



Loose Id

JESSICA FREELY

HERO

Hero

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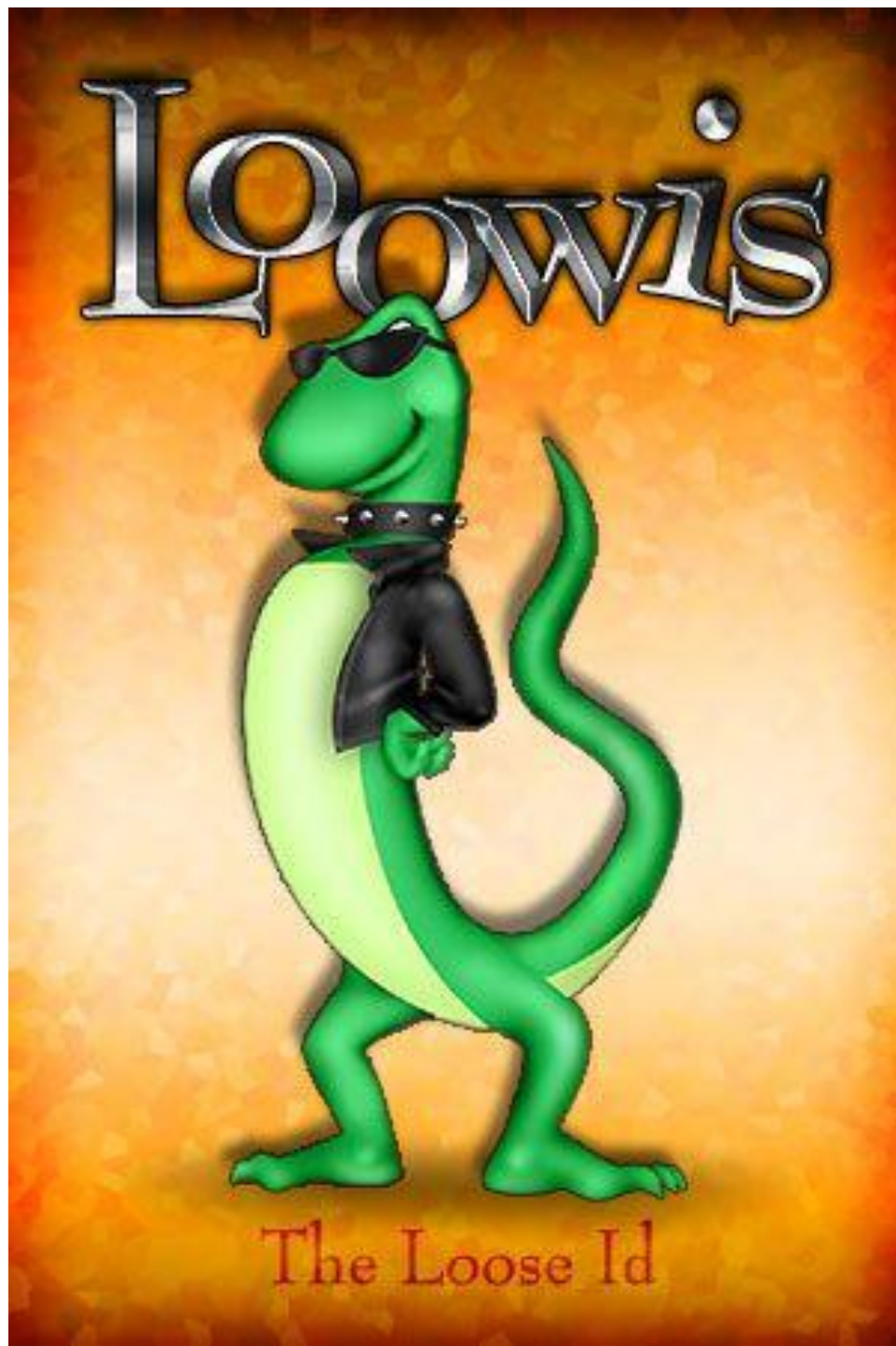
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Chapter One

It was ten p.m., time for David to close up the Haverstock Bookshop and go home. He set aside the book he'd been reading—*Scaramouche* by Rafael Sabatini. It was a daring tale of swordplay and romance—without a doubt the most exciting thing in his life. He took a quick tour of the closely spaced shelves in the tiny shop, replacing a few books left on the floor by careless customers. Another day had come and gone, and still here he was, alone and preparing to go home to an empty apartment. Nothing more to look forward to than another book, a hot shower, and maybe a jack-off session while he imagined *Scaramouche* fucking him senseless.

It wasn't that he hated his job, he thought as he emptied the till, locked the money in the cash box, and locked the box in the safe. The shop was a pleasant enough place to work, and Mr. Haverstock mostly left him to his own devices. It was just that he was so damn lonely. Lonely and bored.

Nothing ever happened to him.

David shut the lights off, stepped out into the night, and locked the door behind him. It was November, and the weather had turned cold and damp. He zipped his battered leather jacket and turned the collar up against the cold.

The Haverstock Bookshop was located in a quaint, pedestrian business district surrounded by not-so-quaint industrial wasteland. Times were tough in the Rust Belt. Across the street, a shabby figure in an old army coat rummaged through a trash can. David felt a pang of sympathy. Here he was feeling sorry for himself. At least he had a home, a job, a paycheck. So he was lonely. Boohoo.

The guy in the army coat looked up, and David quickened his pace. He'd seen that guy before. David had given him some leftovers from the Thai place down the

street once. He wished he had something for him now, but he was down to his last dollar. Tomorrow was payday.

As David left the relative light and prosperity of the business district and started across the parking lot of a defunct factory, he heard footsteps behind him. Was it the army-coat guy?

Suddenly fearful, David looked behind him. No. Not the army-coat guy.

Three guys. Walking fast. Shoulders stiff and faces tense. Heads shaved. Gang members. All three of them stared at him, eyes intent. *Oh fuck*. Sweat broke out on David's palms, and he walked faster.

What had he been thinking? Nothing ever happened to him? That was a *good* thing. Why hadn't he appreciated that?

Behind him, he heard the three guys break into a run. *Shit*. David took off.

He made it all the way across the debris-strewn parking lot of the former Great Lakes Stamping Plant before they caught up with him. One of them—a dude almost as short and skinny as he was—grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. Another, a heavily muscled guy wearing a Detroit Lions jersey, shoved him up against the semidemolished wall of the factory. David's head hit the cinder block with a *thunk*. Sharp pain exploded at the back of his skull. He blinked, trying to focus. A hollow ache echoed through his brain.

A diamond thumb ring caught the light as the third dude punched him in the stomach. It felt like a sword thrust cutting his guts to ribbons. He doubled over in agony. When he opened his eyes again, he was looking at the blade of a knife, way too close to his face.

"Your money, bitch."

He was so not a hero. David's hands shook as he got his wallet out and handed it over. The blade was still there, hovering in front of his eyes. He couldn't stop staring at it. It was long and sharp—a hunting knife with an imitation horn handle. Jesus. Whatever happened to switchblades?

“Fuck, what is this bullshit? That all you got? One dollar?”

“Motherfuck!”

“Bitch, you better have a fifty in your shoe.”

David swallowed. Shook his head. “I...I don’t.”

“That’s too bad for you, bitch. Take off your pants.”

Huh? David blinked at them. “W-what?”

The one holding the knife stepped so close that David could smell his breath—alcohol and that sickly sweet artificial cherry flavoring. What in the fuck had this guy been drinking? He had a tattoo of a roaring lion on the side of his shaved head. He pressed the knife into David’s cheek. “I said, take off your pants, you penniless wretched bitch.”

“Penniless wretched bitch.” Some part of David’s mind that had stepped back from what was going on thought that was hilarious. He couldn’t help it. He laughed.

“You think this is fucking funny? Wait’ll we’re through with you. You’ll be dying of laughter. Now get your pants down, bitch. We haven’t got all night.”

“Yeah, you ain’t got no money, you gotta pay with ass,” said one of the others.

That snapped David back to reality in a hurry. *Ass? Oh no. Nonononono.* He was... He’d known he liked guys since he was eight, but he’d never even had a boyfriend. Never done much more than anonymous handjobs in the back room of the local gay bar, the very few times he’d gotten up the guts to go there. What on earth had he been waiting for—this? No. He tried to shake his head. The knife bit into his cheek with a sharp sting, and he went still again.

“Enough of this.” The guy with the knife pulled it away and dealt David a backhanded blow across the jaw. Bright pain blossomed from the impact, and David tasted blood. He staggered to one side. The next thing he knew, he was on his hands and knees, two of the guys holding him down as the third one undid his jeans and yanked them down, dragging his underwear along with them. The damp air was

cold on his skin. Someone shoved his head down, grinding the cut on his cheek against the rough, wet pavement.

“No!” David struggled against the hands that held him down. But he couldn’t get free. He heard the sound of a zipper opening. Rough hands grabbed him and spread his ass cheeks. *Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck*.

A scream pierced David’s terror-numbed mind. But it wasn’t his. Then who— Suddenly the hands released him. Shouts and screams echoed off the half-demolished walls of the factory, and still none of them were his. David stumbled to his feet and hauled up his jeans. He turned to see the guy with the knife lying on the ground, the side of his head all red and squishy. No more lion tattoo. The other two guys ran as if their feet were on fire.

That just left him and the homeless guy in the army jacket. He loomed over David, holding a four-foot length of iron pipe.

David hadn’t realized how tall the man was before. He was tall. And big and shaggy. Long dark hair and dark beard and wild blue eyes. He was fucking terrifying, and he was the most welcome sight David had ever seen.

“Thanks,” David said. It seemed entirely inadequate.

The guy shrugged. “Thanks for the Thai noodles. They were good.” His voice was deep, smoky. They stared at each other in silence a moment longer. “You okay?”

David realized he was shaking. His face hurt. His stomach hurt. No. He wasn’t okay, but it could have been worse. A lot worse. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

The homeless guy nodded, then looked down at the man who’d had the knife. He was dead. The homeless guy had killed him. “I’m gonna go now,” he said, and he dropped the pipe and started walking away.

David retrieved his wallet from the ground nearby. He was shaking so bad he could barely get it stuffed back into his back pocket. *Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck*. He took one more look at the dead guy and then at the retreating figure of his savior. Was he really going to let him just go off to sleep under the freeway

overpass? In his mind, Scaramouche shook his head in mute disgust. No. He might not be a hero, but he didn't have to be a wretched bitch either.

"Wait!"

The guy turned, and David ran to catch up to him. "Let me thank you properly," he said. "Come to my place. I'll feed you. You can get a shower, and you can sleep there tonight."

What the fuck was he doing? This guy had just killed another man with an iron pipe, and he was taking him home? He was homeless. He might be unstable. It wasn't a wise move.

Fuck that. David was tired of just reading about heroes.

The guy stared at him. "You don't have to do that. I'll walk you home if you want, but you don't have to have me in. I understand."

Did David want this guy with him because he was scared? Fuck yes. But that wasn't all. "Come on. At least let me feed you. I'm David, by the way." He held out his hand.

The guy gave him a long, measuring look, and finally he smiled, suddenly looking a lot younger and a lot less scary. "I'm Seth." He took David's hand, and they shook. His grip was strong but gentle.

"Come on," said David, and he started for home. Seth hesitated a moment, then followed him.

Chapter Two

David had never been so happy to return to his tiny apartment. It was warm and bright and wonderful. There wasn't much to it: a kitchen, a bathroom with a rust-stained, claw-foot bathtub, a living room lined with bookshelves, and a bedroom lined with more bookshelves. And now, a huge stranger rapidly filling the place with the smell of damp homeless guy.

Seth stood in the middle of the living room, staring at all the books, turning in a slow circle as he took them all in. "So, you like to read, huh?"

David nodded. "They keep me company." His heart pounded high in his chest, but he couldn't tell if it was from his near escape, thanks to Seth, or the fact that a guy was dead, thanks to Seth, or just thanks to Seth.

They stood there staring at each other in silence. In the light, Seth turned out to be really dirty. And he was too thin for his frame. But his eyes were this impossible blue. David swallowed, and his guest shifted uncomfortably.

"Can I take a shower?"

For a moment David was in the shower with Seth, the hot water running over both of their bodies, the dirt dissolving from Seth's skin, which turned out to be smooth and soft, pink with the heat of the water. Seth kissed him and pulled him close. His erection, hard and wet, pressed against David's belly, and David...

David blinked, shoved his fists in his pockets, and leaned forward, doing his best to hide his burgeoning erection. Seth was watching him. He couldn't make out the look in Seth's eyes, but suddenly he was having trouble breathing. "This way," he said, his voice thick, and led the way down the hall to the bathroom.

“The towels are on the rack.” David opened the door, not looking at Seth. “Leave your clothes outside the door, and I’ll throw them in the wash. There’s a laundry room downstairs.”

“Thanks,” said Seth, and David hazarded a glance up, catching those eyes full force. *Jesus.*

After throwing Seth’s clothes in the wash, David rummaged through his closet, looking for something for Seth to wear. He pulled out his royal blue terry cloth bathrobe. It was oversize on him, which meant it might just barely fit Seth, but it was the best he could do. He took it to the bathroom. The door was open a crack. David nudged it open and stepped inside to put the robe on top of the toilet seat. The room was filled with steam. On the other side of the semitranslucent plastic shower curtain, he could see Seth washing. David watched, transfixed by the murky hints of a broad back, tight abdomen, round ass, powerful legs. From the angle of his arms, Seth was washing his cock.

He should go.

Then David heard a moan, deep and husky.

God. He had to go.

Seth’s head fell back, and another intoxicating moan escaped.

Oh God. You’d think that almost getting raped would slow a guy down, but apparently not. David felt like his cock was going to burst right through the zipper of his jeans. He was hard as a rock and so close to coming that—

“Mmnuuuhhh.” Seth’s smoky voice rumbled right through David’s balls. David pressed a hand to the front of his jeans. His balls were clenched so tight he was surprised he could swallow. Seth arched his back. “Aaaaaah!” That voice. David palmed his cock once and—God, he was a pervert!—tumbled right over into sweet release, toes curling, head reeling, cum gushing all over the inside of his jeans.

What was wrong with him? David wondered moments later as he threw the steak in the microwave. He’d brought Seth back here to thank him for the rescue, not spy on him in the shower. Appalled with himself, David heated the frying pan

and got out the eggs, determined that Seth would at least get a decent meal out of this increasingly murky arrangement.

The floor creaked behind him, and he turned to see Seth standing in the doorway of the kitchen dressed in the blue bathrobe, looking uncertain. David swallowed.

With the grime washed away, Seth was beautiful, his skin smooth and pale. His long, damp, dark hair clung to his forehead and his neck. He'd shaved off his beard, revealing high cheekbones and a long jaw. His nose was strong, curved just a little in the middle, and his wide mouth was generous. He looked, in fact, a lot like David had always imagined Scaramouche. *Oh brother.*

"Have a seat," said David, forcing himself to stop gaping. "Dinner'll be ready in a second."

"Thanks for this. The shower, the meal. It's really nice of you."

"Well, it was nice of you to save me from being raped." Suddenly David flashed on those guys, on their hands holding him down. *Fuck.* That had really happened. What an amazing job he'd been doing of just forgetting all that entirely. But now he remembered. *Shit.*

David tried to focus on making the eggs. He picked one up out of the carton, but his hand shook. He tried to hit it against the side of the frying pan, but he fucked it up. He smashed the shell down too hard and the egg splattered half into the pan and half on the stove. *Fuck.*

"David," said Seth behind him. David turned and saw him standing by the table.

Seth had killed that guy, the one who had almost raped him. But David wasn't afraid of Seth. No, that wasn't how he felt at all.

Slowly Seth came forward and took the eggs. He set them down on the counter and very slowly, giving David every opportunity to back away, lifted one hand to David's cheek. David couldn't move. He was mesmerized by Seth's eyes, looking at

him so tenderly. His thumb caressed David's cheek, and David felt a twinge of pain. He gasped.

The cut. They'd cut him. How had he managed to forget that? How was it he only felt it now that Seth was touching it? He drew in a deep breath. He hadn't even looked in the mirror. "How bad is it?" he asked.

Seth shook his head. "Not bad at all. A shallow scratch. But if you have any antibiotic ointment, you might want to put some on it."

David nodded and reached into the cabinet over the sink where he kept his first-aid stuff. He got out the ointment. He started unscrewing the cap, but his hands were still shaking, and he dropped the thing.

"Goddamn it!" Sudden irrational anger boiled up inside him. Dropping a tube of ointment was grounds for rage now. He was losing it.

"Let me do that," said Seth. "Here, sit down." Gently, he guided David to one of the kitchen chairs. He picked up the ointment and then knelt between David's knees. He squeezed a dollop onto his finger. "Here." He carefully dabbed the stuff over David's cut. It felt good. Soothing, like Seth's calm gaze. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

David swallowed. It had happened. But he was okay. And now here he was with Seth, and Seth was... David wanted to reach out and run his hand through Seth's hair. Still damp, it looked so silky and dark. He could get lost in it. And why the fuck shouldn't he? Things were going to happen by chance no matter what he did; tonight proved that. He might as well take a few chances of his own.

Just as David was about to lift his hand, the microwave dinged, and Seth stood up. "I can cook, if you want," said Seth.

David found he was no longer shaking. Disappointed, but no longer shaking. "It's okay. I can do it."

David set a steaming plate of steak and eggs in front of Seth and watched as he fell upon it like the starving man he undoubtedly was. Seth shoveled up the food and crammed it in his mouth, closing his eyes and moaning with pleasure. His head rolled back on his shoulders just like it had when he was in the shower. David blushed at the memory.

Seth engulfed another huge mouthful, chewing fast. He was going to make himself sick if he kept that up.

“Hey,” said David, daring to put his hands on the other man’s shoulders. Seth flinched at first and then settled, leaned back into the touch. “Take it easy. You’ll throw up if you go too fast.”

Seth nodded.

David let go of his inhibitions and stroked his shoulders, hoping to soothe Seth as he had soothed David earlier. “It’s okay. You’ve got all the time in the world.”

Seth tilted his head back again and stared at David with wonder in his eyes. He took another bite and chewed it slowly. With regret, David let go of him, got his own plate, and sat at the table across from him.

“It’s good,” Seth said around a mouthful.

“Thanks.”

“You’re the nicest person I’ve ever met.”

What was he supposed to say to that? “Thank you.”

Chapter Three

They finished the rest of their meal in silence. Afterward Seth insisted on doing the dishes, and David went down to the laundry room to put the clothes in the dryer. Coming back to the apartment, David felt good knowing someone was there, waiting for him. He came in, and Seth was at the sink, drying the last of the dishes. The sight of him standing there in that too-short bathrobe, dish towel in hand, made David want to break out like a man and propose on the spot.

What an idiot he was. Seth might be a decent guy, and he was certainly handy in a fight, but he was probably straight. No doubt David could buy his sexual favors in exchange for meals and a place to sleep, but was that what he really wanted?

No. But he didn't trust himself to turn down the arrangement if it was all he could get. And what was he going to do tomorrow when it was time to go to work? Turn Seth out on the street again?

Seth put the last dish away and came over to where David stood staring. He liked being close to Seth. He could feel Seth's body heat. He couldn't help it—he leaned toward him. He looked up at Seth. Seth looked down at him.

"You like guys, right?" said Seth.

A little fizzle of panic ran from David's heart to his head. Was it that obvious? Apparently. That or Seth had special mind powers. Either way David was lost. All he could do was nod, his head reeling with Seth's proximity, the warmth of his body, the heady aroma of his genuine smell.

"But you're the kind of person who'd turn down a sure thing if he thought the other person was doing it for an ulterior motive," said Seth. "Like food. Or shelter—"

“Or if I was just grateful to a rescuer and wanted to thank him,” added David, because there was that, and how could he be certain that wasn’t part of what he was feeling?

“And that would be a shame, because chances to feel pleasure don’t come around all that often, and I’d really like to—” Seth stopped. “Oh. Right. Duh. You were just attacked. It’s too soon. You can’t... Sorry. Of course. No.”

Nononononono. “No. That’s not what I meant. I mean. I am. I am grateful. And I don’t care what happened. They didn’t—I’m fine. Fine enough, anyway. I’d rather—When they had me on the ground and I thought”—the words tumbled out of him in an unstoppable flood, and he sounded like an idiot, but he couldn’t stop—“I thought they were going to rape me, it would’ve...it would’ve been my first time, and I was so mad because I’ve never even had a boyfriend before and I’ve done almost nothing and that was almost my first time and that would have been...” God, he was hysterical.

Seth put his arms around David, tentatively at first, but when David sank gratefully into his embrace, he held on tight. He rested his lips against David’s head. The gentle pressure made David’s scalp tingle. “That would have been horrible, and I’m so glad I heard you yelling.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I’m sick and tired of waiting. I almost missed my chance.” He swallowed and looked up into Seth’s eyes. He felt like he could fall into them forever. He was hard again, but it was different this time. Patient. “I don’t want your gratitude. I just want you.”

Seth lowered his head and pressed his lips to David’s. His lips were soft, every bit as inviting as they looked. Wanting more, David opened his mouth. Seth’s big hands splayed across David’s back, possessing him. He slipped his tongue past David’s lips and laved his mouth. The hot slide of his tongue sent shivers running through David’s body. David wrapped his arms around Seth’s neck and hung on for dear life. Seth gave a low groan, and the sound made David’s cock pulse.

Seth's erection pressed into his belly. David's heart raced. He shifted so his cock was against that long, muscular thigh. The contact filled him with a sweet ache, and he started flexing his hips, seeking more friction.

Hungry, he claimed Seth's mouth, driving his tongue inside and pressing his lips hard against Seth's as if he could devour him whole. Seth lifted him up, and he straddled Seth's hips. Their cocks met with an electric jolt that set every nerve in his body on fire. Close. He was already so close.

Seth carried him to the couch and tipped him onto it. David kept his arms clamped around Seth's neck and pulled him along. Seth's big body covered his. God, Seth was magnificent. So strong and broad. David at last let go of Seth's neck and ran his hands up and down Seth's chest. He explored the smooth skin, the smattering of hair between Seth's pecs.

A line of hair trailed down Seth's belly to his—*good God*—his mammoth cock. David swallowed. It was so beautiful. Huge, hard, and already sporting a drop of precum on the tip. He touched it. It was hot and velvety. David's mouth watered, and somewhere deep inside him, a nerve pulsed in need. His whole body thrummed, taut as a plucked string.

David stroked the shaft. Seth's eyes rolled back in his head, and he made another one of those wonderful moans. "D-David," he said in that husky, smoky voice of his. David's shirt was rucked up around his armpits, and Seth began to rock his hips, grazing David's belly with his cock and leaving cool trails of precum on his heated skin.

Seth reached down and undid David's jeans.

David didn't think he could get harder than he already was, but when Seth's cock brushed against his, he did. He was on fire. He could come at any moment, from one more touch, a breeze, anything. He moved his hands to Seth's chest, circling the raised nubs of his nipples. Seth whimpered, panted, and bucked again, his cock sliding along the length of David's rigid shaft. *Oh God*. He arched up. He latched onto one of Seth's dark brown nipples and sucked.

The movement pushed his cock harder against Seth's erection. The sweaty, steamy friction made David's toes curl. Seth slipped his hands beneath David and cupped his ass, holding him tight.

It was too much. It was everything. David's mind went blank. His balls drew up, and he shot jets of hot cum. Seth captured his mouth and kissed him ruthlessly. Seth bucked against him, hard and fast, then stilled and sprayed an ocean of cum all over David's belly.

They clung to each other through the aftershocks, little pinpricks of delight, little whimpers. Cum sealed their bodies together. Seth was heavy on top of him, wonderful. David never wanted to move. Seth wrapped his arms around David's shoulders and held on tight. With a shock, David realized Seth was shaking. Not with aftershocks now. No. *What the—*

Seth kissed his cheek, then whispered, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." He buried his face in the crook of David's neck. David felt Seth's jaw working, still repeating the words, though they were muffled between their bodies. His neck felt wet. *Oh. Oh...*

David swallowed against his own rising tears. He put his arms around Seth and held him. "Okay," he said. "It's okay now. I've got you. You're okay." And Seth was okay, or would be, he decided. Yes. Seth belonged with him now. He'd take care of him. There wasn't going to be any good-bye tomorrow. There was no way. Seth was staying. Somehow.

Seth sniffed and shuddered. "I'm sorry. It's just been so long since I touched anybody..."

"Yeah, me too." David stroked Seth's back and felt something strange there, raised bumps of flesh. Scars? David ran his hands up and down Seth's back, stroking and soothing. The bumps were everywhere—raised, slick lines. Well, that was a story for another time. Right now he had something important to tell Seth. He bent his head to kiss the top of Seth's still-damp head. "Hey, Seth. Look at me a sec, okay?"

Seth obeyed him, looking up at him with tear-spangled blue eyes, devastating in their vulnerability.

“I want you to stay here with me, Seth. Not just for tonight. For good.”

Seth stared at him, mouth opening and closing a moment. He gave a little shake of his head. “That’s not... I wasn’t trying to get you to... You don’t have to do that.”

“Please,” said David. “Please stay with me. Let’s not either of us be alone anymore.”

Seth swallowed. He stared into David’s eyes, searching. At last he nodded. “Okay.” He shivered.

David held him closer, but it was no use. The bathrobe had come off somehow, at some point, and there was no way he could keep Seth warm with his meager arms. “I have a bed,” he said.

Seth rested his head on David’s shoulder and peered up at him, smiling.

That. Now that was what David wanted to see more of. That sweet, goofy smile.

“A bed?”

David nodded. “Would you like to see it?”

Seth heaved himself up onto his hands and knees and hovered over David, staring down. His grin grew wider. “Yes. Show me your bed, David.”

Chapter Four

It was just a mattress on the floor, but it was paradise with Seth in it. The first urgency of their horniness past them, they could take their time exploring each other's bodies. Seth delighted in David's freckles, making a game of kissing each and every one of them. David squirmed and giggled under the barrage of hot, wet smacks.

"I love it when you laugh," Seth told him, lying beside him propped on one elbow, the blanket draped over his hip.

"I love it when you smile," said David. "And your voice. Your voice is so hot."

Seth looked surprised. "My voice? Hmm..."

David attacked him. He kissed Seth hard on the lips and then rolled him onto his back. He showered Seth's neck with kisses and then moved on to his collarbone. God, his collarbone. Seth had one of those broad, flat torsos crowned with a beautiful curving clavicle. He was perfect. Well, almost. Too thin, but they'd change that.

David nuzzled the little patch of dark hair between Seth's pecs and then worked his way along the line of hair that ran straight down his belly. He kissed and sucked at Seth's navel. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Seth's cock stiffening again already, and his own erection poked Seth's hip. They both had quick recovery times. *Oh good.*

David continued down the line of hair, tracing it with his tongue as Seth moaned. *God. The smell of him.* Rid of the buildup of old sweat and grime, Seth's smell was amazing. Like whiskey and ambrosia.

Seth flexed his hips, and his hard cock hit David on the cheek. David grabbed the straining shaft and nuzzled it, smearing precum all over his face. And then he dipped his tongue into Seth's slit. *Oh God, the taste of him.* It was so intense, his essence boiled down into a dewdrop of pure Seth. David drank it down, and it made him drunk.

He engulfed Seth's cock, wrapping his lips around the head and swirling his tongue around the flared crown.

Seth shouted, and David grinned around that hard cock, giving him a little scrape of teeth. He'd heard some guys liked that. Seth yelled again, even louder than before, so apparently he was one of them. David cupped his balls, rolling their weight in his palm. So warm.

David relinquished Seth's cock and straddled his legs. He took in the wanton glory splayed beneath him. Seth was big and powerful, but not clunky in any way. Far from it. His shoulders, his flat, broad pectorals, his lean abdomen—all were perfectly formed and proportioned. And his face. The high cheekbones and long jaw, his long, beautiful nose, his generous mouth—that mouth. But most of all, the lost, lustful look in those big eyes, the dark lashes wet with passion. David reached up and pulled at Seth's nipples. Seth arched. Gratified by this response, David twisted the raised brown nubs harder. Seth whimpered. David watched, mesmerized, as he tossed his head from side to side, his long dark hair clinging to his face in damp strands. His mouth stretched open, gasping. *Beautiful.*

He looked at David, naked need in his eyes, stripped of all shyness, all hesitancy, all shame.

"Please, David," he whispered.

David swallowed and scooted back down, unable to refuse. He spread one hand on Seth's warm, flat belly and took Seth's shaft in the other. He ran his tongue up the underside and then took the cock in his mouth. He clamped his lips around Seth's width and began to suck in earnest. The skin was like velvet stretched over steel. He found that the tip fit nicely against the roof of his mouth, so he let it rest

there. He kept up the suction and ran his tongue up and down the underside, paying special attention to the indentation at the base of the head. Seth's belly quivered under his hand, and he made some brand-new noises. *Nice*. Suddenly Seth's cock pulsed. A second later, cum splashed against the roof of David's mouth. He drank it greedily, sucking at the cockhead and milking the shaft with his lips and tongue. He didn't stop until he'd consumed every salty, slippery drop.

As Seth softened, David let him slip free. He put his hand over the spent penis, keeping it warm as he scooted up and rested his head on Seth's shoulder.

Seth looked at him, eyes still dazed and smile sleepy. "Nice bed," he said, his eyes closing.

Bed. Oh yeah. It'd probably been a long time since Seth had had a bed to sleep in or even a safe, warm place to get eight consecutive hours of rest. He pushed a strand of sweat-damp hair from Seth's cheek. "Go to sleep if you want."

Seth breathed deep and sighed, and for a moment David thought he had already dropped off, but then a broad smile stretched Seth's lips and he opened his eyes again, and they were no longer dazed or sleepy at all. "Not until I hear you scream, Dave."

David's cock, long neglected, pulsed with interest. The look in Seth's eyes made him blush all over. Seth pushed him onto his back and climbed on top, lying full length against him. He nestled his hardening cock against David's needy shaft. Seth folded his arms across David's chest and propped his chin on them, looking at him with predatory satisfaction. "So, David, what do you like to do?"

What did he like to do? David was so turned on and so flustered by Seth's direct gaze that it took a moment for the question to sink in. What did he like to do? "You mean, like...like..." What was the matter with him? Why couldn't he talk?

"Like sucking." Seth slid down and sucked David's cock into his mouth in one swift move.

For a delirious moment, David's shaft was enveloped in wet heat. "Aaaaaaah!" Then, as quickly, Seth released him and scooted forward.

“Fucking.” He straddled David’s cock and rubbed it between his ass cheeks.

“Haaaaaa!” David cried out at the friction. He bucked his hips, desperate for release, but Seth lifted off him again. David wanted to cry.

And then Seth reached down and pressed into the cleft of David’s ass, stroking his puckered hole with the pads of his fingers. “Or being fucked.”

David’s mouth was dry. That. He wanted that. He couldn’t say it. He flashed on the guys who had nearly raped him. He was afraid. He wanted Seth—there. But he’d never done it before. It would hurt. He—

“Hey.”

It wasn’t until he saw Seth hovering over him, face intent with concern, that he felt the tears on his cheeks. Oh for the love of God. What a wretched bitch he was. His cock was shouting at him *Yes!* and his head was all... He looked up at Seth, pleading silently with his eyes. *Help me.*

Seth bent and kissed him, no longer pressing down on him. “It’s okay,” said Seth. “I’ll take good care of you. We’ll take our time. I can do things that will make you feel wonderful, and none of them will hurt. I promise.” He kissed him again, on the forehead this time, and then he sank down between David’s legs.

David thought Seth was going to go down on him, and that would have been fine, his cock thought, though other parts of him seemed to be disappointed. But then Seth went right on past his cock, nudged his balls with his nose, and ran his tongue over the little patch of skin between his sac and his asshole. *Oh God. Ohgodohgodohgodohgod.*

Seth ran a hand under his buttocks and gently lifted one leg to get better access. He licked and sucked at that tender skin, and David lifted his other leg, his knees against his chest. Seth muttered, “Good,” then ran the tip of his tongue—*no, really? Yes!*—around David’s asshole.

Oh God! David’s balls tightened. “Seth, I’m...I’m gonna—”

Seth gave one of those low rumbles. Then he poked his tongue right down the middle of David's tight, trembling hole.

Jesus!

The feeling was electric, like nothing he'd ever felt before. Like nothing he'd ever imagined he could feel. Seth reached up and took David's shaft in one hand, his thumb brushing the slit, rubbing the glans. David felt the cum welling up inside him. Seth fucked David with his tongue and squeezed his cock, and suddenly every nerve ending David had exploded. He screamed and shot and spasmed, coming and coming and coming as Seth stroked him and continued to lave his asshole. Pulse after pulse of ecstasy rocked him, sending him flying in all directions. Everything he was, everything he had poured from him, and Seth was there, everywhere, to catch him.

When it was at last over, Seth lay down beside him and held him tight. David squeezed back and whispered, "I'm never going to let you go." His voice was hoarse. As he drifted off, David smiled at the thought that tomorrow, when he came home from work, they could do this all over again. And the night after that and the night after that.

They slept wrapped around each other, chest to chest, cock to cock, legs and arms entangled. David had never slept so well.

Chapter Five

Before he even really woke up, Seth knew he wasn't sleeping rough. For one thing, he was warm. It was November. He couldn't be warm in November unless he was back in—*No!* His heart pounded. How in the hell had he wound up back in that place? He'd sworn he'd die before he went back.

Frantic, Seth threw off the oblivious comfort of sleep and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Books. So many books lining the walls on every side of the tiny room. He was in a bed with clean, soft sheets. Beside him, the cutest little blond dude he'd ever seen was sacked out, lost to the world, face open and innocent and breathtaking. David. *Oh. Right.* Seth's heart rate slowed, and he sank back down on the mattress. He was at David's place.

Gingerly, not wanting to wake him, Seth sidled closer to David so that the lengths of their bodies touched. David sighed and turned slightly, draping a warm arm across Seth's chest. Seth's morning erection pulsed back to life after that initial rude awakening and pressed into David's hip. David smiled in his sleep.

Seth felt overwhelmed by the feelings he had looking at David: love, protectiveness, lust, admiration, gratitude. David was kind, intelligent, generous, loving—everything Seth always thought he must be, ever since that first day when David had given him his leftover Thai noodles. The fact that Seth had been able to save David from getting gang-raped last night—that was... Well, he knew David was grateful, but what David didn't understand was that being able to do that for him was the best, most useful thing Seth had ever done in his life. It made his existence no longer pointless.

The last twelve hours here with David were the best Seth had ever known. It would be over soon, he realized. David would wake up, and then he'd have to go to his job, and Seth would have to go back to living on the streets. At least he'd have the memory of this night to keep him warm.

And maybe they could get in a morning fuck before this interlude came to an end. The recollection of the things they'd done together last night made Seth's groin tighten and his head swim. And he noticed that David's own morning woody was poking him in the thigh. Seth couldn't help it. He ran a hand down between their bodies and caressed David's silken length.

"Mmm," David murmured and opened those big brown eyes of his. He smiled at Seth and leaned in toward the caress. "Good morning."

"Good morning," said Seth, continuing to stroke David's erection. David tilted his head up and brushed his lips against Seth's. That was all the encouragement Seth needed to capture David's mouth in a bruising kiss. He poured all of himself into that kiss, wanting to leave as much of himself here with David as possible. David moaned into his mouth, and Seth flexed his hips, rubbing his cock against David's belly. The feeling of David's warm, soft skin was tantalizing, even better than the clean sheets.

David shifted, and their cocks rubbed against each other. *Oh God*. The feeling was electric. Seth whimpered and tried to keep control. He wanted to make it last. But David reached behind and grabbed Seth's ass cheeks, holding him firmly against him as their cocks bucked together.

"Seth, you're so wonderful."

David was the wonderful one. Seth felt tears coming again like they had the night before, and he turned his head to kiss and bite David's neck. Nuzzling the damp flesh, he reveled in David's sweet smell. He didn't want it to be over. And he couldn't stop.

As if sensing how close Seth was, David released his death grip on his ass and scooted his own hips back, breaking contact. He turned his head a fraction of an

inch so his mouth was at Seth's ear, and he whispered, "Seth, finish what you started last night."

Those words went straight from Seth's ear to his cock. Seth willed himself to calm down. He felt like he could come right now with just the lightest touch, and David wanted Seth to take him. But David was a virgin. He'd rimmed David last night, and David had loved it. Just the memory of those cries threatened to topple Seth over the edge.

Before he came just thinking about it, Seth turned from David's embrace and went in search of lube. There was a bottle of hand lotion next to a box of tissues on the floor beside the bed. *Uh-huh*. Seth knew what those were doing there. He couldn't suppress a smile. What did David think about when he jerked off? Did he look at porno magazines? No. Probably, he read stuff. What did they call it? *Erotica*. Seth flashed on an image of David, a studious expression on his face as he held a book in one hand and his cock in the other. The thought did nothing to maintain his control, and he forced himself to breathe deep and focus on what he was doing.

As he squeezed a generous dollop of lotion onto his fingers, he noticed David watching him with an expression of mixed desire and fear. After what David had been through last night, he wasn't surprised.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

David nodded, a little crease of determination forming between his eyebrows. "Yeah, I'm sure. Please. Do it."

Seth nodded. "Okay. But like I told you last night, David, I'm going to take care of you. We're going to go slow. And you'll enjoy it, but you have to promise me something."

David licked his lips and squirmed. "Yeah, sure. What?"

God, David's impatient horniness was so hot. It made Seth just want to attack him, but instead he forced himself to take another deep breath and get on with his spiel. "If you feel any pain at any time, or if you want me to stop for any reason at all, you tell me, and I will. Promise?"

David nodded.

“Say you promise.”

David rolled his eyes. “I promise. Please, Seth, can we just...? I’m really—”

Seth leaned over and kissed David on the lips, shutting him up. They were both just going to have to be patient. For a moment he luxuriated in those soft, sweet lips, that agile tongue. Then he reached between David’s legs. Seth ran his palm down David’s cock and gave his balls an affectionate nudge before swirling his fingers around David’s rosebud of an asshole.

“Ooohhh.” David sighed. He bent his knees and raised them to his chest. Seth kissed his way from mouth to neck, licking and biting at the tender flesh while he teased David’s hole. David flexed his hips, pushing up against the touch, inviting him in. Seth slipped a finger inside the silken channel. David let out the same high, keening noise he’d made last night. *Good.*

When Seth had rimmed him last night, David had thought there was no greater pleasure a human being could experience, but now, splayed out beneath the onslaught of Seth’s ministrations, he began to revise that notion. Could he die from pleasure?

Seth seemed to be everywhere on him and in him. Seth’s mouth was on his neck, then his nipples, sucking and licking and biting. Seth’s talented tongue sent sparks of delight up and down his spine. Seth’s soft dark hair brushed against his skin, making him shiver. And Seth’s fingers petted and probed David’s most intimate, secret well of desire.

Everything felt so good; it was hard to parse one thing from another. Still, when that slick finger already sliding deliciously inside him hit one particular spot, it set off fireworks in every cell of his body. David made an animal noise that would have been totally embarrassing if he’d been in his right mind, but he wasn’t. The sparks set alight by Seth’s touch coalesced in the pit of his stomach like a hand clenching. That fist commanded him with its electric pulse. He couldn’t think; he

couldn't speak. He could barely breathe as he thrust up against Seth's finger, driven by the rising pressure within. And then suddenly that pressure burst. Hot cum splashed against his chest. It was his own. David ran his thumb through it in wonder. There was no mistaking the warm lassitude that spread through his body. Seth slid another finger inside him, and it felt as comfortable as a hot bath.

Seth licked David's cum off his belly. He sucked on his navel and spread his fingers wide apart. They stroked the sensitive walls of David's anus. David's breath left him in a stuttering gasp. It felt... He couldn't conceptualize how it felt. It felt...strong. It was frightening and good at the same time. He was totally vulnerable, completely...known by this touching. He was scared, and yet he felt safe. And more loved than he'd ever known was possible.

Every time Seth brushed, pressed, tickled, or stroked that special spot in there, David lost all capacity for thought or will. He bucked his hips and groaned and screamed and cried and got hard again, and harder and harder.

Two fingers became three, and he wondered if Seth would stop short of fisting him up to the elbow. He wondered if Seth would ever stop at all. And he was helpless. All he could do was moan and buck and let the pleasure build and build.

"Seth," he finally said. "I'm gonna—Again—Can't we—"

Seth gave another few twists of his fingers.

"Ahh! Haa!"

And then Seth's fingers slid out of him, and David felt hollow and desperate to be filled. "Fuck me now. Please, I'm begging you."

Seth smiled down at him. God, he was beautiful with his dark hair and intense blue eyes. And he had the sweetest, goofiest smile David had ever seen. Seth kissed him soundly, then said, "Get on your hands and knees."

The words alone nearly made David come. He rolled over and assumed the position. He felt Seth's hand on his hip, and last night's near rape flickered through his mind in a momentary blast of cold rain and terror. Then Seth stroked his back and ran his other hand down David's thigh, and it was gone, and David was 100

percent present. He was on his hands and knees on his own bed, and he was about to finally lose his virginity.

“Where are your condoms?”

“Condoms?” David hadn’t even thought of that. *Duh*. But he had some! He’d bought them a few months ago in a fit of optimism that, as it turned out, wasn’t so silly after all. “Wait.” David fumbled through the stack of books beside the bed and snagged the strip of foil packets. He’d been using them to mark his place in *Right Ho, Jeeves*. “Here.” He thrust them behind him.

“Just try to relax,” said Seth, taking them. David nodded. He heard the *splorch* of the lotion bottle and felt cool slickness as Seth smeared his eager asshole with the stuff. Then the tear of a foil packet and another couple of *splorches*. David glanced over his shoulder in time to see Seth lubing himself up. Seth’s cock was enormous—thick, long, hard, and even through the latex, flushed deep red with arousal. The sight of Seth, head bowed as he smeared hand lotion down his veiny shaft, was the most erotic and terrifying thing David had ever seen. He turned his head back to face the pillow in front of him, unsure if he was glad he’d looked or not.

Seth gripped him by the hips and stroked his back again. And then David felt the head of Seth’s cock nudging between his ass cheeks. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, relishing every moment of anticipation, trepidation, and delight as the head of Seth’s penis pierced the loosened ring of muscle and stretched it. It was happening. This was really happening. David focused on breathing and staying relaxed.

Seth was so big. David was glad now that Seth had taken such a long time preparing him. As Seth slowly penetrated him, David felt himself stretching wider and wider. David’s breath grew ragged.

Was he going to be able to take it? Was he going to break? But no. There was a burning sensation, but when Seth paused, half in and half out of David, his body soon acclimated, and he was ready to continue. “Come on, Seth. Take me.”

And Seth slid the rest of the way home. They rested there a moment, David relishing the feeling of Seth fully seated inside him, touching him everywhere, filling him with heavy pleasure.

Seth gave a rumbling groan that sent vibrations all through David's body. "Oh God, Seth." Seth wrapped his arms around David's torso and trailed kisses down his neck. Each one tingled. David arched his back, which caused him to pull off Seth's cock ever so slightly. The movement sent pulses of joy from David's core out to his fingers and toes and back again. "Oh!"

Seth chuckled and gripped David's hips as he withdrew with the same torturous slowness with which he'd entered. David, unable to move, feared Seth was going to withdraw completely, but just as the head of his thick cock was about to pop free, Seth reversed the motion and slid back in again.

David curled his toes. He panted, longing for Seth to just let go and really fuck him, but there was no time to do anything about it. In the next instant, Seth made another one of those long, slow withdrawals. David's head swam with an intoxicating mix of delight and frustration. He wanted to go faster, harder, but Seth had a death grip on his hips. He couldn't set the pace.

"S-S-Seth," David stuttered at the end of that second stroke, but then Seth did another slow-motion plunge, filling him up with delicious heat, and all he could say was "ahh!"

It went on like that for what felt like hours, and all the while David got harder and harder, his desire ramping up every time Seth's cock slid over that secret spot inside him. And yet, without a hand on his straining cock, with no regular rhythm to follow, it was impossible for David to come. All he could do was surrender to Seth's majestic onslaught as the man turned every nerve he had into a quivering beacon of need.

Finally, incrementally, Seth picked up the pace. David heard him breathing heavily, and now and then a moan escaped him. "Seth," he gasped. "I'm so close. Fuck me. Fuck me hard."

“Mnaaaauugh.” Seth’s groan rumbled like an avalanche, and he thrust faster.

David saw sparks as Seth’s cock nailed his sweet spot over and over again. “Come on, Seth. I want to feel you through next Wednesday.”

“Mnnnuuuuh!” At last Seth’s grip on David’s hips tightened, and he pulled David back onto him as he slammed inside, abandoning all restraint, fucking David so hard he could feel it in his solar plexus.

They both shouted in unison now, sharp, staccato cries in rhythm with their pistoning bodies. David felt like he’d been turned inside out—wholly exposed and bathed in the radiance of Seth’s lust. Loved and desired and needed, everywhere.

He lost track of everything but the pounding, desperate joy between them. Finally, Seth reached around and wrapped his fingers around David’s cock. His grip was hot and hard, the pressure such an intense relief that David sobbed. Suddenly, everything inside—everything he’d been feeling since that first, slick, slight insinuation between his ass cheeks, up to and including this ramming, slamming ecstasy—bubbled over and poured out. David screamed as he came, the spasming of his body making Seth’s cock feel even bigger inside him. Seth roared and plunged into David and held on tight, pulsing his release inside.

They collapsed in a heap on the bed, and for a while neither of them made a sound except for their ragged breathing. It was really hard to know what to say after something like that. It had been...

There were no words.

Chapter Six

Seth had never experienced anything like that before in his life. The sex he'd had in the past had been wildly varied, but never anything better than furtive, mutual release. What he'd just done with David—it was...

There was no point in trying to put a name on it. It was in a category all by itself.

Now they lay side by side, sticky and spent, catching their breath, waiting for the room to stop spinning. After a long, blissful silence, David sighed and moved his hand to Seth's back, stroking him.

Oh. No...

He couldn't bear David's revulsion, not now. Seth rolled onto his back, pretending the movement was just part of a stretch as he reached his arms up over his head and arched his spine. Maybe David hadn't noticed his scars.

But there was no getting anything past David. He lay on his side looking at Seth, his head propped on one hand, that little crease of determination appearing between his brows. "Someone did that to you."

Seth froze, suddenly remembering David's hands on his back last night, stroking him. He'd been in such a daze after that first orgasm, it hadn't even sunk in. But now... He couldn't move, couldn't get up, couldn't do anything but stare at David and shake his head. "Did...?"

"Those scars," said David, his face grave. "They're from a whip, or something like it."

Well, that was it, then. Hot shame poured through Seth, and he looked down at the rumpled sheet between them. How stupid of him. It would have been over

soon, anyway. But he'd wanted...he'd wanted David to think he was attractive. He'd wanted David to remember him as the guy who'd made him shout and writhe in passion and release. Not as the ugly, damaged wreck that he in fact was.

Seth was even more appalled with himself when his vision went blurry. Tears. Again. Wonderful. *Way to follow up the best fuck of your life, asshole.*

"Hey," said David. And then Seth felt David's arms around him, pulling his hot, wet face into the crook of David's neck and then...then stroking his back. Tracing the scars there with featherlight touches. "It's okay."

Seth shook his head. He tried to break away, but David held him tight.

"Listen to me, Seth. Just listen. I'm not going to ask you what happened. I don't care. I just want you to know that I will never, ever do anything like that to you. Do you understand?"

Seth tried to parse the words. They made no sense.

"I might accidentally hurt your feelings by saying or doing something stupid," David went on, his hands still gently stroking up and down Seth's ruined back, "but I'll never intentionally hurt you."

There was a pause during which Seth continued to sort through what David was telling him and became more and more confused.

"And if I ever find the person who did that to you, I'll kill them." David's voice was quiet, sincere, 100 percent believable, and suddenly the rest of it clicked into place.

Seth lay there still and stunned in David's arms as reality reconfigured itself into something he had never believed possible. David wasn't rejecting him, wasn't grilling him for details or trying to figure out what he had done to deserve those marks. He was taking Seth's part without question or hesitation. And he wasn't repulsed by Seth's disfiguration. He touched those marks gently, caressed them. Nothing Seth knew about the world supported any of this, and gravity was due to fail any second now.

Seth put his arms around David and hung on.

* * *

When they finally got out of bed, David insisted on making breakfast for both of them. Seth, dressed now in his freshly laundered clothes, wandered about the apartment feeling weird. Something had happened, and he didn't understand it. He felt like David had washed more than just his clothes clean. He felt like his every protective emotional callus had been scoured off him in just one night with this guy, and now he was about to go back out into the great wide wicked world as naked as a newborn baby. It was going to be horrible getting dirty and hungry and tough again after this.

The smell of coffee lured him into the kitchen. David stood at the stove, cracking eggs into the frying pan. He looked over his shoulder and smiled as Seth came in. God, his smile was breathtaking. So open, so kind.

"It's eggs again, I'm afraid," David said. "I have to go shopping soon."

Well, while he was here, he didn't have to act like such a guest. "Can I help?" Seth asked, secretly hoping David might turn the cooking over to him. He wasn't about to complain, but David's skills lay elsewhere than in the kitchen.

"Sure." The toast popped. "Butter those and toss this for me." He handed Seth the empty egg carton. Empty. These were the last of David's eggs. When Seth threw it out, he saw the bag from the bread in the trash. The last of the bread too.

* * *

Nothing could stop Seth from eating what was put before him—toast, weak coffee, and runny eggs. It was fantastic. "Thank you," he said, mopping up the last of the yolk with a crust of bread.

"No problem." David put the milk for the coffee back in the fridge. Over his shoulder, Seth saw an orange and a bottle of salad dressing inside. That was it. David shut the refrigerator door and turned back around, his arms folded, his hands

tucked into his armpits, his shoulders hunched. He seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden. "I've got to go to work now."

"Yeah. I know..." Seth got his army coat from where it lay on the overstuffed armchair. He shrugged it on and went toward the door.

"Seth?"

He paused and turned. "Um...thanks again, David, for everything. I'll never forget this." That was the truth.

David's brows drew together, and he got this adorably confused look. "But you're staying."

Shock stilled Seth's heart.

"What?"

"You're staying, I thought. I asked you last night to stay, and I thought..." The hurt look on David's face made Seth want to scoop him up and carry him back to the bedroom and kiss him all over until it went away. "You don't want to?"

Only more than anything. Suddenly David's talk about how he'd never hurt Seth made a lot more sense. And then Seth remembered David in the afterglow of their first mutual orgasm the night before, telling him he wanted him to stay here, not just for the night, but for good. And Seth had said yes. And then he'd forgotten, probably because promises like that weren't meant to be kept, and why ruin such a beautiful gesture by acting as if they were?

"I didn't think you really meant—"

"You thought I was just going to use you and kick you out?"

Oh wow. David stood with his shoulders square, his legs spread, his eyes flashing. Tension radiated off him like smoke from a hot skillet. He wasn't the biggest dude in the world, but he was pretty scary right now. All mad. And that just made Seth feel...fucking fantastic. David thought he was worth getting pissed off over. *Oh, man.*

Seth licked his lips and tried to explain. "I do want to stay...but are you sure? I mean. I don't have a job, David. I have no money, nothing to contribute, and I know you're not exactly what you could call loaded or anything."

"I do okay. Pretty much. And besides, it doesn't cost anything extra for you to stay here with me. Rent doesn't cost more for two than for one, and neither does gas or electricity."

"But food does." Seth walked to the fridge. What was he doing? Why was he trying to talk David out of this? Was he crazy? But something in him answered David's anger.

Because the last twelve hours had been something too beautiful to last, and he didn't want it destroyed by the hard realities of life. David was expecting too much of it and if they pressed it would surely fall apart around them like the dream that it was.

Seth opened the door and pointed at the meager contents. "You've already given me the last of what you had."

David rolled his eyes. "For fuck's sake, Seth, I get paid today, okay? And I don't usually buy a lot of food. I'm just not a big food guy. I spend most of my money on books, so no, I don't have much in the house right now, and yeah, I'm down to my last dollar, but Mr. Haverstock always pays me on time, and tomorrow we can go grocery shopping together. I can buy fewer books. It's no big deal. You may have noticed that I already have some."

Seth took a deep breath, torn between disbelief and the thrill of David being pissed off at him. Well, so much for the food argument, but there was something else.

"And how will you ever know that I'm not using *you*? That I'm not here because I love your apartment, your electricity, your heat, your food, and your hot water? How will you know that I'm here for you and not all those other things?" *Yeah.* He had him there.

David laughed. "That's easy, you goofball. Because we're having this fight right now."

Oh.

"Look." David came over and put his hands on Seth's shoulders, that intense gaze boring into him. "I've never been homeless, so no, I can't really know what life has been like for you out there. But I'm guessing it sucked pretty fucking hard. So, you know, the fact that you're trying to convince me to send you back to that just because you're worried about my feelings...I think that tells me everything I need to know."

David had him dead to rights. What a smart little fucker this guy was, anyway. How could Seth hope to contend with that? *Aw, to hell with it.* Seth knew when he was beat, and it wasn't like he really wanted to win, so...

"Well, I'm going to get a job," he said. "I'm not going to let you just carry me."

David smiled. "I know that. For now, you can do these dishes, and when I get home..."

The prospect of greeting David at the door in an apron and nothing else flashed through Seth's mind, and he kind of liked it. He pulled David in for a kiss that finished the sentence. Just the same, when they parted, he said, "I'll be here."

David blushed bright pink, suddenly flustered. It was adorable. He withdrew from Seth's arms with obvious reluctance. "Okay. I have to go."

After the door shut, Seth stared at it, still stunned to be on this side. Inside. It was strange and wonderful. He had a feeling he was going to have to get used to strange and wonderful, but in a way he hoped he never did.

Chapter Seven

The bell on the door of the Haverstock Bookshop jingled as David opened it. Mr. Haverstock sat behind the antique, carved oak counter near the door, poring over an accounts ledger. He looked up and smiled.

Mr. Haverstock was short and round, with a fringe of white hair around his bald pate and a pink complexion. His tweed jacket was frayed at the cuffs, but his blue eyes twinkled behind round, wire-framed glasses. “Hello, David, how are you today?”

David was unable to keep his grin entirely to himself. Last night had started out nearly as bad as a night could be. He’d been mugged and nearly raped by some local gang members, but then he’d met Seth, and Seth had changed everything. “Fine, Mr. Haverstock, and you?”

“Well enough for an old man, well enough.” He closed the ledger and sat back, his head tilted to one side as he appraised David. “I must say, you look like the sunny side of the street today, son.”

David found himself blushing, which only made him more flustered. He shrugged. “Oh...uh...”

The urge to tell Mr. Haverstock everything was strong, but well, he’d never really broached the subject of being gay with him before. He didn’t think his boss would freak out or anything. It was just...not really something one discussed with a seventy-two-year-old book collector.

“Well.” Mercifully, Mr. Haverstock collected his pen and the ledger and stood. “It’s nice to see you happy.” He bustled out from behind the counter and headed down the store’s main aisle toward the back room. “I’ll get you your check.”

David made a quick circuit of the store, shelving any books left sitting around by the customers. The shop was cozy, with closely spaced shelves and many nooks and crannies. Though tiny compared to the chain outlets, they compensated by catering to the wants of their clientele. They had a good science-fiction section, a solid mystery department, and their romance selection eschewed the bulk of the genre in favor of niche subgenres like paranormal and LGBT. Their crowning glory, though, was their selection of rare and collectible books. This was Mr. Haverstock's passion. He loved nothing better than to hunt down an out-of-print title for a customer, or for himself, for that matter. David often thought Mr. Haverstock had missed his calling. The way he followed up leads and researched his quarry's background, he should have been a detective.

"Did you hear about the killing?"

David dropped the book he'd been about to shelve and turned to find Mr. Haverstock standing there, smiling, holding the envelope with David's paycheck. David swallowed. "Killing?"

Mr. Haverstock nodded slowly, serious now. "Yes. A man, a known gang member with a criminal record, was bludgeoned to death near the old stamping plant. The police were out there investigating it this morning. I saw them on my way in and stopped." Mr. Haverstock looked at him evenly, his usually merry face suddenly unreadable.

David had to say something or it would be weird. "Oh. Wow."

"You go past there on your way home, don't you?"

"Uh. Yeah."

"They think it happened around ten p.m. last night. That's when you closed up, isn't it?"

His mouth dry, David nodded.

Mr. Haverstock peered at him. "Did you see anything?"

David's heart pounded a mile a minute. He shook his head, praying that his alarm didn't show on his face. "No. Nothing." At least his voice sounded even.

"Well, you should be careful, David. It's dangerous out there."

David nodded and turned to neaten the shelf.

"Here's your check, son."

David laughed. It was a nervous laugh. Did Mr. Haverstock notice? David turned to face his employer again and studied him, but he could detect nothing in Haverstock's face to indicate that he was suspicious.

Mr. Haverstock tapped the envelope against his other hand. "You know, if you ever care to part with some of your collection, I can pay you much more than these paltry wages."

David relaxed. They were on familiar ground now. They had this little chat every week when Haverstock paid him. Among David's extensive book collection were some very rare editions, which the boss always urged David to sell, and David always refused. Those books had been his father's. They were books he'd grown up with—Sabatini's *The Sea-Hawk*, *Scaramouche*, and *Captain Blood*. He would no more sell them than he would any other member of his family—if any of them had still been alive. But he was an only child, and his parents were both gone now. Those books were all he had. Well, not anymore.

"Oh thank you, Mr. Haverstock," said David, "but I couldn't. They mean too much to me."

David reached out to take the envelope, but his boss didn't let go. David looked up at him, surprised. Suddenly, he looked very serious. Confused, David shook his head. Haverstock had never pressed the point before. Why now?

But he was mistaken. It wasn't about the books. Blue eyes peered sharply at him. "What happened to your face?"

The cut on his face. *Shit*. David thought fast. "I've been feeding a stray cat," he said. "Last night I tried to pick him up, and he scratched me."

“A stray cat.”

David nodded.

“Mmm.” Mr. Haverstock finally let go of the envelope. He was smiling again now. “You’re too kindhearted, David. Take care of that cut. It’ll scar if you let it get infected.”

* * *

The rest of the day was uneventful, but David couldn’t get that conversation with Mr. Haverstock out of his mind. He’d been looking forward to a day of fantasies about what he’d do with Seth when he got home. Instead the day ground by in a haze of worry. Of course the cops were investigating. Duh.

And of course David hadn’t even considered calling the cops last night. He didn’t have much faith in police. He didn’t want to talk to them about the attempted rape, and he didn’t want Seth to get in trouble. But what if they found out that Seth had killed that guy anyway? Should David come forward now and tell them what happened, that Seth had been defending him? Would that be enough to protect Seth from repercussions?

It seemed like a bad risk. Seth was an indigent. Neither of them had enough money for a good lawyer. Even if Mr. Haverstock suspected David was involved, that wouldn’t necessarily lead the cops to Seth unless David gave him up, and David wasn’t going to do that.

No. It was better just to lie low and hope they let the case go unsolved. A guy like that—a gang member with a criminal record—how hard were they going to look?

It was nearly five when Mr. Haverstock once more emerged from the back room, wearing his hat and coat. “I’m for home now,” he said, his voice cheery.

David forced a smile and nodded. “Good night,” he said as Mr. Haverstock opened the door and the bell jingled.

“Be careful on your way home tonight,” Haverstock said just before he shut the door.

In the sudden silence of the empty bookshop, the light rain striking the windows sounded like the distant hiss of a leaking steam valve. David shook his head. He was being paranoid. Mr. Haverstock had been his employer for five years and a friend of David’s family before that. He was worried about him; that was all.

Chapter Eight

Just before closing, the bell on the door rang, and David looked up to see Seth standing there. Raindrops in his glossy black hair glittered in the light from the shop's old-fashioned, lantern-style fixtures. He gave David a smile and then suddenly went shy, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking at his feet. "Didn't want you to walk home alone."

Mr. Haverstock, the cops, everything flew out of David's mind on gossamer wings, and he actually *jumped* over the counter and threw himself at Seth.

There was a brief moment full of breath and skin and raindrops. Their lips met, teeth clicking and tongues searching. David burrowed his hands beneath Seth's T-shirt, marveling at the warmth of his skin. Seth hugged him tight, then broke their kiss. "Shades," he said, panting.

What? Sunglasses? No. Window shades. Right. David went about in a kind of daze pulling them down. Was he really going to get it on with Seth right here in the bookstore?

Seth grabbed him from behind and nuzzled the back of his neck. He undid David's jeans. Apparently, that was exactly what was about to happen. David arched his back, pushing his ass into Seth's crotch. The rock-hard erection pressing against the seam of his jeans made his already stiffening cock turn adamantine. David's body seemed to be galloping down an unlit road at night, and his mind, disregarded and irrelevant, ran frantically behind it trying to catch up.

Seth rummaged around in David's boxers with one hand while snaking the other one underneath David's shirt. He played with David's nipple.

The fingers on his nipple, the mouth on his neck, and the long, lean body plastered against his back overwhelmed David. Then Seth's strong, agile fingers wrapped around his cock and began to stroke. Warm tingles spread through David's body. It felt like he was being touched everywhere at once. He writhed and gasped, but soon their position frustrated him. All he could do was accept Seth's touch. The most he could do to reciprocate was flex his ass against Seth's hard-on. "Let me..."

David turned and kissed him. He sucked in Seth's lower lip and ran his teeth over it lightly, then released it and dipped his tongue into that hot mouth. Seth rewarded him with the tiniest of whimpers.

David ran his hands up the sides of Seth's face, then through his silken hair. Breathing in the smell of Seth, the rich goodness, he smiled and grabbed his lover's fly.

Seth's long, thick, curving cock sprang out of his jeans, and David fell to his knees. He rubbed his face against the velvety length, inhaling the heady musk. He was about to take that beautiful cock in his mouth when Seth dropped to his knees. "Lie down." Seth guided him onto his back on the polished wood floor of the bookshop.

Seth hovered over David on all fours, his knees on either side of David's head. Now perfectly positioned for the task, Seth sucked David's cock into his mouth. Wet heat enveloped him. Moaning, David flexed his hips as Seth's lips and tongue worked up and down his shaft. Above him, Seth's cock bobbed like an exotic tropical fruit ripe for the picking. David arched his back and lifted his head. He reached up with one hand and cupped Seth's balls as he took the drooling cockhead into his mouth.

It was hard to concentrate with Seth sucking and licking down there, driving him insane. David feared he wasn't doing a very good job of reciprocating. The angle was weird. He couldn't get much more than the head of Seth's cock into his mouth. Determined nevertheless to give as good as he got, David clamped his lips around Seth's cock and wrapped his fingers around the shaft, pumping as he sucked.

Seth moaned. The vibration of his deep, smoky voice reverberated through David's cock and made his balls tighten. David gasped, then focused once again on the big, hot cock marauding in his mouth.

Seth pumped his hips, pushing his cock deeper. Then Seth lifted off David's cock. Before he had time to even register his disappointment, Seth enveloped him again. And then David felt a saliva-slickened finger probe his asshole. *Oh fuck. Yes.* Even that light touch made a sweet ache pulse to life inside him—like a little drumbeat deep within, thrumming, beckoning. He redoubled his efforts at sucking and pumping Seth's cock, at fondling Seth's balls.

Should he finger Seth too? David grinned around the cock in his mouth. He could do Seth one better. David shifted his head, easing the awkward angle he needed to suck Seth's penis. He licked around Seth's balls, enjoying the salty taste and the texture of the skin and hair. He trailed his tongue back, running it over the little patch of skin behind the balls.

Was he really going to do this?

Well, why not? Seth had done it for him, and it had felt... The memory combined with the wet suction of the mouth on his cock and the delicious invasion of the finger in his ass very nearly sent him over the edge. David forced himself to take a deep breath and then plunged his tongue up Seth's asshole.

Seth gasped and reared up, leaving David's cock wet and raging. "Oh God!"

That was all the encouragement David needed. He grabbed Seth by the hips and buried his face in his ass, eating him out in earnest. Seth's cheeks were so smooth against his, he felt his face rested in a cloud. That tight hole, pebbly on the outside, soon yielded to him, and David relished the slick heat of Seth's channel.

Seth's mouth on his cock was a sweet, persistent tug, and the finger he used to explore David's ass made little pinpricks of electricity crackle through him every time he moved it. Awash in a sea of touches, tastes, and feelings, David tried to focus on tonguing Seth's silken tunnel. Then Seth crooked his finger and hit that one special spot inside. Bursts of electricity went off all through his body.

Involuntarily, he bucked. Caught between the wet heat of Seth's mouth and that finger, he was going to come any second now. He thrust his tongue inside Seth harder, faster.

The sounds Seth made were unlike any David had heard from him before: high-pitched, desperate. Seth flexed his hips. David stroked Seth's plunging cock and kept fucking him with his tongue.

Seth swallowed David down to the root, and he crooked his finger again, pressing that same spot and just...staying on it. David couldn't hold back any longer. White-hot ecstasy ripped through him. He bucked his hips and let go, coming in Seth's mouth. Seth's hips thrust reflexively, and his cum poured over David's hand.

The moment they were spent, Seth turned and wrapped his arms around David, holding him tight as he buried his face in David's neck. David hugged him back. Seth was trembling. He was beginning to detect a pattern here. Seth seemed to get kind of emotional after sex. David ran a hand down Seth's back to soothe him, but Seth tensed. *Oh shit, the scars.* David settled for running his fingers through Seth's hair and humming low in his throat the way his mother used to do for him when he was little and had an earache.

In a minute or two, Seth relaxed. "I can't believe you did that," he muttered.

"What, the humming?"

That made Seth laugh, which made David happy. "No. You know..."

"Well, for someone who introduced me to the practice, you're pretty bashful about it." David leaned back to peer at Seth. "Rimming, right? That's what it's called?"

"Yeah. Rimming. I just... I didn't think you'd..."

David pulled him close again. "You did it for me." David left unspoken the question of why Seth thought he wouldn't return the favor.

“Mmmm-hmmm.” Seth relaxed his death grip and lay with his head resting against David’s arm. He looked at David, his eyes sleepy, a content little smile curving his lips.

David felt an answering wave of lassitude wash over him. “We’d better get home before we both fall asleep and Mr. Haverstock finds us here in the morning.”

Seth grinned. “That would be bad.” He made no move to get up.

David laughed. “Yeah, it would be bad. And we’d better wipe up the floor before we go too.” He laughed harder. He sounded like a donkey, but he couldn’t stop.

“What’s so funny?” Seth sat up at last.

David, tears in his eyes, managed to get to his feet. “I just never in a million years thought I’d be cleaning spooge off the bookshop floor.”

Seth nodded sagely. His eyes glittered, but he never cracked a smile to ruin his deadpan delivery. “Not your own, anyway.”

David, who’d almost made it to the counter to retrieve a box of tissues, lost it again.

* * *

Closing up the bookshop, David marveled at what a difference a day could make. Yesterday at this time he’d been bored, lonely, about to be—He shook his head and focused on Seth, who was standing by the door waiting for him. Now he had someone to walk home with, someone to make love with, someone to share his home and his life with. All his fantasy men from the books he read—Scaramouche, D’Artagnan, Sakr-el-Bahr—paled in comparison to the flesh-and-blood reality of his true hero, Seth.

As they walked home, David took comfort in Seth’s proximity. He was tired now that the euphoria from the sex was dying down, and they were coming up on the place where it had happened.

Seth, as if sensing David’s unease, edged closer to him. “It’s okay.”

David nodded. “I know.” And he did. The empty lot next to the stamping plant, now cordoned off with yellow tape, brought back bad memories, but he knew he was safe with Seth. His real fear was not for himself. “But...the cops were investigating this morning. Mr. Haverstock told me.”

Their feet echoed on the pavement as Seth became even quieter than usual. At length, he sighed. “I guess that was bound to happen.”

Even though there was no one around, David lowered his voice. “We should have disposed of the body somehow. I never even thought of that.”

Seth shrugged. “Me neither, but then, I didn’t expect... Anyway, don’t worry about it. The only person who can ID me is you.”

“What about those other two guys, the ones who ran away?”

“No,” said Seth. “They’re Lions.”

“The gang?”

“Yeah. They won’t go to the cops. They handle a thing like this themse—”

“Shit!” For the first time since the night before, true terror gripped David by the guts.

Seth waved his hands. “It’s okay. No, no. Don’t worry.”

David grabbed Seth by the arm and started dragging him at a trot. “Let’s go.” He looked up and down the street. It was empty, which was not unusual at this time of night. What with the economy, a lot of people had moved out of state. Vacant lots and abandoned buildings were as common as occupied ones.

Seth refused to be dragged. He continued to walk at a normal pace as David tugged on his arm like an overexcited Chihuahua. “You’re only calling attention to us.”

He was right. David went back to walking normally, but he kept scanning the street. “You need new clothes and a shave. And tie your hair back so you won’t look the same. The Lions, the cops, they’re looking for a homeless guy. Not you.”

Seth bit back a gasp of surprise. In wonderment, he let those incredible words sink in. *"They'll be looking for a homeless guy. Not you."* The night was dark and chilly and dangerous, but it was as if he and David walked in a little bubble of warm light. His body, still filled with pleasure from their lovemaking, felt relaxed, and the cool air felt good on his skin. David was beside him, whole and unharmed and real. This was real.

When he thought of what he had escaped from and what he had settled for, walking home with David like this was far beyond anything he could have imagined or hoped for.

They came to the apartment building, and David fished the key out of his pocket. "I'll have to get another one made," he said and looked up with a smile that seemed a little forced, but was genuine in the eyes.

Seth smiled back and tried to ignore the sudden thickness in his throat. He didn't want to waste another single moment on tears. He'd nearly cried again after their lovemaking tonight. Surely, David was getting sick of that. It was just that this was so new, so different from anything he'd expected. It was all such a beautiful dream, and of course Seth knew that they'd awake from it eventually. Something would put a stop to this—the police, the Lions, the differences between them. But for now he wanted to savor every second of this special time.

David opened the door, and Seth followed him into the small apartment, which was made even tinier by the shelves and shelves of books lining nearly every wall. They shed their jackets and draped them over the arm of the overstuffed armchair in the living room. David turned to him and wrapped his arms around Seth's waist. It was the most natural thing in the world for Seth to circle David's shoulders with his own arms. The two of them fit together perfectly. Like they were made for each other. Seth smiled and shook his head, silently laughing at his own sappiness.

David tilted his head, looking up at him. "What is it?"

"Nothing. Just...everything."

David's smile was tender, his laugh understanding. "I know what you mean."

Surprise made Seth blink. Could it be that this turn of events was just as unexpected and precious for David as it was for him? He thought of David living alone here with his books. As yet, there'd been no mention of any family or friends. Looking at him now, Seth saw the loneliness in his eyes, the longing. There was only one answer.

Seth bent his head and captured David's mouth in a kiss. Soft and tender, their lips caressed each other, and their tongues met in a sweet, slippery dance of taste and touch. They wrapped their arms around each other tighter, bodies pressing together as the kiss deepened, as they drank from one another all the love, companionship, and desire they both longed to give and receive.

Chapter Nine

“Here, try this on,” said David, handing Seth a cobalt blue sweater before disappearing behind a rack of shirts in the men’s department at Sears.

Seth’s hands sank into the soft, velvety material. “What’s this made of?” He’d never felt anything like it before.

“It’s chenille,” said David, reappearing with two dress shirts. “Feels good, huh? So, which of these do you like better, the solid or the stripes?” He held up the shirts. “Personally, I like the stripes on you, but you seem to like plainer things, so...”

Seth shook his head in bewilderment. David had insisted on bringing him here and buying him some new clothes, arguing that he needed them to avoid the Lions and that it would be easier for him to find a job if he wasn’t dressed like a homeless person. Reluctantly, Seth had agreed, on the stipulation that he’d pay David back out of his first paycheck. But now Seth was beginning to suspect that David’s motives were less practical and more...Barbie. And he was Barbie.

“David, we’ve already picked out two pairs of jeans, one pair of slacks, five shirts, and a jacket, plus a full set of T-shirts, socks, and underwear. It’s enough. At this rate, there won’t be any money left for you, and I’ll never be able to pay you back.”

David looked crestfallen. Seth suddenly felt the urge to try on more clothes just to take the droop out of those shoulders. David seemed to sense him weakening. “At least try on that sweater, okay? I really want to see how it looks on you.”

Like Seth could say no to him. What in the fuck was he going to do with this guy? He slipped out of his army jacket and pulled the sweater on over his now-clean-but-still-threadbare Pistons T-shirt. The material of the sweater was thin, but

soft and surprisingly heavy. It felt like liquid velvet. The sensation of it against his skin was incredible. He ran a hand down his chest. This was far too fine for him. And then he looked up and saw David staring at him with a look that made Seth want to drop everything and hustle him into one of the fitting rooms and fuck him that instant.

“Oh,” said David. “Come see yourself.”

He hauled Seth in front of a mirror. Seth stared, taken aback. It had been a long time since he’d really looked at himself. He was tall and broad across the shoulders. Not hulking, but...*rangy*—that was the word. Rangy. And he looked kinda gaunt, but he guessed that was to be expected. Shaved, he looked younger than he could really remember ever feeling. At least, since he had left home.

His nose was a little crooked where it had been broken once. His hair was dark and, now that it was clean, glossy. It fell around his shoulders and across his forehead. From beneath his thick eyebrows, his eyes beamed, dark blue and intense. *Jeez*. He was a little scary.

He glanced at David, who stood beside him, nearly a head shorter, blond, thin, but like he was meant to be that way. Suddenly Seth realized what a figure he must have cut that first night, standing over the would-be rapist he’d just bludgeoned, shaggy and wild and still wielding the murder weapon. And that was who David had invited into his home. *Man*. David might not be the biggest guy in the whole world, but he had a huge set on him.

“The blue brings out your eyes,” said David, bringing Seth back to the present.

Seth wasn’t so sure his eyes needed bringing out. But he did love the feel of this material. He looked at the price tag. Forty bucks. *Oh no. No way*. He shook his head and pulled the sweater over his head. “It’s too expensive,” he said, fingers trailing over the fabric as he handed it back to David.

“You love it. And you need a sweater.”

Seth went to the rack of \$9.99 cotton crewneck sweaters. “I’ll get one of these. Look, this one’s blue.” He held it up. *And scratchy*, he didn’t say.

“You deserve this one.” David seemed to know that was exactly what Seth didn’t think.

“Please,” he said, his voice low, pleading. He felt the embarrassment rising inside him, his cheeks beginning to grow pink. “Do we have to argue?”

“No,” said David, with a grin. “Not at all.” Giving Seth a look that had *dare* written all over it, he draped the sweater over his arm and began to collect the rest of Seth’s assembled wardrobe.

Seth hurried to help him. *Cock-whipped*—that’s what Seth was. By a skinny little squirt he could beat with one hand tied behind his back. Except that Seth would never hurt David, and David somehow, instinctively and from the very start, knew that. Underwear and socks tucked under one arm, Seth trailed after the blond tyrant. As they reached the checkout counter, he put a hand on David’s shoulder.

A voice came from behind them. “Queers.” Seth turned to see a guy just a couple of inches shorter than him and dressed in chinos and a denim shirt. He was maybe forty, gray at the temples, and solidly built.

Beside Seth, David too had turned and now stared at the guy with focused intensity. The guy stared back for a second, then colored and looked away, trying to act like he hadn’t said it. Coward. Seth took a step toward him. The guy examined a rack of hoodies. Seth took another step. Now he loomed over the guy. A bead of sweat ran down the back of the man’s neck, and Seth felt a stab of gratification. He did give good loom.

But what Seth hadn’t expected was for David to get in on it. He came to the guy’s other side and stood facing him. “Did you expect us to pretend we didn’t hear you?”

The guy looked back and forth between the two of them, whites showing around his brown eyes. Seth almost felt sorry for him. “W-what?”

“Oh don’t be shy. We know it was you,” said David.

Seth leaned in as if studying the man's earlobe. What he was really doing was making sure he could put the guy in a headlock before he could do anything to David.

His proximity made the man nervous. The guy stepped back. "Hey, what are you—Look." He put his hands out in a placating gesture. "I don't want any trouble."

David gave Seth a glance. Seth shook his head. No, they were not going to torment the idiot any further, not if he had any say in the matter. David looked at the guy again. He was still backing up.

"Then don't start any next time, jackass." And as he said it, Seth took one quick step toward the man, who gasped, turned on his heel, and walked quickly from the store.

* * *

"Did you see that guy?" asked an elated David on the bus ride back to his place. His face was pink, and his eyes sparkled with glee. He grabbed one of the hand bars and swung from it. "He was sweating!"

Seth couldn't help but crack a smile. "Yeah, that was pretty great."

The bus stopped, and a couple of guys wearing gray and blue Detroit Lions watch caps got on. The familiar ice and fire of adrenaline raced through his veins. Nobody but gang members wore Detroit Lions gear around here anymore. And David was bouncing around like a squirrel in a nut factory.

The Lions took seats at the front of the bus, thank God. As David was about to launch into a reenactment of their encounter with the Sears bigot, Seth stood. He was just in time to block David from their view.

"I loved when you stared at his neck, and he—"

"Not now," Seth whispered. He stood close and fixed David with a warning look.

David was a smart guy. He shut up and went still. Didn't ask for explanations either. Just waited for Seth's lead. Good.

Seth tilted his head so it was close to David's ear. "Lions," he whispered.

David nodded. His face was still, tense. Seth wanted to tell him it was going to be okay, but he couldn't take the chance that it wouldn't be. Instead he focused on taking deep, calming breaths, hoping that his enforced tranquility would spread to David. It was a funny thing, but Seth had learned it was easier to go unnoticed if you tamped down your personal energy or emotional state or whatever you wanted to call it.

Forty minutes later they arrived at the stop near David's apartment. The Lions didn't seem to have noticed them, but they hadn't gotten off the bus either. From here on out, David and Seth would only be going deeper into Lions' territory, and things could only get worse. They had to try to get past them and off the bus here.

"Come on. Stay on my right," he told David.

Seth gathered their shopping bags. They were a bit shiny and new for a homeless guy to be carrying, but maybe the Lions wouldn't notice that. He stuck them under his arms to make himself bigger and to further block David from view. He began muttering to himself as he shuffled down the aisle. It was his experience that a homeless person, especially one acting crazy, tended to be a no-vision zone for most people. With David behind and to the right of him, Seth's hope was that the Lions would avoid looking at him and thus miss David entirely.

It almost worked.

They were nearly out the door when one of the Lions—a black guy in a red hoodie—stood up. "Hey, it's the guy that got Sam Sam!"

Chapter Ten

“Run,” said Seth, shoving the shopping bags at David and pushing him out the open door of the bus. Seth turned to face the Lions. Red Hoodie and his pal, a burly white dude with a lion tattoo on his neck, were nearly upon him.

“Suspenders!” he shouted at them, throwing his arms out to the sides and lunging forward much as he had when freaking out the Sears bigot. “Not belts, suspenders!”

That bought him a second or two while they hesitated. It was amazing how everybody—*everybody*—instinctively believed that insanity was catching.

Seth turned from the Lions and leaped over the steps of the bus. He landed on the concrete sidewalk, and pain shot up his shins. Half a block ahead, David was tearing ass. *Good boy*. Seth caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. He stepped to one side as the white dude with the tattoo went hurtling past in a leaping kick that would have sent Seth sprawling.

The guy stumbled and went down on one knee. Seth kicked him in the back of the head. The black guy in the red hoodie jumped out of the bus just as it pulled away. He aimed a gun at Seth. “You’re gonna pay for what you did to Sam Sam, man.”

Seth rushed him and grabbed his gun hand, forcing it up above both of their heads. Hoodie flung his hand backward, trying to pull away. He teetered on the edge of the curb. Seth kicked his feet out from under him. As he fell, Seth twisted Hoodie’s wrist and yanked the gun out of his hand. Seth kicked him in the stomach, and he fell into the street with an *oof*.

Seth turned to find Tattoo Dude coming at him with a knife. Seth tracked the trajectory of his swing and stepped outside it. Then he saw David, face stark with terror, running toward them brandishing a trash-can lid.

Everything was crystal clear—every moment, every movement. He could feel the flow of it all around him. Apart from the gun in his hand, this was becoming all too familiar.

As Tattoo Dude turned, David swung the trash-can lid at his head.

Whang! Nice shot, right across the temple.

Tattoo winced but lunged at David just the same.

No! Seth sprang. He grabbed Tattoo by the throat and tried to slam him into the ground. But Tattoo latched onto Seth's shoulder and pulled him down with him. Seth hit the sidewalk first with bone-jarring intensity. Tattoo straddled him and aimed a fist for his face, but Seth rolled him off and got to his knees. He dug the heel of his hand into Tattoo's carotid artery and held it there until he passed out.

Panting, Seth stood up. Where was David? Someone jumped on his back and wrapped an arm around his neck. *Shit!* One red-clad arm pressed against Seth's neck, cutting off his air. He heard a buzzing sound in his ears, and spots appeared before him, blotting out his vision.

Seth threw himself onto his back. He landed on top of Hoodie, who grunted and lost his grip. Seth freed himself and aimed the gun at him, backing away. "David! Where are you?"

"Here," said David, "I'm here." He took Seth's hand. The two of them backed away. Seth kept the gun trained on Hoodie until they reached an alley, and then they ran.

David led him to where he'd stashed the clothes and procured the trash-can lid. "What were you doing, going back?" said Seth, angry now.

"I couldn't just run away and leave you there." David was pale, shaking. "I didn't think I could, anyway. But you"—a faint, wondering smile teased the corners

of his lips, which then spread into an incredulous grin—"but you kicked their asses!"

Seth nodded, still pissed. "Don't ever do anything like that again. With you in the picture, I can't be as effective, because I have to protect you. That can get both of us killed. Do you understand?"

David sobered, and Seth saw in his eyes that he did. "Yes. I'm sorry."

Seth grabbed David and held him tight to his side as they made their way down the alley. "It's okay. Just don't do it again. Nice shot, though."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh." Seth paused beside a sewer drain. He wiped the gun off with the tail of his shirt and dropped it through the grating.

"Hey! What did you do that for?" said David.

"I don't like guns." Seth pushed back a memory full of chaos and pain, the Kid on the ground, Seth's finger on the trigger—*No. Not now*. "They cause more trouble than they solve."

David seemed unconvinced. "But—"

"Forget it!" Seth said, more savagely than he'd intended.

David nodded. "Okay. Let's just go home."

* * *

Back at the apartment, David got down his bottle of whiskey and two glasses. After what they'd just been through, he needed something to calm his nerves. He poured them each a measure and brought the drinks to where Seth stood looking at one of David's bookshelves.

"Have you read *The Sea-Hawk*?" David asked, noting the book Seth stared at. It had a picture of a hawk on the spine above the title.

Seth shook his head.

“It’s good. It’s about a man who’s treated unfairly and is tricked into slavery. He learns much from his captors and eventually breaks free and becomes their most feared nemesis.”

Seth stared at him. Maybe David wasn’t the only one a little shaky after what had just happened. David handed him a glass. Seth took it and downed the whiskey in one gulp. David gestured toward the bottle. “Want some more?”

“Not really,” said Seth. He had that wary look again.

“What’s wrong?” asked David.

“Nothing. Are you okay?”

Oh, of course. Seth was worried about him. David took a measured swallow of the whiskey, savoring the way it burned all the way down his throat into his belly.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just—” It hit him that they’d just had another run-in with the Lions, and again Seth had taken care of it. “I just never thought—Two days ago my life was so boring. Now...”

“I’m sorry.”

David turned and fixed him with a glare. “Why should you be sorry? You’re the one who keeps on saving my ass. How many more of them are there, Seth? Do you know?”

“No, I don’t. More. But these two may not even tell anyone about this. It’s pretty humiliating for them to have gotten beat up by a homeless guy.”

Not just any homeless guy. The way Seth had handled those two Lions—it was like he’d studied karate or something. For the first time, David wondered just how Seth had wound up on the street. But this didn’t seem like the time to ask.

There was a moment of silence as they both stared at each other. Then David took another gulp of whiskey and stepped closer, into Seth’s heat. Seth’s whiskey-tainted breath was warm on his cheek and his spicy, sweet smell, which David was already associating with feelings of safety, surrounded him.

Seth leaned forward and kissed him. David grabbed Seth's head in both hands and crushed their lips together. He pushed Seth back against the bookshelf. Seth moaned.

David pushed Seth's flannel shirt down his arms and yanked it off him. He shoved Seth's T-shirt up, then ran his hands over that broad, smooth chest. He lowered his head and licked and nipped at one of Seth's nipples, eliciting little gasps. The sounds Seth made went straight to David's stiffening cock. He shifted his attention to Seth's other nipple.

Warm hands slid beneath his shirt and stroked his back. David shivered at the light scratch of fingernails. When he lifted his head, it was Seth's turn to disrobe him. Seth latched onto his neck, sucking the tender, sensitive skin as he undid the buttons on David's shirt one by one. David couldn't wait that long.

"Come on." He grabbed Seth by the waistband and dragged him toward the bedroom.

What was it about almost dying that got him so *hot*? The now-familiar aftermath of terror fueled David's desire as he pushed Seth down onto the mattress and undid his fly. He yanked Seth's jeans and underwear off and shucked his own. The shirt came off over his head, so he didn't have to waste time with the buttons. By now Seth had cast off his T-shirt and flannel, and finally, both of them were naked.

David straddled Seth's legs and stroked his beautiful chest. He played with the rose brown nipples, drinking in the sight of Seth moaning and arching beneath him as the nubs hardened between David's fingers.

David sank to one side, pressing his body against the length of Seth's, their naked skin warm, his hard-on digging into a slender hip. He licked at one of those pebbled nipples. Seth whimpered. David latched onto it, sucking and nibbling the hard, pebbly flesh. With one hand, he traced the trail of downy black hair that ran from the patch in the middle of Seth's chest all the way down his belly to his groin.

He grasped Seth's hot, hard erection. The skin was velvety smooth. The massive organ pulsed at David's touch, and his own erection throbbed in answer.

God, how he wanted Seth inside him. It was all David could do not to grab the lotion from beside the bed, lube Seth up, and impale himself without further ado. But he forced himself to wait. He sprawled diagonally over Seth, humping his belly as he latched onto the other nipple with his lips and teeth.

Seth hissed. "David..." Long, gentle fingers stroked through David's hair, making him shiver, then traveled lower. They caressed his back in lazy circles.

David moaned wordlessly against Seth's warm skin. He shifted so their hard cocks rubbed against each other, lifting his head just in time to see Seth's eyes go wide. Seth gasped, his hips flexing.

The feeling of taut, silken skin against the burning need of David's erection made him shake. "God, Seth!"

Already he was so close. But he wanted it to last. Suddenly cognizant of how uncertain life was, of the fact that every time they made love it could be the last time, David wanted to cram in every pleasure he could think of. He raised himself up on his arms and slid down the length of Seth's body, trailing kisses from his chest to his belly. David licked and sucked at Seth's navel, then ran his tongue down the line of hair to the base of his beautiful cock.

He loved to rub his face against Seth's cock. It was the silken texture of the skin, the heady, musky smell, and the hot, undeniable proof of Seth's desire. David grasped the thick shaft and stroked his cheek up and down the length. A bead of precum glistened at the slit, and David licked it off, relishing the strong taste.

David was a bundle of need: his cock, his ass, his mouth all crying out for more, more, more. But he was determined to savor it all. He wrapped his lips around the bulging head of Seth's cock and sucked him down. While he caressed the head with lips and tongue, he stroked the base. Seth panted, thrashed, and groaned. "God, David! You're so..."

He tried to take Seth all the way down his throat, but it made him gag. He wrapped his fingers around the base of Seth's cock and focused on sucking and licking the top part instead, stroking with his lips and fingers. Seth pumped his hips, and soon they set up a rhythm. But he didn't want Seth to come—not yet. Not like this. When Seth's moans became as rhythmic as his thrusts, David pulled off him.

Seth's groan of disappointment was cut short as David captured his mouth in a torrid kiss. He wanted more, but he couldn't wait. He just couldn't wait any longer. He snatched the lotion from beside the mattress, and he smeared some on his wanting hole.

“David.”

He slathered Seth's cock with lotion.

“David, wait.”

He ignored Seth's protests. There was no time. Tomorrow the Lions might win. This might be the last time for them, and he had to have Seth now. David lowered himself onto the slickened pole. At once, the burn was intense, gut-wrenching. He couldn't stifle his gasp of pain.

“David!” Seth pushed him off, rolled him onto his back, and held him down. “What are you trying to do?”

David shook his head. He was shaking. Why was he shaking? “I don't know,” he said. His breath caught. A sob broke loose. *Oh Christ.*

Seth held him close and kissed his forehead, his face, neck, ears. Seth raised himself up on his elbows and hovered over him, staring down, his dark blue eyes intense. David's frantic lust calmed, and his true feelings came to the fore. “I'm afraid of those guys,” he said.

“I won't let anyone hurt you,” said Seth.

“I know that. It's you I'm worried about.” Because Seth would go out alone: looking for a job, picking him up from the bookshop. David couldn't stop him.

“Two things.” Seth stroked the side of David’s face. “One, in my new duds, none of them will recognize me. Two...” He paused. He sank down beside David and rested his head on one elbow. “You saw me fight them, right?”

“Yeah, you kicked their asses.”

Seth nodded. “I’m good at that, David. Don’t ask me how or why, please. Just...just know that I can take care of myself in situations a lot worse than that one was, okay?”

What was Seth talking about? What was he, some kind of black-ops guy? But he’d asked David not to ask. David leaned back, and the two of them stared at each other for a long moment.

Whatever Seth’s background was, David felt no more frightened of him now than he ever had, even when Seth still held that iron pipe and the guy he’d killed with it was lying between them. David’s instincts hadn’t led him astray so far, and right now they were telling him he could accept what Seth said and he didn’t need to know any more. When Seth was ready, he’d tell David anything he wanted him to know.

“Okay,” David said, finally allowing himself to relax.

Seth kissed him. Their lips parted, and Seth’s tongue slid into his mouth. He licked Seth back. Seth broke their kiss and moved his focus to David’s neck. Seth’s teeth gently nipping that tender flesh brought his desire roaring back. He was hard again, not quite as frantic as before, but still...

Seth reached down and stroked him, and David thrust into the warm hand. Seth kissed his way down David’s body until he brought his soft, hot lips down over David’s straining cock. He was close to coming again. “Seth, take me. Please. I want you to...”

Refusing to be rushed, Seth reached for the lotion and coated his fingers. Still sucking and licking at David’s cock, he ran slick fingers around David’s pulsing hole in maddening little circles. David felt his desire knotting in the pit of his stomach, and he clung desperately to the tattered shreds of his control.

First one slick finger and then another were insinuated inside David's eager channel. David's breath came in gasps, his chest heaving as his body roiled in the sweet torment Seth inflicted on him. There wasn't a move David could make that didn't drive him closer to the edge. He thrust his hips forward and plunged into the hot, wet suction of Seth's mouth. He pulled back and impaled himself on Seth's probing fingers, driving them right onto that magic spot inside.

"Seth! Seth, please—I can't—I'm gonna—"

At last, Seth took mercy on him and lifted his mouth off David's glistening cock. He pulled his fingers from David with an audible *pop*. David took advantage of the momentary respite to take deep breaths and regain some slight measure of control.

Then Seth knelt between David's legs. David grabbed his knees and pulled them to his chest, bringing his ass up. Seth guided that big, rock-hard cock between David's ass cheeks and pressed against the loosened ring of muscle.

God, how he loved that sensation of being pierced. He forced himself to keep breathing as his hole stretched and stretched around the slow, gentle invasion of Seth's flared cockhead.

Seth paused as the tip of his cock just filled that outer ring of muscle. David whimpered, squirming, trying to get more of Seth inside him. He felt like he was being held wide open while something deeper inside him cried out for contact. Seth chuckled. Every time David tried to thrust up, he backed off, keeping just the head of his penis inside David and threatening to withdraw entirely. He stroked a hand languidly up and down David's chest and played with his nipples.

"Jesus, Seth..." Squirming was getting him nowhere. David settled.

Seth dipped his head and nipped and kissed at David's chest as he resumed his slow penetration. His cock slid past the outer ring of muscle and filled David with delicious warmth and pressure. David sighed in relief. Seth's cock grazed that spot inside that had been longing for contact. David moaned and dug his fingers into Seth's back.

And then, apparently, Seth had had all he could take as well, because suddenly and without warning, he growled, grabbed David by the hips, and plunged into him to the root.

“Aaaaah!” David shouted as Seth’s balls slapped against his ass and he felt himself open up completely. Sweetness and warmth poured through him from his core to the tips of his fingers and toes as Seth’s hungry heat filled and possessed him.

Holding David in an unforgiving grip, Seth pistoned into him, slamming against his prostate gland again and again. And each time, pleasure sharpened to a white-hot bolt of electricity shooting through his body. Their cries took on a staccato rhythm. David bucked frantically, desperate to take everything Seth could give him.

David thought it would be over quickly at that point, but Seth seemed determined to confound all his expectations. The welcome onslaught went on and on. Seth flew at him, pounding into his hole over and over. Every forceful thrust drove David to greater heights of tormented bliss.

David was nothing but a bundle of nerve endings wrapped around the relentless power of Seth’s cock. Then Seth reached with one hand and stroked David’s raging hard-on. Suddenly, all the disparate sensations, from the fire in his veins to the tingling in his toes, coalesced into one burning, throbbing ball of sweetness at the base of his cock. The overwhelming ecstasy sharpened almost to agony, and David shouted and shot so hard he hit himself in the chin with the stuff.

His orgasm made his ass ripple around Seth’s driving cock. Seth too cried out, his thrusts becoming ragged and uncontrolled. He plunged into David and finally came to rest, pulsing his release with a groan that seemed to shake the whole building. He fell heavily across David’s chest and lay there as they both panted.

Chapter Eleven

“That’s thirty-two seventy-nine for the three Patricia Cornwells, and we’ll call you when the new Evanovich is in,” David said to Mrs. Pinkerton.

The eightysomething-year-old woman smiled at him and pulled some bills out of her change purse. “Thank you, David, and congratulations.”

“What?”

Mrs. Pinkerton’s brown eyes were clear and sharp. She might be old, but the rail-thin little woman was as astute as she’d ever been. “On finally dating. It’s about time. You make sure whoever it is treats you right, now. Otherwise they’ll have me to answer to, and I’m pretty wicked with this cane of mine.”

Shock forced a laugh out of David, and he found himself blushing, which only made him more embarrassed. “Mrs. Pinkerton! How do you kn—What makes you say I’m dating?”

She chuckled. “I’ve been coming in here every week for the past ten years, and for five of those years, you’ve been the one to ring me up. Now don’t get me wrong, David. You’re always polite, always friendly. But”—she shrugged—“there was always something weighing your smile down just a little. Today it’s gone.”

David didn’t know how to respond to that. To make matters worse, he looked up to discover Mr. Haverstock standing at the end of the rare-books section, holding a mug of steaming coffee and wearing a broad grin. “So you’ve noticed it too, Ida,” he said.

She gave Mr. Haverstock a smile. “Our young David is growing up.”

David swallowed and focused on bagging Mrs. Pinkerton’s books. He supposed he should appreciate that they were happy for him. It hadn’t escaped his notice that

Mrs. Pinkerton had avoided using any pronouns. He really did appreciate that. But no one was supposed to know about Seth, for Seth's own safety.

"We're embarrassing him," Mr. Haverstock noted.

Mrs. Pinkerton smiled and accepted her books from David. "It's the privilege of the old to torment the young. Good-bye, both of you. See you next week."

David focused on getting his breathing under control as he watched Mrs. Pinkerton exit the store, leaning on her cane.

"So when do I get to meet your paramour, David?" Mr. Haverstock rested his elbows on the counter. He sipped his coffee, his merry eyes twinkling. Mr. Haverstock was really enjoying teasing him. But was there more to it than that?

"I don't know what either of you are talking about, Mr. Haverstock. I'm not seeing anyone."

Mr. Haverstock raised an eyebrow. "The other night I was driving past the shop, and I noticed the lights on after hours. I thought you must have forgotten to turn them off, so I parked the car, but before I even opened the door, I realized I was mistaken. You were still here."

David turned away. Hands fisted in his pockets, he stared at the shelf they used to store customer holds. Five years at this job. He'd started when he was still in high school. And now...

"Listen to me, son. I didn't want to disturb the two of you, so I left again. I wasn't going to say anything because I didn't want to embarrass you. I suppose now I have, but I just wanted you to know that I don't care. I don't care that it's a man you're seeing, David."

David turned again to face Mr. Haverstock. He searched his round, cheerful face and found no evidence of anything but sincerity. It was true. David took a deep breath. "Thank you. But about the other night, I swear that was just—We didn't mean to—"

Mr. Haverstock held up both hands. "Just don't make a habit of it."

David, awash with relief and gratitude, nodded. “Thanks, Mr. Haverstock. Really. I... Just thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. You know I’ve always thought of you as family.”

Was Mr. Haverstock gay? Was that what he was trying to tell David? The thought had never occurred to him before. He’d known Mr. Haverstock his entire life. He’d been a good friend of David’s father, and as far as David knew, he’d always been single. In Mr. Haverstock’s generation, *confirmed bachelor* was often a euphemism for queer, but—

His speculations were cut short when Mr. Haverstock said, “Have you heard the latest about the murder?”

“What?”

Eagerness lit his eyes. David had never known him to take such an interest in local crime before. He wasn’t even much of a mystery reader, but for some reason this case seemed to fascinate him.

“I have a friend who’s a detective on the force, and I spoke with her just to see if they’d come up with anything yet. They ran the prints on the murder weapon, and they matched those on a handgun found at the scene of an unsolved John Doe case from three years ago.”

David froze. It seemed as if time had come to a halt, and yet Mr. Haverstock sipped his coffee and regarded David calmly, giving no sign that the world had stopped turning. David forced himself to speak. “That’s interesting.”

“Isn’t it? I confess, I find myself quite caught up in this case. Something about it happening so nearby.”

Words swirled around in David’s mind, their implications slowly coming into focus. The prints on the murder weapon. Seth’s prints. A prior murder. Seth’s prints on a handgun. Seth saying, “*I don’t like guns.*” Those marks on his back and his reluctance to talk about his past.

“Are you okay, David?”

He realized Mr. Haverstock was staring at him with some concern. "Yeah...it's just weird. I mean, I go by there on my way home all the time and..."

Mr. Haverstock nodded gravely. "I know. And the murderer could be someone we see every day. That reminds me. Remember that homeless guy who used to hang around? I haven't seen him in a while, have you?"

On automatic now, David shook his head.

"Well, tonight we close early, so I'll give you a ride home. And then, on the nights you close, maybe you should have your new fella pick you up." He started to walk away, and David nearly sagged with relief, but then Mr. Haverstock turned again and pointed a finger at him. "Now, don't think you're off the hook."

Terror gripped David's heart, and he wasn't sure if it was for him or for Seth or for both of them. "W-what?"

"I still want to meet him, whoever he is."

For a second, David couldn't parse the words. Then he realized Mr. Haverstock was referring to his boyfriend. "Oh...yeah."

Finally, Mr. Haverstock went into the back room again, and David sat down on the stool behind the counter. He was shaking. He had to get a handle on himself. Another murder? Seth? No. He shook his head. There had to be some other explanation. Seth had only killed the one guy because he was about to rape David, and in yesterday's fracas, he could have shot both of those guys, but he hadn't. Seth wasn't a murderer. He couldn't be.

* * *

Dressed in his new jeans and his nice shirt with a borrowed tie around his neck and his hair trimmed, Seth walked into the McDonald's on North Street and approached the counter. David was going to be really mad about the hair, but Seth knew damn well his chances for getting hired were better with it short, so this morning after David had gone to work, he'd cut it.

“Welcome to McDonald’s, how can I help you?” asked the young woman behind the counter.

Seth took in her uniform, her uninspired expression. He’d give anything to wear that stupid outfit and be bored to tears behind a counter if it meant he could bring some money home to David. “Yeah. Are you hiring?”

“We’re always taking applications,” she said, brightening a little. “Here.” She handed him a form and a pen and pointed to one of the tables. “You can fill this out and bring it back.”

His heart sank. An application form. Of course. What the fuck did he expect? “Uh. Okay if I take it with me and bring it back later?”

“Sure,” she said, turning to the next person in line, already forgetting about him. “Welcome to McDonald’s, can I take your order?”

Seth took the vile form and folded it neatly. He tucked it in the breast pocket of his jacket.

It was the same at Hardee’s, Starbucks, Kmart, even the little mom-and-pop hardware store on Seventh. In fact, the only place that hadn’t handed him an application form was the Chaldean party store on Woodward, and there the guy behind the counter just flat out told him, “*We only hire family.*”

Fuck. He’d been hoping, really hoping that he’d just walk in someplace, ask if they needed help, and some gruff yet kindly old guy would hand him a broom. What century was he in, anyway? These days *everybody* had you fill out a form.

And Seth couldn’t read. Or write.

He stalked back toward the apartment, jacket pocket stuffed with useless forms and a dark cloud hanging over his head. Now what was he going to do?

He could ask David to fill the forms out for him, he supposed, but David would want to know why, and then he’d have to tell him. And there was already so much distance between what David had to offer him and what he had to give in return.

And David was a huge reader. Big-time book guy. His apartment was practically a library. Not that he'd be a dick about it, but Seth could just imagine the look of incredulous pity on his face when he found out the truth.

It made him want to throw up. What future was there for them if he was never anything but a charity project for David?

Now he was mad. Not mad at David, just...mad. He stomped up the steps to the apartment and went inside. He stared around at all the books on their shelves, lining almost every wall. He felt like they were sneering at him. *David is ours*, they seemed to say. *He'll never really belong to you. He's too good for you.*

Seth tensed against the impulse to pull them all from the shelves and rip them to shreds. That would be a fine way to repay David for his kindness. What was wrong with him? Why had he even come back here? He couldn't stay with David. What in the hell had he been thinking? David was a nice, normal guy, and he was...

A killer. Dark memories threatened to overwhelm him and he went into the bedroom, where more books mocked him from the walls as he took off his new jeans and his new shirt, and put his old clothes back on. There'd been a time, he remembered, as he ran his hands over the threadbare Pistons shirt, the old flannel shirt with its plaid pattern faded to near oblivion, the soft, familiar army jacket—there'd been a time when his hidey-hole under the overpass had seemed a paradise compared to what he'd run from.

The Pit. He'd die before he ever went back there. He'd go back to the street if he had to, but not that, never again.

But maybe there was another option. Maybe he didn't have to leave David entirely. He looked at his new clothes, lying on the bed. He had to pay David back for those if nothing else, and he knew a way. He'd done it often enough when it was too cold to sleep rough or he was too hungry to care about piddly shit like dignity and self-respect. And it wasn't like he really had any true claim to those things anyway. The least he could do was pay David back for his generosity, and maybe David wouldn't have to know, and he could just...

Seth put a stop to that train of thought. He went and got the scissors he'd used to cut his hair. Too bad he'd done that. It would have been better long for this, but it was too late now. He took off his Pistons shirt and cut the bottom half off so that it would leave his midriff bare. His old jeans were full of holes and hung loose around his hips. So much the better. Seth put on the T-shirt again and went out, leaving the flannel, the army coat, and all his fancy new things behind.

* * *

David had spent all afternoon thinking about that prior murder and Seth's possible involvement in it. There was some explanation. He just knew it. He knew Seth. Seth was no killer. Now, sitting on the beige leather upholstery of Mr. Haverstock's ten-year-old Mercedes with the rain beating against the windows, David felt almost light again. Eager to get home and clear the air. As David's apartment building came into view, he put his hand on the door handle and undid his safety belt.

"Good night, David," Mr. Haverstock called as David got out.

"Good night. Thanks for the ride." He slammed the door shut. It was raining. David ran into the building and up the stairs.

His apartment was empty. David walked from room to room, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was almost as if Seth had never been here, except that Seth's new clothes, his job-hunting outfit, lay on the bed. And that meant he'd been back here since he'd gone to fill out applications.

He's left you, whispered a voice inside. And David shook his head. No. That couldn't be. Not after everything they'd shared. *But has he shared everything with you?* David paced, not wanting to listen to his doubts. There was an explanation for the prior murder, and there was an explanation for this.

But he couldn't just sit around here and wait.

Chapter Twelve

It was raining. Seth leaned on the wall of the abandoned warehouse on Vine and Sixth and tried to look provocative as he kept an eye out for patrons, rivals, and Lions. Fortunately, it wasn't long at all before a car slowed down and pulled into the parking lot next to the warehouse. Seth took another look up and down the street, checking for cops, before turning and sauntering toward the car.

He peered into the driver's-side window as he approached. This was the time when you wanted to let your instincts guide you. Whatever first impression you got of the guy, you went with it. Most of the time, they were just looking to get their rocks off, and Seth had the luxury of knowing he could fight his way out of a bad situation if he made a mistake. Not everyone was so fortunate. He'd done this more times than he cared to remember, and it had often bought him a night out of the freezing cold or a meal. Mostly he just sucked cock. It wasn't that big a deal.

This guy, for instance. He wore a vintage suit and a skinny black tie worthy of the Rat Pack. And had a wedding ring. Married hipster yuppie. Not quite progressive enough to come out of the closet. Easy pay. Seth put his hands on top of the door frame and leaned down, fogging the window with his breath. The trick rolled the window down, and Seth gave him a grin. "Hey."

The trick licked his lips. "Here?"

Seth nodded. "Twenty."

The guy got his wallet out in a hurry. "Sure."

Seth cursed inside. He'd forgotten. He was well groomed now. He could have asked for a lot more.

"Here." The trick handed him a twenty.

Goddamn it, Seth thought. But it was too late now. He stuck the twenty in his pocket, went around to the passenger-side door, and opened it. As he put one foot on the doorjamb, he found Hipster Yuppie already turned toward him in his seat, his pants undone. Seth swallowed, took a deep breath, and reminded himself he was doing this so he could pay David back the money he'd spent on him. Here he went.

"Seth?"

David. Behind him. Christ on a crutch. For one mad instant Seth actually thought about climbing into the car, shutting the door, and telling the trick to drive. It might have been better than having to turn around.

But turn around he did, because it was David, and he couldn't do anything else, ever.

The look of hurt recrimination on David's face hit Seth in the gut like a mailed fist. Seth took a step back. "David," he said, having no idea what he meant by that.

David stared at him, wide-eyed. Horrified. He was getting the full effect of Seth's outfit now. His reaction made Seth break out in a full-body blush of shame. "Seth, what are you doing?"

Seth's shame turned to anger. David had never had to choose between sucking dick and going hungry. Seth took a deep breath, embracing the anger. It made him feel so strong. He remembered feeling like this. He crossed his arms and cocked his hips, tilting his head with attitude. "Working."

David's eyebrows disappeared behind his bangs. "Working? Like this? This is your new job?"

Thought fled. "Don't you fucking play the bitch with me, you sheltered little— Yes, this is my new job, my old job, best goddamn job I've ever been able to get, all right? Yeah. What the fuck did you think you brought home, David?"

The look on his face made Seth want to die right then and there. The last thing he ever, ever wanted to do was make David afraid of him. *No. No.*

How could everything go so completely to shit so fast?

“Why in God’s name did you ask me to live with you? Why didn’t you just let me do what I was supposed to do: blow you, get a meal and a shower, and go?”

Every new expression on David’s face was a fresh torment. His fear had made Seth’s insides cold and heavy like he’d been fucked with something that shouldn’t be used that way. Now David’s wounded guilt made all the pain Seth had ever known well up around him. He was drowning.

“Seth, I’m sorry,” said David. He held his hand out. David cared for him. Seth was no fool. He knew that, and he knew how rare and wonderful that was. In fact, it was so amazing that it had seduced him into thinking a relationship between them could work. But there was an ocean between them, and David would drown too, if Seth let him. None of this was David’s fault. Seth could endure whatever life had in store for him, but he couldn’t let David suffer.

He hung his head and took a step toward David, holding his hand out in front of him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. You’re not a—You’re amazing.” He forced himself to look up at David, whose eyes were two dark pits, and he was falling into them. “But you deserve better than what I can give you,” he said, and his breath left him in a rush, because it was true. True.

“Hey, either blow me or give me my twenty back.”

David leaned around Seth, as fierce as Seth had ever seen him. “Fuck you, asshole! Get the fuck out of here!”

“David, go home.” But it was no good. David was bent on menacing the trick. *Great.*

“Screw you, asshole,” said the trick, not about to be outdone in the make-Seth’s-life-hell department. “Who the fuck are you, his pimp?”

David stepped to the side so Seth was no longer between them. “That’s my boyfriend, you creep. And he’s not blowing you, so get lost.”

Seth moved to block David’s access to the trick. And vice versa, because Hipster Yuppie, revealing a hidden idiot streak, got out of the car, waving his cell

phone. “What the fuck is this? Some kind of badger-game shakedown? Fuck you guys. I’m calling the cops.”

Seth put his hands on David’s shoulders and held him back. David struggled against him, all the while leaning over Seth’s shoulder to yell at the trick. “What, and get your twenty—” David shot Seth a look. “That’s *all*?”

At a loss, Seth shrugged.

David focused on the trick again. “Your twenty back for the illegal sex you were illegally buying?”

Enough. Seth grabbed David under the arms and walked him bodily away from Hipster Yuppie. “David, shut up.”

Fortunately, HY saw the logic in David’s argument. “Jerk-offs,” he said, putting the phone away and getting back into the car.

“Wait,” said Seth. And then to David: “Wait.” He paused for David’s nod before releasing him. He went to the car and gave the trick his twenty back. “Sorry, man.”

He snatched the bill from Seth’s hand. “Fuck you.” He rolled up the window and drove off. Seth sighed, watching him pull out of the lot. Suddenly, he felt a hundred years old.

“Seth.”

He turned around, and David was still standing there. The rain picked up, pelting them with cold water. In minutes they’d be soaked to the bone, both of them. Drowning. “David, I know you care about me.”

David nodded and started toward him, but Seth put his hands up and stepped back. “And I care about you, and that’s why I can’t let you take me back. It’s not fair to you. And it’s not fair to me either. I’m not—It’s not—You don’t know... You can’t know...”

David, his hands slack at his sides, nodded, and for a moment Seth thought he’d accepted the inevitable. Grief spiked through him, sharp and shocking. And then David spoke.

“I know about the other murder.”

No. Oh no. It was bad enough he knew Seth was a whore. But the thought of him knowing about the Kid and the Pit was even worse. Seth never, ever should have let him get involved. But it was too late now. The only thing to do now was minimize the impact. Seth couldn't let David's life be poisoned too.

He had to convince David never to have anything to do with him again. The best way to do that was to tell the truth.

“Which one?” he asked.

Chapter Thirteen

“*Which one?*” David hadn’t expected that.

Seth saw his reaction. “See, you *don’t* know. You can’t—I can’t let you...”

Whatever it was, it was high time they got down to it, preferably at home. Seth didn’t look good. He was shivering from the rain, and his eyes were shadowed. He looked dazed—not just distraught, but like he might collapse or something. Extremity. He was in extremity. And determined to stay out in the rain, where he would only get worse. Get sick. David needed to figure out a way to get him home. “You’re right. I don’t know, because you haven’t told me. But I can know. I’m a human being, Seth. I can understand, if you tell me.”

Seth stared at him with eyes like bottomless pits. David could see him warring with himself. He swayed. David grabbed him.

“I won’t tell anyone. Whatever it is, just whisper it in my ear, and the rain will wash your words away. Only you and I will ever know.”

Seth let out a deep breath. It gusted against David’s ear like a warm wind. Seth gathered him close, and David drank in the smell of him—whiskey and ambrosia and now, a hint of iron from the rain. David clung to him, afraid of losing him again.

“My grandmother died.” Seth’s voice was quiet. His lips brushed David’s hair as he spoke, making little shivers creep across his skull. “We lived up north. She had a little place in the woods. We didn’t have much, but we managed. Then, after she died, these men came and said she owed taxes. They said the place belonged to them now. So I came down to the city.

“I met a guy in the bus station,” Seth continued. “He said he could get me a job.” His voice broke. “It was...” He fell silent, and David reached a hand up to stroke the side of his face. Seth was shivering. They were both wet to the bone, and the rain was still coming down. David was about to suggest they go home, finish this conversation in a tub of hot water, but Seth found the strength to go on, and David didn’t dare stop him. “It wasn’t no job, David. We were slaves. It’s this place called the Pit. It’s an underground fighting ring. Blood sport. Men go there to watch other men kill each other and to bet on the outcome.”

David wanted to protest that such a place couldn’t exist, but he knew better. He knew what kinds of things could go on, underground, in a town like this in times like these. “Oh Seth...”

“We were... At first they drugged us and kept us in chains. They trained us, and either you learned or they whipped you. And the ones who didn’t keep up, the ones who were too weak or sick or gentle to come along the way they wanted—they gave to the more seasoned fighters...for them to...practice on. It was horrible, David. You didn’t want to be one of those guys. So I learned. I learned to fight, but I didn’t kill. I had a lot of trouble over that. The crowd wanted brutality, and management wanted what the crowd wanted. They punished me, but I refused to kill or maim.”

David was shaking, his mind blank but for the image of Seth in chains, bleeding from the lash, forced to fight for his life. He took a deep breath. He had to stay strong for Seth. “How old were you, Seth... How long were you there?”

“I was seventeen when I left home. How long I was there... I don’t really know. Long enough to see a lot of guys die. Probably...a year or so.”

Shit. “But you got out.”

Seth swallowed and nodded. “One night they threw this kid in my cell. He was just this kid. Not much younger than me, but he was new, and he wasn’t working out. Some of ’em couldn’t adapt. They’d just go inside themselves.

“They kept us in cells. No walls. Just bars. There was no privacy. There were other men on all sides, screaming for his blood. Screaming for me to...to...fuck him...to hurt him. I didn’t want to. I saw how scared he was, but I knew this was a test. Management was fed up with me. If I didn’t brutalize him, they’d kill us both, and not quickly. I got him in a headlock, and I whispered to him to scream bloody murder like I was raping him. And that’s what I pretended to do. And then I put my hands around his throat, and I told him to pretend I was choking him. And he did, and he pretended to be dead. And I shouted for the guard to come and get this sorry carcass out of my cell, and he did.

“I rushed that guard, and I got his cattle prod from him, and I...I killed him with it. The Kid was right behind me. We just ran. We took the next guard by surprise, and I got a gun off him, and we were all the way to the back door when another guard shot at us. He hit the Kid in the leg, and I shot the guard and he fell down, but there were two more coming and the Kid couldn’t walk, let alone run.” Seth’s voice broke, and when he spoke again, it was with a pleading note as if he was begging David to understand. “I turned to fire on them. One of them raised his gun to shoot at me, and I...I dodged, but...it all happened so fast. I shot—”

Seth let go of him and sank to the ground. He wrapped his arms around his knees and buried his head. A high, thin cry escaped him and was cut short. David crouched down and put his arms around Seth, rocking him.

“I meant to hit the guard, but I missed—I killed him, David,” said Seth. “The Kid. I shot that poor boy in the head, and I ran.”

Oh God. “Seth. Oh, Seth.” It was all David could do, just hold him and rock him. “It was an accident. You—”

Seth wasn’t listening. “I put an anonymous call in to the police about the place. And I hid and watched when they raided it, but it was empty. They’d moved. That had happened a few times while I was there. They’d tranq us all in the middle of the night, and we’d wake up someplace else. Same lousy little cells, but other things

would be different. Different arenas. I don't know where they're at now. Maybe part of me doesn't want to know."

David felt wrung out. He could only imagine how Seth felt. They were both shivering. David hugged Seth as tight as he could and kissed the top of his head. "Come on. Let's go home."

Seth looked up at him, his eyes and nose and mouth red from crying. "What?"

"I said, let's go home."

Seth looked confused. "But...I thought...telling you all this you'd finally see— Don't you see? You can't have me in your life. I'm a killer. A whore. A—"

"No. A hero. That's what you are. You didn't just escape that place, Seth. You risked everything to protect that boy, and what happened to him was not your fault. And then, then, when you were out and safe, you risked yourself again trying to keep more people from being hurt.

"Those...those *bastards* left that boy and the gun you used behind for the cops to find. To make it harder for you. It's not your fault. None of it. And no way in hell am I leaving you out here to freeze and starve and give twenty-dollar blowjobs."

Seth didn't seem to hear him. His eyes were unfocused. He seemed trapped in his memories. "I wanted to make it right. And I can't. I'll never be able to."

"But you saved me," said David. "And if you don't stay with me, who is going to protect me from the Lions? I need you."

Seth blinked. He took a deep breath and looked around as if just awakening. He stared at David. "You're wet," he said.

David smiled. "Yeah, and we're both going to catch pneumonia if we don't get out of this rain."

Seth took a deep breath and scrubbed at his face. "I still don't see how you can take me home again after all you know now. I can just watch out for you from out here. I don't have to go inside with you."

“Shhhh. All that’s changed is that I have a better appreciation now for your gentleness and your strength. You’re a hero. My hero. Now come on. Stand up. We’ll save the world tomorrow.”

Seth got to his feet. He was shaking so hard David wasn’t sure he could stand on his own, but of course he did. David kept his arm around him anyway. “That’s it. Good boy. Come on.”

Chapter Fourteen

Seth had never felt so raw and exposed before in his life, and at the same time, so docile. He let David take him back to the apartment. He sat obediently on the toilet seat while David ran a bath and stripped his clothes off. The steam from the hot water quickly filled the little bathroom, and the misty atmosphere mirrored the way Seth felt inside: vague and indistinct—like he was packed with cotton.

Shock. That's what this was. He was in shock, but whether it was the result of reliving the days in the Pit or of David's still wanting him after hearing the truth, he couldn't be certain. Both maybe. All Seth knew was that he was on unfamiliar ground now, far from any landmarks he'd ever known. And David was his only guide.

David took his arm, and he stood up.

"Get in," David said, nodding at the bath. "I'm going to get us both some tea, and then I'll join you."

The hot water enveloped Seth, and he sank down to his chin, letting his mind go blank as the heat seeped into his body. The door opened, and David came in with two steaming mugs. "Here," he said, sitting on the edge of the tub and handing Seth a mug. "Drink this."

Seth sat up and took the mug. Breathing in, he smelled lemon, honey, and whiskey. He drank. Hot, bitter, and sweet, it warmed him on the inside just as the water in the tub warmed him on the outside. When he looked up again, David was undressing. He pulled off his T-shirt, revealing the smooth, pale, unblemished skin of his back. His shoulders were dusted with a light sprinkling of freckles and blond hair.

He turned toward Seth. Blond curls graced David's upper chest, his rose pink nipples peeking out from amid the thick hair. Seth's gaze traveled downward, following the line of hair that ran down the middle of David's flat belly to his navel and onward, disappearing below the waistband of his jeans. David shot him a grin and undid his fly, skinning out of his jeans and boxers at the same time.

David's body was compact, lithe, beautiful. Seth stared at the long muscles of his thighs, and as David bent to pull off his socks, he feasted his eyes on David's tight, round butt. David turned to face him again, and Seth forced his gaze up from the beautiful cock in its nest of blond hair to David's face. And all his breath left him as he took in the gentle smile and those liquid brown eyes, shining at him with love.

Seth realized he was blushing, and not just from the heat of the water. That look. David knew the worst about him now: the violent, the pathetic, and the vile, and still he could look at him like that. Seth's hands shook, and he spilled whiskey and lemon into the bath. Awkwardly, he set the mug down on the edge of the tub before he dumped the whole thing in the water and they had a whiskey, lemon, and honey bath. There was a hard lump in his throat, and he could barely think, but he made up his mind right there and then that he was going to do everything in his power to make this work between them. He'd learn to read; he'd get a good job. If David could still accept him, then anything was possible, and Seth would find a way to live up to that. Whatever was asked of him, he'd do it.

"Scoot up," said David.

Well, that was easy enough. Until Seth realized that David meant to get into the tub behind him...where he would have a full view of Seth's wreck of a back. He hesitated a fraction of a second, but his resolution ruled out anything but obedience to this seemingly simple request. Seth scooted.

The water rose as David got in behind him and put his legs on either side. Seth sat forward awkwardly, heart pounding and face aflame. David had touched his

scars before, but he'd never had this close a look at them. Seth closed his eyes. He wanted to flee, but he couldn't. All he could do was endure.

Warm hands stroked his shoulders and then traveled downward. David ran his fingers over Seth's scars, those mementos of pain from Seth's former life.

"Oh Seth..." There was no recrimination in that voice, no revulsion. Only sadness. And his touch was gentle.

It felt good. Despite the confused mix of feelings raging in Seth's heart, his body began to relax.

David shifted, and then Seth felt David's lips soft and warm against his scars. Kissing. He was kissing them. Soft, soothing kisses on the most unloved part of his body. David's lips and fingers went to work on every knot of pain and tension in Seth's battlefield of a back. Soothing and easing, sending little ripples of release all through his body. Currents of delight ran up and down Seth's spine and outward to his fingertips and toes. Tension he'd never even known he was holding drained from him, leaving him feeling boneless and suffused with...ease.

Until now, Seth's back had never been anything but a grim reminder that no matter how cold and hungry he might be, things could always be worse. He'd never, ever suspected it could be a source of pleasure, but here he was, drooling into the bathwater as wave after wave of warm delight washed over him.

The question of whether he deserved to feel this good crept into his mind. He thought of the Kid. He didn't even know the Kid's name. He'd only been maybe a year younger than Seth at that time, and yet Seth had always thought of him as "the Kid."

Seth hadn't been able to save him; it was true. He'd never be okay with that, but at least he'd been there for David when he needed him. He'd protected David twice now, and—the thought sent a spark of hope alight in him, and its warmth drove away his despair—he'd be able to keep on protecting David. Yes. So. His life wasn't useless, after all.

The emotional roller-coaster ride Seth had been on ever since David had asked him home that first night finally dropped him off at exhausted. David's gentle touches, the warm water, the whiskey and lemon all conspired to make his eyes close, his head droop.

"Come on. You're falling asleep." David touched him on the shoulder. Somehow David was out of the bath and holding out a towel. Seth shook his head and got to his feet.

Seth let David towel him off and lead him to the bedroom, where they lay down together. David gathered him in his arms and held him close, stroking his hair, his back. "It's okay now, Seth. You don't have to worry anymore. I've got you now."

Seth closed his eyes and let David's words sink in. It was nice to lie there and listen to David's heartbeat, his breath. Real. This was real. Seth hugged David even closer and let oblivion take him.

THE END

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Jessica Freely has been writing and publishing genre fiction under a variety of names for over fifteen years, but it wasn't until she stumbled upon a stash of Jay and Silent Bob fanfiction that she found her true calling: male/male romance. She hasn't looked back since.