



Aftermath

Southern Spirits

BAILEY BRADFORD

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-melting*.

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AFTERMATH

Bailey Bradford

Dedication

To childhood memories, and childhood friends—those we still have,
and those we've lost but will always love.

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Chapter One

Darren Brown eyed Red, the Rhode Island Red rooster, cautiously, watching for any signs of agitation from the bird. Generally he didn't have any problems when it was time to feed the critters and gather eggs, but every now and then that red rooster got his feathers ruffled and decided Darren looked like a walking whipping post. The rooster tipped its head to the side and clucked. It was the sign Darren had been waiting for. He wouldn't have to toss the food from the bucket and run for cover this morning.

A ripple of unease clambered down Darren's spine as he stepped off the front porch of old widow Hawkins' place. Virginia, the café owner, and Deputy Nixon, along with Nixon's life partner, Carlin, had bought the place with the intention of turning it into a hang-out for the elderly. There'd been talk of Darren staying on once the conversion was done, kind of like a groundskeeper or something, Darren wasn't sure. The talk never went far since Darren didn't do much to encourage it. He didn't know how long he was going to be in town and hated the idea of letting anyone down if he left. As it was, Virginia and the others had agreed to let Darren stay here as long as he kept the place up—and took care of the chickens, a job that had, up until Darren moved in a couple of months ago, belonged to Deputy Nixon.

Darren glanced around as the uncomfortable feeling increased. He knew that sensation, the one that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. It was the one that told him someone was watching him, and his heartbeat accelerated until he thought he might burst an artery. But as hard as he looked, he couldn't find anything suspicious. Nothing was out of place, and there was no one here but him and the chickens. He'd heard rumours of ghosts—spirits, Severo insisted they be called, and didn't that little guy creep Darren out? Those pale eyes seemed to drill right into Darren so he did his best to avoid meeting them. It was a challenge since Severo liked to have lunch almost every day with his boyfriend, Sheriff Stanley.

Still, despite the talk, Darren didn't worry about such things as lingering spirits. People just stopped when they died. He knew that, believed it if he didn't believe anything else. One second they were there, laughing, loving you, then they weren't, and everything about them

vanished except what you carried in your memory. Even if you wished you didn't carry anything of them at all.

Darren shook off the paranoia that threatened to swamp him. No one was here besides him. He hefted the bucket of chicken feed and waved it at Red. "You looking for this?" Darren flinched. The sound of his own voice only seemed to emphasise how alone he was, yet he couldn't shake the idea that he was being watched.

The rooster clucked and flapped its wings. Darren shoved aside his discomfort and reached into the bucket for a handful of feed. He tossed the mixture on the ground and waited. Sure enough, Red gave him a haughty look, or as haughty a look as a chicken could give, then strutted to the feed and began pecking at it. Soon the hens joined the rooster, fussing and clucking as Darren spread the food around.

"Be nice," he scolded when a few of them got agitated. "There's plenty to go around." Darren edged around the chickens and went into the coop, gathering eggs and placing them in the bucket. When he thought he had them all, he left the coop and headed back to the house. He'd put the eggs in used egg cartons and take them to Virginia, the owner of Virginia's Café and his boss, who liked to use them while they were nice and fresh.

Since it was Sunday and the café wasn't opening until eight a.m. instead of the usual five a.m., Darren had plenty of time to get to work and deliver the eggs. Used to waking at four or earlier, he'd found himself wide awake and bored out of his mind by four-thirty. He'd tossed and turned and even beat off, but finally gave up on sleeping in and got up around five-thirty. Now it was a little after six and he figured there was no reason to hang around any longer. Virginia would already be at the café, and he could go in early, she wouldn't mind.

Darren loped up the porch steps and that creepy feeling ramped up in intensity until he couldn't draw a breath. Hand tightening on the handle of the bucket, he pivoted slowly and scoured the area. Nothing. No one. It looked as it had every day so far. Darren inhaled and forced air into his lungs then shuffled to the front door. He hadn't got more than three steps inside before he heard the *pop* of the screen door at the back of the house slapping shut.

The bucket of eggs slipped from his suddenly lax fingers. Fear flashed through him, settling in his joints, turning them to gel so that Darren's knees buckled and hit the floor. Fragile shells cracked under his weight, warm wet yolk and albumin seeping through his denim jeans.

Dizzy with the intensity of his fear, Darren caught himself as he fell forward. His hands slipped in the mess he made, undermining his efforts to keep himself from going down. Darren's chin cracked sickeningly against the floor but he didn't notice it or feel the pain. All he could hear was the voice in his head telling him he'd been found and begging him not to run again.

* * * *

The ride through town usually brought with it a strong desire to put down roots, but this morning as Darren pedalled down Second Street, the urge to flee was almost overwhelming. His entire head hurt from the fall he'd taken, or maybe it was just the throbbing in his chin racing up his jaw line to his temples. At that point Darren couldn't separate or pinpoint the pain, it just hurt.

The morning air carried a sharp nip, the promise of a North Texas winter in the wind. Darren wanted to believe that was the cause of the chills that kept pebbling his skin, but that same pervasive feeling of being watched hadn't left him yet. Darren had hoped riding down Second, which was parallel to and behind Main, where Virginia's Café was located, would free him of the sensation but it didn't.

Glancing around as unobtrusively as possible, Darren checked the nooks and crannies that were part of this small town. The buildings on Main were relatively well maintained, but one street over that was not the case. Older abandoned shops with peeling, faded paint were scattered between even older and worse looking homes, some of which looked dangerously close to toppling over. One of them was almost bare of paint and leaned so severely Darren thought a sneeze would bring it down. He wondered if anyone lived there, and if so, did they receive any kind of help? Maybe whoever lived there, if anyone did, would benefit from the plans for Mrs Hawkins' place.

He pedalled up an incline, grimacing at the burn in his calves. Having a car was a pipe dream. Even if he knew how to drive, he'd have to get a license and something to drive. It'd take years to save up enough for something decent, then there'd be insurance and maintenance—and gas, God, that alone would eat most of his paycheque! At least riding the bike might help him build up muscles. He'd always been thin, able to eat anything and not put on an ounce. Other people may have envied him, but Darren hated how gaunt he looked.

Darren pedalled faster since he was approaching an incline, grunting until he reached the top of the rise, then groaning as the ride became easier. Maybe he'd start walking again instead, but he'd have to leave a lot earlier. Mrs Hawkins' place was a good ten miles from town. A gust of cold wind dispelled that notion—he'd freeze his 'nads off if he had to walk. As it was, biking was going to suck, but at least it wouldn't take as long.

As he neared the corner of Second and Shire, the uneasy feeling growing stronger until Darren shuddered with it. It was unbearable and sent a surge of fear through him that seemed to settle in the marrow of his bones. Rather than stopping and looking for the cause of his intense discomfort, Darren took the corner so fast he nearly laid the bike on its side. A horn blasted from behind him, scaring a decade off his life. Darren righted the bike and waved one hand over his shoulder in apology but he didn't slow down. He cut through the alley and steered into the lot behind Virginia's Café. Only then did he pause to check the surrounding area.

Seeing nothing suspicious, Darren tried to convince himself it was only his imagination screwing with him. What had happened earlier in the house had unsettled him, but once he'd calmed down he'd almost persuaded himself he was overreacting. The solid wood back door had been closed, the wind could have caught the screen door or some kind of critter could have pawed at it.

That didn't explain why either door was unlocked though, and as much as Darren tried to tell himself he must have just forgot to lock up the night before, he was pretty sure he hadn't. Locking the place up was such a habit he couldn't pull a clear image to mind of actually doing it, but by that same habit, he wouldn't have *not* done it. But what if he hadn't?

Fed up with his own uncertainty Darren parked the bike by the back wall. He got off and dug the chain and lock from his pack—Virginia's assurances that no one would steal his bike aside. He then looped the chain through the spokes and secured the bike as best he could.

Hefting the pack up from the ground where he set it, Darren tried to prepare himself for the day ahead. Dealing with people always set his nerves on edge, but he needed this job, and having a place to stay instead of sleeping on the street was an unexpected bonus. Virginia had let him stay with her for a while, but Darren hadn't felt comfortable in her home. He was always waiting to screw up, to do something that would get him thrown out and fired. At least at Widow Hawkins' place he didn't feel he had to be perfect.

Darren took the three steps in a quick jaunt, glancing at the cheap watch on his wrist as he did so. Almost eight, he'd barely made it on time. The back door opened just as he reached for it and he snatched his hand away to keep from getting his knuckles rapped.

Virginia stood in the doorway, her plump arms folded over an even plumper chest as she stared at him, her pencilled-in eyebrows climbing comically high on her brow. She looked like a deranged clown with those too-dark eyebrows and the thick makeup she had on. Her cheeks were almost glowing, and Darren didn't think it was from anything natural. Certainly the sparkly blue shadow on her lids wasn't natural. It wouldn't be, not on anyone.

"What'd you do to yourself, Darren?"

Darren tried to look away from the electric blue eye shadow. His gaze bounced to the bright blush then back up before he settled for staring at his hands where they were wrapped around the strap of his backpack.

"I fell. Broke the eggs, too." He really hoped Virginia wasn't counting on fresh eggs today. His hands tightened on the strap.

"Forget about the eggs, we have plenty. Get inside and let me see what you've done."

Darren didn't think she sounded angry, and he didn't think enough of himself to believe she was concerned for him as a person. As an employee, maybe. Virginia would be short-handed if he wasn't fit to work. He followed her inside, squeezing past as she held the door open.

"Just go to my office and have a seat. I'll be right there."

Inside the office, Darren tried to relax but it just wasn't possible. Virginia's scrutiny had been unnerving. On the other hand, at least the creepy feeling of being watched had dissipated, allowing him to think rationally about this morning's events. He *had* to have left the back doors unlocked. What would have been the point in someone coming in and doing nothing?

Darren's stomach cramped, less from hunger—though he'd missed breakfast—than from fear that he might lose his job since he'd broken the eggs and shown up looking like he'd been smacked with a baseball bat. Hunger was something he was used to, although these past few months he hadn't experienced it nearly as often as he had before Virginia found him. He didn't look forward to stealing what bits of food he could again.

Virginia's rapid footsteps warned of her approach. Darren quickly sat in the wicker chair in front of her desk, settling his backpack on the floor at his feet. He fingered the knot

on the underside of his chin, jerking his hand away when fiery bolts of pain rocketed up to make his head pound.

"Did you take anything for that? Ibuprofen or something like it?"

"No, ma'am." Darren shifted uncomfortably, the wicker chair making a crackling noise that had him tensing for another fall.

"Sit still and let me get a better look." Virginia's hand was gentler than her brisk tone as she tipped his head back. It still hurt but he didn't so much as flinch. He could handle a bit of pain.

Virginia clucked her tongue, the sound so much like the chickens he'd fed earlier that Darren was hard pressed not to smile. "Got yourself good, boy." Virginia bent so close her nose nearly touched his chin. Darren found himself fascinated by her glittery eye shadow and hairy spider leg-looking eyelashes. His own mother had never been one to wear makeup, and she was the only other woman he'd ever been this close to, so he was bizarrely entranced. His fingers itched to touch Virginia's lashes and see if they were stiff or soft. They looked...crunchy, he decided, like the makeup on them was hardened and near to cracking.

Virginia huffed and straightened, her hand still tipping his chin up. "I bet that hurts something fierce. Take these." She released him and turned to a tray he hadn't realised she'd brought in. After opening a small white bottle, Virginia shook out two pills and handed them to him. "Ibuprofen. You'll need more in about six hours. You have any at home?"

Hearing Mrs Hawkins' place called 'home' gave Darren an internal jolt. He hadn't had a home in a long time, and he wasn't entirely sure he liked the description. He took the pills and popped them in his mouth, ignoring the pain that shot out from his chin. She handed him a glass of milk to wash them down with. Darren was grateful for the cool liquid; he'd forgotten to eat breakfast, more concerned about being late once he got the eggs cleaned up.

Virginia was staring at him, one pencilled brow arched. Darren remembered she'd asked him a question about the ibuprofen and he shook his head. "No, ma'am, but I'll get some after work."

"You take these," Virginia said, handing him the bottle. He took them reflexively, his protest buried under the commanding look she gave him. "And you sit in here and ice that knot for a few minutes. I can handle the tables for a bit." She placed an ice pack in his other hand and with a curt nod turned and left him in the office.

Darren frowned at both items in his hands before pocketing the medicine. He gingerly pressed the ice pack to his chin, biting his lower lip against a groan that threatened to slip free. The cold was almost as bad as the pain, and the treatment felt more like punishment though he knew it wasn't. Darren slumped in the chair and closed his eyes, replaying the morning's events in his mind. The sensation of being watched was definitely unsettling, but the back door...that continued to trouble him. If it *had* been a person, it must have been a vagrant who'd panicked and fled upon learning the house wasn't empty. He certainly couldn't think of a single person who'd give a darn about where he was.

It wasn't like he was special, surely not worth the trouble it would take to find him. After over two years of being homeless, alone, nobody probably *could* find him. And who was left to? His mother was gone—she'd passed away in her sleep shortly before Darren had screwed up and lost the only other person in his life who had loved him. So yeah, he must have forgotten to lock up, and either a homeless person or critter had tried to make themselves welcome. They'd probably been just as scared as he had.

Well, tonight he'd make sure the house was locked up, doing it consciously instead of from rote. Maybe he'd even set something against the doors, some alarm system of cans or something that would make a lot of noise if disturbed. Paranoid or not, he'd rest easier knowing he'd have warning if someone tried to get in.

Plan in place, Darren took the pack off his chin and stood. He tossed the ice pack down then picked up the tray it lay on. It was past time for him to be working, stupid self-inflicted injury or not. He'd spent enough time sitting on his butt worrying about imagined threats. If his hands trembled slightly and that uneasy feeling skittered down his spine again, well, that was only proof he was imagining things again. There was nobody here in the office except him. He was just being paranoid.

* * * *

Stefan watched Darren stand and gather the tray, noting the shudder that rippled through Darren's body. Did Darren know he was here? Was it possible? Stefan was afraid to hope. He'd managed to do something this morning he hadn't known he could, so maybe he was right to have a little hope. Granted, he hadn't done what he'd wanted to, or rather, Darren hadn't reacted as Stefan had wished. He hadn't meant to terrify his friend—and he certainly hadn't meant for Darren to get hurt. Darren was hurting too much already.

Although, really, what had he been thinking, unlocking the back doors and slapping the screen like that? Stefan groaned silently, frustration flickering through him. Sometimes his thinking got all muzzled, and something that seemed like a good idea turned out to be...not. This morning had, apparently, been one of those times. Stefan couldn't remember what the point was, other than to get Darren's attention. He'd only just...Stefan frowned, or thought he did, it was hard to tell now. He sensed something familiar, something – no, someone?

If he could just remember, damn it! Groaning as his mind swirled into a mass of confused images and thoughts, Stefan left the office, following the tantalising hints of a familiar presence. Whatever he'd been worried about seconds before could wait for just a bit longer.

Chapter Two

Drained didn't even begin to describe how Darren felt by the time his shift ended. The pervasive feeling of being watched had been with him off and on all day, which wasn't surprising given his appearance. Just about everyone who'd come into the café had asked him about the bruised lump on his face.

That had stressed Darren out so much Virginia had finally pulled him from waiting tables and sent him into the kitchen to help the cook and to wash dishes. His mumbled answers to those enquiring about his injury had sapped Darren dry. Not the most talkative of people in the best situations, he'd practically frozen in place on more than one occasion when asked how he'd gotten hurt.

The last time was the one that got him sent to the kitchen. Darren had found himself pinned by Sheriff Laine's eerie silver gaze as his lover, Severo, peppered Darren with questions. If Virginia hadn't come out and rescued him, Darren knew he'd have probably taken off for good. He just couldn't handle such intense attention. Maybe he should move on, find somewhere he could blend in, a big city like Dallas or Fort Worth, or even further away. Somewhere no one would truly depend on him –

"Stop frowning," Virginia said.

Darren glanced up from the stack of dishes he was holding. He hadn't heard Virginia come into the kitchen, and Darren figured the only reason he hadn't startled and dropped the plates was because he was too exhausted to expend the energy. Darren put the plates away and wiped the frown from his face before turning to Virginia. She studied him for a moment then gestured him closer.

"That doesn't look any better." Virginia tipped her head back and clucked. "More colourful. That's a right pretty shade of purple you got going on there. Did you take more pain medicine?"

Darren glanced away as he stuttered, "No, ma'am, I forgot."

Virginia snorted and swatted his arm. "Take some now, then again in six hours. If you don't think you can remember that, I'll make you come home with me and make sure you take care of yourself."

"No, ma'am, I mean, yes, ma'am, I'll take them right now and won't forget again," Darren muttered as he dug the bottle of ibuprofen from his pocket. "I'm sorry, I just...it was busy and people, they just kept—and I didn't know what—" Darren snapped his mouth shut, biting his tongue for good measure. For someone who didn't talk much, he'd turned into a babbling fool. He fumbled with the lid until Virginia took the bottle from his hand.

"Darren, just calm down," she chided as she opened the bottle and poured out two pills. "People were asking 'cause they were worried about you, that's all. Sure, a few were just nosy, but you'd be surprised how many people who come in here feel kind of protective over you."

Darren wasn't surprised as much as he was completely poleaxed. "What? Why? They don't know me!"

"They know enough." Virginia handed him the pain killers cupping his hand in hers when he would have pulled it away. "They know you've been hurt bad enough to be scared of your own shadow. Ain't a lot of people here who don't want to know why that is and how to make you feel safer—the good Sheriff and his man included."

Darren tugged and Virginia released his hand as she pursed her lips. He tossed the pills in his mouth and walked over to the sink, needing to escape her sharp gaze. As tired and miserable as he felt right now, Darren didn't trust himself not to blurt out his entire life story. He wasn't used to the compassion he'd seen in so many people's expressions today, Virginia's included, and it unsettled him to the point he actually felt his lower lip quiver.

That wouldn't do at all. Darren grabbed a clean glass and filled it half way, keeping his back to his boss. He washed the medicine down and took a deep breath, willing away the sudden stinging in his eyes. Her next words were much more effective than his attempt.

"Sheriff Stenley and Severo came back to give you a ride home. They were worried about you riding your bike back in the dark, what with you being hurt and all."

Darren gripped the lip of the steel sink to keep from turning and screaming in frustration. He wanted to be *away* from people and questions and sympathy-filled eyes! "I can get home just fine," he ground out then nearly whimpered from the pain. *Gotta remember not to grind my teeth or clench my jaw for a few days—unless I want to look like a wuss.*

"Darren." This time he did startle at Virginia's voice, coming so closely behind him. Her hand on his shoulder sent his pulse into overdrive. "Let them help you. That's all they want

to do. You'll be home in a few minutes, and I'll know you made it safe and so will they, okay? And I think maybe you should take a couple days off—"

"No!" Darren spun around, dislodging her hand and cracking his hip bone against the sink. He ignored the bright starburst of pain that bloomed from the contact. "I can work, I'll do better tomorrow, I won't freeze when people ask me and I won't break the eggs or anything!" *Please*, he wanted to beg, *please don't make me be alone!* Which was ridiculous and he knew it. Hadn't he needed to escape from the customers today? But he hadn't been alone—there'd been people in the kitchen, and the café had been busy all day.

Virginia grabbed his hands, stilling them. Darren hadn't even realised he'd been waving them in the air as he spoke, as if the movements added weight to his words. "Look at me, Darren."

More than a little afraid of what he'd see, Darren forced his attention from a spot over Virginia's head down to her glittery gaze. The burning sensation started back up in his eyes and spread down to squeeze at his throat. Darren sucked in his bottom lip and bit it to keep it from quivering as Virginia gave him a look filled with understanding and concern. He couldn't keep his focus on her eyes and keep his own from welling up, so Darren chose to watch her lipstick-stained lips as she spoke instead.

"Honey, you are *not* being punished here, okay? I don't care about the eggs, I care about you being hurt, and tomorrow when you wake up, that knot on your chin, and probably the new one you just gave yourself on your hip? Well, both of them are going to ache like a bitch."

Darren knew his cheeks had to be flaming pink. Virginia didn't curse often, and hearing her do so now was half mortifying and half humorous. And she seemed to know it, because her thin lips twitched before stretching into a wide grin.

"What's the matter, you don't think old women cuss?" Virginia didn't wait for him to answer, which was a good thing because he couldn't. "Well, we do, probably worse than any man you've ever known."

"My mom never did, but she didn't live long enough to be old," Darren admitted and was so shocked he revealed that much he would have bolted if Virginia hadn't tightened her grip. He snapped his gaze up to hers, fully expecting a barrage of questions. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity but she only nodded once, which Darren took as an acknowledgement that she'd heard him.

"Tell you what, you take tomorrow off—just tomorrow," Virginia said firmly when Darren started to protest. "You've been in here almost every day since you started. You need to take at least one day off. You do that then come back to work the next day, if you feel up to it. Meanwhile, you let the sheriff give you a ride home."

"But—"

"It's either that or you can take a couple days off whether you like it or not. Part of your job means following whatever work schedule I set for you."

Well, Darren thought as he glared at the back of his boss's greying head as she walked off, at least he didn't feel like he might burst into tears at any moment now. Instead he was just mad. He finished up in the kitchen then went to get his backpack from the office. He ignored the voices coming from the room too concerned with trying to figure out what he was going to do with a day off. A *forced* day off.

With that preoccupying his thoughts, Darren stepped into the open office only to stop when he noticed the two men standing beside Virginia. Darren found himself the recipient of three gazes—silver, pale green and faded blue as Sheriff Stenley, Severo and Virginia all stopped talking and looked at him.

"I've got your backpack," Severo finally said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. He swung the pack as if to emphasise his words.

Darren reached for the backpack, annoyed that anyone, but especially *this* man who seemed to see more than Darren would have liked, thought it was okay to handle his things.

"I can carry it—"

"No," Darren forced the word out, stomping down his impulse to shut up and divert attention from himself. "I'm not so bad off I can't carry it, or," —Darren flicked a glance at Virginia—"get myself back to Mrs Hawkins' place, despite what some people think." He plucked the strap from Severo's hand and settled the pack on his shoulder as his boss narrowed her eyes at him.

"Fine," Virginia grumbled. "You can work tomorrow, but *only* if you let Sheriff Stenley or Severo give you a ride to and from work. I don't want to risk you getting dizzy or something and ending up splattered on the road."

That kind of sucked, but it was better than being alone all day. "Yes, ma'am, I can do that, if either or both of them are willing to pick me up at four-thirty in the morning and bring me home, too."

Severo crossed his arms over his chest and smiled. "I think that's the most I've heard you say in all the months I've known you. We'll be there and we'll even bring coffee."

You don't know me. Darren swallowed the words before they could escape. He'd already said too much.

"You going to be smart enough to let someone help you out?"

The question, asked in a deep rumbling growl Darren knew belonged to the sheriff, made his stomach flutter. As much as he didn't want Severo trying to figure him out—and the man was, had been for some time, which scared the crap out of Darren—he *really* didn't want the sheriff poking around in his life. Which meant taking the path of least resistance in this instance. Darren stared at his hands on the strap of his pack.

"Yes, sir," Darren murmured, unable to look at the bigger man. It wasn't that the sheriff was ugly or anything, because he definitely wasn't. Darren just knew that sharp gaze would see into his head and pull out everything Darren wanted to keep hidden. Okay, so maybe he knew that wasn't possible, but it *was* possible that Darren would start babbling like an idiot, spilling everything about his past, if the sheriff demanded it. That was why Darren didn't want to be near the guy. Just thinking about it made him shiver and he hoped the other three watching him took it for exhaustion or pain or anything but the truth.

"Come on, we're not so bad."

Darren flinched at the fleeting touch to his elbow as he looked at Severo. The little guy had moved so quietly. Severo stepped around him and continued talking as he led the way to the back door.

"Laine pulled his truck around back. We were going to load up your bike but..."

Grunting as he shifted his pack around, Darren unzipped the smallest outside pocket and pulled out his keys. Once outside with his two...whatever they were—Darren didn't know, that was for sure—he started to walk over to his bike only to be stopped by a big, hard hand clamping down on his shoulder.

"I'll get it, go on and get it the truck. You're limping."

Darren bristled but didn't so much as glance behind him as he offered the keys up. Sheriff Stanley took them and stepped around Darren, murmuring something that sounded awfully close to 'good boy', which, if Darren had been certain was what was said, he'd have been more than a little offended by it.

“Least resistance,” he muttered, turning and heading to the truck. He thought Severo snickered but wasn’t sure. It could have been a cough.

“I’m guessing you want in the back seat since you don’t seem to like anyone besides Virginia.”

Darren knew Severo was goading him, but couldn’t figure out why—and he couldn’t stop himself from sniping since he was already a little past mad. “Is it any wonder when everyone’s so bossy and...and nosy?” It wasn’t his best comeback at all, but it was heartfelt enough that no one could doubt he meant it.

Except Severo must have, because he laughed and slapped Darren on the back. “Right. Well, it’s a small town, so everyone wants to, and usually does, know everyone else’s business. And no matter how much you protest, you’ve stayed here a while so you must not mind.”

Severo pulled open the rear passenger door, like Darren couldn’t do it himself. He scowled as Severo snickered, those pale eyes dancing with amusement at Darren’s expense. “I think maybe you’re just shy,” Severo finally said and Darren almost relaxed until the guy added, “Or is there something you’re afraid of?”

Darren shut up and shut down, closing his eyes and slowing his breathing to fake sleep for the short drive to the house. No way would he tell anyone the very thing he was afraid of most in the world was himself.

* * * *

Laine grimaced as Severo not so gently prodded at Darren. Laine knew his lover’s intentions were good, but he was going about gaining Darren’s confidence the wrong way. As scared and wound tight as the kid was, it’d take patience and a willingness to prove oneself to earn Darren’s trust. Patience wasn’t exactly Severo’s best virtue—hell, it wasn’t even on his list of virtues—and God knew Laine wasn’t much better. But something was going on with the kid, and it went against everything Laine believed to be true about himself to sit back and leave Darren alone.

The kid was so skittish it was heart-breaking, really, and his brown eyes always seemed to hold some hidden pain. Neither he nor Severo could bear to see Darren hurting any more.

They'd been patient, for them anyway, and Severo had tried to lure Darren out of his shell all for naught.

As for him, well, the kid wouldn't even look at him if he didn't have to. That made Laine suspicious, but he just didn't get the feeling the kid was a criminal. More that whatever had happened to him, it had destroyed something inside Darren. Whether it was something violent in his past, or some distant sin he was punishing himself for, there was just something about the kid that cried out to belong.

Besides, if Darren was some sort of fugitive, his fingerprints didn't show in the system. Laine had sneaked out a glass Darren had handled a while back and ran his prints. Nothing had turned up. A few phone calls to other cops he'd known before moving to McKinton and a search under the name Darren Brown hadn't turned up anyone on the wanted list. So, not a fugitive then, or at least not a known one, and asking for clarification there would be a mistake. If he did, Laine was certain Virginia would find herself short a waiter in the blink of an eye. And Laine wouldn't know any more about Darren than he had before.

Laine palmed the chain and lock in one hand and hefted the bike over his shoulder with the other. The bike was old, obviously used, and, Laine was sure, had once belonged to Ben March before he sold it. Still, it was in good shape from what Laine could tell, clean and all that. He set the bike on its side in the bed of the truck and dropped the chain and lock down beside it.

When he got in the truck he wasn't the least surprised to find Darren pretending to be asleep and Severo pouting. Laine grinned and winked at his lover, chuckling softly when Severo's pout switch to a glower directed at him. Laine gave himself a moment to appreciate the handsome man in the front seat with him, Severo's sharp cheek bones and full lips making Laine's heart thud erratically. Damn, he loved this man!

Severo blinked then grinned at him, almost as if he read Laine's thoughts. He probably did, Laine realised, or at least his expression. It wouldn't have surprised him at all to find out he glowed when that rush of love filled him. It felt like it seeped out his pores, so surely it must show in his eyes, his mouth as it tipped into a happy grin.

And if it didn't, there was always a chance their friendly spirit, Conner, was sharing the info with Severo. Severo could, after all, converse with the dead, and Conner was never too far away. Laine's hair was ruffled which answered the question—yes, Conner was here, and

he must have been feeling playful which sometimes didn't bode well for Laine. Conner didn't always know when to quit.

Sure enough Laine felt a smack to the back of his head and Severo burst out in a fit of giggles. He stopped suddenly, the sound ending mid giggle. Laine looked at Severo and found his lover pale, his eyes wide and his stare distant. Laine's stomach dipped and churned. Conner or some spirit was talking and Severo was listening, his lips moving, forming silent words. Then he spoke, and Laine shuddered at the single word, a name.

"Stefan."

* * * *

Stefan squealed with delight! It worked, it worked! Well, not as much as he'd hoped, but he'd got through! Something had drawn him to the sexy little dark-haired guy, and after hours of trying, Stefan had got the man to hear him! True, all he'd managed was his name, but still! It was more than he'd expected! Damn, he wished he could clap his hands! He could, sort of, but there was no noise and that just wasn't the same.

A flicker of awareness in his consciousness—or whatever it was that made him believe he was alert, what did he know?—distracted Stefan from the joy of his new-found discovery. Someone was calling him. It scared him. No one knew his name now, no one besides the dark-haired guy and Darren. Maybe the big guy who terrified Stefan, because those silvery eyes were just... They saw too much. Stefan didn't blame Darren for being afraid of the man. He didn't seem physically dangerous, Stefan didn't think, but he'd been wrong before and look at what that had got him! Dead, dead dead dead dead. Which wasn't so bad, except it was, because he couldn't talk to Darren.

Stefan tried to focus his vision, wanting to see Darren again. Even if he didn't have a heart any more, just looking at Darren's beautiful face made Stefan all...fluttery. Which was funny, actually. About all he could do was flutter, but this, the way Darren made him feel, it was different, more internal than—

Stefan's rambling thoughts skittered to a halt. Someone was calling him. He had vague memories of movies about ghosts being vanished, sent back to...wherever. Could that really happen? He heard his name again and Stefan discovered that, dead or not, he could absolutely still be afraid of being hurt, even if he didn't have a body.

Chapter Three

It was just after two in the morning when Lee Bausch took the key card from the motel clerk and thanked the man before leaving the office. God, he was so tired from driving, and he had to smell funky. Something about travelling always made him feel like he needed a long, hot shower, whether it was a few hours' drive time or a short flight, it didn't matter. He just felt dirty. But this time he really was. He'd driven for almost twenty-four hours straight, stopping only to fuel up or use the restroom.

Over a year of hard work, chasing down leads and begging favours of old friends had, hopefully, finally paid off. Illegally, of course, because Jerry Thatcher, a former Ranger buddy of Lee's, had a cousin who worked as a detective and said cousin heard through the grapevine that the sheriff in McKinton had been asking around about a Darren Brown.

Lee hoped to hell it was the same Darren Brown he'd been trying to find, because he couldn't keep doing this, couldn't spend the rest of his life chasing a ghost. Granted, the guy wasn't dead, but he might as well have been a ghost. Lee hadn't found a legal trail for him anywhere, which was surprising. The guy had always been smart, from what Lee remembered.

Which wasn't as much as he'd have liked. Lee opened the trunk to grab his luggage. There wasn't much, just a single bag and a dop kit. He hadn't had the opportunity or need for anything more. Once this ended, however it ended, he wanted to settle down somewhere and have a life. He'd rather have a measure of peace—closure, whatever—if possible, though. There'd always be a part of him missing, losing a brother he loved wasn't something he'd ever recover from, but he hoped getting justice would help ease the loss. It wouldn't make everything magically better, but it would help. It had to.

A cool breeze flipped his hair into his eyes when he slammed the trunk shut. Lee muttered and shoved at the thick chunk of hair, swearing to hack it all off, but the truth was, after six years in the military, growing his hair out was a simple pleasure. Lee hadn't cut it once in the past year and a half, but, as the wind whipped a strand across his eyes hard enough to make them sting, he decided he might be ready for another buzz cut about now.

As if in protest of the thought, a warm breeze kicked up. It teased and tugged at his hair and his shirt. The hem rippled and lifted almost to the middle of his stomach before fluttering back down only to float up again, as if invisible hands were manipulating the material. Lee's mouth twisted in a smile, amused by the idea that the wind was playing with him.

It wasn't until he'd closed the motel room door behind him that it occurred to Lee he hadn't seen any of the trees or plants dotting the motel's grounds swaying in the wind. That was odd, he was normally very observant. Lee shrugged it off. It was only the wind, and he was tired.

* * * *

Stefan was ecstatic, vibrating—if that was possible, he didn't know—with pure joy. He was learning, finally, how to be a ghost—and Lee was here! It'd been so hard to choose who to watch over, but Lee was strong, stronger than anyone Stefan had ever known. He was, like, Superman, if Superman had been an Army Ranger. And blond.

Still, it was too bad all those people who'd thought he was dumb when he was alive couldn't see this! Maybe people got smarter when they were dead—but wait. He was dead so he didn't have a brain, right? His energy ebbed as he concluded that maybe he was dumb. Why else would he have been thinking about having a brain then?

But he could think, so that meant...something. Shit, he was confused. But still! Lee! Stefan did his best to wrap himself around the man, brushing over him, tousling his long sandy blond hair. He liked the long hair. The last time he'd seen Lee, his hair had been really, really short, so short Stefan could see his scalp. He...hadn't really liked it, but he couldn't have told Lee that. Lee was his hero after all, and if he thought he should keep his hair that short, who was Stefan to say otherwise?

No one, absolutely no one. Stefan had even worn his hair just like Lee's because Lee was smart, super smart, and he was a bad ass in the Army—or he used to be. Now he was just lost, and hurt, and Stefan couldn't stand it, just like he couldn't stand to watch Darren, so afraid, so alone. Darren was strong, too, but he hadn't handled it well when Stefan had died, blamed himself and thought he'd failed Stefan. And Darren's mom had died just days before Stefan, so Darren had kind of already been broken then. Maybe Stefan could fix him.

Shit. Stefan stopped teasing Lee as suddenly as he'd started. Had he just jinxed everything, being all smug and stuff? God, he hoped not, but there'd been that voice, how had he forgotten? The one that called his name and sent him running—floating?—away. Stefan hadn't heard it again, but he'd been very, very careful ever since even though he desperately wanted to get Darren's attention again.

Think, think, think! Stefan tried to gather his thoughts back into the important stuff he'd been trying to work out, but somehow he'd—oh. No wonder he'd forgotten. He was worrying over whether or not his pride had screwed things up. No, he wouldn't let it, or...that was pride again, wasn't it? Shit. This was awfully complicated, and he'd never been good with complicated. And admitting that meant he wasn't being prideful, didn't it?

Stefan realised he was hovering or whatever it was he did outside the closed motel room door. The urge to go inside was almost overwhelming, but he didn't. He wasn't sure he could make himself leave if he did, not as long as Lee was in there. Instead he did his little vaporising thing, as he called it, and set off to keep a watch over Darren.

* * * *

Inside the motel room, Lee stood by the bed and stared down at the picture in his hand. It was the last one his parents had sent him, and it made him smile even as it wrenched at his heart. Stefan and Darren. The two young men in the picture were smiling, arms over each other's shoulders, eyes lit with happiness and, yes, love, although he suspected one of the boys seemed to be feeling something other than that best friend-type love.

Lee traced both faces with his fingertips then carefully set the picture on the dresser. He glanced around the room, really seeing it for the first time. A slightly musty odour clung in the air, but the beige carpeting looked clean and the surfaces were dust free, including those horrible red and orange flowered drapes that matched...

"Jesus." Lee had to rub his eyes after looking at the comforter. It didn't exactly match, just had the same pattern except the colours were hot pink and neon yellow. Amazingly enough it didn't clash with the walls which someone had the good sense to paint the same beige as the carpet. Not quite enough blah to counteract the LSD-trip-inspired comforter and blanket, but almost. Lee's stomach growled, nagging him to eat and distracting him from the ugly decorating.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, stripping down as he walked to the bathroom. "Shower first, sleep, then food." He started the water running then went back to grab his dop kit so he could shave and brush his teeth once he was cleaned up. A quick glance told him the mirror was *not* his friend. He looked tired and nappy and old and grumpy.

"Three outta four," Lee said to his image then stepped in the shower and wondered how pathetic he was when talking to himself was the most frequent conversations he had on a regular basis.

* * * *

Riding in with Severo and Laine hadn't been so bad, really, Darren mused as he served each of the men a hot cup of coffee. Severo had hopped out of the truck, as lively and talkative at four-thirty in the morning as he was any other time Darren had seen him. And he'd brought coffee, just like he'd promised, then Severo and Laine had both proceeded to help him feed the chickens and gather the eggs.

Red had taken one look at Severo and squawked like his feathers were on fire. Darren had been sort of stunned when the rooster had run off behind the coop, wings flapping with each step. He'd never seen Red run from anything. Severo had just laughed and Laine grumbled something about not all chickens being dumber than a box of rocks, and that had been the end of most of the conversation. Darren hadn't known what to say, anyway—it wasn't like he was interesting like either of the other men. He was just a guy who waited tables. There wasn't anything exciting about that.

"Y'all ready to order?"

Darren didn't bother to write it down. Laine and Severo weren't fussy, both asking for the breakfast plate with an extra serving of bacon. "I'll have it out to y'all in a few minutes," Darren promised then topped off the coffee for everyone at table six before heading to the counter to place the order. He didn't think much of it when he heard the bells on the door ring—that happened too frequently for him to look over every time someone entered or left during the breakfast rush—but he did notice when that uneasy sensation of being watched crawled over him again.

Darren shrugged it off. It was probably just customers checking out the damage to his face. The knot was about gone, but he still had some spectacular colours decorating his chin.

He grabbed a fresh pot of coffee and turned around then very nearly dropped it when he saw the man sitting on a stool only a few feet away.

Despite the differences, Darren recognised Lee instantly. The longer hair only served to offset the man's sculpted cheekbones, the firm line of his jaw. Mossy green eyes, wide and thickly lashed, the slightly uptilted outer corners—eyes so like Stefan's, despite the fact Stefan's eyes had been a pure sky blue, and the divot in the chin... Darren had spent many nights as a lovesick teen thinking about this man. It was almost as big a shock to realise he still carried a bit of that teenage crush as it was to see Stefan's brother again.

There was a split second where Darren thought Lee looked as shocked as Darren felt, but it was so fleeting, and Lee's expression was blank as the employment section of the corkboard hanging by the register.

"Darren."

That was it, just his name said in a deep, gravelly voice, but it was enough to make Darren grateful for the apron covering him from waist to mid-thigh. He found a hidden reserve of calmness he didn't really feel, especially not when his dick had hardened the instant Lee had spoken.

Darren tightened his grip on the coffee pot, nodded and prayed his voice wouldn't squeak. "Lee." Then he really didn't know what else to say, except the one thing he wasn't sure he *could* say. Darren was saved from having to even try when the cook yelled, "Order up!" He nodded again and knew he must look like a complete idiot for doing so. His cheeks burned with embarrassment as he set the coffee pot down on the counter. The walk around to pick up the orders seemed unnaturally long, and Darren didn't know if it was paranoia or if he really was feeling Lee watching him as he hefted the plates.

Of course he's watching me, stupid! There's exactly zero chance Stefan's brother just happened to show up in McKinton, over three hundred miles from his home in Jackson. Darren turned and walked back around the counter, trying his best to appear unaffected as his thoughts raced as fast as his pulse. *There's only one reason Lee would show up here. He was looking for me, and now he found me, and there's nothing I can do but tell him it was my fault his brother died.* The idea was terrifying and yet Darren found himself wanting to confess his failure, his guilt. Maybe if he did, he could find...not exactly peace, never that, but something close to it. Something that would make it a little easier for Darren to live with himself.

Decision made, he set the plates in front of Laine and Severo, avoiding both men's eyes. He knew he wouldn't be able to avoid their questions and Laine proved him right almost instantly.

"You know that guy at the counter?"

"Yes, sir," Darren said. "I'll be right back with your coffee—"

Darren froze when Laine grabbed his wrist. He shot a surprised glance at the older man and immediately looked away. "Darren, I saw you when *you* saw *him*. Do I need to get involved?"

Laine probably would no matter what Darren said but he tried anyway. "No, sir, he was my best friend's brother. I just didn't expect for him to show up here—but he isn't a bad man, not at all." He hoped. He hadn't ever known Lee well—the man was almost ten years older than Darren, and he'd joined the military not long after Darren and Stefan had met.

"What do you mean, was?" Severo asked.

Darren cringed inwardly. He should have been more careful. Now he had to admit something that still turned him inside out to say. "I mean, he is, but Stefan, he was—he died," Darren muttered, unable to explain any better. Those two words made him feel like something was ripping into his guts with fiery claws.

Severo hummed something under his breath as Laine squeezed Darren's wrist, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to get his attention.

"And he just showed up here...why? Maybe I should just ask him that myself."

"No," Darren whispered, his teeth clenched to keep from yelling the word. "He probably wants to talk to me and that's fine. Lee was serving with the Rangers when Stefan passed, I don't even know when he found out about—it." Darren wasn't able to 'Stefan's death'. He was already on edge, his eyes stinging. The last thing he wanted to do was break down in front of everyone. Anyone. "Just, please, let me see what he wants first. I don't want you to make him leave." Darren tugged against Laine's hold but his relief was short lived when Laine pushed back his chair and stood up, looking at something over Darren's shoulder.

Darren took a step back and felt a wave of heat from a body close to his own. He peered over his shoulder, unsurprised to find Lee behind him, his handsome face devoid of expression.

The hand on his hip, though, *that* surprised Darren so much he yelped. Instead of moving his hand, Lee merely tightened his grip as he asked, "Is there a problem here, Darren?"

The words were different from Laine's question moments earlier, but not by much. And apparently Lee wasn't the least bit intimidated by Laine's dark scowl. "That's what I was asking Darren. Maybe you should let him go."

Darren felt like he was caught between two alpha wolfs vying over a prized meal. He didn't relish getting caught in the middle. "It's fine, Laine, really, just surprised me, that's all." God, people were staring. Darren wanted to curl up into a ball and hide. He hated drawing everyone's attention. "Can you please stop?" Darren begged quietly of Laine, "Please. Everyone is looking and I—" He stopped, his throat clicking as he swallowed. "Please." He didn't know why he was begging Laine instead of Lee but he was. If he were honest with himself, Lee's hand felt really good where it was, warmth seeping through the layers of material to warm Darren's skin. The fact that the hold was possessive didn't escape Darren's notice, and neither did the aching hardness pinned uncomfortably between his thigh and his jeans. That part of him *really* liked Lee's touch.

Laine finally nodded. "All right, for now, but we *will* be having a talk a little later, Mr..."

Darren shivered when Lee's breath whiffed over the back of his neck. "Lee Bausch."

"Laine Stenley. I'll be looking for you to stop by and see me," — Laine hitched a thumb in the direction of the Sheriff's Office — "two blocks that way. Before noon."

Darren didn't hear a reply but Laine nodded again then sat down and took a drink of his coffee. Lee tugged at Darren's hip. "Can you take a break?"

Darren glanced around at the diner, blushing all over again as he saw the curiosity on the customers' faces. "Maybe. Let me refill a few cups and make sure everyone has what they need then I'll ask." He turned and walked around Lee, telling himself the man's hand did not linger, it was only Darren's pathetic wish that it had.

* * * *

Lee trailed his fingers over the sharp blades of Darren's hip. Even through the apron and jeans, he could feel the prominent bone. Darren had always been thin, but now he had

more of a lean athlete's build. And that bruise... Lee wanted to know how Darren had got hurt, and if there was anyone he needed to deal with over it. The protectiveness was sudden and fierce, so much so Lee hadn't been able to sit there and watch the sheriff touch Darren even if it was just a loose hold on the younger man's wrist. If Lee hadn't been used to keeping his emotions buried he'd have snarled at Laine and likely threatened to rip the man's hand off if he touched Darren again.

It was an unreasonable reaction and Lee didn't understand it, but as he'd struggled to hide his shock at finding Darren working in the café, Lee had also found himself battling a jolt of desire that seemed to slam right into his marrow. He'd somehow pictured Darren as the same gangly kid he'd been the last time Lee had seen him, but Darren wasn't. No, the boy had grown into a man so stunningly attractive Lee had had to use every ounce of his control to will his dick to behave.

And Darren was exceptionally handsome, his hair a slightly darker shade of brown than Lee remembered, more of a chestnut now than the light brown it had been. The roundness of Darren's face had faded as he'd matured, making his cheekbones more prominent. Lee was sure Darren's lips hadn't been that full or that deep rosy pink, but then again, he hadn't looked at the kid the way he was looking at the man. Darren was almost the same height as Lee, less than an inch shorter, just the right height to kiss and —

Lee stopped that train of thought and returned to his seat. He nursed his cup of coffee, sneaking sly peeks at Darren's ass as the younger man bent to do one thing or another. Lee didn't pay attention to what Darren was doing except to make sure no one messed with him.

But all of Lee's training in the military wasn't strong enough to keep him from getting hard as he watched that firm ass flex, imagined pulling those taut cheeks apart and licking deep into Darren's body. Lee couldn't even blame the desire raging through him on lack of sex, because he'd gone without for long periods before, a necessity when he'd planned to make the military his career. He'd never felt such an intense need before.

It should have made him cautious, made him question, since Lee rarely did anything without running it through his head a hundred times, examining his plan and looking for flaws. But it didn't. What that need did do was make Lee determined to fuck Darren long and hard if that's what the younger man wanted. Lee had seen the desire in those brown eyes, had felt Darren quiver with it under Lee's hand. He was certain Darren wanted the

same thing he did, but that might change once they talked. Lee hoped not, but he had to consider the possibility.

And plan a counter strategy if that possibility became reality.

Lee drained the last of his coffee as Darren came out of the kitchen, his gaze bouncing around the diner before settling on Lee's. Fisting one trembling hand in his apron, Darren walked over, his body a contrast of emotions. Those long legs moved in steady strides, but the hand twisting in the apron was white-knuckled and a fine sheen of sweat glossed the younger man's forehead by the time Darren was close. He cleared his throat a couple of times, a sign of nervousness that reminded Lee of the skittery teen boy Darren used to be.

"Virginia—she's my boss, well, and she's the owner, obviously," Darren began, stuttering every third word or so. "She said we can use her office, if that's okay with you?"

Was Darren scared or turned on or both? Lee was leaning towards the latter, but a little clarification would be nice. He let his lips spread in a slow smile that he'd been told made a man want to drop to his knees. Darren's eyes widened, his pupils dilating to chase out all but a thin ring of chocolaty brown to frame his pupils. His full lips parted on a gasp as a slick pink tongue darted out to wet the tempting flesh. Lee could easily spot the throbbing pulse at the base of Darren's neck, and the hand that had been bunched in the apron was now splayed open over a place Lee would love to touch himself.

And Darren was definitely aroused, not afraid, at least not now. Lee wanted to keep it that way for a while if he could. His smile stretched wider, became more genuine and less calculated as he cupped Darren's elbow possessively. "Lead the way, Darren. I think it's best that we do this without an audience."

Chapter Four

Uncertain of what, exactly, Lee meant by that comment, Darren nonetheless agreed. He knew that first smile Lee had given him was calculated to make Darren melt into a puddle of lust, and he did, internally, everything heating and going soft on the inside while his dick was so hard he ached from it.

But that second smile, the one that seemed genuine and maybe a little smug, definitely loaded with a measure of the lust Darren was feeling—that smile had pretty much guaranteed Lee could have Darren, any way he wanted him. Darren had been alone too long, lonely too long, to say no to the offer that'd been in Lee's smile. So, if Lee meant it, if he really wanted Darren, he was more than willing.

"It's just up here," Darren murmured, surprised his voice was steady when his heart was racing like a spooked thoroughbred. Lee didn't speak, merely grunted, a soft guttural sound that spawned images in Darren's head of being bent over Virginia's desk and taken hard and fast. His steps faltered as they neared the office. As much as he wanted Lee, this wasn't the time or place, and Darren wasn't entirely certain either of those things mattered.

"Don't stop now," Lee said as he tightened his grip. He pulled Darren along when he hesitated, stopping only when they came to the open door. "Is this it?"

"Yes," Darren whispered, unable to think past the riot of need spiralling from his groin to his brain. He shouldn't go in the office with Lee, should stop him from closing the door. The sound of the lock being set sent a shockwave through Darren, his little fantasy from a moment before suddenly turning into a very likely—and dangerous—reality in his mind. He jerked against Lee's hold on his elbow, surprised when Lee let him go. Darren looked at the other man, fear and desire tangling together.

Lee stared back at him with a blank expression, which confused Darren to no end. He'd been sure the man wanted him, but maybe it'd only been his own lusty thoughts that had made it seem so. It wasn't as if he knew Lee well enough to know if that second smile had been just another tool to manipulate Darren into being alone with Lee. He took a step backwards, then another and another still until his back hit the door. Lee frowned but didn't come any closer.

Darren stood waiting, little shivers racing up his arms and legs as he wondered what Lee was going to do.

* * * *

Lee wasn't sure what had happened to send Darren from aroused to afraid so quickly. He tried to figure out where he'd gone wrong in the last six feet or so of their walk to the office. Darren had seemed willing—eager, even—to be alone with Lee, right up until Lee had forced himself to tamp down the desire that had threatened to shatter his control. If he hadn't, he'd likely have had his cock buried balls-deep in Darren's tempting ass already. So maybe the rapid switch on his part had triggered the fear he could almost scent in Darren?

Lee took a cautious step forward and Darren tensed, his shoulders hunching as he clenched his hands together until the knuckles looked so sharp against the skin Lee wondered how they didn't break through.

"Are you afraid of me?" Lee asked, taking another step closer.

Darren's eyes flared, widening as he shook his head. "No, no I—I just..." Darren shifted his weight from foot to foot, looking at some point over Lee's shoulder. "I don't know," he confessed softly, tipping his head down, a thick fringe of hair tumbling free to hang over Darren's eyes.

Lee felt an odd tug in his chest as he closed the distance between them. He started to reach for Darren's chin then settled for placing his hand along the satiny smooth skin of his jaw. A little pressure had Darren lifting his head, and Lee gently brushed the hair away from Darren's eyes. The confusion and fear he saw in those brown eyes made Lee want to make all sorts of rash promises, but Lee knew better than to let his emotions make him stupid. Instead he slowly traced the bruised skin, feeling a slight bump under Darren's chin. "What happened here?"

Even if he hadn't been touching Darren, Lee thought he would have been able to feel the heat of the man's blush. "I fell," Darren mumbled. "Got spooked and dropped the eggs then ended up doing this." Darren's fingers ghosted over his own, setting a fire blazing along the nerves in Lee's skin. He caught Darren's hand before the younger man could let it drop to his side. Darren's gaze shot to his and Lee leaned in cautiously, not wanting to spook the man, not when he ached to feel those parted lips against his.

Darren's blue-veined lids dropped closed as he tipped his face up. The silent offering was all the permission Lee needed. He lifted Darren's hand, pressing it to the door beside Darren's head while sliding his other hand down Darren's elegant neck. The skin was so soft, like warm satin under Lee's palm. He thought he'd never feel anything smoother until his lips touched Darren's, then Lee knew he was in trouble, his tenuous grasp on his control shredding as Darren moaned and opened wider for Lee's probing tongue.

Like a switch flipped inside him, Lee's cautious approach vanished as lust thrummed through him with every heartbeat. He pressed against Darren from knees to chest, pinning the thinner man roughly as Lee claimed his mouth. Lee pushed at Darren's jaw, tipping his head for a better angle, then he swept his tongue in and tasted every bit of Darren he could reach.

Darren clutched at Lee's shoulder with his free hand but didn't try to move the one Lee had in his grasp. Lee slid a thigh between Darren's, or tried to, only to become frustrated when the apron got in the way. Cursing as he brushed his lips over Darren's, Lee trailed his hand down from Darren's wrist, wishing the man hadn't worn a long-sleeved shirt. Wishing he wasn't wearing anything at all. Lee wanted to feel more of Darren's soft skin, wanted to lick every inch of it and listen to the sounds Darren made each time Lee discovered his erotic spots.

Darren whimpered and touched his lips to Lee's as Lee traced the ribs he could feel through Darren's shirt. Lee couldn't stop himself from sliding his hand around to grab Darren's ass. The taut mound fit perfectly in his hand, and Darren shuddered from head to toe when Lee squeezed, his fingers pressing hard against the seam covering Darren's crease.

"Jesus," Lee muttered, his cock spurting a knee-weakening burst of pre cum as Darren writhed against him. "You're going to burn me alive, you're so fucking sexy." Lee didn't care if they weren't the smoothest words—they were the truth and that was what mattered. No one had ever brought him to the edge so fast before.

Darren opened his eyes as Lee found the hem of the apron with his other hand, completely unwilling to let go of Darren's ass. Lee shoved the apron aside and immediately found Darren's long, thick erection. Lee hummed his approval as he palmed the length, almost grinning at Darren's whimpered, "Yes, please!"

"I've got you," Lee promised, because for now, he did. He felt the warm moist spot soaking the denim where Darren's cock had leaked. Lee was sure he had a matching spot of

his own. "How much longer do you have to work?" He pressed the tip of Darren's dick with his thumb, pleased with the way Darren moaned and thrust into the caress. "When do you get off?"

"Oh, God," Darren gasped. "Soon, if you keep doing that!"

Lee chuckled and repeated the touch, his other hand clenching the swell of Darren's ass hard enough to bruise. He murmured and licked Darren's jaw, the smooth skin tasting even better than he'd expected. Lee inhaled deeply, drawing in Darren's scent. The musky, tangy scent matched the man's taste of sweat and desire, hitting Lee's bloodstream like a potent drug. He groaned and bit at the supple skin below Darren's ear, sucking the tender flesh between his teeth. Marking him, and doing so with enough fervour that Darren had to know it.

Darren tipped his head back and to the side, giving Lee more skin to explore. He smoothed his hand up from Darren's cock, his lips tracing the line of Darren's neck to where it joined his shoulder. Lee nipped the spot, then sucked hard, adding another mark as he found the button to Darren's jeans. He slid the button free as he continued working Darren's skin. The coppery tang of blood so close to the surface of Darren's pale skin made Lee moan even as he grabbed the tab of Darren's zipper. The hiss of the metal teeth separating was matched by Darren's hissed, "Yes," then stifled by, "Touch me, please, God, Lee!"

Lee licked the tangy skin as he shoved at Darren's jeans and underwear. When the task to lower them proved too troublesome with one hand, Lee dropped to his knees, finally releasing that perfect ass cheek to free Darren's dick from his clothes. Lee grabbed Darren's jeans, catching the elastic band of his underwear as well and jerked them both down to Darren's knees. He shoved the apron up with one hand and reached for Darren's bobbing cock with the other, his mouth watering as he looked at the wet tip. Darren's slit was wide, tempting and Lee didn't hesitate to lean forward and lap at the moisture before prodding the opening with his tongue.

Darren keened, his hands gripping Lee's head, pushing him forward even as Darren thrust his hips, seeking more. "Lee! You don't have to—"

The words were in direct contrast to what Darren's actions were telling him, the younger man's fingers fisted in Lee's hair, his cock pushing at Lee's lips. Lee shut off his protests by opening his mouth and sucking the broad cap in, his lips sealed tightly around the red crown. He felt Darren's cock pulse against his tongue and the fingers he had

wrapped around the base of Darren's shaft. Lee pressed his other hand flat against Darren's stomach when Darren tried to thrust.

"Please, please," Darren whispered brokenly, over and over as Lee forced him to be still and teased the bundle of nerves beneath Darren's cap with his tongue. When the desperation in Darren's pleas increased, Lee let go of the base and cupped Darren's tightly drawn balls. He then dove forward, swallowing the fat cock, his nose tickled by the crinkly nest of dark brown curls.

Darren wailed softly, the sound cut off so quick Lee had to glance up. Darren was looking down at him, a stunned expression on his face. Darren inhaled shakily then bit at his lower lip. Lee smiled around the mouthful of cock. He hollowed his cheeks, sucking hard as he slid back up the length, his tongue flicking over a thick vein that lined Darren's dick. His teeth scraped lightly over Darren's frenulum, and Darren's head fell back, thudding against the door as he moaned long and loud. Lee had the wicked thought that he hoped everyone else heard the sound, knew he was taking Darren, making those sexy noises slip from the man's lips. Before Lee could examine *why* the thought pleased him, he engulfed Darren's cock, moaning himself when the broad crown slipped into his throat. He swallowed as he palmed the hard nuts of Darren's sac, and Darren came apart for him beautifully, shuddering his way through another of those sexy moans as Lee pulled back to catch the first jet of cum on his tongue.

The salty-sweet flavour of Darren's seed made Lee hungry for more. Darren tasted different, it was that hint of sweetness, and Lee was afraid he wouldn't be able to get enough of it. He sucked and laved Darren's cock, letting the spunk roll over his tongue and coat his mouth, swallowing only to make room for more as he massaged Darren's balls, wanting every last drop of the man's seed.

Lee's own dick was pinched painfully in his jeans and he felt about ready to explode with the need for release, but he would wait. He didn't want to come from his own hand, not when he could wait just a little while and bury his cock deep in Darren's ass. Just thinking about it made Lee moan, anticipation causing more moisture to leak from his tip.

Darren whimpered and tugged at Lee's hair. The message got through to Lee's lust-hazed mind. Darren's cock was too sensitive for any more, so he forced himself to let the tasty treat slip from his mouth. Lee pressed his forehead to Darren's groin, the smell of cum strong and enticing. He closed his eyes and held onto Darren's slender hips, his thumbs

tracing over the sharp pelvic bones as he fought the urge to spin Darren around and take him right now.

A hard slap from the other side of the door had Darren squeaking and jumping forward, almost knocking Lee onto his ass. He struggled to keep them both upright as the sheriff's angry voice sliced through the thin wood. "Bausch, I suggest you get your ass out here now!"

"Oh sh—crap," Darren rasped as he flailed. Lee leant into him and managed to get hold of Darren's jeans and underwear. He nudged Darren back a step then stood, pulling Darren's clothes up as he did so. Darren looked at him with a mixture of fear and something Lee thought might be awe. "He sounds mad. Why—" Darren's face turned a cute shade of pink as he slapped a hand over his mouth, mumbling around his spread fingers. "Oh my God, did he hear me? Did anyone else? We shouldn't have—"

Lee took Darren's hand in his and pulled it away from Darren's mouth, lacing their fingers together. He couldn't resist kissing those swollen lips, didn't see any reason to even as the sheriff pounded on the door again. Lee took his time with the kiss, stopping only once Darren melted against him then he licked Darren's lips slowly before ending the tender kiss.

"Don't worry about him, or what anyone else might have heard." He glanced at the love bites on Darren's neck then traced each one with his fingers. "These, though, will let everyone who saw you come back here with me know who you belong to for now." Lee knew it was the wrong thing to say immediately, but it wasn't like he could take the words back.

"For now," Darren repeated, his shoulders tensing as he turned away. "We'd better go before Laine breaks the door down."

Everything about Darren's flat tone seemed wrong. Lee surged forward and caught Darren's wrist. Darren stopped and Lee tugged until Darren gave in and faced him. Another round of banging on the door lit the wick of Lee's temper. "Just give us two goddamned minutes," he snapped, studying Darren, trying to figure out how to fix the mess he'd just made.

"You've got a hundred and twenty seconds," Laine growled, and Lee knew that would be exactly the amount of time Laine would wait before breaking the door down if they didn't open it.

“Darren, look at me,” Lee urged when Darren seemed determined to stare at the floor. Lee almost wished he hadn’t made the demand when he saw the hurt in Darren’s eyes, but he simply couldn’t make any promises, not to make Darren or himself feel better. “I need to talk to you about Stefan. There were some things in his last letters that I didn’t understand. Will you please come to my room at the motel—I’m in room six—”

Darren was already shaking his head. Lee ploughed on, determined to make Darren agree to meet with him. “Fine. We can meet here, or wherever you live, anywhere you want. I won’t touch you if that’s what you’re afraid of. Just listen to me, tell me if I’m reading too much into what Stefan wrote.” Lee stopped, dangerously close to begging when Darren shook his head again. He resigned himself to doing just that when the younger man finally spoke.

“I’m not afraid of you doing...touching me,” he whispered, his cheeks tinting darker with each word.

“Then what?” Lee knew he was scowling, but he couldn’t understand why Darren looked at him with fear-filled eyes. “I won’t hurt you, I don’t expect you to put out because I sucked you off.” He’d hoped, yearned, but he wouldn’t have ever forced.

Darren’s bitter laughter was as shocking to Lee as a bucket of ice water would have been. “I don’t think that either. You won’t want anything to do with me once I tell you why Stefan died, and *that’s* what scares me.”

Darren turned and walked to the door, unlocking it and leaving Lee in stunned silence.

Chapter Five

Darren knew he was lucky that Virginia only chewed him out and sent him to work in the kitchen after what he'd done in the office. He should have told Lee no, but how could he have when Lee knelt down and eagerly sought his dick? Darren hadn't been touched in so long, and even then, he hadn't had a blow job anything like the one Lee had given him.

Maybe it had been because both he and his partner at the time, Cody, were both inexperienced, but the only other blow job Darren had been given had been just...less. Less intense, less exquisite, less everything. He couldn't help but wonder if actual anal sex would be better too, because his onetime topping had felt pretty amazing, albeit way too brief. But being on the receiving end had hurt so much he'd thought he was being ripped in two—which was pretty much what Cody had said it felt like to him when Darren topped. They hadn't had another chance to see if it got any better.

And he wouldn't get a chance to find out with Lee, not if he went and talked to the man like he knew he should. He understood Lee wasn't interested in anything other than a quick hook-up—he'd made that clear with his "You're mine for now" comment. Darren was sorry he'd acted like a wounded lover over that when he should have appreciated Lee's honesty.

It was just that it'd felt so good to be touched, not just the blow job, but touched like he mattered, like someone cared. Probably it had been stupid to pretend it meant more than it did, but Darren hadn't been able to stop the little fantasy that he could have someone who loved him, wanted to do the things Lee had done. Lee's words had slapped Darren back to reality, though, and once Darren told him...

Darren set the clean dishes down and wiped his hands on the dish towel. He *was* going to talk to Lee. Stefan's brother deserved to know how Darren's selfishness had led to Stefan's death. It didn't matter that Darren hadn't killed Stefan—if he hadn't let his hormones overrule his common sense, Darren would have been with Stefan, and Stefan wouldn't be dead.

"Your shift's over. Laine and Severo are here to take you home."

Darren sighed. He didn't particularly want to face either of those men right now, but if he really was going to talk to Lee, surely he could be strong enough to tell Laine and Severo

he didn't need their charity. Maybe he'd luck out and avoid another lecture. Virginia's had been embarrassing enough.

"Let me get my backpack." Darren avoided looking at Virginia as he walked around her. She'd let him stay and finish his shift today, but part of his punishment for "getting raunchy in the office" as his boss put it was a week off without pay. The money didn't really matter—it wasn't like he earned a lot or had any bills—but the idea of being alone with nothing to do for a week was kind of intimidating. Darren would have entirely too much time to think, something he tried to avoid. He'd just have to keep busy.

The chicken coop could use a new coat of paint on the outside, and he'd been meaning to weed the vegetable garden and look up whether or not it was too late to plant anything. Darren started making a list in his head as he made his way to the office. He nearly tripped over his feet when it dawned on him he was making plans as if he meant to stay in McKinton.

Was he? Darren forced himself to keep moving as he considered the question. Would it be so bad to stay somewhere? He hadn't wanted anyone to depend on him ever again, but he already sort of had friends here, if he considered a couple of overprotective older men friends. Darren realised he did think of Laine and Severo as friends, and Virginia, too. She'd found him hitching along 97, filthy and starving, scared and yet she'd stopped and offered him a ride first. Then a place to stay and a job here at her café. If that didn't make her a friend, Darren didn't know what would.

He hefted his backpack onto his shoulder, trying not to think about what he and Lee had done in here a few hours earlier. It was no use. Darren's dick had started hardening the second he'd walked in the door. At least he was in the habit of wearing his apron home—and Mrs Hawkins' place was home, at least for now—and washing it out in the evening so it was clean for work the next day. No one would think twice about him leaving it on now, which was a good thing.

Glancing at the door where Lee had kept him pinned with one big hand on his belly, he regretted he'd never get to feel Lee's cock filling his mouth as he'd filled Lee's. Or even—and just the idea made a delicious shiver of desire ripple through Darren—that needy place that Darren sometimes dared to touch.

"Jeez," Darren muttered as lust settled in his groin, warming him from his core to the tips of his fingers and toes. If just thinking about it got him this wound up, what would

actually *doing* it do? Darren huffed as he strode from the room. Likely he'd do something stupid like think he was in love if sex with Lee felt anywhere near as good as that blow job had. Darren could definitely understand how people could get lust and love confused.

Darren stepped out the back entrance and steeled himself for what he hoped wouldn't become a confrontation. His anxiety eased somewhat when Laine's lips quirked and Severo grinned.

"You look like you were walking out to your doom," Severo said with a snicker. "Don't think that you're the only person who's ever been blindsided by lust. Me and Laine know a thing or two about it, too."

Darren knew he was blushing to the roots of his hair as Laine scowled at Severo. "Too much information, sweetheart. You embarrassed the hell out of Darren."

Laine's cheeks had a ruddy stripe of colour tinting his skin, too. Darren pushed past his usual reticence and gave the sheriff an arch look. "I'm not the only one, either. You're looking kind of colourful there yourself."

The colour on Laine's cheeks deepened as Severo laughed, and Darren felt a tingle of pride at having been able to tease back. He joined the two men beside Laine's truck and waited until he had their attention. "I'm going to talk to Lee."

Laine nodded and his normally icy grey eyes seemed to warm as he looked at Darren. "I figured as much."

"Are you really planning on talking?" Severo piped up, wagging his brows.

"Yes," Darren croaked, sure he was going to burst into flames any second, his cheeks felt so hot.

"He told me some of what happened."

That chased the heat right out of Darren, leaving him so cold inside it was almost a physical pain. His throat tightened with emotion as he glanced away, afraid he'd cry if he saw even a hint of sympathy in Laine or Severo's faces. "What'd he tell you?" Darren finally asked when neither of the other two men spoke. He listened as Laine recited a short list of facts. Darren's friendship with Stefan, Lee joining the military, Darren's mother's death and so quickly on the heels of that shattering moment, Stefan's only days after.

When Laine mentioned Lee's suspicions that there might have been more to Stefan's death than it seemed, Darren thought the guilt might suffocate him. He managed to murmur

an appropriate response then quickly said no when Laine offered him a ride to the motel. It wasn't far, and Darren needed a few minutes alone to compose himself before talking to Lee.

He thanked Laine and Severo both and promised to call them if he needed a ride home from the motel. Severo's whispered question of whether or not Darren had 'protection' had it sinking in to him that, despite his claim earlier, Severo—and probably Laine, too, for that matter—thought he was going to have sex with Lee.

Darren wished he was. Even if it hurt, it wouldn't be as painful as the conversation to come.

* * * *

Lee flopped back on the bed and draped his arm over his eyes. Talking to Laine hadn't been as bad as Lee had thought. The man wasn't a bully as Lee had suspected, he'd just been very concerned about Darren. That alone made Lee kind of like the sheriff. Laine tried to come off all rough and gruff and cold—and he was, to an extent. But he also obviously cared a great deal about the people in this town, and about Darren in particular. Lee understood—Darren brought out protective instincts in Lee he'd thought long gone.

"That's not all he does to me," Lee groused, glaring down at his stiff dick. About the only time that part of him hadn't been in that particular state since first seeing Darren was when Lee was being grilled by Laine. If this kept up he was going to have to beat off several times a day like he had when he'd first discovered how much fun it was to do so.

Then he thought of Darren as Lee had last seen him and Lee's erection began going soft immediately. He'd thought Darren might have felt guilty for not being there when Stefan died, that maybe that's why Darren had left Jackson right after Stefan's funeral. Darren probably thought Stefan would still be alive if Darren had been there, and maybe he would, but Lee doubted it. Stefan's last letter had hinted that he'd made a new friend and felt bad about spending less time with Darren.

Lee wanted to know who that new friend had been and whether he—which was about all Lee knew about the mysterious friend, that he was male—knew anything about Stefan's death. And whether it'd been an accident or not, because while it was true enough that Stefan had fallen into Mercer's Ravine, it was equally true that Stefan had confided his fear of heights to Lee more than once—and probably to Darren as well. So why would Stefan have

been anywhere near such a steep drop? Would Darren know, or had Stefan and Darren's friendship already become distanced by whatever secret friend Stefan had made?

Lee needed to know because not knowing was driving him insane. The idea that someone could have killed Stefan and got away with it wouldn't leave him alone, hadn't since Lee learned of the manner of Stefan's death. Darren was the last possible lead Lee could think of since the people he'd asked in Jackson all claimed Darren was Stefan's only friend. Lee knew different, but he'd kept Stefan's last confidences to himself.

* * * *

Stefan didn't know what he'd missed, but something seemed to have happened. Darren had hickeys on his neck—Stefan knew what those were, he'd had one himself before he died, but he didn't like to think about how that mark had ended up on him. He wished someone had noticed, though, once his body had been found. Maybe they had and just thought it was a bruise. He'd hit the bottom of the ravine really hard.

Lee mumbled something and Stefan focussed on his brother, lying on the bed wearing nothing but a towel and a scowl. Stefan thought it was kind of funny, not just because it rhymed, but because Lee was fixing to find himself with company. Well, other company. It wasn't like Lee knew Stefan was here. Stefan wished he did. He wished he could hug Lee and Darren both, tell them he was sorry for hurting them because he had been keeping a secret that had got him killed.

A knock on the door startled Lee. Stefan had known it was coming. Should he stay? He wanted to know what his two favourite people were going to talk about, but when Lee walked over and opened the door, the towel riding low on his hips even though he held it with his hand, Darren's expression did funny things to Stefan. He knew that look on Darren's face—Stefan had often stared at his best friend like that when he knew Darren wasn't watching him. Then Stefan had looked at someone else, maybe not exactly like that, but... Look how that had ended.

But Lee wouldn't hurt Darren, not ever, and Darren was probably the best person Stefan had ever known. Still, he wasn't sure what to do. Stefan's agitation increased as the two men stared at each other. The curtains fluttered and one of the chairs at the small table tipped backwards, and Lee and Darren both jumped, Darren saying something as he stepped inside to stare at the mess Stefan had accidentally made.

He should go, definitely. What if he got upset and something flew and hit Lee or Darren? He could hurt them and he'd never want to do that. Some of the others like him had been working with him—once he quit freaking out when they tried to talk to him—and tried to show him how to control the weird stuff he could make happen. It wasn't bad when he wanted it to happen, like trying to get attention by slamming Darren's door. Well, that hadn't turned out so well, so maybe he needed to learn how to control himself as well as...whatever it was he could do.

Maybe that's what Conner had been trying to tell him. Stefan hadn't understood all the talk about "actions reflecting emotions", but now he thought he might. With one last look at the two men who'd loved him, Stefan floated away to find his new friend Conner.

* * * *

"What happened?" Darren stepped inside and stared at the chair. "How'd that get knocked over?" He'd gone stupid with lust when Lee had opened the door wearing nothing but a towel, but seeing the curtains whip out until they were parallel with the floor had started to douse the desire. The chair shooting backwards before slamming onto its back had replaced the arousal with something very close to fear.

Darren glanced at Lee and didn't feel any better. His tanned skin was nearly as white as Darren's. Darren's fear from the creepy event transferred to Lee. He cautiously put his hand on Lee's biceps. The muscle was hard as a rock and the skin covering it felt chilled under Darren's palm.

"Lee?"

Lee shook his head as if clearing his thoughts then looked at Darren. "I don't know what that was. I keep trying to convince myself a mouse tipped the chair over, but that doesn't explain how the chair flew back a good six feet first or why the curtains did that weird shit."

Darren bet Severo could explain it, which was a scary thought. There had to be more than a little truth to the rumours claiming Severo talked with spirits. Darren might have shrugged it off before, but believing in spirits wasn't so difficult after having seen what happened a few minutes ago. Darren frowned as he wondered if the little stunt with the screen door was a fluke or if there was some supernatural entity messing with him.

As tempting as it was to freak out, Darren stifled the impulse. He'd talk to Severo as soon as possible, though, because if there was a spirit hanging around him, Darren wanted to know who it was and why it was bothering him. One look at Lee told Darren bringing up the possibility of a spirit having had something akin to a tantrum was probably a bad idea. Lee's jaw was clenched tightly and Darren could hear him grinding his teeth.

"We'll figure it out." *Probably with Severo's help.*

Lee unclenched his jaw and gave Darren a look of disbelief. "Right, like there's a logical explanation for the sudden lack of gravity for the curtains or the self-propulsion of the chair. That shit is just creepy."

"But it happened, we both saw it," Darren pointed out. "There *is* an explanation, it just might turn out to be one that's hard to accept."

"Virtually impossible," Lee muttered then looked down at Darren's hand on his arm. Darren felt the change in Lee instantly, the anger turning to arousal so strong the air seemed to thicken with it. "Darren, about before..."

"It's fine, I get it." Darren started to pull his hand away only to have Lee grab it and press Darren's hand to Lee's broad chest. "I do," Darren reiterated before his brain could turn to mush like it would if Lee kept letting him touch.

"No, that's not the part of before I was talking about," Lee said as he pulled Darren into a hug he hadn't expected at all. The backpack slid from his shoulder as Darren waved his arm, his other hand pinned between them still pressed to Lee's chest. When Lee's arms settled firmly around him, one big hand cupping the back of Darren's head, pushing until Darren finally gave in and rested his forehead on Lee's shoulder, Darren timidly reached for Lee, easing his arm around Lee's hip right above the towel. Darren closed his eyes and revelled in being held for several minutes as Lee rubbed his neck and back.

"I don't blame you," Lee said softly. "You shouldn't blame yourself either."

Darren disagreed. "I wasn't there! If I'd been there —"

"No." Lee emphasised the word with a brisk tightening of his arms. "You can't think like that. It wasn't like you knew what was going to happen."

Lee sounded so certain, but he didn't know all of it. Darren rubbed his forehead against Lee's shoulder, soaking up the scent of the man while he could. "I didn't know, no, but Stefan and I had kind of started growing apart—not, not like we weren't still best friends, but, you know, we reached a point where other things interested us some of the time. We

weren't always together. Stefan said he'd made a new friend and he'd tell me about him, I was, um, there was this guy, Cody, and we were, you know, curious."

Darren bit his lip to stop the verbal spew. Lee's body had gone tense against his as he'd talked. Darren figured he'd be shoved away and told to leave any second now.

"Do you know who Stefan's friend was?"

It wasn't what Darren had expected, and he was grateful even though he couldn't give Lee a name. "No, he was secretive. I thought he was just getting a kick out of teasing me, so I didn't press. He seemed happy, then Mom died and I...I don't know. I was a kid really and suddenly I was alone and had to make these decisions and figure out how to do things that would confuse any adult. Stefan was, well, he was Stefan. Happy and sweet, and I couldn't handle that when I was hurting and so scared." Darren's breath hitched as guilt constricted his lungs. "I avoided him for a few days. I was horrible, so selfish and then Cody said we should go to Houston for the weekend so we could...be alone. And Stefan died, and if I hadn't—"

Darren bit his bottom lip so hard he tasted blood. He wouldn't cry in front of Lee, like some small child crying for forgiveness. Darren had been seventeen, old enough to know Stefan needed him, he'd understood Stefan's disability, and he'd still had no patience for Stefan when it might have mattered most. He didn't deserve forgiveness.

"Darren."

Despite his best effort not to, Darren clung to Lee as the first tears slipped free. Instead of the rejection he expected, Darren heard Lee's murmured attempts to comfort, assuring him it wasn't his fault. Darren had only been a kid, and his world had imploded over night with his mother's death. That was true enough even though Darren's mom had been ill for a long time, her heart damaged from years of drug abuse before she found herself pregnant. Darren still hadn't been prepared for her to die.

"But I should have turned *to* Stefan, not away," Darren sobbed, hating himself for his weaknesses.

"Stefan didn't blame you. By that time he was, according to the letters I got after he died, already spending as much time with this other guy as he could. I think he transferred his crush on you to this friend, and I need to find out who he was."

Darren lifted his head, wondering why crying made it feel so heavy, and gaped at Lee. "What do you mean, his crush on me?"

The smile Lee gave him was so sweet it made more tears well in Darren's eyes. "I figured you didn't know. He wrote about having a crush on you once he understood what being gay meant. Stefan wrote me and asked if it was okay to be gay. Of course I told him yes, and he wrote back from then on, until he made his new friend, about his crush on you."

"How did I not know that? We were best friends and he never —"

Darren stopped himself before he could say any more. He didn't have any right to feel betrayed. Stefan wouldn't have ever hurt him purposely, and no matter how close they'd been, Stefan and Darren both had their own secrets. Granted, Darren had told Stefan he was gay, but not at first, not for years, even. Stefan may have been older, but he had been so innocent, and Darren had carefully avoided any talk about sex period in an attempt not to accidentally blurt out more than Stefan should hear.

"He knew you didn't think of him like that," Lee finally said. "Stefan loved you as a friend first and foremost, but he couldn't help crushing on you. He wasn't stupid, he could be very intuitive at times, at least where you were concerned. Stefan wanted you to be happy, settled with someone who was, and I'm quoting directly here, 'smart, sexy, who'll give him everything'. That's what Stefan wanted for you, and he knew he would always be limited."

Darren wanted to claim otherwise, that Stefan could and would have done anything, but the truth was, Stefan had suffered from oxygen deprivation when the umbilical cord had been wrapped around his neck during birth. The brain damage wasn't as severe as it could have been, but it was enough that Stefan would never have been able to live on his own.

"Darren, can you tell me why Stefan was anywhere near the ledge above Mercer's Ravine?"

Darren had wondered that himself later, once the shock of the two sudden deaths had dulled somewhat. "No. I knew he was afraid of heights. He wouldn't even climb onto the roof of the shed with me and it was only eight feet off the ground." Darren started to tremble as his worst fear about the cause of Stefan's death worked its way up to his mouth and spilled free. "I'm afraid he m-might have k-killed himself." Because Darren had all but abandoned his best friend, choosing instead to lose himself in his grief.

Chapter Six

"No, he didn't, Darren, Stefan didn't kill himself." Lee was a certain of that as he was the Earth was round and every other indisputable fact he knew. But Darren clearly didn't believe him, shaking his head so hard as he wept Lee feared he would hurt himself. Lee held Darren close and took the few steps backwards necessary to reach the bed. He sat, pulling Darren down with him.

"Come on," Lee whispered against Darren's ear. "Lie down and let me hold you."

Darren didn't lie down so much as collapse, curling up on his side with his knees hitched up. Lee murmured whatever comforting words he could think of as he wrapped his body around Darren's. The towel was gone, he realised, as his groin pressed against Darren's denim-clad ass. Lee started to move back since his dick had perked up as soon as bare skin met firm butt cheeks. Darren grumbled and reached back, his hand grasping Lee's hips hard enough to hurt.

Lee closed his eyes and tried everything he could to will his erection away, but nothing worked, not with Darren so close, his hand now kneading instead of gripping. Lee grunted when Darren arched his lower back, pressing his ass against Lee's stiff cock.

"Behave," Lee scolded, resisting the urge to rut against Darren until he soaked Darren's ass with cum.

Darren rolled his neck until he could peer over his shoulder at Lee. "But I want—"

Jesus, Lee did, too, but not when Darren was still trembling, his chest hitching with a silent sob every few breaths. "Not yet." No matter how much he ached to feel the silky heat of Darren's ass massaging his dick. "Not after everything that's just happened."

Darren jerked his head back around, but not before Lee saw the pink cheeks or the mortified expression on Darren's face.

"God damn it, I just keep fucking this up," Lee muttered. He hadn't wanted to take advantage of Darren when he was vulnerable. *Yeah, and making him feel ashamed of breaking down after carrying all that guilt for years, that was so much better. I have to fix this!* "I just meant I want you to be sure."

Darren didn't acknowledge the statement. Lee growled and sat up then rolled Darren onto his back. The shock in those brown eyes nearly made Lee smile but he swooped down instead to put his lips to better use. When Darren groaned Lee softened the kiss, thinking of the bruise that darkened Darren's chin. He was an insensitive asshole for not considering until this moment that even kissing might be painful for Darren.

Lee lifted his head only to have Darren grab two handfuls of Lee's hair and pull him back down. The bite of pain to his scalp had a direct effect on his cock as pre cum leaked from Lee's slit. Burying his own hands in Darren's soft brown hair, Lee manoeuvred himself until he was lying fully on Darren, only his elbows keeping the brunt of his weight off Darren.

Darren raked his teeth over Lee's lips before sinking his tongue in deep between them. Lee sucked the slick muscle, loving the way Darren moaned when he did so. Darren's hands slid from Lee's hair, down his neck to clutch at his shoulders. Darren's blunt nails scored Lee's skin. Lee tightened his hands in Darren's hair and rutted against Darren's groin. It wasn't nearly enough. He lifted his head enough to brush his lips over Darren's as he spoke.

"Get naked while I get what we need."

Darren's lips parted and Lee crushed his mouth to Darren's again, wanting to drink the man in. Everything about Darren felt right, tasted right, and Lee couldn't get enough. He was afraid he never would.

* * * *

Darren was drowning in desire, or burning in it—he couldn't decide as he opened for Lee's tongue. All he knew was that he needed more than this, as amazing as it was. Darren twisted his head to the side and moaned when Lee bit at the sensitive spot below his ear in response.

Words he'd never thought he'd be able to speak tumbled out. "I thought you wanted me naked. I *need* to be naked, want to feel you in me—"

Lee rumbled something unintelligible against Darren's neck, his teeth scraping over skin already marked. Lee thrust his hips, shoving his dick against the crease where Darren's thigh and groin met. Darren reached under Lee's arms and managed to get one hand between them. His fingers brushed the wet tip of Lee's shaft.

"Fuck yes, baby," Lee hissed, "Just—"

Darren shoved his hand lower and got a grip on Lee's cock. Lee cursed and thrust harder, his chest heaving as he threw his head back. "Darren, I...can't wait."

The last word came out so garbled Darren had trouble deciphering it but once he did, once he remembered he was the one who'd come once already, he understood Lee's urgency. Darren's dick was harder than it'd ever been—Lee must have been aching with the need for release. Darren gripped Lee's rod tighter as he pulled his other hand free and grabbed a rock hard sweat-slicked butt cheek, his fingers delving into Lee's fuzzy crack. He brushed over the wrinkled skin of Lee's hole and Lee shouted, liquid heat spraying from his cock as he came.

Lee worked his hips in erratic jerks until he finally stilled, groaning loudly. "Jesus, Dar, what are you doing to me?"

Darren didn't know if Lee was referring to his loss of control or the fact that his dick was still hard, pressed against Darren's groin, or both. Or maybe something else entirely.

Lee drew several gasping breaths then gave Darren a heated look. "*Now* you can get naked." Lee pushed up and rolled to Darren's side. "Like, right now," Lee growled, trailing his fingers through the warm cum on Darren's clothes. Lee brought his fingers to Darren's lips and rubbed the spunk on them, then slid his salty digits into Darren's mouth when he opened it. "Suck."

Darren did, his gaze locked with Lee's. He rolled his tongue around Lee's fingers, bit and sucked until he cleaned the cum off of them. Lee purred his approval and pulled his fingers from Darren's mouth. "Strip," he ordered, getting up from the bed.

His hands shaking as adrenalin pumped through him, Darren undressed while watching Lee's rounded ass flex as he walked over to the dresser. Lee opened his duffle and dug around as Darren kicked off his shoes and tossed his clothes on top of them. Darren felt a pang of worry that his body, so much more slender than Lee's muscular one, wouldn't appeal to Lee. Lee was beyond buff, not quite body builder huge, but close. And Darren just wasn't.

Lee turned back with a strip of condoms in one hand and a large bottle of lube in the other. He stopped and looked Darren over from head to toes. "You are so fucking gorgeous."

Darren stopped worrying about his body after that. He sat on the bed and started to move back, intending to get somewhere closer to the middle.

"Stop."

Darren did, one foot on the floor and the other on the edge of the bed. Lee strode over and tossed the condoms and lube on the bed beside Darren. "Put your other foot up, like this." He lifted Darren's leg until both feet were on the edge of the mattress. "Now spread." Lee pushed Darren's thighs apart, exposing him in a way Darren had never thought to be. Lee could see *everything*, which caused the flush staining Darren's chest to race down over his stomach and further still to the tops of his thighs.

Lee knelt between Darren's legs and ran a finger from the base of Darren's cock past his balls, then further down to his anus. Lee looked up, his gaze drilling Darren's. "Has anyone ever fucked this tight little hole?"

"Once," Darren squeaked, mortified by his lack of experience.

"That Cody kid?"

"Yes."

Lee pushed at Darren's pucker. "Just once. Did you like it?"

Darren tried to swallow but coughed instead, the lack of spit in his mouth and throat making the roll of muscles impossible. "It hurt. A lot," he tacked on when Lee made a questioning sound.

"It can, if it's not done right."

Darren groaned as Lee gripped his cheeks and spread them apart.

"So I'm guessing no one's ever done this, then."

Darren propped himself up on his elbows, trying to see more than the top of Lee's head. "Done what? I—*God!*" Darren's thoughts splintered as ecstasy shot up from his ass, scorching a path through his body. He couldn't believe Lee was licking him *there!* And Darren didn't want him to stop because it felt unbelievably good.

Lee chuckled, the vibration tickling Darren's hole. "That's what I thought." Then he proceeded to lick and suck the wrinkled skin, even scrape it with his teeth. Darren moaned and whimpered, the nerves around his ring lit up with pleasure and sharing it with every other nerve in his body. Something slick and hard slid into his opening and Darren keened as he realised Lee's tongue was inside him. His balls pulled up snug as Darren reached for his dick only to have his hand knocked aside. Lee gripped Darren's rod and jerked it hard and rough while his tongue penetrated him deeper with each entry. Something blunt joined Lee's tongue, pushing into Darren's hole and Darren screamed, his orgasm hitting him with no warning tingles or any of the other usual signs of imminent release. Darren's climax was

wrenched from him, bowing his back as his thighs tensed and quivered. Cum hit his chest and stomach as Darren's vision dimmed to a pinprick of light.

"Knew you'd love that," he heard Lee say smugly. Darren grunted then yelped when something cold and wet splattered onto his still tight sac. "Lube," Lee informed him, "because I am going to fuck you until we're both stupid from it."

Darren figured he had a head start there, because he was pretty sure the top of his head had blown off with the intensity of his orgasm. He flinched as Lee worked a finger into him, expecting pain.

"Relax, you'll love this as least as much as the rimming."

He had his doubts about that until Lee's finger brushed over Darren's prostate. Darren knew what it was, but after that one horrible experience he hadn't had the nerve to try to find it himself. Now he wished he had. He could almost weep over losing two years' worth of such pleasure.

Lee rubbed that spot until Darren's dick was fully erect then there was more pressure at Darren's hole.

"Look at that, two fingers inside you, stretching you, and you're loving it, fucking yourself on them."

And it felt too good to be embarrassed about. Darren pushed and ground against Lee's fingers, whining when they slipped from his body.

Lee shushed him softly. "You want more. That pretty little asshole is pink and fluttering, begging to be filled."

"Lee..." Darren gasped as his ring was stretched wider. It didn't hurt, exactly. Lee worked his fingers in deeper, bumping Darren's gland then it didn't even come close to being painful. Darren's hips rocked of their own accord, his butt moving up and down. His dick pulsed and bobbed, slapping against his stomach beneath his naval. Those warning tingles that had failed to alert him last time began at the base of his spine, crawling up its length slowly at first before rocketing up only to come to a halt when Lee pulled his fingers free.

"What... Why..." Darren wished he cursed, because he had been so very close to coming and why had Lee stopped?

As if he knew what Darren was thinking Lee laughed and gently slapped the inside of Darren's thigh. "I need to fuck you, and you're definitely ready."

"Oh." Well, that was all right then. Darren watched as Lee picked up the foil package and tore it open. He rolled the condom down his big cock then grabbed the lube and opened it.

"Always use lots of lube. Better too much than not enough," Lee advised.

Darren figured that was only one of the reasons he and Cody had hurt each other. They hadn't done more than stick a finger in each other before squirting a dollop of lube onto their dicks. Darren had felt like he was being scraped raw with a sandpaper-covered pipe. It had sucked.

"Roll over, it'll be easier for you. Knees on the floor and spread them wide."

"Okay," Darren stuttered, telling himself it was pretty stupid to feel self-conscious now. Lee had stuck his tongue and fingers in him, had already seen how wanton Darren could be. He rolled over and slid down until he was kneeling on the floor, his chest on the mattress and his butt tilted up.

"Wider," Lee said, his voice low and rough in contrast to the way he was softly stroking Darren's hip. "Beautiful."

Darren wasn't sure what the best position for his hands or arms was so he settled for stretching them out and grabbing handfuls of the sheets. He closed his eyes and shivered when he heard then felt Lee kneeling behind him. He flinched when his butt was caressed, expecting to feel a violent plunge into his body despite Lee's assurances otherwise.

"I haven't hurt you yet, and I won't. Trust me, at least with this if you can."

"I do." He didn't even have to think about it. Darren took a deep breath and relaxed his body. Lee ran his hands from Darren's shoulders to his thighs then Darren's balls were cupped and rolled.

"These fit my palm perfectly." Lee tugged and Darren moaned. "And I can't wait to feel this," —he grasped Darren's cock, squeezed it— "buried in my ass. You have a very nice dick, long and thick, and this vein here, the one I traced with my tongue when I sucked you off, mmm."

Darren struggled to return the praise that had him flying but something blunt and hard slid between his cheeks, bumping at his hole. *Lee's cock, and it's* — "Oh," Darren sighed as Lee began pressing in, the fat crown stretching Darren's pucker. Lee released Darren's shaft and grabbed his butt cheeks, spreading them open. "That's so good!"

"It gets better." Lee's voice sounded strained as he slowly pushed his cock in, filling Darren in a stroke so perfect he couldn't imagine it getting better. "God, you're so tight, you don't know...how good this feels, the way your ass clenches around my dick, those soft, warm muscles rippling, pulling me in deeper."

Maybe he didn't know how it felt to Lee, but Darren was pretty near the stupid stage Lee had promised to screw them both into. Lee slid his cock in another inch then his thighs pressed against the backs of Darren's.

Then Darren understood exactly what Lee meant about it getting better. Lee swivelled his hips, the base of his cock stretching Darren's hole while the glans rubbed over Darren's gland. Electric sparks spread out with each touch, zinging throughout Darren until he thought he'd scream from the sheer pleasure filling him.

Lee began thrusting, long slow strokes that speared Darren so deep he thought he should be able to taste Lee. "Feel good?"

Darren tried twice before he managed to answer. "Yeah, please don't stop."

"Not planning on it," Lee rasped. "But I am fixing to take this up a notch."

Darren was going to tell him that might just cause everything in his body to short out but Lee began pumping his dick into Darren harder, deeper than before. "Ahh," was all Darren could get out as he clutched at the sheets, trying to brace himself somehow so he could push back. Darren gave up and moaned when Lee's balls slapped against his, the sound and sensation stealing his breath.

Lee was panting loudly, his hips slamming against Darren's butt. He tipped his hips up and saw stars as Lee's dick once again rubbed Darren's prostate, albeit this time with more force. Darren's butt was caressed, his lower back, then all the way to below his shoulders. Lee shifted behind him then Lee was surrounding him, pressing his chest to Darren's back. Darren yelped when Lee shoved his hands under Darren and plucked and pinched his nipples.

"Again." Darren found his voice long enough to voice the command. Lee's answer was to twist and pull at the hard nubs Darren had ignored except when getting cleaned up. They sure hadn't seemed like an erogenous spot then, so maybe it was just Lee.

"Going to fuck you, suck you, mark you 'cause your mine," Lee growled, sounding so possessive it gave Darren hope for the possibility of something more than just sex between

them. He'd examine that thought later when Lee wasn't ploughing into him so thoroughly, so exquisitely.

Darren sank into the pleasure, moaning and whimpering as Lee sucked up marks on the back of his neck and his shoulders. His nipples were tormented deliciously as Lee plunged his dick into Darren over and over, battering Darren's gland. Darren tried to slip a hand under himself to jerk his own dripping cock but Lee snarled and sat up, pulling Darren with him.

"I told you, mine." Lee emphasised his claim by pinching Darren's nipples, adding a twist to make the swollen nubs burn, the pain nothing compared to how good it felt. "Mine," Lee said again as he fisted Darren's cock. He dipped the tip of his thumbnail in Darren's slit and Darren howled his approval, bucking his hips and begging for more. Lee brought his other hand down to cup Darren's balls, pushing them up against Darren's body.

"Yeah, baby, look at you, listen to those sexy as fuck sounds you make." Lee pushed his thumbnail in again and squeezed Darren's balls. Darren lost it, screaming as cum blasted from his cock. He vaguely heard Lee cursing as Darren's head swam with the force of his climax. Lee kept pumping into him, groaning so much it became one long continual sound to Darren.

Lee shoved him forward, bending him over the bed. Darren was too boneless to do anything other than kneel there as Lee shoved his dick into him roughly, his rhythm gone as he sought his release. His hands spread Darren's cheeks open again and Lee drove in deep. Darren jolted and keened at the contact to his gland as Lee bellowed, his cock pulsing inside Darren so strongly he could feel each shot of spunk that jetted out. Lee collapsed on top of him, placing wet sloppy kisses on Darren's neck and cheek that made Darren's heart flutter.

Lee roused after a while and nipped Darren's shoulder. "Up, come on, get in bed."

Darren tried but he was already half asleep. He got one leg up on the bed before letting sleep pull him under completely.

Chapter Seven

Lee rolled over and pried his eyes open, smiling when he saw Darren lying on his side, his head propped up on his hand. Darren's eyes were still sleep-heavy, the lids drooping until they were almost shut before Darren managed to snap them back open. Darren's stomach growled and Lee had to bite his cheek to keep from laughing when Darren blushed and tried to scramble away.

"Oh, no you don't," Lee said as he hooked an arm around Darren's waist and hauled him close enough to steal a kiss. "Running just makes me chase you. I found you finally, don't think I'm going to let you escape." Not any time soon, at any rate. Darren was just too enjoyable to use once or twice then dismiss. Lee wasn't sure what his intentions were towards Darren but he wanted to explore this attraction between them more thoroughly.

Darren winked at him. "What if I like you to chase me?"

Lee's brows had to have been near to the top of his head. This was a side of Darren Lee hadn't expected to see, comfortable enough to tease. He liked it, just as he did everything else he'd learned so far about Darren. "Well, then, I guess you'll have to make sure I can catch you, and I will definitely have to make sure you want to be caught." He leered and thrust his groin against Darren's. "But maybe we should go find something to eat first so we both have the energy for it."

Darren sighed and looked around the room. "What time is it anyway?"

"Seven, not late at all, why?"

"I have to get home and take care of the chickens. Old Red is going to be a nasty twit since I didn't feed him on time." Darren started to get up again and this time Lee let him. He crossed his arms over his chest and tried not to glower as Darren began getting dressed.

"You don't even have time to eat?" Lee sat up as something occurred to him. "How are you getting home?"

"Laine and Severo said they'd pick me up and take me home." Darren bent to pull his underwear on and Lee caught a glimpse of pink puffy skin nestled between Darren's ass cheeks.

"Is there some reason you don't want me to take you home?" Lee was going to, if Darren insisted on leaving.

Darren turned and frowned as he looked at Lee. "No, but I didn't want to presume anything since, you know, I know this is just a one-night-stand-type deal."

That wasn't exactly what Lee had said. Apparently those two words — "for now" — were going to be used against him and it was his own damned fault. Lee stood and stalked over to Darren. "I did *not* say any such thing. I said you were mine 'for now' which doesn't mean *just for tonight* or whatever temporary description you want to put on it. I mean, really, Darren, what was I supposed to say? We weren't close when you lived in Jackson, and I just found you again today. Thirty minutes after that I'm swallowing your cum as you moan and shudder under my hands. Doesn't that seem a little too quick to commit to a long-term relationship?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for being an idiot. I just...I don't know how to have a relationship or a...whatever this is." Darren frowned and shook his head. "If it's not a relationship, but it's not a one or two-night-stand, what *is* it? Or is a term necessary?"

Darren seemed so puzzled Lee had to touch him. He put his arms around Darren and pressed a kiss to his parted lips. "If you have to have a term, we're dating, taking our time and seeing where this goes, sound okay to you?"

"Yeah," Darren said a little breathlessly, his eyes gleaming as he nodded and held onto Lee. "Yeah, I think that'd be good."

Lee studied Darren until he was sure it *was* good with him then kissed Darren again just because he wanted to. "Okay, then. I'll take you home tonight or in the morning—"

Darren went stiff in Lee's arms, gasping as his eyes widened, fear blowing the pupils wide. Lee felt a blast of cold air, too frigid to be natural, sinking into his back. He let go of Darren and spun around, jaw dropping open as the sheets spun around in the air, a good three feet above the bed.

"What the fuck!" Lee reached behind him and pushed Darren back. "Someone is messing with us. Stay there." He stormed over to the bed and stuck his hand in the space between the bed and the sheets. Nothing but air, very cold air. "What kind of trick is this?" Lee wasn't scared yet, but he was getting there. He climbed onto the bed and waved his arms above the sheets. Again, cold air and nothing else. The rational part of his mind said, *Duh! If*

there'd been strings attached to those sheets I'd have noticed it before now! The irrational part, which hardly ever got a say, pointed out, then there's no rational explanation for this!

Lee grabbed the sheets. They stopped spinning, hanging still and just plain wrong in the air. Lee pulled. A corner of one sheet slithered out like a snake and tapped his cheek. Now Lee was scared. He stumbled off the bed and landed on his ass, never looking away from those sheets.

The corner that had touched him shot up in the air then dove down at him. Lee scrambled backwards, his heart clamouring in his chest. One sheet shot past him. He heard Darren yell then Lee found himself fighting off over six-feet of material. Of all the training he had in the military, all the methods of fighting he'd learned, none of it was any help against a sheet.

Lee's arms were bound to his sides as the thing wound around him. He struggled and cursed then was lifted to his feet and Lee knew he'd either completely lost his mind or...or something. If he was lucky then this was all a dream. The edge of the sheet peeled back then unwound with a quickness that left Lee spinning like a top. He flailed his arms as everything sped by in a blur, then he was stopped suddenly by some invisible force.

"Christ," Lee gasped, blinking rapidly as everything else still seemed to be spinning, then he saw Darren standing in front of him. Bound by the fitted sheet, eyes wide with terror, and unable to scream because a portion of the material was wedged into Darren's mouth.

Lee hadn't been so scared before in his life. He yelled as he grabbed the sheet and pulled. The material didn't budge for a second then Lee was tumbling back onto his ass as the sheet came off Darren in a flash. Lee tossed it aside and pushed himself up, reaching for Darren immediately.

Darren began to shake, his body jerking with the violent waves rolling through him. Lee enfolded Darren in his arms and peppered kisses over whatever part of Darren's face he could reach.

When Darren's teeth stopped chattering Lee was almost recovered as well. He didn't know what had just happened, or why or how, but he knew he was getting Darren and himself out of this motel immediately.

"Can you finish getting dressed?"

Darren blinked at him. The high-pitched laugh Darren let loose sounded off, tinged with a hysterical note. "Y-you're still naked."

Lee nodded, keeping the fact that he hadn't even thought of that to himself. Darren was on edge, it wouldn't do to spook him any more, and Lee was barely keeping himself from freaking out, only the knowledge that Darren needed him giving him the strength not to run from the room butt naked and screaming.

"I'll be dressed and packed in two minutes, then we're out of here."

Darren's nod was more of a twitch, Lee thought, but he released Darren and stepped back. "You're okay. Whatever that shit was, we're both okay."

"Yeah." Darren shuddered then resumed dressing, not looking at Lee. "You can stay with me if you want, unless you're going to leave after this."

Lee paused in mid stride and turned back to Darren. "I'm not leaving yet, and I would like to stay with you."

Darren flicked a glance at him that made Lee's heart lurch. "Good, that's good."

That decided, they each returned to their tasks and in under two minutes Lee and Darren were out the door.

* * * *

Red was in a mood when they pulled up in Lee's Camaro. The rooster made getting to the house a challenge, chasing after them and nearly catching them as Darren and Lee ran up the porch steps.

"Christ," Lee panted, "between that damned rooster and the sheets, we're lucky we haven't been hurt."

Darren snorted as he unlocked the door and turned the knob. "Yeah, we're physically unhurt. Mentally I know I may be scarred for life."

"You and me both," Lee muttered. "I want to know what the hell happened back there, but maybe if we get a good night's sleep we'll be able to think a little more clearly about it. Right now I just keep getting more confused the more I think about it. I *cannot* make sense out of it!"

Lee sounded so frustrated Darren wanted to hold him and soothe his frayed nerves like Lee had held him when Darren had broken down. He doubted Lee would go for that, though. "Okay, we can sleep on it and deal with it tomorrow." Darren would have to tell Lee about Severo and hope Lee didn't think they were all nuts. He had a feeling Severo—and

maybe Laine—was the only one who would believe them. If Lee didn't believe him then Darren didn't know what he'd do.

Lee's hand rubbing at the small of his back drained some of the anxiety from Darren, the possessive gesture chasing off the last of the chill that had lingered in him after the weirdness in the motel. He led the way into the house. Lee tucked his fingers into Darren's waistband and tugged. "Let me lock this."

Darren was going to but it felt nice to have Lee taking charge. He waited while Lee locked the screen door first then closed and locked the heavy wooden door. Not that Darren thought the locks would do any good against whatever had come after them earlier. The deep frown turning down Lee's mouth at the edges probably meant he was thinking the same thing.

The frown turned into a strained smile as Lee faced him. "Done." He looked past Darren into the living room. Darren turned and looked as well. Over the past couple of months he'd got used to the crocheted throws that covered the couch and chair and the numerous porcelain knick knacks that were set on just about every flat surface. The dark wood panelling would have made the place gloomy if there hadn't been so many lamps.

"Did all this come with the place?"

Darren laughed as he waved a hand at the décor he privately thought of as old lady chic. "Yeah. I didn't have anything other than the clothes on my back when Virginia picked me up on 97 and brought me to McKinton."

Lee's mouth tipped down again at the corners as he rubbed at his forehead as if it ached. "I wish I had found you sooner. I tried. I got out of the military and went back to Jackson and you were gone. Mom and Dad were already in the process of moving up to Idaho to be near her family. No one knew where you were or what happened to you." Lee stopped rubbing and gently cupped Darren's cheek. "What happened to you, Darren? Where were you these last two years?"

Darren was already rung out and the questions only made him feel more emotionally vulnerable than he already did. All he really wanted to do was shower and sleep—eating could wait, but Lee deserved answers since he'd been trying to find Darren for so long.

"Come into the kitchen. We'll fix some sandwiches and I'll tell you everything." Lee was probably hungry, and Darren would eat, too. It wouldn't take him long to tell his tale.

“All right, I appreciate it. You don’t seem eager to talk about it, but I’d like to hear anything you’re willing to tell me.”

Darren took Lee’s hand, hoping it was okay to do so. Lee linked his fingers through Darren’s and smiled and Darren lit up inside like he had his own personal sun. “It’s just that there’s not much to tell. It’s kind of pathetic, really,” Darren said as he walked beside Lee until they came to the kitchen. He started to pull his hand free—they wouldn’t fit through the doorway, not with Lee’s broad shoulders.

Lee shook his head and kept Darren’s hand in his, swinging them just a little. “I like this.”

Darren did too, but—“It’ll be hard to fix dinner like this. Dangerous too if there’s any knives involved.”

“You have a couple of good points.” Lee let go of his hand and Darren preceded him into the kitchen.

Darren gestured to the battered wooden chairs at the table. “Have a seat and I’ll get the stuff out.”

“If you’re sure you don’t want me to help.”

“I am.” Darren went to the cabinets first and took out two clean plates. He set them on the table then strode to the refrigerator. “All I’ve done the past two years until settling here in McKinton was scrape by. I’ve been homeless, hungry and a bunch of other unpleasant things but I came out okay. I left Jackson right after Stefan’s funeral—literally. Mom was gone, Stefan, and I couldn’t face running into your folks since I’d let Stefan down so badly.”

“You didn’t, Dar, I told you he was busy with someone else. He wasn’t sitting at home thinking you abandoned him.” Lee’s voice had a sharp edge to it that put Darren on the defensive, although he really liked it when Lee called him ‘Dar’ almost as much as he liked it when Lee called him ‘baby’.

“I did, especially if Stefan was hanging around someone else,” Darren said firmly as he opened the refrigerator and started pulling out condiments. “I should have known who it was, and made sure they weren’t going to hurt Stefan.” Lee would eventually realise Darren was at fault no matter what had happened to Stefan. Darren was supposed to take care of his friend. He hadn’t. That was what would drive Lee away from him.

“Darren, I told you —”

"I know what you told me," Darren said, adding lunchmeat and cheese to the items already gathered. "And I'm too tired to argue about it."

"Then don't."

"Jesus!" Darren yelled, bobbling everything he was holding. He hadn't heard Lee walk up behind him, and the man had probably scared a decade off Darren's life! "Don't *do* that! Especially after a night when sheets attack!"

"It's a habit," Lee muttered as he reached around Darren to grab some of the load. "Now stop changing the subject."

Darren spun around and glared at Lee. "I'm not changing the subject! You snuck up on me and scared the crap out of me!"

Lee's lips twitched and he shook his head. "It just occurred to me that I haven't heard you cuss, not even once. You don't, do you?"

"Mom didn't want me to," Darren muttered. "If that sounds childish, then—"

"It doesn't, and it's good for me to know." Lee headed back to the table and Darren followed. "I won't stop cussing entirely—there's no way I could, especially not when we're fu—" Lee winced. "Having sex. The rest of the time, though, I'll at least try." He set the packages of cold cuts and cheese on the table.

"You don't have to, and I liked it when you talked dirty while we were having sex." It had made Darren's lust flare even higher.

Lee shot him a wicked grin before walking to the counter to grab the bread. "Good. But I meant it when I said I'd work on the other, not cussing, at least as much as I have been."

Darren didn't know why Lee was so willing to try to curb his cursing but it made Darren happy that he even offered to do so. "Okay, thank you."

Lee pulled out a chair for Darren, which made him feel mildly insulted and touched at the same time. He still said thank you though and sat, Lee quickly doing the same.

"Now, getting back on track," Lee began and Darren wanted to groan. "I know you felt responsible for Stefan, and everyone, including myself, let you, but the truth of the matter is, Stefan's family was responsible for him. Me, our parents. We were the ones who should have been watching over Stefan and making sure nothing happened to him. Us, not you. We didn't, and Stefan paid the price whether his death was accidental or...or not."

Darren understood the legality of it but emotionally he didn't agree. "You couldn't watch him, you were gone, and your parents—"

Lee cut him off with a sharp slash of his hand through the air. "No. My parents could have hired someone, they could have afforded it, or they could have spent more time with Stefan themselves." Lee grimaced and tapped his chest. "And I could have stayed in Jackson, but I didn't. I couldn't wait to get out of that place, and I wasn't about to let something like a brother who needed me stop me. So don't tell me you were selfish. I left and only came back once every year or so. I could have come home more often. I chose not to."

Lee's eyes were glittering with unshed tears as he stopped talking. Darren tried to find an argument against Lee's claims that couldn't also be applied to himself but couldn't. He wasn't sure whether he felt any less guilty or not. He'd carried around that weight for so long he didn't know if he could ever let it go.

And Lee had to feel at least as responsible as Darren did which spurred him to speak. Darren reached for Lee's hand and waited until Lee looked at him. "Do you think Stefan would be happy knowing we both felt like this? He was so proud of you, going off and serving in the military. Do you think he'd have wanted you to give that up?"

"He probably would have rather had me at home," Lee said, looking down at the table or his plate, Darren couldn't tell.

"I don't think so."

That got Lee's attention, gaze shooting back up to Darren's.

"Why don't you think so?"

Darren could hear the hope in Lee's voice and he prayed he'd find the right words to ease Lee's guilt. "Stefan knew he wasn't going to be able to leave Jackson and do the things you did. The only way he got to experience life outside that place was through you. I mean, yeah, he could see different stuff on TV, but it wasn't the same. Every time he got a letter or a call from you, he would glow for days and tell everyone he could about his big brother. What would he have had if you'd stayed in Jackson? What would have made him so happy he practically walked on air? What would he have had to look forward to if not your calls, letters and visits?"

Lee looked thunderstruck, his eyes wide and his lips parted enough that Darren could see a strip of that talented tongue. "I don't know."

"Me either, but I am beginning to believe both of us need to think about why we feel like we do."

And if they were lucky they might get some answers they could actually understand.

Chapter Eight

"Why hasn't anyone killed that da—rooster?" Lee washed the set of deep scratches on his forearm. He wanted to cuss so bad he almost didn't trust himself to speak. The little red bastard had got him good, digging those talons in and trying to tear a chunk out of Lee's arm. "He's a menace. Someday he's going to pluck out someone's eye or something. He's like a chicken on meth or maybe he's a sociopath." Lee considered it while Darren opened the antibiotic cream. "Yeah, that fits. You have a sociopathic rooster in your front yard."

Darren pointed the uncapped tube at him. "Are you always this optimistic at five in the morning?"

Lee turned the sink off and took the clean washcloth Darren had laid out for him. "No, I'm usually *asleep* at five in the morning—although I'm certainly not complaining about waking up with your sweet lips wrapped around my dick." Lee grinned and dried his arm off with the washcloth.

Darren had taken the initiative this morning and Lee had been so surprised, his usual control had failed him. He'd shot his wad a lot sooner than he'd wanted to, but that might have been a good thing. Lee had plans for his lover, plans that would satisfy both of them.

He held up his arm and let Darren rub the cream over the scratches. Yeah, he could have done it himself but Darren touching him, even if it was like this, was never a bad thing. Lee could grow addicted to this man. Maybe he already was. He liked Darren, and while the sex so far had been amazing that wasn't all there was between them. The more he got to know Darren, the more fascinated he was by him—and with each moment they spent together, Lee was sinking deeper and deeper into the attraction between them.

He glanced up when Darren's hand stilled on his arm. Lee's gaze met Darren's in the mirror above the sink. Darren's brown eyes softened, the irises appearing almost liquid in the reflection. He licked his lips, slicking the pink skin, making it glisten.

"Dar." Lee wasn't sure he'd actually spoken or if he'd only mouthed the word. He started to turn and Darren was there, meeting him halfway. Darren cupped the back of Lee's neck then crushed his mouth to Lee's. Lee didn't know where the assertive streak in Darren

came from, but he liked it. A lot. Lee opened for Darren's tongue and let his lover take the lead.

* * * *

After a surprisingly good night's sleep, Darren had woken up to the realisation that, once he told Lee he suspected there'd been a spirit in the motel room with them, Lee might very likely leave him. Darren had been overwhelmed with the need to make Lee his, much like Lee had done to him yesterday. Darren had to claim at least some part of the man as thoroughly as possible, and if all he could have was Lee's body he'd take it even though he wanted so much more.

Darren had swallowed his nerves then swallowed Lee's cock. Lee had woken with a rumbling moan that had Darren's balls drawing tight. Sucking Lee off had hurt a little—Darren's chin was still sore but nothing like it had been. Even if he'd been in agony, though, Darren would have continued blowing Lee after hearing the sounds the man made. And watching him, seeing the utter lack of control as Lee writhed and thrashed, ragged breaths cutting the air—Darren had felt like a god for those brief minutes.

Now the chickens were taken care of and Lee's arm was doctored, and Darren did *not* want to talk about what happened in the motel yet. He wanted another chance to bind Lee to him even if it was only until Lee moved on to somewhere else.

Darren shoved his hands under the waistband of Lee's sweats, filling his hands with warm, wonderfully firm butt cheeks. He lifted his mouth from Lee's and trailed kisses across his jaw. Lee murmured and gripped Darren's hips, tugging to bring their hard cocks into contact through their clothes. Darren squeezed the flesh under his hands, delighting in the soft fuzz that was sprinkled on Lee's butt. He nipped Lee's earlobe and the man shuddered. *Hot spot.* Darren sucked the lobe into his mouth as he tickled Lee's crease with his fingertips. He moved his hands down, searching for and finding Lee's puckered opening.

"I want in here," Darren rasped, his cock growing even harder. "Let me."

Lee's hands clenched bruisingly hard on Darren's hips. "Anything, whatever you want, I want."

Darren tapped a finger against Lee's hole, delighting in Lee's ragged moan. "I want to make you mine, just like you did to me."

"Fuck, Dar." Lee pressed his forehead to Darren's, his gaze steady. "I am yours, but I want you to fuck me."

They kissed and groped their way to the bedroom, somehow managing not to trip as they shed their clothes. Lee started to get the supplies they needed but Darren stopped him with a one-handed push that sent Lee sprawling onto his back on the bed. Lee's mouth gaped open, surprise widening his eyes. Darren laughed, pleased with himself for having done something to throw Lee off.

"Stay right there, I'll get what we need."

When Lee didn't protest Darren assumed it was okay for him to open Lee's duffle bag and paw through it for the condoms and lube. He found them quickly then strode back to the bed and gave Lee an appreciative look. Lee had said Darren was perfect, but he wasn't.

This man, with his thickly muscled thighs spread wide, his furry balls heavy and hanging low, covering the spot Darren ached to fill, was as physically perfect as a man could be. His long fat dick nearly reached his belly button, and the beads of pre cum slicking the bulbous cap made Darren's mouth water with the need to taste.

Darren swept his gaze up Lee's body, marvelling at the deeply etched ridges in his stomach. The firm swell of his pecs were topped with small erect copper-coloured nipples ringed with swirls of hair. His shoulders were broad and stacked with muscle, his neck long and thick. Lee's hair was spread out on the pillow, framing his gorgeous face. His green eyes were nearly closed, his lips parted as he panted softly.

Lee was, Darren knew without a doubt, the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life.

Darren crawled onto the bed and knelt between Lee's thighs. He set the supplies down and ran his hands down the insides of Lee's legs, noting the way Lee's skin prickled with goose bumps. Darren hooked his hands behind Lee's knees and pushed. Lee raised his legs then grabbed the backs of his knees, bringing them to his chest.

Lee's willingness to open himself in such a way set Darren's heart stuttering in his chest. The trust the position implied was a gift that warmed him and sent Darren toppling ever closer to the dangerous emotions he was afraid to accept. Darren dragged in a shaky breath, his lungs suddenly desperate for air. His gaze was drawn to Lee's balls. Darren cupped them, loving their weight in his hand. He rolled them gently then bent down and sucked one into his mouth.

Lee's body shook hard enough that the mattress vibrated with it, or maybe that was from the long drawn out moan that rent the air. Darren laved the furry nut, sucking it in deep then pushing it back with his tongue. He let it slip from his mouth then promptly took the other one in, giving it the same attention he had the first.

"Dar, I need..." Lee groaned as Darren worked Lee's sack into his mouth. Darren hummed and fisted Lee's cock, pulling it up from where it bobbed against his stomach. "God, fuck!"

Darren smiled around his mouthful then released Lee's balls with a loud slurp. He licked his way up Lee's dick, stopping to tease the sensitive bundle of nerves. Lee bucked beneath him and Darren opened wide and engulfed Lee's dripping glans. He swallowed as much of Lee's length as he could, gripping the base to keep Lee from gagging him when Lee began to thrust.

Lee cursed and muttered words Darren couldn't understand, they were so garbled. He skimmed his teeth over the rim of Lee's cap and felt Lee's cock pulse and swell in his hand. Darren squeezed the base tightly then let go as he sucked hard. Hot cum shot onto his tongue as Lee gasped and shook, filling Darren's mouth with cream.

Darren sucked and licked Lee's cock until Lee whimpered then he released it and crawled up between Lee's legs. He shoved at Lee's knees to move them then bit at one coppery nub while pinching the other with his fingers. Lee's chest heaved under the assault, threatening to dislodge Darren. He bit down harder and Lee grabbed handfuls of Darren's hair. Darren raked his teeth over the erect nub when Lee shoved Darren's head down, mashing his nose against Lee's pec.

"Don't stop, don't fucking stop," Lee rasped.

Darren bit and twisted Lee's nipples until they were dark red and swollen from it. He blew against one then the other then shot up to kiss the moan from Lee's lips. Darren sank his tongue in deep, sweeping Lee's mouth, swallowing every sound Lee made and keeping it for himself. Lee's tongue battled with his and Darren nipped it, refusing to give over control. He'd meant it when he said he wanted to make Lee his.

"*You are mine,*" Darren ground out once Lee had stopped trying to control the kiss. Lee only nodded, his eyes wide, stunned, his lips parted and plump from Darren's plundering. Darren grunted and dipped his head to get at Lee's neck. Lee dropped his hands, which had been buried in Darren's hair, to his sides and arched his neck, offering or begging, Darren

didn't know which. He caught Lee's chin in a strong grip and tipped Lee's head up and to the side then he began marking him, branding him even if only temporarily as his own.

By the time he'd left a trail of purple bruises on Lee's tanned skin, the man was a mass of quivering need, his words senseless as he gasped repeatedly. The fierce spear of possessiveness in Darren hadn't abated, had indeed only wound tighter as Lee came undone so beautifully for him. His dick was hard and dripping again, and Darren's was so hard he worried he'd come before he finished putting the rubber on.

Darren pinched the tip of his glans, the jolt of pain giving him a measure of control. He sat back on his heels between Lee's thighs and picked up the condom first. As close to coming as he was, Darren wanted to get that on while he could. He ripped the package open then sheathed his dick. He tossed the wrapper aside and grabbed the lube, popping the lid open with his other hand. Darren squirted lube on his fingers, coating them thoroughly then added more just to be safe.

He nudged Lee's thigh and Lee bent his legs, bringing his heels against his butt. Darren wanted to sit back and admire the view but he needed Lee desperately. He didn't want to be careless though, so he looked at Lee intently, seeing his own need reflected in Lee's eyes. "Tell me if I go too fast or...or do something wrong, okay?"

Lee's lips quirked then a chuckle escaped as he shook his head. "You won't. Jesus, baby, I'm so fucking ready for you, you don't even know..."

Darren lifted Lee's sac and looked at the tiny fluttering ring. He darted a glance at Lee's face then back at the wrinkled skin. "You might think you're ready, but this—" Darren slicked lube over the tight opening, drawing moans from Lee and him both. "There's no way it wouldn't hurt if I didn't get your hole stretched first."

"I can take it," Lee said. Darren pushed the tip of one finger in and Lee shut up. Lee's muscle clamped down hard then relaxed and Darren's finger was practically sucked into the velvety heat.

"It's so soft," Darren murmured, wriggling his finger against Lee's inner walls. Lee made a choking sound and Darren wriggled his digit again, feeling the bump of Lee's gland. "Ah, this is good." Darren rubbed and tapped as he pumped his finger into Lee over and over. The second went in easy, Lee rocking his butt down as he begged for more.

"I've got you, I do," Darren crooned as he slid a third finger into Lee. He pushed slowly but unceasingly deeper, his knuckles catching that spot that made Lee babble, "Dar, Dar, please, oh fuck, oh God, you have to, now!"

Darren pulled his fingers out and scooted in, lining his dick up with Lee's stretched hole when Lee pulled his knees back up to his chest. Just feeling the lube-slicked opening against the tip of his glans made Darren's eyes roll back. He couldn't wait to feel all those warm rippling muscles around his shaft, pulling him in deep.

Gripping the backs of Lee's thighs Darren began pressing his cock into Lee's hole. After a slight resistance his crown popped into Lee's opening. Darren's heart thudded and his pulse raced as he tore his gaze from the erotic sight of his dick being sucked into Lee's body. Darren wanted to watch that happen, but he wanted to see Lee's expression even more.

Lee's eyes had a hazy unfocused look to them, wide and unseeing. His cheeks were ruddy and a sheen of sweat made his skin glisten. Lee's mouth was open like an offering, his pink tongue darting out repeatedly to wet his chapped lips. His hair was a tangled mass from Lee tossing his head.

"*You* are beautiful, perfect," Darren gritted out as his cock slid deeper into Lee's hole. Darren groaned as tight hot muscles gripped and massaged his rod. His hips jerked as pleasure shot from his balls and spread up his spine. "*And you're mine.*" Darren thrust and sank his cock in deep, his balls slapping against Lee's butt. Lee shouted, his back arching as he let go of his legs and reached for Darren.

Darren dropped down on top of Lee, catching himself on his elbows at Lee's sides while Lee wound his strong legs around Darren's hips. He took Lee's mouth again and began pummeling his cock into Lee, forcing a grunt from Lee each time Darren's cock lodged deep inside him.

It couldn't last long, or Darren knew *he* couldn't last long, not with the way Lee's walls contracted around his dick, pulling and pushing until Darren couldn't do anything other than give in to his body's demand. Darren snarled like a wild beast as he grasped Lee's jaw and plundered his mouth with the same ferocity he was plundering Lee's hole.

Lee jerked and writhed and clutched at Darren as wet heat spread between their bellies. Darren's dick was gripped so tight he had to lift his lips from Lee's and scream as ecstasy racked his body. He ground his hips against Lee, mindless with the intensity of his orgasm.

Sometime later he became aware of being sticky and sweaty. Darren opened his eyes only to discover Lee snoring softly under him. He knew his grin was a smug one, it had to be as he looked at his lover, worn out and marked with love bites that Darren wanted to keep on that tanned skin.

Despite feeling weak and drained, Darren reached down and grabbed the base of his cock, holding onto the rubber as his dick slid from Lee's pucker. Lee grumbled and tried to pull Darren close but Darren resisted long enough to remove the condom and tie it off before tossing it on the floor.

Darren pushed aside his fears about Lee leaving him and slid onto his stomach beside Lee. He refused to believe this was all he'd have with this man, and as Darren closed his eyes he vowed to do everything he could to make Lee want to stay with him in McKinton.

Chapter Nine

"You think there was a ghost in the motel room?" Lee said impassively as he watched Darren. The familiar bright swatches of colour bloomed on Darren's fair cheeks as he nodded.

"You said yourself there was nothing holding the sheets up, but something was." Darren leant forward and gave Lee a pleading look. "Is it easier to believe the sheets just became animated and spontaneously attacked? Is it really too impossible for you to believe that people's spirits might be able to linger even after the body dies?"

"I don't know what to believe. If I can touch it, see it, hear it, even smell it, then I know it's real, but this..." Lee shook his head.

"But it happened, you know it did. Let me call Severo, maybe he can explain it better."

And there was another creepy thing, a man people claimed could speak to spirits, or hear them, whatever. The very thought of it made Lee want to shudder and run from this town like his ass was on fire.

Darren reached across the table and held Lee's hand in his. One glance at those sweet brown eyes and Lee caved. He didn't want to leave McKinton—specifically, he didn't want to leave Darren. Whatever they had going on was strong and addictive and Lee didn't want to fight it. He nodded once and Darren leapt up from his seat, letting Lee's hand go so he could run around the table and hug Lee so hard he couldn't breathe.

"Thank you," Darren mumbled.

Lee didn't know what he was being thanked for, but Darren followed it up with a tender kiss that rocked Lee to his toes. He was even a little stunned, especially after Darren had been so commanding earlier, taking Lee with all the skills of an experienced lover. No one had ever made Lee feel like that, as if he could—and he had, hadn't he?—hand himself over completely and trust his lover to know what he needed. Darren had said Lee was his, and he was right. For however long this lasted, Darren had him, however Darren wanted him.

"I'll be right back." Darren kissed Lee's forehead then sprinted out of the kitchen. Lee heard the low murmur of Darren's voice and knew his lover was calling Severo. Lee decided

he'd try to keep his mind open no matter how bizarre all this was. It was obvious Darren believed, and maybe, although Lee was afraid to hope for it, if spirits did exist, maybe Stefan was among them. Lee immediately felt guilty for the thought. If there was some way for people to hang around after they died, how did he know if it was better than them just...going wherever people went once they passed?

"Severo and Laine will be here in an hour."

Lee glanced over at Darren standing in the kitchen doorway. He was wringing his hands and looking everywhere but at Lee. Lee couldn't stand seeing Darren so worried.

"Come here." Lee scooted his chair back and patted his lap. Darren hesitated briefly then came over and sat right where Lee wanted him to. Lee hooked his arms around Darren and rubbed his forehead against Darren's chest. "I can't promise you I'll believe whatever Severo says, but I do promise you I'll listen."

Darren wrapped his arms around Lee's shoulders. "That's all I'm asking you to do."

* * * *

Lee was listening! Stefan was so excited he wanted to do something, ruffle Lee's hair or just wrap around him.

"You'll scare the crap outta him."

Of course Conner had to burst Stefan's happy bubble. Stefan gave the equivalent of a huff as he pouted. Sure, it was fine for Conner to scare the shit out of Lee and Darren—that sheet trick had been neat, and Conner had been right, it kept Darren from going home alone and kept Lee from letting him. Maybe Conner shouldn't have interfered but it'd been so obvious that the two men didn't want to be apart from each other.

"See? I had a good reason. See how they can't hardly look away from each other? And Lee has held Darren's hand this entire time. So me scaring them was good. If you scare them now, especially Lee since he still isn't convinced spirits exist, who knows what Lee will do."

Fine. He'd just hover here and be good, but he still wanted to let Lee know he was here.

"Don't even think about it."

God, if Stefan had eyes he'd roll them at Conner. The guy could be such a stick in the mud.

"Trust me, Stefan. Darren needs to know you didn't kill yourself, and he and Lee both need to know the truth. Just have a little patience."

What other choice did he have? Stefan made himself even smaller and settled in to wait.

* * * *

Darren's skin kept flaring with chill bumps. Ever since Severo and Laine had come over, Darren had experienced the creepy sensation of being watched. He wondered if Lee felt it, too. He glanced at Lee's arm. Little bumps prickled his skin and the dark blond hairs were standing almost straight up. That was pretty much a positive answer, wasn't it?

Lee set down the paper he'd been reading, another official accounting of Severo's abilities being used to help the Austin Police Department solve a murder. Darren was so glad Laine had thought to grab the file he said he'd put together on Severo when he'd shown up in McKinton. Lee said he could believe in what he could see, so maybe all the documents attesting to Severo's...talent, would count as something seen.

Lee sighed and rubbed at his forehead, his other hand still holding onto Darren. "Okay, so Conner, who was your lover," —Lee stopped rubbing his head and pointed at Laine before dropping his hand onto the stack of papers—"is a spirit. And Severo can, as hard as it is for me to believe—but I have to, reading these—can commune with spirits. Conner came here and helped you two figure out who killed him and why, and saved a couple of people while he did it. And he's still here."

Laine nodded. Lee pointed at Severo. "And you're telling me Conner is the spirit who decided to play bondage with our sheets last night at the motel. Why would he do that?"

Severo shrugged, his pale eyes focussed on something behind Darren and Lee. "I don't know, he's being coy, the jerk. Maybe you did something to piss him off, or—and this is a guess, mind you, since Conner's being an asshole—you said Darren was leaving. Did you want him to go?"

Darren looked at Lee, who didn't hesitate to answer. "No, but I didn't think he'd like me inviting myself to spend the night at his place."

"There you go." Severo shrugged again as if that explained Conner's actions.

Lee frowned and glanced at Darren before looking at Severo again. "What? Conner was playing matchmaker? He was my wingman? He wasn't bright enough to come up with a better plan than scaring the sh—crap out of us? I thought Darren was going to be suffocated or strangled or—uh."

The temperature in the room plummeted. Darren started to get up, intending to drag Lee out of there. Lee wasn't having it, jerking hard on Darren's hand until he had no choice but to tumble onto Lee's lap. Lee wrapped his arms around Darren's waist and snarled, "What the fuck is happening now?"

Severo and Laine both smiled as the papers on the table rose into the air, floating in front of Darren and Lee. Lee's gasp was almost as loud as Darren's.

"Enough, Conner," Laine snapped, his smile vanishing as he watched them. The papers shot up to the ceiling then sailed back down into a sloppy stack on the table.

"Conner can be temperamental," Severo explained. "And yeah, I can call him names because I know him, but you irritated him by implying he wasn't very smart."

The room warmed back up as quickly as it had cooled. Darren didn't relax, exactly, but his heart quit trying to climb up his throat. "So that was Conner the Vengeful Ghost," Darren blurted, silly with relief at not being turned into a Popsicle.

"Spirit," Severo corrected before laughing softly.

Lee tightened his hold around Darren's waist and grumbled, "Severo had it right when he called Conner an asshole." Lee sagged against Darren's back. "Jesus Christ, there's really spirits wandering around."

There was something in Severo's expression, a flicker of uncertainty, maybe, that had Darren tensing as if for another attack. "He's not the only one here, is he?" The answer dawned in Darren's mind so clearly he felt dizzy as he stuttered, "Stefan?" Whether he was asking Severo or Stefan, he hadn't a clue. Severo nodded.

Lee went tense behind him, squeezing Darren so hard he squeaked. "No, you can't...why would you say that?" Lee demanded, releasing Darren and nudging him to get up.

"Lee," Darren began, not sure letting Lee up was a good thing. He'd sounded very angry. Another push at his butt and Darren stood.

"It's true, that's why." Severo didn't seem concerned about Lee's temper at all, but Laine was slowly rising from his seat, his icy gaze locked on Lee. Darren reached for Lee's arm only to be shoved back into his chair by... Darren blinked as Lee gaped at him.

"Dar, what—" Lee's hair lifted, thick clumps of strand separated by an invisible touch. "Oh God." The colour leached from Lee's skin as a breeze kicked up around him and Darren

both. Unlike the scary cold presence earlier, this one was warm, gentle, like constant caresses bestowed on someone much loved.

Stefan. Darren knew, even as Severo said the name. Darren relaxed into the comfort of his friend's embrace and watched as Lee spread his arms, his eyes wide with wonder and shimmering with tears that quickly streamed down his cheeks. Darren swiped at his own cheeks, rubbing the moisture away as he received more warm touches before, with a final lift of Lee's long hair, the touches ended.

Lee collapsed in his chair and reached for Darren's hand. Darren took it for an invitation and settled back on Lee's lap. He thumbed away the last of Lee's tears from his cheeks then kissed him softly.

"I'm okay," Lee whispered, which was what Darren had wanted to know. "Are you?"

"Yes, a little freaked, but it's..." Darren sucked on his bottom lip then let it pop free. "I don't know how you feel about it, but if Stefan's still here, still with us, that makes me happy, and he—his spirit seemed loving and happy, too." Darren cut a glance at Severo. "Not that I'm claiming I can do what you do, but it was like Stefan, my best friend who I'd known for years, surrounded me completely in his, uh, joy?" It sounded stupid, but that's what it had felt like.

"That's exactly what it felt like," Lee said unsteadily, "exactly like one full-body hug from Stefan. He was always so happy, just glowed with it almost all the time when I saw him. I could even hear it in his voice when I'd call."

"He sounds very special. Conner thinks so, too. Does that make Conner any less of an asshole in your opinion?"

"Yes," Darren answered before Lee could speak and possibly set Conner off again. "Even if Lee doesn't think so now, he will."

Lee huffed, his warm breath wafting on the back of Darren's neck. "You just don't want me to make him mad again."

"Exactly. I preferred the warm comforting spirit to the cold ball freezing one, thank you very much."

"He grows on you."

Darren raised his eyebrows at Laine. "Whether you want him to or not?"

"Yeah, although if I'd known it was Conner fucking with me when he first started I wouldn't have been so mad about him doing it." Laine shrugged. "Or maybe I'd have checked myself in at the state hospital."

* * * *

Lee slid his hand up to Darren's chest and pushed until Darren leant back on him. Looking at Severo, he asked, "Can Stefan talk to you?"

"Ah, well, here's the thing," Severo said as he stood up and stretched his back. "Each spirit is different, pretty much like living people, so the way they communicate varies. Conner is the only one I can actually hear in complete sentences, and that wasn't always true. When he first came to me he was as vague and difficult to understand as any other spirit I'd worked with."

"What do you mean?"

Severo walked to the refrigerator and opened it, helping himself to a cold soda. "Anyone else want one? No? Okay." He shut the fridge door then popped the tab on the drink and took a long, noisy drink. "Sorry. Anyway, what I mean is, spirits don't vocalise like we do, hence the tales of moans and groans and such. It's hard to explain, but there's this buzzing in my head when one tries to get my attention.

Usually I can understand bits and pieces, a word or two, maybe a sentence if I'm lucky – or they're lucky. Either way, it's like most spirits are incapable of getting more than a few words to me at a time. Stefan's like that, very chaotic thoughts and images shoot from him to me. Conner's been trying to help Stefan, so maybe he'll help us communicate, too."

Lee hoped so. He'd even apologise to Conner if necessary – and feel like a complete idiot while he did so. Still, if it was what he had to do to find out if Stefan had fallen or been the victim of someone he trusted, Lee would drop to his knees and beg Conner's forgiveness. Lee wavered, trying to put his thoughts into words.

Severo came over to him and studied him for a moment before looking at Darren and giving him a thumbs-up that made Lee scowl and Darren snicker. Then Severo glanced at him and something in the man's pale eyes made Lee's stomach flutter. "Is there something specific you're needing to know?"

It might have been a common thing Severo asked of anyone whose deceased loved one Severo was communicating with, but Lee felt like the man had peered right into his mind. It was unsettling. He cleared his throat which had gone dry the instant Severo had settled his gaze on Lee's. "I have questions about Stefan's death. He was scared of heights, and like I told you, he was found in Mercer's Ravine. I can't figure out why he would have been anywhere near a ledge."

"And there was the new friend he made, the one even I didn't know about," Darren added.

"Yeah, I'd really like to know who the guy was. That's why I tried to find Darren for so long." But it wasn't why he was so very happy to have found him. Lee tipped his head down and looked at the man in his arms. "And I'm so lucky to have found you."

Darren smiled but glanced away. "But I wasn't any help at all, I—"

Lee kissed Darren, shutting off his protest. He had seen the guilt seeping into Darren's expression, heard it in his voice. Even though he didn't care for an audience, Lee brought his lips to Darren's and kissed him until Darren went limp in his arms, a soft whimper slipping from his mouth into Lee's.

"We're going to go, but I'll see what I can find out."

"Thanks," Lee murmured, too caught by the affection in Darren's gaze to look away. "Lock the door, would you?"

He didn't wait to hear the reply, instead melding his mouth to Darren's again and losing himself in the treasure in his arms.

* * * *

Darren was melting from the inside out, pleasure heating him slowly at first as Lee kissed him tenderly, then ratcheting up several degrees to scorching hot as the kiss turned fierce and Lee palmed Darren's cock through his jeans.

Lee sucked on Darren's lower lip as his jeans were unfastened then Lee's hand was on him, fisting Darren's rod with strokes so perfect Darren's eyes opened and crossed.

"Feels good, doesn't it, baby?" Lee asked as he ended the kiss. "You're already so close, your dick is dripping. I bet your balls are already hard and tight. Let's see." Lee shoved his other hand in Darren's jeans and hummed as he cupped Darren's sac. "Yeah, nice and snug."

Lee did something that had Darren's back bowing and his hands searching for something to hold onto. He settled for clutching at Lee's thighs as Lee laughed. "Hm. You liked my nails scratching you." He did it again, leaving a stinging trail over Darren's balls that kicked his climax into gear.

"Lee," Darren managed to gasp as his vision went bright white and cum shot from his slit. Darren jerked and panted, his balls aching with each spurt. Once he slumped against Lee, sated and sluggish from coming so hard, he became aware of the hard dick jabbing at his backside.

Trying to turn around enough to get to Lee's zipper, Darren asked, "What can I do?"

"Stand up and put your hands flat on the table." Lee was already pushing Darren up.

He hoped his legs would hold him. Darren stood and put his palms on the table then lowered his chest until he was laying half on the scarred wood. Spreading his legs was only logical, but canting his hips so his butt stuck up and his cheeks parted was something he did to stoke the lust he'd glimpsed in Lee's eyes.

"This what you want?" Darren shook his butt, glad Lee couldn't see his flaming face with the way Darren had propped his forehead on his folded arms.

Something wet and cold dribbled into his crack. Darren yelped and lifted his head, trying to see over his shoulder to what Lee was doing.

"Your cum," Lee rumbled. Darren dropped his head back onto his forearms as Lee rubbed the mess between Darren's cheeks. "Now I'm gonna ride this pretty ass, rut right here," —Lee rubbed a path down Darren's crack— "until I cum all over your ass, your back — everywhere I can."

"Do it," Darren urged. "I'm already getting hard again. See if you can make me come again." Lee wouldn't be able to resist the challenge.

"You so fucking will." Lee's hot thick cock pressed into Darren's crease. One of his hands found Darren's erection while the other covered Darren's crack, pinning Lee's cock in the snug sheath he'd made. "You're young, you can come again and again, can't you?"

"Yeah," Darren grunted, his hips slamming against the table as Lee started humping him without restraint.

"Better hang on, I'm just getting started."

Darren took it for the warning it was and rested his head on the table, gripping the edge of it tightly with his hands. "Go for it."

Lee did, with more force than Darren had thought possible. His hips and the tops of his thighs even, not to mention his butt, would likely be bruised all over. A hard jerked to his cock had Darren panting. He pushed back using his arms to power the movement then snapped his hips forward, pumping into Lee's hand.

The tip of one of Lee's fingers pressed deep into his slit and Darren saw stars. His orgasm boiled up from his balls as Lee prodded his slit again then Darren was coming, tumbling further into bliss with each gush of cum that jetted from his dick.

"Yeah, fucking scream for me, baby!" Lee rammed his cock in Darren's crease and moaned as Darren felt the first warm splatter hit his lower back.

He savoured every sound Lee made as more cum coated his skin, purred when Lee finally stopped thrusting and started rubbing the cooling spunk over as much of Darren's butt and back as he could.

"You looked good like this, covered in my cum."

Darren shivered upon hearing Lee's gravel-rough voice and thought his dick would be hard again in no time if Lee kept talking. And he couldn't see how that would ever be a bad thing.

Chapter Ten

It was less difficult than Lee had thought it would be to not only accept the fact that spirits were, however odd it sounded, real, but also to get used to one hanging around off and on. He did wish he could actually talk with Stefan. Lee talked *to* him, more so as each day passed and he got over feeling silly for talking to someone he couldn't see or hear—unless Stefan knocked something over.

He did that sometimes, nothing major, but the day he'd pulled at the back door and sent it slapping shut Darren had been ridiculously thrilled. Once he explained to Lee about the incident that had Darren cracking his chin on the floor Lee understood why his lover was so pleased to find it had been Stefan paying him a visit.

However, the story drove home to Lee the fact that Darren was out here alone, or had been before Lee joined him. And he would be again, if Lee decided not to stay. Lee didn't have anywhere he had to be, and since he'd sold his parents' home in Jackson, he didn't even have a place of his own. He really had spent almost two years trying to find Darren, driving around from one town or city to another, checking whatever leads he turned up—none of which had panned out except the last.

After having spent so long looking for Darren, was it any wonder Lee didn't want to leave him? Lee sat on the porch and watched Darren shake a finger at Red and scold the rooster. After the third time Red had tried to maul Lee, and succeeded to a small degree, Darren had banned Lee from going anywhere near the chicken coop.

Darren turned and began walking towards the porch. Lee's dick firmed up as he started thinking of the quickest way to get Darren out of his clothes. Tomorrow would be Darren's first day back at work since Virginia disciplined him and Lee planned on making sure Darren felt him all day.

Yes, he had plans for that amazingly tight ass, and since Darren said he needed to be up by four-thirty or so in the morning, Lee wanted to get started on fucking Darren right away.

"I think it's time for bed." Lee stood and held his hand out to Darren.

"Really, now, at..." Darren glanced at his watch. "Three in the afternoon. You sure you're only thirty-two?"

Lee caught Darren by the wrist. "Bucket's empty, right?"

Darren frowned at him like Lee was dense. "Well, yeah, I gather the eggs in the — hey!"

Lee slapped the bucket from Darren's hand and hefted his lover up in a fireman's carry before Darren could get another word out. He popped Darren's ass just hard enough to sting. "That's for the age crap."

"And *this* is for spanking me." Darren's nip to Lee's ass wasn't painful at all, but Lee yelped anyway then promptly landed another smack to Darren's backside.

"I can do this all day," Lee warned when Darren bit him again, and much harder than the first time. "Maybe I'll just bend you over the porch rail here, jerk your pants down and pink your ass up right. Sound like a plan?" Lee was only half teasing. He hadn't ever done the whole spanking a lover thing, but those two swats he'd landed to Darren's ass had turned them both on.

And seeing Darren's pale skin warming and blushing under Lee's hand, feeling that firm flesh give under his palm — well, Lee suddenly understood the appeal of a little rough play. For that matter, he'd liked that zing of pain when Darren had bit him the second time.

"So what's it going to be, baby?"

Darren's answer wasn't a word but a bite, and if Lee had thought the second one was hard he'd been wrong, it was nothing compared to this — and he liked that it hurt more, too.

"Damn. Maybe I should strip and let you have at my ass." Lee set Darren back on his feet and reached behind himself to rub the throbbing spot on his butt. "Or maybe I should make sure you didn't take a chunk out of me."

Darren was grabbing at him instantly, spinning Lee away from him. "I'm sorry, I didn't think it'd hurt with your jeans and —" He fumbled with the button on Lee's jeans. "Let me check and make sure I didn't break the skin or something. God, Lee, I'm so sorry!"

"I was teasing. I, uh, I kind of liked it." There was no 'kind of' to it. Lee's cock was hard enough to hammer a railroad spike.

Darren didn't sound relieved as he opened Lee's jeans. "Uh huh. You just don't want me to feel guilty for hurting you. Now let me —"

Lee spotted the truck turning onto the road leading to the house at the same time he heard the engine. "Later. Company's coming."

"Let's go inside and I'll just check real quick." Darren tugged the open flaps of Lee's jeans. "Whoever's coming can — oh. Laine and Severo." Darren's voice hitched slightly on the names but he started pulling on Lee's zipper.

"I've got it." Lee patted Darren's hands then gingerly nudged them out of the way before making himself presentable for company. His nerves had started jangling as soon as he'd realised who was coming down the road.

Darren smoothed a hand down Lee's back as he stepped beside Lee. "Do you think Severo will have any useful information?"

Lee fingered the button he'd just slipped through the buttonhole on the waistband of his jeans, too fidgety to stand completely still. "I think he must, otherwise I would have expected him to call. Something important or...or bad, he'd want to tell us in person, right? I mean, I don't really know him well but he seems like a decent guy." Scary, even, with the whole spirit thing, but Lee knew that was his own fear talking. He had no reason to think of Severo like that.

"You're probably right," Darren murmured as Laine steered the truck into the long driveway.

"Come here." Lee settled his arm around Darren's shoulder, pleased when Darren in turn looped his arm around Lee's waist. Darren was as nervous as Lee and he knew touching each other would soothe them both at least a little. *Kind of like two people in love would draw comfort from each other.* The thought startled him. He sneaked a glance at Darren when Laine stopped the truck a dozen feet from the house. Darren wasn't watching their visitors, he was watching Lee with something so warm and sweet in his brown eyes Lee couldn't even panic over the fact he might be halfway in love with the man. Darren smiled tenderly and Lee mentally cursed as he gave up. He looked fully at Darren and cupped his chin gently.

"Nope, no halfway to it." Lee shook his head once at the question he could see Darren's lips forming. He wasn't ready to explain that sentence to Darren, not yet. Instead Lee lowered his lips to Darren's and kissed him.

"Geez, have y'all been doing that since we left?"

Lee blinked his eyes open and licked Darren's lips one last time before giving up Darren's mouth—for now. Craning his neck around so he could see Severo, Lee grinned despite a new wave of unease that welled in him. "Pretty much. I mean, look at the man. You'd do the same if you were me."

"No, Sev would probably do something involving less clothes and more fucking," Laine said, winking at his partner.

Severo nodded. "Yup, what can I say? Although I would want a pair of handcuffs, you know. Just because."

Lee didn't know and he sure wasn't going to ask. He was going to divert the conversation, which seemed the smartest thing to do but his lover beat him to it.

"Would y'all like to come inside and have a drink?" Darren asked.

Laine and Severo both declined, Severo adding, "We can't stay long, we're supposed to be meeting up with a group of friends for dinner. Zeke can be a bit of a bear if we're late. I just came to give you a message. I don't know if it'll mean anything to y'all or not. Could be a random thing Stefan was thinking about."

As if Severo had summoned him by saying his name, Stefan was there. Lee knew it was his brother's spirit by the warm blanket of air surrounding him and Darren like he did each time Stefan came to them.

"Hello, Stefan." Severo greeted the spirit easily although he frowned when he said it. "It might be a good idea for you to go find Conner and let me and Laine talk to Lee and Darren alone."

Lee's stomach plummeted as he wondered how bad whatever Severo had to tell him was. Severo's frowned deepened as a piece of his hair was lifted and tugged then the warmth surrounding Lee and Darren vanished.

"Brat." Severo rubbed at his scalp and eyed Lee warily. "I mean that in a good way. He's playful, like Conner."

Too highly strung now to even crack a smile, Lee nodded. "So what's the message?"

"Nothing much," Severo admitted, "at least, like I said, not that I could tell, but I asked Stefan to leave in case I'm wrong and he got upset. Whether it's Stefan's age or temperament, his emotions can cause things to happen. You've probably heard the term poltergeist?"

"Yeah, the ghosts – or spirits – that knock stuff over and scare people."

Severo shrugged as he leant against the porch rail. "Kind of. I don't know as much as I wish I did about spirits, but I think poltergeists are probably spirits of younger people who've died and therefore they have less control of their emotions. Not emotionally mature, I guess, and their spirits are no different. But I could be completely wrong."

Lee considered it for a minute. "No, that sounds about right. Stefan was — is — you know what I mean. He was never going to be able to function at an adult level, not emotionally or cognitively."

"Good to know. Now, getting back on track. Sorry for veering off, I tend to do that sometimes." Severo closed his eyes. "I didn't get words, just images. It was dark, there was something on the walls." Frowning, Severo was silent and Lee wished he could see what Severo had seen. So far he didn't have a clue and he was leaning towards this all being something Stefan had only imagined. "There's something about the walls, they aren't...rock? Maybe that's what I'm seeing, because it's distorted, not smooth and flat. Then there's this big rock? I mean, really big, like it's a mountain or —"

"Mystic Rock," Lee and Darren said, glancing at each other as soon as the words left their mouth.

Severo opened his eyes and promptly slapped a hand to his forehead. "Of course! Why didn't I recognise it? I went there once years ago and wanted to trip all the kids who ran up that sucker while I was panting and stopping every thirty feet."

"What is Mystic Rock?" Laine asked. "I'm feeling ignorant here."

"It's one of those Texas treasures you really ought to see." Lee had loved going there as a kid. He would have been one of the ones Severo wanted to trip since Lee had jogged up the incline of the over four-hundred-foot tall chunk of rock. "The Rock is a huge granite dome rising above ground, something like four hundred and twenty feet high. We lived right down the road from Mystic Rock State Natural Area. It was an awesome place to go as a kid."

"And there are caves," Darren pointed out thoughtfully. His eyes lit up and he bounced on his toes. "Caves have rough walls! And Stefan had his favourite of the caves in Mystic Rock!"

Darren bounced again, as if made buoyant by hope. He looked so young, so much like the boy he was when Lee first met him that Lee's heart ached with the knowledge of what Darren had suffered over the past two years. Lee wanted to pull Darren close and kiss him, taste the flavour of hope on Darren's tongue — or whatever emotion it was that made him look like that. Lee restrained himself only because he knew Severo would make some crack about them being at it again.

"I'll have to drag Laine down there to see it. Maybe we'll take a three day weekend and stay in Carrville. I love that town. There's some awesome German restaurants there." Severo was nearly as springy as Darren, Lee noted, and he also noticed the way the harsh planes of Laine's face softened and his icy silver irises warmed until they looked molten as he watched Severo. Laine looked utterly smitten.

Lee knew how Laine felt.

* * * *

"I'm going with you and that's all there is to it. You won't know which cave was Stefan's favourite." And if Stefan communicated to Lee which one it was, Darren was going to scream. He and Lee had been at this for over an hour now, Lee wanting Darren to remain in McKinton while Lee headed back to Jackson. Mystic Rock, to be accurate. Lee said he wanted to make sure Darren was safe, but Darren couldn't shake the fear that Lee would leave and not come back.

"I might be able to. I used to run through just about every cave there."

Darren crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Lee. "So? Like I said, you don't know which one Stefan liked best."

Lee looked exasperated as he flopped down on the couch beside Darren. "Dar, if someone killed Stefan, he might be watching for you. For all this person knows—if there is a person—Stefan told you everything about him before he died. You were Stefan's best friend, everyone knew it. That is why I am afraid to take you with me."

"That's crap and you know it," Darren muttered, seething at Lee using the same argument again when it hadn't worked the first time. Or second. Or third. "Everyone in Jackson knows you're Stefan's brother. The same argument applies to you, yet you think I should be fine being left behind like the little woman while you go out and play the part of the big strong man. I am *not* doing it. If you don't want to take me, I'll hitch if that's what I have to do."

Lee narrowed his eyes as his features blanked. "You will *not* hitchhike. Ever. Again."

Darren could be stubborn when necessary. Ninety nine percent of the time he didn't think it was, but when that one percent rolled around... "Either you give me a ride to Mystic Rock or someone else will." That sounded so bratty Darren flushed with shame. He

uncrossed his arms and slumped deeper into the couch. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be so obnoxious about it, but I have to go and I can't seem to get you to understand that. I'd love to go with *you*, but if I can't, maybe I can buy a bus ticket or something. I won't promise not to hitchhike if I have to, but I will promise to hitch only as a last resort, okay? And there's one really go—"

"You can come with me," Lee muttered.

"What?" Darren had heard him, but Lee didn't sound happy about giving in at all. While Darren didn't expect his lover to be doing cartwheels about it Darren would at least like Lee to not make the offer sound like he thought it was the worst possible thing in the world.

Lee sighed and that impassive expression Darren hated to see on Lee's face disappeared. Now Lee just looked tired and so gorgeous Darren wanted to shove him down on the couch and have Lee every way he could.

"I think we should avoid Jackson completely, cut through Carrville instead. Someone might still recognise you but it's less likely than if we go through our hometown."

"Whatever you want to do, Lee. I trust you." It'd be nice if Lee trusted him as well, but it didn't seem as if he did, not the way Darren wanted him to.

Lee opened his arms and Darren took it for the offer it was. He edged onto Lee's lap and snuggled in. "And I trust you, Dar. The problem is, I don't know if I can keep you safe. I don't know what we might possibly be walking into. Probably nothing dangerous, but you never know."

"We'll both be fine, we will." Darren would do whatever he could to make sure of it. "Now, let me call Virginia and then you and I have a couple of kinks to explore."

Chapter Eleven

Lee smirked, he knew he did, but couldn't help it as Darren squirmed in his seat. Darren winked at him and drummed his fingers on the dash, tapping out the rhythm to a song playing on the radio.

Last night he and Darren had decided their kinks could wait. They'd both been too desperate for each other to spend time playing. Lee had fucked Darren from behind, both of them kneeling on the cushions with Darren's torso draped over the back of the couch. Darren had come all over the flower print material and when Lee was done shaking and moaning, he'd slid to the floor in a boneless heap. He hadn't stayed boneless for long, though, and Darren had rolled Lee onto his side, hitched up Lee's leg and rode Lee until they both climaxed again.

Then Lee had taken Darren again, waking his lover up by sliding his cock into Darren's ass in one long slow stroke. That time Lee held off coming until Darren's second orgasm, which was why his lover was shifting around in his seat.

"I'd give you a hard time for looking so pleased with yourself, but..." Darren waggled his eyebrows. "I'm feeling pretty full of myself—well, maybe I should say full of you, because I swear I can still feel that big cock of yours inside me."

"I plan on burying it in your tight little ass again as soon as we get home," Lee said then shot Darren a startled look.

Darren beamed at him like Lee was every good thing in the world. "I like it, you thinking of Mrs Hawkins' place as home. I hope you want to stay there a while."

A little ball of anxiety Lee hadn't known existed unfurled and dissipated in his chest. "I want to stay with *you* for however long you'll have me, Dar. It's not Mrs Hawkins' place that feels like home, it's being with you." It felt so right Lee couldn't imagine giving it up, not when he knew he'd already lost his heart to the man—and he thought, if he was lucky, Darren might be at least a little in love with him as well.

"That's...that's how I feel, too—about you, I mean. I want to be with you. I was just afraid to tell you. I thought it'd scare you away."

Lee snorted, wishing he could look at Darren for more than a second or two at a time. There were just too many suicidal deer out this way though. He'd barely managed to avoid hitting the last one that had sprinted out in front of the car.

"I don't think anything can scare me away. I didn't even consider leaving town after the motel debacle because I knew I wanted something more than just a night with you." Lee wanted a lifetime—and longer, even, if it was possible for them both to hang around after they died. Why not wish for an eternity together?

"You don't mind if we stay in McKinton then? I've kind of gotten used to it there."

Lee couldn't have missed the wistful tone in Darren's voice if he'd tried. Darren had more than got used to the town, he loved it there and that was good enough reason for Lee to settle in McKinton as well. "No, I like McKinton just fine."

"Good. There's not much in the way of work, but..."

"I'll figure something out," Lee assured. "I have enough money that I don't have to work, but I won't be able to sit around and do nothing. Maybe I can start working on the house, or help the contractors if that's the way the owners go with converting it to an elderly activity centre." Lee spotted the turn they needed to take. "We're almost there."

The line to get in was short considering the time of the year. Lee pressed the button to roll down the driver's side window as he pulled up when it was their turn and paid the entrance fee. The blond guy handed Lee his change and some papers before sending them off with a perky, "Y'all enjoy yourselves!"

Lee put the window up and glanced at the papers, a map and information sheet. "Do we need these?"

"No." Darren took the papers and Lee drove around until he found a parking spot several minutes later.

He shut the car off and unbuckled then caught Darren's wrist as he reached for his seatbelt. "Stay with me. If you see anything suspicious, tell me."

Darren looked at him seriously and nodded. "I will." Lee let him go and Darren unfastened his seatbelt. They grabbed their jackets from the back seat then got out of the car, putting their jackets on once they were outside. Lee wished he could hold Darren's hand but settled for walking beside him, their hands brushing occasionally as they headed towards Mystic Rock.

Darren pointed to a fissure running down the side of the mound of rock. "That's the cave the public is allowed to go in. We're going to a different one."

"I don't think I'd be able to fit in that cave," Lee said. "It was a tight squeeze in places when I was a kid and I'm bigger now. Is the cave you and Stefan found bigger?"

"Not much." Darren stopped and studied Lee. "You should be able to go part of the way at least but there's this one narrow passage that I'm not sure even I will fit through now."

Lee didn't like the idea of Darren being out of his sight in the caves. "Maybe we should leave. There's no guarantee we'll find anything anyway, and I'd rather not risk you getting hurt. Stefan may get better with the communication thing and —"

Darren shook his head and Lee could see the determination in the way Darren held himself, his shoulders going back as he stretched his long body to his full height. "No, I want to do this. I'll be careful and there's no drops or anything, not much climbing up—you know Stefan couldn't have stood that. If the passage I need to get through looks too narrow for me to fit through then we'll leave, but at least let's try first."

"All right, but I'm going with you as far as I can." Lee gestured for Darren to lead the way. Fifteen minutes later, their cheeks chapped from the cold wind that slapped at them, Darren stopped and pointed to a boulder at the base of Mystic Rock. "It's behind there, unless it's been sealed off."

Lee walked over to the boulder and frowned when he saw the small fissure it hid. "I don't know if I can even get in."

"The cave widens as soon as you clear the opening. Go in feet first—watch." Darren eased past him and squatted then sat on his butt. He grabbed the edges of the opening then began scooting inside as he talked. "Just do it like this, then once you have your legs in, kind of twist—" Darren let go of the opening and manoeuvred his torso until one shoulder was on the ground and his other was close to the top of the fissure. "Then you squat as you go in and..."

Darren slipped into the cave. He stuck a hand out and waved. "Gonna have to crawl for several feet, but it opens up a little further in. You coming?"

Tight spaces didn't bother Lee but he couldn't keep from feeling anxious about this cave.

"I'm going to get my flashlight out then start moving back so you can try." Darren's hand disappeared as he went further into the cave.

Lee took a steadying breath then sat down and started working his way in after Darren. He felt a moment of panic when his shoulders were caught in the opening. "In or out," Lee muttered. A slight twist and his shoulders cleared the entrance although not without a few scrapes. Lee squatted in the cave and shielded his eyes when Darren shone the flashlight in them.

"Sorry. These little things are really bright." Darren aimed the mini-Maglite at the ground.

"No kidding. Lead the way, Dar."

Lee's palms and knees were aching by the time they reached the part of the cave where they could do more than crawl. After a few feet of walking folded nearly in half the cave widened enough for them to stand.

"It's not much further until the part where I think you're not going to fit. See up here?"

Lee looked over Darren's shoulder to where the flashlight lit what looked like a solid wall with a dark seam in the middle of it. "That's an opening? Looks like a cave wall to me."

Darren chuckled and started moving forward. "It looks that way but it isn't. That's actually where two walls converge, one behind the other. There's a gap between them, though. Once I get past that there's about five minutes of crawling, a short climb up—not straight up, but an incline that's rocky enough to make it difficult. After that there's a small cave. It'll take me at most fifteen minutes to get there."

Lee did the math in his head, giving Darren ten minutes to check the cave over once he reached it. "If you're not back in forty minutes—"

Darren stopped in front of the seam and turned to Lee. "I'll be back, don't worry."

How can I not? Lee pulled Darren to him and crushed his lips to Darren's, drinking in his lover's moan. "Be careful." Lee brushed one more kiss over Darren's lips then released him and stepped back.

"I will. Knowing you'll be here waiting is an extra incentive for me to be careful."

* * * *

Either he had got bigger or this space had got smaller. Darren grunted and wriggled, easing in an inch or two further.

"Dar, just forget it."

Lee sounded worried, but Darren couldn't give up yet, not when Lee had spent almost two years looking for proof Stefan's death either was or wasn't accidental. There might not be anything in the little cave he and Stefan used to play in, but Darren had to at least check—and he couldn't quite shake the feeling there *was* some kind of clue there.

"I can do this," Darren bit out. He rotated his left shoulder then practically popped through the narrow crevice. "God, that sucked!" He'd probably just skinned half his back.

"Forty minutes," Lee called out, "starting now."

Darren ignored his stinging back and started moving. By the time he reached the cave, Darren was scraped and bruised all over, having fallen twice making his way up the rocky incline. But he *had* made it. Shining the flashlight around, he didn't see anything unusual, just rock, rock, and more rock, no sign of anyone having been there at all.

He walked over to the far wall and reached up until he felt the ridge where the cave wall bulged, forming a small shelf. Stefan had been the same height as Darren but had a longer reach. Darren stood on his toes and felt along the shelf. His fingers brushed over something definitely not rock. Stretching up as much as he could, Darren closed his hand over the object and knew at once what it was. He took it down and shined the flashlight on his closed hand, opening it slowly.

Bits of gold and silver gleamed in the light where the patina on the ring hadn't yet covered the metal completely. Cold to his bones, Darren stared at the men's Jackson High school ring decorated with a symbolic list of its owner's accomplishments. As Darren read the inscription inside, he wondered if the man the ring belonged to had added murder to the list.

* * * *

Thirty-three minutes. Lee depressed the button on his watch and paced what few steps he could then shined his flashlight into the crevice Darren had disappeared into. "Dar?"

Lee nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a faint, "Yeah," followed by the scuff of shoes on rock.

"Thank God. Don't ever make me wait like this again, my heart can't take it." He heard a huff of laughter then Darren's flashlight bobbed into view. Lee pointed his down so as not to blind Darren.

"Sorry, but...can you grab my arm and just pull me through? I can't get any more scratched up than I already am."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure it's a good idea." Lee stood the flashlight on end, bathing the area in light, then reached for Darren's arm as it appeared from the crevice. "I don't want to dislocate your shoulder or anything. How about you hold onto my arm and use me for leverage?"

"That might just work."

Lee settled Darren's hand on his forearm and widened his stance for more stability. "Whenever you're ready."

After a minute of groaning and pulling on Lee's arm hard enough he knew he'd be bruised, Darren finally slid out of the crevice.

"I think I left most of my skin behind," Darren grumbled as Lee gingerly hugged him.

"We'll stop and get an antibiotic cream with lidocaine in it," Lee promised as he cupped Darren's ass. He was afraid to touch Darren's back since he didn't know how badly Darren had been hurt.

"Lidocaine would be good. Lee." Darren leant back and nudged Lee towards the light. "I found this." He held out a fisted hand.

Lee glanced at Darren, saw him nod, then opened his hand under Darren's, palm up, and watched as a ring tumbled down into his hand. He recognised it easily since he had a similar high school ring. It was tucked away in a box now, but he'd been so proud of himself when he'd first got it.

"Do you know whose it is?" Lee asked as he tried to read the inscription inside the band. "Can you shine your light on it?"

"Just remember, it's only a ring. It doesn't prove or disprove anything by itself."

"I know, I'm not going to do anything stupid." But he would keep digging if he thought the owner of this ring had hurt Stefan in any way.

Darren sighed and shined his flashlight on Lee's palm. "The inscription reads, *'To our son Johnny, love Mom and Kev'.*"

Lee fisted his hand around the ring and tried to keep from slamming it against the cave wall. "Johnny Chapman." One of the kids who'd taken every opportunity he could to pick on Stefan, until Darren moved to Jackson.

"Stefan could have found the ring. We don't know how he ended up with it."

"Dar, I promise you I'm not going to go in swinging, but I am going to talk to Chapman. Just talk, that's all." Lee stuffed the ring in the front pocket of his jeans then picked up his flashlight. "I'll handle the light. Let's get out of here and get you taken care of."

Chapter Twelve

“Strip while I call Laine and let him know we’ll be gone over night.”

Darren dropped into the plush chair covered in a soothing shade of blue fabric. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled at having to take care of the chickens an extra day.” Darren looked around the room Lee had insisted they rent for the night. The Waferton Inn was definitely a nicer place than the motel in McKinton. There were no gaudy flower prints on anything, the colours used in the room complementing one another rather than clashing. “I think we need to find out who decorated this room and sic them on the motel owner.”

Lee nodded and resumed talking on the phone. Darren listened as he took his clothes and shoes off then decided to shower and give Lee some privacy. He dug through the plastic bags until he found the one with the package of boxers in it. Taking the whole pack with him, he went into the bathroom and admired the cream on tan colour scheme and the smooth marble countertop for a moment before starting the shower.

After adjusting the temperature Darren stepped in the shower and stuck his arms out first, trying to work up the nerve to step under the showerhead. He moved forward in small increments then finally got irritated with himself for being such a wuss and stepped under the streaming water. “Ouch! Crap, that hurts!”

“Probably wish you cussed about now. You scraped your back up good.”

Darren jumped and slapped his hand against the wall. He pushed the shower curtain aside and glared at Lee. “I thought you’d be on the phone longer.”

Lee shrugged and began taking his clothes off. “You were walking around naked, your dick flapping against your thigh. Made it hard to think. Then I saw your back and rushed through an explanation about finding the ring—Laine said the same thing you did, it doesn’t prove anything—and I just about hung up on him trying to hurry up and get in here.” Lee kicked off his shoes then whipped his jeans down before stepping out of them. Toeing off his socks, Lee looked at Darren. “Scoot over.”

Darren made room for Lee to join him and was soon moaning in pleasure as his hair was washed and his scalp massaged.

Eyes closed, Darren slicked his hands down Lee’s chest. “You have really good hands.”

"I'm just relaxing you before the painful part."

"Painful part?" Darren opened his eyes looked at Lee to see if he was joking. From the grim set of Lee's lips, Darren guessed not. "Can't we skip that?"

"Nope. Your back has to be washed, so go ahead and turn around."

When Darren hesitated Lee took his elbow and turned him so his back was towards Lee. Even though Lee was gentle, the soap still burned Darren's scrapes, and by the time he was thoroughly clean he was ready to drop into bed and sleep even if it was early in the afternoon.

"Dry off where you can then lay on the bed on your stomach," Lee ordered with a tap to Darren's butt. "I'll be there in a minute to doctor your back."

A little dazed from the zing of arousal the swat to his backside had given him, Darren got out of the shower and grabbed a towel. After running the soft material over his hair and body except for his back, he hung the towel up and sprawled on the bed on his belly. He was already half asleep when Lee came out of the bathroom and startled him with a touch to Darren's back.

"Easy, baby, this'll help." Lee's voice soothed him more than the lidocaine-laced ointment.

Darren sank deeper into the mattress and dozed for a while before waking and reaching for Lee. The fact that Lee wasn't beside him, and the wrongness of him not being there, had Darren rolling onto his back before he thought about it. "Holy—crap!" Darren sat up and scowled when he spotted Lee sitting in the blue chair. "Why are you over there?"

Lee held up the ring. "Just thinking about things. Wondering if Johnny Chapman hurt Stefan, and if he did, if justice will ever be done."

Darren scooted to the edge of the bed then stood and walked over to Lee. He held his hand out for the ring. "Justice? Or revenge? Vengeance?"

"Justice." Lee looked up at him as he gave Darren the ring. "That's all. I saw so much death and hatred in some of the places the government sent me when I was in the military. I didn't see much justice, though, so..."

Darren wished he could reassure Lee, tell him Johnny would reap what he sowed and all that, but Darren didn't know that Johnny would. All Darren could do was offer Lee comfort.

"Come to bed with me." Darren set the ring down and held his hand out for Lee's.

"I have a better idea," Lee said, his green eyes going dark with arousal, "why don't you fuck me until I can't think?"

Darren's lungs constricted and his breath whooshed out as blood rushed to his cock. "I can do that."

He led Lee to the bed. "How are your knees?"

"Sore," Lee answered bluntly. "But this mattress is pretty soft, and I like the idea of getting on my hands and knees for you. Stuff's in one of the bags." Lee crawled onto the bed and peered over his shoulder. "You might want to get it so you can fuck me."

Lee's thighs were spread wide, his balls hanging low and heavy, his cock dripping on the blanket. "Yeah, just give me a minute." He'd get the condoms and lube in just a minute...

* * * *

Lee shuddered at the hungry look in Darren's eyes. That look promised pleasure so intense Lee would burn with it. Lee bent his arms and lowered his shoulders until he rested his heads on his forearms. He felt the dip of the mattress, then his ass cheeks were parted and a puff of warm moist air wafted over his hole.

Goose bumps pebbled his skin as soon as Darren licked him from the top of his crack to his balls. Lee fisted his hands in the blanket and arched his back in a silent plea.

"That's it," Darren crooned then a sharp sting blossomed on his ass cheek when Darren bit him. "I know you like this, just like I did when you smacked my butt."

Lee didn't know if it was the pain of the bite or the possessiveness Darren displayed by marking him, it just did it for him. He pushed into the scrape of Darren's teeth, revelling in the pleasure-pain that zipped from his ass to his head.

"You love it when I bite your nipples, too, so let's see what happens when I do this —"

Lee's cheeks were pried open wider then sharp teeth nipped his pucker. "Dar, Christ, baby, I can't think!"

"That was the plan," Darren said. "That, and to make you scream. Love hearing you scream when you come."

Lee figured he'd be screaming pretty damn soon with the way Darren was going at his hole, tonguing it with bold deep thrusts, Darren's teeth scraping over the wrinkled furls time

and again. Lee reached for his dick, intending to clamp his fingers around the base to stave off his orgasm for as long as he could.

As soon as Lee's hand started to close around his hot hard cock he felt a combination assault to his hole—teeth, tongue, lips that then sealed tight as kiss around his opening, and suction—Lee screamed, he whimpered, he went mindless as his climax tore up from his balls and seared a path through his nerve endings. He hadn't even got in a stroke or much of a hold on his dick yet but it throbbed and sprayed ribbons of cream on his stomach and hand.

Lee's legs gave out and he collapsed on the bed as he panted heavily. He'd almost managed to get his breathing somewhere in the range of normal when his ankles were grabbed and tugged.

"Can you get your legs under you? Just curl up for me—yeah, like that." Darren traced a spot on Lee's ass then pushed. Heat flared out from the spot, coiling around the base of Lee's spine as he folded his knees under him. Slick fingers penetrated him, stretching his hole.

"I don't think you need as much of *this*," —Darren twisted his fingers deep into Lee's ass—"since I worked this little hole over so well."

Lee tried to see Darren's face but his position made it impossible. He wanted Darren to see *his* expression so his lover wouldn't doubt he meant what he was going to say. "Dar, just fuck me already!"

"I'm gonna, just let me find..." Those fingers wriggled and tickled Lee's gland, warming him from the inside out. "That's what I was looking for."

The slight pressure to his prostate was making Lee's dick hard again, his balls tingle and tighten. He shoved back as Darren pushed his fingers in deep, stretching Lee's ring until it burned. Lee tried to beg but the garbled sound that sprung from his lips was wordless.

Darren tapped a finger against Lee's gland and asked, "You're ready, aren't you? Begging for my cock?" Then his fingers were gone and the blunt head of his dick speared Lee as Darren gripped his hips and filled Lee's ass in one fierce thrust.

Lee rocked back into each stroke, desperate for the ecstasy he could almost taste, he was so close. When Darren reached under and palmed Lee's dick, Lee howled and bucked, grinding his ass against Darren's groin. Darren grunted and fucked him like a beast, pounding into him, dropping onto Lee's back and biting his neck and shoulders as he jerked Lee's rod.

Lee tried to bring his legs further under him, craving the feel of Darren splitting him deep. Darren flicked the slit of Lee's cock then pinched it and Lee wailed, clenching his ass and thighs, his stomach going rock hard as he came. Darren bit him where neck and shoulder joined and rammed his dick in Lee's ass one last time before shuddering and moaning as he came.

"God, Lee," Darren rasped, "it just keeps getting better."

Lee thought he nodded but wasn't sure. Darren was right, every time they touched each other it was more intense, the sex more meaningful, more powerful—more everything. And Lee didn't think that would ever change.

* * * *

Stefan checked the cave. The ring was gone. That was good, that was what he wanted Lee and Darren to find. He would have tried to tell them sooner, like, as soon as he realised he was dead and still here, but he hadn't known how—and he'd been scared, because this, like he was, was better than being dead and gone. He'd fretted about the ring, but had been too chicken he'd just poof into nothingness if his murderer was caught. Stefan had seen movies like that, where a ghost had to hang around until their killer was caught and stuff.

But...Conner was here, and his killer had been caught—or killed, and that hadn't been a good thing for that poor detective with the scars. Conner had told Stefan about Rich Montoya being haunted by the man who'd cut him up. Stefan thought that had to be the worst thing he'd ever heard, even worse than being dead.

Well, what should he do now? Stefan wished he could sit and talk to Darren like he used to. He missed Darren so much, more than Lee, even though Lee was his brother. Darren had been there for Stefan, until Stefan screwed up and trusted the wrong person. He'd been stupid for spending any time with Johnny, and stupider still for not telling anyone.

Stefan curled up like Conner had shown him, making himself small even though he was nothing. The pangs of loneliness weren't new, but they still hurt and Stefan didn't think he'd ever get used to them.

"You don't have to, Stefan. You have friends here, like me."

Stefan focussed really hard and managed to make out a shimmering form. He still couldn't focus right!

"You'll get there. Now scoot over and make some room for me."

Stefan laughed at Conner's silly comment because they didn't have a...a corporeal body, that's what Conner had called it. But Stefan moved a little anyway, because Conner was here and he was Stefan's friend which meant Stefan wasn't alone any more.

Chapter Thirteen

Johnny Chapman didn't look any different than he did in high school, Darren decided once Johnny finally opened his front door. Well, his mother's front door since Johnny still lived at home. Darren didn't miss the slight widening of Johnny's eyes or the panicked flare of his nostrils as he found Darren and Lee on his doorstep.

"What do you want?" Johnny didn't ask rudely, but like a timid child who wanted to know so they could do as you ask then go hide.

"Just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes if possible," Lee said in a deceptively friendly voice. "I guess we can come back when your mom's home, that way we can ask her about Stefan, too."

Johnny's head jerked back like he'd been slapped. The fear in his eyes showed as the pupils expanded and chased the blue until it was a thin ring around the black. "I don't know why you think I know anything about Stefan!"

Lee stepped up to the door and pulled Johnny's ring from his shirt pocket. "Because Stefan had this. Now you can either let us come inside and talk or we can stand out here and let all your neighbours hear us asking you why you killed Stefan."

Johnny gasped and stumbled but threw his hand up as if to hold Lee and Darren back. Lee grabbed Johnny's wrist and barrelled inside the house as he twisted Johnny around and pinned his hand up between his shoulder blades.

Darren opened his mouth to protest the use of force but pressed his lips together when Lee looked at him. Lee's face was a mask of calmness Darren really hoped his lover felt, at least a little. They'd agreed to confront Johnny and, if his behaviour seemed suspicious, accuse him of killing Stefan and see how he reacted. They hadn't got any further than that with the plan, though, and Darren wasn't sure he could handle the direction this whole inquisition might be headed in even if he did think Johnny was guilty.

"Hold this," Lee said, tucking the ring in the front pocket of Darren's jeans. "Now let's go inside and chat."

Darren followed Lee, who still had a whimpering Johnny in whatever kind of hold that was, into the living room. "Sit. If you get up I will nail your ass to the floor."

Lee wasn't as calm as he appeared, not if he was cussing. He really had meant it when he'd said he'd cut back except for when they were having sex. Darren didn't blame Lee for slipping now, he just hoped it wasn't a sign his control was snapping.

Johnny dropped to the couch when Lee let go of him. Darren hovered behind the couch, not sure where he should be sitting or standing or which of those he should be doing. Lee must have noticed his indecision because he waved Darren over to his side where Lee stood in front of Lee.

Lee crossed his arms over his chest and looked impassively at Johnny who was, in Darren's opinion, a beady-eyed pug-nosed prick. "Now, you can and will tell me why you killed Stefan."

Johnny's eyes seemed to shrink to even smaller beads as he glared back at Lee. "I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't even talk to Stefan."

Darren saw Lee's arm tense, the biceps and triceps rippling, and Darren decided now was a good time to lie. He did just that as he stared into Johnny eyes. "I know you're lying. He was my best friend and he told me *everything*. Why do you think I left Jackson? I was afraid you'd figure out I knew and kill me, too."

Johnny's grin told Darren the prick had thought of that himself once or twice. Lee growled and took a step forward and Johnny's grin turned into a wavering frown as his chin quivered. "I didn't kill him! All I did was fuck him once or twice 'cause he wanted it so bad and he knew *you* wouldn't touch him! But you *knew* that already."

Darren thought he was going to be sick. Johnny had touched Stefan, sweet innocent Stefan who probably hadn't known what the sick bastard was going to do to him. Before Darren could stop himself he was leaning down and his hand cracked loud against Johnny's cheek. "You bastard! Get up so I can beat the crap out of you!" Darren grabbed at Johnny but found himself jerked back and held against Lee's chest.

"Shh, calm down, baby. I want to kill him, too," Lee whispered loud enough for Johnny to hear, then quieter just for Darren, "but we can't, and we shouldn't. It isn't our place to mete out vengeance."

Darren nodded as he glared at Johnny. "Right, but we can try for justice."

"Hope for it," Lee corrected softly before slowly loosening his hold on Darren. "Why did you give Stefan your ring since it doesn't sound like you cared about him at all?"

Johnny rolled his eyes or he might have just blinked, Darren couldn't be sure. "Because I wanted to fuck him. I don't care if he was retarded, he was legal and he was hot. But he kept babbling about love and all that crap."

Darren understood vengeance, revenge and everything else that made someone punish another person when Lee growled, "So you gave him the ring to make him think you cared," and Johnny nodded. "Then you killed Stefan when he wouldn't give the ring back."

Johnny smiled but shook his head. "I didn't kill him. He fell."

"Off a cliff he'd never have gone near!" Darren shouted, diving at Stefan's murderer.

Johnny stood and slammed his palms against Darren's chest, knocking him back into Lee who wrapped his arms around Darren. "Maybe he was eager enough to get fucked he got over being scared!"

"No," Darren said, trembling so hard his teeth chattered. "Stefan wanted to be *loved*." His anger was like a cold thing inside him, spreading through his veins and leeching out his pores. Lee must have been every bit as furious. Darren could feel his lover shaking. "That's all Stefan wanted, and you used him like some cheap—"

Darren stopped as Johnny's little eyes grew wide with fear. "Why's it so cold in here?" Johnny's breath came out in a white puff of air and it was then Darren noticed his was doing the same.

"Tell me how Stefan died," Lee demanded, his breath warm on the chilled skin of Darren's neck. "Tell me the truth or else..."

On cue the temperature plummeted further, dropping so low it was painful. Johnny's lips were blue as he jerked his head from side to side, his gaze darting around as if to find the source of the chill. "I dragged him up there," Johnny blurted, stuttering every word as he shook so hard he looked like he was seizing. "I was afraid he'd tell someone what I did to him so I told him to meet me on the cliff! But he wouldn't come up so I dragged him! Then I let him go and pushed—"

If Lee hadn't been holding him, Darren didn't know what he'd have done, but it would have been bad. He knew the frigid air wasn't natural, knew Conner had come to him and Lee at the motel and brought the temperature down to scare them into doing what they really wanted. But what good was that doing now? They knew Johnny had murdered Stefan but they couldn't prove it. No one else had witnessed his reluctant confession. Johnny wouldn't turn himself in for his crime.

Lee seemed to think Johnny would. "You now why it's so cold? Stefan's here, and he's going to let me and Darren leave, but you..."

Darren tipped his head back so he could tell Lee he was wrong, it wasn't Stefan but Lee nodded at something in front of them. Darren looked and saw the sheets—Conner's hint to them? Or was there another purpose? The fabric floated behind Johnny then began winding around his body. Johnny's scream was stifled when he opened his mouth and the sheet gagged him.

"I think you can either die today," Lee said slowly, his voice thick and low, "or you can call the police and make a confession—a truthful one. Let's go, Dar."

Darren glanced at Johnny, his face streaked with tears turned to ice, then let Lee guide him out of the unnaturally cold house into the warm morning sun.

"Will Conner kill him?" Darren couldn't decide if that would be a bad thing or not.

Lee glanced back at the house, his eyes narrowing as if he could see through the brick wall. "I don't know. I don't think so. For Conner's sake, I hope not. Laine and Severo would probably find some way to exorcize Conner or something, and that would destroy them in a way they might not recover from."

Darren grabbed Lee's wrist and tugged, trying to get him to *move*. "We should go inside and drag Johnny out or—"

"Listen," Lee hissed.

Darren frowned at first then smiled so big it hurt his cheeks. "Sirens!" Darren hadn't cared for the racket before, but the wail of the sirens had to be one of the best sounds he'd ever heard. He let go of Lee's wrist and threw his arms around the man instead, happy to his soul when Lee hugged him back.

"I think, this time, you'll see justice done."

Epilogue

"Virginia, I'm heading home," Darren called out as he stepped into the kitchen. "Lee's here!"

Virginia turned from the grill and waved the spatula at him. "Did he get the floors stripped like he said he would?"

"Yes, ma'am, and he brought pictures to show you. I think he's hoping you'll look at them and see how beautiful the wood is and decide to chunk your plan to carpet over it." Darren agreed with Lee. Carpet would be harder to keep clean and wouldn't be nearly as pretty as hardwood floors.

"Well, he either needs to come back here or you need to man the grill since Mark called in sick. Again." Virginia scowled and flipped a burger. "Just bring him back here."

"Yes, ma'am." Darren went back into the diner part of the café and waved Lee over. "I think she might cave if we nag her the right way—how much money would be saved now and in the long run what with the expense of keeping the carpet clean."

Lee laughed and kissed Darren quickly, a bare touch of lips. "Glad you cleared up what you meant by nagging Virginia the right way. I was just going to beg, though."

Darren took Lee's hand in his and led him into the hall instead of the kitchen. Virginia could wait just a minute.

"Are you taking me to the office?" Lee asked so hopefully Darren snickered.

"Yeah, but just for a minute or two. Virginia will skin us both if we take any longer than that."

"It'd be worth it."

Darren thought it likely would but he wasn't going to put it to a test. As soon as he got Lee inside the office Darren pinned him to the wall—not the door, he wasn't going to close that or all his not too dirty intentions would crumble under the weight of his desire for Lee. Darren grabbed handfuls of Lee's hair and started a trail of nipping kisses from Lee's lips to the base of his neck.

"Let's just get one thing clear," Darren muttered between the kisses, "I'm the only one who gets to hear you beg."

Lee arched his neck and slid his hands over Darren's backside. "Ah, got it. So if I beg you to lock the door and fuck me..."

Darren bit the sweet spot under Lee's ear, making his lover moan and writhe. "You're trying to get me in trouble, aren't you?"

"I'm trying to get you in *me*!" Lee rubbed his groin against Darren's. "Please? I swear I'm not gonna last two minutes anyway."

Darren smiled as he reached for the door. "Well, in that case..."

* * * *

Stefan watched Lee and Darren a lot, but not when they were having sex. That would be creepy and wrong. But he liked to see them and visit, and it made him happy to know they were so in love they practically glowed when they looked at each other. He'd wanted to know what that felt like and Johnny had tricked him and done horrible things to him. Stefan didn't think he'd have been able to ever try the whole love thing with anyone else, even if Johnny hadn't killed him. Maybe that's why seeing Lee and Darren so happy together made Stefan happy, too.

"Whatcha doing, Stef?"

Stefan blinked and was able to focus on the blond man beside him. Conner was really cute and he was nice and sometimes mean in a funny way—like when he hid Laine's hat or when he slapped someone on the butt. And Conner had made sure Johnny went to prison for killing Stefan, how amazing was that? Sometimes Stefan still had trouble wrapping his head around the fact he had such a good friend.

"Let me guess, you were watching Lee and Darren and they snuck into the office for a little..." Conner waggled his eyebrows and Stefan giggled—and stared at Conner in shock. "Excellent, dude! I heard you make an actual noise! I knew you could do it! Let's go give Laine and Severo a hard time, hopefully they aren't busy—oh! If they are, you can giggle! That would be hilarious!"

Yeah, until Laine did the cussing and Severo did the yelling, although that could be funny, too. Just thinking about it made Stefan giggle again, which must have made Conner happy because he started laughing.

"C'mon, Stef, let's go have some fun!"

Well, that sounded like an excellent plan to him. He'd come back and try his new skill out on Lee and Darren later—much later considering the sounds coming from the office. Darren was probably going to end up getting in trouble with his boss again. Or maybe not, he thought as he saw Virginia standing in the hallway with a huge smile on her face. She chuckled and headed off and Stefan decided he needed to do the same. His friend was waiting for him, wanting to spend time with him. How cool was that? Then a thought occurred to him that made him giggle from sheer happiness as he raced towards Conner.

Life—the afterlife, Stefan corrected—was actually pretty awesome, and he really was one very lucky spirit.

About the Author

A native Texan, Bailey spends her days spinning stories around in her head, which has contributed to more than one incident of tripping over her own feet. Evenings are resounds for pounding away at the keyboard, as are the early morning hours. Sleep? Doesn't happen much. Writing is too much fun, and there are too many characters bouncing about, tapping on Bailey's brain, demanding to be let out.

Caffeine and chocolate are permanent fixtures in Bailey's office and are never far from hand at any given time. Removing either of those necessities from Bailey's presence can result in what is known as A Very, Very Scary Bailey and is not advised under any circumstances.

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