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SAMANTHA KANE
*Cherry
Pie*



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the New South. And to small towns and cities everywhere that are struggling to find their place in a rapidly changing world. Second chances aren't just for people.

“If Heaven” by Gretchen Peters (sung by Andy Griggs)

*If heaven was a pie it would be cherry
So cool and sweet and heavy on the tongue.
And just one bite would satisfy your hunger
And there'd always be enough for everyone.*

Chapter One

He was there again, sitting in the shade of the scraggly crape myrtle across the street. This was the third day in a row. Well, the second day. He'd arrived two nights ago. So two nights and two days. Not that John was counting.

He looked young, but it was hard to tell from here. He was wearing baggy jeans and a dark hoodie, definitely not your typical Thursday morning uniform here in Mercury, North Carolina. At least not that John had seen in his few months here.

John took a sip of his coffee. It was still too hot. He wished he could figure out how to lower the temperature on the machine, but that kind of shit had been Steve's job. John hated little gadgets like espresso machines. Which was ironic considering he'd made his fortune as a computer programmer and designer. But the Italian monstrosity that Steve had insisted on didn't come with a keyboard. It barely came with instructions. Steve had fallen instantly in love with it and talked to the damn

thing every morning he'd been home.

With a shaky hand John set his coffee down on the table in the entryway. He blew out a breath and ran his hands through his hair, which felt a little greasy and very messy. He unlocked the door. Now was as good a time as any to find out who this guy was and what he wanted.

As soon as he stepped out the front door onto his beat-up porch, the guy put his book down and stood up, his hands shoved in his pockets. He looked defensive. Not in a threatening way, just wary.

"Are you casing the joint?" John called out congenially. He casually leaned against the post at the top of the stairs. It was a big wraparound porch, the kind that made him think of a younger America—families on the porch after church on Sunday, kids and dogs running up and down the steps while the grown-ups rocked on the porch and sipped lemonade and mint juleps. It was why John had bought the house. That and the backyard.

"No," the guy answered. His voice was deep. He hadn't even had to yell. John had heard that bass tone easily, spoken from across the quiet street. *No kid, then.*

John waited, but there was nothing more forthcoming. He frowned and pursed his lips. Thought about going back in. Rejected that plan. "What are you doing here, then?"

The guy looked down and scuffed his shoe in the dirt. "That was my mama's house."

A jolt of surprise went through John. "They told me there was no family. I bought the house at auction."

The guy nodded and looked to his right, down the street. "Yes, sir. They couldn't find me. I've been gone awhile."

They stood there for a few more minutes, the stranger studiously not looking at John, and John staring holes through him. Finally he turned to John, and his direct stare shocked John enough to make him straighten up and take a step back.

"I just wanted to come in for a minute," he said. He spoke quietly, but that voice of his carried on the cool morning air. "I just want to walk around for a bit."

John shut his ears to the grief in the other man's voice. "No." He turned and went back inside.

The day grew warm. And humid. John wasn't used to the Southern weather. Cool spring in the morning, hot summer by afternoon. Well, hot for him. People around here laughed when he called it hot. That did not bode well, in his opinion, for the summer.

He was still there. He'd taken his hoodie off and wore a faded red T-shirt underneath. Still, he had to be

suffering in those jeans. By midday that crape myrtle wasn't offering much shade anymore. His back was against it as he sat there watching the house, his gaze wandering up and down the street now and then. He had one knee bent and his arm rested on it, pointing to nowhere. A Southern David, waiting for the touch of Robert E. Lee to bring him back to life.

John wondered why no one else found his presence odd. None of his neighbors had come out to investigate. No one had called the cops. True, he wasn't doing much more than sitting there. His neighbors probably thought he belonged to John. They didn't know what to make of that Californian who'd bought the old Meecham place. John's lips quirked in wry amusement. He didn't know what to do with him either.

He turned resolutely away from the window. Lunch was over. Back to work.

At dusk he was gone. John was irritated that he was worried about him. Did he have a place to stay? He knew he had no family around here.

He shook it off. The stranger's voice, his demeanor, everything about him told John that he wasn't as young as he'd first thought. He had the patience of Job to sit out there waiting. A man had to learn that the hard way. John knew all about waiting.

John didn't go look first thing in the morning. He forced himself to keep to his routine. Not that there was much to it. Roll out of bed, run his hand through his hair, and pull a T-shirt on over his flannel pajama pants. Steve had hated those pants. He complained they made him hot, lying there next to John. So John left them off when Steve was home. He didn't have to worry about that now. He could wear them whenever he wanted.

This morning's T-shirt was blue. He'd bought it at a Walmart in Oklahoma City on the drive from California to North Carolina, just because he could. Just because he'd never bought a shirt at Walmart before.

He turned on the coffee machine. *Good Morning*, the LCD screen said. *Your espresso machine is heating.*

"Good morning," John automatically replied. He'd started talking to the machine the morning he knew Steve wasn't coming back. He didn't want it to get lonely.

He stared out the kitchen window to the backyard. He'd gotten quite a bit done out there yesterday. He was replacing the fence. The old one had been falling down when he moved in. It was the first major job he had to do outside. He was going to get the yard in shape before he tackled the front porch. And the house needed to be painted. He'd never done any work like this before. It was slow going.

The gardening was going to be tough. He wasn't a gardener. He didn't have a rapport with plants. But there was no nice Japanese gentleman here that he could hire to come and make his yard bloom year-round with beautiful exotic plants. He'd left Mr. Natsumi in L.A. He'd been one of the hardest things to leave behind. Actually, he was the only thing that was hard to leave behind.

On that depressing thought, John turned back to the coffee machine. *Make your selection*, the screen said.

"Thanks, I will," John answered. "How about a regular cup of normal coffee, not too hot?" Just like every other morning, there was no response. So with a sigh, he grabbed a mug from the cupboard and got his own too-hot espresso.

John finally allowed himself to check about half an hour later. He was back. John stood there in front of the bay window wearing the khakis he'd replaced his flannels with as he sipped his second cup of coffee. That sort of diligence deserved a reward, he supposed. And he could spare a minute or two while he finished his coffee.

He walked over and opened the front door.

Chapter Two

John stood there, his back to the street, his arm straight out as he held the door open, waiting.

He heard the guy cross the street and open the front gate. The slap of his shoes on the concrete changed to a graveled shuffle when he hit the path from the sidewalk to the porch. At that point John simply walked away. He moved off and went to the kitchen, not sure why he'd left him to enter the house on his own.

John leaned his ass against the kitchen counter, right in front of the sink. He could see straight through the house from here, right to the front door. The stranger came in and wiped his feet on the small rug in front of the door for that purpose. John had to smile. At least he'd been raised properly. Idly John wondered if there had been a rug there when this guy's mom owned the house. He pulled the hoodie off and looked up to see John watching him. He had dark blue eyes and really dark brown hair, wavy and thick. That was a nice head of hair.

Bastard. John had always wanted hair like that.

“May I come in?” he asked. His manners should have seemed out of place, but instead they somehow added depth to the picture he made standing there in his tattered clothes with his thick, messy hair.

John waved a hand in front of him like Vanna revealing the letter of the day. “Be my guest,” he said politely. “You wore me down.”

He was a big one. Taller than John by several inches, he barely cleared the low door frames of the old house. His shoulders were wider than they ought to be, as if they used to belong to someone who had more bulk than this tall, lean, young man. John watched him as he turned and closed the front door, producing a quiet *snick* in the heavy silence. He set a raggedy gym bag down on the floor.

When he turned back to John, he rubbed his palms nervously on his thighs. “Thanks for letting me come in.”

John tipped his head. “What do you want?” He was merely curious. He found himself strangely detached today.

“Just to look around,” he said in rush. “I swear. I just wanted to see the old house. I’ll leave soon.” He had a thick accent. *Swear* came out more like *sway-eh*. It was a good thing John was getting good at the local lingo.

“You waited outside for days just to look around for

a few minutes?" John was suspiciously disbelieving.

His visitor smiled, and all vestiges of youth fell away. "This old place has got a hold on me, you know?"

John shook his head. "No." And he really didn't. He'd never been that attached to any place. Only one person, and they'd never had a place.

That brown-haired head shook, with pity or perhaps regret. He didn't say anything, just looked around. John could see the memories swirling through his blue eyes. But he revealed nothing. John watched him walk slowly around the living room trailing his hand along the wooden chair rail absentmindedly. He yanked his hand back suddenly and wiped it on his pants again, as if he was afraid he was leaving a stain behind.

"I'm John Ford," he offered.

Guarded eyes met his. "Connor Meecham."

John laughed. "Meecham. Of course."

"Meaning?" Connor wasn't laughing. His tone was flat.

John held his hands up before him, placating. "Nothing. Just that everyone calls this house the Meecham place. If it was your mother's house, then of course you'd be a Meecham."

"Sorry," Connor grumbled, blushing as he looked away.

It was clear Connor had been prepared for something else. Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would say.

“You painted the place.”

John gratefully accepted the change of topic. “Yep. Needed it badly. But I haven’t got much eye for color. I just went with white and some kind of brown the Sherwin-Williams lady called *café au lait*.”

Connor laughed. It sounded rusty. “It’s a nice brown.” He shook his head again. “I can picture my mama here like it was yesterday.”

John didn’t know what to say to that. “You know,” he chose to observe instead, “Southern men are the only ones who can say ‘Mama’ and not sound like idiots.” That earned another rusty laugh. John had the strange fleeting thought that he should keep count. “‘Daddy’ still gives me the heebie-jeebies however.”

The laugh settled into a chuckle. “No ‘Daddy’ here,” came the laconic reply.

John was shocked when he had a flash of that heavy Southern bass whispering “Daddy” in his ear. He shivered. Then he was disgusted with himself. That had never turned him on. And the reality was, he didn’t think it would if Connor Meecham actually did it. It was fantasy material, though.

“May I?” Connor was gesturing up the stairs.

“Be my guest,” John said, surprised at his own hospitality. He followed along a few steps behind Connor. He barely glanced into John’s room on the first floor, which was the master bedroom only because the bathroom was attached. The room was actually smaller than the other bedroom. The bathroom had obviously been an add-on. John followed him up the stairs and at the door to the second bedroom, Connor stopped, his hands gripping the frame. He just stared at the room, empty except for a bed and some boxes full of knickknacks and Steve’s various trophies. Steve’s guitar sat on top of the pile. John forced himself to look away from it.

“Your old room?” John asked quietly.

Connor just nodded. “You haven’t painted it.” It was a statement, not a question.

John looked at the faded gray-blue walls full of nail holes. “No. I don’t really need this room right now. I’m focusing on the main areas and outside first.”

Connor nodded again, and then he turned and walked toward the stairs. “Is it okay if I go out back?”

John almost said no. He was a little embarrassed by the backyard. Not because of what he hadn’t done yet, but because of what he had. At his hesitation, Connor slowed down and looked over his shoulder at John, a question on his face. “Yes, go ahead,” John assured him.

He followed him down and through the kitchen to the back door. His stomach clenched as Connor opened the creaky screen door and stepped out.

John knew the minute he saw it. Connor's shoulders tensed. Then he took the three steps down to the yard and walked over to the little grave under the live oak in the corner.

When John had found the small moss-covered rock in the yard, he hadn't been sure what it was. It was only after he'd cleared all the weeds out that he saw it was a store-bought pet headstone with the name **DIGGER** hand-etched in the stone. For some stupid reason he'd taken it to a trophy shop a couple of towns over and had the name professionally engraved on the stone. It looked brand-new now. He'd even planted some flowers around it. Today it seemed silly to him, what he'd done. All that work to do on the house and the yard, and he'd wasted hours on that little grave.

He waited for Connor to say something smart, trailing after him reluctantly. Instead Connor unexpectedly sank to his knees and laid his forehead on the ground in front of the headstone. His arms came up, and he covered his head as if to protect it, and his shoulders started to shake. It took John a moment to realize he was crying. Bone-shaking, silent sobs racked his big frame and froze John in his tracks.

Without a word John turned around and walked back into the house. He'd been there. Those were private tears, and he left Connor to them.

John busied himself sanding down the posts on the front porch for the next couple of hours, as far from Connor as he could get. He hadn't done any work out front yet, and it was hard going. Eventually he thought he ought to go and check on him. The man had a breakdown in his backyard, after all. And he'd been awfully quiet back there ever since.

When he tentatively pushed open the back door, he was a little scared of what he might find since he'd forgotten about all the sharp tools back there until just a few minutes ago. He was relieved to see Connor just sitting there next to the grave. His knees were bent, and his wrists were resting on them casually. He looked calm and approachable. John released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

He hadn't made any noise that he was aware of, but Connor turned toward him. "I'm all right," he said, and John could hear the truth of that in his voice.

He wandered over to the tree and stood off to Connor's right, in the shade. He felt awkward and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Have you got someplace to stay?" he asked. He hadn't meant to say that, but once

the words were out, he was glad he had. He didn't want to spend another restless night worrying about Connor. He had a lot of work to do around here and needed his sleep.

Connor shook his head. "Not really. I'm just moving around."

John frowned. "What does that mean?"

Connor stood up, resting one fist on the ground as he gracefully came to one knee and then rose. "It means you don't have to worry about me." His soft smile took the sting out his dismissive words.

John sighed. "I wish it were that easy to turn it off," he said apologetically, "but I suffer from overactive worry."

"I'll be all right, Mr. Ford," Connor told him. "But thanks."

"Come on," John said. He turned toward the separate garage. "I know a place." He turned back to see Connor watching him, his face unreadable. "Do you have anything you need to get? Besides your bag?"

They stood like that for a minute, a silent tug-of-war between them. Finally Connor shook his head. "No, sir. Nothing."

John knew that was a lie. There was a lot that Connor needed. But he wasn't going to find it here. He turned and walked to the garage, listening to Connor's

footsteps as he turned back to the house to get his bag.

Chapter Three

“Want to talk about it?” Mr. Ford asked quietly as he turned onto Bergamot Street.

He hadn’t asked for directions. He must have been in Mercury for a while, then. Conn had been surprised to find him in Mama’s house. He’d just assumed the house would be there, empty. But of course the bank sold it. Of course they did. What choice did they have when he didn’t respond to their letters?

“About what?” He stuck to the man’s question. He’d found that was the best way to get along.

“Want to start with the dog?” The car turned slowly again. It was a little sports car, something Italian. Conn hadn’t paid that much attention. The two of them barely fit in the thing. Conn didn’t see the point, personally. And Ford looked uncomfortable in it too.

Conn saw Harper’s Quick Mart had gone out of business. The strip mall beside the empty building had one business left, a tax preparer of some kind. A lot had

died in his absence it seemed, including Mercury. "His name was Digger."

"Really? Gee, I never would have guessed."

Conn wasn't surprised by the sarcasm of his response. He almost smiled at how mild it was. He was used to a lot more abuse than that. This poor guy would never have survived if he'd been where Conn had.

"I got him from my dad. I was about five, I guess. He was the diggingest dog I ever saw." Ford smiled. Conn couldn't pin this guy down. Why was he being so nice? What did he want?

"I think that's the most you've said today." They slowed to a stop at a red light. "Why did you cry?"

"Who wouldn't have?" Conn replied. He sighed. "Let's just say I've been to a bad place, and coming back to the best place I ever had..." He let the thought trail off as he continued to stare out the window. "I used to own this town," he said a few moments later.

"Literally or figuratively?" Ford asked as he pulled the car to a stop at the curb on Freemont Street. Conn stared at the Methodist church there and felt as if he were looking at a ghost.

He turned to Ford. "I was the all-American captain of the football team," he told him with a wry smile. "Most likely to succeed with the cheerleaders."

“Ah,” Ford said in understanding. “Figuratively, then.” He looked across the street, and Conn followed his gaze to a nondescript house with a small sign in the yard proclaiming it EPSON HOUSE.

“What is this place?” Conn asked as he opened the door and got out. Ford got out too and waited while Conn grabbed his bag from the small shelf that passed as a backseat.

“It’s a shelter and halfway house.”

Conn laughed. “I hope I’m past halfway, but thanks.”

“Come on,” Ford said again, walking toward the house, and again Conn followed him. He wasn’t sure why, except that he had nowhere else to be and nothing else to do. “How long have you been gone?” Ford asked.

Conn didn’t have to think about it. “Almost eight years.”

Ford looked surprised. “Eight years? How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

He shook his head. “You don’t look it. I had you pegged at barely legal.”

“Still have some scruples left, huh?” Conn asked without thinking. He jerked his head around to stare at Ford as soon as he said it.

“Hmm,” Ford said mildly, “I didn’t think it was that obvious. Only a few people in town have figured out I’m gay.” He pinned Conn with a sharp gaze. “How did you know?”

Conn wasn’t going to get into that. Not here, not now, and not with this stranger. He’d dealt with enough personal demons today. They just stared at each other, neither giving anything away.

“Mr. Ford?” A voice interrupted the stare down, and they both turned to the house. A man stood in the doorway: average height, sandy brown hair, polite smile on his face. When Ford turned to him, he stepped out with his hand outstretched. He stopped a few steps away, and his hand fell to his side. “Conn? Connor Meecham?” he asked incredulously.

“Hey, Evan,” Conn said. Personal demons indeed. He’d thought he’d have more time. But no, the past was about to slap him upside the head.

A big grin split Evan’s face. “Good God!” He grabbed Conn’s hand and pumped it up and down. “We thought you were dead. Couldn’t think of anything else that would keep you away from your mama’s funeral.”

Conn smiled ruefully. “Nope, not dead. But the state of Georgia found something to keep me away.”

Evan’s gaze narrowed. He looked between Conn and Ford. “You’ve been out to your mama’s?”

Conn nodded. "Yeah. Mr. Ford here was nice enough to give me a ride."

"Why here?" Evan asked with a frown. "Toby's still in town, you know, and a bunch of the other guys."

Ford wasn't going to help. He just stood there, watching the awkward reunion. "I need a place to stay."

Evan scratched his jaw with his thumb. "There's a new motel not far down 87," he answered as if Conn had been asking for directions. "But that's about it. Most people just pass through on the way to and from the beach. You know the drill."

Conn blew out a breath that fluttered the hair on his forehead. He laid his cards on the table. "I just got off probation and out of rehab, Evan. I've got no job and no money. So Ford brought me here. I didn't even know you ran the place."

Evan looked as if he'd been smacked with a two-by-four for a second. He recovered quickly with a little shake of his head. "I'm a pastor now at the Unitarian church on Summit. You remember?"

Conn nodded, glad Evan had chosen to address that rather than his checkered past. Evan glanced over at Ford. He placed his hand lightly on Conn's upper arm and pulled him toward the house. "Come on. Let's talk." He smiled at Ford. "Thanks for bringing him, John."

Ford finally spoke. "I'm glad I did now. Take care of

him, Evan.” He turned to Conn and held his hand out. “Good luck, Connor.”

Conn shook his hand and was dismayed at how reluctant he was to let go. Strangers were easy. He closed his eyes briefly and felt a quick squeeze of his hand before Ford let go. He opened his eyes to see Ford giving him an understanding look. “Go on,” Ford said quietly. Conn turned to Evan with a deep breath, and he went.

“What happened, Conn?” Evan asked quietly after they entered his office and he closed the door.

“You run this place for the church?” Conn asked instead of answering. He needed a minute.

“Yes and no. It’s a nonprofit run by several churches. Today is my day to man the house.”

Conn was staring out the window, watching the street. It was going to be hot today. Probably rain this afternoon. He heard Evan’s office chair squeak as he moved behind him.

“How do you know Ford?” Conn was more than a little interested in that. He wasn’t sure exactly why and wasn’t in the mood to analyze it.

“He’s a big donor to the charity that runs this house. I hit him up for money as soon as he moved in.”

“I’m not surprised you’re a pastor. You were always

a good kid. Easy to talk to.”

“I had a crush on you in high school.” Evan sounded amused. “Did you know that?”

Conn looked warily over his shoulder. “Yeah, I knew.”

“And you were still nice to me. And because you were, everyone was. If Conn Meecham didn’t mind, well, then, nobody else did. High school here could have been hell for me. Instead it was great.” He fiddled with a pen on his desk. “People expected me to leave here, you know, because I’m gay.” He gave Conn a hard stare. “I stayed because of you. Because you made this town accept me so I didn’t have to leave. I’ll never forget that, what you did.”

Conn blew it off with a dismissive wave. “You were a good kid. Nobody cared.” Conn leaned against the window frame and crossed his arms. “Mama always told me you get what you give, Evan. I guess you owe me. You gonna save my soul now?”

Evan snorted. “I think your soul is just fine. Now tell me what happened.”

“You remember I blew my knee out?” Conn asked.

“Yeah, your freshman year at Georgia Tech, right?”

Conn nodded. “I guess that’s where my road forked.”

“Your mama said you kept your scholarship. For

how long?"

Conn laughed without humor. "Not at all. I just told her that so she wouldn't worry. It was a football scholarship. No football, no scholarship. Good-bye, Tech." He saluted sarcastically.

Evan was listening with a puzzled look. "Why didn't you just come home?"

"After my big send-off? Hometown boy makes good? Gonna set the world on fire with his fine football skills?" Conn shook his head with a disgusted snort. "I was too proud to come back with my tail between my legs. Afraid to shame Mama."

Evan sighed. "It wouldn't have been like that."

"I know." Conn walked over to the old chair facing Evan's desk and sat, suddenly tired. "I got addicted to the pain pills they gave me. I wasn't thinking straight."

"How did you get from there to prison?"

Conn winced. "I didn't go to prison exactly. I did my time in county." He shrugged. "Just the same, I suppose."

"Did you know she'd died, before you came back?" Evan spoke in that quiet, nonjudgmental way his therapist in prison had. It was soothing and annoying at the same time.

"Yeah, I knew. The local paper's on the Internet. I kept up."

Thankfully Evan let that drop. "What were you in for?"

"Possession." Conn leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as he clasped his hands and looked at the floor. "Panhandling." He looked up at Evan and gave him a weak smile when he saw the knowledge on Evan's face. "I had a good lawyer, a good guy. He got the charge changed from prostitution to panhandling."

Evan shook his head. "Aw, Conn, jeez."

Conn fell back in the chair and blew out a breath. "That actually felt good, to get telling someone out of the way."

"How long have you been clean?" Evan asked, all business.

"Two years," Conn automatically answered. "I haven't had so much as a cigarette in two years."

"Have you been tested?"

Conn nodded. "Yeah, regular drug tests and HIV tests. I'm clean. I've got the paperwork."

"Good," Evan said. "You'll need it to get a job." He sighed. "I don't know how easy things are going to be here for you. You're not the boy who left Mercury."

"That's why I'm here," Conn replied evenly. "Somewhere along the way I lost him. I think I left him here, and I'm trying to find him."

Evan gave him a friendly smile. “I hope we can help, Conn. I really do.”

Conn stood up. “Me too, Evan.”

Chapter Four

John's coffee cup stopped halfway to his mouth, and then he lowered it and set it on the table. He walked over and opened the front door.

"You sleep there last night?" he asked Connor, who was sitting on the top porch step.

Connor dusted off the step, and John saw it was the one with a set of handprints embedded in the concrete. "Nah. I slept at Evan's."

"House or shelter?" John wasn't sure why he asked that or why he cared.

"Shelter."

"What time did you get here?"

Connor shrugged. "After sunrise."

John laughed. "Had to be just barely. It's only eight o'clock now, and you look like you've been here awhile." He went over and got his coffee and stepped out on the porch, closing the door behind him. He sat down on the

other side of the step, about two feet between him and Connor. "How'd you get here?"

Connor lifted his leg and shook his foot. "Walked."

"You don't talk much, do you?" John took a tentative sip of his coffee. Still too hot.

"Sure I do."

When nothing else came from Connor, John smiled as he blew on his coffee to cool it. "Sure you do," he agreed.

"I told Evan I was gonna look for a job today."

"Did you?" John looked over at Connor. He didn't seem in a rush to get to work.

"Yep."

John sighed. "Where?" Now he was doing it.

"Here." Connor looked at him then. "He was the last thing my daddy gave me before he died. Seeing that grave..." He looked away. "It was like losing them all again, right there."

He was talking about the dog. John didn't say anything for a minute or two. What was he supposed to say? "I could use help with the fence," he finally offered.

"I thought you could," Connor said.

They sat in silence while John finished his coffee.

“What am I supposed to pay you?” John asked while they were taking a break a few hours later. They were sitting in the shade of the live oak, drinking a Coke. Apparently a “Coke” was any kind of soft drink in the South. John wondered how much that kind of advertising cost.

“What do you want to pay me?” Connor asked. He didn’t sound as if he cared one way or the other. He was just content to dig postholes and hammer nails, sweating in the humidity. John wished he could be so agreeable.

“Nothing.”

Connor just grinned at him, showing him a dimple, and then took a drink from the sweating can. A drop of water ran down Connor’s pinkie and onto his wrist, and then John lost it in the dark hair on his forearm.

“What’s the going rate?” John asked, and then he took a drink too.

“For making an ex-con dig postholes in the midday heat? Room and board.”

John paused with his can halfway to his mouth and slanted a look at Connor. He was still sitting there all relaxed and casual, but there was a watchful stillness about him that told John he was expecting a refusal. He’d framed it like a joke. John could pretend that was how he took it. He went ahead and took the drink, looking away from Connor, giving himself time to think

about it.

He didn't think too long. Being in this house alone had been harder than John thought. Maybe he was being selfish and not thinking it through, things Steve had always accused him of. But he didn't want to be alone anymore.

"All right," he said, rolling to his knees and standing up. "But you've got to clean that room up." He couldn't do it. Moving Steve's things in there had been hard enough.

"I don't need much space."

John had to laugh as he took in Connor's six-plus feet as the other man stood up. "Nope, not much," he agreed and was rewarded with the crooked smile and dimple again.

They walked back over to where the fence posts were piled in the yard. Connor picked one up and then shoved it in a hole he'd already dug. He worked it in by twisting it from side to side, and John had to pause to admire the muscles in his arms as they rippled with his movements. He was lean, but it was clear by the way he moved that those muscles had been around a long time.

"What are you gonna do with the stretch over there?" Connor asked, pointing at the far side of the yard. The fence was covered in vines.

"Cut it out, I suppose," John answered. He hadn't

really thought that far ahead. His new philosophy was taking it day by day. He hadn't gone crazy yet under that plan. The look Connor gave him made him reassess that conclusion. "Or not?" he asked.

"You know what you got there?" Connor asked.

"Um, no," John answered. "Clearly I do not."

Connor shook his head and his lips flattened for moment. "That is a healthy wisteria vine," Connor lectured him. "Took years to grow along the fence." He pointed to the trees. "Now, you got to cut it off those trees, or it'll kill 'em. Have you seen wisteria in bloom?"

John just shook his head.

Connor grinned, and John's shoulders relaxed. Surprise skittered through him. He hadn't realized he'd tensed up with Connor's disapproval. He huffed a disgusted sigh at himself. He wasn't supposed to let other people's disapproval bother him anymore. Right.

"Big bunches of purple flowers," Connor said, holding his hands apart in front of him with the fencepost held in place against his chest. "About this big. Look just like grape clusters." Connor sniffed loudly with a look of pure bliss on his face. "Smell as pretty as anything. Prettier, even."

John contemplated the fence so Connor wouldn't catch him staring at him. John hadn't seen him so animated since they'd met. He must really love those

flowers. "Can we fix the fence without killing them?"

Connor leaned his crossed arms on the fencepost and nodded as he looked at the vine. "I think so. We need to trim it anyway. It'll take over if you don't tame it. If we slide the new posts in one at a time before we take out the old, it should be all right."

John tipped his head to the side as he tried to imagine what Connor was saying. He nodded. "It might work." He looked at Connor. "How do you know so much about it?"

Connor laughed and began to fill in the hole around the post. "Who do you think did the yard work around here? Mama supervised. I did the sweating."

John grinned and squatted by the hole, packing the dirt around the post. "Yeah? Her own personal yard slave?"

Connor snorted. "Yard, house, you name it. We spent years fixin' up this old house only to start all over again. First my dad, then me." Connor wiped his face with the bottom of his T-shirt, the same faded one he'd worn yesterday. John froze as he came face-to-face with Connor's flat, pale stomach, a line of dark hair slicing down the middle to the low-rider waist of his jeans. A strip of plaid boxers was visible above his waistband.

John's mind went blank as his body sat up and pointed like a hunting dog. The shock of awareness that

went through him actually made him jerk back from Connor, and he fell on his ass in a clumsy sprawl.

Connor gave him a funny look. "You all right? Maybe the heat's gettin' to you. People who aren't used to it find they wear out pretty quickly." Then, without any preamble, he whipped the shirt off over his head, wiped his face and neck with it, and tucked it into the back waistband of those damn faded jeans.

John found himself facing lean, hard pecs covered by a fine layer of dark, curly hair. His mouth went dry, and he scrambled to his feet.

"The heat. Yes. The goddamned heat." He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his hand, backing away from Connor. "I need a minute. I'll be back." He turned and had to force himself not to run to the house.

Once inside he sat down at the kitchen table and put his head between his knees. The tears burned behind his eyes, and he welcomed the sting. Not since Steve... He couldn't finish the thought. It was the heat, he convinced himself. It wasn't Connor. It was the heat and the physical exertion and the unexpected sight of a naked man. Half-naked. Thank God, only half-naked.

After a few minutes he sat up, under control. This wouldn't be a problem. It hadn't been a problem in a long time. He could handle Connor being here. He was just so damn glad not to be alone anymore.

“You ready?” John asked.

It was early evening, and Connor was sitting on the back steps, drinking a bottle of water. He nodded. “Yeah.”

They were going to get Connor’s things from the shelter. John watched as Connor unraveled his tall body from the step and walked toward him. The sun was getting lower in the sky behind him, making it hard to see his face. It outlined his rangy frame perfectly, and John forced himself to turn away.

“I can walk over.”

John frowned. “Don’t be ridiculous. I can drive.” He jerked a little when he felt Connor’s warm, rough hand wrap around his upper arm, stopping him.

“Are you sure you want me here?” Connor asked, and John looked from the large hand on him to Connor’s unsmiling face.

“Yes,” John lied. “I’m sure.”

Connor let go of him, and they walked to the garage.

Chapter Five

Conn was sitting on the front steps. John liked that; he could tell. He liked to see Conn there when he got up in the morning. Conn always woke up early. A habit formed in jail, he supposed. He could hardly remember if he'd done it before that. Didn't much matter if he did. He did it now.

He took a sip of John's hot coffee. Man, this shit was strong. He wondered if the hair on his chest was growing with each sip. The thought made him grin. He'd been drinking it for two weeks now. You'd think he'd be used to it. Two weeks of hot, backbreaking work in the sun, getting that fence up with John. Two weeks of not having to watch what he said or how he acted or worry about where he was going to be tomorrow. Two weeks of pure heaven, watching John sweat and curse and struggle to make something out of this old house, and then falling into bed in his own space.

His grin faded as he looked down at his childish

handprints in the concrete of the top step. He dusted his hand over them. He remembered the day he'd done it. His daddy was pouring the concrete, and Conn wouldn't leave him alone. So he'd let him make his mark. He'd run all over town telling everyone to come and see "his" steps. He sighed and took another sip. Burned his tongue on it too.

He heard the door open behind him. "Can't we cool this stuff off?" he asked. "Burns my damn tongue every morning."

"You can't," John told him. Conn heard him settle in the little wooden rocking bench on the porch. "I've tried. Put ice in it."

"If I wanted iced coffee, I suppose that's what I'd make." Conn froze. He still had to watch his temper. He didn't want to go. Not yet. He closed his eyes, waiting for John to kick him out.

"Then get your own coffeemaker," John replied casually. "No one said you had to drink my coffee if you lived here."

Conn forced his shoulders to relax. He wasn't going to admit he couldn't afford a Mr. Coffee yet. "You want me to start on the porch today?" He didn't want to be out front, not yet. But the porch needed it. Bad. This old thing was barely holding on. Conn smoothed his hand over the prints in the step again. "This concrete is all

cracked. Gonna have to put in new.”

“I don’t know what I want.”

Conn chuckled. “When you know, tell me.”

“You’ll be the first.”

Conn sighed and looked up at the porch posts. “Those are still good. Just need some paint. I see you started sanding them.”

John groaned. “I hate sanding.”

“I’ll do it.” Conn meant it. He didn’t mind. He liked being outside. He liked sweating in the sun and working hard. It made him feel alive, productive. Free.

“I’ll let you.” John stood up behind him. “More coffee?” Conn heard the laughter in his voice and finally turned to look at him. He was wearing those red-and-blue plaid pajama bottoms again. He wore those every morning. They made Conn smile. They looked soft. Maybe he should get a pair. Today John’s T-shirt was gray. It looked off, as if John wasn’t used to wearing T-shirts.

Conn grinned back at him. “No, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” John went back inside. The screen door slammed behind him. “Fix that,” John called back to him.

Conn kept grinning. “Yes, sir,” he said quietly. He put his coffee down and stood up, stretching. Then he

went to get the tools to fix the door.

“Goddamn it.”

The voice was almost a whisper, but it floated over to Conn on the still afternoon air from the sidewalk. He lowered his hand from the post he'd been sanding and turned to the street. Toby Thomas stood there staring at him as if he were looking at a ghost. And he was, wasn't he? A shadow of the boy who used to be his best friend.

Toby pushed open the gate and carefully closed it behind him after he walked through. In Conn's mind, he saw Toby doing the same thing when they were six, twelve, eighteen. Conn's mama had always made such a fuss when they let it slam.

Toby stopped at the bottom of the steps. “You lost weight,” he said quietly.

Conn nodded. “You gained some.”

Toby fought a grin and rubbed his stomach. “I look good.”

“I look better.” Conn was transported to his youth, standing here on his porch shooting shit with Toby again.

“You got mean.” Toby frowned and squinted at Conn.

Conn smiled. “You got soft.” Toby shook his head

and closed his eyes. "We gonna do this all day?"

"No hello?" Toby challenged him.

"Hello." Conn waited for whatever Toby wanted to dish out. He deserved it.

Toby walked up the steps, loosening his tie. He was wearing a suit. It looked so weird Conn didn't know what to say. He remembered Toby in cutoff shorts and T-shirts with the sleeves cut off to accommodate his bulging linebacker muscles.

Toby stopped and held out his hand. Conn hesitated a moment; then he wiped his dusty hand on his jeans and took it. The next thing he knew, Toby had pulled him into a hug. "You bastard," Toby whispered. "Not a word from you in almost six years."

Toby was shaking. Conn could feel it in the hand he still held. So he let Toby hug him as if he were trying to make sure Conn was real.

"I thought you were dead, man. Jesus."

After a minute he let go, and Conn dropped his hand. Toby stood staring at him, checking him over from head to toe. He stopped on the sandpaper he still held and laughed in disbelief. "Still fixin' up this old house?" Conn nodded. Toby frowned and looked around. "Where's Ford?"

Conn gestured into the house. "In there."

Toby kept frowning. "Where are you staying?"

"Here. For now."

Toby nodded. "Of course you are." Conn wasn't sure what he meant by that and didn't ask. Toby shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it on the wooden bench. He pulled off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar before rolling up his sleeves. "Give me some of that," he said, pointing at the sandpaper. Conn handed a piece over, and Toby moved to the post next to him and started sanding. "You remember the last time we did this?" he asked without looking at Conn.

"Yeah, I remember," Conn said, going back to work. That had been the summer before he left.

"Why didn't you come see me?" Toby asked after a few silent minutes.

Conn shrugged. "I don't know. Wanted to."

"You gonna tell me where you've been? Why they couldn't find you when your mama died?"

Conn shook his head. "Not today."

The sound of Toby's sandpaper stopped for a few seconds, then started again. "All right. Not today. But soon."

"Soon."

"What do I have to pay you?" John asked about an

hour later when he came out and saw Toby. "I've only got one spare room."

Toby laughed. "I work for beer."

John looked pointedly at his soft middle. "Obviously." He held out a cold Coke for Conn and a cold beer for Toby. "I came prepared."

"Thanks." Toby took a swig of beer, watching Conn. "You don't drink anymore?" he asked when he lowered the bottle.

Conn shook his head. "Nope."

Toby sighed with exasperation.

"He doesn't talk much," John offered as he moved Toby's coat and sat down. He was wearing some chino shorts, and his gray T-shirt had white paint on it. He'd been painting the fence, then. "How do you two know each other?"

Toby looked surprised. "He didn't tell you?"

John raised an eyebrow. "You know what a chatterbox he is. It was hard to get him to shut up long enough to ask, 'Hey, do you know my insurance agent, Toby Thomas?'"

Conn's mouth dropped open, and he stared in horror at Toby. "Insurance agent?"

Toby made a face. "Beats working in the sun landscaping with my old man. I've got to feed the kids."

Conn couldn't get much more surprised. "Kids?"

John shook his head. "What the hell have you two been talking about for the last two hours?"

Conn turned to him. "You knew he was here?"

"I thought I'd give you some time. It was clear you two knew each other." John took a drink of his own beer, but Conn still saw the blush.

"We were best friends when we were kids," Toby told him. "I don't remember a time when Conn wasn't my best friend."

Conn looked down at the wooden porch, fighting unexpected tears. He leaned over and put his Coke down and turned back to the post and started sanding. "Yeah."

Toby leaned on the rail next to him and took another drink. "You still play guitar?" he asked.

"Not for a long time." Conn hadn't done a lot of things for a long time.

"I remember how much the girls loved your corny songs," Toby said with a laugh. "You used to say nothing got a girl's pants off faster." He shook his head. "Your mama gave me some stuff when she was sick. You want it?"

Conn had to stop and take a deep breath through his nose while he bit his lip. Damn these fucking tears. Where had this come from? He'd cried himself out years

ago. Then he saw Digger's grave, and he couldn't seem to stop. "I don't have room right now," he said gruffly. "But thanks."

Toby turned to John. "I heard you were gay."

Whoa. That stopped Conn's tears. He looked over his shoulder at John to see his reaction. John put his drink down on the arm of the bench.

"Yes." His tone was guarded.

"Why?" Toby seemed genuinely perplexed. "You're a good-looking guy. You could get all the pussy you wanted."

Conn couldn't help it. He laughed. John made a face at him.

"It seems to me that any clean, polite, gainfully employed male could get all the pussy he wanted," John told Toby. "Most men try too hard."

"You're not gainfully employed," Conn observed. "Or too clean either."

John shuddered. "If I were, then pussy might seek me out, and that would never do."

Conn laughed out loud, and next to him Toby smiled at the joke.

"Are you gainfully employed?" Toby asked him.

"Nope." Conn waited for Toby to ask about pussy, but he didn't. He just turned back to the rail and began

sanding. Conn looked over at John, who shrugged. Conn shook his head. "Kids?" he asked.

Toby grinned. "I've got two. Michael and Harley."

"Harley?"

"He was conceived during Bike Week in Myrtle Beach."

"Of course he was," John said drily, and both Toby and Conn laughed.

"Can I bring them by to meet you?" Toby asked tentatively. "They've heard so many stories about you. And Cheryl wants to see you."

"Cheryl hated my guts," Conn scoffed.

"Because you used to drag me away from her to get into all kinds of trouble."

Conn looked at him askance.

"Absolutely," John said enthusiastically from the bench. "Bring them all by. I'd love to meet them."

Conn narrowed his eyes at John, who just smiled.

"Great," Toby said.

Conn watched John stand up and head back for the door. Toby was right. He was really good-looking. His hair had some gray in it, but Conn didn't think he was that old. His bright blue eyes contrasted nicely with his dark hair.

“You two keep working, and there’s more beer and Coke in it for you.”

Toby laughed. “Conn’s mama used to give us dinner and some of her famous cherry pie.”

“If I give a man dinner, I expect more than my porch to get sanded,” John told him. “And don’t get me started on what cherry pie will cost you.” Conn laughed as Toby blushed.

Toby turned back to him. “Do you remember that game against Tarheel?” he asked.

Conn nodded. Ten minutes ago he hadn’t been ready to reminisce. He was ready now. He smiled at Toby, who smiled back.

Chapter Six

“I was thinking I might paint that bedroom for you.”

John was standing by the sink, and he looked over at Connor, who was sitting at the kitchen table. It was a big, round farmhouse sort of table. John had never owned anything like it before. He'd always had slick glass-and-chrome modern pieces. But this table fit here. And Connor fit at that table. “Two weeks here, and you think you own the place.”

Connor turned pale and looked away. John silently cursed his stupid, unfunny jokes. “Of course you can paint it, Connor. You're sleeping there, and it needs it, God knows. Ignore my very bad sense of humor. Go ahead.”

“Go ahead and ignore you, or go ahead and paint it?” Connor asked quietly, carefully setting the doorknob he'd been fixing on the table, still not looking at John.

“Both. But I highly recommend the ignoring part.

That's what most people who know me long enough end up doing."

Connor looked at him then. "Do they? Do you want them to?"

John frowned. "What? No. Why would you ask that?" He crossed his arms. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Nothing." Connor stood up. "I'm tired. I think I'll just go up." He turned and walked away. He was wearing that faded red T-shirt again. It had a new hole under the arm and some white paint on it. John had only ever seen one other tee on him. A gray one with a logo in red letters on the front. His jeans were faded too. And getting pretty thin along the knees and the seam over his ass.

When John realized he was staring, he looked away. He didn't know what to say or do. He felt like a shit, though he hadn't done anything. Had he?

Connor paused in the kitchen doorway and looked over his shoulder at John. "I put all those things in the closet upstairs."

"Okay." John searched for something else, anything else, to say. He stared down at his bare toes. Wiggled them against the shiny new hardwood floor.

"Can I play the guitar?"

"No." John's head whipped up, and he said it so fast

it sounded harsh. He surprised himself with the vehemence of his response. Connor's eyes went wide. "I just..." John knew his mouth was gaping, waiting for more words, but he had nothing. Again.

Connor just nodded and then walked away. John turned, and his hands reflexively gripped the edge of the sink as he stared out at the half-painted fence while he listened to Connor climb the stairs.

John felt like a schmuck as he climbed the stairs a couple of hours later. He'd been an ass. He should have come up sooner to apologize. He knew Connor must be starving. He'd worked outside all day again. He seemed to enjoy that, but the heat must affect even him a little. It was so quiet upstairs John could hear the crickets and the toads outside making a racket. He walked as slowly and silently up the stairs as he could. If Connor was asleep already, he didn't want to wake him. But if not, he'd offer to make him something to eat. Food was a good apology, and so much easier to offer than an "I'm sorry."

John's feet refused to move as he rounded the bend near the top of the staircase. He could just see over the top step into Connor's room. What he saw there made him hold his breath, afraid Connor would hear him. Afraid he would stop.

Connor was leaning against the wall by the door,

staring out the window to the backyard. John had been out there just a short while ago. Had Connor been watching him? The lights were off, but there were no curtains on the window, and the moonlight illuminated Connor's profile perfectly. He was bare from the ass up. His pants were pushed down around his thighs. He had one hand wrapped around his dick. In the dark the outline of Connor's cock looked thick and rock hard. His hand slowly pumped along the length of it, and Connor's head gently fell back against the wall. His hips jerked a little, and his free hand resting on his thigh clenched into a fist.

John looked at his face. Connor's eyes were closed now, and he was biting his lower lip. To keep quiet, John supposed. They were both being so awfully quiet tonight. Connor's hand picked up its pace, and his shoulders hunched. A sigh like a whisper cut the night as Connor's left hand came up and covered the head of his cock. His other hand continued to pump, and his hips jerked.

John nearly gasped aloud as he watched Connor come. What was he thinking of? Who? How did he taste?

It was the last question that got John's feet moving—backward. He kept one hand on the wall to guide him, and as soon as he made it back around the corner, he turned and went down as quietly as he'd gone up. He felt the sweat trickling between his shoulder blades, and his

hands were shaking. He went straight to his room. For the first time in over a year, he planned to do exactly what Connor had done. He hoped like hell it was enough. It had to be enough.

“What color?” John asked as Connor tentatively sipped his boiling-hot coffee and made a face. He was sitting on that porch step again, and every so often he’d dust his hand across those handprints. John didn’t think he even realized he was doing it.

John was lounging on the bench, one leg draped over the arm while his other foot pushed it in a lazy swing. He’d been worried that he wouldn’t be able to face Connor this morning. He felt slightly dirty for secretly watching him masturbate last night, but it was a comfortably good feeling. One he hadn’t had in a long time, and he’d missed it. A couple of times last night he’d gotten off thinking about Connor and getting very dirty with him. Strangely enough, he felt more relaxed around Connor this morning. Sex did that to a man. He grinned into his coffee cup. His grin faded as he belatedly remembered it hadn’t been real sex. But it was the best sex he’d had in years.

“Don’t know. What do you want?” Connor’s answer was characteristically short. And self-effacing, which John was beginning to realize was also characteristic of

Connor.

"I want what you want," John answered, just to be difficult.

Connor looked at him then. He raised his eyebrows. "Do you?"

John blinked at him rapidly a few times, various scenarios left over from last night's fantasies racing through his head. Connor's eyes narrowed just a bit, as if he knew what John was thinking.

"Do you?" he asked again, quieter than before.

"Yes," John practically whispered, caught in the moment.

"Then I want yellow," Connor told him with a grin.

He turned back to the street and took another sip as John took a deep breath and tried to recover his equilibrium. What had he been thinking? Of course Connor hadn't been talking about sex. But now that John was thinking about it again...well, he could see he was going to have a hard time getting his mind off that track.

"Then yellow it is," he agreed. He stood up and prayed that Connor kept his eyes on the street. His flannel pants did nothing to hide his erection. He quickly turned to the door. "I'll get dressed, and we'll go to the hardware store for paint."

“Today?”

Connor sounded strange. It wouldn't have been noticeable in anyone else. But John had become used to his even tones and calm demeanor. “Yes. Today.”

Connor set his coffee cup down on the step beside him. He clasped his hands between his knees. “All right.”

John sighed. He'd forgotten for a second how hard it was for Connor, seeing people in Mercury again. “All right,” he said gently. Connor didn't move, so John went inside to change.

“Connor.”

The voice wasn't exactly welcoming. John looked up and flinched. It was a cop. An older guy. His badge said SHERIFF.

Connor didn't turn from the paint display for almost a minute. The man just waited. Connor slid the yellow card back in its slot and then turned. “Mr. Wilkins.”

“I'm sheriff now,” he told Connor. “People around here use the title.”

Connor tilted his head. “Do they?”

John was surprised at Connor's attitude. Clearly there was some history here. John silently cursed Connor's reluctance to talk about himself. He didn't like

not knowing what was happening. He felt vulnerable. He didn't know what Connor needed him to do.

"How long are you in town for?" the sheriff asked. He didn't sound as if he wanted Connor around at all.

Connor shrugged. "Don't know."

The sheriff's mouth moved as if he were chewing on his cheek. "I got your records from your probation officer."

Connor looked around, so John did too. The only other person in the store was the clerk, and he was watering some plants near the door. He didn't turn around. Connor's tense shoulders relaxed a bit, and John took a step closer. He wished he hadn't. The sheriff's red-rimmed eyes fell on him. He was a big, balding bruiser of a man, with a nose and cheeks marked by broken capillaries.

"I hear this boy's staying with you."

John didn't like the tone of that. "He's staying in his old room, yes." His response was cool. He hadn't done anything wrong, and neither had Connor. At least not in Mercury. It suddenly occurred to John that he had no idea why Connor had been in jail. He felt like a fool. That should have been his first question when Connor had asked to stay. But something about the tall, quiet man had made it irrelevant at the time.

The sheriff crossed his arms and widened his

stance. That never boded well when they did it in the movies. "You got a job?"

"Who? Me?" John asked in surprise.

The sheriff looked at him as if he were mentally challenged. "No. Connor."

"N—"

John cut Connor off. "Yes. He works for me."

The sheriff looked even grimmer at John's answer, if that were possible. "Doin' what?"

"He's helping me fix up the house. He knows it better than anyone."

"I don't want any panhandling or vagrancy, you hear?" He spoke harshly to Connor. "What's he paying you?"

"Room and board." Connor's cheeks were red, but John thought it was more from anger than embarrassment.

"And anything else he needs until he figures out what he's going to do," John added. "He has no need to panhandle and is in no way a vagrant."

The sheriff glared at John, clearly angry at his interference. So be it. John really didn't care.

"I knew you were in prison." The sheriff's statement was smug. "I kept an eye on you for your mama."

Connor's nostrils were flared with anger. "You tell

her?"

"Not until the end. When she wanted me to go get you and bring you home. I had to tell her why I couldn't."

Connor paled. "You bastard," he whispered. John took another step closer. He was gritting his teeth to stay quiet.

"Didn't tell her why." The sheriff's tone had changed, as if he'd said what he wanted to say. "Just told her you'd gotten in some trouble, and I was going to help you out."

"You mean you lied, as usual." Connor's voice was lower than normal, menacing.

"Watch your tone, boy," Sheriff Wilkins said with a tight smile. "Your mama isn't around to make me forget what a little bastard you are."

"She didn't want you," Connor told him quietly. "That's what's stuck in your craw. She never did, and we all knew it. 'Cause you weren't man enough to take my daddy's place."

Okay. John's heart was pounding. This was turning very ugly, very fast.

"I'm not your football coach anymore, boy," Sheriff Wilkins said angrily. "I'm the law. I can get your sorry ass right back where it came from—behind bars." He narrowed his eyes. "I'm watching you. You better not

fuck up around here.” With that he turned and walked out of the store.

Connor turned back to the paint display. His hands were unsteady as he picked up the same yellow card. “I like this butter yellow. You?”

John glanced at the card. He hardly noticed the colors on it. “Yes.” He stepped right up next to Connor as if looking at the color. “We need to talk,” he said quietly.

Connor nodded. “I figured we’d have to, sooner or later.” He sounded resigned. “You still want the paint?” He looked at John out of the corner of his eye.

“Yes,” John said. He took Connor’s elbow and guided him to the counter, waving at the clerk to come over. “Then I’m going to buy you some new clothes, and then we’re going to talk.”

“I don’t need new clothes.” John just looked at him, taking in his gray T-shirt and those damned jeans that he couldn’t stop picturing around Connor’s thighs. “Fine,” Connor ground out. “I get that you don’t want Wilkins to think you’re not paying me.”

John shook his head. “It has nothing to do with Wilkins and everything to do with my sanity,” he told Connor right before the clerk walked up. “We’ll take two gallons of the butter yellow, please.”

Chapter Seven

“Talk.”

They barely made it through the front door before John slammed it behind Conn and gave the order. Conn remembered how hard it had been to learn to take orders. Then he'd gotten very good at it. He forced himself not to flinch. “What do you want to know?”

“First I want to know what you were in prison for.” John sighed, and Conn looked over his shoulder at him. John stood there, one hand on his hip and the other buried in his hair. He had dark hair—that's why Conn could see the gray. And it was too long. The cut had been good once. Now it was starting to curl, just thick enough for John to get a good handful. Conn focused on that hand. “I should have asked before. But I've never been very smart about those things.”

“Short on common sense? I never would have guessed that about you.”

“You couldn't tell when I didn't ask the pertinent

questions?" John asked wryly. "Then you're short a couple of dollars too." His hand fell to his side, and Conn inexplicably missed it caught in John's dark hair. "Come on. I need a drink."

"So do I." Conn hadn't wanted a drink this bad in almost two years. He'd been addicted to drugs, to drink, whatever could made him not feel anything. But the funny thing was, once he stopped, it wasn't that hard to leave the drugs and alcohol behind. There were lots of other ways to keep the feelings away. Or so he thought until he got back to Mercury. This old town made him feel too much. And now John was the one pulling the emotions up.

"Well, you don't get one. I did at least catch the part about rehab when you were talking to Evan at the shelter."

Conn grinned sarcastically. "You do all right in the sense department, I think." He followed John into the kitchen and caught the cold can of Coke John tossed him from across the room. "Thanks." He popped the top and took a swig. Sugar and caffeine had a little hit of their own, didn't they? And Coke would clean him out, burn the past out of him like rust off an old battery.

"I'm growing old waiting over here." John pulled out a chair and sat down at the big kitchen table. It was bright red. Conn loved that damn table. It was so John.

Trying so hard to be country and traditional but just not quite making it.

“How old are you?” Conn asked. He sat down at the table opposite John. He was curious. He’d guessed around late thirties, early forties. But the hair had fooled him. He’d been looking at John more and more the last couple of weeks, and his face didn’t seem so old. And he had a killer body, lean and toned, not an ounce of fat on him. He liked to eat—Conn knew that—but he worked pretty hard around the house. He looked like he was a runner, but he hadn’t run since Conn had gotten here.

John squinted at him and pursed his lips. “I’m thirty-five, and stop trying to change the subject.”

“How’d you get so rich?” Conn asked, ignoring the last part of John’s answer.

John looked as if he weren’t going to answer, but changed his mind. “You ever hear of Town Square? The Internet game?”

Conn nodded as he took a drink. He set the can down on a placemat. He’d noticed that John would come and move the can if he set it on the wood. He learned quickly. “I never played it. Never had a computer or anything to play it on, but I’ve seen people play it. Damn near everyone on the planet plays it, I hear. You play?”

John shook his head. “Nope. I created it.”

Conn’s eyes went wide. “No shit.”

John nodded. "No shit." He put his beer down on the table. "How'd you know I was rich?"

"You don't work." Conn shrugged. "You don't seem to care about money one way or the other. Only really rich people can live like that."

"Well, I'm really rich. Which is why you should have let me buy you more clothes today."

Conn frowned at him. "I don't need any more. A couple pair of shorts, my jeans, a few T-shirts. I'm good."

"Exactly two pair of the cheapest shorts you could find at the freaking dollar store. Hello? Dollar store?" John shook his head. "And a five-pack of white undershirts. Oh, and you generously allowed me to buy you a matching pack of boxers."

Conn couldn't stop the grin that escaped. "You insisted on socks too. Don't forget the socks."

"How could I forget the socks?" John answered with a thump to his forehead. He smiled softly at Connor. "Okay, enough procrastinating. Your turn."

Conn leaned his elbows on the table and turned the Coke can in circles between his hands. "I was an addict. You name it, I probably tried it. Although I couldn't tell you for sure because most of the time I didn't bother to ask what they were giving me, as long it made me forget my name."

“That doesn’t sound like the guy sitting in front of me.” There was no censure in John’s words, just a statement.

Conn sat back and drummed his thumbs on his thighs. “It wasn’t. That guy is gone. For good.”

“Okay, good to know.” John took a sip of beer, leaning toward Conn, his elbows on the table. “But you don’t go to jail for being an addict.”

Conn laughed humorlessly. “Oh, yes, you do. Maybe not for being one, but for possession. Georgia does not like drug addicts.”

“Where in Georgia? Atlanta?” John sat back, mirroring Conn’s position. “Start from the beginning.”

“Yeah, Atlanta. I got a football scholarship to Georgia Tech. Blew my knee out in the second game my freshman year. Lost football scholarship.” He waved good-bye. “Bye-bye, Georgia Tech. Hello, pain pills. And lots of them.”

“Ah,” John said as he nodded. “How long?”

“Before I moved from pain pills to the heavier stuff? A couple of years. I got some shit jobs and still had a few contacts on the team to get pills for a couple of years. But the more pills I took, the fewer jobs. Funny how that works.” Conn took a deep breath and blew it out roughly. “So I started paying with other things.”

John just sat there watching him, the look on his face interested but nonjudgmental. “How long did that go on?”

“Guy I started with was a trainer for the team. When I started asking too often, he stopped answering my calls. I guess I wasn’t that good.”

John looked away for a minute, and Conn just sat there. He’d been through worse shit than telling some stranger about his past. Whatever John said couldn’t touch him. He drummed his fingers on his thighs, waiting. He tipped his head to the side, felt a satisfying crunch in his neck, and was pissed when he felt his eye twitch as John turned back to him.

“You didn’t say how long.”

Conn stared at him, and John stared back. He was impassive and immovable. He looked like he’d sit there until Conn answered.

“Maybe another two years. It wasn’t hard to find guys who’d pay for it, one way or another. I actually had some money in the bank for a while.” He smiled grimly. “Georgia took that too.”

“What did Wilkins mean when he said no panhandling or vagrancy?” John’s voice was tight. It triggered things inside Conn that had just started to loosen up, things that were afraid of their own shadow. Those things didn’t belong here, in this house.

“That’s what the second charge was,” Conn explained, looking out the kitchen window. “The court-appointed lawyer and the judge were okay. They changed the charge from prostitution.”

“How long were you in jail?” John’s voice was flat.

“A year. It was a first offense, and I was already pretty successful in rehab by the time it went in front of the judge. Another two years’ probation for a felony conviction.” Conn could see John doing the math.

“You waited a year before coming back. Why?”

Conn got up from the table and walked over to the door that faced the living room. He looked out at the quiet street. “Mama was dead. I didn’t think I had a reason to come back.”

He heard John get up behind him. “Then why did you?” The water came on in the sink, and Conn could see John in his mind, rinsing out his bottle and carefully putting it in the recycle bin. He smiled.

“I couldn’t find who I was. And I thought maybe I was back here.”

There was complete silence behind him for a minute or two.

“Were you?” John sounded a little choked up.

Conn turned to face him. “I’m still looking. But I’m finding a few pieces scattered here and there.”

John turned to look out the back window. "You can't break and not scatter," he said quietly. "If you're lucky, you find all the pieces."

Conn shook his head, even though John couldn't see him. "No, sometimes you don't need all the pieces. Sometimes you're stronger when you glue it back together without the extras."

Conn could see John smile as he looked down at the counter and swept some imaginary crumbs into the sink. "As long as the glue's strong enough, I suppose."

"Mercury makes pretty good glue," Conn said. He grabbed the bag full of his new clothes from where he'd dropped it on the floor and left John looking at Digger's grave out the window.

Chapter Eight

John took another drag off the cigarette. He blew out the smoke and held the butt up, staring at the glowing tip in the dark. It was pitch-black outside, not a star in sight. Maybe it would rain tonight. He set his foot down and gave a push, setting the bench rocking again. He left his other leg over the arm.

The front door opened, and the screen creaked as Connor opened it just enough to lean against the doorjamb. "I didn't know you smoked."

John took another drag. His mouth felt like the ashtray sitting on the table next to him. "I don't. Not anymore."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Connor cross his arms and smile crookedly. "You don't, huh?"

John blew a smoke ring. "Nope."

"When did you quit?" Connor moved out onto the porch and quietly shut the door behind him. The bastard had nothing on but his jeans unbuttoned over a pair of

the boxers John had bought today. He took another deep drag that stung his tongue.

They were having a conversation like it wasn't three o'clock in the morning and John wasn't being completely irrational. Maybe this was why he adored having Connor around. He made John feel normal for a change. He felt his dick getting hard. *Oops*. He made John feel normal that way too. And that was why John was sitting out here smoking.

"When someone asked me to." He stubbed out the cigarette and sat up straight. He rubbed his face. "Sorry I woke you." He reached for the pack of cigarettes.

Connor was quick considering his size and the late hour. He stopped John with a hand on his wrist before he reached the pack. "You didn't." Connor let go of his wrist and picked up the cigarettes and the lighter there. "Who?"

"Who what?" John asked, confused.

"Who asked you to quit?"

John just stared at Connor. He didn't want to say his name. He didn't want him here with Connor. And that was wrong on so many levels.

"Come on," Connor said quietly. He took John's hand and led him to the door, opening it and gently pushing John inside. It was as if John's body had no mind of its own, just a desire to do what Connor made

him do. It was so much easier to let someone else call the shots. Part of him wanted that again, and part of him never wanted that again. He was tempted to pull a James Dean and scream, "You're tearing me apart!" into the night. But that might be a little over the top, even for him.

Connor closed the front door behind them, and somehow the night got brighter. John glanced toward the kitchen. It was the microwave clock light. He'd never realized how bright that was. The green splashed over the hardwood floors and the glass on the pictures on the wall.

Connor placed John's cigarettes on the hall table, and suddenly John was backed against the wall, Connor close enough that John could feel the heat of him from nose to toes and smell the spicy soap John had bought them today.

"Tell me what's wrong, John," Connor said quietly. He leaned his forearm against the wall beside John's head, and John had the completely inappropriate urge to bury his nose in the sparse hair of Connor's underarm and breathe the life of him in.

He closed his eyes and felt Connor's nose nudge the side of his head. When he spoke John nearly missed his words because his hot breath on John's ear fried his brain circuits. "Tell me, Johnny," he whispered.

John let his hand roam. It was wrong, it was stupid, but Connor so close was irresistible. He slid his open palm along Connor's side to the dip in his lower back, and Connor shivered. John liked that. He liked that he made Connor shiver. He slowly glided that palm lower, past the loose waistband of Connor's jeans. He hesitated at the band of his boxers, but Connor's back moved just slightly, just enough to make John think he wanted him in there. He gently worked his index finger under the band, and there was the slightest break in Connor's breathing. He let his other fingers follow, until he cupped Connor's bare ass cheek in his hand. It fit perfectly, soft, round, smooth. Connor moved closer, and the muscles bunched and flexed under John's palm, and his dick got so hard he thought it might burst through his flimsy pants and right into Connor.

"Johnny," Connor whispered again, and suddenly it was wrong. Everything was wrong. He pulled his hand out and tried to push Connor away. Connor easily grabbed both of John's hands and pinned them over his head. "Do you want me to make you feel better, John?" he asked in that low voice that caused the hairs on John's arms to rise up deliciously. John made a feeble attempt to get free, but Connor just grabbed his wrists in one hand and slid the other down John's chest, over both nipples through his soft T-shirt, and John's body betrayed him as his hips jerked, seeking that big, rough

hand.

Connor leaned down and bit one of John's hard nipples through the soft cotton as his free hand pulled the front of John's pants down until his hard cock popped out into the cool night air of the hallway. Then Connor wrapped his heavy fist around John's cock and squeezed. "You want me," Connor whispered against John's cheek. John turned his face, blindly seeking Connor's mouth, but Connor turned away. "You smell like an ashtray," he said. "I don't want to taste that." He squeezed John's cock again. "But I'll taste this, Johnny."

He let go of John's wrists and squatted in front of him. He pointed John's hard cock toward his mouth, closed his eyes, and leaned forward. Without hesitation John grabbed two fistfuls of Connor's hair and stopped him.

"Don't," he rasped. "Don't do it unless you mean it." Connor didn't fight John's hold, didn't look up at him. He just stayed poised there on the brink. "The last man that did that meant it," John said. "I don't want it if you don't."

They stayed like that for a minute or more. It felt like an eternity to John. Finally Connor shook John's hands off and stood up. Without a word, he picked up John's cigarettes and lighter and pressed them into one of his hands. Then he turned without meeting John's

eyes and went upstairs.

“About last night,” Connor said as he walked into the kitchen the next morning.

John shoved his coffee cup under the spout on the espresso machine. His eyes felt like he’d rinsed them with sand, and his mouth felt the same. *Ugh*. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“You’re sorry?” Connor asked in surprise. “What for?”

John pressed the button on the machine and waited until the beans were ground before answering. “For waking you up. Sometimes I get insomnia. Not a pretty sight. Next time I’ll stay in my room.”

“It’s your damn house,” Connor said angrily. “You can have insomnia wherever the hell you want it.”

John turned in amazement. He’d never seen Connor angry. Of course, there wasn’t much to see. Connor stood there stoically glaring.

“Thanks. I will,” John replied testily.

“I was talking about the blowjob that didn’t happen.” Connor’s words were flat.

John had to admire him for not beating around the bush. Those particular bushes, however, deserved a good beating. He shrugged. “It didn’t happen. Not much to

talk about.”

Connor stared at him for a minute while John just sipped his coffee. Finally Connor shrugged too. “I guess not.” He walked past John toward the backyard. “I’m going to see if I can salvage some of the fence lumber to fix the front porch.”

John grabbed his arm. “Forget it. I’ll just buy new.”

Connor roughly jerked his arm away. “You don’t always need new, John. It’s not a crime to use what you’ve already got.”

“And it’s not a crime to be rich enough to afford new when I feel like it,” John shot back.

“We got along just fine fixing this place up with what we had.” Connor was so stiff John was afraid his joints would lock.

“Yeah, well, as someone just told me, this is my house. I’ll fix it up how I want.”

His thoughtless jab hit its mark too well. Connor paled and spun around to walk toward the front porch. “Whatever you say. I’ll finish sanding the posts.”

John sighed. “Stop.” He didn’t yell, didn’t raise his voice. He just asked. Connor stopped at the door as if he’d hit a brick wall. John walked over and spoke to Connor’s stiff back. “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.”

Connor’s shoulders sagged. “No, I’m sorry. I’m

being an ass. I'm taking shit out on you that has nothing to do with you."

Ouch. John didn't even think Connor was aware how that one hit the target. "I guess that makes two of us," he lied.

Connor leaned the front of his body against the wall next to the door and covered his head with his arms. "I wish I could mean it, Johnny," he said quietly, his voice muffled. "I don't know if I can ever mean it."

John didn't know what to say or do. But he knew he had to say something. "I'm sorry about what you told me yesterday," he said quietly.

Connor straightened from the wall, his back to John. He brushed his hands over his cheeks, and John pretended not to notice. "We gonna do anything with the gardens?" he asked roughly. "They're lookin' pretty bad."

"I don't really have a relationship with plants," John confessed.

Connor let out a weak laugh. "You don't really have a relationship with anything, John." John took a step back as Connor looked at him over his shoulder, his eyes red. "Do we need garden tools?"

John shook his head. "I got that far."

Connor nodded. "I guess you had to, to fix up Digger's grave."

John walked past Connor, resisting the urge to throw his arms around his broad shoulders and hold on for dear life. "I deal better with the dead."

Connor grabbed his arm, and John's coffee sloshed onto the floor. He turned to glare at Connor.

"I'm coming alive, Johnny. One of these days you're going to have to deal with me." He turned again and walked out the back. *He must be getting dizzy.*

"No one calls me Johnny," he hollered after Connor.

"I do," Connor yelled back.

John hated when someone else got the last word.

Chapter Nine

Conn heard her before he saw her. *A tap, tap, tap* on the sidewalk. He remembered that sound from his childhood. Miss Priscilla Jones was coming to visit. He used to run inside and wash his hands right away and yell for his mother. She'd come bustling down the path and open the gate for Miss Priscilla and help her up onto the porch, where they'd sit for hours talking, drinking lemonade and eating cherry pie. Miss Priss didn't drink liquor. Not once that he'd known her. But she was addicted to his mama's cherry pie.

She came for her weekly manicure. Barbara Meecham gave them on weekends to most of the ladies in the town for extra cash. Pedicures too. Usually she went to their houses, but Miss Priss always came to theirs. Conn liked that best. He could run and play and do what he wanted here. He had to behave himself at everyone else's house. When he was a teenager, he'd sit on the steps and strum the guitar while they gossiped, the smell of nail polish making his nose itch while the click of forks

on plates made him hungry.

He set down the shovel he'd been digging up the weeds with. There weren't any flowers left here along the front fence. He was just digging it all up and starting from scratch. If Johnny wanted to buy all new lumber, he could get all new plants too. Conn had done some gardening work at jail. He liked those bright yellow daylilies. He wanted to line the fence with them and put a couple of rosebushes by the gate.

He wiped his hands on his new shorts and then cursed himself. He was trying to keep them nice for a while. They were camo cargo shorts. And a damn sight more comfortable than his jeans in the heat. He couldn't do anything about the white T-shirt. It was smudged with dirt, but he had a good excuse. He fought the urge to run inside and wash his hands. Instead he just stood there, watching the intersection of Justice and Goodman Streets, waiting for Miss Priss to come into view.

When he saw her, it was like a punch to the gut. He'd had way too many of those in the last few weeks. Damn if this coming home wasn't harder than he'd thought. She paused at the corner when she saw him. She didn't wave, just turned and walked his way. She looked older, which surprised him. He'd thought she was ancient when he was little. She was walking so slow he felt self-conscious just standing there. She wore all white,

making her brown skin look like dark chocolate. When he was six, he asked her if she tasted like chocolate. Conn had thought his mama was going to have a heart attack, but Miss Priss just laughed.

When she reached him, they just stood there looking at each other for a while. She looked him over from head to toe.

“Connor Meecham,” she finally said in that old-fashioned, formal way of hers. “You look well.”

He nodded politely. “Miss Priscilla.”

She looked pointedly at the gate. Conn looked at it too but didn’t move. She gave him a stern look, and he belatedly opened the gate.

“Thank you,” she said politely. He was worried about her with her cane on the gravel path, so he stepped up beside her and offered his arm. She took it, and they walked to the house and up the stairs. She settled herself on John’s bench. Conn stood there, not sure what to do.

“It is good to have you home, Connor,” she said with a sigh as she settled back in the seat. “Tell me where you have been and why you have not come to see me.”

“This isn’t my house, Miss Priscilla,” he said quietly. “Someone else bought it after Mama died.”

“I am well aware of that, Connor,” she said calmly. “I have not gone soft in the head. A gentleman from

California is living here now, or so I'm told. He has not come by to meet me."

Conn bit his lip to keep from smiling at the disapproval in her tone. "They do things a little differently in California, Miss Priss. I don't think anyone told him he should go and see you."

She smiled at the use of the old nickname. "You should have told him," she chastised him.

Conn nodded. "Yes, ma'am, I should have."

"You are living here now." It was a statement, not a question.

"I'm helping John fix up the house. It had fallen into a bit of disrepair."

"That is an understatement, Connor. It was a shameful sight that deserved better. I am glad to see the new owner agrees." She glanced around the porch. "Your mother always wanted to paint the house a stately gray, with white and yellow accents." She shook her head. "That woman had an unnatural affinity for yellow."

Conn was taken aback. He hadn't known that, about painting the house. "Then why didn't she?"

"White was cheaper," Miss Priss said matter-of-factly. "Which should not be a factor for the new owner, I'm told."

"I like yellow too," Conn said with a smile.

“Of course, you do,” Miss Priss said with a sniff. “As I told you, Barbara had an unnatural attraction to the color.” She looked at Conn and raised an imperious eyebrow. “Are you not going to offer me refreshments, Connor?” she asked. “I have walked all this way.”

“May I get you something to drink?” he asked politely, racking his brain to try to remember if they had any lemonade.

“I would like a lemonade, please,” she answered politely. “And please send your Mr. Ford out to see me.”

“So you know his name,” Conn teased.

Miss Priss gave him an indecipherable look. “I know more than most give me credit for, Connor. I know everything that goes on in my town. Now, if you please, may I have my lemonade? I am parched.” She looked up at the ceiling fan on the porch. “Could you also turn that on, please?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be right back.” He walked quickly over to the front door and went in, turning the fan on first thing. He hustled back through the kitchen to the back door. “John,” he called. John’s head popped up from behind the fence. He was holding a paintbrush covered in paint. “Someone on the front porch wants to meet you,” Conn told him. “Come on over here. Don’t keep her waiting.”

John put the brush down, walked around the side of

the yard, and came in the gate. "Who?" he asked curiously as Conn waved him over. When he got to the steps, Conn grabbed his upper arm and dragged him into the house. "What the hell?" John exclaimed. "Where's the fire?"

"She walked all the way over here," Conn said. He was suddenly nervous, worried that John might offend Miss Priscilla. "Have we got any lemonade?"

John gave him a funny look and then walked over and reached for a cabinet. He stopped before he opened it. "In there," he said. He went to the sink. "I don't want to get paint on the handle." He began to wash his hands. "You'll have to mix it. The pitcher should be on the shelf above." He laughed as Conn got the stuff out. "You know, when I first saw the front porch, I thought it looked like people should be sitting there drinking lemonade."

Conn dragged the bin of sugar over and went to fill the pitcher while John was drying his hands. "Well, Miss Priscilla Jones is about to be." He gestured to the front with his head. "Get out there. And be nice. And polite."

"Who is Miss Priscilla Jones?" John asked as he walked toward the front.

"Miss Priscilla Jones is Mercury," Conn answered.

Conn needn't have worried about John's manners. Turned out he had a boatload of them. Miss Priss took to

him right away, especially when he took Conn to task for not taking him over to meet her. She loved that.

“I understand that you have a great deal of money,” Miss Priss said. “Ordinarily I would not mention it, as it is in very poor taste to talk about one’s personal finances, but I have been told that you have enough money to make it unnecessary to worry about offending you.”

John laughed. “It is true that I am rich enough that people don’t have to worry about offending me.”

“And you earned your fortune on the Internet?” Miss Priss asked curiously. “Do you make computers?”

“No, ma’am,” John said. It was kind of funny, how he’d picked up that Southernism right away with Miss Priss. She just brought it out in a man. “I created a game for the Internet that a lot of people like to play.”

Miss Priss seemed disappointed. “I see. I was rather hoping that you might be considering opening some sort of computer manufacturing facility here in Mercury. But I suppose that was not your purpose for moving here.”

John looked surprised. “No, ma’am. I’m retired, more or less.”

That made Miss Priss raised both eyebrows in disbelief. “At your young age? What on earth are you planning to do with the rest of your life?” She got a worried look on her face. “You’re not dying, are you?”

Conn's chest constricted so hard he fought the urge to grab it. His gaze shot to John, who was watching him. John shook his head. "No, ma'am," he answered, still watching Conn. "Perfectly healthy. But I've made my money already."

"You've made your money at one thing, Mr. Ford," she told him disapprovingly. "A man of your abilities and means has a responsibility to turn his interest elsewhere, either industry or philanthropy. To do nothing is a waste of your God-given talents and a disservice to your fellow man."

John looked amused. "I had planned to spend the rest of my life working on this house. There is a lot to do."

"Do not be flippant, young man," Miss Priss replied, and John had the grace to blush. "Mr. Michaels has informed me that you have been a generous benefactor of Epson House since your arrival in Mercury. Is it philanthropy that holds your interest now? There are other organizations that would also benefit from your involvement and not just your charitable contributions."

John stood up and went to lean against the porch railing. He looked off down the street. "I don't know, Miss Priscilla. I'm still trying to discover what I want."

"You are a lucky man to have the ability to choose what you want," Miss Priss told him, "and not have the choice made for him." She turned to Conn suddenly, and

he gulped down the Coke he'd been drinking, making him cough.

"And you, Connor?" she asked. "Now that you are out of prison, what do you plan to do?"

That little bombshell didn't help his coughing. John came over and pounded him on the back. "I don't think he knows either, Miss Priscilla."

She nodded. "He is also lucky that you have provided the time for him to make his own choice." She took a deep breath. "I have not had a drink of alcohol in over fifty years, Connor." Her stare was forthright. "There were times that I desired it more than my next breath. You too will face those times. I found my strength here, among the people in Mercury." She gazed out unseeing at the street. "But my town is dying, Connor." She picked up her cane and went to rise from the bench, and both John and Conn stood up and offered her a hand. "I am too tired to walk home. May I have a ride in your fancy little car, Mr. Ford?" She smiled at John.

He laughed. "Yes, you may, Miss Priscilla." He looked at Conn. "Can you drive her?" He gestured at his clothes. "I'm covered in paint. And you can stop at the store and buy some plants." He looked at the mess that Conn had dug up. "We can't leave it like that."

Conn was still reeling from Miss Priscilla's revelations. And now John was offering to let him drive

his expensive car. “Are you sure?” he asked, his shock evident in his voice.

John nodded with a smile for Miss Priss. “I’m sure.”

Chapter Ten

“Who does the car belong to?”

The question came quietly from the doorway of John’s bedroom. He’d been lying there awake, refusing to watch the clock, afraid to go out on the porch again. He’d heard Connor get up and come downstairs. With his hands clasped behind his head as he lay there, he pretended a relaxed attitude he was far from feeling. “Me.”

“Why did you buy it?”

“I didn’t.”

There was an expectant silence. John refused to fill it. Finally Connor asked, “Is this what it’s like to talk to me?”

John laughed at the unexpected comment. “Yep.”

Connor huffed out a little laugh. “Why is it such a secret?”

John sighed. “It’s not. A man named Steve left me

the car in his will.” It was so easy to say it. John was dismayed he’d made such a big deal out of it.

“What happened to him?”

Not “Who was he?” or “What was he to you?” Connor went right to the hard stuff. “He died. In Afghanistan.”

“A soldier, huh? That must have been hard, being with him.”

“An officer. And no, not really. He had his life, and I had mine. And sometimes the two managed to take place in the same place at the same time.”

“Like I said, that must have been hard.”

John rolled over onto his side, his cheek cupped in one hand. “What do you want, Connor?”

There was no answer for such a long time that John rolled back over and leaned up on his elbows to see if Connor was still there. He was leaning against the door frame, his hands crossed behind his back, his head tipped forward. John could see him clearly in the combination of moonlight and the light from his digital clock. He was wearing a pair of boxers and nothing else. John fell back in the bed with an inner groan of sexual frustration.

The next thing John knew, Connor was standing at the foot of his bed, watching him. Neither said anything. When Connor climbed on the bed and straddled him on

all fours, John lay there frozen.

"I don't know if I mean it, Johnny," Connor whispered. "I guess I don't really understand what that means. I only know that I need you."

John was torn. He wasn't sure he could do casual sex at all, and casual sex with Connor seemed an impossible thing. But he wanted Connor with a desire he hadn't felt since the first few years he'd been with Steve, before he recognized the future he talked about was nothing more than a dream. Before he accepted that a secondhand reality was better than nothing at all. He didn't want to go there again. He didn't want to need someone again only to be disappointed and abandoned. But what he wanted and was what happening were two entirely different things.

If he had sex with Connor, he was pretty much dooming himself to that fate. So he could either say no and maintain his lonely dignity, or say yes and at least get the chance to fuck a man he wanted almost more than anyone he'd ever met. *Wow, tough choice.*

Connor leaned down. "Please, John," he whispered brokenly in his ear.

John uncurled his hands from where he'd fisted them in the sheet to keep from touching Connor. He laid them softly against Connor's upper arms, barely making contact. Connor's skin was smooth and hot to the touch,

and it was enough to make John's pulse hammer and his balls ache for more. Fate was a goddamn hard-hearted bitch. But he'd known that already.

Connor turned his head, sliding his nose along John's temple and cheek until his mouth hung over John's. "Can I kiss you?" he asked.

John almost laughed at the absurdity of the question. They were going to fuck, for God's sake. "Of course," he said and then cursed himself for not being more romantic about it.

Connor took a deep, unsteady breath. "With men, it's not always 'of course,' John."

He'd left John at a loss for words again. For John and his partners, it had always been "of course." He'd forgotten what Connor had been through. Suddenly he remembered Connor turning away when he'd tried to kiss him the other night. "Connor—" he began, but Connor's soft lips cut off whatever he might have said.

The kiss was so tentative that John just lay there holding his breath, anticipation making him light-headed. He let Connor gently explore his lips, rubbing against them, tilting his head a little more to the side until he found the right angle. When the tip of Connor's tongue lightly grazed the seam of his lips, John finally opened his mouth and took over. He slid one hand from Connor's arm over his shoulder to the back of his head,

burying it in Connor's thick hair, still slightly damp from a shower. Then he held Connor firmly against his lips and tasted every corner of Connor's mouth. He was delicious. Hot and slick and minty fresh. He'd brushed his teeth, probably right before he came to John. Something about that and his damp hair made John want to cry, which was stupid. He ought to be glad he'd gone to the trouble. But he got the impression Connor hadn't wanted to give John any reason to reject him. He really didn't get it. He didn't know that John would have taken him dirty with teeth unbrushed.

Connor made a sound that might have turned into a moan if he'd let it. But he cut it off. It made John desperate to hear it, to make Connor lose control so he couldn't stop himself. He wrapped an arm around Connor's waist and with his hand in the small of Connor's back pressed him down. Connor resisted for a moment, and then he slowly collapsed against John until he was lying full against him.

"Mmm." John tried to talk but realized he had to stop kissing Connor first. He pulled his mouth away and was gratified to hear Connor gulp in a breath as if he'd been so into it he'd forgotten to breathe. "No sheet between us," John murmured, gently pushing Connor back up. Connor rose up onto his hands and toes so John could shove the sheet down. He clumsily kicked it off his feet, hardly able to function, he wanted Connor back

against him so bad. Connor must have felt the same, because as soon as John was free, he fell back on top of him, and his mouth was on John's less than a second later. This kiss was much more aggressive than his first one, and it was John who moaned. He put both hands on the back of Connor's head, his soft, thick hair heaven between his fingers. Then he wrapped one leg around Connor's waist and rolled the two of them over so that he was on top.

"John," Connor protested weakly. God, his voice was so deep it hummed along John's nerves as the hair on his arms rose.

"What do you want, Connor?" John asked him. His voice was a little unsteady, and he cleared his throat. "I want to give you what you want, but I don't know what that is."

"You."

Connor's answer made John's heart pound. But he knew that what Connor meant was sex. He wanted sex, and John was here. He understood that. He let his hands rub against Connor's skin, so hot and smooth and alive. He'd missed the feel of another human being in his arms. And he had the feeling that was really what Connor wanted. To be with someone, to feel someone. To not be alone.

"Then you get me." John rolled away just long

enough to push off his underwear. He nodded at Connor's boxers. "Get those off."

Connor hesitated again. For someone who'd come asking for it, he seemed unsure whether or not he wanted it. John let the thought trail off as Connor reached down and shucked his underwear. John nearly swallowed his tongue at a naked Connor outlined in the moonlight.

He rolled over Connor again, surprising him, and reached into the top drawer of the nightstand, pulling out some lube and condoms. He set them on the bed beside them and then framed Connor's face with his hands. "Unless you tell me no, I'm going to fuck you."

He was serious as a heart attack. There was nothing—barring Connor's refusal—that was going to keep him out of Connor tonight. He could go slowly. He could do all but that with Connor. He could dance around it and give them both the lie that they hadn't really had sex. Or he could throw caution to the wind and live for today. He'd been living that way when he packed up his life and moved from California to North Carolina. And then it seemed his life had fallen into some kind of suspended animation until Connor arrived. He'd already decided to do this. He wasn't going to settle for halfway anymore.

Connor's expression was as serious as John's. "I'm not saying no."

That earned Connor another kiss. A mind-blowing,

toe-curling, I-can-die-a-happy-man kiss. At least for John. The tenor of their encounter changed with the kiss. Perhaps it had changed with the words they'd exchanged. But whatever the cause, there was no hesitation now. They both knew what was going to happen, and it was clear they both wanted it. Badly.

John wanted to savor Connor's body, to taste it and enjoy it. It was impossible simply because he was overwhelmed by Connor: by his scent, his touch, his desire, the smoothness and heat of his skin, the thud of his heartbeat against John's chest. But he was overwhelmed most by the knowledge that it was Connor underneath him in his bed, skin to skin and cock to cock. And before the moment melted away, he wanted—no, needed—to be inside Connor.

"Now," he whispered against Connor's lips, and Connor nodded. As John pulled away, Connor followed his mouth, nipping at his lips, rising to rest his weight on his hands behind him until John was too far away, and Connor had to reluctantly let him go.

John climbed off the side of the bed and grabbed Connor's ankle, dragging him over. "Come here," he growled.

Connor laughed lightly. "Or else?"

"Or else we can't fuck," John said. "And that would be a real shame."

“Yes, sir,” Connor agreed in his deep, quiet voice. “It would.”

He slid over, and John tugged until his legs dangled over the side of the bed. “Flip over,” John ordered, and Connor complied, rolling over onto his stomach.

“Like this?” he asked breathlessly.

“Just like that.” John was as aroused as Connor sounded. He’d rarely gotten to play this role with Steve. He hadn’t minded, not really, not then. But he was different now. He wanted different things from Connor. He wanted what he wanted, and he didn’t want to compromise for someone else’s pleasure. Maybe it was selfish, but he just didn’t care right now.

He had to lean across the bed to get the lube and condoms. He pressed himself flush against Connor’s back, and when Connor shuddered beneath him, John smiled. “Soon,” he told Connor as he pressed a kiss to his nape. A shiver raced down Connor’s back, and John felt it. “Soon,” he said again.

Chapter Eleven

When he pressed his finger against Connor's entrance, John was relieved to find Connor ready for him. He was glad for Connor's experience right then. Perhaps not the way he'd gained it, but John was glad that he didn't have to worry about hurting or shocking him when he fucked him. He liberally applied lube, both for Connor and for him. He had a feeling that once he got inside, he was going to pound Connor hard. He was wild with the need to fuck him, desperate to take him and come.

"Now, Johnny," Connor whispered tightly. "I can't stand much more waiting."

His southern accent was thicker than usual. The idea that John had made him lose control in some way already was enough to have John tossing the lube aside and grabbing Connor's hips to haul him into position, his ass hanging off the edge of the bed. "That makes two of us," John told him fervently, earning one of Connor's

brief, deep chuckles, this one a little breathless.

John raised his left knee onto the bed next to Connor's hip for leverage and snuggled his right leg in between Connor's, spreading him wide. Then he nestled his cock in the crease of Connor's tight, shapely rear and reached up to rest his hand on Connor's back. Connor's whole body jerked at the contact, and he made a desperate little noise in the back of his throat. To John that noise said "go" louder than any spoken word.

As he eased inside Connor's tight heat, John wished he didn't have to wear the condom. It was a crazy wish. He'd never had sex without one, and with Connor's past, it was dangerous to do so. But if Connor stayed in Mercury long enough... John didn't even finish the thought. He wasn't looking for that. He wasn't looking for long-term, for commitment, for heartache. This, what he and Connor had and what they were doing, that was enough. It was more than he'd bargained for when he'd let Connor in, that was for sure. He wasn't going to suffocate it with impossible dreams and expectations.

Connor tucked his arms in under his chest, and John watched in a fog of desire as Connor let his whole body go lax. John could see it happen as Connor's back went from rigid to slack, starting with his shoulders. When his ass relaxed around John's cock, he pushed in all the way—a long, smooth glide into the heaven that

was Connor, that had John gritting his teeth and clutching Connor's hip tight.

He began to fuck Connor hard and fast immediately, and Connor took it. He lay there under John and bit his lip and angled his hips and took it like a pro. John was lost in the haze, and it took a couple of minutes before he realized that while Connor wasn't protesting, he also wasn't participating quite as actively as John would like. He slowed his strokes and ran his hand down Connor's spine to the little indent at the top of his crease. "Connor?" he asked, his voice rough. He was panting. Two minutes in Connor, and he sounded as if he'd just run a fucking marathon.

"I'm fine," Connor said quietly. "Go ahead."

That was not the response John was looking for. "I don't want 'fine,'" he snapped. "I want out of this world, fucking over the moon at me inside you." He quickly pulled out. "What's wrong? What am I doing wrong?"

Connor started to cover his head in that god-awful defensive posture that made John's gut clench. Before he could do it, John pressed his chest against Connor's back, covering him. He grabbed Connor's wrists and pressed his hands into the mattress. "Tell me, Connor," he demanded quietly, his forehead pressed to the side of Connor's head. "Tell me how to make you go crazy. Tell me what you need."

Connor shook his head. John just waited. He rubbed his nose in Connor's spicy-scented, newly washed hair while he waited, breathing deeply.

"Face-to-face," Connor finally whispered. "I want you to fuck *me*, John. I want someone to fuck *me*. Not the football star or the boy toy or the junkie. *Me*."

"Aw, Christ, Connor," John sighed. He crawled on the bed beside Connor. "Slide up and roll over."

Connor did as he was told, slow and easy, and John was struck by the notion that Connor always moved like that. Every move was deliberate and steady, no rushing, no fumbling. As if he thought about every step, every gesture before he made it.

When he finally lay on his back, Connor didn't look at John. He covered his eyes with one hand, his other arm thrown over his head and hanging off the side of the bed. John lay down on top of him, deliberately letting all his weight settle. Connor slid his legs open, and John's fell between, but still Connor wouldn't look at him. That was all right. John could still give him what he asked for. John bent his legs and pressed his knees against the insides of Connor's thighs, forcing them up. Connor didn't fight him. When Connor's knees were bent and he was wide enough, John fit his hips into the space they'd made and pressed back inside. Connor jerked and moaned.

“Hold on, Connor,” John said softly. “Hold on to me.” John took the hand Connor had flung over the bed and pulled it down and wrapped it around his waist. He braced his forearm above Connor’s shoulder, his hand brushing Connor’s beautiful hair. Then he reached for the hand covering Connor’s eyes. Before he could move it, Connor lowered it and wrapped his other arm around John’s waist. John braced his other arm in the same way as the first so that he could slide the fingers of both hands into Connor’s hair.

As John began to move, not as frantic as he’d been the first time they’d tried this, Connor’s arms tightened. His eyes were scrunched closed. In minutes their breathing grew ragged, and Connor’s arms slipped around John’s waist until he was clutching him. Then Connor began to move. His hips rose to meet John’s thrusts, tentatively at first, but soon he was meeting John halfway, fucking him as surely as he was being fucked. His knees bent at more of an angle, his feet right up against John’s ass, pushing him and holding him against Connor.

John had never felt so much a part of someone as he did right then. Connor surrounded him, needing him so badly John didn’t think he was even aware of the little whimpers that escaped each time John drove home inside him. John wanted to taste those sounds on his tongue. But as aggressive as their fuck was, the kiss he

gave Connor was tender. He gently pulled on Connor's lower lip, holding it softly between his until Connor opened his mouth with a gasp. Then John kissed him deeply, loving the breathy sighs that escaped Connor only to be swallowed by John. His hands in Connor's hair were gentle. He didn't want to pull it or be too rough. He wanted Connor to feel two things: John's cock in his ass and John's lips on his. He ran his thumb across the grooves etched in Connor's forehead as he concentrated so hard on what they were doing. John loved it, loved how in the moment Connor was.

Suddenly Connor grew more agitated, his movements jerky. He clutched John between his thighs and held so tightly to his waist that John could barely breathe. Connor's eyes flew open in a panic. "John," he shouted, and then a cry that sounded suspiciously like a sob burst from him, and John felt him come, felt the hot gush of semen against his belly where Connor's cock was pressed between them.

"Connor," he whispered. He pressed deep and let the contractions of Connor's orgasm ignite his own. Coming in Connor was quite possibly the most erotic and satisfying thing John had ever done. He had his open mouth poised over Connor's, and their uneven breaths mingled as they both trembled in the aftermath.

When he could walk without falling, John climbed

off the bed and threw away the condom in the dark. Then he climbed back into bed and dragged Connor into his arms. He didn't say a word, and neither did Connor. Instead, they clung to each other, face-to-face, John's thigh between Connor's, and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twelve

“You been to church yet, Connor?” Miss Priss called out from the porch as she watched him planting flowers along the fence. She’d come over a few times since that first day. Conn had driven over to check on her and brought her back here. Eventually someone showed up to chat with her on the porch, either Evan or Toby or Cheryl or someone else. John was usually there half the day too, he and Miss Priss deep in conversation. John had commented that he’d never seen a soul on the street until Conn showed up. Conn smiled.

“No, ma’am,” he answered, knowing exactly where this conversation was heading.

“Well, you get yourself there this Sunday, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. He didn’t add that he’d already decided to go.

“I’ll let Reverend Whitley know you’re coming,” she said with a sniff.

“Actually, Miss Priss, I think I might be going over to Evan’s church this Sunday,” he said. He stood up and faced her across the fence. Her eyes were wide. To most folks in Mercury, leaving the Methodist church was tantamount to instant damnation. But Conn had thought a lot about it, and he figured he’d done a hell of a lot more than that and was still breathing, so going to the Unitarian church didn’t seem so dangerous.

Miss Priss surprised him by saying, “Well, as long as you go to one of God’s houses.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Conn agreed with a smile. He bent down to place a plant in the hole he’d dug for it.

“You bake a cherry pie like your mama?” Miss Priss asked.

Conn smiled again, behind the fence where she couldn’t see him. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll be checking in on you after church.”

It looked like Conn was going to be baking a pie. He hummed as he pressed the dirt in the hole around the plant. He’d have to tell John to expect visitors on Sunday.

“We’re going *where*?” John asked that night as he lowered his fork to his plate. He looked at Conn as if he’d

lost his mind.

“To church.”

John blinked at him a few times in confusion. “Why? Do you feel the need to confess?”

Conn smiled and took a bite of the roast chicken. It was pretty damn good if he did say so himself. He’d noticed John was on his second helping. After they’d had sex a week ago, Conn had taken over the cooking. He figured being that intimate with someone meant you could use his kitchen. And John was a terrible cook. Between Conn’s mama and the Fulton County jail “work program,” Conn could cook. Of course, they hadn’t had sex since, so either Conn was a bad cook or a bad lover. He was afraid to ask which one. “Catholics confess, not Unitarians.”

“Ah,” John answered, nodding his head. “So we’re going to see Evan.”

“Yep.”

“And Miss Priss will be here after?”

Conn nodded. “Probably a few others.” Suddenly he realized how rude he was being. He hadn’t asked. This was John’s house now. He couldn’t just invite people without asking. “You don’t mind, do you? I can always tell them no. You know, if you don’t want them here.”

John’s expression was unreadable. “I don’t mind.”

He looked away and adjusted the napkin in his lap. "You can invite people over anytime." He sighed and picked up his fork. "I still don't get the pie, though," he added as almost an afterthought.

"You don't like cherry pie?"

"I don't remember the last time I had cherry pie." John took a bite of mashed potatoes.

"I do." Conn got up and walked over to fill his glass at the sink. It was an excuse. He'd had a vivid memory of his mother taking that pie out of the oven and later cutting it and serving it on the porch, right before he'd left for school. His hand shook a little as he turned the tap on.

"I'm sorry." John's words were soft. The words were perfunctory, but the sentiment behind them wasn't. Conn could hear the sympathy in his voice.

"Just another memory sneaking up on me." Conn brushed it away and turned with a smile. "So I'll make a pie."

"All right," John answered. "I'd like a pie."

Conn sat back down and watched John eat the dinner he'd made.

* * *

"You are not wearing that to church," Conn said Sunday morning as John walked into the kitchen. He

almost had to avert his eyes, John's shirt was so pink. He had on a gray pinstriped suit that looked like it had been custom-made and a wildly striped tie that somehow managed to match his pink shirt.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" John asked, looking down at himself. He had on a Rolex too. And a pinkie ring. Did he always wear a pinkie ring?

"I'm not sure you could look more gay."

John slowly raised his head, and then his eyebrow went up as he stared at Conn. "Oh, do not doubt me, my man. I could look a lot more gay. I could go put on the pink-and-white striped seersucker jacket in my closet upstairs. It looks great with this shirt and tie."

"Jesus," Conn sighed. "Have you always been this gay?"

"Yep." John whistled as he grabbed the car keys. "And don't even pretend you aren't pretty damn happy about that, Skippy."

"Skippy?" Conn asked with a grin as he held the back door open.

"It sounds like the kind of guy who would hang out with an ultra-gay like myself," John answered with an expression of mock seriousness.

"Yep, that's me all over," Conn agreed, patting John's ass as he walked by. John just kept on whistling

right on out to the car.

“I thought three pies would be too much,” John said a few hours later as he walked back into the kitchen with two more empty plates. “I was wrong.”

Conn looked over his shoulder from the sink where he was washing dishes. John had his jacket and tie off, and his sleeves were rolled up his forearms. He was more muscular than he’d been just a couple of weeks ago. You could see it in the muscles of his lower arms. With his gleaming silver Rolex on his wrist and his pink sleeve pushed up, his arm looked very tan and strong. Conn found it sexy as hell. Even that damn pinkie ring. He turned back to the sink before John figured out what he was thinking. “Yep.”

“Church went pretty well, don’t you think?” John asked as he put the plates down next to the sink. “I wasn’t expecting all your old friends to be there.” He sighed. “I hope I didn’t embarrass you.”

He was serious. Conn shook his head in disbelief. “Not you. Them. *I’m* the one who’s sorry.”

John looked completely confused. “What the hell are you sorry about?”

Conn slammed the handle of the faucet down with more force than necessary, turning the water off. He grabbed a towel and dried his hands, trying to control his

anger. "It was the Conn and John show. Everybody trying to find out where I've been for eight years, wondering why I'm living here with you, dying to know if we're fucking."

John was clearly taken aback. "It's to be expected that they'd be curious, Connor. But I didn't think any of their questions were malicious."

"They put you on the spot." Conn was still so angry about that. He wished he was only angry with his old buddies. But the truth was, he was angry with John. Because he wanted everyone to know he and John were involved, except they weren't. And it was clear John didn't want them to know and didn't want to be involved. Conn threw the dish towel across the room at the table and missed by a mile. "Why aren't we fucking, John?"

John took a step back. "What?"

Conn shook his head. Now he was angry with himself, and he knew from years of experience that that never solved anything. "Nothing. Never mind." He brushed past John, who let him go.

The crowd thinned out after an hour or so, leaving just Toby and Cheryl and their kids and Evan. Conn had cooled off by then. It was what it was. He may want more, but he couldn't make John's choices for him. He'd only just learned to make the right ones for himself.

"Go away, kid. You bother me." He glanced over to

see Harley standing next to John, staring at him without blinking. "That's W.C. Fields," John explained to Harley, "an old actor."

"Who's W.C. Fields?" Harley asked, looking around.

"Who said that."

Conn could hear the impatience in John's voice. He could tell John hadn't been around a lot of kids.

"Who said what?" Harley looked completely confused.

Conn smothered a laugh. This was beginning to sound like an old comedy skit.

"Go away, kid. You bother me," John tried again.

"You already said that," Harley said in the same exasperated voice as John.

The porch erupted in laughter, and John glared at all of them. He narrowed his eyes at Harley. "This time I mean it."

"Yikes," Harley said and gulped. Then he turned and ran down the steps and around the house screaming, followed by his laughing older brother.

Cheryl was laughing so hard she was crying. John looked concerned. "I didn't mean to scare him like that." Cheryl just laughed harder.

"He's not," Toby told him with a chuckle. "He'll be back to bug you again soon." John didn't look too happy

about that.

"That's what kids do, John," Conn told him. "They always pick the weakest in the herd, you know." John made a face at him.

"So are you two sleeping together?" Cheryl asked out of the blue. Toby choked on his drink and started coughing.

John looked like he'd swallowed a bug, so Conn couldn't resist saying, "Not lately."

John's jaw dropped in shock, and Toby's coughing got worse. Evan just laughed, and so did Cheryl. "You know, Conn, I never liked you much before. I like you a lot more now." She pounded Toby on the back. "The looks on their faces"—she gestured at Toby and John—"were priceless. They like to have died when you said that." She was still laughing, and Conn grinned back at her.

"More pie," Toby gasped. "I need some pie." The demand made his wife howl with laughter.

"I got more," Conn said, getting up from the step where he'd been sitting. "I saved one."

When they were all eating their second piece of cherry pie, Toby asked, "You ever hear that song about heaven being cherry pie?" He licked the back of his fork.

John shook his head. "No."

Toby scoffed and waved a hand dismissively at him.

"It's a country song. I wouldn't expect a city boy like you to know it." He looked at Conn. "You were gone already. But that song always reminded me of your mama's cherry pie."

Conn set his plate down on the step, not looking at Toby. "Yeah, I heard that song." He'd cried over that damned song a time or two over the years and not just because of the line about cherry pie. The rest of the song was about his life. If Conn wrote songs, he'd have written that one. He'd learned it on the guitar, when he still had his.

"What do you think, Evan? Is heaven cherry pie?" John asked with a smile in his voice.

"I think heaven is eating cherry pie if you want it to be." There was a pause. "What about you, Conn?"

He blew out a breath. "I don't believe in heaven."

"What?" Cheryl sounded scandalized.

"Why?" That was John, and he just sounded curious.

Conn turned on the step and leaned his back against the post so he was facing them all. "Because heaven is right now. I want to eat my cherry pie right now. I want to live the way I want right now. If I wait, well, what for?" He shook his head. "No, I'm not waiting on a heaven I can't see or feel or touch." He gestured to the house and the street. "I'm just gonna make this

heaven.”

“Your mama’s house?” Toby asked.

Conn shook his head. “It’s not Mama’s anymore.”

Evan leaned forward and put his plate down on the floor. “How do you feel about that?”

John was silent, just watching. He was good at that. He could be so quiet that people overlooked him. Conn had seen that at church today. He answered, watching John, who was staring at him. “I’m fine with it. I’m glad Johnny bought it. I wouldn’t want anyone else to have it.” He looked away, out at the street. “If it had been mine, I couldn’t have done much with it.”

“So Mercury is heaven?” Toby asked skeptically. “Not hardly.”

Conn’s smile was bittersweet. “You just don’t know what a little slice of heaven it is, Tobe.”

“I’ve lived here my whole life,” Toby answered. “And it ain’t no cherry pie.”

Chapter Thirteen

John was freaking. He was standing at the kitchen sink having a panic attack. And it was stupid, so he was pissed off about it. But that didn't change the fact that he might possibly be hyperventilating.

What the fuck had happened today? He'd gone to church. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone to church. Maybe when he was a kid? But neither of his parents were religious. They were more concerned with using him to hurt each other as he flew from coast to coast between them than they were about his spiritual growth.

And then there were all the people who'd come by "after church." Not just the church they'd been at, but every church in town. Once word was out that Connor Meecham was seeing visitors, they'd come in packs. And he and Connor had fed them, entertained them, danced around their awkward questions, and seen them off.

It was all so...so...domestic.

He spun around and leaned back against the kitchen counter. He was hiding from Connor in here. But he didn't need to, not really. Because when all his friends left, Connor had disappeared upstairs. Maybe he was freaking too.

Or not.

Connor had contributed to John's uneasiness today. He'd relied on John to get through the ordeal of seeing old friends at church. John had tried to distance himself, but Connor wouldn't let him. John didn't think Connor was even aware of the little signals he was giving off, the little signs that they were more than friends. Connor stood just a little closer to John than most men were comfortable with; when he was asked a question, he'd turned to John while answering, as if seeking his approval or input. He'd put his hand on the small of John's back when they went through doors. But others picked up on all those signs. Cheryl certainly had.

Connor's response to Cheryl's question had blown him away. He'd been shocked speechless Connor had all but admitted he was gay and they were sleeping together. John had been playing it cool because he didn't think Connor wanted anyone to know. He'd read that wrong. But in his earlier outburst in the kitchen, Connor had asked why they weren't fucking. Not involved, not together, nothing romantic. Just fucking.

And that was fine with John. He wasn't looking for more. He couldn't handle it. It was too soon. He'd pretty much had a breakdown when Steve died. He crossed his arms and looked around the kitchen in dismay. *Pretty much? Um, hello, John? You packed up all your worldly possessions and moved to bum-fuck North Carolina on a whim.* That wasn't pretty much. That was completely.

Yep, as Connor would say. But the thing was, he wasn't unhappy here. And this thing with Connor was probably helping him. He'd wanted to change his life. A casual friends-with-benefits fuck buddy was definitely not his usual style. Just because he still wanted Connor, just because they were fucking, didn't mean John couldn't stay in control. It didn't mean he had to center his life around Connor. It was fucking, plain and simple. They liked each other; the sex had been great. They could do that for a while, until it got old, and then they could move on. People did it all the time.

While he'd been rationalizing his feelings, John had walked over to the foot of the stairs. "Connor?" he called out quietly. There was no answer. He started up the stairs, remembering the last time he'd sneaked up here. If he caught Connor masturbating again, he didn't have to sneak away this time. He could go right up and take over. The thought made him sweat. He'd wanted to just talk to Connor. But he'd been fooling himself. He wanted to fuck Connor again. And it was pretty clear

that Connor wanted it too. Which was convenient.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he could see Connor in the early evening light, sitting sideways on his bed, his back against the wall, watching the stairs.

“What are you doing?” John asked as he stood outside Connor’s door. He hadn’t done anything to the room yet. The cans of yellow paint sat against one wall.

“Sitting here thinking.” Connor’s low voice hit John in the gut, and everything clenched. He knew. He knew why John was here.

“About what?”

“What do you want, John?” Connor asked. He slid over to sit on the side of the bed, his fists resting on the sheets beside him. His head was tipped to the side as he waited for John’s answer.

“This doesn’t have to be forever,” John said as he leaned casually against the door frame.

“Nothing has to be forever,” Connor agreed. His voice was getting even lower.

“Then I want to fuck you again,” John said.

Without a word Connor pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it aside. John started to unbutton his shirt, but Connor said, “No.” John stood there with his hands at his sides, not sure what Connor wanted. Connor huffed out a breath as he looked away, out the window, in

a gesture John was becoming familiar with. It meant he was going to admit something he'd rather not. "I like the shirt." He looked back at John, and a faint blush stained his cheeks. "I like the big Rolex and the pink shirt and the way they make your arm look." He shrugged. "It's sexy."

John bit his lip so he wouldn't laugh. "You like the pink, huh?" He sauntered over to the bed and ran his hands over Connor's shoulders and down to his chest, where he lightly pinched Connor's nipples. He could see the hard-on tenting his shorts. Connor had gone casual as soon as they'd gotten home from church, but John liked being dressed up. He hadn't dressed up in ages.

Connor rested his hands on John's wrists and ran them up his forearm in a light caress that made the hair on his arms stand up. "I like the arms." He rested his hands on John's hips, his thumbs rubbing the crease between his thigh and groin. John stepped closer. "And the pink."

John laughed. "I knew you did. You like me gay."

"Mmm," Connor mumbled, cupping John's ass and rubbing his face against John's dick through his pants. "Yep."

Connor unbuckled John's belt in that slow, deliberate way of his. He slid it out of the belt loops, and each little tug as it cleared one made John's dick jerk

with excitement. Connor set the belt on the end of the bed. Then he turned back and undid John's pants. By the time Connor had his pants pushed down to his ankles, John thought he was going to jump out of his skin. Then Connor began to unbutton his shirt from the bottom up.

"I thought you wanted the shirt on," he murmured, running his hand through Connor's hair.

"I'm not taking it off," Connor answered. "But I want to see you." He parted the unbuttoned shirt and just looked at John from his chest to his crotch and back again. "Damn, you're hot."

John laughed self-consciously. "I make do."

Connor shook his head. "No, I mean it. You're so good-looking sometimes I..." He let the thought trail off and shook his head again.

John closed his fist in Connor's hair and raised his head until Connor had to look at him. "You what?"

"I think that I'm very lucky."

John knew that wasn't what he was going to say, but he let it pass. "Well, you're about to be, anyway."

Connor gave him that little lopsided grin. "So are you." He leaned over and took the tip of John's cock in his mouth, humming around it. John dropped his head back with a groan, keeping hold of Connor's hair. He could feel

Connor's head move as his mouth slid farther down John's cock. Being in Connor's mouth was mind-blowing. The same mouth that didn't talk much, the mouth that housed that deep voice that never failed to give John shivers. The mouth he'd stared at for hours it seemed, trying to catch Connor's smiles, not so rare anymore. "Jesus, don't stop, Conn," he moaned, the nickname slipping out. His reward was a deeper suction on his cock, to the back of Connor's throat.

John struggled to think through the haze of pleasure. "Wait," he mumbled, pulling on Connor's hair slightly. "This isn't how I want it."

Connor came off his dick slow and smooth, with soft, wet sucks that made John's hips jerk. Connor buried his nose in the hair right next to the base of his cock. "How do you want it?" he asked. He kissed John's hip. "That's how I want it too."

John pushed him back on the bed. He struggled to undo the button on Connor's shorts. "First, I want to suck you off. Then I want to fuck you."

Connor's hands came up and covered his face. "Jesus," he muttered. He lifted his hips, and John pulled the shorts down, and then he lifted his legs so John could pull them off.

"Is that a yes?" John asked, kicking his shoes off and pulling his own pants off.

Connor nodded. He hadn't moved his hands. "Watch me," John told him.

Connor pulled his hands away and set them down on the bed beside him. He crooked his head so he could see John. It wasn't until John was sure he was watching that he knelt down between Connor's spread legs. He reached for Connor's cock. It was a fat cock, heavy and leaking, and his mouth watered, he wanted to taste it so bad. Connor caught his hand before he could touch it.

"No," he said. He nodded in the other direction. "The other one. The one with the watch."

John smiled to himself and switched hands, but Connor tugged on the hand he still held to get John's attention.

"I'm clean, John. I know...with my past..." He breathed out heavily. "But I haven't been with anyone besides you for almost three years. And I had to have regular tests when I was on probation. So...I'm clean. You don't have to worry about that."

Several things went through John's mind, including the fact that he hadn't thought to ask. What was it about Connor that made him forget to be smart? But he didn't comment on that. "I am too," he said. "And it's healthy. You're healthy. Clean has nothing to do with it."

Connor smiled sadly. "It has everything to do with

it.” He raised himself slightly, leaning back on his hands. “Go. I can see you now.”

“Good.” There was so much more he wanted to say. But with Connor, somehow he always ended up not saying more than he did say. But what he wanted to say wasn’t going to help either of them. And this wasn’t about the past or the future. It was about now. It was about eating his cherry pie right now.

John smiled at the thought as he took Connor in his mouth. Connor sucked in a breath and held it, his whole body tense. John deep throatied him, the way he’d been dying to since the day he’d let him in. He slid his hands up Connor’s thighs and onto his stomach, then around to his back.

“Johnny,” Connor whispered. John looked up. Connor’s head had fallen back on his shoulders. He had his eyes closed. He wasn’t watching anymore, but that was all right. He’d whispered John’s name. He knew who had him.

John worked his mouth on Connor with real enjoyment. He tasted wonderful, and he was a firm mouthful, not too little and not too big. He kept his hips still, letting John do the work, letting John take control. John had almost never been in control with Steve.

Every once in a while Connor let out a little sound from the back of his throat, deep and harsh. John loved

that sound. Loved that he made Connor talk like that, made him lose control. He could hear Connor's breath going in and out, hard and fast. He slid his hand down and caressed Connor's balls, the hair soft on his fingertips. He cupped them, and Connor whimpered, so quiet he almost missed the sound. He smiled around the cock in his mouth and took him deep again.

"Johnny, I'm not gonna last much longer," Connor whispered. There was just a hint of panic in his voice. "I'm sorry, but it feels so damn good. If you don't want me to come, you better stop right now."

John's response was to swallow around Connor's cock in his throat.

"Jesus," Connor cried out, his hips bucking slightly.

John continued to do it, over and over, pausing to take a breath and then starting again. He could feel Connor's cock go rigid and start pulsing, just moments before he tasted his cum on the back of his tongue. He continued to swallow as Connor curled up slightly and his hips and cock jerked. One hand came down on John's shoulder, gripping it tight.

When it was over Connor lowered himself to the bed and ran his hands through his sweat-soaked hair. "Jesus, Johnny," he whispered. "That was fuckin' amazing." The heavy accent that turned John on was back.

John laughed slightly as he wiped the side of his

mouth with his thumb. "I'm pretty good at it, yeah," he said without shame.

Connor laughed weakly. "That is the understatement of the day."

John crawled on top of him, framing him with his knees and hands, the open sides of his pink shirt falling around him, cocooning them. He stared down at Connor. But Connor wasn't looking at him. He was looking over at his left arm. Connor reached over and wrapped his hand around John's left wrist. He circled John's watch with his fingers and then ran his hand up John's forearm.

"You gonna fuck me now, Johnny?" he whispered, still looking at his arm, toying with his watchband.

"Yeah. Yeah, I am," John whispered back.

Connor looked at him then. "Face-to-face?"

John nodded. "Face-to-face."

Connor grinned his little lopsided grin and, with a hand wrapped around John's nape, pulled him down for a kiss.

Chapter Fourteen

Conn lay over John's back, still inside him, still breathing heavily. His world was still rocking. The past night had been, without a doubt, the best sex he'd ever had in his life. He slid his hand under John's shoulder and rubbed his nose in his gorgeous hair. The sunlight glinted off the gray in the dark strands. John smelled like sex. And money. Conn had been around enough to know when a man's scent was expensive. He shook his head slightly. This guy was so far out of his league it was a joke, the two of them together.

John's hand covered his. It was such a simple little gesture. But it caught Conn off guard. There was feeling behind it. Conn had never been with a guy he had feelings for or who cared for him. It was different. It was, as corny as it sounded, better. He kissed the side of John's head.

"You're as good at that as you are on the bottom," John murmured with a breathless little laugh. "And I

honest to God didn't think that was possible."

Conn felt a little thrill of pride. He nipped John's earlobe. "I can be whatever you want me to be."

"Uh-uh," John declined vehemently. "Oh no." He rolled over, forcing Conn to come up onto his hands and knees. John poked him in the chest. "When we fuck, you better be who and what you want. Don't put that on me. Don't say it's all for me."

Conn grabbed his finger. "Relax, Johnny. I just meant that I like it all, so whatever you're in the mood for, chances are I'm not going to protest." Conn's heart was pounding, and he was trying hard not to show it. John may say he didn't want more than this, but he was pretty unselfish in bed for a guy who was in it just for a fuck.

Conn's comment took the wind out of John's sails. "Oh," he said. He tugged his finger out of Conn's grip and looked down. "Maybe you should take care of that?"

Conn followed his gaze to the condom barely clinging to his now limp dick. He laughed. "Yeah, I guess I should." He carefully climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

When he got back, John was sitting on the edge of the bed in his pink shirt and underwear holding his guitar. "Here," he said, holding it out. His voice sounded funny, and Conn took the offering cautiously. He

strummed his fingers down the strings. It was badly out of tune.

“Why are you giving me your guitar?” he asked without looking at John.

“It’s not mine.”

Conn placed his hand against the strings to silence them. He looked up at John. “Whose is it?” he asked, but he already knew.

“Steve’s.”

Conn wasn’t sure what to make of that. “Do you play?”

“No.” It was never good when John started sounding like him. He was looking at the paint cans in the corner instead of Conn.

“Then why did he give it to you?”

John stared at his hands in his lap. He was rubbing one thumb over the other. “He didn’t.” He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Well, he did. I got all of his things.”

Conn held the guitar out. “I don’t want to take his things, John.”

John gave him an assessing look. “Why? No one else is using it, or will, if you don’t. I figure it’s better if you play it than give it to some stranger.”

Conn couldn’t fight that logic. “Did he play well?”

John snorted. “Not at all. It was the one thing he

tried that he couldn't do well. And he really tried. It pissed him off no end."

Conn nodded. "All right, then. Thanks."

John got up. "I'm going to go shower. I'll see you downstairs."

He walked off before Conn could kiss him good morning.

"Jesus H. Fucking Christ, this place is Mayberry Hell."

John spun around at the feminine voice dripping with disgust coming through the back screen door. The refrigerator door bounced open hard behind him, rattling the bottles within. "Kristine!"

Steve's younger sister opened the door and glared at him. "Why is your door unlocked? Are you crazy? Anyone could come in here!"

John was so discombobulated by her arrival he couldn't process what she meant. Then he laughed. "I've been in Mercury so long I forgot what it's like to live in LA."

Kristine walked over and gave him a big hug. He hugged her back. She'd been a good friend over the years. There were times, when Steve was overseas, that John had felt closer to Kristine than Steve. She had on

LA casual: skintight jeans, mile-high heels, and a tiny designer T-shirt. She carried a suitcase that was masquerading as a purse, and it banged into John's side when she hugged him.

"Come on," she said. She pulled back and grabbed his shoulders with both hands, looking him sternly in the eye. "Go pack. Enough is enough. No human being can survive here for long. I have scientific proof."

John laughed. "I'm doing more than surviving. I like it here." He was shocked at the admission. He did like it in Mercury. What had once been an exile was now a refuge. He frowned. Was it because of Conn? Or because of this house and the people he'd met? Or both?

"You don't look like it," Kristine said flatly. She looked around the kitchen. "Haven't had time to decorate yet, I see."

John sighed. "Actually, I have. This is all my stuff. My *new* stuff."

"Are you shitting me?" Kristine exclaimed in horror. "You're worse off than I thought."

Suddenly the shower went off upstairs. It had been going unnoticed in the background when Kristine came in, so its cessation was noticeable.

Kristine narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "What was that?"

Before John could answer, he heard Connor strumming the guitar. It didn't sound so good. He winced as Kristine's look turned to anger.

"Who the hell is upstairs?"

He heard Connor's footsteps on the stairs. "Connor!" he called out, still watching Kristine. "We have a visitor."

The footsteps stopped and then went back upstairs. John didn't say anything, and Kristine just glared at him. A few moments later he heard Connor coming back down. Briefly he wondered what he'd had to go back upstairs for. More clothes?

Connor came into the kitchen smiling and then stopped abruptly at the sight of Kristine. He was wearing his old faded red T-shirt and his camo shorts. His hair was still wet from the shower, and John nearly groaned out loud when he saw a hickey peeking out above the crew neck of his shirt. He didn't wait for Connor to ask. He figured he'd get the introductions out of the way.

"Kristine Hamilton, Connor Meecham. Connor, this is Steve's sister, Kristine."

"How do you do," Connor replied politely with a nod at Kristine. John almost smiled at his formality. He sounded and looked so Southern right then. It was a huge turn-on. And wow, what an inappropriate time to get a hard-on.

Kristine didn't respond to Connor. Instead she

turned to John. "Can we talk? Somewhere private?" She stressed the last word, as if Connor had invaded their privacy and not the other way around.

John nodded. "Of course." He started to lead her out to the living room, but Connor stopped him.

"No, it's fine. I've got to run over to the store and get a few things." He nodded at Kristine. "Pleased to meet you." He walked over to the wall peg by the door and snagged the keys to the old truck John had bought to haul all the construction stuff. He turned at the door and held them up. "Okay?" It was clear he was asking to use the truck.

"I've told you that you don't have to ask, Connor," John said impatiently. "Take the car instead, with my blessing. And pick up some coffee creamer. I'm almost out."

"I'm all right with the truck." Connor looked at Kristine. "I'll pick up something for dinner too. For three?"

John looked at Kristine, and she nodded stiffly.

"Fish okay? Or some steak?" Connor asked.

John could see Kristine's cheeks flush with anger at Connor's questions. It didn't take a genius to figure out why. It was that damn domesticity again.

"Fish is good. Thanks, Connor." John watched him

as he waved and walked out the back door. Part of him wanted to call Connor back for a kiss, but he ruthlessly stifled the urge. Not just because Kristine was there, but because that wasn't what this relationship was about. It wasn't kisses good-bye—or hello for that matter. And John needed to remember that.

“Were you trying to get him to take Steve’s car?” Kristine asked in a harsh voice.

With a deep breath John turned to her. He indicated a chair at the table and went to sit down. “Yes.”

“Was that Steve’s guitar he was playing?” She marched over and sat facing him across the table.

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?” Kristine demanded. “He’s only been gone a year! And you’re fucking some boy toy and letting him use Steve’s things.” She shook her head and leaned back in the chair, crossing her arms. “I don’t care who you fuck. But don’t give Steve’s stuff away.”

“It’s not Steve’s stuff anymore,” John answered patiently. “It’s mine.” At his words his heart slammed in his chest. It was the first time he’d admitted that. The first time he’d been able to.

“And they don’t mean anything to you? Is that what you’re saying? You can give them to some grifter with no problem?”

John gritted his back teeth. "What makes you think Connor is a grifter?"

"I haven't heard you mention his name before." Kristine waved her arms around agitatedly as she talked. "He obviously appeared out of the blue. And he's obviously living here. And his clothes were cheap and faded. Maybe I'm wrong, but if it looks like a con artist and it sounds like a con artist, it's a con artist."

John crossed his arms. "And what is he conning out of me?"

Kristine looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Are you kidding me? Multimillionaire, remember? Have you told him that? Or did he already know?"

"He knows." He held up a hand before Kristine could respond. "And he doesn't care. He used to live here, in this house. He showed up one day just to see the house and ended up staying to help me fix it up. That's all."

"You're not fucking him?" she asked accusatorially.

John scoffed. "You've seen him, right? Do I look like Gandhi?"

"Ha-ha," Kristine said without humor. "Don't fool yourself that this is true love, John," she warned. "You're in a bad place right now." She looked around and shuddered. "And I mean both physically and emotionally. Don't jump at the first piece of ass that comes your way out here."

“You don’t understand, Kristine,” he said, frustrated. “You don’t know him, or this place, or what he means here.”

“What he means here? What does that mean?” She made a face. “No, don’t tell me. He’s the Gandhi of Mercury, North Carolina, right?” She laughed at her own joke.

“Enough with the Gandhi,” John said, wishing he’d never brought it up. “But he belongs to this town. And he’s made it...” He sighed. “Oh, never mind.”

“So what does he do? He lives here?” She sounded more curious than angry now.

“Yes. He grew up here.”

“And?” She waved her hand to indicate she wanted more information.

“And...he’s helping me fix up the place.”

“You already said that. What does he do?”

“I just told you.” John was avoiding the question, and he knew it. And from the look on Kristine’s face, she knew it too.

“Okay, before he started helping you fix up this place, what did he do?” She wasn’t a lawyer for nothing, much to John’s regret. She knew how to conduct an interrogation.

“He lived in Atlanta.” It was more information, just

not what she wanted.

She sighed. "You know I can just do my research and find out all about him?"

"He did odd jobs. I never really asked what." John looked away for a moment and chewed the inside of his lip. "And he was in jail."

"Jesus Christ, John," Kristine burst out in disgust. "Did you leave your brains in LA?"

"You don't know him, Kristine. Please, just reserve judgment until you get to know him a little. Please," John begged. "Stay here. We'll make room. You can stay in Connor's room."

"And Connor will conveniently stay in your room?" she asked. "Why do you have separate rooms?"

"We've only just gotten involved. When he first arrived, we became friends, and that was all. Truthfully, that's all we are now, just with benefits. We're both lonely, and we like each other. I'm not fooling myself. Not like I did with Steve. I know it's not true love."

"Steve loved you." She defended her brother. "In his way, he loved you more than anyone else in his life."

John slumped in his seat. They'd been over this. "You know all about the others, Kristine. If you'll remember, they came out of the woodwork when he died."

She sighed. "He didn't love them. He came back to

you, always. Whatever arrangement you and Steve had was your business. You were the only one he told me about. The only one who was family.”

“Our arrangement was we were supposed to be in love and cleave unto each other only. I cleaved; he humped.”

“You came down here because you loved him. You went crazy when he died.” She was talking to him as if he were a child having a tantrum. He hated that.

“I’ve come to realize recently that I went crazy for a lot of reasons. Missing Steve and my grief over his death was only part of it. And I chose this place because it was a reminder of both the love I thought we shared and the betrayal I felt when I found out about his cheating.”

“How so?” Kristine asked.

John just shook his head. “It doesn’t really concern you,” he told her, trying not to sound mean or angry. He wasn’t any of those things.

“Does it concern him?” She pointed out the door. “Connor?”

“It concerns me,” John said with finality, “and those personal revelations I’ll keep to myself for now.” He stood up. “Are you staying?”

She nodded. “Through dinner. But I don’t think I’ll stay with you. It makes us all too uncomfortable. I’ll stay

at the hotel I passed a few miles back on my way here. It looks new.”

John nodded. “Okay. But if you change your mind, the offer still stands.”

Chapter Fifteen

John traced a line down the center of Connor's naked back, enjoying Connor's shiver. They'd only just finished their second fuck of the night. John felt like a teenager. He couldn't get enough of sex with Connor.

It was late, maybe two or three in the morning. John had taken his watch off and tossed it aside when he realized he'd worn it just for Connor. Only when it was too dark to find it had John realized Connor didn't have a clock in his room. It was such a basic ingredient of any room. How could he live without a clock? John supposed he'd lived without a lot of things the last few years. He balled up his fist and pulled it away from the temptation of Connor's warm, sweaty back.

Connor was lying on his stomach next to John, his head pillowed on his arms. He opened his eyes at John's withdrawal. John sat up and rolled off the bed to collect his clothes, needing to be away from Connor for a while. He knew he didn't have the willpower to leave him alone

if he stayed. And he wasn't going to be clingy or desperate. That wasn't who he was anymore.

"Where are you going?" Connor asked. His voice held no anger or accusation. It was just a question. Relief flooded John. With Connor he could do what he wanted. It was that simple, and exactly how John wanted it.

"To my room. It's too hot up here. I can't sleep."

Connor just watched him dress in the dark. He found his watch under his shirt. Two thirty a.m. He strapped it on and then realized how stupid that was. He was going to bed. He was getting dressed in a near panic, and he forced himself to settle down.

He'd been in a weird mood all day. Kristine's visit and their confrontation had set him on edge. Then Connor had returned and disappeared again, only to show up and cook dinner, which he ate silently. It was as if he was avoiding any contact with Kristine. As if he had something to hide, which was what Kristine had hissed at John when he walked her out to her car. At least she hadn't asked Connor about his jail time. John had worried about that all day.

Connor said he'd been at Miss Priss's today, doing some odd jobs for her. John believed him. The thing was, Connor had places to go. He had people he could go see. Toby, Evan, and some guy he'd met last Sunday named Cornelius had called for Connor today. And when John

told them he wasn't home, they all wanted to talk to him instead. Just shootin' the shit. What was that about? They were Connor's friends. He wasn't Connor's boyfriend. His friends didn't need to call John and check up on him.

"I need to get out of here." John didn't realize he'd spoken out loud until Connor answered him.

"No one's stopping you." Connor rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his forearm. He didn't seem too upset about John leaving in the middle of the night.

"Let's go to the beach tomorrow," John said, the idea just popping into his head. "I haven't been to the beach since I moved here."

Connor removed his arm to look at John. "All right."

And that was it. As usual, Connor didn't waste words. John smiled, back on solid ground. "What beach should we go to? I've only ever been to Myrtle Beach around here."

"We can go there if you want." Connor sounded a little reluctant.

"No," John answered, and he could almost feel Connor relax. "Why don't you want to go there?"

"I don't want to run into anyone I knew in Atlanta. A lot of the guys I was with are high-rollers who hit

Myrtle with the wife and kids for spring break.”

John hadn't thought of that. He was surprised at his sudden anger. But it was the wrong kind of anger. It wasn't aimed at Connor; it was aimed at those nameless, faceless bastards who made Connor embarrassed to go where he wanted and do what he pleased. It was a protective anger. And John didn't want to feel that way. This was about sex. Maybe getting out of Mercury would get them back where John wanted them. “Where, then?”

“Kure Beach is nice. I like it there. Used to go when I was a kid.”

“Curry Beach? Where is it?”

“Just outside Wilmington. About an hour from here.”

John laughed. “I can't believe I live so close and haven't been to the beach.” He shook his head. “All right. Get some sleep. We'll leave in the morning.”

“Shouldn't you tell your friend Kristine?”

John had forgotten about Kristine. “I'll call her on the way. Maybe she'll learn not to show up unannounced.”

Connor didn't respond, and John turned and went down to bed. He pretended he wasn't lying there listening for sounds from Connor's room, tossing and turning all night.

“Is this all right?” John asked as he dropped his bag just inside the door of the beach house. It was a bright lime green three-story house on the beach. He’d just Googled a Realtor at Kure Beach this morning and called and arranged for it sight unseen. That was actually harder than he’d thought, since he had no idea “Curry” was actually Kure. He shook his head with a smile. Southerners.

Connor came through the door slowly. “I thought we were just going to stay in a hotel.”

John looked over at him in surprise. “Why?” He shrugged as he walked over and threw the house and car keys on the kitchen counter. The house was very modern and bright, with ocean knickknacks everywhere. “I like to stay in houses whenever possible, not hotels. It’s more comfortable.”

Connor put his beat-up duffle on the floor next to John’s. “All right.”

John opened the blinds and was treated to a beautiful view of the ocean. It was a dark green color, and the beach beside it had quite a few people walking or lying around, enjoying the heat. “We picked a good time to come. This is perfect beach weather.”

Connor had walked over to stand beside him. “Yep. Unusual this time of year.”

The inanity of the conversation struck John. He'd brought Connor here to enjoy some serious sex and fun in the sun, and they were standing here chatting about the weather. He turned and looked up the stairs. "Let's find the bedroom, fuck, and then go out to the beach."

Connor stood there and continued to look out the window while John got his bag and hit the stairs. John stopped and looked down. "What are you waiting for? I thought we came here to have fun."

"Is that why?" Connor asked lightly. He went and got his bag and started up the stairs without looking at John.

John mentally shrugged. "I want you to ride me," John told him as he stopped and looked in the rooms on the second floor. Connor waited for him to choose a room, and then followed him when he continued up to the third floor. He wanted an ocean view. "I drove here. Now you get to be in the driver's seat." He turned and waggled his brows at Connor.

Connor gave him a small smile. "Whatever you want. It's your dime."

Conn stood in the shower, leaning his head against the wall, and let the hot water beat out the tightness in his back. At least the place had good water pressure. You couldn't find that in a hotel.

Other positives of renting a house included not having to run into any of his old tricks while he was playing boy toy to a new one. He turned and scrubbed his face roughly under the water. He hated it here. He hated this house, and right now he hated John. But mostly he hated himself.

His ass was sore. John had fucked him hard yesterday afternoon and again last night. He'd been a machine. *Wham bam, let's hit the beach. Wham bam, how about dinner? Wham bam, I'll sleep in the other room.* Conn got what John had meant a few weeks ago when he'd said no to a blowjob. "*Not if you don't mean it,*" he'd said. If his goal had been to teach Conn a lesson, well, he'd fucking hit the mark and more.

Conn started to punch the tile wall but stopped himself just in time. It was his own fault. He'd let John treat him that way. He'd been too afraid to say how he really felt or ask for what he really wanted because he didn't want to push John away. John had said several times yesterday that the sex with Conn was the best he'd ever had. The way he said it... Conn knew it was his way of saying all he wanted was sex.

But that wasn't what Conn wanted. And if he hoped to get what he did want, he'd have to assert himself and make it happen. John had said it himself. He'd said that when they were together, Conn couldn't make it all about

John.

He put his head under the water and turned his face up, enjoying the pounding wetness against the throbbing headache between his eyes.

“What are you doing?” John called out. Conn wiped his eyes to see John looking at him through the shower door. “You’ve been in there for ages.”

Conn grabbed the soap off the shelf. “I’m sore.”

John whipped open the shower door. “Did I hurt you? Jesus, Connor, you should have said something. Can I get you something? A painkiller?”

His concern was genuine and went a little way to soothing Conn’s bruises. “Yeah, thanks.”

John looked down at his feet, and Conn followed his gaze. John waggled his bare toes on the shower mat. “I guess I’m not used to being, you know, in charge,” he said, and he sounded so forlorn Conn almost laughed. “I just...” He looked directly at Conn. “I just wanted you so much. Sometimes it scares me. That I can’t get enough of you.”

Conn blinked at him. *Wow*. He hadn’t expected that confession. Just when he’d accepted that his feelings weren’t returned, John yanked him back to this side of hope. Before he could answer, John shut the shower door.

A minute later he was back, and he knocked on the

door. Conn opened it to find John holding out a glass and a couple of pills.

“No one knocks on a shower door, John,” he said as he took the pills from him. He popped both in his mouth and chewed. He knew from experience it was the best way to get it into his system. He chased them with the whole glass of water and handed it back to John. “Thanks,” he said before he closed the door again.

He was in no hurry. He took his time washing up. When he stepped out of the shower and reached for his towel, John was still in the bathroom, leaning against the counter with his ankles and arms crossed.

“If it helps,” John told him with a sheepish look, “I’m sore too.”

Conn let out a bark of laughter. “It helps.” John smiled back at him and watched him dry himself off.

“We can go home if you want to,” John offered tentatively.

Conn shook his head. “No.” He wrapped the towel around his waist. “I want to take you somewhere first.”

Chapter Sixteen

“I love the houses here,” John said as they drove down the main street at Kure Beach. He watched the bright blues, purples, greens, and yellows of the houses flash by. “They’re like boxy Easter eggs basking in the sun.”

Conn snorted. “Thank God they don’t smell like eggs in the sun.”

John laughed and turned slightly in his seat to face Conn. “I like it here. It’s a great beach. That pier and the little amusement park reminded me of Santa Monica.” He peered out the windshield. “Whoa, what happened to the houses? Tell me again where we are.”

“This is Fort Fisher,” Conn explained. “It’s just at the end of Kure Beach. Some of it’s still Air Force housing, but most of Fort Fisher is a state park.” He pointed to a small building and some man-made earthen mounds as they drove past. “That’s the real Fort Fisher. It’s a Civil War historical site and museum now.” He

pointed to the left. "And that's the beach. It's part of the park here." He pointed straight down the road. "And at the end is the aquarium."

"It's been years since I went to an aquarium," John said.

"I used to go with my mom every few months," Conn said. He pulled into the parking lot. It was pretty full, but they found a spot.

Conn loved the aquarium. Some of his favorite memories were those trips with his mom. Days when he had her all to himself and she didn't have to work at all.

He got almost as much pleasure from John's enjoyment of the touch tank, where they stroked the rough surfaces of live starfish and sea urchins, as he did from just being there. The place had grown a bit since he'd been here last. He liked that. He liked that something in his past had improved with age.

They had their picture taken together. John started to say no, but Conn pulled him over to the little picture station. For some stupid reason he wanted a picture of them. He wanted to remember sharing this with John.

When they left, John looked happier and more relaxed than he had in days. More like he'd been before they'd had sex the first time. Maybe Conn had pushed too far too fast? He was the one who'd gone to John, after all. Maybe John wasn't ready for that. With him or

anyone. He sighed as they got into the car.

“Where to now?” John asked. “The museum?”

“If you like,” Conn said.

“Why do you do that?”

Conn looked at John in surprise. “Do what?”

“Defer to someone else all the time. Whenever I ask what you want, you always say whatever I want, or some variation of it anyway. Why?” John was frowning. Jesus, Conn could piss him off without even trying.

“I don’t do it to everyone. I do it to you. And I do it because I mean it. Making you happy makes me happy.” Conn glanced at him over his shoulder as he backed out of the parking space. “And I only told you that because I know you won’t be happy until I answer the question.”

John laughed. “You’re right, of course.” He put on his sunglasses. “It didn’t take long for you to figure me out, did it?”

“Shit, Johnny, I ain’t got you figured out yet. I don’t think I ever will.”

John gave him an inscrutable look through his dark glasses. “Take me where you want to go,” John told him finally, and he turned to face the front of the car.

“You got it,” Conn answered.

They didn’t have far to go. Connor pulled the car

into the parking lot for the museum.

“So I get a Civil War lesson?” John asked lightly. He didn’t really care where they went. He had shut off his paranoid inner voice and was just enjoying the day with Connor. He was getting to see a side of Connor he hadn’t seen before. He was lighter here. Still didn’t say much, but he smiled a lot more. John liked that.

He couldn’t believe how different things were with Connor than they’d been with Steve. When he and Steve had done the sightseeing thing, it had been almost as if they were there separately. Once or twice Steve had run into people he knew from the military, and John had to disappear. So most of their relationship had been conducted at John’s house. Ten years of having a partner yet leading separate lives. But none of that with Connor. He’d been right by John’s side the whole way through the aquarium. Even in Mercury, around his friends, he didn’t distance himself.

“Not unless you want one,” Connor responded to his comment about a history lesson. When they exited the car, Connor went around and opened up the little trunk. He’d shoved two beach chairs in there when they’d left this morning.

“So we’re going to the beach?”

“If you want.” Connor carefully closed the trunk. He was so careful with everything of John’s. He was careful

with John too.

That didn't prevent John from getting impatient with him, however. Hadn't he just told him not to defer to him all the time? "Connor..." he growled.

Connor grinned at him. "Grab your chair and follow me."

John took the bright orange chair from Connor. They'd borrowed them from the rental house. "Why is everything here so brightly colored?" He looked around at the parking lot and museum, which were not. "Well, not here. But at Kure Beach."

Connor shrugged. "They like it that way, I suppose."

Connor was leading him across the road to a stand of tall trees in a small area between the road and a parking lot for the beach. It was shady under the trees, with a thin blanket of green on the ground. John could feel the ocean breeze.

When they got to the middle of the green area, right there under the trees, Connor suddenly stopped and opened his chair and sat down. John looked around. There wasn't much to see here. The big rock border lining the beach, the parking lots, the ocean just visible over the rock break. It was cool, though, and there wasn't much traffic at all. John could hear the leaves on the trees rustling in the breeze. He opened his chair and sat

down next to Connor.

“Why are we here?” he asked tentatively a few minutes later when Connor just settled back in his chair and stared at the blue sky with big puffy clouds over the ocean.

“This.”

John rolled his eyes. “And ‘this’ is?”

“Sitting. Relaxing.”

“Oh-kay,” John said. He tried to relax like Connor. Hmm, well, that wasn’t as hard as he’d thought it would be.

Just as he was settling in and his eyelids began to droop, lulled by the slowly moving clouds and the soft breeze and the rustle of leaves, Connor asked, “Why are you here, John?”

John looked at Connor askance out of the corner of his eye. “I thought I was relaxing?”

Connor shook his head, not looking at John. “Not here. North Carolina. Mercury.”

“Ahh,” John said, hedging. Connor didn’t push. He just sat there waiting. But John felt his determination in the air. Connor would wait as long as it took, and he’d keep asking until John answered. John had learned a few things about Connor too.

“Steve was stationed here, right before he died. At

Fort Bragg.” He really, really, really did not want to get into this with Connor right now, during their day together away from everyone and everything.

Connor just waited. John ground his teeth. “Fine.” He readjusted himself in the chair, sitting up. He didn’t look at Connor, but it didn’t matter. Connor wasn’t looking at him either. “I told you I’d been to Myrtle Beach? I went with Steve, the one time I came to visit him. We drove through Mercury.”

He didn’t say anything more. Finally, after several silent, tense minutes, Connor looked at him. “And?”

John sighed. *What the hell.* “He mentioned, driving through, that it would be a great place to settle down. Maybe not Mercury, but a place just like it. He went on and on about the two of us buying a house and fixing it up, retiring.”

“So you came to fulfill his dream?”

John snorted in disgust at Connor’s question. “It was a lie, Connor. Everything with Steve was a lie. Not just because he was in the army and we had to live that way. But because he wanted me to believe there was more waiting for us in the future. He lied so I wouldn’t get sick of his long absences and his fickle libido.” John leaned down and picked up a stick from the ground and started peeling the bark off with his thumb. “So I came to Mercury. Because I did want that dream. He knew it. He

knew just what lie to tell me. So I came to remember both the dream and the lie.”

Connor sighed. “Sometimes, John, the lies we tell ourselves are the only thing that make the truth bearable.”

John tossed the stick aside and turned to look at Connor. “What does that mean?”

Connor ran both hands through his hair and then laced his fingers behind his head, leaning back and staring at the sky. “It means maybe the lies weren’t for you. Maybe the lies were for him because he hated the way he was living. Maybe the only way he could get through one more day was to tell himself those lies and dream those dreams. Even if on the really bad days he knew them for the lies they were.”

John collapsed back in his chair, overwhelmed at what Connor had said. Was it true? Was dreaming of that future with John what had gotten Steve through each day? Connor wasn’t looking at him, but he could see his face and the sad expression on it. Connor was speaking from experience.

“What was your lie, Connor?” he asked quietly.

Connor shook his head. “No, no lie. I came back, didn’t I?” He lowered his arms and looked at John then. “And it’s better than I told myself it would be.”

Later that night John followed Connor into the shower. He took the soap from Connor's hand.

"Let me."

Slowly he washed Connor. When he was covered in the slick bubbles, John turned him and reached around his hip to grasp his cock. John's soapy caresses had aroused him. He felt like an idiot because of the way he'd treated Connor last night. He knew Connor liked it like this, slow and easy. Personal. Connor liked it very personal.

"What are you doing?" Connor asked in that deep, quiet voice of his.

"Making you happy." John's hand slid smoothly up and down Connor's cock, and he felt a little shiver race over Connor's back pressed against his chest.

"You don't have to do this to make me happy."

Connor's words stopped John, but just for a moment. "Okay. Then it makes me happy."

"All right, then," Connor answered with a smile in his voice. He dragged John's other hand up and pressed it over one nipple, rubbing his palm there. He made a satisfied rumbling sound that reverberated in his chest. It was John's turn to shiver. He got off on Connor's pleasure.

"This is different," he said.

“Different how?” Connor asked. His voice was low and a little breathless as he braced his forearm on the wall. John rubbed the soap over his chest and stomach and jacked him slowly.

“Different than what I’m used to.” He didn’t go into detail. Connor didn’t need to know that with Steve he’d never been in charge. Steve directed everything they did, every touch, every kiss—everything. John enjoyed doing what he liked to Connor. Making Connor squirm just because he could and because he wanted to.

Connor chuckled. “Not my usual gig either.”

John laughed softly and gave Connor a little squeeze that made him groan. “Good. I want it to be special between us.”

Connor took the hand that lay against his chest and lifted it to his mouth, kissing John’s palm. “Johnny,” he whispered.

“That’s right,” John said, stepping closer, until he was plastered against Connor’s back and ass. He rubbed his cheek in the hollow between Connor’s shoulder blades. “Don’t forget it. Don’t forget who I am.”

Connor shook his head. “No. You either.”

John held Connor tightly, feeling how close he was to climax. “No. No, I won’t forget.”

Connor came gently, pressing into John’s fist with a

moan. As he was coming he wrapped a hand around John's on his cock, keeping him there. John had nowhere else he wanted to be.

Chapter Seventeen

“Come on.”

Conn felt a hand on his shoulder shaking him awake. He jerked and jackknifed into a sitting position. It took a second for him to remember where he was. Jesus, his heart was racing. He placed a hand over it and tried to calm down.

John stood back a couple of steps from the bed, concern on his face. “I’m sorry, Connor. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

He just shook his head. He was being an asshole. “No. It’s not your fault.” He glanced over and was surprised to see sunlight trying to stream in through the tiny cracks in the miniblinds. “What time is it?” He rubbed his face roughly with both hands.

“It’s almost ten.”

Conn looked at John then. He frowned. “That can’t be right. I never sleep that late.”

John grinned. “I guess I tired you out the last

couple of days.” He came over and sat on the side of the bed next to Conn and ran a hand from his shoulder down his arm. “This place relaxes you. I can tell. Maybe that’s why you slept so well.” He grabbed Conn’s hand and pulled. “Come on, sleepyhead. I’ve got something to show you.”

Conn was still logy from sleeping so late, and he let John pull him out of bed. He finally noticed that John was completely dressed. “When did you get up?”

“I’ve been up for hours,” John said, grabbing Conn’s shorts and throwing them at him. Conn caught them against his chest. His T-shirt came flying over next. “Get dressed.”

Conn started to bend over to put his shorts on.

“Wait,” John said. Conn stood up and faced John with a questioning look. John gave him a sexy little grin. “I just wanted to enjoy the view.” He walked over and slid his hand down Conn’s chest and stomach and around his back to squeeze his ass. Conn’s dick got very interested in waking up. “You’ve put on weight the last couple of weeks. I like it,” John said. He leaned over and kissed Conn’s neck and patted his ass, then stepped back. “Hurry up. I’ve got something to show you.”

Conn laughed. “You already said that.” He pulled his shorts on and grabbed his T-shirt from the bed. “It better be good for all the fuss.”

John rubbed his hands together. "Oh, it's good."

They pulled up in front of another beach house, this one bright yellow. John had a huge grin on his face as he watched Conn's reaction. Conn didn't really have one. They were going to switch houses? How long did John plan to stay? Conn was anxious to get back to Mercury. All the new plants were going to die if no one watered them.

There was another car parked in front of them, and a woman stepped out on the porch above and waved at them.

"Who's that?" Conn asked.

John was opening his door and didn't look at Conn. "The Realtor."

Conn frowned. He glanced over and saw a SOLD sticker on the FOR SALE sign in front of the house. He got a sinking feeling in his gut. "Johnny, what have you done?" he asked quietly, knowing John wouldn't hear him. He was already halfway up the stairs, his hand stuck out to shake the Realtor's.

Conn got out slowly, turning to shut the car door so he could compose his face before John saw his uneasiness. He took a deep breath.

"Connor!" John shouted from the steps. Like the

entry doors of most beach houses, the entrance to this one was up a flight of stairs, because the house acted like a carport, standing on tall stilts with the driveway beneath it.

Conn walked slowly up the steps to where John and the Realtor both stood beaming at him.

“So is this the special guy?” the Realtor asked with a waggle of her brows and an annoying giggle. “Pretty special, I’d say.”

John rolled his eyes so only Conn could see. “Connor, this is Mary Ann Shipley. Mary Ann, Connor Meecham.”

She held out her hand, and Conn tried to smile, but he could tell by her reaction it came out more of a grimace.

There was an awkward silence. But like all good salespeople Mary Ann filled it. “Well, come on. Let’s have a look, shall we?” She led them inside. Looking over her shoulder, she asked, “Which would you like to see first? The second-floor bedrooms? Or this floor? There’s actually a small second kitchen on the third floor.” She sounded as if a second kitchen was the most amazing scientific breakthrough since penicillin.

“Could you excuse us for a moment?” Conn asked politely, standing just inside the front door. “John?”

John was looking between Conn and Realtor Mary

Ann anxiously. "Um, sure."

Mary Ann's lips thinned so much her orange lipstick disappeared. "I'll be right out on the back balcony. It came furnished with some very handsome deck furniture."

Conn bit his lip before he could tell her he didn't give a shit about deck furniture. "Thanks."

While he waited for her to walk out, Conn looked around. The house was a lot like the one they were renting, except the furniture was nicer. It looked like leather. White leather. Who bought white leather furniture?

When the door out to the deck closed, John turned to him with a blank face. "You don't like it."

"I don't know what the fuck is going on. Do I have to pay for a clue? Spin the wheel? What?" Conn hadn't meant to sound pissed off, but he did not like situations where he was the only one without a game plan. Not knowing what was going on had led to some serious shit in his past. That was not going to happen again. Not for John, not for anybody.

John walked over to a window to look out at the ocean. Unfortunately he ended up staring at Mary Ann Shipley. He turned back to Conn. "I bought it. For you."

Conn could only blink at him for a minute. It took him that long to comprehend what John had just said.

“You just woke up this morning and decided to buy me a beach house?” John nodded. “God damn it,” Conn muttered, ramming his hand into his hair and yanking it painfully when he got caught in a tangle. He hadn’t even had time to comb his hair. “How much?”

John glared defiantly. “Doesn’t matter. I’ve got it.”

“Okay,” Conn said slowly and took a deep breath. “Why?”

John laughed, but he didn’t sound amused. “To make you happy. How’s that working?”

“I don’t need a beach house to make me happy.” Conn felt that sinking sensation in his stomach again.

“Don’t you want a beach house?” John sounded bemused.

“That’s an unfair question,” Conn replied. “You know I’d be lying if I said no. You know I love this beach and that it holds some really important memories for me. But John, I didn’t want you to buy me a beach house. I didn’t bring you here so you would.”

He walked over and sat down on one of the white leather couches. It was puffy and pretty damn comfortable. John trailed after him and sat down too. “I know that, Connor. I know you didn’t expect it. That’s part of the fun of giving it to you.” He reached out and wrapped his hand around Conn’s wrist. “But I know Mercury is hard for you. And the sheriff...” John sighed

without finishing his sentence. So he'd heard about Conn's run-ins with Wilkins around town. "It's just that I thought I'd give you a place to go," John continued. "So you wouldn't have to deal with all that."

"You're not going back to Mercury?" Conn could barely get the question out.

John looked at him like he was crazy. "Of course I'm going back to Mercury. The house isn't done. And I've got something in the works—" He shook his head. "Never mind. But you don't have to come back with me if you don't want to. You can stay here. And I'll come visit you, maybe every weekend or something. Would you like that?"

"And do what?" Conn asked flatly. He was controlling his anger, just barely.

John shrugged. "I don't know. Whatever you want. Nothing if you like."

"So you'll just give me the house, and I can stay here and play beach bum and entertain you on weekends when you get the urge?"

"You can stay here and get your head on straight and figure out what you want to do without the pressure Mercury puts on you." John pulled his hand back. "Or so I thought. But clearly I was wrong." He stood up. "Do you want to see it or not? I own it now. Might as well get a look at it."

Conn gaped at him. "You bought it without looking at it?" John nodded tensely. "Why?"

"Because it was the closest house to Fort Fisher that was for sale."

Conn fell back against the back of the couch and looked at his hands in his lap. John had good intentions at least. But he really didn't know Conn at all if he thought this was what he wanted. Conn had a headache, and he felt queasy. The kind of sick he used to get when his tricks paid up. He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "Can we see it another time?" he asked quietly. "I haven't showered or eaten or had any coffee."

Without a word to Conn, John walked over to the back door and opened it. "Mary Ann, we'll have to see it another time. Connor isn't feeling well."

Mary Ann looked stunned for a minute and then shook herself. "Of course! You can see it anytime you like. Once the papers are signed in a few days, you get the key after all."

"Great," John said with a false smile. He turned and walked out the front door, and Conn silently followed.

Three hours later they were back in Mercury without seeing his new house. John was so pissed off he hadn't spoken more than ten words to Connor since they left the beach.

He stomped inside and threw his bag across the kitchen floor. Connor pushed in behind him and shut the door. John turned on him, ready to have it out. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked sharply. Connor put the car keys carefully on the peg by the door. The care he took with such a simple task pissed John off even more. He'd handle his car keys like fucking china and shit on the house he'd bought him?

"Nothing's wrong with me." He didn't look at John. His voice was flat, revealing nothing. He walked right past John without stopping.

With incredulity John realized he was just going to leave him there fuming. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

Connor turned to him, and John could see the little lines at the corners of his eyes and his thin lips. Oh, Connor was mad, all right. He just wasn't going to show it. "I'm going to paint. I said I'd paint that room, and I haven't done it yet. So I'm going to do it."

That sounded like a good idea. Painting was a task that would settle Connor down, and John needed some time apart to let his own anger cool. He waved him off. "Fine. Go paint."

Connor turned away. "I wasn't asking permission," he said calmly as he started up the stairs.

John gritted his teeth. Again, Connor with the last

word.

Chapter Eighteen

John was sipping his coffee in the kitchen, trying to decide whether or not to go up and see if Connor was awake when the doorbell rang. He looked at the clock. It was nearly ten in the morning. With a frown he wondered how late Connor stayed up painting last night. He'd still been at it when John had gone to bed at midnight.

"I'll get it!" he called up the stairs. If the doorbell hadn't woken him up, then John would. They needed to talk.

He opened the door to see Toby standing there looking apologetic and nervous, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"Come on in," he said, holding the door open. He didn't sound all that welcoming, but Toby stepped inside anyway.

"Hey, John," he said. He jingled the change in his pocket. "Conn asked me to come by and see if you needed

any help with that porch today.”

John frowned. “I’m not ready to do anything with the porch. What did Connor want to do?”

Toby shrugged. “Don’t know. He said he just didn’t want you trying to do it all by yourself.”

John turned and walked back toward the kitchen. He needed more coffee, no matter how shitty it was. “Why would I be doing it on my own?” He veered over to the bottom of the stairs. “Connor!” he called.

“Uh, John,” Toby said with a strange expression. “Don’t you know where Conn is?”

“He’s upstairs,” John said. “Connor!” he yelled. He turned back to the kitchen. “He can’t still be painting that damn room.” He gave Toby a disgusted look. “He’s mad at me. That’s why he’s not coming down.”

Toby cleared his throat. “Uh, he’s not up there.”

John stopped in his tracks. He slowly turned to face Toby, pinning him with a glare. “Excuse me?”

Toby swallowed nervously. “He asked my dad for a job today. He’s out with the crew landscaping the Adamses’ yard.”

John slammed his coffee cup down on the counter and raced up the stairs. Connor’s bed was made, and his things were gone. But the walls were yellow. Painted perfectly, the smell still strong. The mellow color

reflected the light coming through the open window.

“John?” Toby called tentatively from downstairs.

John marched down the stairs. *No way*. No fucking way was Connor getting away that easy. “How do I find the Adamses’ house?” he asked Toby.

Toby took a step back from John. “Listen, Johnny, maybe you ought to wait awhile before you go see Connor. You know, cool off a little. Let Connor cool off. That’s what Cheryl and I do.”

John blinked at him. Did he just compare John and Connor to him and his *wife*? Did everyone in town think that? That they were *together*? He took a deep breath. Well, they were right. He’d just bought a goddamned beach house for the ungrateful shit, not to mention his other little surprise. “Oh no, Toby,” he said with a grim smile. “He is about to find out just how pissed off I am.”

Conn heard some tires screeching at the end of the street and looked up to see John’s car jerk to a stop at the curb. What the hell was wrong with him? This was a residential neighborhood.

John climbed out of the car and slammed the door. He stood there glaring at the assembled men in the yard until his gaze landed on Conn. Then he marched across the lawn toward him with purpose.

Conn just leaned there on his shovel and watched him approach with a little smile. He may be pissed at John right now, but damn he was good-lookin'. Then he noticed his clothes were the same rumpled ones he'd worn yesterday, and he still had bed head. Conn stood up straight. "What's wrong?" he asked roughly, worry gripping him.

John stopped in front of him, and his eyes opened wide with disbelief. "What's wrong? How about the fact that I woke up this morning to an empty house with no explanation? You had to send Toby"—he pointed toward the street and Conn saw Toby's sedan coming to a stop at the curb—"to tell me you'd left."

Conn shook his head. "What? What are you talking about?"

John heaved an angry breath. "Did you or did you not tell me you were leaving this morning?"

"Did not," Conn replied. He talked right over whatever John tried to say next. "Because you were still sleeping. I figured I'd call you at lunch."

John narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Where are you staying?"

Conn let John see his angry confusion. "Today? Here. After here, I think we're going to the Wachovia on 87."

"I mean tonight."

Now Conn was really angry. “Are you kicking me out?”

They had attracted an audience. The one guy who spoke English was translating for the other three. Two were laughing. Toby was animatedly talking to his dad at the curb, his arms waving wildly.

“You already took your stuff. It’s not kicking you out if you’ve already left. Hello?” John said sarcastically.

Conn relaxed. “It’s in the closet.”

It was John’s turn to look confused. “What?”

“My stuff,” Conn said calmly, laying his shovel down on the ground. “I painted the room last night, remember? You think I was just gonna leave my stuff laying around to get splattered? I don’t have that much to be risking it.”

John’s mouth gaped like a fish’s for a few seconds, and Conn enjoyed it. He smirked at John. “Gotcha,” he whispered for John’s ears only. “Made you come to get me.”

John got that angry look again. “It doesn’t excuse your disappearing act this morning. We had things to discuss, and you know it.”

Conn took John’s arm and moved several feet away, giving the other guys a look that clearly said don’t follow. They shrugged and went back to work.

Just then Mr. Thomas came up. “Conn? Everything all right there, son?” His look was halfway between pissed and concerned.

“It’ll be just a minute more, Mr. Thomas,” Conn said politely. The man had practically been a father to him when he was a kid. He didn’t want to put him on the spot by taking advantage.

He nodded and looked pointedly at John. “We got to finish this job and the bank today,” he said. “So you only got a few.” He held out his hand to John. “You must be Ford.”

John shook his hand. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t you keep my boy too long,” Mr. Thomas warned. “He’s already the best crew manager I got. The only one who speaks Spanish.”

John looked at Conn incredulously. “You never told me you speak Spanish.” Mr. Thomas sidled away with a sheepish look as if he’d given something away.

“It never came up,” Conn said as he shrugged.

“What else don’t I know?” John demanded through clenched teeth.

Conn sighed heavily. “I thought you knew all the important stuff.” He looked away and closed his eyes for a second to get his shit together. When he looked back at John, he wasn’t angry anymore. Just hurt. And that was

the part he hated. "I was never a very good whore, John," he said quietly. "And I left that behind. I thought you knew that."

John looked as though Conn had punched him. "What are you talking about?" he whispered.

"When you bought that house, made plans to visit me when you got the itch. John, whether you meant to or not, you made me feel like a whore, and I didn't like it. I only just found my pride again here in Mercury. I'm not ready to throw it away again."

"Conn, I..." John's response trailed off. He looked sick.

"I know, Johnny." Conn sighed. "Can we talk about this tonight?"

John cleared his throat. "Are you coming home?"

With a smile Conn nodded. "Yeah, I'm coming home."

Connor was home by six. John's round of conference calls had been over for about an hour. He was glad. He didn't want Connor to find out what he'd been up to by walking in on a phone conversation. John was nervous. Connor hadn't reacted well to the beach house. How would he react to this?

When Connor walked in the door, his feet were

bare. John was sitting at the kitchen table and could see the front entry clearly. He looked at Connor's feet.

"My shoes were dirty." John quirked a brow and couldn't prevent a small smile as he let his gaze wander over Connor's dirt- and grass-stained clothes. Connor smiled back. "The rest of me ain't too clean either." They both laughed.

Connor walked over and leaned in the kitchen doorway. "That rum?" he asked, pointing to the bottle on the table in front of John.

"Yep." He sipped his rum and Coke.

"We're gonna talk about that too, as soon as I have a shower," Connor said gravely. "Because you ought to know it can be damn hard for me to say no sometimes."

Without a word John got up and dumped his drink in the sink. He rinsed the glass and set it in the dish drainer. Then he went over, picked up the bottle, and put it away in the cabinet above the refrigerator. He turned to Connor. "Should I get rid of it?"

Connor shook his head. "Nah. Out of sight is usually good enough for me. If it takes an extra step or two, I got time to think about it some more."

John gestured to the box Connor was holding. "What is that?"

Connor walked over and put it on the counter and

turned it so John could see the front. "Coffee maker."

John couldn't speak past the lump in his throat. He'd told Connor to buy a coffee maker if he was going to live here. He guessed that answered that question.

Connor turned and headed toward the stairs. "Wait for me to get out of the shower?" he asked over his shoulder.

John laughed. "It's my house. Where the hell am I going to go?" He was glad when Connor laughed on his way up the stairs. Maybe he hadn't totally fucked everything up.

When Connor came back down ten minutes later, he immediately started getting out the ingredients for a pie.

"What are you doing?" John asked incredulously. "I thought we were going to talk."

"We are," Connor said. "I can talk and bake at the same time. But everyone's gonna expect pie when they get here."

"Who's coming here?" John asked. He didn't remember inviting anyone. Had Connor?

Connor shrugged. "Everybody, I guess." He spared a glance for John and then went back to measuring. "We disappeared for three days. As soon as we got back, I went and got a job with Toby's dad, and then you came to

find me, and we had a fight.” He leaned his butt against the counter and crossed his arms, staring at John. “This is a small town. We are the entertainment right now.” He shrugged again. “So they’ll come to find out what’s going on.”

“What is going on?” John asked hesitantly.

“We had a fight. You still mad?”

John shook his head. “No.” He sat down at the table and put his head in his hands. “Jesus, Connor, I’m sorry. I didn’t know... I didn’t mean to make you feel that way.” He looked up with a deep breath and gave himself a mental pep talk so he wouldn’t cry like a complete wuss. “I just wanted to make you happy. When Steve and I were together, I bought him things all the time. He liked it.”

Connor came over and pulled the chair next to him out and around so he could face John. “Is that what you’re doing? Are you trying to turn me into Steve?”

“What?” John blurted out. “No! What are you talking about?”

“The car, the guitar, the beach house—you’re giving me his things, buying me things you think he’d have liked. I’m not Steve, John.” He looked so damn serious.

“The exact opposite,” John said, leaning back in the chair and letting his head fall back on his shoulders. “I

was so determined not to fall back into the role I played with Steve that I've turned into him."

Connor's hand squeezed his knee. "What do you mean?"

John shook his head as he looked at Connor again. "It was all about what I wanted. I didn't consider what you wanted or needed. Buying you that house made me happy. By extension it was supposed to make you happy. The same with the guitar and the car. I gave those to you to prove that I could. I didn't care whether you wanted them or not."

Connor's eyebrows went up. "You giving me the car?"

John laughed softly. "You want it?"

Connor shook his head once. "Nope. Too small. But I'll take the truck."

"I'll buy you a—" He stopped at the look on Connor's face. "Okay, you can have the truck."

Connor's hand was still on his knee. He scooted forward in his chair and spread his legs so that John's legs were between his. "And you? Can I have you?"

John leaned forward and put his hand over Connor's on his knee. "Yeah, you can have me."

Connor gave him a big grin. "Now I'm happy."

Chapter Nineteen

“About the job,” Conn said.

John squeezed his knee. “It’s okay. If you want to work, then work. I get it.”

Conn tipped his head to the side. “I’ve got to come to you as my own man, John. Do you understand?” He sighed and closed his eyes for a second. He figured he’d better get used to the tears. When he could open his eyes again, he said, “It’s important to me. It’s part of being who I am now. Who I want to be. I’ve figured that much out since I’ve been back. I’m not some kid anymore, and I’m not that screwed up guy I was in Atlanta. I’m someone else. And the guy I am now...” He rubbed his thumb along John’s. “He wants to be someone you can respect. Someone who can meet you toe to toe because he’s pulling his own weight.”

“Whoa,” John said, grabbing on to his wrist. “I’ve always respected you. I may have gotten screwed up in my head, but I’ve always respected you. I know how hard

this has been for you, coming back here. I've seen it. You've already earned my respect."

Conn gave him half a smile. "Have I?" He pulled John toward him with his hold on Conn's wrist. "How much do you respect me?"

John's pupils instantly started to dilate, and his breath skipped. Conn switched their hands, gripping John's wrist. His pulse was racing. Damn if that pie wasn't gonna have to bake itself. "That much, huh?" he murmured as he leaned in to kiss John.

"Yep," John whispered back, staring at Conn's mouth. "That much."

Conn didn't waste time on slow and sweet. He put both hands on John's head and crushed John's mouth to his. He shoved his tongue inside with a moan. They tangled—their tongues, their legs, their arms. It felt so good Conn wanted to cry. This was home. Fuck paint and boards and roses by the gate. Johnny was home.

Conn abruptly stood, dragging John up with him. John wrapped one arm around Conn's neck and the other under his arm and around his back. Conn could feel John grab a hold of the back of his shirt in his fist. He smiled into the kiss. John was no shrinking violet. They were equals here.

"Oh my God!" Toby shrieked through the back door. "My eyes! Aiieee!"

Conn and John jerked apart and stared at each other in shocked horror for a minute. Then Conn started to laugh, and John joined him. "We'll finish this later," Conn whispered in John's ear, kissing his stubbly cheek as he pulled away.

He looked out the door to see Toby rolling around in the grass holding his eyes and moaning. The two boys were running around the yard shrieking, "My eyes, my eyes," over and over. Cheryl stood at the door peering through the screen.

"Sorry," she said apologetically. "We thought we better come on over. But I guess you two have kissed and made up, huh?" She pushed open the door and walked in without an invitation. "We wanted to get here first." She leaned back out the door. "Toby! Get your ass in here!" she hollered.

Toby got up and staggered up the stairs onto the porch. Cheryl punched him in the shoulder as she let the door bang closed. "Stop it," she said. "You're making a fool of yourself."

"I need a fork to poke my eyes out," Toby said. "I may never get over the trauma." He winked at Conn.

"Good thing you didn't show up a couple of minutes later," John said casually. "You'd need a straitjacket." Conn busted out laughing.

"Har-har," Toby said. "I get it. Straitjacket. 'Cause

"I'm straight. You're a funny guy."

Cheryl didn't laugh. "We didn't just show up to give you a hard time. But we may be the only ones." She sounded pretty upset.

Conn got a bad feeling. "What's up, Cheryl?"

She worried her lip and looked over at Toby. "Sit down," Toby said. "You too, John."

This was the first time Conn saw Toby as the man he was. He was a father and a businessman. He could see that now in his face and the way he stepped up and took over, steady, solid. Conn sat down.

Cheryl went over to the back door to calm the boys down. Toby sat down opposite Conn, but he didn't look at him. Instead he laced his fingers together and stared at his hands. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked quietly.

Conn knew what he meant immediately. But he couldn't answer. The shame and guilt swamped him. John reached over and put his hand over Conn's, and he suddenly realized he and Toby were mirror images across the table.

"Daddy came over and told me a little while ago," Toby said, wiping a hand across his mouth as he sat back in his chair and finally looked at Conn. Conn had expected accusations and disappointment. All Toby's face held was hurt. "He wanted to make sure I knew before I heard it from someone else."

Conn's stomach did a slow roll. "What did he tell you?"

"About the jail time, the using. I can guess the rest."

Conn took a deep breath. "I haven't told many people. I had to tell your dad before he hired me."

Toby nodded. "I know. He went to the police station to fill out a background check on you. Standard procedure for him, even if he's known you forever and you told him everything. He trusts you, Conn. He just does it now for all new employees."

Conn nodded. He could see where this was going.

"None of that matters now," John said angrily. "He's not that person anymore."

"I know," Toby said again, motioning John to settle down. "I never even knew that guy. But I can tell you he isn't sitting in front of me now."

Conn really wanted to cry then. He should have trusted Toby. He should have done a lot of things differently. It seems that even in this new reincarnation, he hadn't gotten over screwing things up by making the wrong choices.

"Sheriff Wilkins was there. He made a big fuss about Dad hiring you. Told him plain as day all about your record right there in front of everyone. He and Dad

got in a fight about it. Sheriff was mighty pissed when Dad stormed off after telling him he better not spread any rumors about his newest employee.”

“Tell your dad thanks,” Conn said roughly.

Toby nodded. “Yeah, I will.” He sighed. “But look, Conn, I think Wilkins will show here. He never liked you—you know that. He thought you were the reason your mama wouldn’t marry him.”

“Maybe I was,” Conn said. “But not in the way he thinks. He treated me like shit, and my mama knew it. She wasn’t going to love a man like that, who treated her boy wrong. But he didn’t get that.” He looked out at the boys chasing each other in the back. “I think she only put up with him to keep me on the football team.”

“Old news,” Toby told him. “But put your prison time together with openly shacking up with Johnny, here, and he’s got a lot of ammunition.”

“To do what?” John asked sharply. Conn looked at him. He looked madder than Conn had ever seen him.

Toby shrugged. “To drag his name all over town, I guess. If he wants to do something besides work for my dad, he might find it a little tough. Dad wanted to come over and wait for him to show to give him another piece of his mind, but I convinced him not to.” He tapped his chest. “He’s too old for that shit. I don’t want him having a heart attack over it.”

“Your dad may lose jobs because he hired me,” Conn sighed. “I can’t let that happen.” He looked at John. “So what am I supposed to do?”

John crossed his arms. He gestured to the counter with a twist of his head. “Go make your pie, Connor.”

Conn just grinned at his command. “Why?”

“I like cherry pie,” John answered, surprised. “Do we need another reason?”

“Hell no,” Toby said.

With a grin Conn got up to bake a pie.

Sheriff Wilkins showed about an hour later. The pie had just come out of the oven, and they were all finishing their takeout pizza on the front porch. Toby was wrangling to get a piece of pie before it cooled off, and John was laughingly guarding the door. They all went silent as Wilkins parked his car on the street in front of the house and got out.

“Boys, go play in the backyard,” Cheryl said.

“But, Mom,” Harley started to whine.

“Listen to your mother,” Toby said. “Now.” The boys didn’t say a word, just ran down the steps and around the house to the backyard.

Wilkins walked up the path to the bottom of the front steps. Conn had moved to stand at the top. Wilkins

pulled his sunglasses off and slid them into his front pocket. He placed one foot on the steps and then leaned on his knee. "You still here?" he asked Conn with a sneer.

Conn didn't take the bait. He was relieved to find he wasn't all that upset at seeing Wilkins tonight. After their first run-in at the hardware store, he'd shown up when Conn was in town a few times. Conn had reached the point of ignoring his pointed barbs, coming so close to revealing his past to the people who might be around them, but never quite crossing that line. Conn had realized that there must be some reason he couldn't, some privacy or ethics issue that came from being sheriff that prevented him from spreading stories about him. He just stood there and crossed his arms, waiting.

Wilkins gave him a smug grin. "Think you're gonna work in Mercury, do you? I told Thomas all about you today." He looked up at the porch. "But he refused to listen." He took his foot off the step and stood facing Conn. "But he will when he starts losing jobs with an ex-con like you on his crew."

He'd hit on Conn's biggest fear about the whole situation. Wilkins must have seen it in Conn's face. His smile was full of satisfaction. "Your pretty boy there"—he gestured at John behind him—"he won't be able erase the past. People round here don't want a lowlife like you hanging around, Meecham."

“You’ve always had it in for Conn!” Cheryl accused angrily. “No one’s going to care about what happened. He’s back. That’s all we care about.”

Wilkins shook his head with a disgusted look. “White trash, the lot of you.”

While he’d been talking, another car had pulled up behind him. A man Conn vaguely recognized was helping Miss Priss out of the front seat.

“Watch your mouth, Sheriff,” Miss Priss’s voice cut across the yard. “I’d be careful who you call white trash. Don’t forget your daddy was a sharecropper for my brother.”

“Now, Ms. Jones,” the man helping her out of the gray luxury car said, “don’t get yourself overexcited. I’m sure we misunderstood Sheriff Wilkins.” He turned with Miss Priss on his arm and gave the sheriff a stern look. “Sheriff?”

Wilkins took his hat off and nodded his head politely. “I’m just checking in on an ex-con who recently moved into the neighborhood, Mayor.” He put his hat back on. “As sheriff I take an interest in these things.”

He moved out of the way so Miss Priss could be escorted up the stairs. She paused at the top and offered Conn her cheek, which he obligingly kissed. Toby got off John’s bench, and Miss Priss sat down.

She snorted at Wilkins’s remark. “Nonsense. You

never liked Connor Meecham, and we all know it. But I must tell you, Sheriff, I was one of many who advised Barbara not to marry you.”

Wilkins took a belligerent stance. “Why?”

“You would not have suited,” Miss Priss said. “She would have been very unhappy. And since she thought the sun rose over her boy, Connor would have been a constant issue between you.”

Her tone had a more than a touch of finality to it, clearly indicating she considered the conversation over. She turned to John. “John, my dear, I’ve brought Mayor Beeson to meet you. I was having dinner with him and his lovely wife today, and we were discussing your plans for Mercury. I thought it would be good if the two of you met in person. Talking on the phone all day, when you’re only five minutes away from each other! I can’t imagine.”

Conn was confused. “Why were you two talking all day?”

Mayor Beeson grinned. He was a heavysset, short man, with balding gray hair and skin that matched in color. But his smile was practiced and polished. “Why, the data center, of course! Imagine little old Mercury at the center of the Internet highway. Job training, new facilities, job opportunities. And Mr. Ford here is going to make it all possible.”

Chapter Twenty

Connor's mouth dropped open. "What?"

John felt himself blushing. "I was meaning to tell you about that, but"—he waved his hand vaguely—"things got in the way."

"And that makes it all better?" Wilkins said angrily. "His sugar daddy puts a new business in Mercury, and we all forget about Connor's prison time? Forget that he's a drug addict and an ex-whore?"

"I'd watch what information you threw around in a public forum, Sheriff," another voice said. John looked down the path to see Kristine opening the gate. "Someone might take it into his head to sue you for slander or verbal assault or defamation of character." She stopped at the bottom of the steps and crossed her arms, glaring at the sheriff.

"It's all true, and you know it," Wilkins said to Kristine. "You came to see me the other day, had his record in your hand. He can't sue me for speaking the

truth.”

“Sure he can,” Kristine said. “He can sue you for whatever he wants. He may not win, but he can sue you.”

“Sheriff,” Mayor Beeson said firmly. “You’re overset. Perhaps we should discuss this situation and its implications for Mercury tomorrow in my office.”

“You don’t control the sheriff’s department, Beeson,” Wilkins growled. “I’m a duly elected representative.”

“Not for long,” Miss Priss said. “You better start thinking about retirement before the next election.”

Wilkins waved a hand dismissively behind him as he walked away. “Your family may have controlled most of this town in the past, Ms. Jones, but those days are gone. You haven’t got that kind of influence anymore.” He climbed in his car and drove away.

The mayor turned back to John and smiled apologetically. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Ford. There are still some old-school Southerners around these parts. They’re threatened by change and growth.” He smiled affectionately down at Miss Priss. “But not all of us.”

John wasn’t sure what to say. He wanted to demand Wilkins be fired, but he knew that wasn’t going to happen. He also wanted to see how Connor was reacting to being protected by John’s money and his plans for Mercury. Did that infringe on his ability to “be his own man”?

“How would you all like some pie?” Connor asked politely. He shot John a look that said they’d talk about things later, and then he turned to the mayor. “It’s cherry.”

Mayor Beeson settled on the bench next to Miss Priss. “Of course it is! Why, I remember your mama’s cherry pie. Won the ribbon at the fair more than a few times, eh?”

Connor gave John that little lopsided grin that sent John’s pulse into the atmosphere. “Yes, sir.”

John walked over to the door with Connor. “I’ll help.”

Kristine walked up the steps. “Me too.”

“Who are you?” Cheryl asked, bemused.

John turned at the door. “Everyone, Kristine Hamilton. She’s a friend of mine from California.” He looked at Kristine’s face and the look she wore made him add, “She’s the closest thing to family I’ve got.” She smiled at him as the others on the porch responded with a chorus of hellos.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Miss Hamilton,” Miss Priss said as she held out her hand.

Kristine shook her hand gently. “You too, Miss Jones. Thank you for seeing me the other day.”

John looked at the two women in confusion. “You

two know each other?"

"I'm a lawyer, John," Kristine said. "I know how to find the answers I'm looking for." She walked through the door Connor held open, and John followed.

"What are you doing here?" John asked Kristine.

"Well," she said sarcastically, "I came to visit a friend, and then he disappeared for several days in the company of a known felon, and after I recovered from my hysteria, I decided to do a little investigating."

They had reached the kitchen, and at her words John turned to Connor with dismay. Connor just shrugged. "Well, I am."

Kristine laughed. "I discovered that you were right, John." She held out her hand to Connor. "I'm sorry. I was just worried. But you seem to be everything John told me you were."

Connor shook her hand. "Not so sure about that, but thanks." He gestured out front. "And thanks for that. I wouldn't sue him, though."

Kristine leaned against the counter next to Connor as he cut the pie. "I know. But it's fun to scare them a little." She looked down at the pie. "Cherry, huh? I'll have a great big piece." She turned to John. "Retirement got a little boring, eh?" She grinned at him. "Starting a new business?"

Connor looked at him over his shoulder. John cleared his throat. "Not really. I'm more of a go-between and consultant. Brian was looking for a place to put a new data center. I suggested Mercury."

"What does that mean?" Connor asked, turning to face him with two plates.

John took them and set them on the table. "Well, in short it means about five hundred more jobs for Mercury and on-site job training for locals who will get first dibs on jobs."

Connor was silent for a minute. Then he bit his lip and turned back to the counter to cut some more pie. "You know it means the difference between life and death for this town." His voice was rough.

"It's your town," John said simply.

"It's yours now too," Connor said.

Kristine grabbed the full plates. "I'll take these outside."

When they were alone Connor turned to John. "This makes me happy."

John's grin was so big he was surprised his face didn't crack. "That's what I was going for."

Conn couldn't believe how long it took to get everyone to go home. Excitement was running pretty

high over, in Cheryl's words, "vanquishing Wilkins," and the new data center.

John explained that first they'd have to build the center. Mercury had one or two existing buildings that might work, but they'd essentially have to be gutted and refurbished to suit the center's needs. Lots of cubicles and big meeting rooms. Brian Curland, John's friend who was an Internet search-engine guru, was coming out next month to make a final decision on where the center would go. But he'd made a firm commitment to Mercury on the phone today with John and Mayor Beeson. The kind, according to Kristine, you can't get out of without paying. And, according to John, the kind Brian took seriously.

Conn's head was spinning. Everyone was talking about associated businesses that would grow out of the data center, new people who'd end up moving here. In a town as small as Mercury, one good business that could employ a sizable chunk of the population made all the difference. And John had given it to them.

"I'm glad you heeded my advice, John," Miss Priss said as she was leaving. "I can see that you are more animated and happier than when we first met. Talent and energy going to waste will drag a man down."

"Yes, ma'am," John agreed obligingly. Conn smiled at him behind Miss Priss's back.

"I think I might open a store of some kind," Cheryl mused. "Maybe an ice-cream shop."

"Ice cream, ice cream!" screamed her two boys.

Toby sighed as he herded them all down the steps to the car. "See what you've started?" he said irritably to John. "I blame you for this."

"I admit it," John said unrepentantly.

Conn laughed. He couldn't seem to stop tonight. Everything was perfect. This moment, this night, this house, this man. He slung his arm around John's shoulders at the top of the stairs. "Get out of here," he told Toby.

Toby covered his eyes and turned away. "We're going! We're going. Just wait until we turn the corner, please," he begged. Cheryl hollered at him from the car, and he laughed. "We'll be here tomorrow to help fix that porch," he called back. "I was afraid it was going to collapse under all the weight tonight. I'll call some guys. We'll be here."

Kristine stopped and kissed John good-bye on the cheek. Conn was surprised when she did the same to him. "I'll see you both tomorrow. I'm bushed."

"You can stay here if you'd like," Conn offered.

Kristine shook her head. "No, thanks. That's a little too much togetherness. I like my space. The motel is fine."

It's actually pretty nice."

They waved as she drove away.

"Are we alone?" Conn whispered.

John slid around in his arms. "Yep," he said, wrapping his arms around Conn's waist.

"Thank God," Conn said fervently. He shoved a hand down the back of John's shorts, making John jump in surprise. He cupped a firm ass cheek and squeezed before sliding his hand down John's crease, over his underwear, coming to a stop when his fingertips teased John's balls. John's breathing went from zero to sixty in five seconds.

"I like your friends," John said breathlessly, spreading his legs, letting Conn snug his hand in farther.

"They're your friends too," Conn told him. He nuzzled John's neck and rubbed the sensitive space between John's balls and his hole. John moaned. "I have a powerful need to be in here tonight. Let me?"

"I thought you'd never ask. But not out here." John wiggled out from his arms and went to the front door, holding it open for Conn with his back.

Conn snagged him with an arm around his waist as he went through. He slammed the door shut with his foot and pressed John against it. He kissed him, and John

didn't hesitate. He kissed him back so thoroughly Conn's knees turned to jelly. He pushed one knee between John's legs to rest it against the door, and John rubbed his crotch on Conn's thigh. He could feel how hard John was. Right then and there, he stripped him. Just stepped back and pulled John's shirt off over his head and nearly tore the catch off his shorts yanking them down his legs.

When he had John naked, he knelt on the floor, slid his arms between John's legs to cup his gorgeous ass, and swallowed his cock, right to the back of his throat.

"Conn!" John cried out. He ran his fingers through Conn's hair and held him in place, shuddering against his mouth. Using his hands to push John forward, Conn encouraged him to fuck his mouth. He liked that. Liked John using him like that. And the right or wrong of it didn't matter here between them. It was all right, all good, all John and Conn and sex and feelings. He swallowed around John's cock over and over, wanting him to come down his throat, wanting to taste him and own him like that.

John gave him what he wanted. He fucked Conn's mouth, setting a hard pace that had John panting and Conn desperate for him to come within minutes.

"I'm going to come, baby," John rasped. "I want it here, in your mouth."

Conn barely nodded, not wanting to mess up John's

sweet rhythm. John gripped his hair and slid deep in Conn's throat. Conn would have gagged if he weren't so experienced. He didn't let the thought disgust him like it used to. What was past was past. The present was John, and he was gonna enjoy it. With a groan, John came, his cum a salty wash in Conn's mouth. He swallowed repeatedly, making John curse softly and shudder. When John was done, he fell back against the door.

Conn pulled off John's softening dick slowly, licking the dripping end with little laps of his tongue.

"Jesus, Conn," he said. "Are you trying to kill me?"

As he stood up, Conn ran his nose all the way up John's stomach, loving the feel of his tight abs and hairy chest and the sexy, earthy smell of him. When he was standing, he pressed his lips against the side of John's head while John held on to his hips weakly. "Nope. Tryin' to fuck you," he murmured.

"Doing a good job," John chuckled. "I'm ready to let you violate me any way you like right now."

Conn gently bit John's chin. "Not supposed to be a violation." He tried to remember what John had said to him the first time they were together. "You're supposed to be fucking over the moon at having me inside you."

John laughed outright. "I'm fucking over the moon right now from being inside *you*." He touched a finger to Conn's lower lip to indicate his mouth.

“Good.” Conn made sure to make his voice really low. He knew that turned John on. He watched with satisfaction as John shivered and his eyes closed. “Come on,” he said, wrapping his arm around John’s shoulders. “I want a bed, some lube, and a condom.” John started to say something, but Conn was a step ahead of him. “And you.”

John laughed as he put his arm around Conn’s waist and walked beside him, bumping his hip. “Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars?” He froze and stared at Conn, horrified. “Oh my God, I didn’t it mean that the way it sounded.”

It took Conn a second to figure out what John was talking about. When he did, he laughed so hard he had to lean against the wall in the hallway.

“It’s not funny, Conn,” John protested.

“It’s fucking hilarious,” Conn told him. He grabbed John and planted a hard kiss on his mouth. “You don’t have to watch what you say around me, Johnny. I get it. I get that you don’t think that way about me. I trust you.”

John wrapped his hand around the back of Conn’s head and pulled him back for another kiss. Conn could feel John’s emotions in his kiss. He didn’t have to say anything. Conn knew. When they broke apart the laughter was replaced as their desire reignited. “Bed.

Lube. Condom. You.”

“You betcha,” John mumbled, tugging Conn toward his room.

Chapter Twenty-one

“Connor,” John moaned as Connor slid inside him.

“You’re so fucking tight and hot and perfect, Johnny,” Connor whispered.

“Mmm,” was all John could manage in response. They were in Connor’s favorite face-to-face position. Connor was nibbling on his neck as he wiggled up closer between John’s spread legs, his fat cock stretching John until he hit John’s prostate with a zing that nearly made the top of John’s head blow off.

Connor chuckled, and the low sound seemed to shimmy up his cock and into John, right up his spine until it forced a whimper out of his throat. Normally he would have been embarrassed, but Connor soothed him.

“That’s all right, Johnny,” he murmured. “So sweet, you giving it up for me. Squeeze me tighter, baby.” John did as he asked, and Connor groaned. “Oh, yeah. See? You do it to me too.”

Connor began a slow, barely there thrust and

retreat, just massaging John's prostate with the tip of his cock. It was amazing. "On purpose?" John managed to croak out as he shivered and shook in Connor's arms.

"Yep." His pace picked up, his thrusts a little harder, tapping that space rather than massaging.

"Hit it," John cried out. "Please. Hard."

"You really want it?" Connor asked, biting John's chin, raking his tongue along the stubble there.

"God, yes," John begged.

"If it will make you happy." John barely had time to smile before Connor started slamming in and out. His slow and steady early pace had stretched John just right, so all he felt was mind-blowing pleasure as Connor hit that spot over and over.

"Gonna make you come again," Connor growled, grabbing John's legs behind his knees and pressing them wide and back. He hooked John's legs over his arms as he braced his fists on the bed and fucked him like a man possessed. John was in heaven. And Connor was right. He was going to make John come again.

"Now!" John cried out as his climax rushed through him. His ass tightened around Connor's big dick deliciously. John loved the feeling.

Connor didn't let up, wringing cries out of John with each thrust until he stiffened and groaned long and

low. John could feel the pulse of his orgasm through the cock buried deep in his ass. He pressed as close to Connor as he could get, wanting all of it, wanting to feel every second of Connor coming inside him.

When it was over, John clung to him, and Connor held him close. It was clear Connor was as reluctant to let go as John was. Eventually Connor had no choice but to get up and clean himself and John off. John couldn't have moved if fire alarms were going off in every room. When Connor slid back into bed next to him, it was the most natural thing in the world to roll over into his arms and go to sleep.

John woke up and groggily looked at the clock. Almost three thirty in the morning. He reached out and realized Connor was gone.

"Connor?" There was no response.

Suddenly John heard a faint sound. Music? It sounded like it was coming from the porch. He crawled out of bed and grabbed a shirt off the floor, pulling it on. It was Connor's and came down past John's ass. He chuckled softly, loving the soft feel of the faded cotton and Connor's smell surrounding him.

He wandered toward the front door. A quick peek out the front window revealed Connor leaning against the porch rail with the guitar. He was tuning it, messing

around with the tuning keys. John opened the door, and he looked up.

“What are you doing?” John asked.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

John leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms. “You could have woken me up.”

“I did.” He could see Connor’s grin in the moonlight.

John laughed. “Touché.” He looked up at the star-filled sky. He hadn’t ever seen a sky like that when he was in LA. “What’s keeping you awake?”

Connor strummed a chord on the guitar and adjusted a tuning key. “Just thinking about everything that happened today. We started out mad and ended up making love. That’s a good day.”

John’s vocal chords wouldn’t work. Making love? Was that what they’d done? When had it changed from just sex to making love?

“I was thinking about this new data center and what it means to Mercury and what it means to me.”

John decided not to address the making-love thing right now. He was still wrapping his head around it. “Do you want a job there? I can get you one.”

Connor shook his head. “No, sir. No, thank you. Stuck inside in a tiny little square space all day? Been there, done that. I’ll keep on working in the sun, if that’s

okay with you.”

“Right.” Connor may have told him he didn’t get upset, but John still felt like an ass when he said something that brought up Connor’s past.

“We stayin’?”

Connor’s question caught him off guard. “Out here? Not much longer. I’m tired. And I guarantee Toby will show up with the sun just because he knows we were probably fucking all night.”

Connor laughed. “Yes, sir, he will. And we can blister his ears with stories of it.” He gave John a sly glance. “But we haven’t been fucking all night.” He waited a beat. “Yet.”

John got a little breathless with anticipation, but he didn’t show it. “Hmm,” was all he said.

“I meant here. In Mercury.”

John’s heart raced at the question. Connor was asking him to think of the future, and he’d stopped doing that over a year ago. He’d been living day-to-day. The thought of planning ahead scared the shit out of him. “I don’t know.” Then he realized how Connor had phrased the question. He’d said “we.” “Don’t you want to stay here?”

Connor shrugged. “Not if you don’t. Whither you go, I go.” He strummed a chord, and even John could tell it

sounded good. Connor played a small part of a vaguely familiar tune. It gave John a chance to regulate his breathing so he didn't hyperventilate. He wanted it. He wanted that *whither thou goest* crap. It was what Steve could never offer and what Connor gave without question.

"You should put your handprints in the new step tomorrow," John finally offered.

Connor stopped strumming for a moment; then he nodded. "You too." John could tell he knew what that meant. What John was trying to say, even though he couldn't say it yet. Connor resumed playing the haunting melody.

"What is that song?" John asked.

"'Gentle on My Mind,' an old one by Glen Campbell. You remember it?" John nodded. "My mama loved this song. I was just thinking about the part that says it's not some paper or words we speak that keep me coming back to you. I guess he's saying, you know, you gentle my mind, my soul, and that's why I'm here. Not some building or rocks or whatever. And he doesn't care if people curse him for the way he feels." He shook his head. "I'm not saying this right, am I?"

So instead he played it for John. When he was done, John walked up to him, and Connor set his guitar down. John framed his face in his hands. "You're saying it just

right.” He kissed him, as soft and gentle as the words of the song. “Is that one of your corny songs?” he teased.

“Your pants off yet?” Connor asked. He cupped John’s bare ass cheek beneath the shirt. “Yep. Works every time.”

John laughed. “I’d like to keep the beach house, if that’s all right with you.”

“Sure,” Connor said. “We can go look at it in a couple of days.” He sounded so blasé about it that John knew that issue was dead. It had never been about the house. It had been about John and the clumsy way he’d bought it and presented it to Connor.

“I just need a place to make you cherry pie,” Connor murmured, fondling John’s ass. “Don’t care where.”

John laughed again and let go of Connor. “You are my cherry pie,” he said.

“I’m going to make you eat those words,” Connor promised roughly.

John just walked over and opened the front door and stood there with his back to Connor, holding it open with his arm. He heard Connor pick up the guitar, and John walked away, secure in the knowledge that Connor was right behind him.

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Samantha Kane

Cherry Pie

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