean didn't go back to the courtroom while the jury retired to deliberate. He went home, drank, paced his house, thought of everything Eden had said and how his closing statement had seemed to point to he and Eden being over. Eden was going to try to kill himself again as soon as he could. That was not in doubt. Perhaps if he was set free, Sean could stop him, but if he was convicted, Eden would find it easy to take his life in prison or get into a fight so someone else did it for him. Oh God, what was he going to do if Eden went to jail? He knew the answer. Wait for Eden as long as it took. The rest of his life if he had to. And what if Eden was acquitted but no longer wanted Sean in his life? He said he had achieved catharsis. As far as Sean could see, that meant putting Sean from his life once and for all, and dying a peaceful man.

He clenched his fists until his nails left imprints in his palms and cried. Terrified and despairing, he prayed for the first time in his life. He asked God for forgiveness for everything he'd done and swore that if only Eden would come back, Sean would love and worship him until his last breath.

Finally, he passed out on the couch in a haze of alcohol.

The phone was ringing insistently, vibrating furiously against his thigh. Sean grunted and turned over, wiping a string of drool from his mouth as he dug into his pocket.

"Sean, it's Jonah."

"Yeah, I'm late, I know." Sean squinted at the clock across the room. Eleven a.m.

"Don't worry about that. The jury came back. You missed the verdict."

Sean lay on his back with his arm across his eyes. "Go on then."

"He got off."

Sean let out a shaking breath of disbelief.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Jonah."

"You take care now." The concern in his deputy's voice was stark. Clearly he thought Sean wouldn't be back in work any time soon. At least not once a torch-bearing mob from the town had caught up with him for his crime against Eden.

Sean lay on the couch motionless and wondered if Eden would come straight here from court. He prayed that he would.

It was six-thirty and there was no sign of Eden. Sean paced his house in a cold, anxious sweat, drinking beer and craning his head from the window. Jesus Christ, it had been seven hours and no sign of Eden. That sent a message loud and clear to Sean. Perhaps Eden was already gone. Sweeping in, destroying Sean's life, killing Paul and leaving him empty. The perfect revenge. Perhaps calculated down to the last detail. And Sean had fallen for it all.

He stalked onto the porch with a fresh bottle of beer and sank down in a chair, looking along the lane for the thousandth time. An engine sounded through the stillness and then as Sean looked, Eden's Porsche came bumping slowly down the road.

Oh God, oh thank you God. Sean remained in his seat though as the Porsche drew up, and he saw the back packed with boxes and trunks. *Oh no, please no.*

Eden switched off the engine and got out, slamming the door. He came to the bottom of the porch steps and stopped, his face tight and anxious.

Sean waited where he was, with bitter bile rising up in his throat.

"I'm leaving. Just so you know."

"And what about everything you said? About how you love me."

"I *do* love you. But nothing can ever come of it. Not after everything that's happened."

"But..."

"Don't." Eden shook his head. "I don't want to hear. You and me, everything between us is done now. I can go away with relief and—"

"Are you going to kill yourself?" Sean blurted out.

Eden turned his face away, biting his lip.

"Oh God you are." Sean sprang from his chair. "You're going away to die."

"The best thing I can do for you is die. I've blighted your life the way you've blighted mine."

"No." Sean strode to the edge of the porch. "No."

"Yes." Eden's voice was firm, no trace of hesitation, but his eyes betrayed his anxiety. A film of tears covered them, making them shimmer like jewels. "I just wanted to see you one last time. Say goodbye."

Sean descended the steps, stood on the last one above Eden. "This is not goodbye," he said through clenched jaw. "I won't allow it."

"You won't *allow* it? Now you sound like the bully you were."

"Shut up. Jesus Christ, Eden, don't do this to me anymore. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry." Sean sank down on the step with his head in his hands.

A gentle hand touched him, fingers smoothing through his hair. Lips pressed to it. "Bye, Sean."

Sean caught Eden by the wrist as he turned away. He remained seated, holding Eden hard, refusing to let him go. He shook his head over and over. "I'll come with you. *Let me.* Wherever you want. I'm begging you."

"Oh, Sean. What about your job and your life?"

"Eden, I *have* no life since your revelations in court. I had no life since I did what I did to you. I've merely been existing since then, waiting for you to come find me."

I've deserved all this and more. But now I'm begging for your forgiveness and your pity and just begging you to *please*, give me the chance to love you."

Tears streaked Eden's cheeks. He sank down on his knees, his face against Sean's chest. Sean held him, and for the first time in eighteen years, the agony in his breast subsided. He could take a breath without it being laced with his own poison. He could see light at the end of the longest and darkest tunnel imaginable. He could see his life lasting beyond this day because, oh God, if Eden had gone, Sean would have killed himself today. That was not in doubt.

He held Eden close for the longest time and then he gathered Eden to his feet and led him inside and up the stairs. With curtains closed, he undressed Eden, laid him down on the bed and undressed himself. He stretched himself out on top of Eden and they kissed as their tears mingled and their hearts entwined.

Sean made love to Eden, watching his face and the way he trembled and as Eden shuddered beneath him in orgasm, Sean said, "Say you can forgive me. In time."

"I can," Eden moaned softly, cheeks flushed and chest heaving. "I can."

They lay quietly in the afterglow, Sean holding Eden while he dozed, exhaustion apparent in every line of his body.

"We could go to Canada and get married."

Eden's eyes opened, his pupils shrinking, his eyes almost yellow. "Romantic devil, aren't you?" He smiled suddenly.

Astonished to see such a sight, Sean traced the smile with his fingertips then kissed it.

Eden stretched. His hand trailed over Sean's shoulder, making him shiver. "Actually, I *was* thinking about Canada. It's a great place."

"That's settled then. We'll get married and live in a cabin in the snow with a Husky dog."

The smile didn't disappear. "You think?"

"I think."

"Say you're mine forever."

"I'm yours, Eden. I was yours the moment I first set eyes on you. I'm sorry all this had to happen before I'd admit it."

Eden kissed Sean's throat. One leg slid sinuously between his, hardness pressed against his hip. "Make love to me again."

Sean smoothed his hands down Eden's back. "First say you meant it. That you can forgive me. I don't want to think it was just orgasm talking."

"It wasn't. Just... give me time, Sean."

Sean stared into Eden's eyes. Maybe if he loved Eden enough the hate Eden carried would dissolve into the ether like a bad memory. Maybe Sean held his own future in his hands for the taking, just like he always had. Hadn't he had the chance before, just like the DA had said in court, to stop all this by finding Eden, begging his forgiveness? Hadn't the coward in him always balked at the idea? Perhaps if he'd done it eighteen years ago, Eden wouldn't have been tortured and suicidal for half his life. Perhaps Sean would have been able to sleep at night without seeing Eden pinned down on that car every time he closed his eyes.

"You'll never, ever regret giving me this chance," he whispered. "I swear to you."

Eden didn't reply. Sean brought him down into a kiss and their limbs tangled, hearts beating hard against the other. Eden's body slid against his own and that never-ending passion rose in Sean effortlessly. This was it. He and Eden. The pinnacle of Sean's long-held secret hopes and desires for more than half his life. The only thing he'd ever wanted in life and the thing he'd driven away with his own sinful behaviour.

When he had told himself after Paul's death that he no longer owed Eden anything, that had been his typical arrogance and head in the sand approach surfacing as always. Of course he still owed Eden. He owed Eden everything. And he would make it up to him, he was sure of that.

In time, Sean would earn Eden's forgiveness and one day be equal in his eyes and worthy of his love.

The End

About the Author

Scarlet likes cats and hats and firmly believes that the only thing better than one attractive man is two attractive men.

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Also by Scarlet Blackwell:

Available at **Silver Publishing:**

Rescue Me
Anthology Volume 1 (May 7)

CLEAR WATER CREEK CHRONICLES

Into the Light
Smashed into Pieces (April 16)

Available at **All Romance Ebooks:**

Captive
Stand and Deliver
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Just Desserts
Second Helpings
Beached Hearts
The Vampire's Prisoner
And So Is Love
Love Bites

"Of Genies and Sea Monsters" in *Myths and Magic: Legends of Love*

Available at **Dreamspinner Press:**

Apathy
The King's Man

Reviews for *Rescue Me*:

Rescue Me by Scarlet Blackwell is a character driven, angst-filled, heart-wrenching, soul redeeming, romantic story with one of the best endings I've read in a long time.

(5 stars — Top Pick)

— Night Owl Reviews

....**Rescue Me** is an impressive story that illustrates love has no gender, in spite of predetermined thoughts. Scarlet Blackwell has created an exceedingly enjoyable saga.

(4 ½ nymphs)

— Literary Nymphs