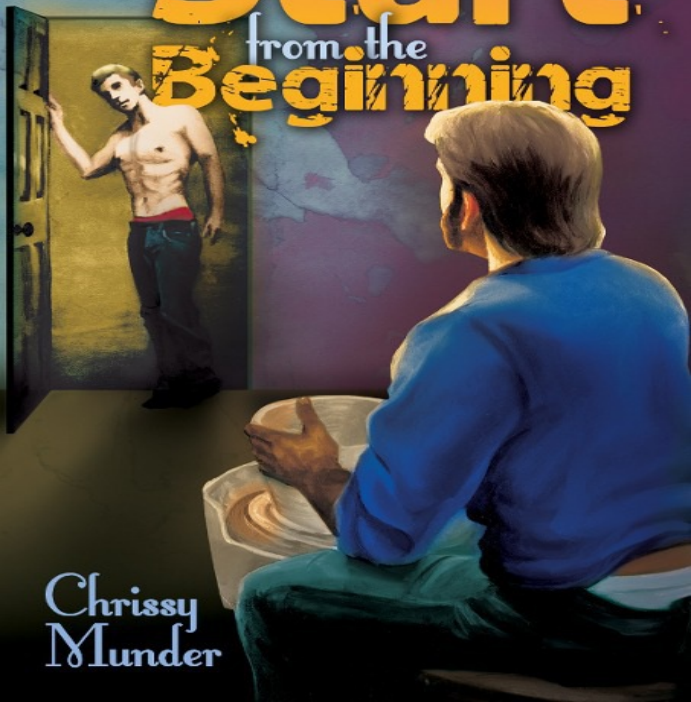


Start

from the

Beginning



Chrissy
Munder

Chapter One

“CHRIST, Kurt. When you said peace and quiet, you meant it.” Miles Taylor looked around suspiciously. The one-room cabin, while small, was fully modernized with all the conveniences one could hope for. Except for one.

“Where’s the bloody phone?”

Kurt Fulton set Miles’s suitcase down at the foot of the queen-size bed that was covered in an attractive, geometric-patterned quilt.

“The whole concept of you getting peace and quiet entails keeping you away from telephones, fax machines, the Internet, and anything else that’s going to keep you from the rest and recuperation you need.”

Miles grimaced. “I’ll rest when I’m dead.”

“And that, my friend, is the reason why you’re here.” Kurt shook his head at Miles. “You have to take this seriously, Miles. You had a heart attack. You could have another one if you don’t

make some changes.”

Miles watched Kurt as he paced over to the front window. He understood Kurt's concern, but he couldn't escape the feeling of unreality that threatened to overwhelm him every time he looked at his friend. How could he ever thank the man who had not only saved his life but had literally held his heart in his hands?

“Well, if things are so serious, dumping me off in the back of the beyond with no car and no phone to contact my doctor is asking for trouble now, isn't it?” Miles's green eyes sparked at his long-time friend, sometime lover, and currently full-time doctor.

Kurt ran his hand through his hair and frowned. “It's not like you're just post-op, Miles. Besides, I told you: an old colleague of mine lives in the cabin up the hill. I'm leaving him your file and asking him to look in on you. Brenda, one of the locals, will come by once a week with your groceries and to do any errands you need.”

“I'm a fuckin' prisoner, then?” As always when Miles became upset his accent thickened, emphasizing his British roots that the last several years in the States had never managed to erase.

“You're not a prisoner,” Kurt recited for what

Miles felt sure had to be the tenth time. "You can go anywhere up here you want. There's a lot to see. There are the lighthouses and miles of beach to walk on. The sunsets are terrific, and the town has some great little art shops."

"You've got to be kidding me." Miles crossed his arms over his chest, feeling the scar under his shirt as he did so. He knew denial would only take him so far; that was the reason he'd agreed to Kurt's crazy idea in the first place.

"Come on, Miles."

Miles could hear Kurt's frustration in his voice. "It's the best I can think of. I tried to let you do it your way but you were headed right back into trouble. At least, just try it... for me?"

"Even though I can't believe you stole my cell, it's not like I could ever deny you anything," Miles grumped as he looked out the large picture window. Kurt was right about one thing. The view here was terrific. The cottage was situated atop a small series of sand dunes and looked down onto the big lake.

"Feel like I'm going to turn into a bleedin' turnip just sittin' around."

Kurt reached out and caught Miles close in a tight hug. "You'll be the blondest, tannest, and

sexiest turnip I know."

Miles returned the firm grasp of Kurt's arms, knowing it was one of the few ways his friend could show his relief while still trying to maintain some professional focus.

"I did say thank you, didn't I?" He mumbled against Kurt's neck, his breath ruffling the sandy hair at the nape with gratitude he found difficult to express.

"For what?" Kurt joked. "My amazing ability to ignore you when you're being a foul bastard? Or for carting you up here to the 'back ass of beyond' as you so delicately put it?"

"It's certainly not the last part, I can tell you that!" Miles grinned. "And how many times do I have to tell you it's 'arse', not 'ass'?"

"Yeah, yeah. Tomato, to-mah-to. You go ahead and settle in. I'm going to take your file up to Drew and fill him in." Miles watched as Kurt shifted his feet uneasily.

"Uh... Miles, go easy on him, will you?"

"What do you mean?" Miles asked.

"Drew's a quiet kind of guy. He's had some... personal troubles, and I know you, remember? Just don't push, okay?"

“What aren’t you telling me here, Kurt?”
Miles’s suspicions drifted back to the fore.

“Nothing,” Kurt muttered as Miles picked up the remote control to the television. “I gotta go, Miles. I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

Miles watched Kurt rush out of the cabin and sniffed as he turned on the television. No telling with Kurt sometimes. There was a large assortment of DVDs in the lower half of the entertainment unit but Miles thought he’d check out some international news instead; maybe he could catch a market report.

There was only one small problem with that plan.

Even half way up the hill to Drew’s cabin, Kurt could hear Miles’s yell through the open window of his truck.

“No fuckin’ cable either? Kurt, you wanker!”

Chapter Two

“COME on, will you just think about it?”

Drew Cole stood at the front door of the cabin with his arms folded across his chest and shook his head at his friend. He watched as Kurt turned to look down at the thick, manila envelope that had just flown over his head to land on the dry and dusty path behind him.

“You’re always picking up strays, what’s one more?” Ignoring Drew’s strong, non-verbal statement, Kurt reached for the envelope and turned back to Drew with a wide smile as he brushed the dirt off. “Great toss, by the way.”

Refusing to be swayed by Kurt’s blatant attempt at flattery, Drew rolled his eyes and shook his head once again.

“This was the only thing I could think of that would work,” Kurt said tiredly. “Miles is refusing to take care of himself properly. He needs rest and a lack of stress to complete his recovery.”

Drew shrugged. The physician within him was curious to take a look at the file in Kurt's hand despite his misgivings, and he admitted, if only to himself, that Kurt's concerns were valid.

"You know with my schedule the cabin sits empty most of the time, and there's not another world-renowned ex-cardiologist I'd rather trust Miles's care to."

Instead of listening to his instincts and closing the door, Drew stepped back into the cabin's cool interior and headed for his studio. There really wasn't any point in shutting Kurt out of his own cabin.

They had bought the adjoining properties back when they worked together in Grand Rapids. When Drew had moved up here permanently, Kurt had transferred his belongings into the smaller, one-room cabin Miles would be staying at, opening this one up for Drew.

He had never met Miles Taylor, but Drew had heard plenty about him from Kurt. Even though Kurt constantly complained about what a pain in the ass he was, Drew knew Kurt cared for Miles, and he owed Kurt enough that he couldn't refuse his request.

Drew gave a wry smile at his mental

acknowledgement that Miles would be staying. He knew Kurt would keep pressing until he gave in. The best he could do was postpone his ultimate defeat as long as possible.

“I can’t believe how clean this place is.” True to form Kurt couldn’t keep quiet as he followed close on Drew’s heels. “It sure didn’t look this good when I lived here.”

A quick glance at the cabin’s spotless interior made Drew frown. He might live here full time, but it didn’t look any more lived in than Kurt’s cabin had before Miles arrived. Drew hoped Kurt thought the lack of clutter was a comment on his own rather careless housekeeping rather than a statement of how hard Drew worked at leaving little impact on the world around him.

“Can we talk about this?” Kurt quietly asked as Drew sat down at the potter’s wheel in the back room. Drew’s bare foot automatically found its way to the unit’s floor pedal, and he began the rhythmic pumping that set the wheel in motion as he shook his head firmly.

Kurt stepped into the room, walking carefully over the various tarped clumps of clay that were strewn about the floor on his way over to the storage shelves beside the large kiln. Drew hadn’t

shipped his latest work down to the shop in town yet, and the shelves were still full. He watched as Kurt wandered around, the bright light streaming in the open windows highlighting the different colors on the completed pieces.

“That new glaze you’re experimenting with looks to be working well.”

Drew shrugged again, and he fought back a smile. Kurt was so predictable. He was trying misdirection now. Drew tossed his head, sending his long, dark hair swirling off his neck before it settled back down in the middle of his back.

“Your hair is longer than it was last time,” Kurt commented.

Drew nodded, his hands resting lightly on the wet mass of clay on the wheel before him. Kurt had always had a thing for his hair, and Drew knew it took everything his friend had not to reach out and feel the softness. Drew appreciated the restraint, remembering his reaction the last time Kurt had unexpectedly touched him.

“It won’t take up any more of your time. It’s not like Miles needs care; he’s fully recovered from the surgery. He just needs to get away from the stress of his daily routine and make some decisions about his future.”

Drew hated hearing the pleading note in Kurt's voice, and he hated being the cause of it, but he wasn't going to make this easy. They both knew what Kurt was asking of him.

"It would make me feel better about leaving him alone if I knew you were keeping an eye on him."

Drew let his foot rest atop on the pedal, and both men watched as the wheel began to slow, water and rich red clay sluicing off as it spun down.

"How about I pay the property taxes while he's up here?"

Drew took a deep breath and squared his broad shoulders under their blue denim covering. He needed to stop drawing this out and give Kurt an answer.

"Do it for me?"

With perfect timing, the wheel stopped moving at Kurt's last words and Drew stood up, shaking his head as he turned to face his friend and former colleague. Without a word, just a meaningful glance from his dark hazel eyes, he took the envelope from Kurt's hand before making shooing motions toward the other room.

"I know, I know." Kurt laughed. "You hate it

when I'm in your studio." Drew walked him out to the living room, but when he gestured toward the coffeepot, Kurt shook his head.

"I wish I could, but I have to get back. It's a long drive, and I've too many appointments booked tomorrow to push it."

Drew smiled and ran a hand through his hair. He regretted the gesture as soon as he made it. Kurt tried not to stare at the crooked fingers exposed by the gesture but it was obvious he couldn't help himself, anymore than he could avoid looking at the scar visible just under the dark beard at Drew's neck.

Drew's smile faded. He shoved his hand down into his front pants pocket and dropped his chin toward his chest.

"Oh, Drew," Kurt said. "You don't have to hide, not from me."

As always when he saw Drew, emotion filled Kurt's eyes, emotion that Drew appreciated Kurt never fully expressed. Drew knew the situation had been difficult for his friends. They couldn't seem to forget the past, the time when they said being in Drew's presence was like being caught in the hot burning sun of a summer's day. A time before, when he had been able to laugh easily and

had loved life with a fierce joy. They couldn't accept that those days would never return.

Kurt stood there with his hands moving restlessly at his side. Drew knew he wanted to reach out and hug Drew close the way he used to. Drew could remember the comfort of Kurt's lean body pressed against his, the way he smelled safe and familiar. Drew wished there was a way to reassure Kurt that he was more than this silent ghost he'd become, but he didn't know how. He just nodded at Kurt before walking them both out of the cabin.

"I'll see you later, then." Kurt kept his voice steady with what Drew could tell was an effort as he opened the door to his truck. "Thanks for looking in on Miles. I appreciate it."

"Kurt—"

Drew's voice was low and rough from both scar tissue and disuse, but it was strong enough to stop Kurt in his tracks. Drew couldn't remember the last time he had spoken around Kurt, much less said his name, and he was ashamed he hadn't made more of an attempt. The two men stood silently, each lost in their memories before Drew leaned forward and briefly let his lips touch the side of Kurt's cheek. The kiss was as soft as a

butterfly wing, barely there, barely felt, but a small miracle nonetheless.

Kurt's arms came up instinctively—only to clutch empty air as Drew shuddered and stepped back away from the touch.

“Drive safe,” Drew uttered gutturally. And then he retreated to the safety of his cabin, and Kurt was left standing there with nothing but the silly smile on his face.

Chapter Three

MILES lay on his back in the hot grass and watched two seagulls coasting overhead on the breeze blown in off the lake. The winds here were pretty phenomenal. He'd almost think he was in South Dakota, the way they didn't seem to ever stop blowing. Idly he wondered if these winds had names—like something out of an old myth.

He'd given up wearing his watch after the first three days, as the visible proof of time's slow passage had almost driven him insane. But he didn't need it anymore; he'd gotten pretty good at reading the sun. Judging from the shadow in the grass cast by the cabin, it was almost time to check on that surly bastard next door.

The first week in the small cabin had gone by slowly for Miles. Actually, in the journal Kurt had left him and encouraged him to write in, Miles had described it in far more graphic and forthright terms. Miles grinned. He couldn't wait to read bits of this journal to Kurt. Serve the bugger right.

By the second week, with none of his usual distractions, Miles's world had been reduced to little things. Things like naming the seagulls he watched for hours and walking down to the lake's edge and dipping his toes in the freezing water. He'd discovered a garden behind the cabin, the small plot abandoned ages ago and gone to seed in a wild and disreputable fashion. In desperation for something to do, Miles had begun clearing it out, finding an unexpected pleasure in the simple task of nurturing the neglected greenery.

Miles knew he needed to make some decisions. That was, after all, the reason he was here. It was time for him to face a few truths about his life and the way he lived it. He rubbed his hand down his bare chest, feeling the sweat beneath his fingers as well as the raised line from his surgical scar. Damn thing had itched like hell when the hair was growing back.

The heart attack had scared the absolute shit out of him—if he was going to be honest, he had to admit that. What made it worse was that there was no physical reason for it to have happened. No blocked arteries, no defects. There was nothing that Kurt could tweak with his scalpels. It was all the result of high blood pressure brought on by the dreaded S word: stress.

Miles snorted to himself and watched a lazy bumblebee meander through the patch of clover beside him. Stress that had left him with his chest cracked open and the knowledge that Kurt could now claim to have put his hands on just about every part of Miles there was. So, if he'd been so scared, why had he fallen back into his old, careless habits when he'd been released from his post-op care?

Truth was, Miles didn't need the money. He'd already made a small fortune—enough to last him for this lifetime and beyond. He'd only kept going for the thrill, the adrenaline rush as he teetered on the edge of disaster and pulled himself back using only his wits, nerves, and bollocks. Kurt said those days were done and God knows he did trust Kurt, no matter how much he ragged on him. So what did a bloke newly retired from the global commodities market and perfectly happy residing in a foreign country do? He wasn't interested in moving back to England; his parents had died several years back, and there was nothing and no one there to lay claim on him.

Miles's thoughts were interrupted by a creaking noise. He was always amazed at how easily the sound traveled the distance between the two cabins in the afternoon quiet. But he was

grateful as well. With a groan, he rolled over onto his stomach and oh so casually laid his head down on his folded arms. His eyes didn't close, however; instead they were drawn to the lounge outside the other cabin and the lounge's current occupant. Yep, there he was, right on time.

In addition to all his newfound pursuits, Miles had also discovered something even more fun: watching Drew. That and seeing how long the man could ignore him. Miles wasn't sure how it had come about. He supposed it began that first night when he had been restless and unable to sleep. He had prowled around the small cabin before finally being driven outside by his irritation, like a wolf leaving his den to howl at the moon.

With no street lighting, the world outside his cabin had been a revelation. He sat on a bench and stared up at the sky, unable to remember the last time he'd seen so many stars. There had been a light on in the rear part of the cabin up the hill and Miles could hear music, light and faint as it drifted through the dark, soothing and calming his frustrations, leaving him able to wonder at the sounds of the nocturnal creatures as they accepted his presence and went about their business.

Miles had actually started to drift off, warm and comfortable in the cool night air, when he

heard the now familiar creaking noise from the other cabin. His eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness to make out a large shape on the lounge, but no other details. Silently Miles sat and watched the other figure, hypnotized by Drew's utter stillness, and amazed to discover later that he'd sat there and watched him do nothing for three whole hours.

And so it had somehow begun. Miles's new obsession, he called it in his journal. Nothing else up here to bloody obsess about, he joked to himself. Of course, the fact that even from a distance, Drew was one of the most attractive men Miles'd seen in ages didn't hurt. Not that Miles could do anything about that right now.

After a few days, Miles knew more about Drew's daily routine than he'd known about most of the partners he'd had in his life. What he didn't know, Miles had ended up pumping Brenda for when she came up with his groceries.

In between Brenda's visits, Miles had tried being civil to his neighbor; hell, he'd even tried being social. All that his greetings and conversational gambits had gotten him were dark glances and endless silence—always from a distance.

He'd even tried knocking on Drew's door, certain his neighbor was inside and thinking he'd at least like to meet him before he might need his medical help, but Miles never received any response. "Better hope I don't try to drop dead tomorrow, with all the attention I'm getting from that one."

Thanks to Brenda, who had turned out to be a round and dark-haired ball of energy, Miles now knew that Drew spent his time as a potter, selling his pieces in some of the shops below. She'd had a load of his work in the bed of her truck and Miles had peered at it in curiosity. Apparently Drew had kept his medical license active and held a free clinic on Saturdays for any who cared to show. Well, that explained the line of people Miles had seen the prior weekend. They'd stood there for what had seemed like hours.

Mainly migrant workers, Brenda told Miles, afraid or unable to afford the doctor in town, but strangely comfortable with the silent man next door. "Not a big talker at all, is Dr. Drew." She'd laughed before her expression changed, quickly becoming somber. "'Cause of what they did to him."

That statement had made Miles question her further, and with a little pressing Brenda gave him

the basics. Apparently, Miles's neighbor had led quite a different life than he did now. A much-lauded surgeon and cardiologist, he'd been working for a volunteer group in South America. The usual civil unrest had led to violence and Drew's group had been captured and, well.... "Bad things were done to him." That's all Brenda would say.

So, okay, given that information, perhaps there wasn't anything personal about the way Drew ignored Miles. But Miles was bored and that was a dangerous thing, given he never could resist a challenge. So every time Miles was out and saw his new neighbor, he'd give him a wave and a smile.

Sometimes he'd beckon Drew over, just to watch him stiffen and turn away. Other times, Miles would start to walk toward him, only to see Drew silently turn and enter his cabin, shutting the door firmly behind him. Miles had to give Drew credit—he didn't even make a pretense at being polite.

The subject of Miles's solitary musings decided it was time to roll over and Miles caught his breath with appreciation. Damn, but he was a big, fine bloke. Every day, like clockwork, Drew

would venture outside and strip down before stretching out on the lounge, looking for all the world like a big lazy cat basking in the heat of the day. His dark hair spilled off the back of the lounge, drifting down to the grass and shining like a mallard's wing in the hot sun.

Miles could still remember the first time he'd realized Drew sunbathed naked. Granted, he wasn't prudish by any stretch of imagination. It was just the surprise. Either Drew didn't see him, or he just bloody well didn't care that he had a new neighbor.

After the first day, it became obvious he just didn't care. The distance was such that Miles couldn't really see more than the large expanse of honey dark skin, set off by the dark beard and that waterfall of dark hair. But that was more than enough to add to Miles's sleepless nights.

He didn't know what to do about the situation either. He'd discussed these things—briefly—with Kurt, but his friend had just told him to worry about that later in his recovery. Well, here he was, wondering just how much later. Miles had seen the commercials; he used to laugh at them too. But now the words "... must be healthy enough for sexual activity..." took on a whole new meaning, one tinged with fear.

He'd lain there at night feeling the tingle of lust, his hands itching to reach down and touch familiar ground, wanting to relieve himself of the images that came to his mind every time he thought of Drew. But fear stayed his hand.

Miles's sense of the ridiculous painted graphic pictures of Brenda finding him dead, cock in one hand, fingers of the other buried deep in his ass. Victim of a simple wank. It had been so damn long! He laughed about it to himself, but still couldn't take that first step.

Deciding he'd spent enough time being lazy and thinking silly thoughts, Miles stood and stretched, slowly enjoying the crack and pop of his joints. With a jaunty wave in Drew's direction, he smiled and headed off to his garden.

"Catch you later, you rude, soddin' bastard," he muttered affectionately.

It was definitely time to come up with something new to add to the game.

Chapter Four

DREW crushed the misshapen mass of clay between his hands and frowned. He was going to kill Kurt. He really was. Kurt knew that the reason Drew had moved up to the cabin was to get some much-appreciated distance from the rest of the world, that he needed the space and the quiet and the isolation to be able to breathe after all that had happened. Drew also knew that Kurt disagreed; he knew Kurt thought what Drew needed was more contact with humanity—not less.

But Kurt didn't understand how just being in the same room as another person, much less being touched, could make Drew's skin crawl and burn as if a thousand ants were trapped underneath if he wasn't prepared. Kurt didn't realize just how bad the nightmares were or how many nights Drew was unable to sleep.

The walls would close in on him; claustrophobia building, memories filling his mind until he had to go outside into the darkness and

gulp in the cool night air to still his pounding heart and throttle the silent screams that were all his damaged throat would allow him.

Kurt didn't know how tired Drew was of people looking at his hands or his neck or any of the other scars that bore brutal testament to the inhumanity of man. Up here, alone, Drew could relax and strip off his shirt without having to hear the gasps, the concerns, or the questions. Up here, Drew could almost forget.

He had his work, enough to satisfy. His physical therapist had introduced him to working with clay as a way to strengthen the shattered bones of his hands and fingers. Drew would never wield a scalpel again, but this was creation of another kind. And he could still heal others, offering his services free of charge to those who had no one else to trust their care to.

Drew didn't live in total isolation. It was more a chosen solitude. If there was some unacknowledged need for human companionship during the long nights, some atavistic desire to touch another, he just ignored it. His prior painful attempts to reconnect with humanity had taught him he wasn't ready for that.

Brenda brought him his groceries and supplies

and took his finished wares down to the shops to sell to the tourists. He had his patients. He had been adopted by a stray tomcat that visited when the mood struck or the local pickings were slim. Again, it was enough.

But now he had Miles. Obnoxious, absolutely fucking gorgeous Miles, and the unwelcome surge of desire that accompanied him. What the hell had Kurt been thinking? Drew had become accustomed to his isolation. Kurt spent more time working than not, and with the cabin unoccupied, Drew had forgotten how close the two units actually were—until now.

To make things worse, he couldn't get away from Miles. Every time Drew stepped outside, day or night, there he would be, rooting about in the overgrown garden with his torso bare to the touch of the sun, walking along the beach with his hair tousled by the wind, or just sitting and staring up at Drew's cabin like it was the center of his universe.

He insisted on totally ignoring Drew's efforts to ignore him. He would wave and flash an infectious smile in Drew's direction, gesturing to him like they were old friends no matter how cold a shoulder Drew turned to him. Was the man completely insane?

Drew couldn't help but notice how much lighter the tawny hair became, how much darker the pale skin turned as the days passed. That was all right; he could allow himself to admire Miles from afar. The problem was that Miles refused to respect the distance between them. He kept pressing into Drew's space.

Drew knew he should get it over with and just go and confront Miles, let him look his fill, ask his questions and then shy away like they all did. But still he held back—not sure why, until the day he hid behind the door of his cabin, hand pressed up against it to feel the vibrations from Miles's knock. It was then that Drew acknowledged the fear and desire hiding within him.

He didn't want to see the same pity or the disgust in Miles's eyes he'd seen so many times before. He wanted something more. It had been a long time since Drew had felt the eyes of another on him. But he could feel Miles watching him. Without thinking, Drew had gone out to sunbathe the first few days as was his habit, only to remember too late that Kurt's cabin had an occupant. Miles's attention turned his way and he'd almost felt normal again.

Drew knew he should stop. It was a silly,

childish game he was playing. He knew what the reality would be like if Miles were ever close enough to see the marks on his body the distance between them softened and hid. But he didn't, he couldn't, and he found he wouldn't.

If this was all Drew could have, if this was all he could bear, then what harm did it do? And if in the night his swelling flesh told him it wasn't enough, he would bury that still voice beneath the throbbing strains of the music he played to express the emotions he could no longer voice with ease.

Chapter Five

THERE was something different about today, Miles thought. He couldn't put his finger on it. It was something in the air, something almost tangible, something just out of his reach. He snorted at his fanciful thoughts. He'd been up here too damn long. But making fun of it still didn't make the feeling go away.

There was a hush, a stillness that surrounded him. Miles supposed he could call it a sense of waiting, but he didn't know for what. Even the winds seemed to have died down and the seagulls were reduced to walking along the edge of the shoreline rather than lazily floating on their warm air currents.

Miles looked out at the lake though the clear glass of the window and thought that even the color of the water and sky appeared different this morning from all the others. The clouds were tinged with a faint green haze that sparked with an almost electric current. Strange, he thought.

And beautiful.

Whatever affected the world outside the cabin today seemed to be taking a toll on him as well. He couldn't manage to sit still. He felt as if his skin was too tight; agitated and angry and nothing seemed to help. He didn't want to rest, he didn't want to garden. He didn't know what he wanted to do.

Miles frowned and turned to survey the interior of the cabin in restless disgust. He was bloody well sick and tired of being cooped up in this bloody cabin, all because he'd had a bloody heart attack and Kurt was being a bloody mother hen. Ha! He ought to put that in Kurt's bloody journal, except he couldn't still his agitation enough to pull the bloody thing out and write in it.

Of course, if he were being honest with himself, Miles might have to admit that this disquiet he was experiencing had been building ever since he realized that Drew wasn't up at the cabin. As a matter of fact, he'd seen neither hide nor hair of his tall, dark, and silent neighbor for three entire days. Well, to be bloody accurate it was more like three bloody days, three long bloody nights and six bloody hours, not that he didn't have anything else to pay attention to, mind you.

It was the silence that first unsettling night that had clued Miles into Drew's absence. After weeks of thinking the music that Drew played all hours of the night was responsible for keeping him awake, Miles couldn't understand why he now missed it so much he couldn't sleep. The darkness from the cabin was his next sign: Drew always left a light burning through 'til morning.

When Brenda had swung by with his load of groceries he'd (very casually, of course) questioned her about Drew's whereabouts. Miles had long passed whatever litmus test she held newcomers to before considering them locals and her prior hesitations about sharing gossip had vanished, leaving her more than happy to sit down to a soft drink or two and some conversation.

So here he was, three days, three long nights and six hours later, stuck worrying about a man he'd yet to even speak to. Miles kicked at a shoe he'd left lying in the middle of the floor, smiling with grim satisfaction as it bounced off the couch and hit the wall with a satisfying thud.

He'd tried to tell himself he was just bored. Wasn't Drew-watching one of his main pastimes? He was just deprived of his daily amusement, that's all. But when even a night out at the local

watering hole with Brenda and her friends hadn't cured Miles's restlessness, he knew he was in trouble. Deprived wasn't the word for how he felt; addicted and in withdrawal was more like it.

He just needed to see the man.

And that, given that Miles had not yet spoken to Drew, didn't know a thing about his romantic preferences (he could hope, knowing Kurt—but still), and didn't even know what his own current limits were sexually, well, that was just pretty damn pathetic.

Miles sighed. Then he gave himself a mental slap upside the head. Miles Taylor was not a man given to sighing, or talking about himself in the third person for that matter. It must be this place. Maybe it was the air in this place. Or maybe it was just Drew.

When he gave it some thought, Miles could understand how, given Drew's history, he might need to go see a specialist every once in a while, even a fancy-pants one in Chicago, as Brenda had called him. But how long could that take? And what was he doing the rest of the time? Visiting old friends? Painting the town red? Shagging everything in sight?

Fucking hell!

Miles's teeth ground together as he contemplated the last possibility. This was definite proof that life wasn't fair! Here he was, stuck in the back arse of nowhere, too damn scared of dying to even give himself a good wank, and Dr. Drew bloody-fucking-gorgeous Cole was probably wining and dining his way around Chicago. Miles had no doubt that even now Drew was letting someone else enjoy that wealth of golden skin and shining hair while leaving Miles here, alone, worrying about him.

And wait just a minute; wasn't Dr. Drew bloody-fucking-gorgeous Cole supposed to be looking out for Miles? Keeping an eye on him and making sure that he didn't need any kind of medical attention? Just wait until he could get a hold of Kurt and give him an earful about this! God knows what could have happened to Miles in the last three days!

Having managed to work himself into a foul mood, Miles decided it was time for action. He wasn't going to moon about here all day like some stupid fool, just waiting for Drew to come home. Ignoring the total and absolute irrationality of his thoughts, Miles grabbed a sweatshirt and headed out into the strange afternoon air. He cursed as he stubbed his bare toe on the door frame, and he

managed to successfully place the blame for that on Drew as well.

Chapter Six

MEANWHILE, the object of Miles's frustrations threw himself heavily upon the patchwork quilt that covered his bed with a sigh of his own. He was finally home! And luckily, he'd managed to beat the monster of a storm that was brewing as well. God, how he hated hospitals. The irony wasn't lost on Drew given his prior occupation, but he could ignore it.

It wasn't really hospitals themselves that bothered him; it was everything else that went along with them. Drew hated leaving the life he had made for himself up at the cabin. He hated having to face the crowds of people that went along with the city, hated having to force himself to speak to strangers, hated being poked and prodded, forced to remember things better forgotten, and this time, he had hated leaving Miles and the odd, unspoken connection that had developed between them.

Drew knew he should have let Miles know

that he was going away, or at the very least told him that he had made arrangements with the general practitioner in town in case something happened. But to do any of those things, Drew would have had to talk to Miles, and he wasn't ready. Not yet.

Besides, he told himself, there hadn't been any time once he had decided to have the procedure. The sudden opening in the surgical schedule had left him scrabbling as it was. Add into the equation the stress of knowing what was ahead of him, and it was a wonder he hadn't backed out. Drew had thought about changing his mind and called himself all kinds of fool for going ahead with the surgery. But in the end, he found he really didn't have any choice.

The look on Kurt's face when Drew had spoken his name was what had finally decided him. Drew just hadn't realized the power and meaning behind such a simple act. Not being able to talk easily hadn't bothered him at first, not really. After everything that had happened, it wasn't like he had much to say anyway.

Everything just seemed to jam up inside his head and that was where he thought it should stay. He didn't want to share what had happened, didn't want to remember most of it. It was easier

to let others think that he wasn't able to talk. The expectations were lower and most people left him alone.

But now there was Miles—beautiful, golden Miles who filled Drew's days and nights with thoughts of what could be. Kurt had always said Drew had more pride than sense, and after enduring the esophageal stretching and removal of scar tissue he'd just undergone, Drew knew Kurt was right. It had definitely been pride that had driven him to Chicago and the hated hospital.

Pride that insisted Drew become more than just a silent spectator to life. A man ought to be able to speak his lover's name, plain and simple. And so, for Miles, for the unexpressed hopes and desires that had blossomed so unexpectedly in Drew, he'd put himself under the hands of those he'd rejected years ago.

And wasn't that a sad comment on his life? Here he was, unable to gracefully handle the mere presence of another human—much less touch—without preparation, having schoolboy fantasies about a man he'd not even spoken to.

Of course, never satisfied, the medical staff had pushed for more, bringing up the additional procedures they had talked about before. But Drew

wasn't ready for any of that. Hell, he didn't know what he was ready for now. He just knew that if he wanted to find out, he needed to find a place to start.

Drew did a few of the breathing exercises they had taught him, breathing in and out deeply while attempting to relax his throat. Feeling ready, he pursed his lips and exhaled gently as he gave voice to a husky whisper, pushing the words past the pain in his throat.

“Miles.”

The name seemed to echo in the small room, hanging in the air with a life of its own. Drew shivered, amazed as he felt himself harden. The power of the spoken word. It was amazing, a simple but vital component of life that he had chosen to forget.

Suddenly Drew rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. Miles wasn't the one who was insane, it was Drew, and it didn't matter that he was a man grown—right now all he wanted to do was pull the covers over his head and hide.

Chapter Seven

DREW woke from his brief bout of self-pity to the loud slam of a car door. He groaned and pushed up off the bed, stretching as he did so and amazed at all the kinks he could feel. Hospitals just didn't agree with any part of him nowadays, it seemed. He recognized the sound of Brenda's flip-flops on the cement walkway and grabbed a shirt to meet her at the door.

“Hey there, Dr. Drew.” As usual, Brenda was in a cheery mood. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight braid and the ribbon tie matched the bright yellow of her shirt. “Glad you made it back in one piece.” She gave his large frame a quick, appreciative glance as he finished buttoning up his shirt. “They didn't keep anything useful there, did they, big guy?”

Drew couldn't help but stare. What? He was gone for a few days and the world changed? While always cheerful, Brenda was never this familiar, almost flirtatious with him.

“Hi Brenda,” he uttered cautiously.

“Dr. Drew!” Suddenly he was enveloped in a quick hug. Before he had time to react and push her away, she stepped back, wrapping her arms around her waist as she smiled up at him.

“That’s so cool! Your voice sounds a lot better!”

Without waiting for a reply, she went back to her truck and pulled out a couple of grocery bags. Handing one to Drew, she walked past him and headed towards his kitchen as she continued to chat.

“Bill over at the Gas and Gone left me a message. He saw your truck drive by, so I thought I’d bring you some groceries ’til you had a chance to get a list together. So everything went okay with the doctors, huh?”

Drew nodded, still groggy from his earlier retreat from reality.

“Miles will be real happy to hear that. I didn’t know you guys had become such good friends. Poor guy, he missed you something terrible.” Giving Drew a quick wink, Brenda reached into the grocery bag she’d placed on the counter. “Let’s put these away and have something cool to drink. I can catch you up on all the local gossip.”

“Miles?” Drew froze. He knew he was staring again as he whispered the name in shock, his brain finally having caught up to Brenda’s flow of words.

“Yeah. He was really lost without you.” Brenda laughed. “You should have seen him; he was trying to be so cool, you know, asking me where you were, how long you’d be gone. You really should have told him.”

“He asked about me?” Drew parroted again, ignoring her scolding.

“Real cute about it, too.” Brenda winked at him again. “It’s about time you had a little fun. He’s a pretty hot-looking guy.”

“Cute?”

Brenda walked over and gave Drew a gentle shove into one of the chairs by the kitchen table. “You must be tired from being poked at so much. Sit down and I’ll tell you about us taking Miles out to the bar the other night. You were the only thing he could talk about.”

AN hour later, a very confused Drew was again at his front door, this time waving goodbye to a very

amused Brenda. Maybe it was his dazed state, but he had found he really hadn't minded Brenda's longer-than-usual visit. He wouldn't have called it relaxing, but at least he hadn't felt the need to bolt. Perhaps it had something to do with the subject matter of their conversation?

"Oh, Dr. Drew?" Brenda poked her head out her truck window. "When you see Miles, be sure you tell him about the big one we've got heading in off the lake. I meant to warn him about it, him being new up here and all, but he was out when I drove by. Wouldn't want him blowing away now, would we?"

Brenda's parting words worried Drew more than he immediately wanted to admit. The storms that blew in off the Great Lake were astounding in their intensity and always managed to surprise those that hadn't experienced them. Usually not in a pleasant way.

Drew looked down at Miles's cabin but couldn't see any sign he'd returned. He debated whether or not to try to look for him, but without knowing where Miles had gone or how long ago he'd left, it would be pretty futile; there was just too much territory to cover. He'd have to keep his eyes open and catch him when he came back.

Drew set about his usual storm preparations, checking he had candles and that his supplies of water and oil for the lamps were all stocked and readily available. He preferred not to use the generator unless power was out for several days, but that needed to be checked and cycled as well. He had a root cellar he could use for cold storage in an emergency, but doubted he would. Having been away, his fresh supplies were limited to what Brenda had dropped off, and he would go through those before they went bad if the power did cut out.

Confident that the interior of his cabin was ready for anything the weather could throw at him, Drew began working on his exterior storm shutters. The wind had picked up and he could smell the difference in the air. He didn't know if it was the scent of ozone or just some innate animal sense, but he could tell this storm was going to be a strong one.

He decided not to wait but began closing the outer wooden shutters designed to protect the glass windows. Some closed easily with a hook and eye setup, but others on the side that faced the lake needed the reinforcement against the wind that only a hammer and nail could provide.

Drew welcomed the labor; his thoughts were

still in chaos over Brenda and her coy hints and comments. Should he believe her? Was it possible that Miles felt the same fragile connection between the two of them that he did?

He glanced down at the other cabin yet again, but saw no sign of Miles. Drew shrugged and went inside. He had a consignment due he needed to get started on. As he sat down at his wheel, he reminded himself to be sure to check on Miles before too much time passed.

Satisfied with the work he'd produced so far, Drew stretched and rubbed his long fingers along the base of his spine. Either he was getting old or the hospital had taken more out of him than he'd thought. He thought of the gray he'd noticed in Kurt's hair a few weeks ago and winced. But that was Kurt, he assured himself.

Drew grabbed a bottle of water and walked outside the cabin. The storm clouds were gathering in force, and the sun had disappeared in their wake. Even though it was only late afternoon, it might as well have been twilight. Normally he loved the greenish yellow color the sky turned before all hell broke loose, but today he could only think of Miles.

He picked up his phone and called into town, checking with a few of the locals to see if they'd seen Miles during the day. Everyone Drew spoke with was pleasantly surprised to hear from him, complimented him on his voice, and all answered his questions in the negative. This wasn't good.

Knowing what could be ahead, Drew pulled on a heavy sweatshirt and slicker along with his boots. He grabbed his emergency bag as well as some extra blankets and with a muttered curse threw it all into his truck. Damn the fool man, Drew thought worriedly as he drove off with a squeal of his tires. Didn't he know enough to come in out of a storm?

Chapter Eight

THE winds had changed, growing stronger and cooler, and the sky had darkened before he knew it. Miles had tried to get back to the cabin before the obviously rising storm with no luck. The thunder had started first, low and rumbling in the distance, before quickly building to a constant roar overhead that rivaled the sound of the winds that whipped leaves and debris around him and churned up whitecaps on the lake surface.

He'd paced himself, careful of his bruised feet and slightly fearful of his increased heart rate. Nothing he hadn't experienced in cardio rehab, but knowing he'd already excited himself enough for the day, the last thing he needed was to have something stupid happen.

Well, he amended, not anything stupider than what he'd already done. As if in answer to his thoughts, lightning appeared, streaking through the dark clouds over the lake, and finally the rain began to fall in drenching buckets.

Miles limped gratefully back into the small cabin, struggling against the winds to close the door behind him. Rushing out in a blaze of righteous indignation, while satisfying for the moment, had left him a few miles out with sore, bare feet, feeling terribly foolish once the blaze had burnt itself out. Not to mention that he was now wet, freezing and creating his own interior downpour as he stood in the entranceway, dripping puddles onto the floor.

He was more than a little ashamed of his earlier behavior. The long walk and the unexpected onslaught of the storm had calmed him. Looking at things with a fresh perspective, Miles didn't even have a good reason why he'd gotten so agitated. Could be simple frustration, could be the isolation. Cabin fever, he thought the Americans called it.

Or, damn it. It could just be Drew. Miles didn't know what it was, but something about Drew called to him on all levels. In the long run, Miles guessed it didn't matter. One thing to come out of his association with Kurt had been an understanding and acceptance of his feelings. He felt it, and no matter how strange, it was what it was. Trying to deny it would only lead to trouble.

Right now, though, he needed to get warm and dry. Deciding his wet clothes couldn't damage the floor any more than the water running off him already had, Miles wiggled his way out of his drenched clothing and dropped them into a soggy pile where he stood. He shivered as goose pimples formed on his clammy skin.

Towels, he thought as he padded into the kitchen area, leaving dark and soggy prints in his path. Towels would be good. A hot bath would be better and best of all would be.... "Aha!" Miles exclaimed triumphantly as he pulled a dusty bottle of whiskey from a cupboard under the kitchen sink where he'd been rummaging. He knew Kurt too well.

He poured himself a small glass, smiling with appreciation at the amber liquid he could barely see in the darkened interior of the cabin. Outside, the intensity of the winds increased; he could hear the trees thrashing about, limbs creaking and mixing with the loud accompaniment of thunder. Ignoring his physical discomfort, Miles walked naked toward the front window, fascinated by the lightning show before him.

Most of the time in the city he could only see a small part of a storm. Here, with only the fragile pane of glass between him and the outside, it was

like being one with the elements. The lake was an open expanse that the light from the bolts sparked and cracked their way across in jagged arcs. Only once before had he ever seen four of the differing types of lightning at the same time, and never had he seen so many strikes in such a short period.

They spread out before him, lighting up the lake and for a few moments letting him see the rain that the wind was blowing almost sideways. It had been frightening when he had been at the storm's mercy; exhilarating and somehow cathartic now with the benefit of shelter. He sipped the whiskey, letting it warm him from the inside out, and wondered if Drew was watching the same display wherever he was.

Shrugging the thought away as soon as it crossed his mind, Miles walked to the bathroom and fumbled for the light switch so he could run his bath.

Nothing happened.

Even though he knew it was foolish he tried it again, flicking the switch up and down a few times as if he'd gotten it wrong the first time.

"Bollocks."

So much for the hot bath idea; he'd been gone longer than he'd thought and depending on when

the power went out, the water in the heater tank could already have cooled. Miles was surprised at how little this bothered him; the storm raging overhead left him feeling oddly calm and serene. Without even bothering to try the hot tap, he grabbed a couple of towels and rubbed himself down briskly, enjoying the texture of the material against his skin and the tingle of circulation that followed.

Miles stumbled as he left the bathroom, wincing as the awkward movement jarred his feet. He groped his way to the bed, finding and pulling on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt—worn soft by time and too many cycles through the wash—he'd left on top of the quilt that morning.

He should have tossed the shirt long ago, but he had stolen it from Kurt and hated to part with it. The calm bubble hadn't left him, and he wondered idly at the cause behind it without feeling any pressure to investigate further.

He stood at one of the back windows, looking up the hill to where he knew Drew's cabin sat, even though he was unable to see it through the deluge. Might as well change my name to Noah, he thought wryly. Miles thought about the whiskey and how good another drink would taste, but he was reluctant to move. The storm seemed louder

in the back part of the cabin and yet, over the crash of the thunder and the roar of the wind, he heard a loud snap, almost like a gunshot.

His unreal bubble of calm burst at the same moment and Miles turned away from the window, his heart pounding and sweat breaking out on his forehead. Even as he turned he threw his hands up over his head as the ceiling of the small cabin exploded, collapsing down on top of him.

Chapter Nine

WHERE could he be?

Drew pounded the truck's steering wheel with his fist, frustrated as he peered out the windshield. Even with the wipers on full, they couldn't keep up with the driving rain, and he could hardly see the hood in front of him, much less hear anything over the water drumming on the roof.

He had pulled off the road on his way back to Kurt's cabin, hoping that if he waited a few minutes the intensity of the storm would lessen, but there was no sign of relief in sight and no sign of Miles. Drew didn't know if he really expected to find him in a storm like this, but he had to try.

Drew didn't know how to feel right now. One minute he blamed himself for not making more of an effort with Miles, maybe then he would have an idea of where to look; the next he cursed Miles's stupidity for going out in what was shaping up to be the worst storm this year. The

last weather report he'd managed to pick up through the radio static noted that a waterspout had been spotted out on the big lake.

Another bright burst of lightning convinced Drew that he'd better do something other than sit there, and he cautiously pulled the truck back on to the road. Not that he was worried about traffic, but parts of this road had a tendency to wash out during a downpour and he didn't want to end up with the truck stuck or worse yet, flood the engine.

His headlights didn't make a dent in the darkness of the storm; only the brilliant and blinding flashes of lightning illuminated his way to the cabin and helped him maneuver the truck past downed branches and other debris. He was hoping Miles had made it back before the storm started; there weren't too many places to take shelter otherwise, and Drew had checked as many of them he could think of.

Drew parked the truck before the darkened cabin, knowing the lack of light didn't necessarily equate empty. A storm this bad was going to knock out the power. He was already drenched from his searching, but pulled the useless hood of the slicker up over his head anyway as he ran for the front door.

Without the lightning, he couldn't see clearly and he grunted as his momentum pushed him up against the door, which swung open eerily from his weight.

"Miles?" he called as loudly as he could in an effort to be heard over the wind and rain. "Are you here?"

Drew stepped in, stumbling over something in the entryway. He knelt and felt for what tripped him, his heart beating swiftly. Nothing human, just a bunch of wet and soggy material.

"Miles?" he called again and coughed; his voice rough and throat sore from the abuse he'd already put it through.

Another bolt of light illuminated the interior of the cabin, and Drew felt his blood freeze at the scene before him. No wonder it was so loud in here, a section of the roof had collapsed and the rain and wind poured through the opening.

Drew pushed his way past the debris. He knew the bathroom was to the back, behind the downed timbers. He ignored the pain as jagged splinters of wood and sharp metal fought back, tearing and pulling at his clothes and skin, his focus on maneuvering through the wreckage, fearful of what he would find.

"Miles?"

MILES raised his head groggily. What had happened? He coughed and felt a sharp pain in his side. Groaning, he attempted to sit up, shaking his head and regretting it instantly. What was he doing on the floor? What was that noise? What the bloody hell?

“Miles!”

He heard his name, and instinctively he knew who it was. He didn't understand how, but he knew that low and rough voice.

“Drew?”

Miles coughed again and pressed one hand to his forehead. Shite. He strained to focus in the darkness as Drew pushed his way through the damage with controlled haste, frantic but still careful not to disturb as much as could.

“Are you all right?”

Drew was there now, kneeling beside him, his large frame barely visible in the dark. He ran his hands down Miles's torso, carefully feeling his limbs and where the debris had him pinned, all the while asking questions, words Miles heard but couldn't process.

“Yeah.” Miles coughed again. He was

fascinated by the brief glimpses of Drew's face the lightning flashes revealed to him. Nothing but dark eyes and stark, shadowed angles of face and jaw hidden by his beard. Drew was still speaking, asking him questions, but all Miles could do was stare at the curve of his lips as they moved. Christ. Must have banged his head harder than he thought.

"I'm okay." Miles could feel the heat of Drew's hands through his T-shirt and shivered. "I don't think anything's broken, m'leg's pinned though."

"You're soaked." Drew looked around. "Hold still, I'll get you out of there."

Miles watched as Drew struggled to find something to lift the mess on top of him, the flashes of lightning adding a surreal, strobe effect to the unreality of the situation. Finally, Drew was back with a long piece of metal he carefully placed under the pile before putting his weight on the other end.

Drew's muscles flexed as he worked to raise the material. Miles could see the strain in his face and then there was pain again, sharp and insistent. He tried to keep quiet, but knew he didn't succeed when Drew hesitated before he tried again. Miles could feel the debris shift above

him and wondered if they were going to bring the rest of the cabin down around them

“Can you pull your leg out?” Drew gasped out as he struggled with the weight, cursing his hands and their limited abilities.

Miles grunted and tried to use his hands to propel himself backwards. “Almost there, a little more,” he panted.

Despite the gravity of the situation, his mind was working to fit their heavy breathing and exclamations into a more pleasurable scenario. Idiot! He chastised himself, even as he used the images to distract himself from the pain. With a final burst of effort, he dragged his leg out from under the pile.

“Got it!”

Drew quickly let go of the pole, and the material he had lifted fell to floor with a crash. Immediately he was at Miles’s side, checking to make sure that Miles was right and that the leg wasn’t broken.

“Can you put your weight on it?”

“Not much choice, eh?” Miles snorted even as he tightly grasped at the arm Drew gently placed around his shoulders. It hurt. It hurt a lot, to be bloody honest.

“Let’s get you out of here.” Drew lifted Miles up with impressive ease.

“I was right,” Miles gasped. “You’re a damn fine big bloke.”

Drew didn’t answer, and Miles shivered with cold and shock as Drew balanced him against his hip and removed his slicker. Miles welcomed the residual heat of Drew’s body when the material was wrapped around him and allowed himself to be urged out of the destroyed cabin and into the truck.

Miles leaned against the side of the door and watched as Drew climbed in the driver’s seat. His head swam with the effects of adrenaline and the whiskey he’d drunk and he leaned his forehead against the cool glass of the window with relief.

Drew’s lips were moving again, but Miles couldn’t hear what he was saying over the noise of the rain on the roof and the confusion in his head. Miles just nodded and closed his eyes. He was safe now; he was with Drew.

Chapter Ten

MILES'S peace was short lived. Instead of concentrating on the barely visible road ahead of them, Drew was staring over at Miles.

"Is something wrong?" Miles asked groggily, wiping the water off his face with one hand.

"What were you thinking?" Drew's voice was low but filled with an intensity that made it audible even over the rain, and Miles blinked in surprise as his rescuer glared at him, the peace he'd first felt at being surrounded by Drew's presence in the confined space disappearing in seconds.

"What?" Miles was sure he'd misheard Drew's words in the din of the storm.

"Worst storm of the year and you go gallivanting off sightseeing!" As if propelled by the force of his feelings, Drew leaned closer to Miles as he made his point.

"Gallivan—" Miles felt his own temper rise,

even though he was bewildered by the sudden argument.

"I can't believe a grown man doesn't have the sense God gave a goat!" Drew interrupted.

"Now that's bloody unfair!" Miles protested. His aches and throbbing pains were forgotten as he glared back at Drew in the small cab of the truck. His chin jutted forward in a sign of defiance his friends would have easily recognized.

"Do you have any idea how long I've been looking for you? Do you know what could have happened to you out there?" Drew questioned in a harsh voice.

"Well, at least a bloody roof wouldn't have fallen on me! As far as gallivanting, I'm not the one who was living it up in Chicago!" Miles knew his voice sounded peevish as his earlier agitation returned.

Miles sat there, waiting for a response, and when Drew just ignored him and tightened his hands on the steering wheel he threw himself back against the seat, an act Miles instantly regretted as the pain in his side and leg stabbed at him again.

"Are you okay?" Drew instantly stopped the truck at Miles's involuntary gasp of pain and

reached out.

“I’m fine.” Miles angrily swatted at Drew before he paused in shock, his anger forgotten as he took hold of Drew’s hands. “Did you do this getting me out? Why didn’t you say anything?” It was dark, but Miles could just see the awkward angles of Drew’s bent fingers.

DREW froze at Miles’s touch. Confusion, fear, and desire swirled inside of him before Drew gritted his teeth and looked away from Miles’s eyes, piercing even in the dim light. This wasn’t how he wanted his first conversation with Miles to go, not even close. But after the tension and uncertainty of the afternoon, he had been so scared when he’d seen Miles lying under that debris he couldn’t stop himself.

Not knowing what to do or what to say, Drew pulled his hands back from Miles’s warmth and steered the truck toward his cabin once again. The silence grew between them at his retreat, the only sound the rain as it continued to beat heavily down on the roof. “No,” Drew finally said, his voice thick. “I didn’t do that getting you out.”

And then he didn’t say anything more.

The silence stayed between them even when they arrived at the cabin. Each man was lost in his own thoughts, each berating himself for his side of the silly argument and wondering what to do or say next. Once inside, Drew's face had been closed and shuttered against Miles's questioning gaze as he poked and prodded at Miles's injuries.

Drew was relieved that despite his injured ankle, Miles's additional injuries appeared to be minor, just some bruising and small cuts. He was pretty sure one of Miles's ribs was cracked as well. It would be painful, yes, but nothing as serious as it could have been. He could have broken a limb or worse. Drew made sure to check Miles's heart rate and listen to the sound of it beating, finding the experience oddly intimate instead of clinical. It was fast, but that was easily explainable. Harder to explain was the increase in Drew's own heart rate as he touched and examined Miles so closely.

Drew decided to clean and disinfect the various cuts and put a wrap on Miles's ankle for the night. He'd check him again in the morning. He knew Miles was watching him with those intense green eyes, but he avoided his gaze and focused on his injuries instead. Drew was embarrassed by his outburst and nervous now that he was in such close contact with Miles.

He had lit the oil lamps when they'd first arrived, but the soft glow didn't help soften their somber moods. He heated some water on the gas stove, grateful once again for the propane tank that didn't depend on the electrical service. Then Drew found some dry clothes for Miles and silently showed him the small bathroom so he could clean up.

Drew busied himself in the kitchen, prepping the water for tea and trying not to think about Miles stripping off his wet things in the warm glow of a lamp or the softness of Miles's skin under his fingers. His broken fingers that Miles had commented on. Drew winced. He could have handled that better. Hell, he could have handled everything better. But at least Miles was here and safe and maybe Drew could get over his nervousness.

When Miles finally shuffled stiffly out of the bathroom, Drew had poured the tea and had the mugs sitting on the table in the living room. He gestured for Miles to sit on the couch and picked up his own mug. The two men sat quietly, Miles on the couch and Drew sitting in a rocking chair, watching as the lightning show continued outside.

"I... uh, want to thank you." Miles's voice

was almost as rough sounding as Drew's when he finally broke the silence between them. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't gotten me out from under that mess."

Drew coughed and looked down at his tea, not seeing the hot liquid that helped to soothe the irritation of his throat, only his fingers, some of them splayed out and unable to fully bend as he held the mug gingerly in his palms.

"Want to apologize too," Miles doggedly continued despite Drew's inability to respond. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable there in the truck, you know... about your hands."

"No, it's fine," Drew said, meeting Miles's eyes for the first since the argument in the truck. "I'm sorry as well, for... yelling. I was worried. Kurt would've killed me if anything happened to you."

"Yeah, well...." Miles shrugged. "He's a worrier, he is."

Drew smiled quietly at Miles's words and then looked back down at his hands.

"Do they hurt?" Miles asked tentatively, seemingly afraid to upset or offend Drew with the question.

"What?" Drew looked up again. He knew in

this light it was impossible for Miles not to have caught a glimpse of the scar on his neck. "Not really. Not so much anymore."

"Can they... fix 'em?"

Drew hesitated. Better to get this all out in the open. "The doctors in Chicago, they want to try re-breaking them again. Want to see if they can clean up some of the damage to the ligaments and the like."

"Again?" Miles questioned. Drew knew by the way Miles looked at his scarred hands he was imagining the pain Drew must have endured.

"Twice already." Drew spoke to the storm outside rather than to Miles. It was easier. "There's been some improvement each time and I've adapted. I have a career of sorts; there's only a few things I can't manage." He looked up at Miles, his eyes dark and liquid as he confessed. "I'm afraid. What happens if I go through all of that again and I'm worse off than I am now?"

Miles stayed silent for a moment and Drew waited for a reaction to his unexpected openness. "That's right, you're a potter, Brenda told me. Did you make these?" Miles gestured to the mugs in their hands, and Drew welcomed the change in subject as a way to cover his emotional moment.

"Yeah."

"They're nice. Man-sized too. I'm not afraid I'm gonna break one."

Drew laughed, even though the action hurt his already strained throat. "Don't worry. I've broken several."

"Your thumbs still work then?"

"What?" Drew asked again, baffled by the question.

"You know, opposable thumbs? It's what separates us from the lower orders and all that. Where would a bloke be without opposable thumbs?"

Unable to think of anything but one use for opposable thumbs, Drew laughed a deep belly laugh that hadn't escaped him in ages. "Get some rest, Miles."

"Easier said than done, with that racket still going on out there."

They sat there in silence again, lost in their thoughts. But this time the silence was restful and Miles's eyes began to close. Drew stood up and reached over, taking the empty mug off Miles's lap.

"Let's get you to bed."

“Just throw me a blanket,” Miles murmured without opening his eyes. “I’m fine here.”

“You’ll be more comfortable on the bed. I’ll take the couch.” Drew leaned down and put his arm around Miles’s shoulders, effortlessly helping him up.

“I can’t kick you out of your bed.” Miles relaxed back against Drew’s supporting arm.

“I’ll just wake you up if you stay out here.” Drew smiled at the boneless way Miles leaned against him. “I’m up and down a lot in the night.”

“That’s right.” Miles sleepily let Drew stand him up and lead him into the other room. “I always see your light shining into the night when I’m looking for you.”

Drew put Miles in his bed, trying not to appreciate how right he looked there, and pulled the covers up around his shoulders as Miles settled against the pillow.

Miles watched for him?

Chapter Eleven

AFTER making sure Miles was resting comfortably, Drew moved tiredly through the cabin, blowing out most of the oil lamps he'd lit and straightening up the clutter they'd left behind. He put their mugs in the sink and picked up his medical bag, carrying it into the bathroom where he stopped for a moment, stunned.

Drew could only laugh at the state of the bathroom. Apparently neatness wasn't high on Miles's list when the man was tired. He would have thought Kurt had been there given the way clothes and towels were strewn over the small area.

From the look of the floor, Miles had managed to spill more of his wash water there than down the sink, and Drew wiped it up before he hung Miles's wet clothes over the tub and then picked up the damp towels. He took one of the towels, shrugged, and used it to roughly dry his own hair.

He wasn't sure what condition the cushion on

the rocker where he'd sat would be in, probably unsalvageable, but it didn't matter. He'd known Miles had been in shock; the fact the other man had never even noticed or commented on Drew's bedraggled and dripping condition spoke volumes. Recognizing it, Drew hadn't wanted to leave Miles alone, even for the short time it would have taken him to get dry.

Drew felt as stiff as Miles had looked earlier, and he knew it was the cold and exertion settling in. He heated more water and then stood shivering in the small bathroom as he struggled to peel off his wet clothing. It took him some time; he could ignore the way his fingers ached, he had enough practice at that. His hands were cramped and uncooperative.

Finally he was able to hang the soaked and dripping garments over the rod of the shower curtain where he'd hung Miles's. It gave him a strange feeling to see his pants next to Miles's; he hadn't realized how alone he'd been until he saw that small bit of hominess.

The water felt soothing to his various aches and he held the washcloth over his face for a moment, letting the heat seep in and relax him even further. Finally, he felt ready to take a look at the physical damage he'd incurred.

Both of them had been lucky. So very lucky, Drew thought as, ignoring the ones he couldn't reach, he covered the worst of his cuts with antibiotic cream before pulling on some sweatpants. He didn't bother with a shirt; he knew he wasn't going to get any sleep anyway and he might as well do some more work on his latest consignment. He peeked in on Miles again, pleased to see him deeply asleep, and then carried the oil lamp back into his studio.

Drew's mind still whirled with the events of the day, and he let his thoughts wander where they would as his fingers sought solace and relief from their painful cramping by digging into the stiff clay. The material warmed and softened as he worked. It never failed to soothe him, both mentally and physically, as the clay gradually became more pliable and malleable to his touch.

He was surprised at how peaceful he felt. The storm was still raging outside, but Drew didn't feel his usual anxiety at having someone in his space and that was a welcome relief. Miles had been rather matter of fact about his damaged hands and that made it easier for Drew to relax around him.

Drew's idle musings were interrupted. It was a feeling more than an actual noise that caught his attention. He looked at the clay in front of him,

amazed at how much time must have passed. Wiping his hands on a nearby cloth, he walked back into the living room searching for what had disturbed him, but everything looked fine.

He pushed the bedroom door slightly open and found the cause for his sudden unease. Miles was tossing and turning on the bed, undoubtedly reliving the tumultuous events of the night.

Not wanting to wake Miles but fearful he would hurt himself with his restless movements, Drew sat on the edge of the bed and hesitantly pushed the tousled hair off Miles's face. His skin was warm to the touch, but not enough to worry. Drew gently stroked one finger down the chiseled line of cheek and jaw, savoring the contrasting textures of smooth skin and rough bristle.

Miles seemed to settle under the caress of his hand and Drew continued to delicately map the surface beneath his fingers. He traced the curve of Miles's lips and then down under one ear, smiling as Miles exhaled and turned his head in his sleep, exposing more of his soft skin to Drew's exploring fingers.

The world around Drew seemed to shrink, closing in until there were only the two of them, warm and cocooned in this small circle of dark sensation. He learned the curve of Miles's neck,

felt the blood pulsing under the skin, the heartbeat strong and decisive.

Desire.

Drew could taste it, and his mouth grew dry. It had been so long since he'd enjoyed the simple and sensual feel of another's skin.

Suddenly Drew wanted more; he wanted to let his hands drift down to Miles's chest, tease at the small buds he knew he would find there and then explore even lower still.... With a curse, Drew stood, embarrassed to find himself pawing Miles as he slept.

Drew left the bedroom, full of agitation and unrest, and paced around the living room until he felt like he was choking. Finally he threw open the front door and stood there sucking in great gulps of air. The storm had settled down to a steady rain, leaving only a far-off rumble of thunder and the downed tree limbs around Drew's cabin as a reminder of its prior fury.

It wasn't his usual need to escape his memories that pushed Drew outside into the night. It was fear; fear and desire for the man even now sleeping in his bed. He had worked hard to make his life placid and uneventful after everything that had happened, and now Miles was forcing Drew to remember what it was like to feel.

Drew stood under the falling rain, his face upturned to the darkness of the night sky. He was confused about what to do next. He had let his fantasies about Miles continue because he had thought they were a diversion, an outlet with no chance of actual fulfillment. Now he seemed to have traded the security of unrequited want with the desperate uncertainty of reality.

MILES limped slowly back into the bedroom and gingerly lay back down. He wanted nothing more than to go to Drew as he stood outside like some primal warrior challenging the elements, but there was so much holding him back, including his own doubts.

He had awoken to feel callused fingers lightly stroking across his skin and it had taken everything he had not to reach out and touch Drew in return. Miles had continued to feign sleep, just wanting the moment and the sensation to go on.

Warm and comfortable now despite his injuries, Miles was able to appreciate the severity of the storm, and he was grateful that Drew had been looking for him. He could only imagine what

might have happened if he had stayed trapped in the small cabin.

Miles had just been playing around to pass the time. That's what he'd told himself: his fancies for Drew were nothing serious. But the imposing reality of Drew in the flesh was more intriguing than he ever would have thought, and Miles felt almost intimidated by the silent, dark, and bearded man.

He shivered even though he was under the covers. Miles could still feel the lines Drew had traced on his flesh, burning him with a fire he hadn't felt in years. Why had Drew done that? There had been such yearning in his touch. Such sadness. How was it Drew could communicate so much with a simple touch?

In the end, it was only Miles's utter exhaustion that finally brought his mind to a halt and let sleep claim him once again.

Chapter Twelve

THE next weeks seemed to fly by as Miles continued to stay with Drew. Arrangements had been made for the repairs to start on Kurt's cabin, but it would be a slow process as the rest of the county had been hit just as hard, and the local workmen had jobs scheduled for weeks. Unlike many other families whose homes were destroyed by the high winds and collateral damage, Miles had a place to stay and he found he was in no hurry to go back to living on his own.

Instead of visiting as planned, Kurt had agreed to fill in for a colleague on an overseas lecture circuit, and Miles had been unwilling to do more than leave a few messages, letting him know he was staying with Drew and everything was fine. The messages would catch up to him at some point, and Miles hoped it would be later, not sooner. Miles was surprised at the relief he felt at not having to deal with Kurt right now. He knew Kurt would swoop in and attempt to arrange

things, and things were, in Miles's considered opinion, just fine.

He was now a part of Drew's daily routine rather than an observer, able to look up at any moment and see the object of his interest whenever he pleased. After a few initially awkward moments things were going nicely, and Miles didn't want any disruptions, especially a Kurt-sized one.

Miles used his prior observations of Drew's routine to fit himself seamlessly into Drew's life, taking on small and varied tasks around the cabin as his ribs and ankle allowed, and they had settled into a surprisingly companionable co-existence that extended benefits to both of them.

There was now a telephone available to Miles, cable and internet as well, but he found his interest in the world outside the cabin had disappeared. Gone was the restless agitation that had plagued him, and he relished the intimate opportunities his and Drew's new closeness afforded. He greedily tucked each quiet moment between them into his memories as he learned more and more about the man he had watched for so long.

Drew wasn't much of a conversationalist; that

was definitely true. He and Miles had developed a form of abusive verbal shorthand that Brenda and the other locals found amusing to listen to. But Drew made up for it by expressing his silent concern for Miles in a variety of small ways, including leaving a steaming cup of coffee on the nightstand each morning and making sure Miles followed his diet and exercise program more closely than he had been doing on his own.

In return, Miles would notice when Drew's voice grew rough, his throat raw and painful; then Miles would set a cup of tea with honey beside his elbow as he worked. Or Miles would leave dinner warming in the oven for when Drew returned home late. It was easier for both of the men to make and accept these gestures without acknowledging them.

All in all, Miles only had two complaints. The first was that Drew hadn't sunbathed since Miles had moved into his cabin. Much to Miles's chagrin, he hadn't even managed to see Drew up close with his shirt off, and he missed the large expanse of honey-colored flesh he'd admired for so long. The second complaint Miles had was that Drew worked far too hard. He didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't the constant activity that surrounded Drew.

Even though he no longer did field work, Drew was still very active in the charitable organization that had cost him so much, mainly on the administrative end. Miles was surprised at the correspondence and amount of paperwork involved in the fundraising process, and was fascinated when Drew let him take over some of the computer work that he found frustrating.

There was also an open door at the cabin for those who sought Drew's medical skills, not just on the weekends as Miles had thought. It was interesting to see the variety of human ailments that found their way to be either looked at or referred off to the doctor in town.

At first, curiosity and a desire to be near Drew had kept him watching, but as the weeks passed, Drew let Miles wrap limbs and assist him with some of the patients that needed finer hand coordination than Drew could achieve. Miles wondered how Drew had managed on his own before.

The man hardly slept, Miles fretted to himself as he continued to add to what he was now calling his "Great Book of Drew." He worked all hours of the night in his studio, the gentle hum of the wheel a soothing background noise for Miles if he

awoke. If Drew wasn't working, he could be found outside, pacing in the night.

Miles would get out of bed and sit by the window, hidden in the shadows, watching as the darkness seemed to soothe Drew and the pacing slowed and then finally stopped and Drew would come back inside.

Miles would return to his bed then and pretend to be asleep. Because always, after Drew paced his fill in the dark night, he would return to the cabin and silently enter Miles's room. Miles would hold his breath with anticipation until the gentle touches came, stroking gently down his face and neck, soothing Miles with their softness even as they tortured him with the desire to reciprocate.

With a soft sigh, Drew would leave and Miles would flop over on to his back to stare up at the ceiling and wonder when he'd become such a coward, fearful of disturbing the delicate balance they had achieved.

Wanting, always the wanting.

But now it was different, stronger and gentler all at the same time. Drew was no longer a beautiful object to admire from afar; he was a man of depth and feeling who left Miles feeling better

just for having spent time with him.

THE morning sun streamed through the window, illuminating the tendrils of steam that rose from the cup of coffee on the nightstand beside Miles's head. Miles groaned and wiped his hand down his face. It had been a long night, full of thoughts and wonderings and wishes; he hadn't even noticed when Drew had brought in the coffee.

His mouth felt like something had died in it, and Miles swallowed some coffee before throwing back the covers and wandering out to the kitchen in his shorts, surprised to find Drew dressed in jeans and a long sleeve shirt on such a hot and humid day.

"What's this then?" he asked. As far as he knew, Drew hadn't slept last night and Miles had hoped to get him to rest in the garden as he'd done before, letting Drew doze while Miles puttered around with deliberate, lulling slowness.

Drew continued to put items in the backpacks he used to hold his medical supplies. It was obvious he'd planned to be gone before Miles was up and was dreading the grilling he knew would come now that he had been caught, even as he

smiled his good morning at Miles.

“I’ll probably be back late. Did you say you were going to work in the garden today?” His voice was still low, but it didn’t seem to hurt him so much to talk now. Having Miles around had forced him to speak more than he might have and Miles hoped it helped.

“Where will you be?” Miles prodded with a scowl as he ignored Drew’s attempt at evasion and slouched against the kitchen counter with his morning hair askew. He knew what Drew was up to, and they both knew it wouldn’t work.

Resistance was a waste of his time, Drew thought as he gave in and offered up the truth. Much to his amazement, he’d learned Miles was even more stubborn than he was. “I’m heading off to the back fields at the Winding Creek Farms. I heard some of the workers there are sick.”

Miles didn’t bother to ask how Drew knew this. He had learned there was an information web among the locals that put the MI-6 to shame.

“I’ll come and help.” Miles put down his coffee and headed back to his room. “Let me get dressed.”

“No,” Drew said sharply. “I’d rather you stay here.”

Miles turned back to face Drew, folding his arms across his chest and narrowing his eyes as he waited to hear more.

Drew sighed in exasperation. Having Miles living with him had turned into a constant battle of wills. At least it did as soon as Miles wasn't getting his way.

"These could be illegals."

Miles just continued to stare at Drew.

"There could be trouble. I'd rather you not be involved."

"But you'll be," Miles pointed out calmly. Drew couldn't help but feel flustered at Miles's attempts to look after him. He knew Drew wasn't used to explaining himself and it wasn't fair how Miles seemed to enjoy their small skirmishes.

"That's different." Drew looked down at his backpack and started counting to ten in his head as he tried to ignore Miles's piercing green eyes and his own desire to kiss the grin off the handsome face before him.

"I'll be dressed in five minutes." Miles unfolded his arms and walked off with a parting shot. "If you're gone, I'll just get directions from Brenda and follow you."

Chapter Thirteen

THE two men were silent the first part of the drive as the scenery changed from rolling coastline and heavy woods to open, flat fields. Miles finished his coffee, smirking slightly at his victory in the small skirmish. Drew was amused as well, enjoying Miles's not-so-hidden delight. It was a silly game, this battling between them over the littlest things, but a fun one.

Drew didn't know which he enjoyed more, coming out the victor and watching Miles sulk (an act he denied vehemently when Drew called him on it) or giving in and basking in the glow of satisfaction that Miles would radiate for hours afterward.

As he looked over at Miles, Drew couldn't believe how easily he fit into his life. It was almost scary. Drew was sure a personality as obstinate and abrasive as Miles could be would have left him crawling the walls and looking for a way out, but that wasn't the case at all. For the first time in

ages, Drew felt comfortable. There was someone there for him to look after, and someone there looking out for him.

Harder to deal with were the nights. So many times Drew told himself he wasn't going to enter Miles's room; he wasn't going to risk touching him as he slept or sit and watch him just breathe. But Drew couldn't seem to help himself: Miles was a drug. The more Drew interacted with him, the more he wanted.

"What's that in the fields?" Miles interrupted Drew's thoughts.

"Asparagus."

"Really?" Miles craned his neck to get a better look out the truck window at the waist-high, feathery growth in the field beside them. "Looks rather bare and spindly."

"Hard to see it from the road," Drew smiled. "We'll let you pick some fresh from the field, and you can make it for dinner tonight."

Miles shuddered. "Not a chance, mate. Triffids."

Drew waited a moment, slanting his hazel eyes in Miles's direction. He was getting used to Miles's conversational tangents. Sometimes he thought Miles did this just to keep him talking.

“Triffids.” Drew kept his tone flat and matter-of-fact.

“Yeah, asparagus looks just like Triffids. Not a chance I’ll ever eat one.” It was obvious Miles tried to hide his smile as he looked back out the window and waited for Drew to grab the dangling bait.

“So are you going to tell me just what a Triffid is?” Drew put more exasperation than he was feeling into his voice.

“You’ve never seen Day of the Triffids?” Miles asked in dismay. “Classic horror movie. There’s a meteor shower, see? Great special effects, shots of the meteors falling over Big Ben and the like. And there’s this military fellow in a London hospital, he’s been wounded and his eyes are bandaged. Well, everyone who watches the meteor shower ends up blind, and when he takes the bandages off he’s the only one that can see.”

“And this equals asparagus how?”

“The meteors are actually a way for these spores to travel to Earth.”

“Spores?” Drew played along a little more.

“Yeah, you know, spores. So they grow into these plant-like creatures. Only they can walk and they make this strange noise, kind of a constant

chatter. Scared the bejeezus out of me as a lad.”

“And?”

“They eat people. End of story. Man-eating Triffids terrorize the countryside. So, asparagus looks like Triffids, and I’ve never been able to eat ’em.”

Drew tried not to smile as he nodded his understanding. “Wouldn’t you be scoring a victory for us Earthlings if you would just eat the Triffid-resembling asparagus instead of waiting for them to kill us?”

It was Miles’s turn to cast green eyes in Drew’s direction and he sniffed. “See if I protect you when they rise up.”

Drew pulled the truck off the road, laughing as Miles’s coffee cup went flying out of his hands when the vehicle jounced its way through the deep ruts before stopping beside a large field. He ignored Miles’s offended glare.

Drew got out of the truck, stretched and then pulled out the packs and a long-sleeved cotton shirt which he tossed at Miles, who looked at it in obvious confusion as the temperature was hot enough without it.

“What’s this for?”

“Protection,” Drew replied.

“Doesn’t look like a rubber to me.” Miles countered with a playful retort. “You know, sentences of less than three words could be perceived as a lack of intelligence.”

“Fine,” Drew muttered, distracted by the heat in his groin at Miles’s teasing words. “It’s for your protection, to keep the pesticides off your skin.”

Miles beamed at him. “See, I knew you could do it.” The sarcasm that laced his voice was evident and Drew shook his fist at him, while Miles just stuck out his tongue, undeterred by the implied threat.

Miles pulled the shirt over his tee and shielded his eyes with one hand as he looked around. It was a huge and flat area with nothing but green stalks as far as he could see and a couple of portable toilets.

There were three or four tractor-type vehicles with strange covered extensions to each side that resembled the wings of an old bi-plane. Seated on the extensions were two or three people on each side, legs out in front of them and a small knife in their hands.

Miles watched as the tractor trundled its way through the long rows and the workers picked and

tossed the freshly cut stalks into the bins beside them.

“Not a faster way to do that?”

Drew shook his head. “It takes a trained eye to know what to harvest and what to leave for next time. Did you know that under the right conditions an asparagus plant can grow ten inches in twenty-four hours?”

“Like I told you, Triffids.”

Miles walked behind Drew through the field, watching as he greeted the Field Supervisor and they agreed upon an area for Drew to set up his impromptu clinic. There was a steady stream of workers, always careful to make sure there weren't too many off the field at one time. He found it soothing to watch Drew at work, his large hands moving with competence despite their damage.

Drew hardly spoke, just smiled and nodded and looked where dusty fingers pointed and pantomimed their ills. Miles had aided him enough by now to know what was needed and the two men worked as one efficient machine.

“Lots of rashes,” Miles observed, swabbing as Drew lanced a painful-looking boil from the back of a man's arm.

“That’s why I gave you the shirt. It’s mainly a reaction to the pesticides. Rashes and respiratory problems.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I wish I were,” Drew shook his head. “The farms have come a long way in their attempts to improve pest management and reduce the fungicide applications, but the risks are still high. There’s a local university that’s working on using spore traps to reduce the need for the pesticide spray programs, but it’s going to take a while for it to catch on.”

“Spores.” Miles nodded as if he’d known it all along.

Drew laughed as he knew Miles intended him to. “Well, if it will keep down the risk of birth defects and lung disease, I’m all for your Triffids.”

“Where do these workers come from?” Miles asked.

“The majority are registered migrants. They travel all through the U.S., from Mexico to the Upper Peninsula and then back again in a season. Some of these families have worked these farms for decades picking a variety of produce. The county provides lower-cost housing and schools for the children. It has one of the best migrant

service programs around, including health care.”

“So why are you here?” Miles looked up from where he was cleaning a scrape on a little girl’s leg; she couldn’t have been more than twelve and Miles passed his hand through her dark curls to soothe her.

“Some still don’t trust the service organizations,” Drew shrugged. “And some are illegals.”

“Do the farmers know that?” Miles wondered as he looked at the line of people before them.

Drew looked up, his eyes dark with knowledge. “It’s kind of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy.”

The two men worked until Drew’s bags of medicine and supplies were empty. Miles peeled off his last pair of latex gloves and put his hands on his lower back, groaning as he stretched.

“I told you it would probably be late.”

“You did at that.” Miles looked around at the gathering twilight with satisfaction. They had accomplished something today and it left him feeling better than making money ever had.

“You do good, here.” He touched Drew’s arm softly, proud of this complex man and the things

Drew had shown him.

Drew looked up in surprise at the unexpected touch, feeling the heat where Miles's hand rested on his sleeve.

"I just wanted to thank you," Miles said, "for letting me be a part of it."

Before Drew could react, Miles cleared his throat and turned away, picking up the bags and walking towards the truck.

"C'mon then," he called over his shoulder. "Hurry up or I'll let the Triffids get you."

Chapter Fourteen

HOT.

Miles was hot. Not only was he hot, but he was restless and couldn't manage to fall asleep to save his life. The air was heavy and sticky and—

Oh, who was he trying to kid?

Rolling over to stare at the ceiling, fighting the sheet that was clinging to his sweaty skin, Miles wondered why he was so determined to lie to himself. Over the last several weeks, things had changed for him in a fundamental manner. And he hated change.

Hell, if he was going to be honest, his life had been in flux since even before the heart attack. And what a catalyst for change that had been, he thought with a hint of gallows humor.

The result of this long and unexpected period of touchy-feely self-exploration, as Miles liked to think of it, had been the realization that there was something more out there, and he was damn tired

of being too afraid to reach out and grab it.

Granted, that was the purpose behind this whole “come stay at the cabin” thing, but Miles hadn’t actually expected anything to really come of it. He’d just thought he’d spend a few months in the sun, relax and get Kurt off his back.

The events of today, the satisfaction that he’d felt working so closely with Drew, only seemed to reinforce the conclusions he’d come up with. Now what to do about it? Miles listened for the familiar hum of the wheel from the back studio, audible over the classical guitar disc softly playing, indication that Drew wasn’t sleeping either.

Could he take the chance?

Miles pushed the sticky sheets away and grimaced as he slid off the bed. He was still a little stiff from the roof collapsing on him and working all day at the impromptu clinic hadn’t helped matters, but he couldn’t deny he’d been a lucky man. That was part of his realization. He’d survived a heart attack and a bloody cave-in, what was he so afraid of?

Rejection.

The word seemed to hang in the air heavier than the humidity. It conjured up past relationships, past heartache. Past failures. God

knows he'd never exactly been involved in what he would call a sure thing, but when Miles thought about it, did such an animal really exist? Life was a gamble and at least in the last several throws he'd done all right. Maybe it was time to take another?

He didn't know where to start on any of it—there was still so much he didn't know—but he knew he had to try. Shuffling his feet on the cool wood, Miles walked towards the back studio, drawn by the soft light, hesitant but hopeful. Things had come a long way between him and Drew and he really would like to see things go even farther. He stood outside the door and looked into the studio.

Drew was sitting at the stand, one leg rhythmically pumping as the wheel spun. His hands were agile despite their limitations, finding and coaxing his vision inside the clay to show itself. Dark hair gleamed as it waved down his back and Miles could only imagine how it would feel under his hands.

But it was the rest of Drew that made Miles draw his breath in sharply with awe and sudden sheer physical hunger. Drew had his shirt off. There he was, close enough for Miles to reach out and touch. Honey-gold skin flowing over the

flexing muscles of back and shoulder. Miles shifted uncomfortably, moving the seam of his shorts to the side as it pulled from the sudden force exerted upon it.

Bloody fucking hell.

He didn't know if his exclamation was a plea for help or a paean of thanks.

It didn't matter because Drew heard Miles's indrawn breath and, misunderstanding the reason the behind it, flinched. He fumbled for the plaid shirt he'd tossed aside in the heat and pulled it over his shoulders, hiding his back from Miles.

Miles made a guttural noise of protest, the sound coming from deep in his throat, deep from his soul.

"Just don't say anything, Miles," Drew whispered. His worst fears had come true. Miles had seen his back, and Drew had heard his reaction.

Miles stood there, stunned. Rejected before he even had a chance to say anything? Before he even took the risk and reached out? No fucking way!

Filled with purpose Miles entered the room—his sudden confidence fueled by endless nights of desire—striding forward as Drew stood. Miles

stopped mere inches away, his body vibrating with denied want as Drew looked at him with pain-darkened eyes.

“What do you mean, don’t say anything?” Miles burst out angrily to Drew’s surprise. “There’s a lot of bloody things I’d like to say to you.”

“I’m sorry, Miles,” Drew began in that low husky voice that always went straight to Miles’s gut. “I never wanted you to see the—”

Drew’s words were cut off as strong fingers grabbed his arms and jerked his body forward with sharp tug, and Miles’s tongue forced its way into his mouth. It was brutal and biting, a savage, frustrated invasion of lips and tongue and Drew couldn’t get enough of it.

One of Miles’s hands gripped the nape of Drew’s neck, trapping the hair and refusing to allow Drew to pull away. The other moved upwards to caress Drew’s neck as the intensity of the kiss softened and slowed, and Miles released his grip, pulling Drew’s forehead down to rest against his.

“Christ,” Miles groaned again as he tried to catch his breath. “You’re going to be the death of me yet.”

Drew was speechless, his hand coming up to touch his bruised lips in wonder. He thought he'd prepared himself for every reaction he could dream of from Miles. But not this, never this.

"I don't know which is going to blow up first," Miles uttered possessively as he watched Drew's hand move over his lips. "My heart or my cock."

"What?" Drew gasped as Miles's eyes narrowed with lustful purpose.

"You're a cardiologist, right?" Miles murmured as he leaned in and began to nuzzle Drew under his right ear. Miles's teeth caught and worried at the warm skin, licking and tasting the line of scar tissue and causing pinpricks of gooseflesh to rise on Drew's arms. "You'll know what to do when you give me another heart attack."

Miles shoved the shirt partially off Drew's shoulders, trapping his arms and pinning them behind his back before bringing his teeth to the sharp jut of collarbone before him. Drew gasped and shuddered in response.

Drew was adrift in a world of sensation. It had been so long since he had wanted the touch of another, and despite his initial surprise Miles felt

so very good. Miles rubbed against Drew's thigh, grunting as he continued to lick his way across Drew's broad expanse of chest. Every nerve in Drew's body was tuned to Miles and he felt overwhelmed, dazed by his physical presence.

He let Miles push him back against the wall, pressing against him with obvious desire. Drew wanted to reach out to Miles and reciprocate, but could only close his eyes and let Miles's sudden passion spend itself on his willing body. He would take this; he would make it a memory to warm him on all the cold and lonely nights ahead.

Hands opened his jeans, reaching in and possessing the hard length within. It was Drew's turn to moan as his hips hitched helplessly against Miles's knowing grasp, legs instinctively splaying open as he sought deeper contact.

Hot. Miles was on fire where his skin melded against Drew's bare chest. His heart was pounding, pulse beating, vision blinded by the sweat that dripped from his forehead. Good Christ, this was going to kill him.

He tightened his grip on the molten steel in his hand and listened to Drew's breathy moans. It didn't matter that the lights were on or that the music had stopped. The two men were trapped in

a world where nothing existed except the feel of the other.

“God,” Miles muttered as he shoved his shorts down and grabbed his own cock, thrusting it into his hand alongside Drew’s, feeling the slick, the stroke and glide as he mindlessly drove them both to satisfaction.

He returned to Drew’s mouth once again as they panted in unison, and Miles teetered on the edge of release. He was afraid to let go, it had been so long, but he was more afraid to stop. In the end, it was Drew’s broken and helpless moans and the gushing heat in his hand that sent Miles plunging headlong into delirium.

Miles buried his face in Drew’s shoulder, shaking with the intensity of his release, inhaling the scent of sweat and savoring the salty taste, unwilling to move, but knowing he had to. He finally pushed himself away, ashamed to realize that Drew’s arms were still caught in his shirt.

“Are you all right?” Miles asked as he freed Drew, removing the shirt and using it to wipe them both off before he hoisted the other man’s jeans back up, concerned at Drew’s unexpected docility. “Did I hurt you?”

“You expect me to be able to talk after that?”

Drew continued to lean against the wall with his eyes closed, looking to Miles's satisfied eyes like his brain was still too short-circuited by their flare of passion to make any sense.

Miles was exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. His legs were trembling and he was lightheaded. Christ, he thought. I lived. All that bloody time I could have spent wanking. He was unwilling to lose his new connection with Drew and he pulled the unresisting man into the other room, pushing him down on the bed.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Miles asked again, running a gentle hand down Drew's back, unable to keep from placing soft kisses on the scarred shoulder blade before him and enjoying Drew's inarticulate sounds of response.

"They don't bother you?" Drew whispered in a quiet voice.

Miles blinked in surprise. "What?" he responded blankly before he realized what Drew was asking. "Oh, your scars, you mean? We all have scars, Drew." Miles picked up Drew's hand and ran the long fingers down the line that zippered his own chest.

"Some inside, some outside. Some of them are of our own making. Yours should be worn with

pride.”

Drew heard the words, but it was the tone, the complete and utter surprise in Miles’s voice that brought him hope.

Miles pressed another kiss to Drew’s back and snuggled closer, letting his fingers trace over the marks on Drew’s back as he whispered into Drew’s ear.

“When I was a wee lad, my Mam despaired of me. All the other kids slept with a plushie. But I would only be able to settle if I held my football. There was something about the pattern, the seams, that soothed me. When I held it in my arms, everything would all make sense then.”

Drew’s hopes rose even higher; he was unsure if it was the gentle touches or the surprisingly poetic words. “You’re saying I resemble a soccer ball, then?” Somehow he managed to keep his voice light and teasing.

Miles smiled with pleasure and pressed another kiss against Drew’s back. There was so much for them to talk about... later.

“I’m saying you bloody well near killed me, and I need to sleep. So lie here with me and let me take comfort from you.”

Drew exhaled, feeling truly at peace for the

first time in years as he let himself settle back against Miles. As his breathing slowed, he wondered if Miles knew that instead of taking comfort, the other man was giving it.

Chapter Fifteen

DREW stirred, feeling the warmth of Miles's body where it tucked up behind him. He felt both restless and at peace all at the same time, full but somehow empty of the burdens he had carried for so long. He moved Miles's arm carefully off his waist, not wanting to wake the sleeping man, and edged his way off the bed, smiling down at the sight of Miles's face buried in the pillow, his blond hair awry. Drew resisted the urge to touch and walked stiffly into the living room.

It was early yet, the morning light just starting to creep across the lake and in his windows, and he enjoyed the feel of the cool breeze on his skin after last night's stifling heat. Drew stretched and twisted, working the stiffness out of his body.

Last night.

More than Drew had imagined. More than he had dreamed of. Always before when someone had gotten too close to him physically, he would

panic. Against his will, painful memories would flood his mind and body and he would react... badly. He'd stopped putting himself in that position after a while. It was part of why he'd withdrawn from the world.

There had been a few moments last night when, blinded by the intensity of Miles's overwhelming need, Drew had been afraid the same thing would happen again. But the now-familiar feel and smell of everything that was so utterly Miles had soothed him, and the unsated desire had its chance to push the memories away.

It wasn't going to be that easy, not by a long shot; Drew knew that. But it was a start. And it was more than he'd been able to hope for in a very long time.

Drew heard the pad of footsteps behind him and smiled as strong arms curved around his chest to rest against his waist, lean fingers pressing into his hips and pulling him back against the warm body behind him.

Stubble grazed the back of his neck, raising goose bumps, and Drew shivered once again as he realized that even in the brightening light of day he didn't want to hide his scars from this man any longer.

“Good morning.” Miles’s voice was rough and deep. “You okay?”

“Good morning,” Drew replied as he turned to face Miles. He raised his hand and, ignoring his stiff fingers, caressed the cheek that had moments before pressed against his shoulder.

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“Top of the world.” Miles turned his head, pressing his lips to the palm that touched him so tenderly. “Will we... can I...” He broke off nervously; he’d been afraid he’d hurt Drew or scared him off when he’d woken up alone, and he wasn’t sure how to proceed, even though Drew’s response was giving him hope.

“Hmmm?” Drew’s eyes closed and he swayed slightly in Miles’s arms.

“Are we okay? Is this okay?”

The dark eyes opened and Miles held his breath as they stared into his searchingly.

“What do you want here, Miles?”

Green eyes dropped for a moment before lifting again, letting himself be seen naked and honest for the first time in ages. “We’ve started something, yeah? I’d like a chance to see where it goes.”

Drew nodded, smiling as the words echoed his thoughts. "It's a beginning." His smile faltered. "I don't know what I can...."

Miles tightened his arms around Drew, feeling both the strength and vulnerability that called to him in so many ways. "We'll figure it out. We'll figure it out together."

Drew let his head drop onto Miles's shoulder, feeling truly free for the first time in years before he groaned. "God, I'm never going to hear the end of this from Kurt."

The joke in CHRISSY MUNDER's family is that she was born with a book in her hand. Even now, you'll never find her without a book or seven scattered about. Forced to become a practicing realist in an effort to combat her tendency to dream, her many years of travel and a diverse assortment of careers have taken her across most of the United States and shown her that there are two things you can never have enough of: love and laughter.

Visit her web site at <http://www.chrissymunder.com/> and her blog at <http://chrissymunder.livejournal.com/>.

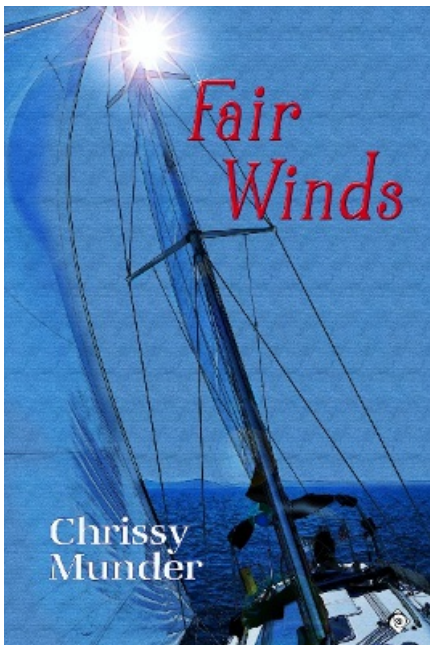
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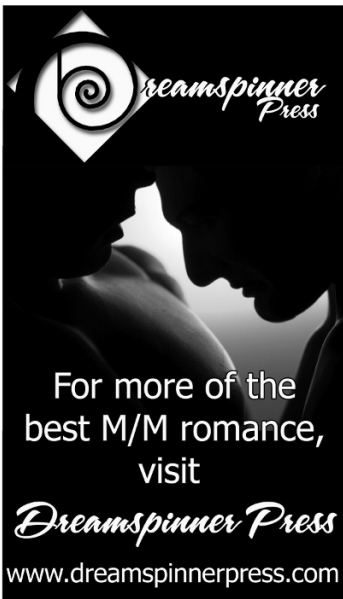


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