



LooseId

NO APOLOGIES

TIBBY ARMSTRONG

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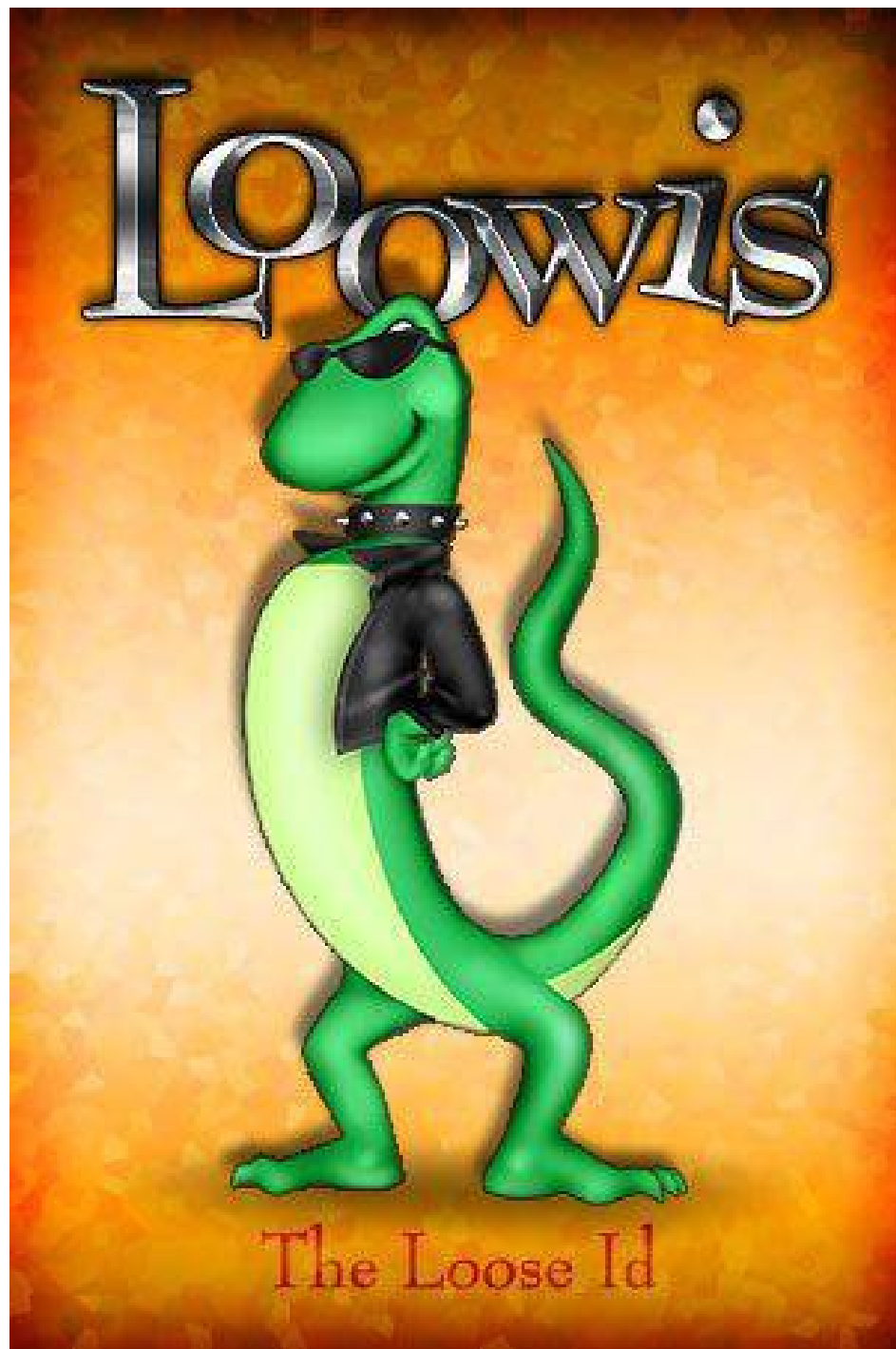
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Dedication

No Apologies is dedicated to Kele Moon, author and friend. Thank you for showing me the road my soul needed to travel. Your bravery and insight never cease to amaze.

I'd like to thank the following people who traveled this road with me:

First and foremost, to Nathan. Only you can see my truths.

To G.G. Royale and Saritza Hernandez, thank you for giving and finding this novel a home.

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Chapter One

November, 2002

Surfing Greg Falkner's temper felt like trying to survive the Banzai Pipeline ahead of a North Pacific storm. Toe the board steadily—twist your hips, adopt the right crouch—and you might come out the other side without getting worked by a wave.

Say the wrong thing and you'd get tumbled faster than a sock in a spin cycle and end up shredded on the reef. Fortunately for Greg, Aaron Blake had always risked everything for the perfect wave.

Until now.

"What do you mean you want to take separate limos?" Aaron stared out over Pacific blue waters. Maybe if he focused on his favorite view, he'd keep his own temper in check.

"The press will be there." Greg spoke as if he addressed a five-year-old. "They'd get photos. Ask questions."

The whole relationship struck Aaron like a wave gone wrong—one he'd approached even though he knew he'd end up falling over the lip and breaking his board. He glared at the speakerphone.

"When are you back in LA?"

"Morning of the premiere."

Shoulder-length strands snagged on Aaron's promise ring, and he winced. Extricating his hand from his hair, he glanced at the day planner on his laptop.

"Can you stop by?"

He worried the platinum ring, twisting it around his finger.

"Why?"

"Well, for one, I'd think you'd want to see me, but if that's not enough of a reason, then I suppose because we need to talk."

A long pause preceded Greg's reply. "Talk about what?"

"Us." There. He'd said it.

"What about us?" It was amazing how you could hear someone swallow from over a thousand miles away.

"Greg, let's not do this now."

"It really means that much to you that we arrive in the same car?"

It did, actually, but that was just the tip of the iceberg freezing Aaron out of this relationship. Against his better judgment, he found himself saying so.

"Jesus, Aaron."

"I'm through being your dirty little secret."

"Wh-what?"

Probably it wasn't very enlightened of him to feel a deep sense of satisfaction at the stunned question, but he did. "You heard me."

"You're not a...a dirty little secret."

"What am I, then?" He stood and pressed his forehead against the window, wondering if all the salt water in the world could fill the cavernous hole in his middle. "Because nobody outside your professional life even knows I existed. That we existed." His use of the past tense wouldn't go unnoticed. Not with Greg.

"You need to give me a little more time."

"How much time do you want? Another decade? Maybe two?"

"Until the premiere."

Stunned, Aaron pushed away from the window and stared at the phone. "You're promising me you'll move in after the premiere?"

Silence.

"That's what I thought."

"I—shit. Look, Aaron, you have to trust me."

"I don't get you." Aaron thought about all the times he'd fooled himself into believing he had Greg under his control and expelled a bitter laugh. "I really and truly don't."

"Can you do it? Trust me until the premiere?"

"As far as I'm concerned, there is no premiere."

"You can't mean that." Aaron felt Greg clutching at him, as sure as if he'd been in the same room, trying to bridge the growing emotional distance. "I just didn't want us to arrive together because I was afraid they'd..."

"They'd what?"

"The rumors—about the script being autobiographical. If we arrive together, there'll be conjecture about you and Alan, the character. Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"Is there a connection?"

"You saw the treatment."

"I saw the first two paragraphs before you tore it out of my hands!" Aaron took a deep breath and vowed not to raise his voice again. "I know what the public knows. No Apologies is about two guys discovering their sexuality in military school. You and I never went to military school."

"You'll be my official date." Greg's conciliatory tone surprised him. "We'll arrive together."

Aaron watched the sun glittering on the whitecaps and attempted to let his anger move through him like water. Greg's offer was unprecedented...for him.

"You're coming out?"

"After the film, how can I not?"

"Fine."

"Thank you."

"I'm not saying we're staying together."

"Aaron..." Greg's voice went low and sexy. "We'll fuck in the moonlight...on the beach...after the premiere."

"Like hell we will."

"What?" Greg sounded a little desperate. A little crazy. "You can't mean to say it's not still your favorite fantasy. You've wanted to do it for years."

It was the wrong thing to say.

"Not with you." Aaron winced at the deluge of painful memories. "Not anymore."

"Please."

"You're out of chances, Greg." Aaron looked at the ring once more. "No more empty promises."

"It's not empty."

"It is for me."

"Aaron—" Greg choked on his name.

Hope rekindled in the recesses of Aaron's mind. Was Greg going to say he was sorry? "What? What could you possibly have to say to me that I haven't heard before?"

Silence stretched heavy between them.

"I'll see you the day after tomorrow," Greg said finally.

Aaron swallowed his disappointment, cataloged each shard as it slid down his throat to his gullet. "Yeah. I—I'll see you later." He bit off his customary I love you—an inappropriate sentiment, given the circumstances. Besides, Greg never responded in kind.

"See you Friday, then."

Finger hovering over the Off button, Aaron opened his mouth to say he regretted the end of the relationship, but after a pause, he hung up. He'd already said too much. The premiere would give him a chance to tie up loose ends, and they could both move on, like they should have years ago. There'd be time enough for good-byes and regrets the day after tomorrow.

* * *

A dial tone echoed in the stillness of Greg's Park Plaza hotel room. He stared at the phone, trying to conjure Aaron back. What if he called him now? What if he said the words he wanted to hear?

The dial tone turned into a staccato beeping sound.

No. It wouldn't be that simple. Not this time. This required he pull out all the stops. Go all the way. Even then, it might be too little too late.

He hung up the phone and paced to the window, desperate to impose order on his thoughts.

Why had he written No Apologies? Why hadn't he simply said he was sorry to Aaron? Told him how he felt about him? Why did he have to do everything the hard way?

Ten stories below, yellow taxi cabs inched past blinkered horses waiting to take tourists on Central Park carriage tours. It all looked so simple. Until you got up close.

On the street, where people had faces and names, voices and fists, there was plenty to fear. He remembered with clarity, almost ten years later, the

taunting words—hurtful, hateful things classmates had said and done. He'd vowed never to expose himself or Aaron to ridicule again.

Except he'd written a screenplay virtually guaranteed to expose them both. Why?

He wanted to sink to his knees and pray. If he'd had a whip, he would have applied it to his own back.

"Think of something," he said into his hands, then dropped them to renew his pacing.

A life without Aaron loomed before him. The vision made his stomach heave. He'd give anything to stop the earth—make it cease spinning so time wouldn't carry them farther and farther apart. If time flowed backward, he'd erase every fucked-up, misguided thing he'd said and done over the years.

Aaron owns me.

He closed the drapes and stripped off his clothes.

Aaron could break me.

He crawled under the covers.

Aaron is leaving me.

He shut his eyes and begged Morpheus for a dreamless sleep.

* * *

He really was a coward.

Rather than face Aaron alone before the premiere, Greg arrived in the limousine and asked the driver to ring the bell. He knew Aaron had expected him hours earlier, and while his flight had been delayed, if pressed he'd have to say he'd been avoiding the inevitable.

Aaron slid into the limo, and his expression told Greg he knew as much.

"Hey." He leaned in to give Aaron a kiss that ended up brushing his cheek and sat back, pretending not to notice the rebuff. "You look good."

A modernist statement, the casually cut tux lent raw power to Aaron's sharp-sloped jaw and angled features. God, how Greg wanted to touch him—greet him properly like a lover should. He coveted the freedom he'd neglected for so long.

Aaron looked at him, blue eyes like ice as they made the round-trip from Greg's traditional black bow tie to his patent leather shoes. When he remained silent, Greg struggled for words to fill the void.

"Thank you for coming."

Aaron nodded and stared out the window.

Greg's lungs felt like they were filling with water. If it was possible to drown in your own fear, he was fucked. He breathed deeply through his nose and exhaled slowly to banish the black spots from his vision.

"Shit, Aaron." He slumped forward, putting his head between his knees. "I can't do this."

"Then why the hell'd you ask me to come?" Aaron's voice was a bitter snap.

Appalled at the perceived slight, Greg straightened. "I wasn't talking about you. I'm glad you're here."

The crinkle of skin at the bridge of Aaron's nose told him he'd have to explain himself.

"The premiere. The screenplay." Greg gestured vaguely. "Everyone will guess."

"Well, what'd you write it for?"

"I honestly don't know."

"You, of all people."

"I know."

Aaron snorted his response.

"I'm so screwed." Greg blinked against the returning black spots.

"If the rumors are true, then you're so outed."

"Ya think?"

"So are the rumors true?"

"What? That I'm gay?"

Aaron grinned at the sarcasm, and warmth fluttered in Greg's chest.

"No, that you wrote it about yourself. About us."

Greg couldn't answer that question until Aaron saw the film. It was the only way he'd understand.

He changed the subject. "Do you remember the last time we rode in a limo together?"

Aaron's darkening expression said he clearly remembered what happened during that ride, but his shrug was indifferent. "Sure."

"What do you remember?"

Greg held Aaron's stare, noted as his expression turned sour. "That you were a twat."

Well, hell, he wasn't supposed to remember that part.

"Things haven't changed much, I guess." Greg offered up the wry dose of self-recrimination in belated penance.

"No. They sure haven't."

Shit. He should have left well enough alone.

"Well, at least we're not on the way back to Lawson from your mother's birthday soirée." Greg put his hand on Aaron's rock-hard thigh and gave a daring squeeze. "We could just ask the driver to pull over."

The look Aaron gave him was acerbic at best—the expression so out of place on his normally friendly, easygoing face, Greg almost flinched. "If history were to repeat, the damage to your tux would cause more gossip than you're ready for."

Sliding closer to Aaron, Greg took a chance and cupped the back of his neck to search his steely expression. Brushing back gold-streaked strands from a wide, suntanned forehead, he recataloged the features he loved and beheld a stranger's face.

Angry, desperate, scared, he held Aaron's face immobile and swooped in for the kiss he'd been denied earlier. Nibbling, pressing, he cajoled a parting of lips with his tongue and teeth. Scraping against canines, grazing along molars, he delved into the sweetest mouth he'd ever known. A mouth that had pleased

him a thousand ways and more—a mouth he didn't deserve, but one he couldn't live without.

Distracted with his own arousal—oblivious to anything but his own need—Greg took a long minute before he noticed Aaron's stiff back, his arms at his sides. Greg pulled away and found furious eyes. Another minute and Aaron would have laid him out flat. Premiere or no premiere.

Greg moved away in search of some air that didn't include the scent of cocoa butter sunblock. Since when had his intuition ever been wrong where Aaron was concerned?

Since he stopped being your lover.

Sweat popped out along his brow. "Aaron?"

"It's over."

Greg looked at the gray satin roof lining and breathed through the stinging in his nostrils.

This wasn't the time to beg. He had a premiere to get through. After... Well, he'd say the things he knew Aaron wanted to hear. Slipping his fingers into his inside jacket pocket, he made sure his speech was still there. The crisp edges reassured him in a way paper always did. If he could write it, he could say it. And if he could say it, everything would be all right.

For the next half hour, Greg let Aaron ignore him. He stared at his hands, at his feet, out the window—anywhere that didn't include seeing the alien expression in Aaron's eyes.

When they inched up to the theater, he asked, "Do you want to get out first?"

"They're here to see your movie."

"It's not mine."

"Shut up and get out of the car, Greg."

Battling the urge to flee or vomit or both, he slid over and waited for the chauffeur to open the door. He exited the limo, the camera flashes compounding his disorientation, and nearly stumbled into Aaron.

Amidst the flashing lights and Hollywood dazzle, with the whole world watching, they walked the red carpet. Together yet separate. Now that he was willing—no, desperate—to hold Aaron's hand in public, he knew better than to try and clenched his fist against the impulse.

Searching for any touchstone amidst the hubbub, Greg looked at Aaron. The black and white of his tuxedo highlighted his tan. Built and powerful, he was almost nothing like the lanky teenager Greg had come to love so many years ago.

Aaron seemed to feel his stare and glanced at him.

Greg searched his lover's face, hoping for a smile.

That smile.

Until now, it was one thing that had remained the same. Warm. Reassuring. With a glint of mischief. And when that smile turned dark...

Aaron's eyes narrowed, and Greg shoved the pleasurable memories aside.

"Let's head over there."

Greg looked in the direction Aaron indicated. To the left of the press gallery stood an out television journalist. It seemed as if Aaron's unerring instincts and steady calm might save his ass again. It was something Greg had learned to count on, maybe a bit too much.

"It's Greg Falkner, No Apologies screenwriter! And producer Aaron Blake! This isn't exactly your first premiere, but how're you feeling? Excited?"

Greg mustered a weak smile, and Aaron jumped in. "We're both a little stunned, I think."

"The reception from the critics has been amazing. There are rumors"—the journalist focused on Greg—"that the script is partly autobiographical."

Greg forced his stock reply past constricted vocal cords. "The seed of every good story comes from experience."

The journalist drew himself up like a snake poised to strike. Greg wasn't playing nice enough for him. Politically or professionally.

"Aaron, it's rumored No Apologies came across your desk initially, and your studio passed on it. How're you feeling about that decision now the film has generated so much buzz?"

Aaron's cheekbones colored—twin blades of pink easily mistaken for sunburn.

Bastard.

"Actually, Aaron wanted to see the treatment, but I never gave him the chance. I thought it would be, you know, a risk for the studio. And I wasn't sure he could be objective enough to make the call..."

Aaron stared at him, and Greg trailed off. He was rambling. Revealing too much.

"So, you wrote this script based on your own experiences?" The journalist returned to the original topic.

Greg looked at Aaron, who had the gall to pick that time to give him a shit-eating grin. It had been years since he'd seen an expression that so clearly called him a pussy. In response, he leaned into the microphone and enunciated. "Yes. I'm gay."

Aaron made a choking sound, and Greg's anger somersaulted into smugness.

Mollified, the journalist let them go with, "Congratulations again, Greg. Aaron, enjoy the film. I can't wait to see it for myself."

They escaped to the dimmer recesses of the venue, an old Westwood Village theatre, where art deco flourishes and burled walnut abounded. They shook hands with eager guests and made polite chitchat before an usher showed them to their seats.

"Jesus, Greg," Aaron whispered as they sat. "I'm impressed."

Knowing Aaron wasn't referring to the premiere or the quality of the venue, Greg chanced a glance at him. Had he managed to break down the wall around Aaron's heart that easily?

"You didn't think I had it in me."

His friend, at least, blinked back at him. "No. Quite honestly. I didn't."

The house lights flickered.

"I venture you're going to be more surprised before the night is over."

Aaron leaned over, breath hot in Greg's ear. "I can't believe you wouldn't let me see this before now."

They'd rehashed the same argument for months.

"You know what it's about." How could Aaron not know? Especially after all the rumors Greg had purposefully let the PR people leak. He hadn't wanted No Apologies to hit him broadside, as a total surprise.

"Look me in the eye." Aaron's jaw flexed. "And tell me."

Greg called on all the nonchalance he could muster. "What do you want to know?"

"How autobiographical is it really?"

After facing the cracks in their relationship over the past two days, he couldn't find the wherewithal to lie. Searching Aaron's eyes, he swallowed hard and pled silently for understanding.

"Shit."

"I—" Greg raked shaking fingers through his hair.

God, he was such an idiot. What if he'd irrevocably fucked up one of the few relationships that had ever mattered to him? All for a futile grand gesture and a cause he'd spent his life avoiding? He tried to say more, but the house lights went down, and the red curtain lifted. The next few hours loomed like a death sentence. He hoped his jury of one found it in his heart to issue a favorable verdict.

Chapter Two

January, 1994

"Your roommate's a freak," Carl Westerhouse said.

Aaron Blake tore his gaze away from the isolation table and trained it on Westerhouse, who stabbed at a piece of meat and examined it as if it were Greg Falkner's head on a pike.

"Why do all y'all hate him?"

Westerhouse chewed the morsel and shook his head, letting Tom Quinlan answer for him. "What's to like?"

Aaron opened his mouth to protest, but Quinlan held up his hand. "Seriously, Blake, why do you defend the prick? He's always late, doesn't pull his weight, and his attitude sucks."

When they put it that way, Falkner sounded pretty lame.

Maurice Jennings, normally the friendliest of the clique, sat back. "What's with him and those black notebooks? Even in class?"

Aaron looked over to where their maligned classmate sat with his metal tray and a mess of slop. Punishment for giving someone a black eye. Or had he mouthed off to their AP calculus instructor? Aaron couldn't keep track.

As he stared at Greg, conflicting emotions eddied through him. All darkness and no charm—from the black wings of his brows to the deep brown of his eyes, nothing invited friendship. Even the set of his broad shoulders screamed keep out to anyone stupid enough to contemplate an approach.

"Well, damn," Aaron muttered, finding the challenge only made his roommate a more compelling puzzle.

"He should be expelled." Quinlan looked around the table for support.

Pity twisted Aaron's stomach, and he put down his utensils. He knew what came next, and he refused to take part in it. Not this time. He wanted to protect the kid—to find out if there was more to him than explosive anger and biting sarcasm. If they got him kicked out, he'd never discover what made him tick.

"Let him alone, fellas." As their ringleader and the highest ranked among them, usually his word equaled law. This time, the heavy looks exchanged around the table warned him he'd have to fight to keep the upper hand.

Kevin McHugh made the attempt to unseat him from his place of power. "Do you like him?"

Aaron sat up a little straighter and looked the fiery redhead in the eye. This was a dangerous question. Say yes and he'd be labeled a queer. Say no and Greg became fair game.

"I think he has some heavy shit to think on," Aaron said carefully.

"He makes his own fucking problems." McHugh touched his nose where Falkner had broken it at the start of last term. "He's on thin ice. It wouldn't take much to send him packing."

"What if..." The group looked at Aaron. "What if I could get him to apologize to all y'all? For every shitty thing he's done?"

The table burst into laughter until the monitor pointed a finger their way and wrote something on a pad.

"Shit." Quinlan slumped. "There goes tomorrow night. Amy was supposed to meet me at the Rusty Spoon."

"That shithole'd give you the runs," McHugh said. "We can use the time to plan."

Fuck. He had to stop this.

He didn't understand it, but something told him Greg Falkner's world was ready to shatter into a million little pieces at the slightest provocation. Why he cared, he didn't know, but he resolved to save him the humiliation this crew could dish out. They were only months from graduation, and Falkner wouldn't be their problem much longer.

"Afraid to bet on it?"

His friends stared at him.

"A bet..." Jennings rubbed at the sparse hairs on his pimpled chin. "You mean, like if you win, he stays. And if not, you kick his ass, or we get him expelled?"

Aaron thought about that a moment. The plan had merit. "Sure. I'd kick his ass. Nobody's gettin' kicked out, though."

Mutterings of "chicken" and "pussy" rippled through the small group.

He let the barbs bounce off his thick skin. "What's chicken about kickin' the ass of someone twice my size? Alone?"

McHugh hooted with laughter, and the monitor held up two fingers. "Fuck me," he said, quieting.

"You'd do that? Kick his ass while we watched? Humiliate him old-school?" Quinlan looked at him like it was Christmas morning.

"You mean really put a hurt on him?" Aaron mustered a nonchalant expression, though he blanched inside.

"Yeah," the group chorused, salivating to see their nemesis brought low.

"If he doesn't apologize to all y'all?"

Enthusiastic nodding told him he could do no better for his roommate.

"Fine." He wiped his mouth with his napkin. "How long do I have?"

They looked to each other. Quinlan spoke. "Two days. Taps night after next, if he hasn't apologized, you make his pussy-ass cry this weekend while we watch."

"And if you can't do it?" McHugh added, "We do."

"Done deal." Aaron shrugged as if he were about to take a leisurely Sunday stroll instead of manipulating the biggest, meanest, most fucked-up kid at Grayson.

Looking over at the isolation table, he saw Falkner glaring at him as if he knew what Aaron's posse planned.

Aaron nodded in greeting and started praying hard. If Greg didn't buckle, this whole stunt could end with his own ass getting run out on a rail, because touching Greg Falkner with anything but a stick was likely to prompt more speculation about exactly why he liked the cadet. And how.

* * *

Greg's pencil snapped in half, points of wood piercing his palm. Unblinking, he stared down at his fist. The memory of Aaron Blake's conversation with his patsies made his blood boil like the liquid in the beaker on the soapstone counter in front of him.

He examined the yellow slivers sticking from his flesh. Ignoring the science experiment, he picked wood out of his hand and grabbed another pencil from his bag, along with a black notebook to jot down the conversation he'd overheard in the mess hall.

The idiots didn't realize the placement of the isolation table allowed him to hear most of their conversations with Carnegie Hall clarity. Thanks to his penchant for trouble, he now had a heads-up about the ass-kicking Blake thought he would hand him.

Blake.

Foreign emotions flitted through him as he transcribed Blake's dialogue into the notebook, the rawness of reality hitting him broadside.

Hurt. Confusion. Loneliness.

As if on cue, a scene manifested, so tangible he had only to pluck it out of the air and place it on paper. He sank into the warm cocoon of fiction—of a world he could control. He loved this headspace. It felt like getting high and getting a hard-on, all in one.

Blake. In uniform. Leading drills in the early fall frost. Breath eddying against the morning fog. His voice a sharp shock to sleep-slogged senses. One-two-three-four. Then double time. Rhythm. Muscle. Trickling sweat. Pumping arms and flexing legs.

After. Inspection. Standing at attention as Blake examined him from head to toe. In his face, his breath a hot wash, lips curling...lips—

"Mr. Falkner!"

He jumped guiltily and slammed the notebook shut, stuffing it in his bag before he rose to attention.

"Sir!"

The class stared, Blake among them. Molten heat flooded Greg's cheeks as he steadied himself against his fight-or-flight response.

"Hand me the notebook."

Fuck... FUCK!

Bending down, he pulled the notebook from his bag as a chorus of "That's right, sir! Read it! Out loud!" filled the room.

"Silence!"

The class quieted, suppressing snickers that flitted above the hiss of the Bunsen burners. Greg held out the notebook, trying to keep the pleading expression off his face. He was his own man as long as he didn't beg or bend.

Fingering the edge of the notebook, Captain Norris stared him down. Greg lowered his eyes, giving himself up to his fate.

"You'll get this back after class. Back to work," the captain barked. "All of you!"

Greg slid onto his metal stool with all the energy of a deflating tire. His hands shook as he lifted his beaker with a pair of tongs, sending scalding liquid over his knuckles. Skin peeled back immediately, but he didn't make a sound. That would scar. And it'd be a good reminder. Play with fire, and someday you'll get burned.

* * *

Falkner scribbled something in a notebook at his desk, as usual. Aaron lounged on the bottom bunk, staring up at gunmetal gray slats supporting a flimsy mattress. When he lay up there, the mattress would poke through, shifting with his weight as he rolled over.

Everyone said Aaron wouldn't last a single quarter rooming with him. So far they'd managed to get along, perhaps because they hardly spoke.

"Greg." The name caressed the back of Aaron's throat, startling him with its intimacy.

Falkner turned, looping one arm over the slats of the wooden chair. Aaron stared at the thick rope of muscle framed by the edge of his white T-shirt.

"Blake."

Their eyes met. Damn, but the guy looked like the devil. Hair black as sin offset pale skin and wine red lips.

"What were you writing in class today?"

Falkner looked as if he'd been slapped. "Just some notes."

"Bout what?"

The glare he got said "go to hell," but Falkner didn't do more than turn his back. Aaron never knew someone as closed off. For the thousandth time, he wondered what it would take to get him to open up.

Trailing his gaze over the bulletin board above the desk, he took in a navy bookmark emblazoned with the words NYU Tisch and a postcard of New York City. It was blank on the back, and Falkner never got mail. This and the brand of deodorant and shampoo he used comprised the short list of things Aaron knew about his roommate. Oh. And he preferred jeans to slacks during leave, though he rarely went home.

Denim left little to the imagination on him. He worked out almost daily, and it showed in the muscles of his thighs and the firm round globes of his glutes.

Falkner paused, his pencil hovering over the open notebook like a weapon. "What?" he asked, apparently feeling Aaron's eyes on him.

Aaron's stomach twisted with anticipation. He had to tell him the truth. If he ever wanted his friendship, he had to demonstrate loyalty and honesty. He didn't know how he knew this. He just did.

"I think I'm gonna have to kick your ass."

Falkner turned with a predatory grace and leveled a glare that sent less sturdy cadets wetting their pants and calling their mommies to take them home.

Aaron rubbed his fingers over his eyes and inhaled. That hadn't come out right.

"Fuck you," Falkner answered.

"I said I had to. I didn't say I wanted to."

Turning fully around in his chair, Falkner grasped the back with square palms and long, strong fingers. "Couldn't say no to your girlfriends?"

Aaron blinked at the enmity Falkner directed toward him, and hurt swelled in his chest. "What?"

"McHugh told me."

"Sonofabitch." The drawl Aaron normally tried to hide hovered in the air between them.

"I was waiting to see what you'd do." Falkner huffed through his nose and shook his head. "I'm disappointed...Aaron."

Desire unfurled, spread with a flush of heat from Aaron's belly to his fingers and toes. He grabbed his pillow and sat up against the headboard, shielding his crotch from Falkner's view.

"I really thought...maybe. Ya know?"

"What? That I'd apologize to the assholes who've made my life miserable from the first moment I stepped into the quad?"

Drills mid-January almost two years ago—Aaron still remembered clearly the limo pulling up to the gates. Most of the cadets came from wealthy families, except they weren't so showy about it. If Falkner had an open, easy demeanor, he might have overcome their animosity. Instead, his family's ostentatious behavior fueled some primal rage in the other cadets that turned him feral.

In those first moments, Aaron saw his future roommate's expression for what it really was—not angry, but frightened. More wounded animal than snarling beast.

"Why'd you come to Grayson?"

"To make men out of pussy cadets who think they can 'put a hurt on' me." Falkner mimicked Aaron's drawl.

Fucking McHugh. Aaron would kick his ass when he finished with Falkner's.

"Fuck you. I made a promise." God that sounded like a whine.

"So?" Falkner shrugged one broad shoulder. "I'll let you keep it."

Hope surged. "You'll apologize?"

"No. I'll let you take the first swing."

Aaron narrowed his eyes as something base in him rose to the implicit challenge. The cadet thought he could fight him and win.

"By the end of the night, you'll be doin' drills for me." Steely promise filled Aaron's voice.

A slow smile flattened the pronounced Cupid's bow of Falkner's upper lip, somersaulting Aaron's stomach with its decadence.

"I'll be drilling something, that's for damn sure...but it'll be your ass." Falkner held Aaron's wide-eyed gaze for a long moment before he returned to his scribbling.

* * *

Sunset bloomed like a bruise, purple and yellow, across the sky. Greg glanced at the clock tower and blew out a frosty breath. Five minutes till five, and Blake and his cronies hadn't shown yet.

Old snow squeaked under his boots, creating an unnatural echo against the pillared Georgian buildings surrounding the quad. It was quiet. Unsettlingly so. Five more minutes and he'd go in.

"Look who showed."

"Fuck you, McHugh."

The asshole obviously hadn't learned his lesson the last time he'd gotten his nose broken.

A shit-eating grin split the cadet's face. "You've met your match this time, Falkner."

Eyeing McHugh from toe to head, he snorted.

"Not me. Blake," McHugh clarified.

Greg arched one brow. That was seriously funny, but he couldn't laugh at Blake. The kid's good nature would land him in a world of hurt.

The library door opened, and the rest of the clique appeared, charcoal wool peacoats and cherry red scarves belying the malice they intended to perpetrate. Or rather, that would backfire in their faces.

As always, Blake strode at the head of the pack, and Greg wondered exactly why he hung out with these losers. Everything about him, from his lanky build to his ready smile, seemed easygoing, while these pricks were nothing but self-serving toadies.

The sandy-haired cadet took off his leather glove and held out his hand. Greg looked down at long fingers with square nails and back to eyes that held a hint of hope and a lot of remorse. He imagined gripping that hand, and heat unfurled low in his belly, shocking him.

"Stop feeling bad. It's not like you're going to hurt me."

Blake flushed with anger. "Suit yourself." He shoved his hand back into his glove as he turned.

"Running away?"

The cadet turned back to him, sultry calm blanketing his features, and for the first time in the two years he'd known him, Greg classified him as dangerous.

"Unless you've a hankering to be kicked out, we're gonna do this in the cemetery."

"Yeah. We already dug your grave, Falkner," Westerhouse said.

Greg ignored the idiot and, reserving his energy for the fight, followed the clan to the other side of the brick wall surrounding the campus.

Yellow light from the dormitory shone over the group as they slipped between granite headstones, stopping to one side of a moss-blackened crypt.

In the dusky light, the pale-faced group surrounded him and Blake. He just hoped he didn't have to break the kid's pretty nose. Although, a little bump in the middle might man him up a bit.

Greg smiled at the thought as he shed his coat and tossed it over the crypt. His gloves followed, and he turned to Blake.

"Rules?" Blake asked.

"Fuck the rules. Kick his freak ass!" Quinlan said, and the other three backed him up with a chorus of jeers.

Blake shrugged and turned to Greg. "Any rules?"

"Is that what your daddy taught you before he died? How to fight like a politician?" The kick Blake snapped missed Greg's face by a millimeter, and he recognized it for what it was. A warning.

"Fuck." The word spilled out before he could stop himself. With grinding clarity, Greg saw he was in more trouble than he'd bargained for. The kid...Aaron...knew martial arts. His vision tunneled until the world included only the two of them.

"When I finish, you will apologize," Aaron said with more grit than Greg expected.

An upper cut whistled through the air. The motion threw Greg's weight forward, and Aaron had his arm. The cold snow met his back with a resounding crunch. A boot pressed to his windpipe, cutting off access to what little air he could gasp.

"Apologize." Aaron's face snarled against the night.

Greg laughed on a pain-filled wheeze.

"Get up, freak." Aaron removed his boot.

Complying, if only to get away from the snow melting into his back, he stood and tried to lunge, but Aaron's foot snapped out and returned him to the ground.

As he stared up at the sky for the second time, fear washed over him—a sickening twist to his gut that had nothing to do with the pain he faced. The only thing he'd had in this godforsaken place was the ability to make people stay the fuck away from him. Now they'd take that away from him too. Once they knew they had a weapon like Aaron to use against him, they'd never leave him alone.

Edging to a sitting position, he shook the stars out of his head and stood. He swung, and his fist met air, as expected.

"Do you dance like you fight? It's real pretty," Greg taunted, his laugh as brittle as the January air.

He went down again.

Shit.

Greg's laughter sounded hysterical to his own ears. He couldn't win this fight, and he knew Aaron didn't really want to hurt him. He'd had ample

opportunity. So now what? He had to find a way to end the stalemate. For both their sakes.

Reaching down to the most secret portions of his soul, he found an insult virtually guaranteed to make any cadet see red.

Clambering back to his feet, Greg cocked his head to one side and cast his barb. "I mean, if you want to get someone on their knees, I'm sure one of your bitches here would suck dick."

The ground rose quickly. He hit face-first, biting through his lip as Aaron's boot met his rib.

Something cracked, and he gasped with pain like he'd never felt. He'd always been bigger. Stronger. He'd made sure of it. This shouldn't happen. He coughed, and fire raced into his lungs, black flecks of blood spotting the moonlit snow beneath him.

"Get up, pussy," Westerhouse taunted, and more insults surrounded him.

Humiliation washed over him, coming up like bile to mix with the blood in his mouth, and he realized he'd always wanted Aaron to like him. Always held out hope for his friendship until now.

Forcing himself to his knees, he looked at Aaron towering like a dark god above him.

"You should have told me you liked boys," Greg rasped.

The last thing he remembered was a blinding flash as Aaron's boot met his face.

Aaron looked down at blood spreading in a sinister blot and inhaled through his nostrils. Greg's face pressed sideways into the snow where he'd fallen backward from his knees, his legs angled oddly to his side.

The other four cadets were quiet for so long they might not have been there.

Jennings broke the silence. "Do you think he's dead?" he asked, his voice filled with awe.

Westerhouse, who had taken medic training in preparation for West Point, leaned down to feel for a pulse.

The gentle gesture, so out of place for the cadet, swiped away Aaron's angry haze.

"Shit." What had he done?

McHugh clapped him on the back. "Good work! Never knew you had it in you."

A sickening crunch preceded McHugh's howls. "You broke my fucking nose!"

"Maybe they'll fix it right this time," Aaron said and broke into a run toward the gate.

The infirmary light still illuminated the hall when he skidded to a halt in front of the door, breathless, and pointed toward the exit.

The nurse didn't stop to ask questions, simply grabbed her bag and coat and followed him out the door to the graveyard.

When she saw Greg's form in the snow, she shook her head and looked up at him.

"Go fetch the commandant, Mr. Blake."

* * *

"I just don't understand." The commandant swung away from the window overlooking the quad.

"I'm sorry, sir," Aaron said.

"Did I tell you to speak?"

The shouted question snapped Aaron's head back, and he braced himself at attention, eyes forward, hands to his sides.

"No, sir!"

The commandant sighed and moved to his desk. "This is going into your permanent record, Blake. I never thought I'd see the day..."

Aaron kept his mouth shut.

"Kitchen duty for the duration. Isolation table. Drills nightly. No February break. You hear me, Blake?"

Aaron nodded.

"I asked you a question!" the commandant snarled.

"Yes, sir!"

"You're lucky I'm not expelling you. You just about killed him."

Aaron couldn't agree more. Wondered frankly why he wasn't already in the quad with his bags, waiting for his parents to come.

"Had it coming, I suppose," the commandant muttered, scribbling the report. "Parents at their wits end with him. Sister dead."

Aaron's eyes snapped to the commandant's face. The man might have just handed him the key to Greg's soul.

The commandant came around the desk and held out his hand. When Aaron blinked, not understanding, the hand ripped the epaulets off his shoulders, effectively demoting him to the lowest rank in the school. The humiliation paled in comparison to what he felt when he thought of the ambulance lights flashing bright red against the snow as they carted Greg away.

"Dismissed," the commandant growled, and Aaron left to find his empty room.

The hallways echoed with his footfalls. He felt bone weary, a thousand years old, and profoundly sad.

If he only knew how Greg fared, maybe he could sleep. He passed the darkened infirmary. He'd have to wait until morning to get any news. It would be the longest night of his life.

Chapter Three

"I brought your books. Oh, and this came for you."

Greg opened his eyes to see Aaron place an envelope on his chest.

It was February break, and most of the cadets had gone home. Aaron remained on campus, assigned to KP duty for the duration of the school year, and Greg, released from the hospital, convalesced in the infirmary while his parents vacationed in Monaco.

Fingering the bright yellow envelope, he watched Aaron move around the bed, straightening covers and refilling his water pitcher.

"What are you doing?" Greg asked, holding back a wince at the pain in his cheek.

Aaron turned to him, eyes brimming with worry and guilt. "I thought you might like some company."

Greg shifted, trying to sit up a little. Despite two cracked ribs and a bruised lung, he hadn't cared about the pain until last night when they'd started weaning him off the codeine. Now everything seemed to ache, even the sunlight in his eyes.

"I'm okay," he said, waving the envelope lightly.

With no more than sponge baths all week, he undoubtedly looked like hell and smelled worse.

"What's that?" Aaron asked.

Greg examined the flowery handwriting on the front, then flipped the envelope over. "From my mother," he said, cracking open the flap.

"How come she doesn't visit? You don't live too far."

Greg looked up at his nosy guest and frowned. "She's busy."

Aaron made himself comfortable in the wooden side chair, and Greg sighed, resigning himself to a long visit. He didn't have the energy to needle him into leaving.

"Your dad, he still around?"

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"You never talk about him."

"I never talk about my mother, either."

This conversation was getting uncomfortably personal. Greg focused on the card in his hands.

"What's that for? For being...laid up?" Aaron asked, obviously skirting around the fact that he was the reason Greg was lying here bandaged like a mummy.

Greg looked at the card covered in tacky balloons. "Birthday." His eyes automatically trailed past the verse, and his stomach turned. She couldn't even bother to sign the fucking thing.

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the card into the trash can next to his bed.

"Hey!" Aaron shot out of the chair and retrieved the card, placing it face out on the nightstand.

Greg rolled his eyes. The kid might kick some serious ass, but at the moment he reminded him more of an annoying puppy than Bruce Lee.

"Nineteen, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I turned eighteen in September."

"I know."

"You do?"

Greg looked at him like he was stupid. "I bunk with you."

"Sure," Aaron said. "But you weren't...you know...at the party."

Greg ignored the statement as emotion stabbed at the pit of his stomach. He pictured friends clapping Aaron on the back, celebrating with him, and swallowed hard. God, the withdrawal from the drugs was making him morose. He had to get out of the infirmary before he went nuts. A shower would be a start.

"Look, if you're going to hang around, do you mind making yourself useful?"

"Sure!" An eager light kindled in Aaron's eyes. "Anything."

"Get me in the shower before the nurse gets back from lunch."

"What?"

"I need a shower. I can't stand to be near myself."

He shifted to swing his legs over the side of the bed and grunted. Aaron shot to his side, slid his arm under Greg's shoulders, and helped him stand.

The room swayed.

"Y'all sure 'bout this?" The thickening drawl in Aaron's voice took Greg by surprise.

"I'm fine." He shuffled forward.

The kid smelled nice. Clean like the ocean, with a hint of suntan lotion. All wiry muscle and steady grace, Aaron reminded him of the kind of guy his grandmother would feed Cornish pasties, telling him he needed to eat hearty food if he hoped to fill out that lanky frame someday.

Greg laughed, then gasped when pain lanced his side.

"Jesus, I'm so sorry."

The apology caught Greg flat-footed, and he stopped outside the locker room. "What are you apologizing for?"

Aaron worked his jaw in that way he did when he thought about how to phrase something. "For losing control... For hurting you so bad."

The hoarseness in Aaron's voice constricted Greg's breathing further, and he swayed.

"Shit. Don't fall! They'll they think I put a hurt on you again."

"Get me in there. I'll sit down."

They shuffled into the showers, where Greg lowered himself onto a bench. Winded, he looked to Aaron, who hovered like a mother hen.

"Look, you have to stop this."

"What? What am I doing?"

"Feeling like you did this."

Aaron leaned back, his head hitting the subway tile with an audible klunk as he closed his eyes. "I did do this."

"No. Idiot. I did it."

Blue eyes snapped open. "Are you feeling all right? You do remember what happened?"

"Oh, I remember." Humiliation and helplessness reared at the vivid memory of Aaron's foot sweeping his legs out from beneath him, but he kept his gaze steady as he confessed, "I made you do it."

Aaron frowned, pushing away from the wall to stare down at him. "You can't make a person do something by talking at them."

Power rushed over Greg's skin, standing his arm hair on end. "Sure I can." He smiled at the thought.

Aaron spun away and took several deep gulps of air.

Had he pissed him off? God, he hoped not. He'd never make it back to the infirmary without him.

"I wasn't going to apologize to your girls. I knew pretty quick I couldn't beat you. So I made you man up and knock me out."

Aaron's expression flickered between incredulity and horror as he turned around. "You wanted me to hurt you? That bad?"

He nodded.

"That's...that's absolutely the most fucked-up thing I ever heard," Aaron said, breathless.

Greg grinned, enjoying fucking with the kid's head, but decided not to let him think he was totally whacked. "I don't like the pain. I liked that you couldn't make me do what you and your girls wanted."

"Why not say you're sorry? Why go through..." He waved a hand vaguely at Greg. "This?"

"Because there's strength...and there's strength." Greg tapped his temple with his finger.

"That's so fucked up," Aaron whispered, his eyes growing hazy, like he'd smoked weed. "Someday, I'm gonna find a way to make you cry 'uncle.'"

The odd statement snapped through Greg's mind. Something he didn't understand—something just out of reach—passed between him and Aaron, and unfamiliar territory loomed ahead.

"Yeah, well." Greg looked away. "How about for now you help me get in the shower?"

Aaron nodded. "You need, you know, help getting undressed?"

"Nah. I think I can do it." Greg gingerly drew his T-shirt over his head. "It's the bandage..."

He felt badly for making Aaron look at the mess underneath, but if he didn't get a shower, he might cry.

"Okay." Aaron pushed himself from the wall and walked around to Greg's back. "Tell me if I'm hurting you."

Greg nodded and braced for the pain. He wasn't disappointed. With the decompression came a shifting that made him cry out despite his best effort to keep quiet.

"Sweet Jesus!" Aaron said.

"Don't fucking stop. Do it."

The bandage unraveled, releasing an indescribable hospital smell. Pain mixed with the stench, and Greg gagged.

"You all right?"

"Keep...going."

The bandage slipped free, and Aaron spun away, the punch he landed on one of the metal lockers echoing off the shower tiles.

"That pretty, huh?"

"Shut up. Just shut the fuck up!" Aaron choked back a sob that clawed at Greg's conscience.

"Look. Man up. Don't go all queer on me now. I'll be afraid to take off my pants in front of you."

Aaron grew quiet behind him. So quiet he might have left.

Rising on shaking limbs, Greg drew off his sweatpants and socks, relishing the feel of the air on his skin.

"Want me to turn on the water?"

"Would you wash my hair too? It'd suck to lift my arms."

A small part of him wanted to discomfit Aaron further, enjoyed the soaring power that came with unnerving the normally steady cadet—he'd always wondered what it would take. The larger part of him, however, just wanted a warm shower and clean hair.

"Sure."

Aaron's shoulders slumped as he tore his clothes from his body. He opened his locker to rummage for soap and shampoo, and Greg took the rare opportunity to examine rangy muscle and golden skin, telling himself research informed a writer's craft. He took in high arches, white-blond hair along sculpted calves, lean thighs, and the shadow of taut testicles between the V of Aaron's legs. The shower spray sounded against porcelain tiles, a wet hiss that echoed more than it would in the normally noisy, crowded room, and he had to force his eyes from Aaron's square-cut ass.

Greg inhaled, quick and deep, letting the searing pain chase away his budding erection.

"Shit!"

Aaron, a blur of white skin, arrived at Greg's side before his vision fully refocused.

"Here. Lean on me." He placed a hand under Greg's elbow.

The shower felt blissful. Hot water tapped at his bruises, but he didn't care. It washed away the pain as soon as it hit, relaxing his muscles and cleansing his skin. Aaron soaped his hair and adjusted the spray so he didn't have to lean back too far to rinse the suds from his hair.

"Again?" Greg asked, not knowing when he would manage to escape the nurse for another shower.

"You sure it's all right with your stitches?"

Greg shook the water off his face and looked at Aaron.

They reached the same height, Aaron maybe an inch shorter. The cadet brought up a gentle finger to trace the sutures along Greg's cheek. The light pressure felt good, replacing weeks of pain with a thrill of pleasure he found difficult to combat.

Their eyes met, and Aaron licked his lips, catching water droplets from the corner and drawing them into his mouth.

"Oh shit," Greg whispered, recognizing the answering spark of lust.

Aaron lightly caressed the spot where Greg knew a green and blue bruise spread over his cheekbone. "I'm really sorry."

"Shut up."

Long fingers fluttered over his skin, skimming stubble to linger over a scab on his lower lip. "I feel awful about this."

Heart hammering, Greg took the initiative and turned his face away. If caught, they'd face nightmares worse than expulsion.

"Get me a towel?" He willed his gaze not to dip lower.

Aaron dropped his hand. "Sure."

They made it back to the infirmary with Greg in one piece, but not before the nurse returned from lunch. Aaron, late for kitchen duty, suffered an extra hour of drills in the quad. From the window, Greg noticed him limping and wondered at the harshness of the place.

He almost equated it with living in hell, but that analogy he reserved for home. And Grayson was, if nothing else, better than home. He looked at his birthday card on the nightstand and swiped it into the trash.

Four more months.

He could survive anything for that long.

* * *

The door opened, and Aaron looked up from his book. He hadn't seen Greg in a week. Ever since the nurse barred him from the infirmary for helping him shower.

Remembering the water sluicing down Greg's pecs—suds trailing over the green and black bruises on his side—alternately turned him on and pummeled him with humiliation and disgust at his all-around lack of self-control.

Longing almost drove him to the infirmary more than once in the middle of the night after the nurse had gone to bed—that and the sheer isolation of his lowered position within the corps of cadets. His former friends refused to speak

to him, he sat alone at meals, and his extracurricular activities included drills and KP duty. In short, he was persona non grata.

Ultimately, he didn't care. It was the least penance he deserved. While he marched the endless miles in the quad night after night, he thought about Greg. About what had really brought him to Grayson. What he'd said in the shower—about wanting Aaron to beat the crap out of him like that—really twisted his brain. Sometimes the thought pissed him off all over again, and other times he played with it like a puzzle he wanted to understand.

Now the enigma stood in the doorway, confusion creasing his brow.

"Hullo," Aaron drawled.

"You moved the furniture."

He'd taken the beds apart, placing them on opposite sides of the room with one desk between them.

"It'll be easier on you if you don't have to climb to the top bunk."

"What happened to the other desk?" Greg sat gingerly on the edge of his bed.

"I got permission to put it in storage."

Greg looked out the window, avoiding Aaron's eyes. "Heard you caught shit for coming to see me."

"That's all right." Aaron hoped to God he wouldn't mention the shower.

Greg nodded and lay back against his pillow.

Aaron let his gaze run down Greg's torso, taking in the crisp shirt, standard gray slacks, and spit-shined loafers.

"I did your shoes for you."

Greg opened one eye and looked at him. "I know. I asked them to make you."

Aaron hissed through his teeth. What about his roommate set him off? He'd endured pricks before, but Greg? He specialized in infuriating everyone around him.

"Did your parents send you here to teach you manners?"

Greg's bark of laughter ended with a wince. "Control."

Aaron widened his eyes, surprised that Greg had answered the question. "How's that working for ya?"

Greg surveyed his shoes. "Pretty damn well, I'd say."

Aaron slammed his chemistry book shut. "What's your damage, Falkner?" he snarled, standing to tower over Greg.

"Other than two cracked ribs?"

"Fuck. You."

A slow smile spread over Greg's features.

"Shut up," Aaron said preemptively, balling his fists at his sides.

"You know," Greg said, sitting up, his considerable muscle looming large in the room, "I've been thinking."

Aaron stepped backward and folded his arms over his chest. Not out of fear of Greg, but fear of himself. Of the strange emotions his roommate wrung from

him. The anger. The lust. Greg represented everything he'd never wanted to become—out of control, bitter, disliked. He wanted to remake him in his own image, not the other way around.

"You're so curious about my parents. Why I'm here," Greg mused.

"So?"

"Come home with me in a few weeks. It's my gan's birthday."

Aaron dropped his arms to his sides and stared. This felt like getting an invitation to the White House. Then he remembered his virtual house arrest.

"Can't," he said and turned back to his books to hide his disappointment.

"I already cleared it with the commandant."

Aaron couldn't keep the stunned expression from his face as he looked over his shoulder. Greg's eyes sparkled with energy. If he didn't know the kid, he would have said he felt happy.

"How?" Aaron whispered.

Greg looked pointedly at his feet. "I need someone to shine my shoes."

Chapter Four

Waiting in the quad for Greg's parents' limousine on the windless March day seemed like a good idea until McHugh showed up.

"Taking your girlfriend home to meet the parents, Falkner?"

"Ignore him."

Naturally, Greg ignored his advice instead. "What ruptured your dick, McHugh? Too many hand jobs?"

McHugh's eyes narrowed, crinkling the edge of the white bandage covering his nose.

Aaron, sensing a fight, stepped in front of Greg. McHugh hadn't spoken to either of them since the night in the graveyard, and Aaron would have welcomed the contact if Greg hadn't been around.

"Let it alone, McHugh," Aaron said, jerking his head toward the dorm. "Just go inside."

"You're no cadet leader anymore." McHugh swiped his gaze down Aaron's front. "Fuck off."

Greg stepped forward, but Aaron held up his hand. "His fight's with me, Greg."

"Ooh, first name basis for the lovers. Ain't that sweet?"

Aaron blinked, his mind scrambling for a way to cover the blunder. "If you're trying to piss me off, it's not working."

Greg laughed behind him. "That's because he doesn't know how to do it right."

"Shut up," Aaron snapped.

Whose side was Greg on, anyway? They couldn't afford a fight if Aaron wanted to see the outside of these walls for the last time before graduation. Miracle of miracles, Greg listened for once and let him work his magic.

"I'm sorry about your nose." Aaron stepped forward.

McHugh's already ruddy cheeks turned wine red as he tried to glare and failed. "Yeah, well..."

Aaron bit back a smile. People found it difficult to stay angry with him. When he apologized or said something nice, he made it close to impossible.

"I was pumped from the fight, ya know?" Aaron took off his glove and held out his hand.

McHugh stared at it for a long moment and reluctantly reached out his own. They shook.

Casting a glance over Aaron's shoulder, McHugh nodded. "Watch yourself around him."

"It's all good." He clapped his one-time friend on the shoulder, wishing things felt easy like before. He looked at McHugh's nose. "I really am sorry."

"That's all right. They set it right this time." The cadet went inside as a black limousine crunched over the pea-gravel drive.

The driver stepped out of the vehicle in full dress uniform, the patent leather of his black cap glinting in the sunlight. Aaron gaped at the man. Easily six feet two, the man dwarfed Greg and probably outweighed Aaron and Greg together, every ounce made of muscle and broad bone.

The driver approached, and Greg took an uncharacteristic step back. Gaze averted, he seemed a combination of embarrassed and afraid as he said, "Just pop the trunk, John."

A ghost of a smile played at John's mouth as he complied. The self-satisfied nature of the expression sent a shiver down Aaron's spine, and he made a mental note never to get caught alone in an alley with this man.

Greg grunted with pain as he swung their bags into the trunk.

"Why didn't you let him do that?"

"I'm fine," Greg muttered.

John held the door, and Aaron watched as Greg got in at an awkward angle.

"You all right?" Aaron asked after the door closed with a quiet thud.

"Sure." Greg nestled back against the leather and tugged at his pant legs, adjusting the legroom. "Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason." Aaron chose his words carefully. "You just don't seem to get on with that guy much."

Greg looked at the black privacy glass separating the passenger compartment from the driver's seat and shrugged.

"He works for my father."

"Oh."

Apparently that explained something, but Aaron let it go and looked around at the plush interior. Tinted windows, seats so comfortable they invited slumber, speakers, a wet bar, and walnut trim provided ultimate luxury.

He'd ridden in limos before, but only for political events with his father or stepfather. Much time had elapsed since he'd had the pleasure. It surprised him anyone would send a full stretch rather than a sedan to pick up their kid at school.

"Your parents believe in going all out, huh?" He settled against the black leather seat.

"My father."

Apparently that excuse explained a lot in Greg's life.

"What does he do?"

Greg pulled a face. "Mostly squanders my inheritance."

He was a master of answering questions without answering them at all.

"That was incredible, what you did with McHugh."

Aaron blinked at the compliment, waiting for Greg to call him a kiss-ass. The expected insult didn't come, so Aaron changed the subject, not knowing what to say.

"How far is it to your house?"

"About two hours."

"I would've thought it'd be shorter. New England's small compared to the South."

Greg reached up and slid open a panel to reveal the stereo controls. "What do you want to listen to?"

Aaron shrugged. Denied the luxury of listening to music for so long, he didn't know the current groups, much less what he liked.

"Do you like Nirvana?"

"I don't know them much."

Greg gave him an odd look.

"My parents don't like rock music," Aaron explained.

That raised Greg's black brows within touching distance of his buzz cut. "Do you always do what your parents tell you?"

Aaron laughed, self-conscious. "Yeah. Pretty much. It's easier. Ya know?"

"Not really."

The band's male vocalist came on singing about something brooding. Lonely and sexy all at once, the raw sound steamrolled over Aaron's emotions.

"I would have taken you for a metal head, but this fits."

"It's called grunge."

"Ha! There's a word for you."

Greg grinned at him, surprising Aaron with his good humor.

"How come you're not pissy? You hate going home."

"Yeah, well," Greg said, sliding his gaze sideways out the window. "My gan will be there."

"How old is she?"

"She's going to be eighty-eight."

"Gan? Is that Irish?"

"No. Just a family thing. Though my father is English."

"Is that why you sound like you do? Did you grow up in England?" Greg's accent wasn't exactly Yankee, and it wasn't exactly British. It reminded Aaron of those old movies with Cary Grant. Clipped. With rounded vowels.

"No. Just my father, and my gan went to school there for a while when her father was in diplomatic service."

Greg pulled a black book from his coat, scribbled something, and replaced it in his pocket.

"You're always doing that," Aaron said. "What are you writing?"

"I don't think I should tell you."

That direct answer surprised Aaron. "All right. No big deal."

Greg sighed, Aaron's calm acceptance seeming to wear away his reluctance. "I know what your uncle does for a living. I heard you talking to your girls about it. It's why I don't want to answer."

"Film producer?" Aaron tilted his head to the side, furrowing his brow. "Why would that... You're writing screenplays?"

"It's not...why I invited you."

The thought never crossed Aaron's mind. If he knew anyone incapable of lying to get what he wanted, that person was Greg. He smiled. Greg Falkner. Screenwriter. It had a ring to it he liked.

"I have no problems with him seeing your stuff."

"That's not..." Greg frowned and looked out the window.

"What?" Aaron snorted. "You think most people who make it in Hollywood don't have connections?"

"I'm not some sycophantic toady."

"Sycophantic?" Aaron laughed. "Who uses words like that?"

Greg folded his arms over his chest and glared.

Aaron tried to picture Greg kissing someone's ass to save his own mother's life. The concept struck him as highly unlikely. "I'd never think of you as an ass kisser, all right?"

Greg nodded, apparently somewhat mollified. "I guess your father was in the business too?"

The unexpected mention of his father made Aaron's insides wobble. "Yeah. Film industry lobbyist." He looked out the window at the scraggly trees along the highway. "It's sort of the family business."

Greg cleared his throat. "Where did you learn to fight the way you do?"

Thankful for the abrupt topic change, Aaron glanced back at Greg. He'd bent one knee, his foot casually resting on the seat. "I was into those old kung fu movies when I was a kid. Went around kicking walls and stuff to see if I could break them. My mother decided it'd be better to pay for classes than keep replacing the sheetrock."

Greg laughed out loud, and delight ran through Aaron.

Leaning over, Greg opened a panel to a refrigerator under the seat. He held up a soda, but Aaron shook his head.

"How long have you been taking them?" Greg asked, snapping open the fizzy drink.

"Classes? About ten years. Not so much lately. Over summer and breaks mostly now. Before Grayson, I was in tournaments all the time."

"What kind do you practice?"

"Jujitsu."

"How's that different?"

"Well, there are lots of schools, but the stuff I learned focuses on using your opponent's force against him."

"Are there belts, like in karate?"

"Yeah."

"What belt are you?"

"I've made black."

"Nice," Greg said, and Aaron felt an answering surge of pride.

As the limousine wound its way through the western Connecticut foothills, they discussed fighting technique. Aaron watched in fascination as Greg seemed to morph in front of his eyes, shedding his sarcastic armor in favor of genuine conversation.

Not until the limousine swung onto a narrow country lane overarched with leafless oak trees did his host quiet down, the light in his eyes replaced by the more familiar guarded expression.

As they crested a steep hill, the limousine passed a painted white cross covered in fresh flowers.

"Creepy," Aaron remarked, noticing how the wooden memorial stood out against the barren countryside.

Greg followed Aaron's stare. In a flurry of motion, he rushed forward and pounded on the window dividing the driver's compartment from the rear.

"Stop the fucking car!" he shouted and leaped out of the slowing vehicle.

Aaron stuck his head out of the car to bawl him out for the crazy stunt, but one glance at the length of Greg's stride told him he better keep his mouth shut.

Standing next to the cross, Greg looked as if he might howl at the rising moon. Anguish rolled off him in palpable waves, his shoulders shaking with ragged gasps Aaron could hear from fifty feet away.

Bending down, Greg ripped the cross from the ground, flowers and all. Heedless of his hands and still-tender ribs, he tore it in two and threw it into the overgrown field beyond the stone wall.

"Fuck!" he bellowed at the sky.

Aaron slipped from the car and walked over to place a hand on his friend's arm. To his relief, Greg didn't shake it off. They stood there, side by side, until the sun sank behind the trees.

When Greg moved, it seemed as if he'd come out of a trance, his body reanimating with a snap. "Let's go," he said, voice hoarse.

Aaron followed him to the car, understanding he'd just crossed a boundary no one had passed before. Greg Falkner had let him in.

Chapter Five

The house was the color of wet cement, a twelve-thousand-square-foot monstrosity cantilevered against the Litchfield hills. A terrace sliced into the side of the hill on which the house perched, providing a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside.

Like the house, however, the family displayed all show and no substance. Aaron's presence probably spared Greg a scathing lecture on his still-visible injuries.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Falkner."

Greg's father frowned at him, pinky ring glinting as they shook hands.

"Sir?" Aaron glanced at Greg. Had he said something offensive?

"Not to worry, Mr. Blake. Our Gregory isn't as proud of his heritage as he should be, is all."

Greg muttered something suspiciously like, "Here we go."

"You had no knowledge," the elder Falkner said with a sniff. "It is Lord Falkner, you understand."

Aaron almost barked laughter into his host's face. Somehow, God only knew how, he managed to restrain himself.

"Sorry to have offended you, uh, your lordship." He was so close to laughter, his eyes stung with it. Nostrils flaring, he looked to Greg for help.

"Have to go unpack, Father." Greg gestured to the door.

"Oh, have Louis do that."

"It's all right. We have to, you know, change for supper."

Lord Falkner waved them out of his study, and they made a break for Greg's room. Aaron thought he was going to lose it all the way up two flights of stairs, but he held it in until they closed the door behind them.

With absolute abandon, he threw himself backward onto Greg's bed, howling with laughter.

"Holy shit, dude! You should have warned me!"

He opened his eyes, wiping them with the back of his hand, to find Greg grinning at him.

"Yeah. He's something."

"Should I call you Lord Falkner? Your Grace? Sir Greg?"

"Shut up," Greg said, but the smile stayed put. "He only has a title in his dreams."

"Huh?"

"Courtesy titles like lord and lady are only given to certain ranks, not youngest sons of viscounts. My father likes to think Americans are too ignorant to figure that out."

"Well, that's a relief. I'm glad to know I'm safely among the common hordes."

Greg tilted his head to one side, studying him with a lopsided grin that didn't stretch the almost healed skin on his cheek. The endearing expression unraveled something hot and sensual within Aaron, charging the air between them until a car door thudded outside.

"I'll show you to your room." Greg lifted Aaron's bag and turned.

"Here." Aaron bounded from the bed. "Let me."

Their fingers brushed, and Greg snatched his hand away. Clearing his throat, he led the way to a room next door.

The third-floor bedrooms appeared sparse—very much akin to old-fashioned servant's quarters. Aaron wondered at the arrangement, but he really didn't care where he slept as long as he stayed near Greg.

Aaron recalled the intricate carvings in the newel post at the base of the stairs. "How old is your house?"

"Nineteen-twenties or something like that. It was my gan's family's summer home."

Aaron let out a low whistle. He knew wealth, but this level of old money still impressed him.

"I'll leave you to dress for dinner. Do you need Louis to press anything?"

"I thought I was here to shine your shoes?" Aaron kept his voice light. Teasing. Even as he took a dangerous step closer.

Embers sparked to life in Greg's eyes. "We're good," he said, playing obtuse. "I'll ask Louis to come up to get your clothes."

Disappointment doused his arousal, and Aaron turned away.

"Drinks at seven. Dinner at eight. Come down when you're ready. Bottom of the stairs. Turn right."

Aaron nodded, clenching his jaw until the door clicked softly closed. He pulled his clothes from his duffel with more force than necessary. Once again, Greg had found a way to screw with him.

Did Greg feel what he felt—this attraction that pulled low in his belly every time they got near each other?

If he misread Greg's feelings, he was in for more shit than he wanted to contemplate. One way or another, he had to find out. The waiting made him crazy. Unbalancing him in ways he'd never experienced. He wanted control back, and he wanted it now. How fucked up that the only way to regain it meant a giant leap into the unknown.

* * *

"Your acceptance letter came from Harvard, Reggie," his mother said and took a delicate bite of roast beef from the tines of her fork.

Aaron choked on his potatoes, and Greg resisted the urge to kick at him under the table.

"Attaboy, Greg. I'm so proud of you," Gan said, with a lilting voice that contained none of the affectation his parents exhibited.

Greg smiled at her, taking in her rosy apple cheeks and white hair. Why couldn't the rest of his family act like her?

"Thank you, Gan."

"Where are you going to university, young man?" his mother asked Aaron, a quizzing glass the only thing missing as she looked down the length of her nose.

Aaron looked from Greg to his mother. "UCLA, ma'am."

His father cleared his throat at the head of the long table.

"Uh. Your ladyship," Aaron amended.

Greg wanted to curse out loud. His parents pissed him off. Playing lords and ladies of the manner. Even the fucking Queen of England answered to ma'am.

"Well, it's not Ivy League, but we can't all be as lucky as Greggie, can we?"

"Mother! That was rude."

"Gregory..."

"Father!" He saw red, completely humiliated, until Gan reached out a hand and gave his fist a squeeze.

"It's all right, Greg. Your friend has sense enough to know whose opinion to esteem," she stage whispered.

Greg caught the gleam of Aaron's smile and leaned in to kiss the old woman on her cheek. "I love you, Gan. Happy birthday."

"I love you too, Greg," she said, with an answering pat. "Now shoo. I plan to get soused on port tonight, and I don't want to ruin your friend's good opinion."

Greg laughed and pushed back his chair.

"Gregory." Again the warning.

"May Mr. Blake and I be excused?" Greg asked through clenched teeth.

"You may," his mother said. "Thank you for joining us for supper, Mr. Blake."

"Thank you for having me to stay, your ladyship." Aaron folded his napkin with flourish, a devilish gleam in his eyes. "It's a pleasure to finally meet Greggie's parents."

"You're a dead man," Greg hissed into Aaron's ear as they strode toward the east side of the house. "Your ass is so mine."

"Promise?"

Greg's mouth went dry, and he came to a halt outside french doors leading to a trellised walkway.

"Care for a swim?" he asked, for lack of a comeback.

Really? What could he say? Yes, I want to put my hands all over you? Make you my bitch? That might sound good in a rap song, but somehow he didn't think it'd go over well in real life.

"I didn't bring trunks," Aaron said.

Greg shrugged. "Swim in your briefs."

"Your pool is heated?"

"You think my father would settle for less?"

Aaron appeared to think on it a moment. "Is it lined with gold too?"

Greg opened the french doors and playfully shoved Aaron outside.

"Dang! It's cold out here!"

"Dang?" Greg laughed.

"Shut up."

They raced across the bluestone patio, tearing off pieces of clothing as they went. Greg ignored the stabbing pain in his side, relishing a rare feeling of abandon.

Aaron whooped as he cannonballed into the steaming pool.

Greg watched as he bobbed to the choppy surface, shaking water out of his eyes. Spotlights lit the pool from underneath, and he could see Aaron's long legs kicking as he swam to the side. Bracing his elbows on the edge, he looked up at Greg, wetness spiking his lashes.

"Coming in?"

"Yes."

Greg took the stairs at the far end, knowing he'd reinjure his ribs if he followed Aaron's example. Kicking off the wall of the pool, he zoomed underwater toward Aaron's legs and pulled him under.

Slippery and hard, their bodies tangled and tumbled in a blue-green paradise. The contact, however painful, was heaven. He could feel every ripple of muscle, every bulge of turgid arousal as they wrestled and splashed.

An accidental elbow to his ribs had him gasping water into his lungs, and he surfaced rapidly, expelling chlorinated water from his nose.

Aaron broke to the surface as Greg splashed toward the side of the pool and hung on for dear life.

"Jesus, I'm sorry." His New Orleans drawl kicked Greg's arousal back to life as he neared.

"I'm okay," Greg gasped, waving his hand.

"I forgot."

Aaron braced one elbow on the ledge, facing him. Greg nodded and coughed some more, chlorine burning his lungs.

"Sure you're all right?"

Hot breath grazed his mouth, and Greg's eyes flew open, heart trip-hammering in his chest.

Blue eyes reflected the water's rippling surface, mesmerizing him with their depth. One millimeter. And another. Aaron neared. His eyes drank in Greg's mouth as he moved. He gave him every chance. Infinite moments to back away. He could refuse. Never find out what those lips tasted of.

Greg tilted his head to the side in invitation.

Soft. Gentle. Wine and salt and chlorine. Wet and warm. His world narrowed to two points: his cock and Aaron's mouth. Safety and sensuality spun around one another, wrapping him in hazy freedom even as it tore an aching hole in the pit of his stomach.

The pressure of the kiss intensified. Need, raw and real, sliced through him, and he seized the back of Aaron's head to crush his lips to his own. Teeth clashed, feet kicked as they both let go of the wall and embraced with a frenzy of lips and tongues.

Aaron's tongue twisted into his mouth, exploring every crevice with hot, lancing motions. His cock brushed against Aaron's hip, and Greg arched back, chest heaving as he fought against the onslaught of desire.

"God, Aaron." He sucked in great lungfuls of air before diving toward Aaron's mouth again.

He couldn't get enough of his lips. His tongue.

Kicking back, Aaron canted horizontally in the water, pulling Greg over him, sliding every inch of his hard body along his own.

"Fuck!" Greg gasped, his cock jerking at the contact.

Aaron laughed darkly, his hands clenching at either side of Greg's head, pulling his mouth back down.

They thrashed together, alternately sinking, surfacing, and tumbling—mouths joined, bodies undulating, crashing together in a sexually choreographed aquatic dance. It was messy and carefree. Greg lost himself in the human contact until white-hot pain rocketed him back to reality.

"Ribs." He gasped, clutching at his side and kicking clumsily to the edge of the pool.

His cock still throbbed even as his ribs flashed fire into his lungs. He didn't want to stop now. Disappointment formed a bitter pill.

Fucking pride. Why hadn't he just apologized that night?

The thought surprised him. He'd never wanted anything badly enough to say sorry. He'd always made do rather than lower himself into that viper pit of vulnerability.

"You all right?" Aaron asked, his mouth cherry red.

Greg nodded, reluctant to speak in the face of his realization.

"You're not angry?" Aaron's eyes filled with worry. "Not gonna freak out on me?"

Greg shook his head. "You?"

"Nah."

"We should go in, though."

"Yeah." Aaron nodded. "You look tired."

The tenderness of the comment kicked Greg's panic up another notch, but he bit his tongue against a sarcastic retort and rose from the pool.

Everything seemed louder, brighter, as he grabbed a towel from underneath a storage bench and tossed one to Aaron. Water cascaded off his body, pattering to the ground. The hot tub bubbled on the other side of the pool. He could hear his own blood pounding and Aaron's breathing through his nose six feet away.

He stared at his roommate. Muscles rippling over his abs as he dried off, his cock straining at the band of his briefs. The show tore a groan from Greg's lips, and Aaron paused mid stroke to look up at him.

Greg closed his eyes, not wanting Aaron to see his need. He didn't know if he could do this. He'd never imagined feeling turned-on by a guy. Why couldn't Aaron be a woman? Why couldn't it all be simple and...normal? He'd gotten to third with Andrea Peterson, and that hadn't made him half as hard as he felt now. He choked back the urge to fist his hair and cry.

Aaron approached him with languid strides.

"I need to go...to sleep." Greg struggled to keep his tone light.

"Sure," Aaron whispered, cupping his face, sampling one last taste. "Sleep."

That one word, almost a whisper, said he understood, and Greg relaxed into the embrace, wringing every drop of sweetness from his lips.

* * *

A grandfather clock chimed the half hour. Aaron had been wandering the downstairs of Greg's family home, poking around the library, for over an hour. Nerves wound to the breaking point, he couldn't sleep.

Thoughts of Greg's perfectly curved lips juxtaposed above his strong, Roman chin undid him every time he closed his eyes. His mouth, so cruel and yet so hotly inviting, presented a sexy contradiction. Aaron's lips still tingled from the bruising kisses they'd shared, his tongue nicked in places where it had scraped more than once along Greg's canines.

He imagined fisting his hands in blue-black hair, pulling backward, diving down for a flat-tongued lick along ropy muscle and pulsing vein. He groaned, letting his head fall back against the warm leather of the wingback library chair.

They roomed together. How in God's name could he keep his hands off him for the rest of the year? Just because they shared a room didn't mean they could do anything they wanted. The doors didn't lock. Someone could walk in at any moment and often did. They were so fucked if they touched one another at school.

Clenching his jaw, he looked around the dimly lit room, searching for a distraction from his tortured thoughts.

A cluster of family photographs caught his eye, and he rose to examine them more closely. A black-and-white wedding photo—Greg's gan, he guessed—took center stage, among photos of black tie affairs and Kennebunkport weekends. He picked up one, a family photo taken at a formal sitting.

Greg—maybe fourteen, he'd guess—a possessive hand on his sister's shoulder, stood as much to the side of the group as he could get away with and remain in the photo. Aaron bet his family hadn't read the reluctance in his body language.

He glanced at the picture of Greg's gan in her younger days. The similarity between her and Greg's sister struck him as remarkable.

"That's Gwyneth," a warm, reedy voice said from the doorway.

He jerked to face Greg's gan.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep...um...your lady—"

"Don't be ridiculous." She cut him off as she entered the room. "I'm no lady."

Relieved, he grinned. "I can see why Greg adores you."

She patted his cheek as she passed him. "And he you."

Aaron beamed at the compliment. The knowledge of Greg's affection, a gift all the more valuable for its rarity, touched him.

Gan sat with a repressed groan.

"I saw you in the pool, you know. You two should be more discreet."

The world dropped out from beneath his feet. "I'm not... We're not—"

She waved her hand, cutting him off. "You care for him. That is all that matters to me."

Tears smeared Aaron's vision, emotions whiplashing his mind, sapping his reserves.

"You have a tough row to hoe," she said.

Deep down, he knew this. Hearing someone put it into words, however, comforted him. Her statement allowed him to temporarily push aside his confusion and fear.

"Sit," she invited, and he replaced the photograph on the table to join her.

"What happened to her? To Gwyneth?"

The old woman closed her eyes and pursed her lips. When she opened them, he swallowed hard against an answering surge of grief. "The idiot I call a son-in-law cannot stomach failure. What he is incapable of comprehending is that his entire life is about failure. Sometimes we create that which we most fear."

Aaron furrowed his brow. How did this relate to Gwyneth's death?

"I'm getting to it. Keep your shorts on," she snapped in response to his expression.

He nodded, learning to love her deeply in that moment when he understood where Greg got his penchant for blatant—if less endearing—honesty.

"There are social functions one is expected to attend, according to my jackass son-in-law. Two Decembers past, during an ice storm, he sent Gregory and Gwyneth to attend one function—to represent the family—while he and my daughter attended another. The chauffer took Maurice and Catherine. Gregory drove himself and his sister. He'd had his driver's license for less than six months. She was just fifteen."

Understanding unfolded in a sickening tableau as she spoke. The white cross. The chauffer carting Greg everywhere. The healing stitches near his hairline when he'd first arrived at Grayson. Aaron understood it all without her saying another word.

"Shall I continue?"

He shook his head. "I can guess the rest."

"Greg was bad before, but after? Positively destructive. Nothing in this house was safe from his rage. I do believe Maurice lost more than one heirloom in the following weeks."

Aaron nodded, picturing violent outbursts with bleak clarity.

"Tonight was the first time I've seen him smile...heard him laugh since Gwyn died."

Aaron's gaze snapped to hers. She rose from her seat, and he stood.

"He cares for you. No matter what else he says or does, remember that he's crying out to be loved." She patted his cheek once more and turned toward the

door. "And for God's sake, be careful next time, or you'll give a less sturdy old woman a heart attack!"

Aaron barked with laughter, surprising himself with lighthearted emotion in the face of what he'd just learned.

Alone again in the room, he tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling. Two floors above, Greg slept in a bed, in a room with a door and a lock. Knowing tonight might present his only opportunity, he made his decision and stood. If Greg Falkner needed loving, Aaron couldn't think of a better time or place to give it to him.

Chapter Six

Greg stared at the shadows the moonlight cast on his ceiling. Indistinguishable from the watermarks on the old plasterwork, they created a landscape he remembered as his own private world—a map of the childhood continents he ruled. It had taken him places books never could. Tonight, however, his imagination did little to soothe his agitation.

Kicking off the covers, he tried letting the cold air wrestle with his frayed nerves and aching cock. When that didn't work, he slid from the bed and did push-ups. Sure, he could jerk off, but the hard-on wasn't eating at him. Even if he rubbed himself raw, he'd still want to slip into the next room. Into Aaron's bed.

How would Aaron react? Would he be shocked? Would they make out...or do something more? Rolling to his back, Greg imagined sleepy eyes and warm skin, Aaron's arms wrapping around him, their lips meeting in a desperate kiss. Aaron's cock rubbing along his belly as Greg stretched out on top of him.

Greg's hand trailed to his cock, and he inhaled sharply through his nose as he swooped his thumb over the head. Would Aaron jerk him off?

The hallway floorboards creaked, and Greg sat up, guilt whipping his conscience. Chest heaving, he watched the doorknob turn and bolted to his feet. Looking around wildly, he dove back under the covers on his bed and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Greg?"

Aaron's voice, a whisper in the darkness, flooded his stomach with adrenaline-soaked excitement. He rolled over, flung an arm over his eyes, feigning half sleep.

"Yeah? Everything all right?"

Greg couldn't make out Aaron's features, but he could see the rapid rise-fall of his chest. He leaned against the closing door and turned the lock with his hand behind his back. Greg's pulse fluttered against his throat. He slid to a sitting position, the cold brass bars of the headboard a shock to his overheated skin.

He swallowed and asked again, "Are you...all right?"

Pushing himself away from the door, Aaron neared the bed. "I couldn't sleep."

A shaft of moonlight slanted across Aaron's face, and Greg groaned. Silvered irises studied him, lids heavy with the promise of sex, as Aaron stalked toward him in nothing but his underwear.

"C-can I get you something?"

Aaron shook his head, his last halting step eating up the distance between them. Reaching out a hand, he stroked Greg's cheek. Savoring the warmth, Greg

rubbed his face against Aaron's fingers then captured one digit between his lips and sucked it in.

Aaron hissed and brought his other hand around to the base of Greg's skull. "I want you," he whispered.

Moaning, Greg released Aaron's finger with a pop. That damp finger raked along his chest, flicking nail against nipple.

Greg's hips surged from the bed. Staring into Aaron's eyes, he savored the great gasps of air rushing in and out of his lungs. He couldn't move. Balanced on the knife's edge between desire and fear, he hung in suspended animation.

Aaron's hand trailed lower. Hovered. Just there. A mere inch from heaven.

Greg squeezed his eyes shut, not daring to invite the touch by look or deed. He willed Aaron to take the initiative. To make this decision for him.

"Tell me you want this." Aaron's voice cracked, the note of desperation a line in the sand between them.

Greg's throat closed against a response. Once they did this, they couldn't go back.

"Shit." Aaron pulled away.

A gulf as wide and jagged as the Grand Canyon loomed between them. The contrasting emptiness broke him. Leaving no room for thought or regret, Greg grabbed Aaron's wavering hand and pressed it along the length of his cock.

Pressure built with the force of a freight train in his balls, sending sparks of sensation along his shaft. He fisted the sheet and cried out. Aaron jerked his hand away, and Greg gulped in oxygen.

"Jesus," Aaron said. "You're gonna wake the house."

Greg blinked away the spots in his vision.

"Not up here."

Like sunshine breaking through storm clouds, a smile widened Aaron's features, smoothing the ridge of worry from his brow and crinkling his eyes. "Yeah?"

Greg found it impossible not to grin back at him. "Yeah," he replied, automatically imitating Aaron's drawl.

"Shut up," Aaron said on a laugh.

Greg slid down in the bed a fraction. "I wasn't making fun. I couldn't help it."

"I know. It was hot, actually." Aaron's hand slid over Greg's hammering heart. "You sure you want this?"

Struggling to keep his arousal in check, Greg tried for measured breaths, but Aaron's hand slid down, brushing sensitive skin and swollen nipple.

"I so fucking want this," Greg said, unable to care any longer about what the admission meant.

His shoulders hit the mattress with a force that clacked his teeth together and hurt his ribs, but he barely noticed. Somehow, he didn't know how, Aaron held him down and tore off his underwear at the same time. Covers flew back, and Greg reared upward as Aaron crashed over him, grabbed his wrists and pinned them against the mattress to either side of his head.

Gritty with need, Aaron owned him, tongue-fucking his mouth with an unyielding series of thrusts that threatened to reach straight down Greg's throat. Their bodies slid together, cocks chafing between washboard abs in a sweat-slicked frottage that had Greg desperate for every breath he could steal. Dimly, he realized his wrists ached—would probably bruise.

Pulling back, Aaron stared into his eyes, the gravity of the moment and the choice they'd made hanging heavy in the air around them. Everything was about to change in their lives. Vulnerability reared its ugly head, and Greg glanced away.

"Look at me." Aaron squeezed his wrists until he complied. "I want you to watch."

"Goddamn." Greg groaned, arousal twisting through his cock like the sheets tangled around his feet.

Aaron slid against his bare stomach, using the friction to stoke his arousal, his thrusts carrying them backward, forward, in waves of movement that bound them together in ways Greg never imagined, overriding his senses until he could no longer tell where Aaron ended and he began. Gazes locked, their rhythmic breathing formed a wordless mantra between them.

He watched pleasure spark in Aaron's eyes and foreign feelings anchored him, security and comfort attaching to his arousal.

So this is love.

Shock coursed through him at the alien thought.

Aaron stilled. "Almost there," he said, dipping for a soft kiss. "Hang tight."

Greg watched, fascinated enough to forego his own release as Aaron found that sweet spot of heaven on earth and jumped over the precipice into oblivion. His face appeared more beautiful in that moment than he'd ever seen. Captured in marble, angles and lines frozen in the throes of pleasure as sticky fluid anointed his skin.

Gasping, Aaron collapsed against him.

They lay there so long Greg wondered if Aaron had fallen asleep. Trailing fingers through sweat-soaked hair, Greg played with the bristlelike texture before trailing down his neck and along his spine to his ass. Palm curving against the muscled flesh, he explored the masculine indentation, savored the feel of silky skin against his palm.

Aaron lifted his head, and Greg stilled, letting his hand fall away.

"Hey," Aaron said with a smile and a kiss.

"Hey."

Greg looked out the window, trying to gauge the time by the path the moon had travelled.

"Roll on your side," Aaron said as he pushed himself to a sitting position.

Cold air met Greg's sticky stomach, and he shivered before he faced the window. Aaron slid down next to him, facing his back, and pulled the covers up over them both. Spooned together, Greg felt the press of Aaron's half-hard cock against the curve of his ass. He clenched his jaw against arousal he couldn't do anything to assuage.

"You don't usually sleep naked." Aaron's fingers traced the lines of Greg's biceps. "What were you doing when I came in?"

"Sleeping."

"Bullshit. You were jacking off."

"Nah." Greg laughed. "But I was thinking about you."

Aaron's hand trailed down to cup him, and Greg's hips undulated with pleasure.

"Mmm..."

"What were you thinking about me?"

"Damn. Do you always talk like a girl during sex?"

Aaron's grasp tightened. Heat surged up Greg's shaft, and a hearty bead of precum wept from his slit.

"Shit, Aaron."

Aaron laughed, lavishing him with strokes up and down his shaft. Light, teasing. Designed to taunt but not tip him into oblivion.

"Answer my question."

Sensation scattered his ability to resist. "I was wondering what you'd do if I came to see you."

Aaron's fingers swept along the ridge under the crown, and Greg inhaled, short and sharp. "Go on."

"I—" The outline of the distant hills wobbled before his open eyes.

"C'mon. Tell me."

"Sliding..." He gasped. "Into bed with you."

"Like we are now?"

"Yes."

Collecting the moisture at the head of Greg's cock, Aaron smoothed it downward. Greg grunted against the sharp surge of pressure up his shaft.

Aaron assaulted his balls with a lightning tug. "Not yet!"

"Goddamn it!" He'd never actually seen stars before—he'd only thought he had. "What the fuck was that for?"

"We hafta work on that."

"What?"

"You come too easy. You need to beat off more."

Aaron let out a satisfying "Oof" as Greg's elbow met a fleshy spot under his ribs.

"Unlike you, I don't need to do that every night before I go to sleep."

Aaron paused. "You heard me?"

Greg rolled to face him, brushing away thoughts about blue balls and ice cold showers. "Oh, come on, Aaron! I'm not deaf!"

Guilt stabbed at him when Aaron looked away, embarrassed. Uncomfortable with the weakness he'd laid bare, he caught Aaron's lips in a kiss. "It's hot as hell."

Aaron's eyes snapped to his, and relief washed through Greg in sympathetic response. "Yeah?"

"You make this sexy grunting noise when you come." Greg remembered how he'd lie awake, waiting for the moment when Aaron's breathing would quicken. The full moon nights were the best. "I watch you in the mirror."

Aaron's eyes narrowed. "You owe me."

"I owe you?"

"Every night. Next week. You're gonna beat off while I watch."

Greg inhaled shock and exhaled arousal. "Aaron..."

Aaron's mouth captured his, teeth biting the fleshy underside of his lower lip, sucking it in with a slaking pull.

Protest forgotten, Greg yanked Aaron close—returned his kiss with a ferocity only pent-up need provoked. Reaching between them, he took charge this time, curling his palm around Aaron's shaft.

A heated hand grasped him in return. He groaned and invaded Aaron's mouth with his tongue, giving as good as he got. Aaron gasped, surging upward as he broke away from the kiss and flipped Greg to his stomach.

Greg's head shot up. The heated brand of Aaron's cock pressed against his ass cheeks, rubbing along the cleft, but not penetrating. Vulnerable...sexy... This was really close to fucking...but fucking seemed...gay.

"Your turn," Aaron growled in his ear, reaching between Greg and the mattress to fist his cock.

A tidal wave of lust swept away thoughts of sexuality, and Greg dropped his head to the pillow. Rocking forward, finding his rhythm along the cleft of Greg's ass, Aaron owned him—asserted his dominance in the most primitive way possible. He was on top. Greg was on the bottom. But it didn't matter, because he had a place where he belonged.

The thought freed him. Passion soared, bringing him, like Icarus, within touching distance of the sun, until his wax wings melted from the burning heat, and he came crashing down. Plummeted in a delicious, screaming fall back to earth.

* * *

The day dawned with fingers of red-gold stretching across the hills, but Greg longed for the cushioned anonymity of the night.

Gan and Aaron walked ahead of him in the sunshine-filled garden. The landscape was barren, but the company should have provided plenty of color and cheer. Lord knew they'd tried everything.

When Greg looked at Aaron, his stomach churned in horror and his heart clenched with self-loathing. What they'd done last night... What had it meant? What if someone found out? What if he was...no... He couldn't contemplate that. If they never did it again, it would all go away. Things would go back to normal. He'd live a regular life.

Aaron looked over his shoulder at him, and Greg looked away.

Gan halted, then spun around to face him with more flexibility and balance than Greg would have expected from an eighty-eight-year-old woman.

"Stop moping, Greg." Her eyes sparked blue fire. "You're leaving in a few minutes. Get up here and hold my other arm."

He pasted on a bright smile, pissed at himself for letting her see his mood. What if she guessed?

"I want to know when you're coming to visit this summer."

"End of July. Same as always, Gan."

"Well, I think you should invite Aaron and come for two weeks instead of one. We're visiting the lake first week of August."

The thought of Aaron diving off the dock, naked in the moonlight, his body slicing through the water, stopped Greg in his tracks.

Gan looked up at him, a frown creasing her brow. "What has your balls in a knot?"

"Gan!" Greg gasped, then laughed. "What a thing to say!"

They resumed walking.

"I venture you say nastier things among your school chums. It shouldn't be new to you, and as old as I am, it certainly isn't new to me."

Greg grinned, sunshine breaking through his personal clouds. He bent and pecked Gan's cheek. "I love you."

"You had better. Unless you're nicer to this here Aaron, I'm all you've got."

Her words hit him like a bucket of cold water. Aaron remained silent on the other side of Gan, but Greg felt him staring over her head. God, he wished they hadn't let themselves go. They might've been good friends.

"We didn't get much sleep last ni—" He bit off the last word, horrified at what he'd just revealed.

"Well, with you sleeping up in those old servants' rooms, it's no wonder." Gan continued walking as if she hadn't heard anything unusual. "Why don't you come back to your old room, Greg? I can help you clean out the things you don't want to see."

"Gan..."

"What things?" Aaron asked.

"Things..." He tried, but words failed him.

"There is a sitting room between his and Gwyn's room. Their games and books are still there, and the pictures Gwyn painted for Greg. All over his room."

Oxygen soured in his lungs, and his breakfast threatened to come up.

Despite the pain she'd just caused him, Greg bit down on an acerbic response. He tried to ignore the conversation Gan and Aaron carried on as if he weren't there.

"...was quite the artist."

"What did she like to paint?"

"Mostly these hills. Gwyn loved the out-of-doors as much as she loved fashion and New York."

His vision smearing, Greg looked away from the hills toward the stables. All the horses were gone since she'd died. "Fuck."

"Excuse me?"

Mortification consumed him. "I'm—" He clamped his jaw shut and searched for different words. "That...slipped out."

Gan patted his arm in a comforting gesture he knew he didn't deserve. "No. I apologize, Greg. This is a thoughtless conversation to have with you here."

He shook his head, not wanting her to shoulder the blame for his rudeness.

"Don't you shake your head at me, young man. I'm aware you're still smarting. Sometimes I do think it does you good to hear her name spoken, though. Stretches the scar so it won't bind you up inside."

Chest rising and falling on a cleansing breath, he looked down at the woman he loved more than anyone in the world. Her strong voice belied the sheen of tears in her eyes.

She'd spoken the truth. She was the last person on this earth who loved him—who he could love in return. Without guilt. On impulse he stopped and gathered her frail form into his arms and held her tight. If he could have stopped time, he never would have let her go.

* * *

Things had gotten weird.

Tension blanketed the interior of the limousine as they rode back to Grayson. Aaron watched Greg staring out the window, wishing he could find words to restore their camaraderie.

The only time Greg let down his guard all morning was when he'd met Aaron's eyes over Gan's head as he'd held her. In that moment, all the love and pain he kept buried under that hardened shell had shone through—much as it had the night before—and Aaron had swallowed against a lump in his throat as he'd turned away.

A couple times before they left, Gan had given Greg a look and seemed on the verge of saying something about them in the pool. Aaron found it surprising, in fact, when she didn't. The pointed way Greg kept at least six feet between them at all times hurt him. It felt like they'd never been friends.

"She saw us, you know," Aaron said, not knowing what made him do it.

Greg's eyes snapped to his face, and Aaron found himself glad for the attention, no matter how he'd secured it.

"Who?"

"Your gan."

Aaron didn't think skin as pale as Greg's could get any whiter. Somehow it did.

"Fuck, Aaron," he said, running the flat of his hand over the top of his head.

Trying not to watch the play of Greg's muscles under his tight turtleneck, Aaron shrugged, downplaying the revelation.

"She was cool with it."

Incredulous didn't begin to describe Greg's expression. Mouth parted, he grasped for words. "How?"

"In the pool." Aaron remembered the arbor hid the pool from most of the house. "She must have been outside."

"Christ..." Greg said, brown eyes wide. "When did she tell you?"

Aaron could almost feel the oxygen-starved numbness tingling underneath Greg's skin. He wanted to reach out to him, to reassure him, but after the tension of the day, the words wouldn't come out right. "I was in the study...before I...before we..."

"We can't do that again." He pierced Aaron with his stare. "Ever."

Sadness and shame welled, filling the widening gulf between him and Greg. "I shouldn't have told you."

"No." Greg glared at him. "I would've been pissed if you hadn't. I don't want my grandmother walking around thinking I'm a fag. I'll think of something to tell her."

"I'm sorry," Aaron said, his voice hoarse against a phantom constriction.

Greg's perfunctory nod struck like a physical blow.

Aaron struggled against the impulse to curl into a ball on the black leather. God, he thought... He didn't know what he thought. Choking back hysterical laughter, he realized he'd just had his first heartbreak. Had gotten his heart stomped on by a guy, and he wasn't even queer.

"I like girls," Aaron confessed in a belated attempt to salvage his pride and clear up any misunderstandings.

Greg flinched, the movement almost imperceptible.

A flash of Greg at dawn, on his back, sooty lashes curved in stark relief against his skin, filled Aaron's vision. Like an idiot, he'd watched him sleep. Pictured all sorts of post graduation scenarios. Hell, he'd even imagined them living together. This time he did laugh out loud. That idea felt so fucking queer as to be vomit worthy. Disgusted with himself, he leaned over and turned on the radio.

Choosing a suitably masculine song, he straightened and looked Greg in the eyes. "So, you like girls?"

Greg gaped at him. "Of-of course!"

"Fucked that one you were dating in town?"

"Yes! Not that it's any of your business."

"What did you like best?" Aaron slid to the far end of the seat opposite Greg and stretched his legs across the leather.

Greg mimicked his position so that they faced each other. "Dunno... It was...soft."

"Your dick was soft?" Aaron went for the jugular. "Doesn't seem you liked it all that much."

"Fuck off," Greg spat, coloring. "You know what I meant."

"What? What was soft then?"

"Her...you know...pussy."

Aaron stretched out his arms, pinning his hands behind his head. "I'm a tit man myself."

Amping up the macho in his own position, Greg jerked his head in a manly nod.

Relief washed through Aaron, along with the realization Greg hadn't fucked that girl. The cockfight struck him as hilarious.

The strain of the day crashed in on him, and he latched onto an insane impulse. "You want to beat off together and talk about chicks?" His fingers went to his own belt. "You can go first."

"I—"

"'Cause you have more experience than I do..." Aaron slid the leather from the belt loop, and Greg's eyes riveted to his crotch. "And it would be hot as fuck to think on it. Since we both like pussy. Ya know?"

Aaron unbuttoned his fly, and Greg licked his lips.

Victory.

Pulling out his cock, he nodded to Greg. "Well, go on, then, whip it out."

Fingers shaking, Greg complied, and Aaron began a slow and easy dance with his hand up and down his own shaft. Squeezing and pumping, he peered down at himself, determined not to look at Greg until the right moment. He had to regain control over this situation, over Greg, before their friendship permanently derailed.

In his peripheral vision, he saw the flushed skin of Greg's cock protruding from his fist as he mirrored Aaron's movements.

"C'mon. Tell me about it," Aaron prompted. "You're the storyteller."

"September, while you and the fuckwads were celebrating your birthday," Greg said, the slap of his hand against his cock sounding above the muffled thrum of the engine. "Her name's Andrea—Andy."

"She hot?" Peeking out from under his lashes, Aaron saw Greg, his head thrown back, eyes closed as he stroked himself.

"Yes. Hot." Greg's hand hesitated on his fully hard cock.

Aaron grinned, doubting a memory of the girl had Greg's prick at attention.

"She has these huge, um, tits, and her dress... It was always, you know, buttoned low."

Aaron nearly rolled his eyes. If he wasn't watching the hottest guy he'd ever seen beat off right now, he'd have lost his hard-on completely. He didn't know how, but it sounded like Greg had less experience with girls than he did.

"Liar."

Greg's eyes snapped open, his hand convulsing around his cock with a reflexive jerk. Their eyes met, and Aaron held the stare until Greg's eyes slid away.

Aaron crossed to Greg's seat. "Finish me." He felt more than a little imperious as he let his head fall back.

Greg's hand cupped him, applied pressure and friction in all the right places, showing much more interest than he had in his own cock.

Aaron rolled his head sideways to look at Greg from under his lashes. Cheeks flushed, nostrils flared, he bit his lip and stroked Aaron with single-minded concentration.

Reaching for Greg's cock, he asked, "Fuck, Greg. Do you know how hot you are?"

Greg groaned and lifted his hips, inviting Aaron's down stroke.

The CD ended, and the sound of slapping flesh and ragged breathing filled the limo. Aaron pumped harder, the bite of Greg's zipper scraping his hand with each full stroke. Tension ratcheted, tightening the bowstring of his lust with each inhale, until it became impossible to hold back. Dimly, he heard Greg's simultaneous shout and followed him into ecstasy.

Neither moved for a long while. Aaron lay back, his hand lightly cradling Greg's softening cock. Languid. Content. He never wanted this moment to end. But it had to. He agreed with Greg on that point 100 percent.

"We can't do this at school." Aaron hated himself for saying the words even as they left his mouth. "We'd get too much shit. Even though we're not gay."

"I know," Greg said thickly.

Meeting brown eyes filled with honest friendship, he sent up a relieved thank-you to whatever god gave him the ability to break down Greg Falkner's sturdy walls.

"It doesn't mean I don't want to," Aaron explained. "It's just...dangerous."

"I know," Greg repeated. "Kiss me?"

Aaron's heart did a joyful flip.

"C'mere." He tugged Greg forward with a fistful of turtleneck. "I'm gonna be on you every minute we got left."

Chapter Seven

“Greg?”

The shirt Greg slipped from his shoulders stopped midway down his arms.

“You have to stop calling me that.”

Aaron swung his legs to the edge of his bed, words he’d meant to say forgotten as Greg pulled his T-shirt over his head and dropped it into the laundry basket.

“Why?”

“Someone’s going to guess.”

“Guess what?”

Greg cast an arch look over his shoulder as he hung up his shirt.

“Oh, c’mon... What? They’re going to know we gave each other hand jobs because I call you by your first name?”

Greg pulled his towel from the hook on the inside of the closet door, his shoulder muscles a visual symphony of rippling flesh.

“I’m going to take a shower before I study.”

“I’ll come with you.”

The closet door slammed shut.

“Do you have a fucking death wish?”

Aaron glared, embarrassed Greg thought him indiscreet. He had as much to lose if they were found out—maybe more so. His reputation wasn’t already shit. “You’re paranoid.”

“I’m careful.”

“So careful that you write your sexual fantasies in black notebooks in the middle of chem?”

Greg’s white-knuckled hand dropped from the doorknob, and he turned around with the promise of malice in his eyes.

“I’m going to smear you from here to the mess hall if you read my shit.”

“Calm down...Falkner. I didn’t read your jerk-off stories.”

Greg’s lip curled. “You f—”

Aaron flew across the room and pressed his palm against Greg’s mouth. “Shut it. Or I’m gonna kick your ass just so’s I can touch you.”

Greg moaned into Aaron’s hand.

The sound vibrated along his skin, sending a thrill straight to his cock. Aaron’s pulse double-timed, and his fingers slid open, just wide enough so he could have pressed his lips against Greg’s. Brown eyes, glazed with desire, tugged him forward—his personal gravity well, a force he had no power to deny.

Rather than a soft landing against Greg's mouth, he found himself on his ass on the speckled green linoleum.

"What the—"

"McHugh." A gray pallor tinged Greg's complexion.

Aaron's heart dropped to his knees, and he scrambled from the floor to look out the window. He detected McHugh's loping run. He'd already crossed from the window to the far side of the quad.

"Shit."

"Yeah." Greg ran his palm down his face. "Shit."

"Look. Maybe he won't say anything."

Greg burst into hysterics and quieted just as quickly. "Yeah. And my father's really the Prince of Wales."

"Calm down." Aaron leaned back against the sill and pressed his fingers to his temples. "We'll just act normal. Nobody worth anything'll believe him. We'll just say he's pissed 'cause of the stuff that happened—you know, to his nose."

Some color returned to Greg's face. "This is why you can't call me by my first name. And why we can't act like friends."

"Yeah."

Greg's point went down like a bitter tonic. Aaron didn't like lying, and he didn't like treating his friends badly—no matter the stakes. If he'd listened to Greg in the first place, he might not have had to compound the untruths they would undoubtedly have to tell.

* * *

Three weeks of self-imposed isolation—days upon days where Greg wouldn't speak to him, even in the confines of their dorm room—formed a black hole in the last quarter of Aaron's school year. In P.E. he always managed to get benched rather than play on the same team. Even when Aaron only managed to catch his eye, he looked away.

So when Greg slid into a seat at the isolation table one Sunday afternoon, it came as a surprise.

Aaron cast him a quizzical glance, which he ignored.

"Well, what'd you get sent here for then?" Aaron hissed into his cup.

Greg looked at him sharply.

Aaron glared.

A silent war ensued. Neither could look away and risk losing the challenge.

You're a twat, Greg's expression said.

Takes one to—

Oh, ha ha. That's the best comeback ever. Your pimply faced sister teach you that one?

Leave my sister out of it.

Why? You fucking her too?

Aaron almost lunged across the empty seat between them, but caught himself. He'd nearly gotten them both into trouble over an imagined

conversation. The entire situation struck him as ridiculous, and his shoulders shook with repressed laughter.

Greg caught the spark of amusement and snorted.

Maybe it was the endless rain, or maybe the loneliness had finally broken him, but their eyes met—held—and for once, Greg didn't look away.

For twenty glorious minutes, they sat together, forbidden from speaking, yet having a million wordless conversations. Buzzing voices surrounded them, snatches of school gossip trailing to their ears. Westerhouse had found a new girl. Liddelon had made it to the semifinals in the national marksman competition and planned to travel to Ohio with his father next week.

He knew why Greg liked this table so much. His secret was out. The acoustics allowed him to get a feel for natural dialogue while also making sure nobody like McHugh could sneak up on him with a plan to kick his ass.

Now that Aaron thought on it, he wondered if Greg had eavesdropped on the scheme they'd cooked up before that awful night in the graveyard. McHugh had denied taunting Greg about it...

Sliding his gaze to Greg, Aaron watched him spoon up the ungodly concoction they ate and wondered whether Greg's presence at the table was deliberate today. Greg looked up, caught Aaron staring, and swallowed. The muscled length of his throat constricted with the motion, and Aaron imagined lifting his hips as Greg took him in. Swallowed him down.

A snap of energy arced between them, so palpable he knew if he reached a hand into the air, his arm hairs would stand on end. They hadn't kissed after the limo ride. Had barely locked gazes in the last few weeks. Sexual tension born of delayed release carved away at their self-restraint, infusing gesture and glance with unrepressed desire, and apparently it didn't go unnoticed.

A whispered conversation broke into Aaron's haze, and he looked down, coloring. Hoping to God he hadn't heard what he thought he'd heard. Sneaking a glance at Greg, he saw he had turned whiter than their morning oatmeal ration. He'd heard it too.

Rather than coming from the usual suspects, the conversation came from the ranks of the elite corps.

"The way they look at each other!"

"Which one takes it up the ass you think?"

"McHugh caught them fucking... Blake on top."

Greg slammed his fists down on the mess hall table, making their trays jump several inches into the air.

"Greg, don't!" Panic carried Aaron's voice across the sudden silence. He felt collective recognition sweep over the hall and fought against the urge to run. The monitor approached the table as the catcalls began.

"Fight for your bitch, Falkner!" someone shouted as the monitor grabbed Aaron by the collar and dragged him to his feet.

Greg reached them as the monitor shoved Aaron's back against the wall of shame. He'd stand there until mess ended, and likely a long while after, maintaining attention until his legs gave out beneath him.

The monitor turned around into Greg's fist.

Aaron bowed his head. He could stop this, but he didn't want to. Rage and humiliation demanded retribution, and he let Greg do his dirty work for him.

The elite corps rushed Greg, honor and sadistic glee compelling their response. It took seven cadets to wrestle him to the ground. Even then they had trouble pinning him. Until someone remembered his weak spot and kicked him in the ribs.

Aaron bent double in sympathetic response to Greg's anguished howl, reliving the sickening crunch of bone under the toe of his boot. By the time he straightened, they had already dragged Greg from the mess hall.

White haze foamed over Aaron's gaze. Before he thought about the potential ramifications, he trotted down the hall after them, knowing, without caring, their futures held a one-way ticket home.

"What were you thinking, Mr. Falkner?" the nurse reprimanded Greg as the cadets threw him at her feet.

Aaron crouched down.

"Are you all right?" He reached out a shaking hand to soothe Greg's brow.

"Faggot," one of the cadets spat.

"Mr. Norris," the nurse snapped. "That's enough!"

Aaron didn't care. He knew he wasn't gay. The freedom that thought gave him made his spirit take flight.

Nostrils flaring, Greg turned his face away, and Aaron came crashing back to earth. The implicit rejection wrenched a gasp from him. Numb with shock, he stood. He couldn't get out of that fucking school soon enough.

"I'm sorry," Aaron said as adrenaline exited his bloodstream, leaving him shaking and cold.

He abandoned Greg in the infirmary. New leaves waved in the spring breeze outside the window as the entire upper school began a discipline drill in the quad for the uproar in the mess hall.

Three more weeks and they would have graduated. Well, screw it. He'd take the GEDs.

"Where are you going, Blake?"

Aaron snapped to attention at the sound of the commandant's voice. "Home, sir."

"My office."

"No, sir!"

During the beat of surprised silence, Aaron felt the bands of control pop, leaving him free to be himself.

"Don't be a fucking idiot. Get in my office."

Curiosity drove Aaron to comply. Not caring about protocol, he sank into the guest chair to quell his shaking limbs.

The commandant shut the door with a quiet snick.

"One week suspension," he said as if offering up stakes at a betting table.

Aaron stared at the man in surprise. He took in rumpled gray hair, a lopsided tie, and eyes near wild with panic. As a politician's son, understanding dawned. What had happened in the mess hall smacked of very bad press. As a

ranking member of the Senate, his stepfather could make a lot of trouble for the school if he wanted.

"I never eat in the mess hall again," he bargained, and the commandant's expression turned thunderous. "I have no problem explaining to my stepfather why I was expelled."

The commandant's mouth snapped shut on whatever comment he'd been about to bark. "Fine."

"What's going to happen to Greg?"

The man looked at him as if Aaron deserved a prize for stupidity. "Expelled."

A sick feeling somersaulted in Aaron's stomach. Expulsion would ruin Greg's life. He'd never go to Harvard, and his parents would more than freak. "Why?"

The commandant's expression soured. "Some of us don't have powerful fathers to wipe our asses. I would have thought you'd already figured that out after your stunt in the graveyard."

"Well, maybe my powerful father will wonder why I left without you kicking me out, and I'll have to tell him about the ethically uneven standards applied at your school."

Meaty fists slammed down on the desk, toppling a framed photo and making the brass letter opener jump. "You little shit."

Aaron said nothing, and the commandant appeared to deflate.

"If you want the same treatment for Falkner, you never speak to him again."

"But—"

"If I had expelled him sooner, he wouldn't have corrupted you."

It was Aaron's turn to glare. "With all due respect, sir, fuck you." He refused to play the perfect student, loyal son, and infallible best friend.

The commandant turned a mottled shade of eggplant. "Last chance. Do you agree?"

Aaron thought on it for a moment. Greg didn't give a damn what happened to him or to their friendship... A picture of him curled in the fetal position on the infirmary floor flashed before his eyes, making his decision for him.

"Two single rooms. One for me and one for Greg."

"Oh, you can bet on it."

"Fine." Aaron stood. "I'll be in my room."

He had entered that office a boy and left as his own man. Walking by the closed infirmary door, he wished the same for Greg and silently said good-bye.

* * *

Greg understood the word numb on a cellular level. Physically, emotionally, he floated on a sea of nothing, and he gave himself over to it as he'd never given himself to anything.

When Gwyneth had died, he knew rage. White. Hot. A knife ripping him from stem to stern when they'd told him what he already knew. The accident. At

first he thought she slept next to him. So pale. Then he tasted the oil and tiny shards of glass nicking at his swollen tongue.

Father would be furious they'd missed the banquet. She hadn't wanted to wrinkle her dress. No seat belt. Thoughts had flown through his brain like popcorn exploding from an uncovered popper. His mind scrambling to grasp what it couldn't grasp, to make right what he couldn't make right.

That was grief. He didn't recognize this feeling. Because he didn't exist. Nothing existed. Not food, not air, not waking, sleeping, talking, or feeling. He wrapped the emptiness around him like a security blanket during the night. Telling God if he'd just spare Aaron further humiliation and pain, he'd never touch a man again.

He turned the knob to their dorm room and walked in...to more nothing. Aaron's bed, barren, the mattress rolled in half to expose the gray, chipped paint of the support bars. He'd spent the night in the infirmary at the nurse's insistence. Had they expelled Aaron for what Greg had done?

Turning, he ran until he reached the commandant's office. Hell, they should give him a desk. He visited often enough. He charged in without knocking.

"You can't expel him, sir." He bent over to clutch his upper thighs, trying to regain his breath. "It wasn't his fault."

The commandant frowned over the edge of his black-rimmed glasses. "Falkner?"

"Blake. It wasn't his fault."

An odd expression passed over the commandant's face. "Are you admitting guilt?"

Greg nodded, snapping to a more rigid stance than he'd ever held. For anyone.

"And what, exactly, are you going to do to demonstrate your remorse?"

"Demonstrate my remorse?"

"Yes. You admitted guilt. I assume that means you are sorry and would like to write a letter of apology, admitting the wrongdoing was on your side. Detailing your infractions."

A remote portion of Greg's brain clicked into gear, and he answered more on reflex than by thought. "I am not sorry, sir. Only to blame."

The answering scowl on the man's face said he'd denied the commandant a coveted Christmas present. "Then get out of my office. I don't want to see your ass again this year. Understood?"

"Sir?" Confusion tumbled his thoughts.

"Mr. Blake has not been expelled. Merely suspended, as you have been." The commandant looked at his watch. "Aren't you supposed to be in the detention room with him?"

"His things. They're gone." Greg ignored the commandant's question. Still trying to understand.

"That was at his request. Now get out."

Like a mechanized soldier, Greg walked from the room. He couldn't say whether he'd shut the door behind him. Or how he made it to the detention room where a teacher—Mr. Doyle—and Blake already waited.

"Five demerits, Falkner," Doyle said. "Ten more and you'll be in here this weekend too."

The man might not have spoken for all Greg heard him. He stared at the back of Aaron's sandy brown hair, saw his neck flush, but he didn't move. Greg slid into the seat next to him and tried not to look at his face. If he didn't see his eyes, he might keep the nothingness swaddled around himself.

"You're to sit here during class periods for the duration of your suspension. You can use the latrine once an hour. Meals will be served in this room. You are not to enter the mess hall or fraternize with the other cadets."

Greg stared at the blackboard, watching as the chalk markings blurred and wobbled. Wetness glided down his cheek, but he didn't move. There was no point. In anything.

"Do you hear me, Falkner?"

He jerked his head once, if only to shut the man up so he could go back to not existing.

At the three p.m. bell, Aaron bolted from his desk, and Greg had to rush to catch up with him in the crowded halls. Maybe if he had the balls to apologize, Aaron would forgive him? He clenched his teeth against the welling nausea but forced himself onward. He'd do it if it killed him.

"Aaron!"

The milling students quieted. Greg ignored their sneers—knew only the presence of one of the teachers kept the catcalls and violence from erupting as he spun Aaron around with his hand to his shoulder.

In a flash, he found himself flat against a wall, the light panel digging into his back, Aaron's forearm pressed heavily against his throat. "Don't. Fucking. Talk to me."

Greg blinked against pain and confusion, forgetting what he'd meant to say.

"Ooh!" The jeering began. "Lover's quarrel!"

With a push to his windpipe that left Greg gasping, Aaron spun on his heel and exited the scene.

"Guess you're going to have to find another fudge packer." One of the cadets grabbed a freshman and shoved him at Greg. "Here, suck dick, Erikson. You're a fairy-in-training."

Greg walked away, barely registering the insult.

One day. Two. Three. They blurred together. Might have formed the same endless day, for all he knew. His mind folded in on itself. He became as small as possible. So small, even the other cadets didn't seem to notice him. Or if they did, it didn't register. He lived for the nights. When the darkness cushioned his senses and he could sleep.

Endless reams of dreams spiraled in vivid color. In some, he waltzed with Gwyn. Others, he swam with Aaron. In some, they chased him through crumbling buildings as derelict and abandoned as his soul. Others, they forgave him. He hated waking—facing the moment when he looked around, recognized his room, and remembered he was alone.

The third day, they made Aaron talk to him. Whispered, frantic voices trailed through the cracked door into the detention room. Aaron cleared his throat and sat next to him at the table where their meals were served.

Greg stared at the cinder block wall. Looking into bright blue eyes, at sensually peaked lips and sandy brown hair, would feel like walking willingly into hell.

"Greg?" His name caressed him like tender fingers trailing down his cheek. "You have to eat."

The nurse and Mr. Doyle entered the room. He felt them staring and swallowed hard. If he spoke, his voice would shake. He'd totally unman himself in front of everyone. Again. He clenched his jaw against the panicked urge to tell Aaron to go away.

"Greg, I'm not letting you be until you eat."

A chisel couldn't have done more damage to his heart than the sound of Aaron's voice. Emotions hacksawed through him, laying waste to the fortress he'd built. Aaron reached for his arm. Pain and longing jerked through Greg's middle.

Yanking his arm away, he picked up his fork and ate like they'd taught during war games. Not stopping to chew. Barely swallowing down one bite before the next one filled his mouth. He ate every last crumb and shoved the tray away, wanting to vomit.

"Milk too," Aaron said.

Rage coursed through him at the demand. The feeling shocked him, and that angered him more, because he didn't want to feel anything.

He grabbed the milk carton, ripped it open, and gulped down the warm liquid before crushing the cardboard in his hand and slamming it down. Aaron pushed back from the table and stood.

Greg inhaled through his nostrils, willing the haze to return. When it didn't, he shook against the urge to pick up the tray and smash it against something.

A warm hand weighed heavy on his shoulder. He flinched and looked up involuntarily.

Aaron.

Memories of aqua-tinted light, searing kisses, an easy smile, and the languid grace of bodies moving, slippery and wet, skin against skin, laid waste to his remaining reserves.

Doyle cleared his throat, and Aaron's hand fell away.

"Why?" The single word tumbled from Greg's lips.

Aaron blinked and shook his head in an almost imperceptible movement. "Take care," he said, his voice low and quiet, before going back to his seat at the front of the room.

Understanding dawned.

The bastards refused to let Aaron speak to him! And the idiot had complied. Why? Given the same command, he'd have told them to shove it up their hairy asses.

Unless...

He turned around and looked at Aaron.

"Did they tell you they'd expel me if you talked to me?"

"Two demerits, Mr. Falkner!"

Greg clenched his hand against the urge to give the shithead the finger.

Aaron's shoulders stiffened. Without turning, he nodded once.

"You idiot." Relieved laughter broke joy wide open in Greg's chest. "There're things to do besides talking."

Aaron spun around, the shocked expression on his face a sobering weight. Even Doyle looked at him slack-jawed in lieu of penning black marks in the demerit book.

"What?" Greg's laugh trailed into something bitter. "You think they don't know?"

Doyle crossed the room with lightning speed. Surprise giving him the advantage, he hauled Greg out of his seat and chicken winged him face-first against the wall. Pitted concrete scraped his cheek as the teacher hissed in his ear, "Shut your mouth, or I'm going to break the law against whipping your faggot ass."

Ignoring the searing pain in his shoulder joint, he bucked backward, and Doyle toppled to the floor. Greg stood over him, rage mottling his senses.

"Touch me again, and I'll show you the meaning of the word fag, you son of a bitch."

Aaron stood. "Greg! Stop!"

Doyle scrambled to his feet and straightened his tie. "Sit the hell down," he said after considering Greg's greater size and Aaron's looming presence. "And shut up."

Greg growled, but Aaron gave him a pleading look that said he'd gone to a lot of trouble to keep him in school.

"Fine." He took his seat at the front of the room.

Aaron slid into the chair next to him and caught Greg's eye. A shake of his head showed disgust with Greg's lack of self-control—with everything he'd revealed.

Greg arched an eyebrow to show he didn't care. That he refused to be manipulated and pissed on by people whose opinions he had never regarded. They could do nothing worse to him than what they'd done already. He'd rather they expelled him than take his friend away, because without Aaron, everything was pointless.

Chapter Eight

Aaron crossed the courtyard on the way to the detention room. A warm spring rain pelted his face, cooling its heated surface. He couldn't help it; the insults hurled at him every day made him blush. Things he'd never heard of—never even contemplated—were suggested as his favorite fetishes. So far today they'd called him a toe-toucher and a cocksucker. And what the hell was a butt plug?

A small crowd gathered at the far end of the courtyard. Aaron tensed. Crowds were dangerous. He changed direction to skirt along the edge of the building.

"Gonna cry, Falkner?" McHugh's voice lifted above the others.

Aaron stopped as the air around him became heavy with dread.

Greg.

Greg stood almost a half-head taller than most of the gang. If looks could kill... He wasn't going down without a fight.

Fuck, Greg, don't give them attitude.

Naturally, Greg swung at McHugh. The blow landed with a satisfyingly fleshy thud, followed by McHugh's curses. Greg landed another punch before two cadets pinned Greg's arms behind his back.

"No visible bruises, boys."

That was a teacher!

Aaron's head snapped around. Sure enough, Mr. Shepherd stood not twenty feet away—had just turned his back on the group.

Aaron's breakfast hurtled into his throat, and he bent over double into the bushes. By the time he finished retching, Greg was no longer visible above the throng.

Walking up to Mr. Shepherd, shaking with anger and fear, he said, "Make them stop, or I'll take you out."

The man couldn't have appeared more surprised if Aaron had threatened to fuck him.

"You know what I did to Falkner? You'll be wishin' I was that nice to you if you don't make it stop." He leaned in for emphasis, making certain the man couldn't read his fear. "Now!"

"Enough!" Shepherd shouted at the group. "Satisfied?"

The cadets ignored the command, and Aaron took a fighting stance.

"Not until they stop."

The teacher walked to the edge of the group. "I said enough!"

The motion slowed and stopped, with McHugh giving one last punch to Greg's stomach. Greg whipped his arms out of the slackening grasps of the

cadets who held him. They stepped back out of his reach and spat in his face. He flew at them, but they moved faster than he could in his winded state.

Greg held his side as he picked up his bag from the ground.

"Now get out of here before I give them new instructions," Shepherd snarled.

Rather than turn tail, he stood his ground for Greg. "Take him to the infirmary."

Shepherd sneered at him. "He can take himself. Get to detention."

Greg jerked his chin toward the building and didn't quite manage to hold back a wince. The gesture told Aaron to get going. He'd be all right.

Aaron glared at the teacher he'd once respected. "You're a prick," he said, surprising even himself, but he followed orders and left Greg to whatever fate had in store next.

* * *

Aaron slid the soap down his torso and shook water from his eyes. It was midnight, the only time he could shower without a threat of having the shit kicked out of him by a gang of cadets.

Two more weeks, he told himself, turning off the water. Then he'd escape this hell. Counting the days kept him moving forward.

He wrapped his towel around his waist, then sat heavily on the bench. Dropping his head into his hands, he wondered how he could get Greg through the next two weeks without getting them both expelled. Or worse, killed. Two weeks. It wasn't that long. Yet it was forever.

He pulled on his sweatpants and put his toiletries away. His hand hovered over his open locker when the hall door creaked open.

"Shh," said a voice, and Aaron tensed.

"I don't hear anyone."

"Steam is still in the air," another voice said. "He can't be far."

"What if he's on his way back to his room?"

"Avery and Nelson will get him."

Leaving his door open, Aaron grabbed his shaving mirror, then slid around to the other side of the lockers. He'd have to think his way out of this one. He could hurt them, but no way could he take three guys...or more. Stall doors banged open, and he knew they were searching for him. Using the mirror to peer around the lockers toward the door, he saw Stuart Meyer guarding the exit.

Meyer he could take.

With a deep breath, Aaron barreled down the aisle.

"He's—oof!"

Knocking the cadet into the doorjamb with extra force, he bolted into the empty hallway. Heavy footfalls followed as he pounded barefoot against cold linoleum in the opposite direction of his room, where the other cadets apparently waited to ambush him. His mind raced. He couldn't count on a teacher—not after the incident with Greg today.

A skidding left turn took him down a dead-end corridor, and he cursed as the shaving mirror slipped from his sweaty palm to the floor with a telltale crack. He prepared to fight, then registered his location. Opening a dorm room door, he slid inside and slammed it behind him. Without stopping to look around, he grabbed the desk chair and jammed it under the knob just as the oak rattled with the force of three bodies slamming into it at once.

"Pussy!" someone hissed, and a chorus of insults followed.

Aaron inhaled the scent of masculine soap and looked around.

Lying with his feet toward the headboard, Greg shifted to look at him upside down, muscles undulating along his torso as he moved. He was shirtless, in gray sweats, the silvery moonlight washing his pitch-black hair and pale skin with a devil-meets-angel glow. Aaron drank him in, arousal smashing into adrenaline with giddy speed.

"Hi." Greg broke the silence with the quiet rumble of his voice.

Liquid need trickled through Aaron's belly. "Sorry."

"What for?"

"Not helping you this morning. Not kicking ass."

Greg shrugged, moonlight sliding like liquid over his skin. "You helped."

The door trembled against Aaron's back as the cadets gave one last try and left.

"Looks like they finally got the guts to come after you."

"Yeah," Aaron said. "Mind if I stay?"

Greg sat up on one elbow. "There'll be more shit."

"More shit for you, you mean."

"I'm used to it."

The simple statement brought Aaron low. "I never meant to make it worse for you." He stepped forward, wanting to soothe Greg's pain. To make something in this whole mess better.

Greg caught his intent and swallowed loud in the midnight silence. "We can't."

"Shut up." Aaron traced a finger along the smudgelike circles under Greg's eyes before trailing down his cheek to his mouth. Lush lips, firm and ripe, heated his finger.

Greg's eyes turned limpid, his chest rising and falling in shallow movements.

Aaron separated Greg's bottom lip from his teeth with his index finger. "Suck."

The heated pressure of Greg's mouth found a direct connection from Aaron's finger to his cock. His knees sagged, and he moaned as Greg worshiped him. Wet, sucking sounds permeated the room, and Aaron brought up his right hand to tangle in Greg's hair. He'd grown it longer, defying the dress code over the last six weeks, until now Aaron could get a good fistful to anchor himself.

"Good. That's nice." Aaron hissed the last word, his hips thrusting forward as Greg found a rhythm his body recognized.

Looking into dark eyes, he found liquid passion and no small amount of adoration. Seeing those emotions revealed in Greg's eyes was the sexiest thing he'd ever known. This guarded, once unattainable man was his for the taking. Aaron groaned at the knowledge and sank onto the edge of the bed, no longer able to stand.

It was Greg who brought them together, the heat of his palm spreading along the back of Aaron's neck, directing him into the kiss. Their tongues met before their lips touched, twin points of heat, twisting, melding into a mirror of their tangled emotions and desperate need.

"Don't stop," Greg said on a gasp as Aaron pulled away.

"Shh." Trailing the palm of his hand over the ridge of smooth sculpted pecs, Aaron strummed his thumb over the pebbled hardness of a nipple. He watched, mesmerized, when Greg's hips surged upward, his erection bobbing underneath his sweats.

Aaron's cock, painfully hard from the moment he'd seen Greg on the bed, tented the front of his sweats. He was aware of the seep of precum darkening the material, turning cold in the chill of the air. Leaning down, he closed his eyes and raked the tip of his tongue over the same nipple he'd teased with his thumb.

"Shit-shit...fuck!"

Greg's hands grabbed the sides of Aaron's head, yanking him away, but not before he nipped hard with his teeth.

"Agh!"

Aaron started to laugh, gleefully drunk on sex and power. "You'd better be quiet," he teased, not really giving a shit right then who knew what he did or how he felt about the man on the bed with him.

Greg colored, his blush a darker shade of gray than the other shadows along his face. "I don't think"—he panted the words—"I can."

"Well, you'd better think of somethin', because"—Aaron leaned down to whisper in Greg's ear—"I'm gonna love you till you can't see right."

A whimper escaped Greg's lips, and another rush of arousal assaulted Aaron's cock. He gritted his teeth. If he came before Greg, he would be seriously pissed with himself.

Grabbing Greg's still-damp towel from where it draped over the footboard, he handed it to him.

"Bite this if you're gonna holler." He grinned when Greg's eyes flew wide.

"We can't... What are you going to do?"

Aaron held back a sigh, remembering the last time they'd gotten each other off. Evidently, he needed to take Greg's control away, or he would feel guilty as sin tomorrow, and they'd be back to not speaking again or worse.

Fisting Greg's hair, using it as a weapon against him, Aaron jerked his head back, watching as widening pupils reacted to adrenaline and arousal. Greg swallowed convulsively, going limp. God that was fucking hot, watching him drift into some mystical headspace that would allow him to enjoy the moment, for the moment. No barriers. No regrets.

"Whatever I want." Aaron gave an extra tug for good measure. "Say yes."

Greg nodded once, slowly.

“Good enough.”

He picked up the towel from where Greg had let it drop to the floor.

“Open.”

Lush lips parted. Silvered saliva gleamed on Greg's tongue. Aaron stuffed the towel in his mouth. He stared down at Greg biting the cloth, chest heaving madly, breath rushing through his nose in great puffs that spread his nostrils on each inhale.

“Not. A. Sound.” Aaron's voice rasped in his throat, need lacing every syllable.

Aaron stood from the bed, moving out of his sight, and Greg fell back against his pillow, giving himself over completely and without question. He distracted himself with the towel, worrying the rough surface, listening to it squeak against his teeth as he bit down.

Excitement spiked through his middle when Aaron came back into view. Naked. His thick, uncut cock bobbing in the moonlight. Greg sucked at the towel, tasting lingering laundry detergent, imagining he teased the cowl of Aaron's foreskin with his tongue.

Languid movements, ropy muscles rippling like water, mesmerized him. Aaron lowered himself to the end of the bed, steel eyes radiating confidence and control. Greg couldn't have moved if he'd wanted to, with that stare pinning him to the mattress.

Aaron tugged Greg's sweats down past his knees, exposing him.

Palms massaged the length of his thighs. Hands squeezed, fingers kneaded, thumbs swooped, edging along his groin. Black spots peppered his vision, obscuring man and moonlight. He didn't want to come. Had to find a way not to come.

“You're gonna come,” Aaron breathed, awestruck. “The second I put my mouth on you, you're so gonna come.”

Tossing his head on the pillow, Greg shouted his denial into the towel.

“Don't worry.” Aaron's hands swept around Greg's quads, capturing his ass in his palms. “We'll practice plenty.”

Greg thumped his head against the pillow in frustration. He didn't want to humiliate himself like this. He didn't want Aaron to be in control. He wanted... He wanted...

Aaron's mouth, hot and raw on his cock.

Greg's hips convulsed at the first languid pull—legs trembling, toes curling, his body bowed, focusing every pulse of energy on that one point where Aaron's tongue pressed him against the roof of his mouth.

Fists slamming into the mattress, Greg threw his head back and came in long, pulsing waves. Great gasps heaved his chest, and as he came back down, Aaron was there, withdrawing the towel with a delicate tug.

Greg swallowed, wetting his tongue with saliva as he opened his eyes. Aaron stood above him in the moonlight.

Memory flashed back to that moment in the graveyard. He'd taunted Aaron then. About this very act. Something in him had known a mutual need. An

attraction that hadn't needed to be spoken to be recognized. He'd denied it even after what they'd done together at his house. God, he was such a coward.

All those months living with Aaron. Every time he'd entered the room, Greg had turned his back and started writing as if his world were on fire. Anything to resist Aaron's pull. He didn't deserve this man—had come so close, so many times, to ruining the best thing that had ever happened to him.

"You knew all along that I wanted you."

Aaron sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing his hand through sweat-slicked hair. "If I let myself think on it, I guess I suspected."

"The things I said..." Greg turned his head away, ashamed. A tug to his chin brought his face back around. Aaron's lips met his, softly pulling.

"Say you're sorry."

Fear clutched at Greg's chest, and he opened his eyes, trying to speak. Nothing came out but a croaking sound.

Aaron pulled back and looked at him, curiosity evident in the tilt of his head, the lift of his brows.

"You seriously can't do it." He expelled an incredulous laugh. "You can't say you're sorry. About anything. Even when you want to!"

Greg held still, a shaking exhale the only betrayal of emotion he allowed himself.

"Why, Greg?" Aaron whispered. "Why?"

He didn't say anything. Couldn't. In front of him yawned a black abyss. If he tried to cross the divide, he'd fall into it and be lost forever. Time unfurled, fluttering like shredded crepe paper ribbons, as Greg wrestled with his demons and failed.

Aaron stirred, and Greg blinked.

"I-I can make it up to you."

Aaron smirked, amused, power still arcing from him.

Greg sat up, kicking off his sweatpants, and slid off the bed to his knees between Aaron's legs.

The sharp tug of Aaron's fingers in his hair had Greg's cock springing back to life even as he inhaled against the pain. Their eyes met, and Aaron considered him, the shadow of his lashes falling against the twin half-moons of his cheekbones.

"Do it real good, and I'll forgive you." Aaron widened his legs, his hand slipping to the back of Greg's head, pushing him down.

Greg inhaled musky sweetness, sweat, and soap as his eyes fluttered closed. Silkier than rose petals, Aaron tasted salty against his tongue. Widening his throat, he cushioned his teeth with his lips and drank him in. On the first attempt, he gagged as Aaron thrust upward. Adjusting, Greg curled his palm around Aaron's hard length and tried again. This time Aaron moaned and laced his hand in Greg's hair. Delight surged, zinging across his skin, making Greg smile even as he bobbed his head and sucked with the flat of his tongue.

"Shit!" Aaron cursed, and Greg redoubled his efforts, licking up along the thick-veined underbelly to ruffle tender foreskin.

Remembering movies he'd seen, he tried twisting his hand as he bobbed down again, and Aaron's hips lifted, his hand clenching hard at the back of Greg's head.

Aaron gasped.

Tangy liquid spurted across Greg's tongue and down the back of his throat. He swallowed reflexively, laving the residual drops as Aaron fell back across the bed, chest heaving, his arm thrown over his eyes.

"Fuck. I'll forgive you anything for that." Aaron tugged languidly at Greg's arm. "Come on up here."

Floating on a sea of absolution, Greg complied. Curling along Aaron's side, he settled his head onto Aaron's chest and let the rhythm of his lover's heart tug him down into slumber.

* * *

When he woke the next morning, Aaron had already gone. Greg was naked under the covers, his sweatpants puddled on the floor—the only evidence of the carnal delights he'd succumbed to the previous night.

Glancing at his alarm clock, he swore. He had six minutes to make it to the detention room. As he tugged on his uniform, he forewent socks in the interest of time, buttoning his shirt the rest of the way as he ran down the halls and crossed the quad.

A light spring breeze cooled his face, pea gravel crunching under his feet. The rest of the school was still in the mess hall. He'd missed breakfast in the detention room. Oh well, he'd rather sleep than eat anyway.

The door banged against the wall, rattling the old glass as he flew into his seat. Mr. Doyle looked at the clock on the wall just as the red second hand clicked the minute hand into the hour position.

Catching his breath, Greg didn't dare look at Aaron. If he did, he knew he'd give them away, his blood already surging to southern points as scenes from the night before flooded his mind.

He had six hours—seven if he counted lunch—to contemplate what Aaron thought about their odd relationship. What did he think? Greg glanced sideways, then down at Aaron's crotch and grinned. Relief washed over him, mixing with the sweet strain of his own arousal. Right now, at the very least, they had the same thing on their minds.

Aaron watched Greg out of the corner of his eye. Shit. What was wrong with him? He'd very nearly earned himself weekend detention skidding in here at the last minute. That would have seriously sucked for them both and ruined Aaron's plans entirely.

Had arrogance or wealth or both made him so disdainful of rules and respect? If he only knew how much it made him like his father, he'd probably choke. Something had to make him grow up. Damned if Aaron knew what.

Cut him some slack, his conscience said. The guy has been through hell.

Aaron thought about losing his own father at age thirteen, and anger flowed through him. He'd never pitied himself. He'd taken a place of responsibility in his family, and his younger sisters looked up to him. He'd made

sure they had a role model until his mother remarried. Why couldn't Greg man up and stop feeling so fucking sorry for himself?

Unlike him, you didn't accidentally kill your own sister.

Well, his gan had said he'd been an angry kid before the accident. Likely the situation had fed into an already precariously balanced disposition. Sometimes personality made up half the battle. But so did wanting to improve.

People could change. Aaron firmly believed that. So for the next several hours, he would dedicate himself to Greg Falkner's attitude problem. And how he would personally set him on the road to fixing it.

Chapter Nine

Greg lay in a wildflower-strewn field to the north of the school, Aaron trailing his fingers through his hair, as they whiled away Friday evening. What he wouldn't do to stay here with his head on Aaron's shoulder forever.

"We have class Monday," Greg mused.

Even more than Greg, Aaron risked graduation by leaving campus. He broke lots of rules lately. Not the important ones. Just the bullshit ones. It seemed he'd become independent of the system. Not rude. Not angry. Just...his own person.

"They're gonna give us both shit." Aaron's languid tone belied the seriousness of his words. "You know it, right?"

"Yes." Greg combated a rise in blood pressure with a deep sigh.

Aaron lifted his head to look at him. "You gonna keep your cool?"

Greg contemplated a ladybug crawling up a cornflower stem.

"Greg?"

"Probably not."

Aaron's fingers curled against his scalp. "Come again?"

Greg smiled into Aaron's shirt. "If you say so."

Aaron pushed him off his shoulder, and he met the ground with a thud.

"Hey!"

"Sit up." The ice in Aaron's voice chilled Greg's blood. He'd never heard that tone from him—like arctic air clashed with Southern heat, and a storm brewed as a result. Greg rolled over, propping himself up on one elbow to stare at him. Face turned away, brow drawn low, Aaron worked his jaw as if he chewed glass. What was his damage?

Aaron leveled a glare at him, anger highlighting his cheeks with twin points of cherry red. "When are you going to grow up?"

"What are you? My mother now? Fuck off."

Quick as a snake, Aaron rolled him to his back. Greg moaned as blood rushed to his cock with pain-pleasure swiftness. Aaron dipped his head and bit down hard on Greg's lower lip.

"Fuck!" He bucked against Aaron's weight. "What the fuck'd you do that for?"

"That's one," Aaron breathed. "Disrespect me again, and I'll do something else to your cock besides suck it."

Greg's eyes went wide. "Disrespect you?"

Lust and power darkened Aaron's gaze, dilating his pupils and flaring his nostrils. "I told you to sit up." Aaron slid downward, every ridge of muscle stroking along Greg's length. Face level with Greg's crotch, he stared pointedly

at the bulging placket of his button fly jeans. When he looked up, his gaze hardened. "I'd hate to damage my favorite toy."

Mouth as dry as desert sand, Greg inched into a sitting position and raked a shaking hand through his hair. Shit. He'd never been so hard. Reaching down, he adjusted the seam of his jeans.

Aaron sat in a cross-legged position, his hands draped casually over his raised knees. "Here's how it's gonna go Monday." He quirked a brow at Greg to make sure he listened.

Fascinated, Greg bit back a sarcastic retort and nodded.

"You're gonna keep your mouth shut. No fights. No matter what anyone says or does."

Greg opened his mouth but clapped it closed when Aaron curled his lip.

"If you succeed? You're gonna think you died and went to heaven."

Heart thudding with arousal and awe, he stared at Aaron like a wide-eyed idiot. "And if I fail?"

Aaron's smile bordered on evil when he spoke. "Oh, I wouldn't if I were you."

* * *

Sunday night, Greg and Aaron sat in Aaron's room, studying. Greg watched as Aaron flipped a page and made a note in the margins of his yellow lined pad. Their conversation Friday afternoon played over and over in his head.

How did Aaron manage to remain so calm when people ragged on him? Not that they often did, but the only time Greg had ever seen him lose his cool, come to think of it, was with him.

"How do you do it?"

Aaron looked up, eyes curious over the edge of his textbook, and Greg had to shove down the urge to lean over and kiss him. Not that he had anything against kissing, but the impulse struck him as worse than gay. More like girlie.

"Do what?"

"Stay so cool?"

Aaron shut his book with a quiet thud and dropped it onto the gray blanket. He looked out the window for a long minute before meeting Greg's gaze again. "I like myself. I don't give a shit what anyone else says."

Greg blinked. He'd never heard someone say they liked themselves before. He knew Aaron was likeable, but that was an external observation. He pretty much figured everyone felt like him internally. "How come?"

"How come I like myself?"

Greg nodded.

A frown furrowed Aaron's brow, emphasizing his slight widow's peak. "I've...rarely...done anything I'd dislike myself for."

"Like what?"

"Like losing it with you in the graveyard." Aaron sighed. "Not thinking of another way to get McHugh and the others off your back."

Raising his chin, Greg leaned back onto the palms of his hands. They had mostly avoided speaking explicitly of that night, and he found himself confronting the elephant in the room. "Then why'd you agree to do it?"

Jaw flexing, Aaron looked away. "I thought you would apologize."

Greg fisted the wool blanket in his hands. "You don't know me very well."

The sorrowful look Aaron turned on him would have softened his mood if he felt like being a decent human being. "No. I didn't. Not then. It was a serious misjudgment on my part. And I'm sorrier than I can say."

Something brutish and childish prodded at Greg. "You could have warned me you were trained to fight."

"It was already too late. I figured better me than four guys on you."

"Four guys, I could have saved face. Getting your ass kicked four-on-one is a lot different than one-on-one." He relived that bleak night in his mind's eye as if it unfolded before him.

"How many times do you want me to say it, Greg?" Aaron's voice took on an edge. "I'm not gonna lick your boots too many more times without demanding you say sorry in return." He held up a hand when Greg opened his mouth. "No. Blowing me doesn't really count as an apology. You weren't exactly blameless, you know."

That shut Greg up.

"I know why you can't apologize for things," Aaron said after a long moment. Greg's heart tried to claw its way out of his chest. He felt like he was rubbernecking at his own car wreck when Aaron asked, "Don't you want to know why?"

Shrugging, he looked away. He knew why, but he wanted to know how much Aaron had guessed.

"Because if you say you're sorry, you think you're responsible. For Gwyn. For everything."

A stinging sensation assaulted his nose at hearing his sister's name on his lover's tongue. "That's bullshit."

"Something doesn't have to be your fault for you to feel sorry it happened, Greg."

Greg glared out the window, clenching his jaw against a hurricane of hateful responses. Aaron didn't know shit, but Greg wished he did. He wanted to talk about it so badly, but the words, buried so long, lodged deep in his chest.

"You'd feel better about yourself if you apologized for the things you really oughta be sorry for."

Greg leaned forward and gathered up his study materials, determined not to listen to another word about Gwyn, if nothing else.

"Goddamn it," Aaron cursed softly under his breath. "I won't make you do it."

He stilled, not really wanting to leave the relative comfort of Aaron's presence. "Are you going to drop it?"

"Yeah."

Greg nodded—a jerk of his head that said he'd stay if Aaron would back the fuck off.

Aaron folded his arms over his chest, and Greg tried not to admire the way his short sleeves emphasized his biceps. "Do you want to know how to avoid a fight? Even when you're pissed?"

Greg glared at Aaron over his pile of books. He knew he was acting like a bratty kid. Aaron offered him a graceful out. He took it with a shrug.

"Sure."

"One of two ways." Aaron stared pointedly at Greg. "Don't back your adversary into a corner. Give him an out."

"Ha. Fucking. Ha." He gave Aaron a look that said very funny.

Aaron ignored the sarcasm. "Or, in more immediately dangerous circumstances, turn the tables on him with your smarts."

Greg mulled that over for a minute and grinned. "Well, with McHugh that shouldn't be too hard. He's dumb as rocks."

Aaron returned his smile and leaned forward to capture Greg's chin in his hand.

Swooping in for the very kiss Greg had wanted to plant on him earlier, Aaron murmured, "And whatever you do, just don't throw the first punch."

Dropping his books to the bed, Greg pressed his palm against Aaron's chest. "I don't have that kind of control. I'm not like you."

"Sure you do." Aaron tilted his head to the side. "Want me to show you how much control you have when you put your mind to it?"

"If you don't mind a black eye...or two." He shrugged, wondering exactly why Aaron would want to piss him off.

"If it's gonna work, you're gonna have to give yourself over." Pupils dilated to swallow up a good portion of blue. "Promise?"

This was a sex game?

Curiosity and a hardened cock demanded he answer, "Yes."

Aaron yanked Greg off balance by the back of his neck and captured another kiss. Soft moistness vied with demanding aggression. Lips, tongues, teeth, and hot breath collided and mingled with increasing frenzy. Aaron pushed their books to the floor with a cascading thud and forced Greg backward until his head rested against the metal bar at the foot of the bed.

Tearing open Greg's pants, Aaron exposed him with an alacrity that left them both breathing in greedy gasps. "Need you," he said, diving down.

Aaron's lips brushed across the tip of his cock with a moist kiss, and Greg's hips jerked high. Not that he wasn't enjoying every second of this experiment, but in the back of his sex-soaked mind, he wondered exactly how this was supposed to demonstrate his control.

Hovering, Aaron blew a hot stream of focused air along the tip of Greg's cock. His hands flew from his sides to clutch Aaron's head in an attempt to tug him down. Resisting, Aaron continued the sultry assault.

"What the fuck?" Greg gasped. "You trying to lend meaning to the term blowjob or what?"

Aaron looked up, smirking.

"Y'all wanna come?" His voice dripped with the lazy heat that never failed to kick Greg's arousal into overdrive.

"No. I want you to give me blue balls and make my dick fall off," Greg snapped out of sheer physical frustration.

Aaron's eyes narrowed. "That's tomorrow's lesson, if you don't keep your cool."

Greg swallowed, knowing Aaron never made a promise he couldn't keep. "Teach me control."

"I thought you'd see things my way."

"So how does this work?" He shifted, feeling self-conscious now of his cock hanging out of his pants while Aaron remained fully clothed.

"Two minutes." Aaron ran a fingertip around the rim in a fluttering motion that had Greg's head tilting back.

"Two minutes what?"

"That's how long you hafta last."

Greg's head snapped back up. "You don't have much faith in my staying power, do you?"

Aaron snorted.

"Keep it up, Aaron. See where it gets you."

"Keep what up? This?" Aaron squeezed hard.

Greg surged upward, both inviting and attempting to escape the harsh caress. "Fuck, Aaron!" He panted the words. "You're going to break it."

"Whose is it to break?" Aaron asked, leaning in close.

The sex fog limited Greg's ability to respond.

Aaron squeezed harder.

"Y-yours!" he said, belatedly figuring out what Aaron wanted.

The pressure lessened, turning into a rough caress that raked the bunched cotton of his underwear around the base of his cock.

"Good answer."

Pride and lust shattered what little free will remained. Aaron's fingers swirled precum along the sweet spot, and the room became a universe unto itself.

Aaron pulled down Greg's jeans and maneuvered the band of his underwear to free him completely. The first touch of his mouth was a heated taste of heaven. Wet and slick, Aaron's tongue traveled from tip to base and flicked upward again to catch the sensitive ridge of flesh.

"Please," Greg heard himself beg.

"You wanna fuck my mouth?" Shadows chiseled Aaron's cheekbones into a harsh display.

"Yes."

"Two minutes from now." Aaron set the timer on his watch. "No coming."

His breath hit the tip of Greg's cock again, and Greg's belly tightened. "Wait!"

"What?" Aaron looked up, eyes narrowing. "I'm gonna have to restart the clock."

"What if...?" He couldn't even bring himself to ask. He felt so turned-on. He couldn't last. How fucking embarrassing.

"It'll be easier with time." Aaron's lips curved upward, his smile a wicked enchantment. "Besides, if it's not? We do it all night till you get it right."

"You don't play fair." Greg groaned. "I'm going to fucking die of humiliation, and you're eating it up like ice cream."

"Let the ego go, Greg." Aaron reset his watch. "Enjoy."

"Easy for you to say,"

Greg laced his right hand through Aaron's hair to brace himself for the challenge.

Slow, deliberate suction drew him in, forcing him past tight lips, swirling tongue, and into the heated paradise of Aaron's mouth. The skin over Greg's abs twitched in response. Aaron's tongue sucked him in farther, worked him toward convulsing throat muscles.

Greg banged his head against the bar at the foot of the bed with a metallic clang. He looked at the watch on Aaron's wrist, watched his hand flex as he tightened and released his grip over and over. Fuck! More than a minute to go. Shoving his free hand into Aaron's hair, he tried to tug him away from his cock.

No way was he coming in under two minutes.

No. Fucking. Way.

Aaron slid his tongue side to side, catching every millimeter of the ridge, flicking against the supersensitive flesh until Greg's abs quivered. Hands clenching in Aaron's hair, he spiked upward as heat rushed through his tightening balls.

Aaron closed his palm around the base of Greg's cock, his hold like a sensual torture device as he pulled Greg deep and swallowed him against the back of his throat in a flurry of strokes. Hot, rhythmic, fluttering. Twisting fisted flesh. Suction, heat, and movement combined to push him into a mindless state. He didn't care when he came. As long as he came.

Greg fucked Aaron's mouth with abandon. His body took over. Its mindless, rhythmic pumping heightened his pleasure until release pulsed through him, stiffening his spine, surging through his groin to end in sweet, consuming convulsions.

Coming down, languid, he ran his fingers through Aaron's hair, felt him turn his head and smile into his hand as he kissed it.

"What?"

"Mmm," Aaron hummed into his palm. "Not bad, but we have to go again."

"Oh, the horror." Greg laughed. "I'll wear out your jaw."

"Hardly." Aaron grinned. "Sit up, legs over the edge of the bed."

Greg complied. Both he and Aaron looked down at his rapidly stiffening cock.

"What you lack in staying power, you got in repeat performance."

"Can't help it. You get me hard."

His position faced him toward the dresser. He watched, curious, as Aaron swiveled around and met his eyes in the mirror. They looked like night and day

next to each other, his pale skin contrasting with Aaron's tan. Where Greg's midnight hair all but rejected the light, Aaron's sandy, sun-streaked hair glowed golden, just like his disposition.

The spark of lust in their eyes appeared the same at first glance, but upon closer examination, even that distinguished them. Aaron's held a sense of steady confidence, his dominant personality shining through. Greg recognized in his own eyes a spark of wonder and worship at being lavished with attention by this bronzed god.

"What now?"

"I want you to watch yourself in the mirror." Aaron grabbed a bottle of sunscreen from his nightstand and flicked the cap open with his thumbnail. "Don't take your eyes away."

The scent of cocoa butter trailed to Greg's nostrils. "Oh my God."

"What?" Laughter laced Aaron's question.

"You always smell like that shit. Even in the winter."

"And?"

"I thought you were protective of your Southern skin, but that doesn't make sense. You tan easy." He laughed convulsively now. "You're beating off with it!"

Aaron slapped his palm along Greg's cock with a fistful of cold lotion, cutting off his amusement.

"Here's how it's gonna go," he said. "You're not gonna move. Not gonna holler. You're just gonna come. When I say."

"But..."

What if someone saw them through the open window? And they probably would. The thought twisted on itself, the friction of fear creating arousal where none should exist. Cocoa butter hovered thick in the air as suntan lotion took on a whole new dimension.

Aaron leaned in as close as either of them dared, whispering, "No buts. Keep your eyes open and on your face."

A moth beat its wings against the overhead light, casting flitting shadows across Greg's face. He struggled not to look down, tried to find something interesting in the twin pools of his eyes, almost black with lust at this distance. His parted mouth, ultimately, caught and held his attention when Aaron's slick palm wrapped firmly around the head of his cock and slid downward. The lotion's warm scent grew stronger, and he fought against the impulse to surge upward.

"Relax your jaw."

Greg complied, his lips parting another fraction.

"Good. Very nice."

Pleasure built in lapping waves, mounting higher and higher with the slip of Aaron's fist up and down his shaft. Tranquil, meditative caresses blended with the rhythm of his hand. No one else existed in the quad or on this earth. He registered only the bed, the covers he clutched, and Aaron's hand.

"Take a deep breath and let it out slowly." Aaron's voice, low and quiet, hypnotized him.

Greg inhaled, the motion expanding his chest. Oxygen filled his universe with clarity. Sparkling light on the mirror exploded into individual points. As he

let out the breath, Aaron's fingers slid underneath the sweet spot. Greg blinked—the only movement he allowed himself—and the light jumped, smearing across his vision.

"I'm so proud of you." Aaron's voice filled with awe, and Greg felt capable of anything.

Twisting his wrist, Aaron developed a repetitive rhythm, clenching, circling, cupping his fingers over the head, and dipping back under. Each time his hand popped up, an answering squeeze and a pull downward followed. Greg came to anticipate and crave the motion.

Pressure built, tugging at his nerves, twitching the skin over his abdomen.

Aaron hadn't said to come yet. Greg took another steadying breath.

"Nice. So hot. I'm gonna come just watching your face. Holding your cock in my hand."

A repressed groan built in Greg's chest, but he didn't utter a sound. His eyes. His mouth. Aaron's hand. God, Aaron's hand...

On the upstroke this time, the side of Aaron's thumb dipped into his slit, sluicing the steadily leaking liquid downward.

He wanted to beg... That wouldn't please Aaron.

Opposing desire built his arousal higher, into a peak he knew would crash like breakers pounding to shore. In surreal animation, the moth hovered in his peripheral vision, suspended in time against the heat of the lamp. Greg inhaled. Exhaled. Balanced inside a bright orb, motionless in time and space, he waited as the earth spun around him.

Aaron's hand journeyed from tip to base and back up. Tugging, squeezing, pulling, pumping, until Greg wanted to forego the very air he breathed for sensation and control. Who needed oxygen when there was Aaron?

"Come," Aaron whispered.

A shudder overtook his body. What began as a white-hot pinprick radiated, consuming every nerve. He felt electricity zing from neuron to neuron in an endless wave of energy.

As he bobbed to the surface of his personal ocean, Greg noticed Aaron's hand first. It gripped him lightly, fingers soothing and gentle. A cooling presence. He inhaled, and sound came back. First the flutter of the moth. Then the shout of someone down the hall getting ready for bed. Slowly, his world expanded until he separated from the universe again.

Chapter Ten

During review week, classes shortened and study periods lengthened. The adjusted schedule might save him, Greg thought as he crossed the quad with Aaron and his classmates for the first time since they were outed.

Outed .

The word pricked his mind like a poisoned dart. He couldn't really be gay. Could he?

He thought back on the flirtations and more promising interludes he'd had with girls. They felt pleasant enough. Nothing to write home about, though. Then he remembered watching Aaron change the first night they'd roomed together—the placid blue of his eyes before he turned to tug on his pajama bottoms. Mutual attraction had flared. He had forgotten that spark of recognition and the hurried, reflexive dismissal of what he felt.

The single memory stood out, its lush outlines a map of his soul. Walking beside Aaron, their feet heavy against the pavement, he experienced a burst of loyalty. If being queer meant loving Aaron, then he'd own the label, at least internally. It was just...going to take some getting used to. And they'd have to be careful, once they graduated, not to out themselves again.

"Stay cool," Aaron muttered as Nelson, a member of the elite corps, approached carrying a wooden dress rifle.

"Fucking freaks. I've got a pole to ram up your ass." He jammed the butt of his gun toward Greg's solar plexus as he passed.

Before Greg had a chance to react, a hair before the gun reached his gut, Aaron knocked it to the ground with a swift chop to Nelson's arm.

Nelson grunted and cradled his arm. "Fucking queers!" he shouted at their retreating backs, Aaron propelling Greg along by the arm.

Greg clenched his jaw and looked straight ahead. Vulnerability enveloped him like a hooded straightjacket, threatening to smother and strangle. Fuck, what a cross to bear, just to be together. Did Aaron feel it too? The suffocating fear? The fight-or-flight pump of adrenaline through his system?

"Hey." Aaron looked around to make sure no teachers would hear him speaking to Greg. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Greg choked on the unshed adrenaline. "Thanks for that."

"Sorry. It was reflex."

The idea that Aaron would break his do-no-harm code to protect him buoyed his spirits, but in the next second, he remembered he had AP English next. Usually his favorite class, it held no joy for him when he realized he'd be without Aaron's watchful influence to keep him in line.

He could handle a beating, he guessed. He'd taken them a thousand times before and by all appearances would again. The idea of failing Aaron—of

breaking his promise to keep his temper in check—worried him most. Several times today, he'd barely missed blowing it. His ankle still throbbed where Aaron had trod on it when McHugh and Griswold had prodded their tongues in their cheeks, making blowjob motions, as they'd walked by.

They reached the building, and Greg opened the door to go inside, stopping when Aaron tugged on his sleeve.

"Here." He held out a slip of paper.

Taking a deep breath, Greg pocketed the note and went inside. He stopped to use the latrine on his way to class.

He had just zipped up his pants and turned to wash his hands when the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Three of the elite corps swaggered into the bathroom—DeSota and Franks with Nelson trailing behind, a bruise already blooming on his forearm.

Gaze averted, Greg washed his hands. If he pretended he was Aaron—cool, calm, well liked—he could do this. They'd leave him alone if he refrained from baiting them... Wouldn't they?

Three khaki shirts loomed in the mirror.

Fuck.

His mind scrambled for a solution as he reached for a paper towel. Turning, he saw they'd left him no room to get to the door.

"Your fucking fag boyfriend isn't here to protect your ass now, Falkner." Nelson brought his dress rifle around so that the butt pressed against the seam of Greg's pants.

He froze. Terrified. This situation went beyond a schoolyard brawl. These cadets smelled blood.

"Excuse me." He attempted to step past them, but Nelson pressed the stock harder into sensitive flesh.

"There's no excuse for you." DeSota threw the trite line at him.

"Don't move," Nelson ordered.

Greg swallowed hard. Wished to God he had a prayer of disarming Nelson.

"Please let me by." Bile rose in his throat as he made the request.

"Oh listen! He begs so pretty!"

Red spots formed in his vision, and Greg clenched his jaw, bowing his head like a bull at the charge. A dim voice in his head told him he couldn't take them all. A louder voice told him not to go down without a fight.

Just don't throw the first punch. Aaron's voice replayed in his mind.

Haze clearing, his head snapped up as he found a touchstone of strength. He looked at them each in turn, derision etched across his features.

"Three against one? I guess you're really afraid of fags, huh?" He turned their implicit insult around on them.

Shock rippled through the group, and they shuffled, looking to one another for direction. In the confusion, Greg twisted the mock rifle up and out of Nelson's grasp and shouldered past him to bolt out the door.

Sliding into his seat in English—on time, for once—he drew Aaron's note from his pocket and read the words: I'm proud of you.

In that moment, he liked himself.

* * *

"I can't believe we're graduating tomorrow," Aaron said.

He pulled another one of his shirts from the duffel and tossed it onto the pile where Greg's summer and winter uniforms already lay in a jumble of khaki and gray.

"Thank fucking God."

Greg popped open the lighter fluid, drizzling the astringent liquid in a clear arc over the sacrificial offering. Or were they performing a slaughter? Probably a little of both, Aaron mused. "You're not gonna miss anything? Nothing at all?"

Still pouring lighter fluid, Greg glanced at Aaron's crotch then up to his face and arched his eyebrows.

Aaron burst out laughing. "You perv."

Greg shrugged and returned his attention to the bonfire they were building in the field. They'd walked several miles just to make sure they wouldn't attract attention, saving only their dress uniforms for graduation. Everything else lay in the pile.

"I still don't know why you wanted to burn our underwear," Aaron said.

"I don't want any reminders of this place."

"Don't you think that's enough lighter fluid? You're burning clothes. They'll go up easy enough."

"I want flames so high you can see them from space."

"I think you might've just written poetry."

"Huh?" Greg paused, match over the strike plate. "What are you talking about?"

"When you said... Oh never mind." Aaron gave up. Greg had behaved irritably all day, and he grew tired of trying to cajole him into a better mood. "Light your match."

The snapping hiss of the match preceded a whoosh of flames. Greg stepped backward and folded his arms over his chest. Orange and yellow waves of light washed his brooding features with a hellish glow. As the initial chemical fire died down, however, the light became softer, lending an almost mystical quality to the surrounding air.

"Do you think you'll ever get married?"

The question, so out of left field, drove into Aaron's mind with the force of a pile driver. "I dunno. You?"

Greg tilted his head sideways and swung his gaze to Aaron as if to ask, Are you fucking serious?

"Well, you're the one who said you'd fucked girls."

"Haven't you?"

"Yes. Two."

"Are you gay?"

"Shit, Greg!" Aaron's stomach revolted at the question. If he got any more upset, he'd probably start dry heaving. "What the fuck kind of question is that?"

Greg spun away, placing the bonfire between himself and Aaron. Smoldering wool created an acrid stench as black smoke curled into the air.

"Do you think there's something wrong with it?" Greg's jaw visibly clenched. "Being gay?"

"N-no...it's just...I'm not, you know. That way."

"So, you'll get married someday?"

Aaron ran a hand through his hair and looked away. He had barely thought about whether or not he'd accidentally burned his last pair of dress socks, never mind what he planned for the rest of his life.

"Probably," he answered with as much conviction as he could muster. "It's not like I want to spend the rest of my life with guys like McHugh trying to break my face." Why had Greg brought up this uncomfortable subject exactly?

"Cool, then."

Greg's face had a funny screwed up look about it.

"Are you crying?"

"Fuck no!" Greg spun around and stalked away from the fire. "It's the smoke."

"Oh. Okay." Aaron bent and grabbed the bag of marshmallows they'd brought and ripped it open. "Where'd you put the sticks?"

Greg waved toward the duffel and inhaled audibly before he turned around with an unnaturally bright smile pasted on his face. "So, what do you want to do with our last night?"

Aaron frowned. "You sure you're all right?"

"Right as rain, as Gan says." He snatched the bag of marshmallows from Aaron's hand. "Gimme a stick."

They stood, shoulder to shoulder for a long while, toasting marshmallows and popping them into their mouths.

"So," Aaron said after the silence had stretched on for as long as he could bear.

Greg tossed his stick into the fire and faced Aaron. "So..."

Aaron cleared his throat. He'd felt so certain he and Greg would have one last fling tonight, but after their conversation, it didn't seem appropriate. It seemed gayer than ever.

"I-I like you, Greg." Aaron shifted his gaze from one brown eye to the other. "I just... I'm not queer."

"Whatever." Greg shrugged, his hands coming up to give a reassuring squeeze to Aaron's shoulders. "Want me to blow you?"

A kick of lust hit Aaron's gut and slid down to pool in his groin. "Sure," he answered, lowering to the ground. "That'd be real nice."

Aaron listened to the tree frogs playing a summer melody as Greg added some sticks to the fire.

"We should have brought something to lie on."

"Sissy," Greg teased, his tone lighter than Aaron had ever heard it.

Aaron laughed. "You northern guys are used to frigid summers."

"I dare you to say that come August."

Shivering against the damp grass, Aaron snorted. "What? You think ninety is hot?"

Greg finished poking at the fire and knelt next to Aaron's hip. Stars blanketed the sky above his head as he leaned close.

"Let me warm you up."

One square-palmed hand covered Aaron's hammering heart.

"You're going to have a happy life, Aaron Blake," Greg whispered and bent to brush a tender kiss against his mouth.

Aaron tried to capture the back of his neck—to pull him in for a full-mouthed kiss, wanting to taste sticky marshmallow on Greg's tongue—but his hand fell away as Greg slid down to free the top button of his jeans with his teeth. Another followed in its wake, and Aaron groaned.

"I fucking love button fly jeans."

Greg chuckled into the denim and undid the next button before inhaling deep. "I love the way you smell."

Aaron tangled his hand in Greg's hair, encouraging the nuzzling motion he made. "Sunblock?"

"Mhm...and you."

A sweet ache formed in Aaron's chest, and he swallowed against it. "Just suck me. Stop being a girl."

Greg hissed as if he'd been struck and raised his chin, the hardness in his eyes promising retribution. He tugged down Aaron's jeans with a brutal yank that tore at his pubic hair and gave a good dose of rug burn to his cock.

"Ow! Fucker!"

Greg's hand silenced him, tugging at his turgid shaft, soothing the burn with the rush of blood that brought him to aching fullness. Flicking his tongue back and forth, Greg teased the seam of Aaron's balls and popped them into his mouth for a pressured suck. Aaron leaned up on his elbows to watch Greg's head bobbing in the firelight.

"So fucking sexy." Aaron panted against sensations rocking along his spine, increasing the heaviness in his balls. "You know just how to do it, Reggie."

A sharp nip along sensitive skin surprised him, and he jerked backward. "Fuck!"

Greg looked up, licking the glistening wetness from his lips. "Call me that again and you'll lose one of your balls."

"What?" Aaron grinned. "Reggie?"

Greg's hand shot out, but Aaron, now prepared, had quicker reflexes. He grabbed Greg's wrist and applied measured force until Greg grimaced.

"Uncle?"

"Mhm."

"Say it."

"Uncle." Greg gritted the word between his teeth.

"Now suck me...Reggie." Aaron released his hand.

Greg growled, but dipped his head to comply, taking Aaron all the way to the back of his throat in the first swallow.

"Shit!" Aaron's hips jerked. "Yeah!"

Hand twisting with a determined I'm-going-to-make-you-come-in-under-a-minute motion, Greg swallowed him down again, cupping his lips and applying just the right pressure with his tongue.

"Easy—" Aaron panted.

Greg redoubled his efforts, and Aaron fell backward. When he came, he didn't know if the stars he saw were real or imagined as Greg pinched his foreskin over the head of his cock, cutting off immediate release, creating the longest orgasm of his life.

"God," Aaron said when he could finally speak. "I'm gonna miss you."

Greg rolled to his back and tossed an arm over his eyes. "You're going to miss my mouth."

Aaron chuckled. "Especially your mouth."

"You'll find some girl and teach her how to do that."

A vision of Deirdre—his girlfriend from the summer before—flitted through his mind. He pictured her lipsticked mouth taking him in, and he shuddered. "Ew," he said before he could stop himself.

Greg's arm slipped to the ground, and he rolled his head to the side. His eyes sparkled with amusement. "Ew?"

"I was trying to picture Deirdre doin' that." Aaron scrambled for an explanation. "It's just—she'd probably bite me or something."

Greg looked back up at the sky. "I guess guys do know what guys like."

Aaron frowned. "I never thought on it."

"Well, if you only have one more night of good blowjobs to look forward to for the rest of your life, we'd better make the best of it."

"God! You make it sound like I'm going to my death!"

Greg quirked an eyebrow at him. "Aren't you?"

Aaron opened his mouth and closed it again. Rolling to one elbow so his stomach rested against Greg's side, he looked down into inscrutable eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess I am."

* * *

"Do you want to come for a visit this summer?"

Greg turned from packing his personal belongings into his duffel. Not many things remained after the uniform bonfire he and Aaron had indulged in last night. Graduation loomed only hours away, and Aaron sat on the windowsill in his T-shirt and jeans, looking good enough to eat.

"Change in plans. My parents decided to send me to Europe." Greg slid his gaze to the left.

"Were you ever planning on telling me?" Aaron narrowed his eyes.

"You'd have gotten a postcard."

Greg never relished good-byes, and this one in particular well and truly sucked. He'd been up for nearly forty-eight hours, mind clawing against a vision of his own personal hell—life at Harvard. Without Aaron.

Like a hunted rabbit, he'd watched his brain skitter first left and then right in an attempt to escape the inevitable. So far, he had only come up with half a solution, and it didn't include Aaron—Aaron, whose golden future included beautiful Hollywood babes and a normal family someday. As long as Greg stayed out of his way.

Sliding off the windowsill, Aaron reached him in one stride. "If we had more time, you'd be in serious shit."

Greg gave him his best lopsided grin. He didn't want to fight now. Even via whatever game he and Aaron played.

He glanced over Aaron's shoulder. Full sun shone in the open window. Parents and cadets milled in the courtyard.

"I'll just have to owe you."

Their eyes met. Locked. They both knew the timing sucked. A parent might see.

Oh fuck it.

He reached around Aaron and opened the closet door, swinging it halfway so it blocked the room from the window. Grabbing the desk chair, he jammed it under the outside door handle, recreating their makeshift lock.

When he turned back, Aaron's eyes widened.

Greg stilled.

"I just wanted..."

Aaron stepped closer. "To kiss you good-bye," he finished for Greg.

They'd said their real good-byes last night by the light of the bonfire in a raucous collision of sweaty bodies and undeniable need.

Warm hands, strong fingers, cupped either side of his head. Held him still for a gentle brush of lips. Their breaths mingled, expelled roughly with the deepening of the kiss. Greg clutched Aaron to him. Drank him in. Mentally recorded every second as if he hovered both outside and within the experience at the same time. He'd write about it later...someday...if only so he wouldn't forget.

Breaking the kiss, he leaned his forehead against Aaron's and closed his eyes. "Promise..."

"Promise what?" Aaron whispered.

"That you won't forget..." Greg choked on his words, wanting Aaron to know how much he'd always meant to him, from that first day in the quad, but not wanting to appear weak. Pride won out. "To write. That you won't forget to write."

Aaron's hand slid to the back of Greg's neck, pulled him in for one last kiss before he replied, "I promise. I'll never forget. Anything."

Chapter Eleven

November, 2002

The graduation scene played out on the screen as Aaron leaned into Greg in the darkened theater. “It wasn’t that bad,” he whispered. “Was it?”

Greg didn’t so much as blink in response as light from the movie played over his face, but Aaron knew he’d stared more at him than the film.

The last hour had alternated between agony and beauty, breaking his heart as he realized how Greg had seen him—seen their relationship back then. He’d come across as half god, half confused kid.

Was that what it’d been like? What he’d been like?

The graveyard, when Greg looked up at him. Kneeling. The camera angle on Aaron’s...the actor’s face. The moonlight behind his head. He understood so many things Greg had never said. He saw now, in a fictionalized version of their lives, all the things he hadn’t seen then. And it left him ragged.

How had Greg managed to translate all that had happened to them into this tale? They hadn’t gone to military school, rather an elite New England prep school, but now that he’d seen the first two thirds of the film, Aaron would have sworn their lives had really unfolded this way—the way Greg had written.

Stomach in knots, he wanted to leave the theater, but he knew Greg had more to say to him through his chosen vehicle—the movie screen. He tried to shove down the anger and rejection he felt at the knowledge Greg Falkner had kept this movie—their movie—a secret for so long. They should have done this together, if they’d done it at all.

Knowing he could do nothing about it right now, he focused on the fascination of seeing himself portrayed by this famous actor. He never would have said before that they resembled one another...or that he could have relived being outed in high school without falling apart.

“Greg?”

“What?”

“Was it really that bad?”

For Greg, he meant.

“It’s fiction.” Greg barely moved his lips in his attempt to be quiet. “Real life is lots of boring stuff mixed with a few interesting moments.”

Aaron narrowed his eyes, ignoring the screen until Greg looked at him and said, “Fine. Your parts? I only know what you told me.”

Aaron had his answer. For Greg, it had been hell on earth, from start to finish.

Leaning toward Greg's shoulder again, inexplicably wanting to lift his spirits, he whispered, "Tell me you didn't put in all the sex."

A small smile twitched at the corners of Greg's mouth. "You think it would've been an hour and forty minutes long and rated R?"

Mollified, knowing he disturbed the studio executives next to them, Aaron sat back to watch the screen.

His character. A New Orleans mansion.

Fuck.

Calling on every bit of calm he could muster, he took Greg's hand, damp with sweat, and braced for the next beautiful disaster.

Chapter Twelve

August, 1994

Magnolia trees swayed in the rare breeze. Aaron luxuriated in the heat, stretched like a leopard on the Serengeti as he took in lush sprinkler-fed lawns and listened to the rustling leaves.

"Aaron, honey, sit on a chair."

Aaron looked over his shoulder at his mother, fanning herself like an old-time Southern belle on the deep antebellum porch. She waved at the chair closest to her, and he slid off the porch railing.

"You're too old to sit on the porch rail, sweetheart. It's crude." She breathed the last word as if it were a swear, and Aaron bit down on a smile.

"Yes, ma'am."

He sat in the chair and sighed, tilting his head so it rested on the back. He let the wicker dig into his scalp. He felt restless... He felt lonely.

"Did you invite that nice boy to stay?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's in Europe for the summer."

"Oh, isn't that nice?"

Greg and his mother had met briefly in the courtyard during graduation. She'd not said anything about how ostentatious it was for Greg's father to present him with a BMW in the middle of the school driveway, but she wouldn't say anything bad against someone like Lord Falkner. The aristocracy were trendsetters, not the nouveau riche, in her eyes, and Aaron refused to humiliate Greg by clueing his mother in to his father's impostor status.

He scrunched his eyes shut, remembering Greg's embarrassment when his father had handed him the car keys, telling him some people were born to greatness. Damn, he'd felt for him in that moment. Scared shitless to drive home by himself but wanting to get the hell out of Dodge, he'd driven the car—a stick—and hadn't even stalled leaving the drive.

Aaron smiled at the memory of Greg's courage. Then frowned as he remembered the promised postcards had never come. "What's the date, Mother?"

"August the seventh. Sit up, Aaron. You look like a vagrant."

Aaron pushed himself upright in the chair, making it creak with the sudden movement. "The heat..." he said when his mother pursed her lips.

"Go inside." She waved at him. "Or go for a swim."

She always waved at him, as if he were a fly disturbing her shallow little world. Ashamed at the thought, he stood and kissed her on the cheek.

He couldn't swim in a pool. It reminded him of Greg.

He really needed the ocean. He'd visited his uncle in Beverly Hills earlier in the summer. Toured UCLA for the second time, found an apartment to rent, and discovered surfing. If it was August seventh, that gave him a little less than two weeks before he left home for good.

After swinging the door to his room open, he looked at the four-poster bed and marble fireplace, floor-to-ceiling windows, and ironwork railings beyond. What would Greg have thought of his childhood home?

"Stop thinking on him. He's obviously not thinking on you," he muttered and flopped backward onto the bed in a way that would have made his mother cringe.

He was done here. Wanted to be on the road. It was time to go. What if he drove instead of flying? He sat up, thinking he'd go ask his stepfather. Anything he said yes to, his mother almost never contradicted.

A photo on his nightstand caught his eye. He picked it up. He hadn't really looked at it in a long time. His father stood with him, flying a kite at the beach. They'd been unaware of the photographer. Laughing, they tugged at the string, hair ruffling in the breeze. Waves crashed to shore in the distance. He could still feel the sand in his toes, hear the water, smell the tangy ocean air. Heaviness settled in his chest. What he wouldn't give to have that moment back again. That carefree feeling.

Tossing the photo onto his bed, he threw open a balcony door.

"Mother?"

"Aaron!"

He ignored the warning in her voice, desperate to know the answer to his question.

"Where are the photos from graduation?"

"Your father's study. He picked them up this morning."

Aaron slammed the door shut, raced down the hallway, and slid down the entire length of the curving banister to the first floor. He grimaced at the end, realizing why he didn't do that anymore. He rapped on the door.

"Yes?"

"Sir?"

His stepfather looked up from a stack of briefs, the half-moons of his glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

"Have a seat, Aaron."

He fell into the leather wingback chair, and Lee smiled at him.

"You're impatient," he said, perceptive as usual.

"Can I... May I drive to California?" Aaron puffed out his cheeks, exhaling tension, when his stepfather's smile broadened.

"Your mother will have my head."

"Please?" He felt like a seven-year-old on Christmas morning.

"Yes."

He let out a whoop and burst from the chair. "Thank you!"

He hadn't felt this free since...since he'd kissed Greg.

"You need a way to get your car there anyway. Your mother thought you should buy a new one since you've come into the money from your father, but I think this is a better idea. You can stretch your legs."

Aaron nodded. Felt his eyes shining with happiness.

"Do you have those photos of Gre—graduation?"

"Sure. I had two copies printed. One set for you and... Well, I was going to give this to you when you left, but here."

Lee held out a box.

Aaron slid off the green ribbon and pried open the lid. Removing the tissue, he saw a frame. Inside the frame lay an eight-by-ten photo of him and Greg in full dress uniform, arms slung around each other's shoulders, each clutching a diploma and grinning at the camera.

"There are two in there. One's for your friend."

A swallow caught in his throat, and he looked up, stunned.

"Thank you."

His stepfather smiled.

"Why don't you ask him to drive with you? He could fly home in time for school."

That was possibly the best idea the man had ever had. Aaron nodded and left the room, walking on air. He looked at his watch. Seven o'clock. An hour earlier than the coast and Greg's family's dinner hour. He'd go upstairs and pack. Then he'd call Greg's private line.

* * *

Greg thumbed through his journal as Louis unpacked his things from his two weeks at the lake with Gan. A hanger clattered to the closet floor, and Greg glanced up.

"Sorry, sir."

"You don't have to call me that." Greg regretted the artificial distance that had grown between them with each passing year since he'd turned sixteen.

"Thank you, sir." Louis continued with his task. "Will you be running or lifting this afternoon?"

Greg gritted his teeth against a sharp retort. "Running."

"Very good."

At one time Louis had acted like an older brother to him—helped him learn how to tie a Windsor knot, drive a car, and took him to the movies so he could get into shows of which his parents never would have approved. He didn't know if Gwyn's death or his age had separated them, but he wanted to understand.

"Louis?"

The butler turned, his body a study of grace in motion, reminding Greg of shared snippets of conversation. Louis had once wanted to be a dancer.

"How come we're not friendly anymore?"

Louis' eyebrow quirked—the understated gesture more aristocratic than any Greg's father could hope to affect.

"I mean...we used to talk."

Louis contemplated him for several long moments, and Greg prepared to give up the conversation, when the butler finally spoke.

"It isn't prudent for me to be...friendly with the son of my employer."

"Prudent?"

Louis examined his fingernails before giving Greg a pointed stare.

"What was acceptable when you were a boy is no longer acceptable now that you are a man."

Knowledge he'd had all along buoyed to the surface.

"Oh." He sank back into his reading chair.

"Yes," Louis said. "Oh."

"When did you first know?"

Doubt, then resignation, flickered across Louis's square-boned visage. Greg remembered thinking as a kid that despite the butler's lithe body, he'd have made a better prizefighter than a dancer with that face.

"I believe I was about your age, but I suppose I suspected before that time."

"How did you really know?"

Louis turned off the closet light and shut the door with a click. "Your parents received a tuition bill from NYU while you were away."

Greg bolted from his chair in response to the non sequitur. "What did they say?"

Louis considered his answer, and Greg began to pace.

"I do not believe the decision was in your favor."

Greg leaned his head against the window. Rain drizzled down the pane, mimicking trickling fear that pooled into disappointment.

"Fuck."

The glass reflected Louis as he picked up his garment brush and paused at the bedroom door. "I am sorry, sir."

"Thanks." Greg sighed, his breath fogging the glass. At least someone in this house cared about what he wanted. God knew his parents never had.

Dinner that night was a strained affair, but this was nothing out of the ordinary. As he ate, Greg found himself picturing Aaron's smiling face across from him—remembered how they'd shared wordless jokes throughout the interminable dinner that usually only Gan's presence could make bearable.

Louis poured another glass of wine for his father, and Greg waited until he'd taken a sip before he spoke.

"I've decided to go to NYU instead of Harvard."

His mother's fork clattered onto her plate, spraying sauce.

"You'll go to Harvard." His father sounded unconcerned.

Greg put down his fork with a gentle clink, and Louis slipped from the room.

"I was thinking you might feel that way." Aaron would have told him to play it cool, so he tempered his argument with reason. "So I'm going to find a job. Apply for some scholarships."

His father took a bite of the lemon caper chicken and ignored him.

Greg looked at his mother. "Isn't anyone going to say anything?"

His mother gulped down her wine.

"There is nothing to say." The response came from his father. "Your tuition to Harvard has been paid. You will go."

Fury scorched his brain, but he managed not to yell when he said, "It's not what I want."

"It is what you will do."

If he'd been Aaron, he'd have heeded the warning in his father's voice and pretended to go along—hell, he'd probably have just gone to Harvard. But he had never resembled Aaron and never would. Discretion forever eluded the better part of whatever valor he scraped together.

Leveling an uncompromising look at the man he hated more than any living being, Greg said, "By all means, keep believing that if it makes you happy."

His father's napkin hit the table with force, and a wineglass toppled, sending crimson liquid across the cloth in an expanding blot.

"Catherine, would you please leave us?"

His mother slid from the table, disappearing like a wraith into the night. Greg knew what that meant—the same thing it had always meant. The chauffer stepped from the butler's pantry at an unseen signal from his father—had undoubtedly been waiting there on orders all through dinner.

"No," Greg whispered, rising from his chair, then said more firmly, "Not this time, you sons of bitches."

The surge of power and hope he'd felt at issuing the denial fizzled when the chauffer pinned him to the table. There wouldn't be any escape from the caning. There never was.

"It will end when you apologize and agree to go to Harvard." His father's voice hissed in his ear, and Greg closed his eyes.

A long time later, he must have said something, because as quickly as it had started, John released him, and his father hovered next to his ear once more.

"Accepted," he said. "You'll be happy at Harvard."

Then Greg was alone. Lacking support or a reason to stand, he slid to the floor where he nursed his ragged sense of self back into a semblance of its former shape. Huddled in a ball under the table, he waited until the staff cleared the dinner plates. Then he waited some more. The clock chimed ten thirty before he hobbled to his room.

In his bathroom, he tore off his ruined clothes and threw them in the trash. The trash. He belonged there. Nobody would miss him if he crumpled himself into a wad, like so much paper, and discarded himself along with the refuse.

Pulling open his medicine chest, he tried not to look at his face in the mirror. In his peripheral vision, he could see the blotches mottling his pale skin from too much crying. What a pussy, crying like that. Why couldn't he take it like a man?

Because you're a freak.

Greg clutched the bottle of codeine, left over from his accident. Twenty pills rattled into his hand. Would it be enough? Or would he wake up in an institution?

Aaron's smiling face hovered in memory.

I'm proud of you.

Warmth infused his heart.

If he threw himself away, he'd never see Aaron again, even in his dreams. At worst, he'd die. At best, he'd land in a mental hospital. He shuddered and placed the bottle back in the chest. A hospital would feel too much like Grayson. At least if he ran away, he had a chance of real escape. He could start over in New York. Like he'd planned. He'd find a job, save money for classes, and write.

Stalking into his room, ignoring the burning pull of the welts along his back and thighs, he dressed in his sweats and yanked his duffel from the closet. He threw it on his bed and shoved his notebooks inside. A picture of Gwyn's that he'd secreted in a top drawer, all his pens, markers, and pencils, and his thesaurus and dictionary followed. He hefted the bag, testing its weight, and grimaced. Good thing he had his car. No way could he take his journals plus all his clothes on a bus or train. If forced to make a choice, he'd have left his clothes behind.

When he got to New York, he'd sell his car. That would pay for a few months' rent.

He shoved his shoes into the bottom of a suitcase as the phone rang, its jangling as shrill as the internal screaming of his battered emotions. He paused and stared. Only two people had this number—Aaron and Gan, who had paid to have it installed. He couldn't picture either one of them calling him at this time of night.

The phone stopped ringing, and the answering machine clicked as it picked up. There was a five-second interval before the sound of Aaron's voice warmed him straight to his tattered soul.

"Greg, sorry to call so late, but if you're home, I figured you'd still be awake. I tried earlier, and you didn't pick up. I wanted to tell you personally, but I guess a message is just as good. Anyway, my stepfather thought on it, and he wants you to drive to California with me, then fly back to Boston in time for school."

Greg frowned at the phone. He didn't plan to go to Boston, but everyone, including Aaron, needed to think so until he disappeared. He wouldn't put it past his father to find him and force him to go to Harvard.

"Isn't that awesome? We can hang out, and you can see California for a few days. So, anyways, when you get this, call me... Oh. It's me, Aaron."

The call disconnected, and Greg stared at the machine on his desk. Aaron had never phoned him before. That he'd appeared out of nowhere tonight almost seemed like a sign. What if he drove to California with Aaron and just stayed there? Worked on the Strip instead of in New York? There were plenty of film programs in Los Angeles.

Taking the NYU Tisch bookmark from his bulletin board, he thought of Gwyn and how much she loved New York—how she'd kept that skyline postcard pinned to her wall since they'd seen their first Broadway show. He glanced at the postcard and made his decision. He'd already cut one life short. He refused to screw up another. Which is exactly what he'd do to Aaron's if he got tangled up with him again.

Putting the rest of his clothes into his bag, he looked back at the answering machine. Aaron's voice was on that tape. He popped the cassette from the housing and slipped it into his bag along with an old cassette player he had in a bottom drawer. Listening to it sometimes would feel nice. When he got too lonely, he could write stories about how things might have turned out.

Chapter Thirteen

Aaron pressed the Off button on the cordless phone and let it drop to the bed next to him. Bags packed, car gassed up, he planned to leave in the morning. He'd called Greg six more times over the last week, but since that first message, the machine hadn't picked up.

Shadows flitted across the plasterwork, thrown by the ceiling fan. He watched them until his eyes unfocused and his lids drooped. Why wouldn't Greg return his calls? He rolled onto his side and stared at the phone. The alarm clock digits flipped in his peripheral vision, and he looked at the display.

Seven.

The music store stayed open until eight. He'd get some CDs for the road and try Greg again when he returned.

The store was quiet as he moved along the classical aisle. Stravinsky. Debussy. Bach. He flipped through the plastic cases. Nothing interested him. Everything felt bland. Lackluster. He'd heard all this music countless times.

An endcap displayed the store clerks' favorite releases, and he paused as a name caught his eye.

Nirvana.

He reached out a finger and traced it over the letters. That was the group Greg liked.

Grunge?

Aaron laughed. What a word.

Picking up a CD with a swimming naked baby on the front, he decided to buy it. And everything else the store had by that band. By the time he finished picking out music, he had a stack of twenty-two artists, from Blues Traveler to Alice in Chains.

The pink-haired clerk's eyes widened at the stack.

"You're into alternative stuff, huh?" He found her pink hair and lip rings jarring and tried not to stare.

"A friend likes it. I figured I'd try it."

"What do you usually listen to? Trance?"

"Never heard of it."

"Oh. My. God."

Aaron laughed despite himself. "What would you recommend?"

Her eyes lit up, and she raced around the counter to an aisle in the middle of the store. "How many you want?"

"Um. I don't know. Four? Five?"

She whipped CDs from their troughs with sure-fingered precision and bounced back to the counter. "Okay. These should do it."

He took out his American Express card and snapped it against the laminate.

"If I were buying all this stuff, I'd be a helluva lot more happy."

He hid a grimace. Usually he found the Yankee tendency toward blatant honesty refreshing. Tonight, he just wanted to hide.

"Hey, you want to get a drink or something after I close?"

He paused as she handed him the bag, and their fingers brushed. He'd never had a girl ask him out before. She did nothing for him, but he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"I'm leaving for LA in the morning. Long road trip."

That should put her off.

She shrugged, the handles weighing against his fingers as she let go of the bag.

"Well, if you want to talk or anything, it's dead here. Feel free to hang out."

Inexplicably, he found himself blurting, "My friend was supposed to come with me. Well, not supposed to. But he hasn't returned my calls. And he hasn't written all summer."

The clerk's eyes widened, and her mouth formed a little O of surprise.

What had he said?

She leaned forward, plastic bracelets clinking dully against the counter. "How long have you two been, you know, seeing each other?"

"Wh-what?"

"Oh, come on. You're totally bummed out. Like jilted-lover-level bummed out."

A funny sound, something like a croak, came from his throat, but he didn't say anything for a suspended minute.

"How would you know?" The defensive question sounded childish to his ears.

The clerk—he looked at her nametag: Sam—grinned.

"I'm bi, stupid."

"Bi?"

"Bisexual?"

Aaron's head whipped around as he scanned the store for other customers. Thankfully, they were alone.

She looked at him as if he'd been dropped from a spaceship.

"How sheltered can you be? You live in New Orleans."

"I've been away at school."

"Haven't you ever been to Mardi Gras?"

He shook his head. He wouldn't get into his mother's opinion of the festival with her. Even when he hadn't been in school, they'd managed to flee the city for a winter vacation.

"And there were no gays at school? No television? No magazines?"

Aaron thought about the years without music and television. He'd never realized how much he'd missed out on.

"I went to military school. Those things were...discouraged."

"So?" She leaned forward, folding her forearms along one another against the counter. "You still managed to figure out who you like to do."

He refused to believe this conversation was happening. He'd come in here for CDs, not sex ed.

"I'm not..."

She raised her eyebrows at him.

A memory of the bonfire conversation with Greg rammed through his mental walls. God, he really was.

"Oh...fuck."

"Hey, don't beat yourself up." Sam unwrapped a sucker from a dish on the counter and popped it into her mouth. "You're not going through anything different than the rest of us."

"What? Figuring out I'm a social pariah? That my parents are going to disown me?"

"Fuck your parents," she said around the sucker, "and you're not a social pariah. You're just not the dominant paradigm."

Greg would love this woman's fifty-cent words. Then he'd probably tell her to get a new hairstylist and piss her off just to see if he could.

"Did you go to college?"

Sam laughed. "Yes."

"I wouldn't have pegged you..."

"What? As smart? Or queer?"

"Well..." He hesitated and decided he'd gone too far to lie. "Either?"

"Thanks a lot, brat."

A solid smack landed upside his head.

"Ow." He rubbed his head. "What was that for?"

"Mostly for being a closeted motherfucker."

"Closeted?"

Sam rolled her eyes and ducked behind the counter to return with a magazine.

"Read this. It'll blow your twink mind."

Aaron frowned. "Twink?" He took the magazine. "Out? It looks like a fashion magazine for..." Understanding dawned.

"Welcome to Oz, Dorothy."

Paging through the magazine, Aaron saw guys about his age hanging all over one another. "People publish...this?"

"That and more."

His tongue nearly lolled out of his mouth at a cologne ad. "This looks like it's for guys who like guys, though."

"Gay men? Yes. It is." She pulled the sucker from her mouth. "But it's still fun to read. Besides, I like guys too, remember?"

That whole bisexual concept twisted his brain. He remembered the sexual interludes he'd had with women. They were all right. They didn't gross him out or anything. Did that make him bi? An ad at the back caught his eye.

"What's trans?"

"Haven't you ever been to Rocky Horror?"

He'd heard of it, and even if Grayson allowed it—which they emphatically didn't—the posters for late-night showings in town always struck him as grotesque and in poor taste. He made a face that told Sam as much.

She shook her head, her expression disappointed at his obvious elitist attitude. "You just focus on figuring yourself out."

He thought of Greg and more immediate problems. It all seemed so impossible.

"Hey, what do you think's up with your boyfriend anyway?"

Boyfriend...

The word simultaneously warmed and chilled him with its import.

"I don't know. Like I said, he just...disappeared."

"Is he out?"

The word—out, so simple—took on a whole new meaning as he considered the magazine in his hands.

"I don't think so." He remembered the way Greg flaunted their relationship to Doyle. Then the conversation they'd had over the bonfire. "But maybe."

Sam chewed at the sucker, the candy crunching between her teeth.

"You know," she said, then swallowed. "He probably is. At least to himself."

Aaron leaned into the counter and frowned, trying to picture Greg being anything but dishonest with himself about his feelings.

"Because, if he is, maybe he's hiding from the people he knows—afraid of what they'll think."

"Even me?"

"Especially you."

"But why?"

"Because maybe he thinks you aren't. Or that you don't know. About yourself."

The need to see Greg, to have his best friend to talk all this over with, seized him. "I have to go."

"Yeah. Sure." Sam leaned over the counter to give him a sticky peck on the lips. "Good luck, twink."

Aaron sped all the way home, avoiding the ubiquitous potholes and taking tight corners with a speed that anything but a sports car would have protested.

Back in his room, he threw the bag on his bed next to the phone. Now that he'd stopped moving, panic gripped him. The woman had read him. Intimated he was in love with Greg...said he was gay.

He looked at the magazine sticking out of the top of the bag, and his heart clenched. He was gay.

But you've slept with girls! his mind screamed in denial.

Ignoring the voice, he picked up the phone and pressed Redial.

God, he needed to talk with Greg. Hands shaking, he held the phone as it rang three times. He was about to disconnect when someone picked up.

"Falkner residence."

"Hello. May I please speak with Greg?"

"I'm sorry, he is not at home."

Ah, the butler.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Is this Mr. Blake?"

"Yes."

He heard a door close.

"I would appreciate it if you did not repeat what I am about to tell you."

"Is something wrong?" Fear seized him. "Did something happen to Greg?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Aaron clutched the phone, his palm breaking out in a sweat. "Spit it out!"

He'd never said anything so rude in his life. He could almost feel the butler blanch.

"He has left home."

"For school? He left home for school?"

"No, sir."

"For where, then?"

"I do not know."

"Can I reach him? Do his parents know where he is?"

"I am afraid not. But...he had an acceptance letter to a school in New York. There were...words exchanged."

"A school in...Manhattan?"

"A film school."

NYU Tisch. Now that made sense.

"Should I call his parents?" Maybe he could talk sense into them? Explain to them in a rational manner how much this meant to Greg?

The man cleared his throat. "I would advise against that."

"If they knew—"

Aaron heard a voice calling, distant.

"I am very sorry, sir. I must go."

"But...okay. Thank you." Aaron felt his formerly safe, secure world spin further out of his control.

"Good luck."

"You too."

Aaron looked around the room, stunned, willing raw panic not to overtake him. He could worry about his own issues later. He needed a clear head to think this through.

Their conversation in the dorm before graduation—that last kiss—and the guilty look on Greg's face. Aaron wanted to punch something. Greg had blatantly

lied to him! What had he gotten himself into this time? He was probably sleeping under a park bench, eating dog food. He'd sooner die than ask for help, and probably would if Aaron didn't drag his sorry ass out of the gutter.

"Why didn't you tell me? You sonofabitch!"

Punctuating his words with a kick to his suitcase that sent the contents flying, Aaron spun around and went in search of warmer clothes.

* * *

"I'm not going to L.A."

His stepfather put down his fork with a clink and frowned at him. "Explain."

Aaron tried to hold his gaze steady as he stared back, but morning sunlight glinted off the bone white china nearly blinding him in his sleep-starved state. Thank God his sisters were at their riding lesson. He couldn't have taken their questions on top of everything else.

"Greg's in trouble."

"I fail to see what that has to do with you, Aaron." His mother took a delicate sip of tea from her cup.

"He needs my help."

"I'm sure it's something his family is more than equipped to handle." His stepfather returned his attention to the morning paper.

Aaron picked up a slice of toast and buttered it as if his world wasn't falling apart. He had to make his parents understand how much Greg needed him—that his family wouldn't help him.

"He's run away."

"He called to tell you this?"

"No." The toast tasted like cardboard. "The butler."

"Aaron." The coffee mug met the table with an uncustomary thud that in any other house might have sounded normal. His stepfather was angry. "You can't be serious."

Pushing his chair out from the table, Aaron held firm. "I understand you don't approve. I'll use my trust fund money to find him."

His mother gasped. "What about school?"

Aaron's napkin hit the table with force. What kind of selfish douche bags did he have for parents? "What about Greg, Mother?"

"Aaron!"

His name served as a warning, low and ominous in the back of his stepfather's throat. But he wasn't a kid anymore, and he could make his own decisions.

The combination of his mother's recrimination, the lack of sleep, and the stress of not knowing where Greg was pushed him over the edge.

"What do you want me to say?" he spat. "That I care more about school and your good opinion than the guy I love?"

His mother looked at him in absolute shock, her hand flying to her mouth as if this was a horror movie, and she repressed a scream. His stepfather, on the other hand, didn't so much as bat an eyelash. Had he known all along?

"Is it possible for you to discuss this rationally?" he asked.

"No." Aaron choked on the word, stunned at what he'd just revealed. "I don't believe it is."

"Then go."

Aaron blinked, fear and hope mingling to form a sour cocktail in his stomach.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if we can't change your mind, and you can't speak with rational thought, there's nothing more to say."

Aaron backed his chair farther from the table and stood. He looked to his mother. Her hand remained clamped over her mouth. Tears spilled from her lashes onto her cheeks. He hated himself. Truly loathed everything he was in that moment. And he despised her for making him feel that way.

He turned to leave.

"Aaron—" His mother's voice quavered with emotion, and he halted in the doorway. "When you're ready to go to school and forget this...this...sordid infatuation, you come on home."

Not knowing what to say, he jerked his head once and walked away—knew from the bottom of his heartsick soul that it'd be a long time before he ever came back.

Chapter Fourteen

December, 1994

Aaron's feet hurt. He felt cold to his marrow. And he hated New York. This city felt loud, dirty, and obnoxious compared to the one he'd grown up in—and New Orleans wasn't exactly known for solitude and quiet.

Stopping in a clothing boutique on Christopher Street, he picked out a puffy down coat, hoping it would cut the knifelike wind rushing at him down the long avenues. As a matter of course, he pulled out the photo of Greg as he paid for the coat.

"Your card was denied." The clerk arched his tweezed brow.

"What?"

"De-nied."

"Aw hell."

His parents had threatened to cut off the American Express if he didn't get his butt home. It looked like he needed to tap further into this month's trust fund payment. Most of it had already gone for that worthless private investigator.

"Do you take checks?"

The clerk laughed in his face.

"Fine," Aaron snapped, turning to leave without the coat. He got as far as the door before realizing he'd forgotten the photo on the counter.

As Aaron reached for the picture, the clerk asked, "How do you know Greg?"

Aaron blinked, anger melting in the face of hope. "You know him?"

"Sure. I know of him." The clerk tapped a black fingernail on Greg's face. "That go-go boy's a freak."

"Go-go boy?"

"Stripper?" The clerk looked at him as if he'd landed from Mars.

"Stripper!"

"My, my, my." The clerk laughed. "Aren't your twink balls in a twist?"

Aaron stomped on the urge to grab the guy by the throat and shake him. "Where does he...do that?"

"Shake his ass?"

"Yes." He issued the word from between clenched teeth.

"A couple blocks down. That new club, Gilded."

"Is he there tonight?"

"How should I know?"

Aaron snorted and pivoted on his heel.

"Don't be disappointed when the Prince of Ice doesn't talk to you," the clerk called.

Out on the sidewalk, Aaron looked frantically up and down Christopher Street. Neon lights flickered as guys walked arm in arm, mingling with unfazed Greenwich Village revelers.

He tried two blocks west and then a block farther east before he saw a line of people that might signal a popular dance club.

A stripper.

Aaron's stomach turned. What the fuck was Greg thinking? As he headed to the back of the line, it began to sleet, and he pulled the lapels of his peacoat around his cheeks.

"ID?"

Aaron held out his license, and the bouncer raised an eyebrow.

"What? You're not even going to pretend to be twenty-one?"

Closing his eyes, he called himself a thousand different names and exited the line. He could have smacked himself. The guy would never forget him now, so that ruled out a fake ID, even if he knew where to get one. He was so fucking close to Greg. He couldn't quit now.

Walking around the block, he tried to find a back door to the building. Instead, he found the front of another building. With a growl, he entered a bank foyer and shoved his card into the machine. Two hundred dollars. All the money he had in the world. If the guy didn't cave at that, then he'd have to beat him senseless and run past him into the club. No way was he leaving here tonight without Greg.

He stood in the line again, ice crusting in his hair, freezing to his lashes, and thought of all the ways he could make Greg sorry. Make him apologize. On his knees. Greg would look up at him with flushed cheeks and kiss-swollen lips—beg him for mercy. Beg him for love. As he promised never to abandon Aaron again.

"You again?" The bouncer cut into Aaron's thoughts.

Aaron simply handed him the folded wad of twenty-dollar bills along with his license.

The bouncer smiled broadly and handed him back his license.

"Must've mistaken you for someone else," he said and unclipped the velvet rope to let Aaron pass.

A pounding backbeat permeated his chest as he opened the door and stepped over the threshold into the club. Flashing lights and dry ice fog made the murky atmosphere even more difficult to navigate against a crush of heated bodies. Everyone else had checked their coats, but Aaron didn't bother. He didn't plan on staying long.

Cages hung at intervals around the dance floor. Paid dancers in various stages of undress undulated with muscled grace behind the golden bars, money littering acrylic trays beneath their feet. Aaron watched as a skinny man approached the nearest cage, mouth open, clutching his wallet. The go-go boy removed his shirt and tossed it down onto the man's face. The patron tossed a wad of cash into the tray, and the cage lowered to the floor.

Reluctantly swaying his torso to the four-on-the-floor beat, Aaron watched the five-minute show. Stick-man stood stock still as the piece-of-ass body worshiped him, mimicking an act Aaron figured the guy would never see without five g's and a private contact number. When the time was up, the go-go boy left for a break.

Fuck.

That was one of the sexiest things Aaron had ever seen...and Greg did this for a living. Jealousy, bitter and burning, surged through him at the thought of other men touching Greg, and Aaron pushed through the crowd to get a good look into the other cages.

His shoulders slumped. None of the gilt prisons contained Greg. Maybe the clerk had lied? Aaron found he didn't know which scenario he preferred—to have been misled or to find Greg debasing himself for strangers.

Pulling out the photograph, Aaron approached the crowded bar.

Eyes flicking down Aaron's body, the bartender licked his lips, showing off a surgical modification that had split his tongue in two. Aaron's stomach roiled. What if Greg had done something to his tongue? His body? What if he let people who looked like this fuck him?

"Do you know him?" Aaron shouted above the music, holding out the photo of himself and Greg to the bartender.

The man's answering grin was 100 percent leer. "Didn't know Falkner did boyfriends."

"He's my friend!" Aaron defended, not wanting to out Greg. Then it occurred to him—he worked in a gay dance club. He already knew what he was... What they were together.

"Talk to me when you're ready to come out of the closet!" The bartender walked away.

Aaron raced to meet him at the other end of the bar. "Fine. He's my lover."

Pulling a beer, the bartender looked at Aaron appraisingly. Seeming to come to some private conclusion, he nodded. "He called in sick yesterday. Sounded like hell."

"Where does he live?" A whole new source of fear shredded Aaron's nerves.

Sliding the beer to a patron, the bartender took a pencil from behind his ear and wrote an address on the back of a paper coaster.

"I give him a ride home sometimes," he explained, handing the cardboard to Aaron.

"That'd better be all you do."

The bartender threw back his head and laughed. "You're cute. Nobody touches Greg. Nobody."

Well, that Aaron hardly believed, given where Greg worked, but he nodded, somewhat mollified.

"Thanks." He turned to leave but stopped as if he'd walked into a brick wall.

Across the dance floor, Greg was walking into a lowered cage.

Pushing against the throng, Aaron tried to reach the cage before it went up, but the music worked against him. The DJ had built it up in repetitive phrases,

bracing it with kicks that brought the dancers into an oblivious, trancelike state. No one moved aside as he tried to part the crowd.

A distorted, gritty feedback washed through the song, and the music looped back on itself in a rush. The dancers whooped with a collective jump into the air. No way could he get through them fast enough. He watched, helpless, as Greg's cage rose into the air.

"Greg!"

Voices shouted beneath him. Used to the catcalls, he ignored them. Even if someone dropped a grand in his tray tonight, he didn't think he'd be up for a one-on-one.

He didn't mind the dancing. It was the stripping part he hated, and he always put it off as long as possible. For now, the crowd undulating beneath him would have to satisfy themselves with his fully clothed seduction. Like a drowning man welcoming his own death, Greg tuned out everything but the music and sank into his untouchable headspace.

"Goddamn it! Greg!"

Someone rocked his cage, and he held out an arm to grab one of the bars. Too late. He tumbled forward, the edge of his cheek catching the steel bars, smashing his mirrored sunglasses into his face. Security arrived before he had righted himself from the nasty tumble.

Testing his cheek with his fingers, he winced. That would hurt come morning. Tossing the broken glasses to the floor, he tried to find the rhythm of the music, wished he could beat the shit out of the twat they dragged off the dance floor.

The music gritted to a halt in time for Greg to hear, "Fuck off! He's mine!"

Aaron?

Greg pressed the button to lower the cage and hollered as loudly as he could to the bouncer, "Robbie, stop!"

The regulars in the crowd, unused to him lowering the cage, never mind deigning to speak, snapped one another on the shoulder and pointed as he parted them like the Red Sea.

Robbie let go of the guy he hauled across the floor just as Greg got a peek at his back. Hope plummeted. Aaron didn't have longish hair. And, if it were him, wouldn't he have fought Robbie off? Feeling like an idiot, Greg almost turned away, but something made him wait.

Aaron spun to face him. Chest heaving, eyes sparking with fury, he appeared to be channeling the wrath of a thousand gods. "Get your things."

Oh. Fuck.

"I'm working." Greg held back a wince. Damn. He didn't know which hurt worse. His sore throat or Aaron seeing him like this. In this place.

Aaron met him nose to nose. "Don't make me force you."

The music kicked back to life, mimicking the beat of Greg's heart as rough words mingled with raging need. Closing his eyes, he realized if he didn't feel so damned shitty, he'd be seriously hard right now.

Aaron's fingers laced in Greg's hair, tugged his head sideways as he claimed a bruising kiss.

All the blood he needed to stay upright went roaring to his cock, and he stumbled. With a half-hearted protest, he groaned into Aaron's mouth and clutched at the lapels of his jacket when his knees went weak. God, the second Aaron stopped mouth-fucking him, he would hit the floor.

Aaron lifted his head. Panting, Greg took in eyes glazed with exhaustion, pinkened cheeks, and more than a day's worth of razor stubble.

"You're coming with me." Aaron spat the words, each syllable hitting Greg with the impact of a sledgehammer. "Now."

"All right."

Aaron stepped back, and Greg wobbled.

"Are you sick?"

"I'll be okay. I just need my keys and stuff."

They made their way to the dressing rooms, Aaron trailing like a police escort.

"He's with me," Greg said to a bouncer who cast a dubious glance as they passed.

Pulling his gym bag out of his locker, he debated whether or not to get changed. The mere thought of undressing gave him chills. As he threw on his coat over the tacky ensemble—a police uniform complete with handcuffs and nightstick—he felt Aaron's stare.

"What?"

"You look like a cheap whore."

Closing his locker, he braced a hand against the cold metal to keep himself upright.

"Leave." Humiliation threatened to cut him off at the knees.

Aaron had his back up against the locker so fast the world didn't stop undulating for several seconds. Looking to the side, he refused to meet Aaron's gaze. In addition to the threat his father presented, this was another reason why he'd cut off everyone. Gan. Aaron. He knew they would never understand why he had to do this. Besides, wasn't Aaron supposed to be off living his glorious homo-free life?

"Look at me."

"Fuck off."

"Look at me!"

The anguish in Aaron's tone drew his attention, and Greg hesitantly met his eyes.

"You're worth more than this, you stupid fuck."

Aaron punctuated his words with a shake that snapped Greg's shoulders against the lockers with a hollow sounding crash.

"Yeah. Whatever." Years of practice at shoving people away poked through the haze, made Greg say, "I don't lower the cage for less than five hundred bucks."

Aaron rammed him against the locker again. "Fuck you! Do you know how long I've been looking for you?"

"Aaron..." Greg managed to choke out, desperate to keep it together. Not knowing how to make it better. How to find the energy or the will to explain. His knees sagged.

"Are you...?" Aaron's hand went to Greg's cheek. "You're burning up."

"Just dehydrated." Greg managed to infuse some strength into the statement. "Happens."

"Liar. Let's get you home."

Mortification seized him. "You're not coming to my place."

"Like hell. Shut up. I'll get your bag."

For the second time in his life, Greg gave himself over to Aaron's care. Or was it the third? He lost count long ago. He probably should feel ashamed. Right now, he could only manage grateful.

Chapter Fifteen

They rode the subway to the Bronx. Greg slumped in the seat, his head lolling against the glass, as Aaron watched him sleep. He looked like hell. No wonder he was sick. He'd lost so much weight. Looked like he hardly slept at all.

Bulky muscles had become lean and wiry—his hollowed cheeks reminding Aaron of the gaunt, haunted statues in the New Orleans cities of the dead. Was he on drugs? Had he started turning tricks in addition to stripping?

"Hey!" Without thinking, he shook Greg awake.

"Mhm." Greg opened his eyes halfway. Red lips and flushed cheeks contrasted sharply with pale skin and black brows.

"Are you on drugs?"

Greg closed his eyes. "No. No drugs. Tylenol might help."

If he felt less freaked out, Aaron might have laughed at the answer.

"What about tricks? Do you fuck people for money?"

That got Greg's attention. Sitting up straight, he glared at Aaron with glassy eyes. "Blow me."

"Depends," Aaron snapped, knowing he'd regret lowering himself to Greg's level later. "How much do you charge?"

He saw Greg's jaw clench and braced himself for the nasty retort.

"I don't fuck people for money, Aaron, but for you I'll make an exception."

Aaron felt himself go pale and turn red with head-spinning alacrity. Months of not knowing, worrying, and feeling lost...afraid...caught up with him. Hauling Greg across the seat toward him, he fisted a hand in his lover's hair and yanked backward.

"I'm gonna fuck you for that. I'm gonna fuck you so hard."

Greg's eyes widened.

"Say you're sorry for the hell you put me through."

A lazy grin spread across Greg's fevered features. "Not on your life."

Heat coiled and released, springing from Aaron's belly to his groin. "Have it your way."

Lips warred, tongues clashed, as Aaron molded himself to Greg's mouth. Hot. So hot. And it wasn't his temperature. This man burned him in ways he couldn't begin to comprehend. The rocking of the train threw them against one another. Chests heaved. Bodies bucked. Crashed together in a wild dance.

Reaching between them, Aaron palmed the turgid length of Greg's cock and gripped hard. Greg hissed into Aaron's mouth, giving as good as he got in a series of rhythmic tugs that had Aaron groaning against the pressure building in his balls.

"Need you." Aaron thrust upward into Greg's hand. "Unzip me."

Probably, Aaron realized dimly, he should have cared that they did this in public, but nobody else occupied the car this time of night. He wasn't sure he'd have cared regardless.

"You're coming first."

"Aaron, shut the fuck up." Greg yanked him from his open fly.

The retort surprised Aaron but only for as long as it took him to straddle Greg's hips and expose him as well.

Aaron hissed air through his teeth at the view. Two cocks dueled, one an angry red only the palest skin could produce. The other, his own, a ruddy brown-red that did his heritage proud.

"Fist us both." Aaron dipped his index finger into the glistening bead at Greg's tip, spreading it with languid precision.

Looking from under the fringe of his lashes, Greg bit his lip and circled their cocks together in his fist.

"You're so fucking sexy." Aaron's words accompanied an elongated groan. "You know that?"

"No. You." Greg surged upward so both he and Aaron rocked along the palm of his hand in time to the motion of the train.

The slide of silken skin and roughened palm contrasted, keeping motion and sensation fresh. The alternating sensations sparked Aaron's nerve endings, rapid-firing his neurons to life.

He panted against Greg's mouth. "Not gonna last."

Tightening his grip, Greg moaned. "Me neither." Greg brought up his other palm to run back and forth along their cock heads, mingling milky fluid with fevered friction that had them both struggling for control.

"Fuck yeah. Just like that." Pressing his cheek to Greg's heated forehead, Aaron watched their reflections in the subway window, buildings and lights racing by in the background. The slap of Greg's palm focused Aaron's view on their cocks, as they tangled like swords vying for prominence on a battlefield.

God, he'd never forget the image of Greg's fist holding them together.

Heaviness tugged at Aaron's balls, swelling the length of his shaft with the pressure of his building release. God, he wanted to watch them both shoot. He wanted to see Greg go over with him. He gripped the metal bar behind Greg's head and arched back.

"Come!" The train's mechanical white noise muffled Aaron's strangled plea.

Greg thrust. Once. Twice. Followed with a hearty down stroke of his hand. Then again. Aaron couldn't have said who cried out the loudest, and he didn't care as shudders wracked his body with his raging release.

In the dim recesses of his mind, he knew their stop approached. Summoning energy from God knew where, he tucked Greg away with a languorous kiss to his mouth before attending to himself.

"We're a mess," Aaron said with a chuckle, looking down at their coats.

"Sorry," Greg slurred.

Aaron pulled back as if struck.

Something was seriously wrong if Greg was apologizing. Looking down, Aaron swore softly. Greg's head lolled to the side on the headrest, his eyes unfocused. Touching the back of his hand to Greg's forehead, he cursed himself.

"You're really sick."

Tears sprang into Greg's eyes. "I know. I had to do it, though. I needed..."

"Shh." Aaron placed a finger against Greg's lips. "That's not what I meant. I'm sorry I was such a prick."

Greg sighed, his eyes fluttering closed as the train squealed to a stop.

Somehow, he didn't know how, they made it off the train. If they had to walk more than three blocks to Greg's place, they'd never make it. As much bulk as he'd lost, Greg probably still weighed twenty pounds more than Aaron did, and wasn't exactly carrying his own weight as they walked.

Fear slid along Aaron's spine as he asked, "Is it far?"

"We can sleep here."

"Wake up, Falkner!" Aaron used his best drill sergeant voice.

Greg's spine straightened. Reflex, Aaron knew, but every bit helped.

"How much farther?"

Please, God, just let him get Greg home safely, and he'd make sure this never happened again. To either of them.

Greg pointed to the building across the street.

At least the traffic was light enough that they could take their time crossing.

Aaron practically dragged Greg up the steps.

"Shit. You are heavy." He gasped as he felt around in Greg's coat pocket for his keys. After pulling them out, Aaron slung Greg's arm over his shoulder to hold him up while he unlocked the door. "Which floor, and please tell me you have an elevator?"

Greg grunted.

"I'm so gonna kick your ass," Aaron threatened, and Greg opened his eyes.

"Twelve. Apartment twelve."

"First floor?"

Greg nodded.

That was the best fucking news Aaron had all day—well, except finding Greg. Locating the right key for all three locks presented another problem. Propping Greg against the wall, Aaron focused on getting the door open. One person could only do so much.

"Shit. Piss. Motherfucker," he swore as the last lock stuck and Greg slid to the floor.

He'd had it. Totally and completely. Using his shoulder, he threw himself into the door until the last lock gave with a sound of splintering wood. Dropping his bag inside, he hauled Greg backward by his armpits into a hallway. Once Greg's feet cleared the door, it swung shut, leaving them both in the dark.

"Figures." Aaron slapped along the wall for a switch. Light flickered to life overhead—a god-awful fluorescent yellow that made the mint green walls look like Frankenstein's skin.

"C'mon, Greggie." He talked to keep himself company, not because he thought Greg was paying attention as he dragged him down the hallway. He left Greg on the living room floor and found a thermometer in the bathroom.

Kneeling, he pressed the tip against Greg's lips. "Open."

While the thermometer chirped softly against the silence, Aaron watched Greg shivering in his overcoat. He was thin. Too thin. Probably his manager already got on him about it. Any skinnier and the patrons would complain. As he remembered last spring, Aaron's eyes flew to Greg's face. Had the dancing made him lose weight, or had he starved himself again?

The thermometer gave a staccato series of chirps, and Aaron pulled it from between Greg's cracked lips. One hundred six degrees.

Holy fuck.

He ran around the apartment until he found a cordless phone in the bedroom. Punching in numbers, he called Greg's parents as he rushed back to the living room.

At midnight, he was surprised when the butler answered.

"Are Greg's parents there?"

"Mr. Blake?"

"Yeah. It's me. Aaron." He stared down at Greg in helplessness as shivers wracked his frame. "You have to help me. I don't know what to do."

"Mr.—Aaron, you don't want me to get Greg's parents."

"What? Fuck that! He's got a fever of a hundred and six!"

His lover was fucking dying on the floor, and this asshole was giving him shit.

"Trust me, Aaron." Louis's voice formed a calm port in his very stormy world. "You need to talk to his grandmother—Mrs. Stoddard."

"Gan! Yes!"

Louis rattled off the number, and Aaron didn't even bother to say thank you before he hung up and dialed the number.

He heard a receiver as it fumbled from the cradle, and then a papery voice rasped, "This had better be good."

"Gan! You gotta help me."

"Is this Aaron?"

"Yes. Greg has a really high fever, and I didn't know who else to call."

A beat of silence preceded instructions hurtling along the wire. Aaron's hand, slick with sweat, clutched the phone as he traded her instructions for Greg's address.

"Greg, what's your phone number?" Aaron wanted to give Gan a way to reach them.

No response.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Stoddard."

"We're way past that. I liked it better when you called me Gan. Now go take care of our boy."

"Yes, ma'am."

Consumed with terrible thoughts of what the fever was doing to Greg's brain—boiling it to a pudding or worse—he hung up the phone without saying good-bye.

He tried to get it together—to think clearly, but the effort felt like walking through a marsh loaded down with a hundred-pound pack. Sure, his pseudo military training had prepared him for emergencies, but it hadn't prepared him for being in love with the soldier dying in the foxhole next to him. Emotional distance simply wasn't possible in this situation.

"Fuck me." Aaron choked back a sob as he dragged Greg into the bathroom. "You sonofabitch."

The black-and-white bathroom with grungy grout and broken subway tiles was more of a blessing than he would have credited six months ago. It sure as hell beat the one in his fleabag motel.

Turning the tap on the bath and testing the water, Aaron looked in the tub. Clean. Good. Cash-strapped or not, apparently Greg wouldn't tolerate filth. As the water ran, he undressed Greg, who intermittently roused himself enough to be a pain in the ass.

"Bed," Greg murmured, pushing Aaron's hands away.

"Behave or I'm gonna use these costume cuffs on you." Aaron funneled his emotions into anger to keep himself from falling apart. That elicited a grunt, but Greg let Aaron get his pants off.

"Can you get in the tub, Greg?" If Aaron lifted him, he might drop his head against the rim of the tub. "Greg!" Aaron smacked his face hard. "Get in the fucking tub!"

Greg hauled himself up and over the edge of the tub and pretty much fell into the chilled water. He sat up with a gasp, and Aaron pushed him back with the heel of his hand.

"You're not going anywhere until I say so."

"F-fucking f-freezing." Shudders wracked Greg's body.

"Deal with it. Consider it your punishment for the hell you've put me through."

Greg ceased his struggles and fell back against the wall of the tub.

"Stay right there. Don't move!"

Aaron stood to find a washcloth and some generic acetaminophen. He had to run to the kitchen to find a cup. By the time he returned, he felt like a goddamned chicken scrambling around without its head.

"Here, Greg. Take the pills." Greg complied, and Aaron grabbed the facecloth.

He knelt then dipped the cloth to bathe Greg's face and neck. His body heated the water more than Aaron would have thought possible, and he drained and refilled the tub several times over the next hour. Thoughts about everything he wanted to say and should have done over the last several years tortured him as he bathed Greg's face and chest over and over, the trickling water soothing his nerves as it cooled Greg's blood.

"Why'd you do it? Why didn't you call me, Greg?"

Hot breath sighed past Aaron's ear. "My father..."

Aaron paused mid stroke with the cloth, surprised that Greg had attempted to answer at all.

"What?"

Greg bowed his head, an inky lock falling to his pale brow.

"I just want to help you," Aaron coaxed.

"Don't want charity."

"Apparently you don't want my friendship either."

"I couldn't...didn't..."

Aaron dragged the cloth through the water and squeezed it out over Greg's chest.

"Didn't what?"

"Want you to see what you saw."

Aaron blanched, understanding that his words in the dressing room must have cut Greg deep—hit him right where he lived.

"I'm sorry for what I said. I was...jealous. All those guys looking at you. I don't want anyone touching you but me."

"Why would you care? You're not gay."

Aaron rested his forehead against the chilled rim of the tub.

"Yes. I am."

Greg inhaled deeply, his breath catching in a choking sound as great shudders wracked his frame.

Aaron's head shot up. "Hey—what...? Shit! Are you all right?" he asked before fat tears began to roll down Greg's cheeks. "You—hey...shh... It's all right."

Leaning over the tub, he clasped Greg to him, not caring that the cold water soaked through his clothes. Rocking him back and forth, he soothed him with reassuring sounds and rubbed his back as Greg hyperventilated against his neck in heated gasps.

Incoherent babbling mixed in with the sobs, but Aaron didn't try to understand the words. He didn't need to. He understood what lay behind them. Greg had thought he'd lost him. Just like Aaron had thought he'd lost Greg.

"Shh, now. I'm here. I'm not gonna go anywhere," he said over and over as Greg clutched at his back, threatening to topple him into the tub.

Just when he thought he'd calmed Greg down, some private thought would trip him into a renewed bout of crying. Aaron was getting ready to find a shot of something alcoholic to bring him down a notch, when he finally quieted.

Aaron figured the hysterics, as out of character as they seemed for Greg, made sense given his fever and the trials of the past year. Hell, the past three years.

"You okay now?" He kissed Greg's temple and leaned back to look at him.

Greg nodded and closed his swollen eyes.

Aaron let him go gently so that he rested against the curve of the tub.

"I'm glad I'm here with you."

Greg made a contented sound. "I missed you."

"Promise you'll never disappear like that again? I was so freaked out." Aaron whispered the last sentence, struggling against the residual fear.

"Promise," Greg said, looking him in the eyes.

"Good." Aaron brushed damp tendrils from Greg's forehead.

They fell into silence, Aaron bathing Greg's brow and chest.

Sometime later, Greg said, "I'm okay."

Aaron held up the thermometer. "Open."

Greg complied and stared at him, lips pursed around the thermometer. He was pale, but his eyes looked clearer. The thermometer beeped, and Aaron withdrew it, relieved to see a more manageable one hundred point five.

"You're such a shit. Don't ever put me through this again."

"Yeah. This is a blast." Greg's voice sounded like his sinuses were full of cotton.

"Shut it." Aaron smirked despite himself. "You want to go to sleep?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Anything I can get you first?"

"A towel?"

"You're feeling better, all right." Aaron gave him a hard look. "Okay. C'mon. Get up. I'll dry you off."

Greg rose unsteadily from the tub, water cascading down his pectorals in a decadent display that Aaron forced himself to ignore as he held out the towel. He made short work of drying Greg before they shuffled to the bedroom. He had tucked Greg in and turned to leave.

Greg grabbed his hand.

"Don't leave."

"You're still delirious if you think I'm gonna go anywhere."

With a smile on his lips, Greg closed his eyes.

"I'm washing up," Aaron whispered, and Greg nodded, already half asleep.

Making his way into the living room, Aaron flicked on some lights and frowned. Greg's parents would shit bricks if they knew where their son lived. He had managed to make his apartment homey enough but obviously saved his money for school.

Old movie stills, cheaply framed and matted, decorated the stretch of hallway leading from the living room to the front door. The apartment smelled of warm leather and something reminiscent of wood smoke. Looking around the living room, he saw two walls lined with cork, covered with storyboards and sticky notes.

Aaron whistled low.

"I guess I don't have to ask what else he's been up to."

Lifting a notebook from an occasional table, he flipped through pages of notes outlining a treatment for a screenplay.

He looked at the front page. No Apologies, it read. A title?

A heavy weight settled in his stomach as he read snippets of dialogue. Greg wrote these words about them. About school. From the very first pages, Aaron recognized Greg had carried a torch for him long before they'd roomed together.

Aaron glanced at the storyboards on the wall. Thanks to his father and his uncle, he'd seen plenty of this stuff, and he intuited Greg had the makings of something great. Obviously, his parents had refused to pay for film school, but what was he doing stripping instead of applying for scholarships?

Adding that question to his mental list, Aaron put down the notebook and went to check out the food situation. He opened the refrigerator and stared. Empty? The freezer yawned at him like a cavern. All the cupboards were bare. One drawer held a couple Chinese takeout menus. He'd wait until tomorrow and get some groceries, provided Greg had any money.

Agitation tugged at him as he wandered the living room, picking up notebooks and thumbing through them. He knew he was snooping, but if he was going to do what he was about to do, he had to be sure.

As he read, story after story leaped off the page at him. There were so many. Mostly chick flicks, and Aaron wondered at No Apologies. What had made him write the pieces of that? It was nowhere near finished, but it was so different. Deviant. And in the wrong hands, dangerous. God, if their classmates or teachers had gotten hold of some of these notes...

Well, it didn't matter. The romantic comedies Greg wrote struck him as really funny, and Aaron didn't usually like the genre. Not bothering to look at the time, he picked up the phone from the coffee table and dialed his uncle. One way or another, he intended to keep Greg by his side. Where he belonged.

Chapter Sixteen

Greg snuggled backward into a warm body lying next to him. Naked skin, a muscled torso, and long, strong legs made him sigh in contentment. Everything felt right.

Greg's eyes flew open. He was in bed with another man!

"Who the..."

He rolled over and met blue eyes and a sleepy smile.

"Morning, stranger." Aaron put the back of his hand to Greg's brow. "How're you feeling?"

"Christ," Greg swore. "You gave me a heart attack."

Aaron frowned, taking his hand away. "I owe you several after last night. You feel cooler. You're not normal, though."

Greg snorted lightly.

"Yeah. You're a freak." Aaron out-and-out grinned. "But I was talking about your temperature."

Flashes of hazy memory came back to Greg. Aaron finding him at Gilded. The train ride. He inhaled deeply. God, the train ride. He blushed, remembering snippets of the lewd display, and hoped nobody else had seen them on the train. If he hadn't been half out of his mind, he'd have at least checked to make sure.

"Was there anyone else on the train?"

Aaron's pupils dilated at the memory. "No."

"Thank God for small favors," he said as his stomach rumbled.

"Hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Is there a store around here?"

"Two doors over." Greg rolled to his side and grabbed his wallet from the nightstand. "A convenience place."

He tossed the wallet to Aaron who caught it with one hand.

"What d'ya want?"

Greg thought about it. "Probably nothing too rich." He pushed himself to a sitting position.

Aaron was already out of the bed, tugging on his pants.

"When was the last time you ate?"

"Not sure. Today's the first time I remember being hungry."

Aaron cast him an arch look. "When I get back, you and I are going to have a talk."

"Sure, Dad."

"Shut up or I'll beat your ass."

Greg barked a laugh, and Aaron glared.

"I'm serious."

"I know you are." Greg sobered. He had a lot of explaining to do after the way Aaron had found him last night. "And I'll answer your questions."

"Oh, you already answered my questions." Aaron pulled on his coat. "You're a lot more honest when you've got a temp of 106."

Panic grabbed him by the throat and shook him hard. "What did I say?"

"You told me you were sorry for being such a shit and not calling me," Aaron threw over his shoulder.

"Did not." He sank into the pillows and glared at the empty doorway.

"Don't worry!" Aaron called, already on his way out. "I considered it temporary insanity."

The front door banged shut. Racking his brain, Greg tried to remember what he'd said last night. He remembered the cold water. Aaron's anger. And he remembered wondering if Aaron's cock and his own might melt together and join them permanently while he fisted them both. Even hazy, the memory remained sexy. God, he wanted to have Aaron again, this time when he could remember every last detail. It had been so fucking long. Too long.

Just before he drifted off, he recalled Aaron admitting he was gay.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face. The next thing he knew, Aaron tossed a plastic sack of groceries at the foot of the bed. Greg opened his eyes and watched Aaron leave the room. Rummaging around, he found the cinnamon bread and ate three slices before Aaron returned with steaming coffees and a stack of black notebooks. Greg's notebooks.

Shit.

"Tell me you didn't read those."

"I read them."

Naked. He was naked. He needed to get some clothes on. Flinging the covers back, he found some pants and a shirt. "You're an asshole."

Coffee sloshed out of Aaron's mug onto the industrial carpet. "Are you gonna let us have this conversation like reasonable adults? Or are you gonna throw a temper tantrum?"

"Fuck off!" Greg snapped.

Aaron narrowed his eyes and put down his coffee.

Greg looked away, buttoning up his shirt as he fumed. He tried to leave the room, but predictably found himself on the floor, staring up at Aaron.

When he tried to sit up, Aaron pressed his bare foot into Greg's chest.

"I have some things to say, and you're gonna listen."

Greg looked away, fighting the heady mixture of anger and arousal he'd come to embrace from these exchanges.

"Fine. Don't look at me," Aaron conceded.

In his peripheral vision, Greg saw him hold up one of the notebooks.

"No Apologies? It's about us."

"That's private." Greg struggled, desperate to reach the notebook, and Aaron pressed his foot down harder until Greg gasped.

Tossing the first notebook to the bed, Aaron grabbed another. "This one? I think you called it Upside? It's a romantic comedy. It's also really good. Better yet, it has mainstream potential."

Knowing Aaron had read his work felt like having his guts ripped open and examined on a surgical table. He had to escape. Surging upward, he unbalanced Aaron, who staggered backward before knocking him flat again.

"Be still and listen." He flinched at the savagery in Aaron's voice, even as his cock twitched with interest.

"I don't want to have this conversation, Aaron."

"While I applaud your honesty, all I have to say is, too fucking bad."

Mutiny on his mind, Greg slammed the sides of both fists into the carpet.

Aaron tossed the second notebook to the bed and asked, "Do you know what I've been doing since the third week in August?"

Greg lashed out the only way he could with Aaron and hope to win. "Perfecting your technique with some other fag?"

"Oh, that's rich coming from you." Aaron pointed an accusing finger down at Greg. "I was looking for you, you self-centered bastard."

A hatchet couldn't have sliced him deeper. Guilt bloomed hot and cold across Greg's chest, running outward to numb his extremities.

"I came out to my parents. About you and me." Aaron ran his hand through his hair and looked around. "They told me I would get over my 'infatuation' once I was in school. Wanted me to leave you to your own fucked-up devices."

Greg watched hurt, betrayal, and self-loathing flicker across Aaron's normally tranquil, confident features. His anger melted, and he wrapped gentle fingers around Aaron's ankle.

"But you didn't," he whispered, acknowledging the enormity of Aaron's sacrifice. Aaron could have had everything—a normal life—but he'd given it all up. For him.

"No, I didn't. I took my trust fund money and lived on ramen noodles to find you. And if you think you can hide from me now? Then you are in for a rough fucking time of it, because I'm gonna peel you layer by layer until I lay bare every shred of your soul and make for damned sure you never leave me again."

Love and regret vied for prominence in Greg's heart as he stared up past the cut of Aaron's cheekbones into his eyes. No one had cared this much about him. Ever. And he knew he didn't deserve it—would still make him regret it sooner or later.

Fighting against the urge to meet kindness with cruelty, he tried to say sorry. What came out was, "I thought I was the only one I was hurting."

Aaron flinched. "You dumb bastard." He flattened his foot against Greg's chest.

He didn't fight when Aaron increased the pressure. Breath coming in ragged gasps, he offered himself up, wanting to be cleansed of the burden of his sins. Aaron trailed his foot down Greg's chest, and he arched into the pressure, inviting it, needing it to move lower. He wasn't disappointed. Aaron's bare foot

brushed downward, coming to rest against his cock. Desire knifed through Greg's belly, jerking his cock upward with a rush of blood. His skin tingled and his head felt lighter than air.

So turned on.

So fucked up.

Opposing emotions short-circuited his brain, permanently melting and warping the wires of his reality. Aaron bore down, and Greg whimpered, meeting the pressure pound for pound. Aaron twisted and grasped with his toes. Pain and pleasure merged, tangling until one became unrecognizable from the other.

"Like that?" The question cut at him like razor wire.

Greg sobbed something incomprehensible, writhing with abandon under Aaron's foot.

Digging deeper, toes resting against Greg's balls, Aaron growled, "This is gonna feel like a fucking massage by the time I'm done with you."

Greg tossed his head in denial. Not wanting to know how it could get better, wanting it to get worse. Much worse.

"You like that?" He shoved his foot harder. "Answer!"

"Yes!"

"Want more?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, what?"

Greg pulled from the recesses of his mind the military protocol drilled into him during more than two years of hell. "Sir! Yes, sir!"

Aaron removed his foot, kneeling to cup Greg's face in his hands, swiping at the trailing tears with his thumbs. "That had to be the sexiest thing I've ever seen. You're never gonna get away from me again."

Lowering, Aaron nipped Greg's top and bottom lip. Shoved his tongue inside. Slick heat ransacked Greg's mouth, fucked him with an intensity that built up his emotions and knocked them down again brick by brick, until he became nothing more than the sum of his own desire.

Aaron tore his lips away. Greg lurched upward, not ready to stop—needing to continue—but a knee pressed at his sternum, shoving him to the floor, bearing down until he gasped for air.

"Take off your clothes. I want you naked," Aaron commanded.

Greg's fingers flew, buttons popping as he tore his shirt over his head. His zipper bit into his cock, stinging, adding to his arousal as he ripped his jeans down his hips, bucking out of them in one frenzied motion. Dimly, he realized he must look like a drug addict as he gazed up at Aaron, lust blanketing his face.

"Good," Aaron said, his voice low. "Spread your legs."

Complying, Greg pressed his thighs against the industrial carpet and slid them open, relishing the burn. Aaron trailed his fingers around Greg's nipple, following the motion with his eyes as he fluttered lower. Biting his lip, Greg watched in fascination as his cock jumped in time to his heartbeat, pulsing against Aaron's fingers.

"What are you going to do?" Greg asked, his words melding with a groan.

Aaron slid his gaze sideways, narrowed eyes promising a mindfuck of monumental proportions.

"I'm gonna own you." Aaron stood. "Where's your lube?"

"Nightstand," Greg answered thickly.

Staring at the peeling paint on the ceiling, Greg trailed his hand down to the head of his prick. Massaging his thumb over the tip, he closed his eyes as Aaron closed the drawer and popped the cap on the lube.

"That is so hot."

Greg's eyes flew open to see Aaron towering above him.

"Spread your legs wider," he said, and Greg's limbs fell open. "I don't have a condom on me. Do you?"

"What?" Greg sat up on his elbows. "Wait!"

Aaron positioned the lube bottle upside down, clear liquid streaming into his palm.

"Yeah?"

"You're—" The word came out with a prepubescent squeak, and he cleared his throat. "You're going to fuck me?"

Aaron's eyes glazed with need as he massaged the lube along his own cock. Slick, wet sounds made Greg bite his lip and groan.

"I'm clean," Aaron said by way of answering. "You?"

"Yes."

"So bareback's all right?"

Greg swallowed hard, words refusing to press past his closed throat. Filtered sunlight caressed strands of copper and gold as Aaron leaned in close and darted his tongue along the seam of Greg's lips. Sticky fingers probed his entrance, filled him in the same way Aaron's tongue filled his mouth.

"God...damn." Greg responded in breathless pants against Aaron's mouth, both loving and dreading the unfamiliar sensations.

One finger became two, then three. A groan shook his entire body. Aaron fucked him with his hand, rocking forward with each thrust, his slick cock sliding against Greg's hip with the motion.

"That's nothing compared to what I'm gonna feel like inside you. Want it?"

Greg nodded, wide-eyed as Aaron withdrew his fingers. The emptiness surprised him—casting him adrift—and he clutched at Aaron as if he were his life buoy. "Go slow." He wanted to remember every second.

"Shh now, I won't hurt you." Aaron misinterpreted the request, but Greg didn't have any attention to spare on correcting him. "Relax."

Aaron's cock brushed at Greg's ass cheeks, probing, seeking, and he reached down a hand to steady himself as he pushed forward.

Greg tensed.

Aaron adjusted and tried again. This time a popping sensation accompanied Aaron's intrusion past the tight ring of muscle. Unexpected panic sent Greg surging backward into the bed supports hard enough to see a flash of light.

Aaron stilled, and a lock of hair fell back into his eyes.

"Greg?"

"I—"

"You haven't done this before?" Incredulity permeated Aaron's tone.

"We never did," Greg said with a shrug, embarrassed to meet his lover's eyes, trying not to squirm against the unfamiliar fullness—the sweet ache of Aaron's cock penetrating him, owning him, loving him.

"Look at me."

He obeyed. Aaron kissed him lightly on the mouth.

"You've been working in a gay strip club?"

Greg nodded.

"And you never did this?"

Greg laughed, hysteria welling within him as a mix of emotions surfaced. "No. There's never been anyone but you."

Aaron sputtered. "You've never...except now...with me?"

Greg shook his head, feeling an odd mixture of embarrassment and pride that he'd saved himself, like some ritual offering. Truth be told, he'd never wanted anyone but Aaron.

"Um. Have you?"

"Just girls." Sweat popped out on Aaron's brow from the effort of restraining his natural impulses. "And not for a long time."

"Good."

Greg gripped Aaron's back, inviting him to continue their lovemaking.

A lazy Southern lift of his lips made Greg's stomach do a little flip as Aaron dipped his head for a kiss. "Relax," he said and pushed forward.

Folding his legs along Aaron's hips, Greg offered himself as completely as he knew how. His hands slid up forearms to flexing biceps, trailed over undulating delts and wound in sweat-slicked hair. Greg tilted his head back to focus on every bump and grind, each searing ripple of his cock against Aaron's abs. Sensation sparked over stimulated nerves, triggering pressure in his balls, circulating, building with every return trip. Aaron withdrew, penetrated—fucked him in a series of rocking motions.

Greg clutched at Aaron's back. Burying his nose in the dip along Aaron's clavicle, he inhaled salt and soap and musk. He'd never felt this close to another human being—had never wanted to.

"God, I love you," Greg mumbled into his shoulder.

Aaron stilled and looked down at him, mouth parted in physical exertion and shock. His tongue passed over the fullness of his lower lip. "You what?"

Heat raced up Greg's spine and concentrated in his face. "Never mind."

Clutching his shoulders, holding him down, Aaron thrust forward, insistent. "Coward. Say it."

Greg's body bucked at the mix of pleasure-pain. God, that was better than any drug.

"Make me." He knew his next words would goad Aaron into doing exactly what he wanted him to do. "And stop acting like a girl."

Aaron's answering laugh was full of gleeful menace. "You're asking for it, Greggie." He pulled out.

Greg tried to glare at him in defiance, but his mouth pulled into a smirk, ruining the effect.

"You want hard? You want mean?" Aaron yanked him from the floor. They'd stopped making love and started playing their special game. One that reminded Greg of the rough-and-tumble of rugby. "Fine. I'll give you something you won't be tempted to say 'I love you' to."

Aaron shoved him face-first into the corner, and a sweet mixture of humiliation and love pelted him like hot drops of rain. Greg brushed off the obvious question—why do I want this?—and focused on the mind games. In a delicious twist of fucked-up fate, it seemed he enjoyed being made to submit to someone he loved. He allowed Aaron absolute control over his physical person yet had never felt freer or more cared for.

A sensual burning shot from his scalp to his cock when Aaron tugged his head backward and sank his teeth into his neck. And then he filled him in one deep shove that rocked Greg forward onto the balls of his feet.

"Yes!" The word—a benediction and a plea—tumbled from Greg's lips.

Aaron, sinister god, heard both and wrapped his hands around Greg's hips—held him steady for a series of thrusts that wedged their bodies into the tight space. A throbbing ache and liquid heat turned Greg's world upside down until he didn't know whether he experienced heaven or hell. His body rebelled, nausea welling, even as pressure coiled ever tighter in his balls. Cheek pressed against peeling gold wallpaper, Greg inhaled its musty smell. Ten seconds and he would add another stain.

"Can't," Greg gasped, not knowing if Aaron wanted him to go over yet.

Aaron surged forward, hard, growling, thrusting, bumping in an unmistakable, demanding motion. "Come!"

Long, rushing waves of light cleansed Greg, body and soul, as he and Aaron came together, arching against one another, melding into one being. Two halves, long separated. Whole.

Chapter Seventeen

Aaron collapsed against Greg's back, sweat and muscle forming his only touchstone to the physical plane. He floated on a sea of tranquility. Coming down, he noticed Greg's fingers first, stroking his hips with infinite tenderness. Second, he noticed the rug burn on his knees.

"You okay?" Greg asked, voice rough.

"Yeah. Wanna lie down?"

"Sure."

Pushing himself away, Aaron winced, withdrawing slowly from Greg's body and his embrace. Holding out a hand, he steadied Greg when he wobbled, obviously a little worse for the wear. They both fell onto the bed, and Aaron pulled Greg close, enjoying it when he sprawled under his arm along his side.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just...sore," Greg said, his chuckle self-conscious.

Aaron laughed. "Me too."

They lay there for a long while, Aaron mesmerized by the square edges of Greg's fingers as they trailed back and forth over his skin.

Aaron finally broke the silence. "I love you too."

Hot breath puffed from Greg's nose onto Aaron's shoulder.

Greg pushed up on his elbow, and Aaron studied flushed features and porcelain skin. The dark and the light in this man would never fail to fascinate him. Such a puzzle. Such a prize.

Aaron watched Greg struggle with his emotions, his eyes flitting from one point to another. Several times he opened and closed his mouth. Then he shut his eyes and said, "Yeah. Me too."

"Open your eyes."

Greg complied. God, it was sexy how he did that. Obeyed what Aaron told him to do.

"Say it."

"Say what?"

He thought to play dumb? Aaron grabbed either side of Greg's face. Stubble rasped against his palms as he held Greg immobile.

"Say, 'I love you, Aaron.'"

Greg tried to look away, and Aaron jerked his head back around.

"And look at me when you do."

Aaron almost laughed when Greg turned an unbecoming shade of green, but somehow he managed to keep his expression stern.

"Say it or I'll go at you without lube next time."

Greg's eyes shot wide. "That'd hurt you just as much as me."

"Maybe. Wanna find out?"

Greg swallowed hard, and his lashes fluttered closed.

"Aaron, don't make me say this. I'll do it when I'm ready."

Aaron let his hands fall away, surprised at the answer. He relented, but only because it would feel more special to hear the words from Greg when he meant them, not when he'd forced them from his lips.

"Sure." He shrugged off the sting of rejection.

He'd heard Greg say the words while they fucked. He didn't have to do it again for Aaron to know what lived in his heart.

"Thanks." Greg slid down with a wince.

"Still sore?"

Greg laughed. "I imagine I will be for some time."

Aaron's cock twitched against his own thigh. "I love your accent. The way you talk."

"Ditto."

Aaron smiled. "We're a pair, aren't we?"

"Mhm."

Aaron pulled the comforter over them both and trailed his fingers through pitch-black strands. Traced the soft shell of an ear. Breath shallow and head heavy on Aaron's shoulder, Greg relaxed into slumber in his arms.

Hours and hours later, Aaron awoke in a darkened room, Greg tucked under his arm. They'd never done that before—made love and slept together, safe and warm without the threat of discovery.

Those awful, final days at Grayson played in his memory, and Aaron remembered Greg's face when he left for good—the look he'd given him out of the lowered window of his cherry red Beemer. What had he felt in that moment? When he'd thought he'd never see Aaron's face again?

"Why was it really?" Aaron whispered. "That you didn't call me?"

"I thought I told you last night. Mostly because you were straight."

Aaron's hand froze mid stroke along Greg's back.

"I thought you were asleep."

"No."

They cuddled quietly as Aaron relived their conversations and sexual interludes. He remembered the bonfire. Something Greg had said about him having a beautiful life.

"You really thought you were giving me up for my own good?"

Greg tensed, his quiet, "Yes," several minutes later unexpected.

"Did you even go to Europe?"

Aaron didn't know what made him ask that. He already knew the answer, but it seemed an easier question to ask than the others.

"No."

"You totally lied?"

"Yes."

Aaron rolled away and stared into the darkness. The amount of forethought that must have gone into Greg's plan—what amounted to their breakup, coming to New York—struck him as bleak and beautiful at the same time. He'd cared enough to let Aaron go, but what had it cost him during those long days and nights on top of everything else he'd been going through? No wonder he had looked as if he hadn't slept that entire last week of school.

Still, something didn't sit right with Aaron. More lay behind Greg's not calling someone—him, Gan—than met the eye, but he decided to leave the rest alone for now. Rather than go into some emotional soliloquy he knew Greg would neither let himself hear nor understand, he said, "Ever lie to me again and I'll leave you flat."

Greg's sharp intake of breath said he'd driven his point home.

"Hungry?" Aaron asked after a moment, wanting to restore things to normal.

"Yes."

"Shower first, then eat? Or eat first?"

"Shower."

In the bathroom, Aaron sat on the toilet lid, watching the muscles in Greg's biceps flex as he turned on the water, then reached above Aaron's head to grab some towels from the shelf.

"My uncle—the producer—wants to meet you," Aaron blurted.

Steam curled from the shower toward the fluorescent light fixture. Greg pulled open the shower curtain and stepped over the rim of the tub.

"Come on in. It's nice."

He followed Greg into the shower and watched as spray hit the top of his head, slicking his hair back, sending rivulets of water trailing down his face and making waterfalls over his biceps and abs. Aaron watched, greedy for the sight.

"Will you move to LA with me?"

Greg leaned his head forward and shook the water out of his eyes.

"Your turn. I'll soap up."

They traded places. A moment later, suds glistened over Greg's nipples, and Aaron took the soap from his hands.

"Let me."

He'd wanted to do this since they'd showered together after sophomore-year P.E.

"You could go to UCLA." Aaron's fingers slid over square cut muscles, explored the moguls of Greg's abs, massaging as he spoke. "You'll get a scholarship for sure."

Greg's eyes brooded at him.

"I don't want handouts."

"A scholarship isn't a handout."

Greg frowned. "I mean from your uncle."

"Writers are fucking high maintenance," Aaron grumbled, reaching lower, soaping between Greg's legs. "You can't make it in Hollywood without help."

Bracing one hand on the shower wall, Greg closed his eyes as Aaron caressed him.

"You can't keep running from people forever," he said, enjoying the way Greg's balls slipped through his fingers. "You deserve to be happy. I bet your sister would want you to be happy."

Greg opened his eyes, his glare swallowing the light in the room.

"Stop playing therapist."

"I'm being serious." Aaron clutched Greg's ass, pulling him close with his soapy hand. "You need to confront a few things in your life before they eat you up inside until there's nothing left. Gwyn wouldn't want that... I don't want that."

"You don't—"

"Shh," Aaron said, kissing him lightly on the lips. "You don't have to say anything. Just think about what I've said. About Gwyn."

"I—"

Aaron kissed him again, briefly. "She'll be with you no matter where you are."

"It was never fucking about Gwyn!" Greg exploded, and Aaron took a startled step back.

"What?"

Greg thwacked his skull against the shower tiles hard enough to make Aaron cringe. When he tried to do it again, Aaron grabbed his head and held it immobile.

"Stop it, Greg!"

The look Greg gave him said he would chew off his own arm as long as it meant he could escape. Aaron bundled him into his arms, sliding wet palms along his back and squeezing him tight.

"Tell me? Please?" Aaron choked out. "I can't stand not knowing what's eating you up inside."

Greg spun out of his arms and faced the wall. "Look at me!" His broken voice echoed off the tiles. Aaron reached out a hand to grasp Greg's shoulder. "No! Really fucking look at me."

Hand falling away, Aaron did as he asked and trailed his eyes down his back and over his ass and thighs, down long muscular calves and back up. On the return trip, he saw it—fine white lines striping the entire length of Greg's body, including his shoulders. If he'd ever gotten a tan, the marks would stand out, but his pale skin all but hid the scars—wheals from beatings. Lots of beatings.

"Jesus, Greg," Aaron said, his stomach souring. He reached up a finger and traced one of the lines. "Your father?"

"Him and John." Greg turned to hide his back from view.

Aaron remembered the way Greg had behaved around the chauffeur and could have kicked himself for missing the warning signs. He felt as if by letting Greg go back home for the summer, he'd thrown him to the wolves. He thought of Gan and knew she'd shoot both men for what they'd done to her grandson.

"Why?" He couldn't understand how someone could be that vicious to an enemy, never mind their own flesh and blood.

"Does it matter?"

"Did it start after Gwyn?"

"No."

If Aaron ever saw either man again, they'd die.

"Does he know you're here?"

The terror that flickered over Greg's features told Aaron why he'd had such a difficult time finding him. It also told him the missing piece to the story of why Greg never called.

"Shit." Aaron passed his palm over his face to wipe the water droplets away. "C'mere."

"No."

Aaron nodded his understanding. Greg couldn't stand physical contact with the memory of his father so fresh in his mind.

"I'll keep you safe. My uncle will keep you safe. Nobody will know where you are or even who you are."

Greg frowned. "He could do that?"

"He'd be happy to."

"Why?" Greg stepped under the spray, and Aaron moved out of the way. "Why would he do that for me?"

How to explain? He'd always known but had never spoken of it before.

"Because he has a lover."

Greg spat water from his mouth. "Whoa."

Aaron laughed. "Yeah. Whoa."

Greg's mouth and eyes softened into thoughtful rather than tortured lines.

"Come to California with me," Aaron said, not wanting to waste the opportunity to press the issue while Greg seemed malleable.

"You're a pain in the ass." Greg winced as he soaped himself. "Literally."

"You owe me." Aaron's laugh ended in a gasp as Greg's hand grasped his cock. "Tell me you know it."

Greg looked down at the angle of Aaron's cock and quirked an eyebrow, all clouds gone from his face.

Aaron laughed despite himself.

"I meant the stuff about California." He pulled Greg close under the showerhead. "But you can owe me that too."

When they kissed, water cascaded, blurring his vision, getting into his mouth as he sucked on Greg's tongue.

"God, I'm hard again." Aaron groaned. "I'm gonna have cockburn."

Greg lowered to his knees and looked up from beneath water-spiked lashes. "I'll go easy on you."

Aaron curled his fingers into Greg's hair and leaned against the shower wall with a contented sigh. With infinite, tiny licks and sucks, Greg worshiped Aaron's cock as his soapy hand fisted around the base. It had to taste awful, but

it felt divine. Slick and hot, the slippery friction combined with the pressure of Greg's mouth until Aaron didn't know where one sensation ended and the other began.

Aaron clenched as Greg slid his hand around to cup his ass and then curled his fingers lower. Knees already shaking with restrained release, Aaron nearly collapsed when Greg inserted two fingers in his entrance and curled them with a light wiggling motion.

"Damn!" Aaron clutched at Greg's head for support.

Greg stopped sucking him down long enough to grin up at him and say, "I only said I'd go easy on your cock."

With a twist of his fingers, he went down again, and Aaron's head fell back against the tiles. Pleasure emptied his brain of thought as light and sensation converged at the epicenter of his universe. The orgasm consumed him, taking memory from him and making him anew.

* * *

Greg opened the apartment door on their way out to eat and froze, motionless, in the hall.

"Oof." Aaron walked into broad shoulders that could have doubled for a brick wall. "Watch it, Greg."

"Gan?"

Aaron peered around Greg. The white-haired woman stared up at her grandson, worry deepening the wrinkles along her brow and mouth.

"Gregory, what are you doing out of bed?"

Greg craned his head around slowly and leveled a glare at Aaron.

"You were dying, Greg."

"I wasn't dying, Aaron."

"How would you know? You weren't exactly conscious. I called her while I was standing next to you, for chrissakes."

"Boys!"

Aaron and Greg took a step backward.

"I asked you a question, Gregory."

"Uh." Greg shuffled his feet. "We're going to get some supper?"

She drew back the sleeve of her mink coat to look at her diamond wristwatch. "At this time of night?"

Aaron heard Greg's stomach rumble.

"He hasn't been eating lately, ma'am."

"And why is that?" Gan's eyes sparked blue fire as she swung her attention to Aaron. "And didn't I tell you to call me Gan?"

"Yes'm. I mean Gan." He shifted his eyes to Greg and back to Gan. "I'm afraid you'd have to ask him about why he's been starving himself to death."

"You're his lover." Black-gloved hands slid to diminutive hips. "Shouldn't you know?"

"He wasn't here." Greg broke into the discussion, a deep frown creasing his features.

Aaron cast a thankful glance at Greg. He was embarrassed and uncomfortable, but he wouldn't let Aaron take the heat.

"You have some explaining to do while we eat." Gan pivoted on one well-heeled foot and held out her elbows for the young men. "I'm a mite peckish myself."

Greg cast Aaron an oh shit look and took his grandmother's arm. Aaron followed, smirking. Finally. Someone who could knock some sense into him.

They walked down the street to an all-night diner and ordered breakfast for supper. Gan made Greg order two omelets, and then forced him to eat half of hers plus Aaron's home fries.

"I've never seen you so skinny—except maybe when you were fourteen and had that growth spurt." Gan sipped her tea. "But you couldn't stop eating then."

Greg looked down at the eggs on his plate and felt a little green. "I really am full, Gan."

"Eat!"

He picked up his fork and took a small bite. Gan nodded in satisfaction, and he looked at Aaron pleadingly. Rather than helping, he held out a bite of potatoes. Even as he glared at him, Greg's heart tripped at the sweetly familiar gesture. Casting a glance around the restaurant to make sure no one other than Gan was looking, he leaned forward and nibbled the morsel from Aaron's fork with his teeth.

Chewing, swallowing, he kept his eyes pinned to Aaron, telling him exactly what he wanted to eat.

"Keep it in your pants, you two."

Mortification flooded him, and Greg looked down at Gan, stricken with shame. He didn't know how he could take it if he lost her too.

Gan cupped his cheek and patted it as if he were twelve, not nearly twenty.

"I'm teasing, Greg," she said. "You two make a handsome couple. Though Aaron's ass fills out his jeans better at present."

Aaron spewed soda across the table. Greg laughed until he was breathless.

Taking another sip of tea, she considered him over the rim. "So, why didn't you call Aaron here sooner?"

Greg sobered, looking to Aaron, unsure of what to say.

"I didn't. Call him, that is. He found me." He hedged his answer, he knew. He'd never lied to Gan. Not really. He didn't want to start now, but the right words simply wouldn't come.

"If I may?"

Greg nodded at Aaron and gave him a small smile.

Aaron waited until the waitress finished refilling their water glasses before he spoke.

"Greg's father..." Aaron's eyes flicked to Greg's face to make sure he was okay with what he was about to say.

Greg swallowed hard and nodded. This was going to change everything in their family. What if Gan didn't believe him?

"Greg worried that his father...with some help from John, uh...might find him. So he didn't call anyone."

Gan stared at him, and Greg looked away. He couldn't finish Aaron's explanation. Her hand came up and turned his cheek, forcing him to look at her.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Hot lead slid down his throat, settling heavily into his stomach. "I didn't think of it before. After Gwyn, I figured I deserved it."

"Tch, Greg." Gan dropped her hand as tears sprang into her eyes. "You are so thickheaded. I don't know what Aaron sees in you."

It was her turn to look away.

Greg dropped his head into his hands.

"I asked Greg to come to California with me, Gan." Aaron broke into the tension. "My uncle wants to help him with his screenplays."

Greg's hands fell away from his face, and he looked at Aaron, horrified.

"What? What'd I say?" Aaron spoke around a mouthful of toast, looking between them. "Did I say something wrong?"

Gan blinked up at him.

"You started writing again?"

Greg nodded, bracing himself for the questions.

"You approached your father about film school?"

"Yes." The last night at home skittered to the edge of his brain, and he pushed it away forcefully. "It didn't go over very well."

"What made you start again?"

He had stopped after Gwyn's death. Hadn't picked up a notebook in Gan's presence for the entire summer before his junior year—had even had a shouting match with her over it, the only real argument they'd ever had.

"Aaron."

Greg lost himself in the bluest blue he'd ever seen and realized Aaron and Gan...and Gwyn...all had the same color eyes.

A grin broke across Gan's features.

"You're going with him to California, Greg."

Longing to do exactly as she bid tugged at him, and he almost gave up the fight. He wasn't nearly tired enough yet to stop struggling against their kindness.

"I can't throw myself on his uncle's charity, Gan."

Gan drew herself up against the red vinyl booth back, almost reaching his chin.

"Since when am I not allowed to pay for my grandson's education?"

Aaron sat stock-still. Greg didn't look at him, but he could almost feel him holding his breath, waiting to see what he'd say next.

"I—" He couldn't desert Gwyn's dream. She'd wanted to live in New York. "I was thinking about NYU."

Aaron deflated in the seat across from him.

Gan looked from him to Aaron and back again, opened her mouth a couple times but finally pursed her lips shut.

"You gotta eat." Aaron held out another bite. "It's getting cold."

Guilt swelled, filling his stomach until there was no room for food, but he took the bite anyway. A disgusted sound came from two tables away, and fear swelled, hot and tight.

"We have to stop, Aaron." He sat back. "People are noticing."

Gan snorted. "So let them notice."

"Yeah," Aaron said. "I don't care what they think. I'm not in love with them."

Love.

The word spun Greg's world around, pressing in on him with a sense of responsibility. If he loved Aaron, shouldn't he withstand a little bashing for him? Hadn't he been willing to in school?

Yes, but you could escape school. You can't escape life.

Aaron's fork dropped to his plate with a clatter as he picked up his napkin and rose to pay the check. He returned all business.

"Come on." He held out his arm to Gan. "Greg needs his sleep."

"Stop fussing over me." Greg took Gan's arm from Aaron, wanting to make this argument about something other than his own shortcomings. "It's annoying."

"Gregory! I'm ashamed of you!" Gan said.

Greg looked to Aaron accusingly. This was all his fault.

Anger suffused Aaron's cheeks with a ruddy streak across each curve of bone.

"Apologize!" Gan said.

Greg turned his back to escape them both.

"It's all right, Gan." Aaron took her arm back from Greg. "He can't. Even when he wants to."

The two people he couldn't live without left him in the diner. Alone.

* * *

"You're going to lose him."

Greg's shoulders slumped as he stood in front of the coffeemaker. He didn't have to turn around to know Gan looked at him with a worried expression.

"I know."

He'd stayed awake half the night thinking about how he could change. What he could do to make Aaron see how much he needed him. How much he loved him. This morning he was at as much of a loss as he'd ever been.

She sidled up next to him and rubbed his arm.

"Don't be a failure like your father."

Greg frowned at the stream of brown liquid bubbling into the glass pot.

"He's not a failure. He's an asshole, if you'll pardon the term."

"That too." Taking a couple of mugs from the rack on the counter, she pushed them toward him. "You can be a complete... What do you boys say? Dick?"

Greg considered the statement and poured two mugs of the dark brew, the nutty aroma tickling his nostrils awake.

Creamer and sugar. Toast. Jam. Gan slid everything in front of him.

They had breakfast thanks to Aaron's shopping excursion. Aaron who did so much for him and who he couldn't even thank properly by apologizing for being a complete shithead. He was just like his father.

"He loves you."

"I know, Gan." Greg sighed into his coffee mug. "And I don't deserve him."

"Yes, Greg." Gan pinched his cheek. "You do deserve him. You just don't behave like you do."

He let out a wry snort that passed for laughter.

"You're both handsome boys. You look good together."

Greg examined her face for any trace of recrimination and found none. "I can't believe you're so accepting of us."

"Why shouldn't I be?" She sipped her coffee and grimaced before stirring in more sugar. "You enjoy drinking paint thinner?"

He looked down at his cup and shrugged. He hadn't thought it that strong.

"I just figured you'd freak out. You're from a different generation. Hell, even my generation thinks I should"—how had Johnson put it?"—"eat shit and die."

"Well, I hope you give me more credit than those walking bags of testosterone you went to school with. As I told Aaron the night I saw you two kissing, you care for each other, and that's all that matters."

Greg curled his fingers around Gan's palm and looked at her with love. Sometimes he thought he'd burst from the feelings he had for her and Aaron. Especially Aaron. So new and overwhelming, they made him vulnerable.

"It scares me." The words came out of his mouth before he thought to stop them.

"Loving someone?"

He nodded and gulped some coffee.

Gan squeezed his hand. "Then you're doing it right."

Studying her features—so wise and so beautiful, with life and love written into every line—he said, "I should go to LA."

Her wrinkles spread like rays of sunshine across her face.

"Well, what are you doing sitting here telling me?"

* * *

Late morning sunlight muscled its way through gritty windows. Greg sat in a chair, alternating between working on his story and watching Aaron sleep. He'd looked so hot in the shower yesterday, all liquid heat and trembling limbs when he came. Holding him up as he tasted Aaron's essence on his tongue, knowing he'd given back a fraction of all he'd taken, formed the most blissful moment Greg had known in a long time.

For months he'd existed in a nowhere space. Stripping. Writing. Dead to himself and the world, he'd buried his need for Aaron's companionship. Now he felt safe and alive. Connected with everything around him. Most of all, thanks to Gan's insight, he felt at peace.

Greg knew Aaron couldn't stay here forever, though. He had a life to lead. If his parents would still let him. He thought about his own parents—his father. If he'd thought refusing to attend Harvard a mortal sin, what would he think if Greg came out to them about Aaron? God, he'd probably have John murder them both rather than suffer the shame to the Falkner name.

That Aaron had done that—stood up to his parents like some kind of wayward knight—bound Greg's loyalties to him in ways he couldn't completely comprehend, and it scared him shitless. He'd lost a piece of himself over the past few days, but during the night, when he'd lain awake listening to Aaron's breathing, he realized he'd gained so much more in return. He had never really doubted he'd belonged to Aaron before, but now? It seemed as certain as sunrise.

Aaron rolled over. Greg watched him feel around on the bed before rising on his elbows with a start. Eyes wild, he looked around until he found Greg sitting in a chair in the corner.

"Shit. You done near freaked me out."

"What?" Greg frowned "Why?"

"I thought you'd gone."

Guilt unsettled his stomach. "From my own apartment? With my grandmother here?"

Aaron punched the pillow and sat up.

"I wouldn't put it past you."

Greg closed his notebook, sat forward, and rested his elbows on his knees. He'd waited for this moment for three hours. Had worked himself up for it so he wouldn't chicken out. Some things Aaron hadn't guessed, but others he had, and Greg owed him the truth—the knowledge that he'd gotten it at least partially right.

"I was thinking..."

"About running away again?"

God, he woke up cranky.

"Aaron..." Greg sighed, wishing for the easy camaraderie they'd had last night before Gan arrived. "I was thinking about what you said. About Gwyn."

Aaron sat forward, covers falling to his hips. "You were?"

"Damn." He looked out the window. "This is hard."

"What?" Aaron's coaxed. "What's hard?"

"Admitting...saying... I killed her. I owe her a life. I owe her New York." A lump slid down his throat and dissolved painfully in his chest. Thankfully, however, no tears came with it. After all these years, he hoped and prayed, he'd simply cried himself out. "She was so good. So nice and sweet. You would have loved her."

The bed creaked as Aaron shifted into a cross-legged position.

"It should have been my fucking fate. Or my father's." He covered his face with his hands. "Not hers."

Aaron remained silent.

Greg chanced a glance at him from between his fingers. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I thought you might want to skip my trying to convince you that what you're feeling isn't real. That it's bullshit. Because you're obviously gonna feel it no matter what I say."

His laugh sounded bitter, but a little of the ice melted from around his heart. "That's a first."

Aaron smiled sadly. "I used to think I'd killed my dad."

"You did?" How could someone as wonderful as Aaron ever have these bleak, terrible feelings? "Why?"

"Because my mother couldn't find the cordless phone. It was in my room under my laundry, and the kitchen phone was broken."

Greg gave him a puzzled look.

"He died of a heart attack. The ambulance got there later than they might have."

"My God, Aaron."

"It's okay." Aaron waved his hand and shook his head. "I found out years later his heart attack was so massive his only chance would've been if he'd had it in a hospital."

Words seemed inadequate. Just like Aaron pointed out, nothing he said could fix that kind of pain. He wanted to offer himself up to this beautiful, amazing man. Gwyn would have loved him too. She would have accepted them, just as Gan had.

He'd thought to gift Aaron with his company in recompense for the hell he'd caused, but now it felt more like a promise than a present when he said, "I want to go to California with you."

"You do?" Aaron stared at him.

"It's not a pity party."

Aaron laughed. "I'm not the one with the pride problem."

Greg moved to the bed, sat, and pushed gold-streaked strands from Aaron's eyes.

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

Greg turned his hand palm up, and Aaron took hold of it.

"Stay so happy?"

Aaron kept quiet for a long moment, tracing his finger along the line of Greg's palm, before he raised his eyes. "If you'd seen me looking for you, you wouldn't be asking that question."

"Jesus, Aaron."

Would guilt ever cease to be a familiar companion?

"You just 'bout killed me."

A mantle of responsibility settled around Greg's shoulders. It had a heavy, unfamiliar weight, but he didn't allow himself to shrug it off. Not this time.

"I have something else to say."

Aaron's eyes exuded steady strength, and his fingers curled around Greg's hand.

"Sure."

Leaning his forehead against Aaron's, he battled the gaping maw of his personal abyss. Squeezing his eyes shut, he said the words he knew Aaron had been waiting to hear.

"About last night. At the diner..."

"Yeah?"

"Actually, about the graveyard...about everything."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

Time suspended between them. The drop of sweat trickling down Greg's back seemed to move at stop-motion speed. He felt as if he plummeted through space with nothing to catch him.

Except Aaron.

A rush of air hit his cheek as Aaron burst out laughing in a giddy peal.

"You idiot." Aaron placed his hands on either side of Greg's face and gave him a smacking kiss.

Greg opened his eyes and leaned back, confusion warring with shock at Aaron's response. "I'm serious."

Aaron rolled him backward onto the bed, happiness twinkling in his eyes. "I know you are."

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Because now you don't have a title for your movie."

Freedom rushed over Greg's skin, breaking down the walls between him and the man he loved. He could think up a thousand stories and a thousand titles to go with them, but no fiction could possibly match the reality he lived. Flaws and all, Aaron loved him, and Greg planned to spend eternity loving him right back.

Chapter Eighteen

November, 2002

As the credits rolled, and the handpicked crowd roared their approval, Greg leaned into Aaron and whispered, “Better than a blowjob?”

Feeling as if he’d been repeatedly flattened under a steamroller, Aaron slid his stare sideways and replied with the most innocuous comment he could think of. “You said you didn’t put in all the sex.”

Greg arched an eyebrow. “Well, I didn’t, did I?”

Fair enough, Aaron guessed. Still, he felt exposed. Most of the details hadn’t been on the screen—they couldn’t with that R rating—but Aaron’s memory and imagination had supplied them anyway as he’d watched. If he viewed it again, he might see the movie more objectively.

True to rumor, Greg had written one part fiction, one part fact, and stirred them together to form a story that only he and Aaron could read into. The movie wreaked havoc on Aaron’s sense of reality, and he tried to shake off the sense he’d dreamed the life he knew. As scenes played over in his mind, he reminded himself that the real Greg—Grant in the film, though Aaron couldn’t help hearing Greg’s name the whole way through—had never been out a moment in his life until today when they’d arrived together.

For his part, Aaron hardly believed he’d grown up as sheltered as his own character in the film, Alan, but God, he really had. Maybe worse. It wasn’t as if they’d had the Internet back then, and his parents, both strict Baptists, used every opportunity to keep him safe from what they called Satan’s influence. Even in a city as decadent as New Orleans. He remembered having a conversation with Greg about it once—one he’d obviously used in the film’s fictional record store scene.

Aaron had grown up since then—shucked off his parents’ suffocating prejudice. Many things had changed, but in all that time, one thing remained the same. Greg still refused to say “I love you” and never said “I’m sorry.” The title was more appropriate than the audience would ever know.

Aaron snorted his disgust and pretended he didn’t notice when Greg looked at him. Now he understood the criticality of his presence at the premiere for Greg. Tonight, he’d let his character apologize for him—had shown Aaron how he wished he’d behaved. As if that made up for everything. As if now he didn’t have to say the words because he’d let some overpaid actor say them for him.

The indie-studio exec who had gotten the film made crossed to a podium at the front of the theater and waved down the applause, breaking into Aaron’s increasingly bitter thoughts.

"I could stand here and regale you with how incredible our director, actors, and production people have been on this project, but I wanted to give you the man who is ultimately responsible for making this happen. This is really Greg Falkner's baby. So I think it's only appropriate that he come up here and say a few words... Greg?"

Greg stood, and Aaron watched as he made his way to the podium with surefooted grace.

"Thank you." Greg bent down a tad so his voice reached the microphone.

A stage assistant rushed forward and adjusted the mic for him, and he smiled as he pulled a folded piece of paper from his inside jacket pocket along with his reading glasses.

"I have a lot of people to thank for making this film happen."

Aaron listened as Greg ran through a list of cast and crew long enough to seem thorough but not so long as to cause pain.

"Now, I have several things to confess," Greg continued. "In case you haven't figured it out, I always wanted to be a stripper."

The audience laughed, and a few catcalls sounded from the balcony.

"Seriously though, before I go on, I'd like Aaron Blake to come up here. Aaron?"

The crowd began applauding before Greg's request really sank in.

Aaron stood. A sea of faces rose toward the back of the auditorium, and, in a strange role reversal, Aaron wondered at Greg's calm demeanor. His own knees were knocking even as he smiled out at the audience.

Greg cleared his throat.

"So, Aaron. I know I kept you mostly in the dark on this project for a long time, but I want you to know this film is dedicated to you."

A heart that beat nominally fast kicked into overdrive, slamming against his ribs. What the hell was Greg doing?

Greg looked out over the crowd. "You see, Aaron has put up with a lot from me over the years. And I can be quite a... Well, you saw the film."

The laughter from the audience seemed more nervous—obliging.

"Unlike the scenario you saw with Alan in the film, when Aaron tried to read the treatment for No Apologies a couple years ago, I wrestled it from his hands—not an easy thing to do. So I know he suspected I was writing something risky. Judging from his response tonight, it seems he let himself guess less than I thought."

"You're not kidding," Aaron grumbled.

The crowd laughed again, and Aaron blushed before he stepped back from Greg and the mic.

"Let me be clear. No Apologies is fiction, but yes, it is based on my feelings during the time I met Aaron and discovered my homosexuality. Over the years, I hid a lot from myself and from my friends. It was a rough truth to face, especially given my upbringing. I think I got used to hiding and didn't realize how much my fear eroded the important relationships in my life. If this film can help one person to avoid the mistakes I made—the fear and loneliness I faced—then I have accomplished part of my goal."

Greg took Aaron's hand and tugged him forward again.

Aaron shook his head. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes. I do have to do this. You see, I have to do this because I've never been as brave as Alan or Grant were in this story, and certainly not as brave as you, Aaron. I've spent too long afraid to tell you how I feel. Afraid that once you knew, the whole world would know. That somehow people would look at us and see what we mean to each other—what you mean to me—and wouldn't let us be together. The truth is, it was me. I wouldn't let us be together."

Aaron listened in disbelief to his lover's words, not knowing whether to slug Greg or to hug him close.

"Aaron Blake, you are my partner. In body, mind, and soul. Without you, this movie would not exist. I would not exist. I love you. For that, from this day forward, I offer no apologies."

Greg pulled him close and leaned down with a kiss. Soft. Tentative. Full of tender sentiment and unbreakable promises.

Applause caught Aaron on a wave of shared emotion, surrounding him as the audience burst to its feet, acknowledging Greg's words and their relationship. Greg pulled back from the kiss and smiled down at him. Holding hands, they exited the stage to find the after-party.

Hours later, when they slid into the limousine, Aaron still felt dazed. This in no way resembled how he'd envisioned the evening going, and he found himself wondering how he could reconcile the Greg Falkner he knew with the one who held his hand all night and professed undying love before an auditorium full of almost strangers. He'd wanted this for years—waited an eternity. Why, then, did he feel empty as Greg sidled up to him and pulled him close?

"Hey."

"Hey," Aaron answered.

Greg leaned in to kiss him, but Aaron pushed away and placed some distance between them. Silence stretched like a rubber band, ready to snap at the tiniest provocation.

"I guess you don't want to go to the beach."

Aaron heard the implied question in Greg's inflection.

Are we really through?

"You need to give me some time on this one."

"What's there to think about?"

Aaron's head snapped around. He glared at his lover...former lover...friend. God, he didn't know what he meant to him anymore.

"While I appreciate tonight's gesture...and it means more to me than I probably let on...I need you to back off."

"So now wouldn't be the time to offer to move in?"

"No." Aaron sighed, wondering when their relationship had turned into an episode of *Queer as Folk*. "Now would not be the time."

"Was it the film?"

"No." Was it? "Yes."

"Fuck."

"You've had months...shit...years to contemplate this film and everything it means." He closed his eyes and let the leather seat cushion his head. "I haven't thought about high school since it happened."

"This wasn't exactly the reaction I anticipated."

Aaron kept his eyes shut. He felt tired. He wanted his bed.

"Well, maybe if you thought about things from someone else's perspective once in a while, you might have seen this, and a lot of other things, coming."

Greg didn't answer, and Aaron warmed to his diatribe.

"You know, I should have heard all this from you a long time ago. I shouldn't have seen it on a movie screen, and I damn sure shouldn't have heard it for the first time in front of several hundred people. And what the fuck was with displaying our sex life to the world?"

He felt like a heartsick chick as he lambasted Greg for his insensitivity, but he was through holding back, playing games, trying carefully to mold Greg into the man he wanted him to be.

"I don't know what you were watching, Aaron, but we left a lot to the imagination in the film."

"You know better than anyone, sex isn't always about skin."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Yes. Was that shit about your father true?"

"Basically." Greg looked away when Aaron caught his eye. "John didn't exist, and the methods were different."

"Fuck, Greg! That's not the kind of thing you keep a secret for almost ten years!"

"Any other questions?"

Aaron thought on it.

"You never had any siblings, did you?"

"No."

"Just checking. How in the hell did you come up with that plot line?"

He heard the whisper of starched material as Greg shrugged. "I needed a good excuse."

Greg examined the square cut of his nails as if he wanted to bite them. God, he hadn't seen him do that since sophomore year.

"For what?"

"For how big of an asshole I am."

Aaron sighed. "Save it."

"Fine. The plot was for dramatic impact. It's fiction, for chrissakes." Greg's hand fell to the seat. "What else do you want to know?"

"Dunno. Why fear makes you into such a cunty bitch?"

He got a glare for that one. Fair enough. He probably deserved it.

"If you were watching the movie, then you'd know why."

"Because your father was a raving lunatic, and you have an overdeveloped fight response as a result?"

Greg shifted to the opposite seat. "If I hurt people first, they're hurting me because I made them do it."

"Well, that's insightful but not entirely true. Not anymore." Unless you counted sex, but Aaron hardly wanted to bring up intimacy at a time like this.

"In case you hadn't noticed, it was set in the past."

"Yeah, well, your present isn't looking all that bright either."

Aaron knew his words probably stung—had ample proof in the heightened color along Greg's cheeks—but for once, he couldn't find it in himself to care. God, had he really sunk that low? Had loving Greg all these years reduced him to this?

"Anything else you want to get off your chest?" Greg asked.

"I can't believe you made yourself into a famous stripper."

"What?"

"When you ran away to New York you were bussing tables for minimum wage." Aaron snorted. "I found you living in the Y. And your temp was one hundred four, not six."

"Do you think that was more dramatic? Would be more interesting to watch?"

"I think you're a narcissistic shit."

"Takes one to—" Greg clamped his mouth shut, and his nostrils flared. Aaron could almost hear him counting to ten before he spoke again. "Yes. You're right. I could have written the story more truthfully there, but it wouldn't have been fiction. If I skated too close, especially after what I said tonight, people would recognize themselves, and I'd be sued."

"I think you're still going to be sued."

"Really?" Greg blanched. "By whom?"

"Me!"

"You don't... Fine. Anything else?"

Aaron looked out the window as the limo left the 405 for 110. They were almost to Greg's place.

"Yeah. Lots. But I think you've got the gist."

"Mind if I add something to the mix?"

"Knock yourself out."

"You're right. I should have done things differently. I fucked up. I thought, you know, especially after the other night, the only thing that would fix us was a grand gesture on my part. If I'd stopped to consider your feelings, I wouldn't have done it that way. With the speech and all."

"The speech I don't really take exception to. It's the film. You planned it years ago. This wasn't a last-minute decision. And unlike Alan, I never had access to your little black books. I had much less notice and zero input."

Greg frowned. "You were already out."

Aaron could have forgiven him his confusion if his words weren't completely insensitive and totally typical. It amazed him, really, that he'd kicked Greg's ass only once in the entire time they'd known each other.

"Sure, but I would have liked some warning before I relived shadows of my miserable youth in front of—" Aaron waved his hand.

He didn't mean to diminish the beauty of the film or of Greg's accomplishments. Right now, however, he had to get all this out before it poisoned their relationship even more.

"It wasn't all miserable."

Memories of him and Greg rolling in the field, thrashing in that swimming pool, flitted through his mind. He smiled. Perhaps, in the film, the exact location and circumstances differed, but the end result rang true to life.

"No. It wasn't all miserable."

"Especially for you."

"Especially for me?" Now Aaron really wanted to punch something. "What the fuck do you know? I haven't spoken to my family in years, thanks to you! At least you have your grandfather."

It was nice of Greg to give Aaron a doting gay uncle in the film, but that had hardly been the case. Instead, Greg's gampy offered their sole means of support during those first years. Now that Aaron thought on it, he figured Gampy had morphed into Gan for privacy reasons, but he'd save that question for later.

"You have him too."

"He's not my fucking family!"

Greg cupped his hands in a pleading gesture. It looked so strange coming from him that Aaron's temper melted from sheer shock.

"What?"

"Forgive me?"

Aaron looked out the window, at a loss for words. He didn't know this Greg. Obviously, someone had replaced him with an alien life-form.

The limousine pulled into the lot at Greg's beachside condo, saving Aaron from having to come up with a reply he didn't have.

"Do you want to come in and talk some more?" Greg's voice betrayed no emotion.

Aaron kept his gaze averted. "I think I've said enough."

The limo door opened, and moonlight played off the waves. Their pounding rhythm pulled at Aaron until Greg shut the door.

Greg tapped on the window, and Aaron let it down with a mechanical whir.

"Yeah?"

Greg stretched out his palm.

Frowning, Aaron opened his hand, and a heated piece of metal dropped into his curled fingers.

Greg clenched his fist, closing Aaron's palm around the promise ring.

"I...I really am... I'm sorry." Greg blew out a breath, and even in the moonlight, Aaron could tell his face had turned beet red. "I know you're hurt, but I know you love me. I'll be here when you're ready to give this back."

What the fuck?

Greg pulled his hand away, and Aaron watched him walk toward the stretch of beach between his condo and the next. The limo moved, jolting Aaron out of his daze. He pressed the intercom.

"Stop the car."

The vehicle slowed, and he rolled up the passenger window before getting out. He let the driver go and stood alone in the car park, watching Greg take off his clothes in the distance. Belatedly, it dawned on him that he planned to go swimming.

Was he nuts? He couldn't go in the North Pacific in late November without risking hypothermia. Aaron broke into a run, determined to get to Greg before he landed himself in the emergency room. Stupid self-destructive fuck.

When he hit the sand, Greg had disappeared. Aaron searched the waves, fear holding him captive.

He prepared to peel off his own clothes and dive into the surf in hopes of finding his idiot partner, when a deep voice rumbled into his ear, sending chills down his spine.

"Want a wet suit?"

"Shit!" Aaron whirled, poised to strike. "You asshole."

Greg's palms came out to stave Aaron off. A wet suit dangled from one hand, a beach towel from the other.

"What'd I do now?"

Aaron pulled the promise ring from his pocket and shoved it at Greg's naked chest. "Put it back on."

"Why?"

"Because I never said you could take it off."

One corner of Greg's mouth quirked, and he slid the ring back onto the third finger of his right hand.

Aaron took the towel and spread it out.

They sat facing the waves, knees drawn up. Aaron kicked off his shoes and socks to dig his toes in the sand.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

A shiver belied Greg's reply, and Aaron pulled him close to share his body heat.

Moonlight glimmered off the surf crashing to shore. The ocean was a moody mistress—she could present you with the perfect wave or a watery grave on a whim, never caring which so long as it pleased her. That was precisely what made her so exciting—her power and unpredictability.

"Never take that ring off again."

"I won't."

"I'm serious."

"I know."

Silence stretched between them again until Greg said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Are you angry because I took control away from you tonight?"

Well, that wasn't the question he'd expected.

"You think I'm like the guy you wrote? Into controlling you?"

"I think I'm not your responsibility."

"It's not—" Aaron started to say it wasn't like that, but another thought occurred to him. "Do you want me to control you?"

"No. But I like that you're in control."

"Jesus." Aaron looked down at the top of Greg's head and ruffled his hair playfully. "Wonders never cease."

"Don't take that as an invitation to start bossing me around."

"I won't." Frankly, he'd probably have a better shot at controlling the tides. "But you have to try being a little less prone to pushing things to the brink. Furthermore, you're not stupid. You know exactly why I'm pissed."

Greg made a noncommittal sound.

"So you really want to move in with me?"

"Yes."

The answer came more quickly—more confidently—than Aaron expected.

"Mind if I ask you one more thing?"

"Course not."

"Why'd you buy us the rings?" Aaron stared down at his hand. "If you weren't ready to be out?"

"Because I wanted to be ready."

In its own screwed up way, that actually made sense.

"How—"

"Aaron?"

"Yeah?"

"Stop yammering like a girl and fuck me."

Greg found himself flat on his back in the sand, exactly where he wanted. Aaron loomed above him like Apollo, a golden halo shining around him even in the silvered moonlight, so that in his vision, Greg had the sun, the moon, and the stars.

The universe existed in his lover's arms. Aaron's mouth claimed him with a soul-stealing kiss—tongue and lips moving heaven above and earth below. Greg gasped as the emptiness within him retreated, replaced with Aaron's essence.

Salt and sand. Cocoa butter and musk. The sound of the rushing waves.

His senses heightened as Aaron filled his mouth with deliberate, dancing strokes of his tongue.

"Want you," Greg said on a gasp.

Aaron groaned. "Lube."

"Wet suit pocket."

Aaron stilled above him.

"You knew."

Greg waggled his eyebrows. He landed on his stomach, sand scraping his abs, towel muffling his grunt as Aaron yanked his trunks past his protesting cock and slapped him once on the ass.

"Ow!"

"I owe you more than that, but it's gonna hafta wait until after I ream your ass."

Hips surging upward in open invitation, Greg looked over his shoulder at his personal god. Aaron knelt behind him, lubing his cock with his fist.

"Aaron." He wanted to clear the record. "I didn't know. I hoped." God, how he'd hoped.

Aaron's hand paused mid stroke, his smoky, half-lidded stare a threat and a promise.

"I know." He fell forward against Greg's back, both arms going to either side of his shoulders. "But it was more fun when I had something to growl at you for."

Greg dropped his head to hide his grin.

"I'm sure I can think of something else to piss you off."

"I'm sure you can." Aaron slid against his entrance, the heated touch delivering a pleasurable jolt to already overloaded nerve endings. "I always figured you did it on purpose."

Aaron entered him full bore.

Greg grunted, falling forward on his elbows, giving himself over to the pounding.

Sticky with lube, encrusted with sand, Aaron's palm grasped him. Shit. If he moved, that would hurt.

"Say it."

He thought he knew what Aaron wanted to hear.

"I love you."

Aaron's fist tightened as he sank into him over and over. The sound of slapping bodies vied with crashing waves as Greg struggled to think coherently.

He tried "I'm sorry," choking on the unfamiliar words as he uttered them.

White light flashed behind closed lids. Greg was perilously close to coming even while Aaron's hand abraded him. Apparently, those words didn't satisfy Aaron either. What then? A thought whizzed through his lust-soaked brain, and he latched on to it like a drowning man to a life preserver.

"I was going to ask you to be my partner." He panted. "Vermont."

Aaron stilled, his hand falling away.

"Shit, Greg."

Worried now, thinking he'd revealed too much at the wrong moment again, Greg looked over his shoulder at Aaron.

"Wasn't that it?"

"No." Moonbeams played like sheet lightning across Aaron's hair as he tossed it out of his eyes. "It wasn't."

Aaron gripped his shoulders and began to move again. A series of full strokes split Greg open on levels he'd never dreamed existed. Spiritually. Physically. Every move Aaron made from that moment heightened their pleasure and their connection. God, he loved this man. Would never get enough of him.

Greg tried to fist himself—to bring himself over with Aaron—but the sand sticking to his cock made him gasp against the burn. Ever responsive, always attentive, Aaron found other ways to stoke his arousal—a pinch to his nipples, the scrape of teeth along his neck, nudging strokes inside him.

“Come for me.” With those words, Aaron carried Greg with him through the curl of a perfect wave.

A long time later, Greg trailed his fingers along the slope of Aaron's pecs and asked, “What did you want me to say before?”

Aaron chuckled, apparently pleased with everything he'd made Greg reveal.

“That you piss me off on purpose...and you'll keep doing it forever.”

Greg grinned. Well, if that was all Aaron wanted...

“Don't you have better uses for that mouth?”

Aaron's arm tightened around Greg's shoulder.

“No. But I have one for yours.”

And to Greg's delight, he did.

 THE END 

Loose Id Titles by Tibby Armstrong

No Apologies

Tibby Armstrong

Tibby Armstrong's reading tastes extend from biography to romance and science fiction/fantasy, but in her world no story is quite right without a love interest. In fact, her favorite books always feature edgy alpha heroes and the women or men who drive him to distraction.

Tibby holds a B.A. in English from The University of Connecticut and is studying for a Master's of Library Science. When not writing, she works toward defying librarian stereotypes; yet, she lives with four cats, two computers, and enough books to collapse a poorly engineered house.

She enjoys hearing from readers at tibby@tibbyarmstrong.com.