



NIGHTSHIFT

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Chapter One

THE night shift sucked. The hours didn't bother Aiden Finn; he'd never been much of a morning person anyway. And he didn't mind that there weren't many people around to interact with. He wasn't much of a people person either. But the boredom got to him, the way the hours crawled by as he swept and mopped and emptied trash cans. The big excitement came when some drunk stumbled into the motel lobby after the bars had closed, and didn't make it to his own room before puking. There was something wrong with a job if the high points involved cleaning up vomit.

Aiden got a clean rag and a can of Endust and began to wipe down the woodwork near the continental breakfast area. Everything in that corner always ended up sticky with jam, greasy from the little plastic packets of margarine, dusted with sugar and coffee creamer.

He knew he should be thankful he had a job at all. Lots of people didn't in the current economy, especially guys like him: ex-cons with rap sheets so long they couldn't remember all the falls they'd taken. But he had a decent parole officer this time, a woman who was truly rooting for him, and for the first time in his life, Aiden was really trying. Trying to stay out of prison, trying to stay away from booze, trying to get somewhere in life. Right now, though, he was mostly trying to get a stubborn stain off the counter where the coffee urns would sit.

Aiden glanced up when the security guard entered the lobby from the parking lot—and then did a double take when he realized the guy in uniform wasn't Frank, the retired cop. Frank was in his late sixties and had a substantial gut and a few wisps of gray hair floating over his pinkish head. This guy looked to be a few years younger than Aiden—twenty-five or twenty-six tops—and he was trim. Wiry, even. His brush-cut hair was black and his skin was the color of a caramel latte—a beverage Aiden had recently acquired a slight addiction to.

Aiden was trying unsuccessfully to guess the guard's ethnicity when the guy glanced his way and caught him staring. Aiden blushed a little but set his jaw and didn't drop his gaze. He didn't go looking for fights, but he'd learned way back when he was a kid in juvie that if you backed down too quickly, the others would eat you alive. So he maintained eye contact as the guard sauntered over, even though Aiden knew he didn't look very intimidating in his green maintenance uniform, the dust rag still in hand.

"Where's Frank?" he asked before the guard could say anything. Not that he and Frank got along all that well. Cops—even retired ones—made Aiden nervous, and Frank always looked at him narrow-eyed, like maybe he suspected Aiden of stealing the rolls of toilet paper meant for the lobby bathrooms.

"He had a heart attack yesterday."

"Really? Shit. Is he okay?"

The new guard shrugged elegantly. "He is in the hospital." He enunciated every syllable clearly, and he had a faint accent Aiden couldn't place. He sounded fancy, like some kind of duke in a movie or something.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Aiden replied, although he was actually thinking he was kind of pleased with the replacement. The new guard was certainly a lot easier on the eyes than surly Frank.

Aiden's opinion of the new guy went up a few notches when the guard smiled, showing white teeth, and held out his hand. "Luka Gabor."

Aiden tucked the rag into a pocket. Luka had a very firm handshake, although his hand was cold from the chilly nighttime air. "Aiden Finn." He felt sort of strange—people rarely shook hands with him, and doing so was a little like an alien ritual.

But Luka kept the contact between them maybe a beat longer than Aiden thought was usual, and Aiden took a more careful look into his face, expecting some kind of challenge. He found one, but not the kind he expected. Luka's brown eyes glittered with an emotion that was definitely not hostile, and his full lips were raised in an easy grin.

"Do you receive a break?" Luka asked when he finally let go of Aiden's hand.

"Um, yeah. Already took my first fifteen, but I get a thirty-minute break in about an hour."

“Good. Maybe we could sit together and you could tell me about the Snooze-Inn Motel. Any security risks of which I should be aware.”

“S-sure.” Aiden didn’t usually stutter, didn’t tend to feel so insecure. Hell, normally other people gave *him* wary looks and a wide berth, with his prison-built muscles and his prison-inked tattoos. Never mind that he’d done his time for nonviolent crimes—stupid shit like stealing cars and breaking into closed shops and empty houses—mindless acts of a drunken idiot who needed a few easy bucks. He *looked* scary.

But Luka didn’t appear to be frightened at all.

With another smile that made all sorts of promises, the guard turned on his heel and walked back to the front desk, where he started a conversation with James, the middle-aged night clerk. Kudos to him for getting James to talk; generally the guy spent the whole night playing some game on his phone. Aiden could hear snatches of their discussion as he continued to clean the breakfast area: something about baseball, a sport that bored him to death.

Fifty minutes later, the tables and counters were ready for the morning rush, when guests would leave new greasy fingerprints, scatter crumbs everywhere, and drop plastic knives and coffee stirrers in unlikely places. The next job on Aiden’s list was to wrestle with the floor polisher, an antiquated beast with a humming whistle that set his teeth on edge. Instead of dealing with that particular task right away, he headed for the break room—more a glorified closet jammed between the manager’s office and the laundry room. He retrieved a paper sack out of the fridge and sat down at the room’s lone table, a dented, scratched relic that had once been in the guest breakfast room.

He was just unwrapping his sandwich when the door swung open and Luka entered. The guard held a tray with two steaming cardboard cups. “Coffee?”

“McDonald’s?”

Luka grinned. “I am permitted to travel within one block of the motel while I am on duty. McDonald’s is two blocks. You will not tell anyone I cheated?”

Aiden mimed locking his lips and throwing away the key.

Luka had a deep, sexy chuckle that made the hairs on Aiden's arms stand on end. Luka sat and handed over one of the cups. "Black. If you want sugar—"

"I know where it's kept. I stock it every night. But that's okay anyway. I like my joe straight up." Aiden took a scalding sip, noting how much better coffee always tasted in the free world than in prison.

Luka toyed with his cup but didn't drink. Maybe he didn't want to burn his tongue. "Have you worked here for long?"

"Eight months."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"I've had worse." Actually, Aiden had held very few straight jobs, but he'd been stuck doing all kinds of crap when he was locked up. Thirty-eight cents an hour wasn't much, but it had kept him busy and provided petty cash to spend at the commissary. "How 'bout you? Are you an off-duty cop or something?"

"No." Luka had the most amazing smile, sexy and a little predatory. Aiden got half hard just looking at it. "I like the hours," Luka said.

"You're a night person?"

"Very much so."

Aiden was casting around for something else to say—he wasn't good at small talk—when Luka reached across the table and grabbed his wrist. Not hard enough to freak Aiden out, but it was a firm grip. "Will anyone else come into this room?"

"Uh, no. James takes his breaks out front, and nobody else is due for hours."

"Very good."

And then Luka was out of his seat again, moving quickly around the table, and Aiden scrambled to his feet to meet him. He knew he shouldn't be doing this. If he lost his job, he'd violate parole and get thrown back behind bars, this time for a really long stretch. The crappy job in the crappy motel was his last chance, and he knew he shouldn't blow it.

But Luka had his hands all over him and mouthed at his jawline, and when Aiden settled his hands on the taut fabric over the guard's round ass,

the cautious little voice in Aiden's skull finally shut the fuck up. Hell, it wasn't as though Aiden ever paid that voice much attention anyway.

Luka was stronger than he looked. He pushed Aiden back against the wall and began to fumble impatiently with Aiden's belt. He probably could have gotten it unfastened more easily if he wasn't pressing his body so tightly against Aiden's, licking underneath his ear in a way that made Aiden feel weak at the knees. It was a strange feeling—Aiden was used to being the aggressor, to manhandling his short-term partners and taking whatever they'd give him. Usually it made him uneasy to have someone else in charge, but not tonight. Maybe it helped that Luka was shorter and leaner than Aiden's muscled bulk.

Aiden threw his head back against the wall hard enough to hurt and gripped a little desperately at the other man's shoulders. He could smell Luka. Aftershave or cologne, maybe, but it was subtle. It was a dusty scent but not unpleasant, with overtones of warm spices. It made Aiden think of caravans through the desert.

But then Luka dropped to his knees and Aiden stopped thinking of anything at all.

With hands that seemed to tremble with excitement, Luka unbuttoned Aiden's ugly green pants and drew down the zipper. When he pulled out Aiden's already hard cock, Aiden bashed his head against the wall again, this time on purpose, and made a low, desperate sound deep in his throat. Nobody had touched him in a long time. He'd been avoiding clubs and bars because he was staying clear of alcohol, and he'd been skipping parks and public bathrooms because he was avoiding getting arrested. He couldn't afford to go anywhere else to find sex. Hell, he'd gotten more action behind bars than out in the world, and that was pretty damn sad.

There was nothing sad about how he was being touched now, though. Strong, long fingers worked his shaft, squeezing and twisting a little while a palm cradled and rolled his balls. Aiden realized his hands were fisted tightly enough that the fingernails were digging into his skin; he forced himself to relax and rested them lightly on top of Luka's head. Luka's hair was very soft, the ends of it tickling in a nice counterpoint to the tingles running up and down Aiden's spine.

Luka looked up at him, smiled hungrily, and licked his lips. Then he swallowed Aiden whole.

“Oh, fuck,” Aiden groaned, widening his stance slightly. Apparently his new friend had no gag reflex. Luka’s mouth was moist, wonderfully tight, and surprisingly cool—but then he hadn’t actually drunk any of the hot coffee, had he? When Aiden groaned again, more loudly, he thought Luka might actually be laughing, but it was kind of hard to tell on account of the guy having his mouth full.

The security guard was very skilled at his task, his head bobbing visibly and his cheeks hollowing. At first Aiden struggled to keep his hips still. But then Luka slid a hand between the wall and Aiden’s ass and urged him to move, at the same time rolling his eyes upward to give silent assent. So Aiden began to fuck his mouth in earnest, burying himself to the root with every hard thrust. Luka happily took every inch of him.

In an almost embarrassingly short time, Aiden felt delicious pressure begin to build. “Gonna... gonna come,” he panted, trying to pull away.

But Luka kept the one hand firmly against Aiden’s butt, holding him close, while with the other hand, he gave Aiden’s balls a particularly clever little caress. Aiden conked his head for the third time and didn’t even feel it, because lights were flashing behind his closed lids and he was emptying himself down Luka’s willing throat.

And Luka didn’t seem eager to give him up. He swallowed everything Aiden had to give and then licked Aiden’s softening and somewhat oversensitive flesh clean. He grinned, tucked Aiden back into his pants, and stood, eyes shining and lips puffy. A flush had risen in his cheeks. He was possibly the most beautiful thing Aiden had ever seen.

“Do you want—” Aiden began, gesturing at Luka’s crotch, where an impressive bulge was very evident. Aiden was nowhere near as good at cocksucking as Luka was, but he figured he owed the guy an effort, and besides, Aiden had never minded a guy’s dick in his mouth.

“No.” Luka leaned in close and kissed the corner of Aiden’s mouth, surprising the hell out of him. “I am quite satisfied for tonight.”

“But you didn’t—”

“Mmm. Your climax is enough for me.” Luka kissed him again, this time on the other corner of the lips, and moved a step away. “I must return to my patrol. Good evening, Aiden Finn.”

Aiden was still gaping stupidly when Luka left the room.

THE Snooze-Inn was located in a small island of respectability adjacent to a freeway off-ramp. A few other businesses shared the island: another motel, the McDonald's and a couple of other fast food joints, a Denny's, and a Chevron with a quick mart. The sky was still pretty dark when Aiden stepped off the island into the neighborhood proper, a sea full of sharks, barracudas, and men o' war. Figuratively. There were auto body shops of the type he would have done business with back in his car-thief days, a check-cashing business, some liquor stores, a bunch of grungy bars. Everything was closed up tight now, of course, metal roll-down barriers locked in place and coated with layers of graffiti.

He walked past the boarded-up ghost of a barbershop and turned down a narrow side street of cracked and pitted asphalt. There were no sidewalks, and the streetlights had long ago burned out or been destroyed. The parked cars were old ones, dented and dinged, the kind not worth stealing, and the apartment buildings and tiny houses were sagging and worn out. Earlier there would have been clots of young men standing here and there—drug dealers and gangbangers—but they were all tucked away in bed now. A couple of mean-looking dogs barked and snarled from behind chain-link fences, but Aiden ignored them.

Technically, he was violating the conditions of his parole just by living in this neighborhood. But his PO understood that he couldn't afford anything better, and this way he could walk to work, avoiding the time and expense of public transportation. He didn't have a driver's license. Never had. Couldn't afford a car anyway, let alone gas and insurance. God, it was so fucking hard to make it, so many obstacles in his way. And yeah, he'd talked to a shrink while he was locked up, and he knew he was responsible for a lot of those obstacles himself. That didn't make them any easier to get over.

But tonight those obstacles seemed just a little bit lower. He knew that was stupid. One fantastic blowjob meant nothing. Luka had probably forgotten about him already. Aiden felt almost happy anyway. Endorphins must still have been fizzing through his nerve cells.

His apartment was on the ground floor with a stunning view of a parking lot and the dumpsters. It was just a studio, and it had come

furnished. He suspected most of the furniture was older than he was. The space was dank and ugly and the bathroom was moldy. There were roaches and sometimes mice. The TV received only a few channels, and the colors were off. He had almost no personal effects, just a couple sets of cheap clothes and a pile of tattered paperbacks he'd picked up for a quarter each at a thrift store. It was still better than a prison cell—bigger, quieter. He could sleep without worrying about getting shanked and take a dump without an audience looking on. And he could shower whenever he wanted to, for as long as he wanted to, and the water pressure wasn't bad.

He stripped off his ugly uniform and shoved it into a plastic garbage bag. One of the few perks of the job was that his uniforms got washed at the motel for free. Wearing only his socks and boxers, he padded into the kitchenette. The miniature stove was avocado green, and the dented metal cabinets were burnt orange. The little fridge, at least, was off-white, but it tended toward the unpredictable, wavering between too warm and frozen solid. Today was a frozen-solid day. He looked into the icebound depths and decided he wasn't hungry. He ended up grabbing an apple out of the bug-proof plastic container he kept on the counter, then wandered to the overstuffed armchair, the only place to sit other than his foldout couch. He grabbed his most recent book, a spy thriller, and opened it.

But he didn't read. Instead, he found himself leaning back in the chair, remembering the way Luka smelled, the way Luka's soft lips had felt on his skin—and around his cock. Recalling the way Luka had looked at him, as if Aiden was a favorite meal. As Aiden reminisced, he set the book down and allowed his hand to drift down his chest, lingering a moment to play with his chest hairs and pinch his nipples, then continuing down his hard belly and beneath the waistband of his shorts to his hardening cock.

That was another thing he liked about freedom: he could jerk off in private. Could even make noises, which he liked to do, instead of having to muffle himself with a pillow or the back of his hand. And this time the exercise was even better because he had a vivid memory of someone else's fingers wrapped around his dick, someone else looking up at him with shining eyes.

When Aiden climaxed for the second time in six hours, the fingers of his free hand were flexing, rubbing an imaginary head of soft black hair.

A LOT of guys would have hated Aiden's work schedule, which was six hours a night, six days a week. Not quite forty hours, and only one day off. But he didn't have much else to do with his nights anyway, and spending them vacuuming floors made the temptation to drop into a bar—for just one little drink—a lot less seductive. Because a monster lived in Aiden's brain and whispered to him often about what it wanted. And sometimes it was hard not to listen.

That left his days free, though. He usually slept until early afternoon and then went out for a run. His wasn't exactly the best neighborhood for jogging, but he couldn't afford a gym membership and he wanted to keep in shape. His boss let him use the weights in the motel's little exercise room as long as none of the guests were there, so sometimes he worked out before his shift. Not too many guests were inspired to lift weights at 11:00 p.m.

His PO had pointed out that if he saved up enough dough to buy a laptop, he could enroll in an online community college class or two. He'd already earned his GED while in prison, a fact that had helped earn his early release. He'd have to find Internet access to do the coursework, but probably his boss would let him use the motel's Wi-Fi when his shift was over. So far, Aiden had squirreled away a little money but hadn't yet decided whether to take the plunge. He'd never figured himself for a college guy, and he wasn't sure a degree would help him get a better job, given his long rap sheet. He was thinking about it, though, and that was something new—another tiny hint that maybe someday his life might get past nowhere.

Today he ran a couple of miles to a grocery store, where he picked up a loaf of bread and some lunch meat. He'd never learned to cook, and he survived mostly on sandwiches and fruit. Three mornings a week, he splurged on Denny's, and sometimes the morning desk clerks let him steal a couple of bagels, a bowl of cereal, or a banana from the breakfast buffet after he'd clocked out.

He showered after the run, shaved, and ate. He considered attending an AA meeting but decided against it. He wasn't feeling the familiar old craving today, at least not very much. The monster was asleep. He ended up finishing the spy novel instead but didn't really pay much attention to the

words. His thoughts kept drifting back to Luka, no matter how many times he tried to steer them away.

He knew that was stupid. He'd seen shrinks over the years, enough times to have picked up a little of the lingo. He knew he had issues. Didn't take a goddamn PhD to figure that one out. *Attachment disorder*, some of the docs said. *Personality disorder*, said others. Fancy words that meant he wasn't good at following rules and didn't get along well with other people. So now he was probably developing some new kind of head sickness—maybe because without the booze, his brain was looking for something else to fuck up—and he was going to fixate on the first friendly face, like a stray puppy following someone home. Wasn't going to end well. Never did. But God, it felt really good right now. And was that too much to ask for? A couple hours when he didn't feel completely lost and miserable?

Aiden was much more eager than usual to get to work. He hurried through the dark streets, scowling at the thugs he passed. He'd spent half his life locked up; he could certainly outstare a few punks on the street. They left him alone.

Luka wasn't on duty yet when Aiden arrived. Aiden exchanged nods with James, clocked in, and began his trash-emptying rounds. He was getting out his mop and bucket when a small group of guests entered the lobby from outside, talking loudly. Aiden could smell the booze on them. They wore cheap suits, their ties shoved in their pockets. Salesmen in town for a convention, maybe. None of them even glanced at him as they made their way to the elevator.

Sourly pondering the pros and cons of invisibility, Aiden returned to his mop. But just then Luka came into the lobby through the automatic front doors, and when he saw Aiden, his face lit up in a delighted smile. "I did not know if you worked tonight as well," he said, ignoring James's scowl and crossing the floor toward Aiden.

"Every day but Monday."

"You work very hard."

Aiden shrugged. "I'm just a janitor."

Luka shook his head slightly and patted Aiden's arm. "Will you share your break with me tonight?"

Aiden's pants were suddenly much too tight. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

“Excellent.” Luka patted him again and then turned and walked away. Aiden couldn’t help but notice how nice his ass looked in his blue uniform pants and how confidently he moved.

“Jesus,” Aiden grumbled to himself, plunging the mop into the sudsy water. He was acting like a lovesick teenager, not a hardened con. So the guy wanted a repeat performance—big deal. He obviously got a kick out of sucking cock, and Aiden was easily available. Didn’t mean Luka wanted anything more from him. Hell, what else could Aiden offer, other than a quick fuck?

Despite this inner monologue, Aiden couldn’t help a small smile as he worked. There was just something about the guard, and it wasn’t only his talented mouth. Maybe it was the way he looked Aiden straight in the eyes—not in an aggressive way, but as if Aiden were as important and worthy of attention as anyone else.

Time passed more quickly than usual that night, as Aiden’s mind kept itself busy with pleasant thoughts. He was almost startled when he glanced at the clock over the reception desk and realized it was time for his break. He hurried to the supply room and put away the paper towels he’d been carrying. He could refill the bathroom dispensers later.

Luka entered the break room seconds after Aiden. This time he carried a Jack in the Box bag instead of coffee. “Dinner?” he said, holding it aloft.

“I have a sandwich.” Christ, the burgers and fries smelled really good.

“Save it for tomorrow. I fear that last night you did not eat anything at all because of me. Please. Have some food.”

Nobody ever cared whether Aiden ate; this was... endearing. He had to work hard not to grin as he sat at the little table. Luka sat opposite him and handed the bag over. But when Aiden dug in, he discovered only one burger and one bag of fries. He squished the bag flat and set them on top, then started to stand.

“Where are you going?”

“To the breakfast area. There’s some plastic knives there so we can split the food.”

“Oh, it is all for you.”

“But—”

“I must eat a special diet,” Luka said. “I brought this for you.”

Aiden was immediately wary. “Why?”

“Because I like you and I wished to give you a small gift. Please accept it.” He quirked his lips into a crooked grin. “Where I am from, it is an insult to refuse a gift. You would not insult me, would you?”

Aiden still wasn’t sure of the guy’s angle, but he figured eating a burger couldn’t hurt. He unwrapped it and took a big bite. When he swallowed, he asked, “Where *are* you from?”

“I have lived a great many places. And you? Are you from this city?”

“No. I’ve moved around too.”

“And your family? Where are they?”

It didn’t hurt anymore when Aiden dealt with those questions. That was progress. “No family,” he said succinctly. Which was more or less true. His mom had OD’d when he was a kid, last he heard his dad was doing thirty to life somewhere back East, and none of the many foster parents or group home supervisors had kept in touch. He didn’t blame them—he hadn’t exactly been an endearing child.

He was surprised to see that Luka didn’t appear to be pitying him. “My family died long ago as well,” Luka said quietly.

Aiden took another bite of burger instead of answering. He should have been uncomfortable with the way Luka was staring at him—as if Aiden were a puzzle he was trying to figure out—but for some reason the scrutiny didn’t bother him. He ate a couple of fries and washed them down with a swallow of the generic cola he’d brought from home.

Aiden was almost finished with his food when Luka smiled and sat back in his seat.

“What?” asked Aiden.

“You are remarkable.”

“You can lay off the sweet talk. You already know I’m not gonna play hard to get.”

“This is not seduction. I am merely stating a fact: you have a... a light to you. A strength of spirit.”

Aiden snorted and wiped his hands on a paper napkin. “I’m a felon and a drunk. A loser.”

“No. You are... you are becoming something more.” Luka held up a hand. “Do not argue. I assure you, I am an excellent judge of character.”

With an even louder snort, Aiden pushed his chair back and stood. “Maybe you should get yourself recalibrated or something.”

Luka chuckled and stood as well. Then he moved very quickly, rounding the table and pressing himself against Aiden’s body. He didn’t stick to chaste little kisses this time. He licked at the seam of Aiden’s lips until Aiden parted them, and then Luka thrust his tongue inside. By the time he pulled back a little, Aiden was breathless. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d made out with someone.

“You taste very good,” Luka purred. “An appetizer.”

An appetizer to what? Aiden was thinking, but then Luka was on his knees again, busily massaging the growing bulge at Aiden’s groin. “Jesus,” Aiden groaned. “That’s—”

“You do not want this?” The look on Luka’s face suggested he knew exactly what Aiden wanted.

“God, I... I really do. But you—”

“I want this as well. Very much.”

Well, Aiden wasn’t going to argue with that, especially when Luka was rubbing him so deliciously with one hand and reaching for Aiden’s belt with the other. This time, Luka not only unbuttoned and unzipped but also pushed Aiden’s trousers and boxers down his thighs, preventing Aiden from easily moving away. Not that he intended to try.

“Beautiful,” Luka moaned and then said something in a language Aiden didn’t recognize. Luka cupped Aiden’s ass with both hands and buried his nose deeply in his wiry curls, and Aiden steadied himself by resting his own hands again on Luka’s head. They felt comfortable there.

The blowjob that Luka gave him was even better than the one the night before, which Aiden wouldn’t have thought possible. Luka seemed bolder with his fingers this time too, sometimes delving gently into the crease of Aiden’s ass, sometimes rubbing at the sensitive skin behind his balls. Aiden would have liked to spread his legs to give the other man better access, but he was hobbled by his clothing. No matter, though—Luka did quite well as it was. He looked sexy and somehow powerful as he knelt on the break

room floor, and when Aiden came, Luka again swallowed as if he'd been given an offering.

"You don't want—" Aiden began as Luka rose gracefully to his feet.

"Not tonight. Not now." Luka stroked the stubble on Aiden's jaw. "For now we are getting to know one another, and I am quite satisfied."

Aiden had met guys who got off on sucking cock and didn't want much else. He'd even met a few who seemed to like feeling used—they were probably as fucked up in the head as he was. But Luka didn't seem like any of those men. Hell, he was grinning smugly as if he'd been the one to get the better end of the deal, and he also seemed to be hinting at some kind of future. Which was scary as fuck and made Aiden back away.

"Gotta get back to work," he said gruffly, zipping and buttoning his pants.

Luka didn't say anything. But he gave Aiden another of his long, searching looks, although what he was looking for Aiden couldn't guess. Finally, Luka gave a faint smile. "We could save ourselves much time and grief if we were direct and honest with each other, but I do not suppose that is possible."

"I haven't lied to you." That was true. They hadn't really exchanged enough words for there to have been any lies.

"That is not what I mean. If we could tell what was truly in our hearts and in our heads—well, things would be much simpler."

Some kind of drugs, Aiden concluded. Good ones. Maybe the prescription kind. He was a little envious, even though alcohol had usually been his drug of choice. "If you want someone who's gonna go on and on about their feelings, you're looking in the wrong place. Hell, you're looking at the wrong gender."

"I know." Luka reached up as if to touch him again, but then let his hand drop. "You are unwilling and perhaps unable to tell me what you want and need, and I... I cannot be frank either. I only wish things were different." Then he turned and walked out of the break room.

Aiden caught only occasional glimpses of Luka during the rest of his shift, but he thought about him all night. He kept trying without success to figure out Luka's angle. The guy had to be after something, but what? Even a moron would know that the night janitor at a motel didn't own anything

worth stealing, didn't have any connections worth exploring, didn't have any talents worth investing in. The only thing Aiden could give him was sex—something a good-looking man like Luka could get wherever he wanted, and without all the fancy words.

In fact, there were probably men who would pay Luka good money to suck their dicks. Luka was a little old for the trade, but he was goddamn sexy, and he was rather exotic too, which some johns really went for.

There was nothing exotic about Aiden. He'd been scrawny and nondescript as a kid. But he'd hustled every now and then when he was in his teens, desperate for a few bucks so he'd have a place to sleep or something to eat. There'd even been a few times when he'd let some guy fuck him for free, as long as the guy gave him enough beer or whiskey to get Aiden good and wasted. He wasn't proud of that history. But it wasn't the worst thing he'd done either. At least he'd gotten something out of the deal and hadn't hurt anyone. Anyway, he never really made a living off it, but someone like Luka probably could.

So, Aiden thought as he clocked out and walked from the lobby into the chilly predawn air, that left him right where he'd begun. What kind of game was Luka playing?

He wasn't any closer to an answer by the time he crawled into bed.

Chapter Two

“TELL me how your week has gone, Aiden.” Ms. Simmons had salt-and-pepper curls cropped short against her skull, mahogany skin, and eyes so sharp they should be classified as weapons. When she asked Aiden a question like this, it wasn’t rhetorical—the parole officer wanted an answer, full and accurate. Not for the first time, Aiden thought about Ms. Simmons’s kids, two boys in their late teens. Aiden both envied and pitied them.

He took a sip from his straw and shifted on the slippery plastic seat. “It was fine.”

She raised her thin eyebrows. “Fine? Fine can mean a whole lot of things, Aiden.” She tilted her head a little. “You go to any meetings?”

“One. On Monday.”

She nodded approvingly. “And you haven’t had anything to drink?”

“Nothing stronger than this,” he said, tilting his paper cup of cola slightly.

“Okay then. And work?”

“’S okay.”

“I saw the results of your IQ tests, Aiden Finn—you’re probably going crazy pushing a broom. You give more thought to the college idea?”

A small sound of frustration escaped Aiden’s throat, and he stared over her head at the menu board advertising burgers and fries. “What’s the point? I could get a whole alphabet of letters after my name, but all a boss is ever gonna see standing in front of him is an ex-con.”

This time she narrowed her eyes. “You’re not feeling sorry for yourself over the consequences of your own choices, are you?”

“No, I’m n—okay, maybe I am. A little.”

The first time Aiden had met his parole officer, when the stink of the prison had still been on his skin, she’d pointed at his thick file and given

him a speech. He used to tune out lectures like that, but something about her made him listen—something about her and maybe the last guttering sparks of hope in his soul. The speech had been simple and direct. “I’ve read up on you, Aiden Finn, and I have a good feeling about you. Don’t get that feeling real often. So I’m gonna believe in you. You’d better believe in yourself, because if you fuck up, I’ve got another fifty people on my caseload. I don’t like wasting my time. Don’t blow it—this is your last chance.”

He’d never known what she’d seen that made her think he could be saved, but he’d vowed then not to disappoint her. She’d warned him that his road would be a hard one—if it was easy, he’d have done it long before—but as long as he kept on track, she’d stay at his side. And so far she’d been good to her word, finding him a tolerable job, meeting with him more often than necessary, really seeming to care what was going on in his life.

Now she favored him with a small smile. “Least you’re being honest about it. Look, I can’t guarantee that you’re going to end up with some fantastic career just because you go to college. But I can guarantee that an education is going to change you, and for the better. You haven’t seen much of the world. College is going to open your eyes.”

He nodded and took another sip of his drink. “I’m saving up for a laptop.”

“Good.”

A family sat down near them—young parents and a couple of kids—and Aiden and Ms. Simmons both watched as the father patiently helped one child assemble his Happy Meal toy while the mother laughed at something the toddler said.

“What about social support?” Ms. Simmons asked, bringing Aiden’s attention back to her.

“I told you. I’ve been going to meetings.”

“And that’s a good start, but you need more than that. What about friends?”

“It’s hard to meet anyone when you work my schedule. And I don’t... I don’t....” He let his voice drift to a stop, not wanting to admit that he didn’t know how to make friends. He’d had cellmates, drinking buddies, and fuck buddies, but never a true friend.

“You start by broadening your interests. Find people who like the same things you do.”

“Getting wasted and committing burglary?”

She scowled at his lame attempt at humor. “We both know you never liked those things. You need a hobby. You like to exercise, so maybe that’s a start.”

He shrugged. “I’m used to doing it alone.”

“Hmm. Maybe we’ll see if we can find you a gym.” She cocked her head a little. “What about dating? Sex?”

He blushed, which was stupid. “Um....”

“I know men. I know *young* men. You’re thinking about sex almost all the time, and you’re not going to be satisfied with self-help.”

“I... I...” He couldn’t explain how this woman reduced him to a stuttering mess so easily.

“Healthy sex is part of a healthy life, Aiden. You need to find some ways to meet that need without any violations.” She nodded decisively. “Homework. Give me a plan when we meet next week.”

“A plan to get laid?”

“A plan to find emotional support and intimacy. You don’t have to sweep some man off his feet and start building the picket fence yet. I just want to see you taking some steps. Your chances of success go way up if you have someone important in your life.”

He gave her a miserable half nod and watched as she stood, threw away her cup, and left the restaurant. She made it sound so simple, as if all it took to find a friend or lover was writing up a to-do list. He wondered what she’d think of Luka. Probably tell Aiden there was nothing healthy about getting blown in the break room. But then he already knew that.

LUKA wasn’t at the motel that night—instead, Iakopo was on duty, his substantial girth threatening to send shirt buttons flying at any moment. Iakopo’s presence wasn’t unusual because he always worked on Frank’s days off, and of course Luka couldn’t work every day either. But each time Aiden glanced over at the security guard and got a noncommittal grunt in return, he was reminded that Luka wasn’t permanent at the Snooze-Inn.

Sooner or later Frank would recover or be replaced, and Luka would move on.

The thought of that shouldn't have made Aiden's belly clench sickeningly.

On his break, Aiden found a pad of the motel's imprinted notepaper and a Snooze-Inn pen, and he sat and tried to come up with the plan his PO had requested. Brainstorm first, he thought. What were all the possible ways he could meet people?

The problem was that he'd never had many interests, aside from crime and booze and sex, and he was supposed to stay away from the first two. Well, he liked to read. Always had. Books had helped him escape his crappy life when he was a kid, and when he was an adult, they had helped him forget for a short time that he was locked in a cage. While he was reading, he could be anyone—a heroic sword-fighter, a hard-boiled private eye, an explorer, a starship captain, a brilliant scientist. A man with people who loved him and with a promising future. Even now, when he wasn't working, sleeping, or exercising, he generally had his nose stuck in a book. He liked the way books smelled and the smooth rustling of pages under his fingers.

He wrote two words on his pad of paper: *Book club*. And then he imagined himself sitting at a table with housewives and retired people, the kinds of folks who listened to NPR and bought organic veggies at farmers' markets. He pictured them staring at him—his cheap clothes, bulging muscles, and swirling tats—and he almost crossed out the words.

Instead, he chewed thoughtfully on the end of his pen. Finally, and with considerable reluctance, he wrote *Group counseling*. He'd done group several times before and hadn't really liked it. Sharing his thoughts and feelings with one shrink was hard enough, but opening up in front of a whole room of people was almost physically painful. He'd been relieved that group therapy wasn't made one of the conditions of his parole. But he *could* go—Ms. Simmons could hook him up—and he'd meet up with sad sacks similar to himself. He could even choose the pathology: addicts, ex-cons, queers who'd been bullied, victims of childhood abuse. Problem was, he didn't want to meet someone like him. He wanted someone a lot better.

The third entry came a little easier. *College*, he wrote. Maybe he could work out a way to take a class in person. That wouldn't be easy with his

work schedule and with the nearest community college campus many miles away. Getting around town was a pain in the ass without a car. But maybe he could pull it off, and maybe he would meet a fellow student who was well past his teens, with bigger problems than having to wait a few weeks to get the newest iPhone. Minutes ticked by loudly on the break room clock, and Aiden couldn't think of anything else to add to his short list. He crumpled up the paper bag that had held his sandwich and apple, and he tossed it into the trash can. After draining the last of the cola from his can, he tossed that too. He considered buying a Snickers from the vending machine but decided against it. And then, just as he was about to return to work, he wrote a fourth item on his pad: *Luka*.

AIDEN was ridiculously relieved when Luka returned to duty two nights later. And Luka seemed pleased to see Aiden—he spent more time than usual in the lobby, pretending to gaze out at the parking lot but frequently sending hungry looks in Aiden's direction.

When Aiden took his break, Luka burst into the room moments later. Aiden rose to his feet and Luka launched himself against him and rubbed their bodies together, squeezing Aiden's ass, sucking at the tender skin of Aiden's neck. "I missed you," he whispered throatily.

Aiden knew sweet words like that came to Luka easily, but he allowed his hands to settle on the other man's hips anyway.

"I have been thinking about you for two nights," Luka said. "About the taste of you on my tongue and the feel of you in my mouth. Your scent. The sound of your lungs and your blood, and that small moan you make when you climax."

"Jesus."

Luka chuckled and buried his nose behind Aiden's ear. "No, I have not been thinking of him." Then his tone changed, becoming more earnest. "May I taste you now?"

"I... yes. But—" Aiden tried to unknot his tongue. "Hang on. Please."

"Yes?"

Aiden swallowed. "Would you.... I was wondering if maybe.... Tomorrow's Monday."

“So it is.”

“I know you have to work tomorrow night, but in the afternoon, I was thinking... we could catch a matinee, maybe. Or there’s this great used bookstore a couple miles from here, with a coffee place next door....”

Luka pulled away slightly. His eyes seemed darker than usual, the brown irises almost indistinguishable from the pupils. His gaze was utterly deep, oddly inscrutable, and Aiden didn’t know whether he was enticed or terrified.

“I cannot meet with you tomorrow,” Luka said carefully.

Aiden tried to keep his voice even, despite the blush of shame that filled his cheeks. “Uh, yeah, sure. ’Course not. You probably got—”

“I am sorry. I can share nights with you, but that is all.”

Aiden gave a small nod. He wondered what the story was. Maybe Luka had a boyfriend—or a girlfriend. Maybe he was just embarrassed to be seen in public with a thug like Aiden Finn. Probably, despite all the fancy words, he was just looking for a midshift hookup and nothing more. Not a real lover. Not a... a pal.

“’S okay,” said Aiden. “No big deal or anything.” He started to walk away. He was going to try for casual. He’d have to abandon his food, but he had enough time to make a run to Mickey D’s or something. God, maybe there was a bar close enough for him to sneak in just one drink before he had to go back to work. Just one fucking beer.

But Luka caught him by the arms and held on with surprising strength. “Do not go.”

And Aiden didn’t go, because it wasn’t like he had any pride to worry about, and besides, what kind of guy said no to a spectacular and strings-free blowjob? He stood impassively while Luka pressed cool lips to his cheekbone. When Luka fell gracefully to his knees, Aiden even unbuttoned his own pants and pushed them down his thighs a little, freeing his soft dick.

He didn’t stay soft for long. Luka nuzzled and nibbled, licked and sucked, and soon enough Aiden was emptying himself down a cool, tight throat. Then Luka stood and kissed him, allowing Aiden to taste himself on the other man’s lips. As always, Luka refused Aiden’s offer to reciprocate.

“Believe me, I am quite satisfied,” he said, although the bulge in his uniform pants said otherwise.

But Aiden didn’t argue. “Okay. I gotta get—”

Luka grabbed his arm. “I *am* sorry, Aiden. I wish... I wish I could spend time with you tomorrow afternoon.” For once he looked more sorrowful than confident, but Aiden knew it had to be an act.

“Yeah, whatever. Told you. No big deal.”

Luka didn’t let him go. “I am so lonely. I want... what I want does not matter, though. I will think about you during the long hours of sunlight. I already do.” He reached up to stroke Aiden’s cheek. “I dream of you.”

Aiden was suddenly furious. He pulled himself out of Luka’s grip and curled his hands into tight fists. “Yeah? If I’m so dreamy, how come you can’t even catch a movie with me? Look, I know what I—never mind. Just get the fuck out of my way. I got goddamn floors to mop.”

But even though Aiden was wearing his most intimidating scowl, Luka didn’t budge. “I am sorry. This is not fair to you. I have... so many secrets.”

“Secrets? Fucking *hell*, Luka. You know that I’m an ex-con, a drunk. A loser who cleans up people’s shit for a living and considers a blowjob in the middle of his shift the highlight of his pathetic fucking life. What kind of secrets could be worse than that?”

Luka’s answering smile held no humor. “Believe me, there are many things worse than that. And you, my friend, are not a loser.”

Aiden snorted, shook his head, and pushed past him, stomping out of the room.

As he completed his nighttime chores, he kept catching sight of Luka. Which wasn’t unusual—Luka was, after all, supposed to be patrolling the motel. But tonight he seemed to be spending an awful lot of time staring at Aiden instead, which made Aiden uneasy. He couldn’t read Luka at all, didn’t really understand him. Maybe it was because Luka was foreign. Maybe it was because Aiden’s people skills sucked and he wasn’t used to dealing with people who weren’t cops or criminals. Whatever the reason, Aiden felt like he and Luka were two different species.

When Aiden clocked out, he grunted at Luka rather than saying a proper good-bye. Luka looked crestfallen, which only pissed Aiden off. Aiden continued to seethe the entire way home. How dare Luka act as if

Aiden were the one who'd disappointed him when it was Luka who was spouting all that crap about dark secrets! Aiden had never been anything but straightforward with him. All Aiden had asked for was a fucking movie matinee.

If any of the local thugs had still been outside, they would surely have fled at the expression on Aiden's face.

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Chapter Three

Ms. SIMMONS peered at Aiden's list. It was a new list, because at first he'd tried crossing out *Luka*, but he knew his PO would ask him what he'd originally written. So he'd written the other three items on a fresh piece of paper. Neatly, as if she might grade him on penmanship.

"This is a good start," she said.

He made a dismissive noise.

"No, I mean it. I think you should follow through with all of these, Aiden. The book club especially."

"Suppose I do find a book club? What're the other members gonna do when *this* walks in the door?" He waved his hands at himself, indicating his hard face, his heavily inked arms, his thick muscles.

"I don't think they're gonna shriek and start tossing *War and Peace* at your head."

"Maybe not, but—"

"But when you open your mouth to talk about the book, they're gonna realize you have a fine brain in that thick skull, and they're gonna be glad you're there."

Aiden frowned and picked at the edge of the cup lid. They were at a Starbucks this time, well outside his home neighborhood and the little island of commerce near the motel. He'd had to take a bus to get there. Ms. Simmons thought it was a good idea for him to make occasional forays into unfamiliar territory. "Don't want you building prisons of your own," she'd explained.

He felt uncomfortable among the well-dressed college students, the carefully saloned housewives with stroller-bound babies, the businessmen with suits and pastel-colored shirts. And the coffee was ridiculously overpriced. He kind of liked the music, though.

Ms. Simmons tapped the tabletop with one of her colorfully lacquered nails. “That’s your homework for next week. Find a book club.”

“How?” He knew his panic must have been showing on his face, because Ms. Simmons laughed.

“You spent all those years locked in with murderers and rapists, and now you’re freaked out by a bunch of librarians?”

“Murderers and rapists respect me,” he muttered darkly.

“I’ve seen the pictures. You were nothing but a skinny little kid the first time you did time. I bet those guys tried to eat you alive.”

He had a quick flash of memory—big, sweaty bodies; hard hands holding him down; the reek of floor cleaner and blood—and suppressed a shudder. “So?”

“So eventually you earned their respect. You’re a tough cookie, Aiden. If you can impress a bunch of cons, don’t you think you can win over some retired folks who drive Priuses and get all worked up over dangling participles?”

He didn’t tell her that those kinds of people intimidated him more than the meanest mobster in the state. Instead he sipped at his coffee—it was really sweet and still hot enough to burn his tongue—and watched the baristas zoom around like demented hummingbirds. He imagined the unlikely scenario of being given that job instead of night custodian and almost grinned. He wouldn’t last an hour.

“Maybe you’ll get a kick out of a book club,” Ms. Simmons said. “It’ll be something new, anyway. Unless you’d rather sign up for counseling first.”

“Even if they let me into the group... they’re not gonna be inviting me over to their houses to have dinner and meet their sons.”

“You don’t know that. If you keep telling yourself you’re nothing but a con, that’s all you’re ever gonna be. You gotta focus on the other stuff. You’re a high school grad who’s holding on to a job. A good-looking guy who could probably pull off charming if he gave it half a try. Or you could do the strong and silent thing. Lotta girls like that—and I bet a lotta boys do too.”

When he didn’t answer, she huffed at him and opened the manila file containing her notes about him. She scribbled for a while on a pad of

yellow paper, and he didn't bother trying to read what she wrote. He listened to the music instead—some lady with a beautiful voice, singing about something in what he guessed might be Portuguese. He'd always wished he could sing, but he couldn't carry a tune worth a damn. He had a cellmate once who had a hell of a voice, probably could've made it big as a singer if he hadn't had a really big monkey on his back. Sometimes late at night the guy used to sing, real soft and mournful, and if anyone complained, Aiden told them to shut the fuck up. He'd lie curled on his thin, lumpy mattress with his scratchy blanket pulled up to his chin and his eyes closed tight, and he'd allow the notes to carry him somewhere far away.

"You're probably never gonna have an average kind of life," Ms. Simmons said softly, and he realized he'd shut his eyes.

He looked at her. "I know that."

"But do you know it's okay? You've spent your entire life being... classified." She tapped his file. "Now's your chance to decide who you want to be. You wanna be a quiet guy in a cardigan who talks about Oprah's book of the month? You wanna be the tough bastard who gets bitched for stealing cars and doesn't get sprung until he's too old to stand upright? Choose your path, Aiden. But don't be a fool, 'cause you won't get this choice again."

He nodded at her because she was right, and because there wouldn't be any point in arguing anyway. But he didn't ask her the obvious questions. What if he couldn't decide on a path? What if all the routes looked equally dark and ominous? What if he was fucking sick over the fact that whichever way he chose, he was always going to have to walk it alone?

They finished their coffees, and he promised to do his homework. She stood and gifted him with one of her rare smiles. "I'm proud of you, Aiden Finn. I know this isn't easy, but you're working really hard at it. Maybe someday you'll find some joy in life."

Joy, he thought sourly as he watched her walk away. Didn't exist, not for him. Closest thing to it he'd ever found was the numb feeling at the bottom of a bottle, and now he didn't have even that.

Fuck. Maybe he'd better find a meeting.

HE HAD to do a fair amount of sleuthing to find a book club. He began at a big chain bookstore near the edge of town. He couldn't afford any of the books—he was pretty much limited to his twenty-five-cent thrift-store finds—but nobody barred him from entering, and he perused the store's bulletin board carefully. There were advertisements for guitar lessons and for daycare and for facials and waxing services. Somebody was looking for good homes for a litter of kittens. People were offering tutoring services in French, math, and chemistry. And there were several book clubs, but one was for books on Christianity, another seemed to focus on chick lit, and the rest met in the evenings.

Discouraged, he spent a half hour leafing listlessly through magazines before catching the bus back to his part of town.

At work that night, he avoided Luka as much as possible. Luka looked at him sadly but couldn't do too much with James around. As soon as Aiden took his break, however, Luka came bursting into the room, a Jack in the Box bag clutched in one hand. "Peace offering," he said, setting the bag on the table in front of Aiden.

"Fuck you."

Luka only smiled and sat opposite him. "You may fuck me if you wish. But eat first."

Aiden couldn't think of a suitable reply for that, and the food did smell tempting. So he opened the bag and popped a few fries in his mouth before unwrapping the burger. As usual, Luka ate nothing.

"I don't get you," Aiden said with his mouth full. He didn't really want to talk, but the silence seemed oppressive. "You obviously don't want to be friends, and you can't possibly be so hard up that all you can score is someone like me. But then you say those pretty words and you bring me dinner.... What the hell do you want?"

"What I want does not matter. It is what I need that concerns us."

Aiden squinted at him. "Are you some kind of sex addict or something? One of those guys who have to get laid all the time?"

Luka had very white teeth. "Not precisely. But I have certain... appetites."

"You're hungry to stuff someone's cock down your throat."

“Lately, I am hungry to stuff *your* cock down my throat.”

The cock in question swelled, making Aiden shift a little in his seat. But he remained stubborn. “I bet James would let you suck him off. He thinks he’s straight, but in the middle of the night, a lot of straight guys won’t say no to a willing mouth, even if the mouth is attached to a man.”

“But I do not want James.” Luka leaned forward over the table to look earnestly into his eyes. “I want you.”

“But not during the day.”

This time Luka sighed, long and loud. “This is a matter of necessity, not desire.”

“Whatever.”

When the food was gone, Aiden wanted to ignore Luka, but Luka wouldn’t allow it. He crawled under the goddamn table and crouched at Aiden’s feet, and when he spread Aiden’s legs and fumbled at his fly, Aiden didn’t have the fortitude to refuse. Luka gave him slow, excruciatingly wonderful head, only crawling out to stand upright after Aiden had sagged in a postorgasmic haze. Then Luka kissed Aiden’s closed lips very firmly and snuffled at his hair before adjusting his own uniform and exiting into the motel hallway.

THE library was only a couple of miles from Aiden’s apartment—close enough that he jogged instead of taking the bus—but the neighborhood was much better than his. It wasn’t a fancy area, and some homeless people were gathered in the adjacent park with their shopping carts, bicycles, and backpacks. Aiden had lived on the streets several times since he was a kid, and as he walked by this group, he was suddenly very thankful for his crappy apartment and lumpy bed.

The library was crowded with junior high kids and moms and a few men dressed in shabby clothes. The place smelled of stale perfume, body odor, cheap booze, and dust. But people seemed happy as they surfed the Internet, browsed the shelves, or buried their noses in books. A preschooler was cuddled on her father’s lap, listening intently as he read aloud in Spanish from a picture book. Aiden briefly wondered whether anyone had read to him when he was small. He couldn’t remember.

He wandered around the crowded room, getting a feel for it, and was distracted by a shelf labeled “Friends of the Library.” The books there were for sale—a quarter for paperbacks and fifty cents for hardcovers. He’d have to remember that when his thrift-store collection ran low. Then it occurred to him he could even apply for a library card and check out books for free. That idea made him grin because getting a library card seemed like such a civilized, law-abiding, mainstream thing to do.

A large corkboard hung on the wall near the photocopier. Aiden stood in front of it for a while, reading the advertisements for babysitters and yard services, the announcements about various community events. Eventually he came across an index card with a notice carefully penned in black ink:

Come discuss the classics with us! Mondays, 6-8 pm, Steinbeck Meeting Room.

There was a phone number as well. Aiden keyed it into the contacts on his cell phone. Nobody ever called him except Ms. Simmons, but carrying a phone was one of the conditions of his parole.

Aiden considered getting the library card application before he left, but there was a line at the checkout desk. He wasn’t in any particular hurry, but he could picture himself asking for the application and the librarian—a grandmotherly lady with glasses on a chain around her neck—shaking her head and pointing her finger at him. “Library cards aren’t for people like *you*,” she would say, and all the people in line would laugh and sneer.

Yeah, okay, that probably wouldn’t happen. But still, Aiden walked to the door and exited into the warm afternoon sun.

He jogged home, enjoying the relative rarity of being out during the day. The houses near the library were small and old but generally well kept, many of them with plastic riding toys or kiddie pools in the front yards. But as he drew closer to his apartment, there were more empty lots and boarded-up buildings, and the windows and doors of the houses were all heavily barred. Men in their teens and early twenties loitered in small groups, watching him with narrowed eyes as he ran by. He made sure to look straight back at them, just long enough to show he had no fear. Sometimes he felt like some kind of jungle beast that had to constantly prove it was the biggest and the baddest or else risk being taken down in a storm of torn muscle and fountaining blood.

But what really bothered him about his neighborhood was the kids. He'd see them hanging out with their siblings—all of them looking old beyond their years—and he'd see himself reflected in their eyes. These kids had fathers in prison, mothers so desperate for survival that they had little time to watch over the children or were too far gone to care, mothers' boyfriends who beat them or worse, teachers who'd given up on them long ago. The girls he saw would begin having babies in their midteens, right around the same time the boys would be entering the revolving door of incarceration.

Maybe a few of them would make it, he told himself as he rounded the corner to his street. The ones who were exceptionally strong, or who lucked onto one adult who believed in them. Not the ones who'd already discovered drugs or alcohol when they were in grade school—they already had their own private monsters. Not the scrawny boys who figured out early on that they might be queer, and who responded by making themselves as rough and tough and hard as possible.

Aiden sprinted the last few blocks and arrived at his place sweaty and fighting to breathe. He engaged the four locks on his door and began stripping, dropping his clothes in a pile near the wall. He was going to have to visit a Laundromat soon, or else wash his stuff in the bathroom sink and hope it dried before mildew set in. He thought about the luxury of having his own washing machine. Someday, maybe. Then he laughed at himself, at his low standards for success.

Before he could wallow in self-pity any longer, he dug out his phone and called the number from the library bulletin board. It rang three times before a slightly breathless woman answered. "Hello?" She sounded young.

"Um... hi. I was at the library today and I, uh, saw a card. About, um, discussing the classics." Jesus, could he sound any more like a moron?

But the woman didn't sound too put off. "Hey, great! Are you interested in joining us?"

"Uh, yeah. I mean, if it's okay."

"We'd love to have some fresh blood. That's why we advertised. Are you a fan of the classics?"

"Yeah. I mean, I haven't read very many of them, but I'd like to." And that was true, although he didn't add that he wasn't positive he'd be able to

understand them. Maybe he should have signed up with the chick lit group instead.

“Well, that’s what we’re hoping for. Some of us read these books years ago and want to rediscover them, but for some of us they’re brand-new. Or, you know, we hated it when our teachers *made* us read them, but now we want to tackle them all fresh.”

“Okay.”

At the other end of the line, something crashed and the woman swore. “Sorry! I should know better than to multitask. So will you join us? We meet Monday nights at the library. We’re doing *Les Misérables* tonight, but I’m guessing that’s kind of short notice for you. It’s like, over a thousand pages long.”

“I, um, don’t think I can quite pull that off in the next three hours.” He’d never read the book, but he knew what it was about—an ex-con—and he was glad he’d missed it.

The book club lady laughed. “Yeah, probably not. Well, next we’re going to do *The Iliad*. You’d only need to read the first eight books by next Monday. Is that doable?”

He had no idea whether that was doable, but he said, “Yeah, sure.”

“Fantastic! We’ll see you next week, then.”

“Is there... is there anything else I need to do?” He had no idea exactly what the club might entail. He pictured uniforms, secret handshakes, theme songs.

“Nope. Just show up. We take turns bringing snacks, but since you’re new, your turn won’t come for a while. Oh, but what’s your name? I’m Mickey.”

He briefly considered an alias. What if she googled him and dug up shit from his past? He sighed. “Aiden Finn.”

“I’ll be looking forward to meeting you, Aiden.”

When the call ended, he stood for a while in the middle of his apartment, naked, still holding the phone. He was smiling.

Chapter Four

Ms. SIMMONS was very pleased with Aiden's book club progress. He knew he was stupid for feeling a wash of pride over her praise—he hadn't cured cancer, for Christ's sake—but he felt proud nonetheless. It wasn't often that someone told him he'd done well. Ms. Simmons also pointed out that he could read *The Iliad* for free online if he couldn't dig up a copy somewhere. Then he told her that he planned to apply for a library card the next day, and she practically gave him a frigging medal. "That's my boy," she said, and for a little while he felt a pleasant warmth in his chest, as if he sort of belonged to someone.

The warmth returned, albeit considerably farther south anatomically, when he got to work and Luka showed up, throwing him smoldering looks across the lobby. Aiden knew Luka would join him during the break, knew he ought to refuse the blowjob. Knew he probably wouldn't, not when his cock was already half hard just from thinking about it.

Sure enough, almost the minute Aiden sat down for break, Luka came into the room bearing two cups of McDonald's coffee. Aiden hadn't even seen the guy for a couple of hours, and he wondered how Luka knew exactly when his break began, especially since the time varied from night to night. But there he was, smiling, sitting on the chair Aiden had come to think of as Luka's.

"Did you enjoy your day off?" Luka asked. His hands were wrapped around his cup, but he wasn't making any effort to drink it. In fact, Aiden could not remember ever seeing the man eat or drink a thing.

"Yeah, it was okay. How 'bout yours?"

"I thought of you."

Aiden shook his head. "Yeah, see, here we go again. You pretend like we're all lovey-dovey, but you won't have anything to do with me away from here. Why don't you just quit the shit and be honest. I'm a hookup, a handy guy with a dick."

“You are more than that. If you knew how long it has been since I stayed so long with a single... partner....”

“You’ve stayed so long ’cause I’m here every night. Like I said, handy.”

Luka looked at him a long time before seeming to reach a decision. “I cannot meet with you during the day. But you have Monday nights off. I will ask for my schedule to be readjusted and we can spend next Monday night together.”

For a moment, Aiden felt stupidly thrilled with the concession. Then he remembered. “Can’t.”

“You no longer wish to spend time with me?”

“I.... Fuck. I have a book club.”

To his credit, Luka didn’t look shocked. Instead, he smiled. “What are you reading?”

“*Iliad*,” Aiden mumbled.

“Ah,” said Luka, and then he said a bunch of words in a language that wasn’t English or Spanish or Portuguese, which meant Aiden couldn’t recognize it. When Aiden just stared blankly, Luka smiled. “*Sing, Goddess, of the rage of Peleus’s son Achilles, the accursed rage that brought great suffering to the Achaeans.* The first lines, yes?”

Aiden had borrowed the book that afternoon—proudly using his brand-new library card—but hadn’t begun to read it yet. “You know the beginning of *The Iliad*?”

“I know the entirety of *The Iliad*. In Homeric Greek and English. Would you like me to recite more?”

As was often the case around Luka, Aiden felt slightly uneasy, as if there were something about the man he should know but couldn’t quite grasp. “What kind of security guard memorizes Homer?”

“I have not always been a security guard. I have been many things. And... I have had a lot of time to read.” He leaned forward over the table and placed his hand over one of Aiden’s. “Perhaps we could meet after your book club. I should like to hear your thoughts on the ancient Greeks.”

“I don’t think I have any thoughts on the ancient Greeks,” Aiden replied stubbornly.

“You will when you have finished this tale.”

After that, Aiden’s break went as expected, with Luka on his knees and Aiden climaxing down the other man’s throat with a muffled shout. But this time, Luka didn’t simply leave the room. Instead, he pushed Aiden gently but firmly until Aiden’s back was against the wall, and then Luka pressed their bodies tightly together. They fit well, Aiden couldn’t help but notice, like two puzzle pieces. Which was stupid, but there was Luka nuzzling into his neck and massaging Aiden’s ass through the ugly green custodian pants.

And then, in a voice barely above a whisper, Luka began to recite something that was obviously a poem of some kind, though Aiden didn’t have a clue as to the language. The words were full of that throat-clearing sound that Middle Eastern languages had, but also sort of hissy s’s and drawn-out vowels.

“What was that?” Aiden asked when Luka paused.

“A love poem. Older than your *Iliad*. ‘My love penetrates me like honey into water.’” Then he said more of the strange, exotic words.

Aiden felt a little light-headed. Nobody had ever recited poetry of any kind to him, let alone love poetry. He hadn’t ever pictured such a thing happening. And he knew it was more of Luka’s bullshit, yet it was also amazingly erotic. Especially with Luka’s wiry body against him and Luka’s breaths, which smelled slightly of Aiden’s own spend, puffing against his skin.

“Jesus,” Aiden groaned as Luka ground their hips together. Despite the recent and very spectacular blowjob, Aiden’s cock reawakened, rubbing through thicknesses of cloth against Luka’s bulge.

“Older than Jesus as well,” Luka said with a soft chuckle.

“I... I didn’t know people wrote love poems back then.”

“Oh, they did. So many centuries past, yet people loved as deeply then as they do now. Sometimes they loved foolishly as well, just as they do now.”

All the talk of love was making Aiden uneasy. “You’re quite a history buff.”

“I... have an interest in years gone by. But now I am more interested in the present.” He tipped his head up to look into Aiden’s eyes. “Life is so fleeting and everything we have passes through our fingers like sand. We

must find joy in the moment, in the now. Like this.” He thrust his pelvis hard against Aiden’s, at the same time gnawing gently at the crook of Aiden’s neck.

Aiden didn’t know if what he felt just then was joy. Really, he wasn’t sure what joy felt like. But what Luka was doing sure as hell felt *good*. Aiden grabbed Luka’s ass and thrust back, and soon they were rutting against each other, their breathing harsh and loud in the little room.

Luka came first. He threw his head back and made a sound that was like a muffled howl. A second or two later, Aiden came as well, bashing his skull hard against the wall and not feeling the pain at all.

They remained pressed together for a few moments, panting, until Luka pulled away. Aiden was a little embarrassed to have come in his pants like a teenager, but then Luka had done the same, and the guard looked more pleased and sated than ashamed.

“It has been so long,” Luka said huskily.

“Hey, I’ve been offering, but you always say—”

“I know.” He leaned forward again for a quick kiss, then back, looking down ruefully at the dark stain at his crotch. “I think I must clean up before returning to work.”

Aiden shrugged and pulled his shirt out of his pants. The hem was long enough to cover the evidence, and James probably wouldn’t complain over a small violation of the dress code—assuming he even looked up from his game long enough to notice.

At the door, Luka paused to look back over his shoulder. “I will be looking forward to Monday.”

When Luka was gone, Aiden sagged against the wall, spent.

Chapter Five

BY MONDAY afternoon, Aiden was feeling slightly ill and was sort of hoping the clenching in his belly meant he'd contracted something fatal—something *swiftly* fatal, so he'd be dead before six. But no such luck. It was only anxiety that was making his stomach lurch and his skin feel clammy.

The problem wasn't lack of preparedness. He'd read the first eight books of *The Iliad* during the week. He'd struggled to understand some of it, in part because Achilles's world was so different from his own. But every day during his break, Luka would blow him and then sort of... cuddle with him, pulling his chair close, leaning up against Aiden's shoulder, and talking at length about ancient Greece. As far as Aiden knew, every word Luka told him about the siege of Troy was complete bullshit—Luka certainly wasn't eager to explain how the hell he was so well versed on the topic—but what Luka said about Agamemnon and his buds *seemed* plausible enough, at least to Aiden's ears. And it was certainly the most pleasant learning experience Aiden had ever had, with his body feeling all floaty and postorgasmic, and with his handsome teacher pausing now and then for a grope or a kiss.

But Aiden wasn't optimistic that his diligent attempts to understand epic poetry were going to do him any good when faced with a room of literate and law-abiding citizens. They were going to laugh him out of the library.

And even once he survived book club—assuming he *did* survive book club—he had a date.

He tried to use other words in his head: a meeting, an appointment, a social thing, a casual get-together. But it was what it was: a really hot guy picking him up at the library and taking him out for dinner. Even an ex-con with a prison-earned GED knew that was a date.

Aiden was coming up on his thirtieth birthday, and he had never, not once in his life, been on a date. It wasn't just the complication of being gay.

When he was in his teens, when other kids his age were stressing about the big zits on their foreheads and negotiating with their parents for a later curfew, Aiden was locked up tight in various institutions: group homes, juvenile hall, the youth authority. Or he was out on the streets, crashing in vacant buildings, selling himself for enough cash to buy a burger and a bottle of cheap wine.

He walked to the library in the gathering dark, acknowledging to himself that he and Luka had kind of gone about this thing ass-backward, fucking first and then going out on a date. Next thing they'd be passing notes in class.

But Aiden was still nervous. He didn't know how to act on a date. And he still didn't know much of anything about Luka, except that he was fucking gorgeous and seemed to truly enjoy having Aiden's cock in his mouth. And that he could recite ancient Greek poetry in English and, apparently, in ancient Greek.

More homeless people were gathered in the leafy park across from the library. They hadn't settled in for the night, which meant the cops were probably going to come soon to kick them out, but they weren't making any particular effort to hide their forty-ouncers or bottles of Thunderbird. Aiden heard a whisper from the monster, how just a few swallows of rotgut would go a long way toward calming his nerves and boosting his confidence. He hurried into the building instead.

The library was crowded again. Lots of kids seemed to be working on school reports, while lots of adults clustered around the computers. A half dozen old men who smelled of cigarette smoke and coffee were gathered around a table, whispering loudly to each other in a foreign language. The balding librarian at the reference desk gave them the evil eye more than once, but they ignored him.

The Steinbeck Meeting Room was located in the basement, near the bathrooms. Aiden checked the time on his phone—5:56 p.m.—took a deep breath, and opened the battered wooden door.

Six people sat on folding chairs around a long table. They all turned to look at him, and Aiden froze. For a moment there was complete silence. Then one of the people stood. She was in her midtwenties and dressed in a bewildering variety of layered skirts, blouses, and scarves, with her long

hair dyed multiple colors. She wore dangly earrings with feathers at the ends. “Are you Aiden?” she asked.

He actually considered saying no. He could pretend he’d walked into the meeting by mistake and make a quick run for it. Hell, he could keep on running all the way to the bus station, hop the next ride out of town, avoid the date with Luka, and jump parole.

“Um, yeah,” he said.

“Hi! I’m Mickey. Grab some cookies and stuff and come join us.” She gestured at a table near the edge of the room, where there were several paper plates containing food, as well as a few bottles of water and iced tea. Aiden wasn’t remotely hungry—his stomach felt a little like he was aboard ship during a typhoon—but he thought it might be rude to refuse. So he made his way across the room, feeling all those eyes following him, and he took a chocolate chip cookie and a water. As he uncapped the bottle, he took a moment to covertly assess the book group.

There was Mickey, of course, and a pair of stout middle-aged women who must have been sisters. They might even have been twins. They both wore sort of ratty cardigans, one in turquoise and the other in pink. There was a very thin young man with thick eyeglasses and a *Star Wars* T-shirt, and next to him was a grizzled man in old jeans and a denim shirt, who would have looked at home on a Harley. And there was another woman, this one maybe fortyish, with blonde-streaked hair and a blue sleeveless dress. They were munching on cookies and talking quietly; their copies of *The Iliad* were set in front of them. Not one of the people looked anything like he’d expected, and none of them was yet clamoring for him to leave.

In fact, Mickey was smiling warmly at him, and she nodded approvingly when Aiden took a seat next to the geeky-looking kid.

“So, welcome!” Mickey chirped at him. “We can do intros in a sec. But first I wanted to kind of explain how we work. We meet every Monday right here at six—”

“Unless it’s a holiday,” interrupted the boy next to Aiden.

“Unless it’s a holiday. We take turns leading the discussion and bringing snacks. Oh, and I’m a vegetarian, so I’d really appreciate stuff without any kind of meat. I’m not vegan, though, so eggs and dairy are fine.”

“Uh, okay,” Aiden said, unable to picture himself either leading a discussion or feeding a group.

“Cool. Let’s see... we choose books every three months. We can each nominate five books, and then we vote on which ones to read. It usually takes us three weeks or so to cover a whole book, but some are longer.”

“*Moby-Dick* took us forever,” said the sister in pink.

“Yes, but Dostoyevsky would be even longer,” the one in turquoise said.

Mickey dug in her purse for a piece of paper, which she handed across the table to Aiden. “Here’s our schedule for the next couple months. Some of us like to get ahead—” She paused to give a meaningful little glare at the Harley guy. “—but most of us just do one at a time. If you have the list, you can find the books really cheap off Amazon or something. I get a lot of them free on Kindle.”

He looked at the printed list. *Les Misérables* was at the top, followed by *The Iliad*. Next came *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Frankenstein*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Call of the Wild*. None of those looked too intimidating. None of them were ancient Greek poems.

“Sorry you didn’t get any input this round, but you will next,” Mickey said. “Do these look all right with you?”

Aiden was surprised by the ready assumption that he’d be around long enough to help choose the new books. Apparently, he hadn’t scared them off with his looks. Well, he still had plenty of opportunity to alienate them with his lack of education and poor social skills. “They’re fine,” he said.

“Great! Okay, so it’s intro time.”

They went around the circle, each person giving his or her first name. Nothing else. It didn’t seem to matter what anyone’s job was or what they did when not reading books. Certainly criminal records, addictions, and sexual orientation seemed to be irrelevant. Aiden smiled at everyone as confidently as possible and relaxed just a tiny bit in the uncomfortable chair.

The older man—his name was Richard—took a swig of iced tea, wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, and cleared his throat. “Let’s get started, folks.” He had a notepad in front of him, which he consulted before continuing. “We’re gonna have to talk about fate and all that kind of stuff,

but let's begin with a few facts. What the hell is Achilles so pissed off about, and is he blowing things out of proportion?"

To Aiden's complete astonishment, he followed the discussion very well. In fact, when the lady in the blue dress, Jennifer, complained about all the repetitious phrases in the story, Aiden found himself chiming in with something Luka had told him. "I think they're there partly because this poem wasn't originally written, it was recited out loud. So stuff like Hera's white arms and the clattering armor, they're a little like the chorus in a song. They sort of... tie things together. I guess."

He hunched his shoulders and prepared to be attacked. But when he glanced up, Jennifer was nodding. "Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. The repeats probably helped people remember the poem better too."

Then the geeky kid chimed in. His name was Tad. "Also, those phrases helped Homer keep the right meter. It's like, if he needed x number of syllables, he could just pull up one of those phrases that matched, and voilà."

Luka had mentioned that to Aiden too. Huh.

Aiden continued to mostly listen to the others after that, but he added a few words now and then, and although not everyone agreed with him completely every time, nobody laughed at him or called him an idiot. The disagreements were friendly ones—sort of... intellectual ones—and he didn't come off looking like he'd ridden the short bus to the library.

Laura, the lady in pink, got up for a couple more cookies. When she sat down, she said, "Here's something I've been thinking about. The characters sacrifice everything for honor, even their families. Was Homer trying to say that honor is more important than family? Because I don't believe that."

Aiden said, "I think the point is that everything else is... sort of temporary. Family members leave you or die or whatever, and someday you'll die too, but honor is forever. Even the gods get impressed when a guy's got a good rep, right? And the poets sing about you and people still read your story thousands of years later."

When Aiden had discussed this with Luka, Aiden had mentioned that family and life must have been even more fleeting in Homer's time, when people died pretty young. Luka had given him one of his enigmatic smiles.

“Most people died young,” he had said. *“A very few most definitely did not.”*

As with a lot of what Luka said, Aiden hadn't known what the hell to make of that statement, so he'd ignored it.

Now, Laura tilted her head at him. *“Do you think the point is still relevant, Aiden? Do you think honor still trumps family?”*

He had to think about that one for a few moments. *“I think... I think that a lot of the time, if you put your people first, that is the honorable thing to do. But not always. I mean, what if your family is a bunch of shitheads?”* He winced at his own profanity, but the others only laughed. Tad almost snorted iced tea out his nose.

Eight o'clock came much more swiftly than Aiden would have guessed. Everyone stood and gathered their things, and every one of them told Aiden how glad they were that he had joined them. *“I'm really looking forward to your turn leading the group,”* Richard said with a clap to Aiden's shoulder.

Jennifer gave him the leftover cookies to take home.

He was still feeling a little light-headed and shell-shocked as he walked up the stairs to the library's main room. He hadn't been chased off with pitchforks and torches. Okay, he and the rest of the group members weren't best buds, but they had listened and often agreed with him, and there had been no ridicule. They seemed to genuinely want him to become one of them.

Holy shit. Aiden Finn had joined a friggin' book club.

But his grin faded as he pushed open the glass door of the building. Luka was supposed to be waiting for him. And either Luka was going to stand him up, which would be devastating, or else Luka would be there and they'd be going on a date, which would be terrifying.

Maybe nobody would notice if he snuck back in and spent the night among the shelves. But as he started to turn back, he saw the balding librarian usher out a pair of men in grubby coats, then lock the door behind them.

Aiden took a few deep breaths, clutched the book and the paper plate of cookies tightly, and turned back to the parking lot.

A car was idling at the curb. He couldn't make out the color in the parking lot's poor light—black or very dark blue or green—and he blinked at the squat little vehicle. “A Fiat?” he said out loud. Surely Luka didn't drive a *Fiat*.

But the car's window moved down and a familiar voice called to him from the dark interior. “Aiden! I am here.”

With a shrug, Aiden walked toward the car. He pulled open the passenger side door and bent to peer inside. Luka smiled back at him. “How was your book club?”

“Good.”

“Will you return?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Very good. Please, have a seat.”

Aiden bent and squished into the passenger seat and closed the door. He'd spent the past few weeks with his dick in Luka's mouth on an almost daily basis, and just recently there had been considerable additional groping and making out. But somehow sitting next to the guy in a tiny car in the dark was almost embarrassingly intimate, and Aiden couldn't find anything to say. He startled a little when Luka set a hand on his knee.

“You smell of cinnamon and chocolate,” Luka said.

Aiden slightly raised the plate. “It's the cookies.”

“It is you as well. Delicious.”

“You want a cookie?”

Luka chuckled. “No. I want you.”

Oh, Aiden thought. So that was it—they were going to skip right past the date part to sex. He felt mingled relief and disappointment.

Luka pulled the car away from the curb, and Aiden buckled up so the car would stop that obnoxious warning noise. He snuck glances at Luka as they rode. It was the first time he'd seen the man wearing anything but his guard uniform. Tonight he wore a plain white shirt that set off the color of his skin nicely, and a pair of dark pleated trousers that looked kind of expensive. His pointy-toed shoes looked pricy too—at least, a lot pricier than Aiden's Walmart sneakers.

“Are you still hungry after the sweets?” Luka asked him.

So maybe they weren't going to fuck right away after all. "Yeah, I could eat." Well, maybe, if his nervous stomach would settle.

"What kind of food would you like? There are so many choices."

"Um... I dunno. What can you eat?" Aiden was still unsure of the details behind Luka's special diet.

Luka shook his head. "Very little. So you choose what you would like."

Aiden considered his options as well as his budget. He hadn't eaten anywhere fancier than Denny's in years, and not often even before then. "Mexican?"

"Do you have a favorite restaurant?"

"No. I don't really... don't really know the city that well."

"I have come prepared in case that was the situation." Luka pulled an iPhone from his shirt pocket and handed it to Aiden. "I have a restaurant rating app. Yelp, yes? See what you can find."

Aiden was glad it was too dark for his blush to be visible. "I, uh, don't really know how to work one of these." There were no smartphones when he'd been sent away to prison this last time, and his own phone was a very bare-bones model, the cheapest he could get.

Luka sighed. "It is becoming so difficult to keep up with technology. One moment, please." He pulled to the curb before taking the phone back and spending a few minutes poking at it. "This device informs me that El Mundo restaurant is two miles from here, and that it averages four and one-half stars. Will that suffice?"

"Yeah, sure."

Luka smiled at him, then put away the phone and reentered traffic. "Good. I enjoy the scents of Mexican food. The chilies, the spices. Sometimes even a bit of chocolate. We did not have these when I was—well, before I was on my current diet."

"I guess Mexican is hard to find outside the US. And, uh, Mexico." Aiden still didn't know where Luka was from, and Luka danced around the subject whenever it was raised.

"It was when I was young."

They drove in silence for a short time. The car had a manual transmission, and Aiden enjoyed watching Luka work the gearshift. There was something both sensuous and powerful about the movements, and Aiden couldn't help but imagine that hand gripping another shaft instead. He squirmed uncomfortably. Luka must have noticed because he laughed softly.

El Mundo was located in a strip mall, between a pet store and a hair-cutting chain. The restaurant seemed crowded, which Aiden took as a good sign because the hour was already a little late for this town. And the inside *did* smell good. The décor was simple—a few posters of Mexican scenes and some hand-painted pottery hanging on the wall. The kid who greeted them at the door had a wide smile but looked somewhat frazzled, as if he'd been running around a lot.

“Two?” the kid asked.

Luka nodded.

The host grabbed a pair of plastic-coated menus from a rack and led them to one of the few empty tables, a small square one near the back. He waited for them to sit and then handed them the menus. “Can I get you something to drink? We got Cadillac margaritas for five dollars tonight, or draft beer for two bucks.”

Aiden could almost taste the fiery sting of cheap tequila, the answering bites of lime and salt. “Just water,” he said.

Luka nodded. “For me as well.”

The boy nodded back. “Kay. Waitress'll be right with you.”

“This is very nice,” Luka said when the kid was gone. “It has been a very long time since I have done this.”

“Been to a restaurant?”

“Yes.”

“Doesn't it bug you to sit here when you know you can't eat anything?”

“Not when I have a companion such as you. You are a feast for me, even before we touch.”

Dammit, Aiden was blushing again, and this time under bright overhead lights. “You’re really good at the sweet talk, aren’t you?” he said, a little gruffly.

“Only when the situation merits it.”

Aiden was still crafting a clever retort when the waitress appeared. She was middle-aged, plump, her short black hair showing gray at the roots. She had a bright smile. “Have you decided?”

Having barely glanced at the menu, Aiden had no idea what to order. He chose something more or less at random, something not too expensive. “Uh, enchilada, please.”

“Beef, chicken, or pork?”

“Beef.”

“Green sauce or red?”

“Um... green.”

“Refried beans or black?”

Jesus. He was almost missing having prison food slopped onto a tray. Tasted like shit but you didn’t get dizzy with choices. “Refried.”

“And do you want two enchiladas or three? The three come with salad.”

He was going to tell her two, even though he was starving, but Luka answered for him. “He will have three,” he said firmly.

She scribbled on her order pad. “And how about you?”

“I will have the soup, please.”

“Anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back with your drinks and chips.”

After she walked away, Aiden looked at Luka. “You can eat soup?”

“No. But I can smell the steam and the bowl will feel pleasant when it warms my hands. You are welcome to eat it for me.”

“I, uh, I think three enchiladas is gonna be plenty.”

The waitress brought their water as well as a basket of warm tortilla chips and three little bowls, each with a different kind of salsa. Aiden spent

a few minutes happily dipping and munching. He rarely spent money on snack foods, and when he did, he usually bought the cheapest brands he could find. He certainly didn't get amazing homemade chips or really fresh pico de gallo. "You can't eat any of this?" he asked Luka, who was watching him with a small smile. "Not even a nibble?"

"Not without... disastrous results."

"That sucks."

For some reason, Luka snorted an inelegant laugh. "Yes, it most certainly does."

"What *can* you eat?"

Luka wagged his brows. "You."

"I think I'm lacking in nutritional content."

"You would be surprised."

Aiden realized once again that he was not going to get a straight answer from this man. He decided to change the subject to more certain ground. "Thanks for the help with that book. Made me not look stupid tonight."

"You are not stupid, and it is my pleasure. It is not often that I have the chance to discuss literature."

"But you like to read."

"Very much." Luka's dark eyes focused very closely on Aiden's blue ones, as if Luka were trying to read something in him. "It passes the time so well. Allows me to journey even when I am confined."

"Have you done time?" Aiden asked, surprised. There was nothing about Luka that suggested ex-con—none of the wary looks or purposeful swagger.

"No. But there are many types of confinement."

Ah. So it was more with the mystery, then. Aiden stuffed a few more chips in his mouth and washed them down with water. He still wished he had something stronger to drink.

But then the waitress arrived with his plate and Luka's bowl, and everything looked and smelled so delicious that Aiden had to stop himself

from attacking the food like a ravening wolf. He took a big bite, though, watching as Luka inhaled deeply over the soup.

“Is your meal as good as Yelp promised?” Luka asked.

“I’m not much of a restaurant critic, but yeah, this is great.” It was. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d tasted food this good, and he still had to exercise considerable control not to shovel it all into his mouth in huge forkfuls.

Luka’s eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. “Good. This soup reminds me of some months I spent in Oaxaca. Scent can be so evocative of memories.”

“You’ve been to Mexico?” Aiden had never left the United States, and even his domestic travels had hardly been of the touristy sort.

“I have. I have traveled... a lot.”

“Tell me about some of it. Tell me what you’ve seen.”

Aiden thought his companion might be evasive again, but instead Luka looked pleased and slightly surprised. As Aiden ate, Luka talked about seeing the twinkling lights sparkle on the Eiffel Tower and the northern lights play in the vast skies of Siberia. He described what it was like to float in blood-warm water in a quiet cove, the moon winking overhead, fish nibbling at your toes, the scent of tropical blossoms heavy in the air. He had been to the night markets in Taiwan, heard elephants calling in Tanzania, listened to the flute players in Algiers.

By the time Luka paused in his storytelling, Aiden had polished off his dinner and the soup as well, and was nursing a mug of cinnamon-accented hot chocolate. Aiden knew every word from Luka’s mouth was probably finely crafted bullshit—a bunch of tales stolen from Rick Steves and *National Geographic*. Luka was too young to have seen all those things, and he certainly couldn’t afford all that travel on a security guard’s salary. But Aiden didn’t care if it was all lies, because it was wonderful to listen to. And just as importantly, Luka was wonderful to watch. When he got involved in descriptions, his eyes sparkled, his hands waved, and his pretty mouth mesmerized Aiden like a hypnotist’s coin.

But when the waitress cleared away Aiden’s mug, Luka stopped talking and blinked at him. “I am so sorry. I did not mean to go *on* like this. I only—”

“I’ve been enjoying it. The way you give all those details, I almost feel like I’ve been to those places now too.”

Luka’s answering smile was a beautiful thing, slow and radiant. He ducked his head a little, as if unused to praise. “Thank you,” he whispered.

It was a good thing the waitress appeared with the bill just that moment, because Aiden was considering jumping the man right then and there, ripping his clothes off, and licking him from stem to stern.

Luka shot his hand out unnaturally fast and grabbed the check.

“Hey!” Aiden protested. “That’s mine!”

“But it would be my pleasure—”

Aiden almost growled at him. It wasn’t that he had tons of extra cash burning a hole in his wallet, but he’d been the one to ask Luka out first. And Luka had to be the one to drive, because he had a car. And Luka found the restaurant because he had a smartphone and the brains to use it. Dammit, Aiden had never taken someone out before, possibly never would again, and just for once, it would be nice to be something slightly better than pathetic.

Maybe Luka saw all that in Aiden’s face, because he nodded and handed over the slip of paper. “Thank you, Aiden. This is a very rare treat for me.” He managed to look sincere as he said it.

Aiden silently pulled out his wallet and paid the bill, leaving a 20 percent tip.

They walked back to the Fiat and got inside. Luka started the engine but didn’t put the car in gear. He turned his head to look at Aiden. “If you were to invite me to your home, I would not refuse.” His voice was barely above a whisper.

Aiden swallowed. “I’d like to. But my place is pretty much a shithole.”

“I am sure it is better than a great many of the places where I have lived.”

Aiden doubted that very much. But Christ, he really wanted to get Luka somewhere private, somewhere he could finally strip off Luka’s clothes and see the body that lay beneath, somewhere he could find out if the rest of Luka was as welcoming as his mouth. “Okay,” he said and gave directions to his apartment.

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Chapter Six

LUKA didn't comment as he drove through gradually deteriorating neighborhoods. He didn't even wince at the thugs hanging out on the corner near Aiden's place, who watched the car the way a school of sharks might eye a diver. Aiden glared back, of course, but it was difficult to look menacing in a Fiat.

Only as they pulled to a stop in the parking lot did another thought occur to Aiden. "Um, maybe we'd better not do this. I'm not sure how safe your car's gonna be."

Luka appeared completely unconcerned. "My car will be fine."

"Somebody can jack this thing in, like, a minute. Maybe less. I'm not sure 'cause I never tried to steal a Fiat."

Leaning closer, Luka gave his cheek a quick stroke with one thumb. "Do not worry. Please. I have other things on my mind right now."

Well, so did Aiden, now that the subject had been raised. Like getting them both naked very fast. He decided that he'd given enough warning to assuage his conscience, and he unfolded himself from the car.

Luka held the plate of cookies while Aiden undid all the locks on his front door. But when the door was open, Luka hesitated at the threshold.

"I told you it was a rathole," Aiden said unhappily. "We can go to your place instead."

"No, it is— Please, may I come in?"

That was weird. Maybe some strange custom where Luka came from, wherever that was. "Yeah. Come on in," Aiden said.

With that, Luka slipped inside. Aiden locked the door behind them and stood, waiting for Luka to look around. "This is my stately manor. You still wanna try and claim you've seen worse?"

But Luka was already handing him the cookies and then crossing the room, bending for a better look at Aiden's collection of battered

paperbacks. “Neil Gaiman! Oh, I like him. And Kurt Vonnegut.” He looked back over his shoulder at Aiden. “You have very good taste.”

“It’s just... you know, whatever they have at the thrift store that doesn’t look too crappy.” Aiden set the plate down on the kitchen counter, thought better of it when he saw a roach skitter under the sink, and shoved the cookies into the little fridge instead. When he emerged from the minuscule kitchenette, Luka was still examining the apartment, even though there wasn’t much to see: dingy paint, greenish carpet that was probably older than Aiden, battered mismatched furniture.

“You have very few... personal effects,” Luka concluded finally.

“Never had the time or cash to accumulate them. Or a place to keep them, most of the time.”

“Everything I own but my furniture and my books fits in my car with room to spare. I lost so... so much over the years, I suppose I stopped trying to keep things.” Luka’s voice was low and sad. For the zillionth time, Aiden wondered about his backstory. And for the zillionth time, Luka didn’t fill him in.

Instead, Luka strode across the room—which didn’t take many steps—and embraced him tightly. When they kissed, Luka’s tongue swept the inside of Aiden’s mouth, maybe gathering the flavors of his meal, and Luka moaned. “I am so hungry for you,” he said after their mouths parted.

Aiden felt pretty much the same way. He began to fumble with the buttons of Luka’s shirt, but Luka dropped to his knees.

“I thought—” Aiden began and then stopped himself. Complaining about a blowjob was stupid, especially when the person giving it was so talented.

But Luka tipped his head up, his eyes glittering as brightly as jewels. “Please. To... to take the edge off. So that I do not lose—” He bit his lip. “I promise this is only a beginning.”

Well, when he put it like that, Aiden could hardly protest. Luka unzipped Aiden’s jeans and pushed them down a little, along with his briefs. The touch of those strong, nimble fingers on Aiden’s cock was already so familiar. Luka’s hands were always cold at first—poor circulation, maybe?—but they warmed rapidly as he stroked and fondled.

And then his mouth... so slick and tight, and he allowed his teeth to graze the glans just a bit, just enough to make Aiden's breath catch in his lungs.

Tonight Luka seemed ravenous for Aiden's dick, eager to make Aiden climax as hard and as quickly as possible. All Aiden could do was clutch at Luka's shoulder and soft hair and go along for the ride. He could barely keep himself upright, his legs shaky and weak, and when the wave of pleasure swept through his body, he would have collapsed entirely if Luka hadn't helped ease him down to his knees.

"Shit," Aiden rasped.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to be so greedy. But I was—"

"No way you should be apologizing for that, man. Fuck."

The corners of Luka's mouth twitched, and he gave Aiden's still firm cock a friendly squeeze. "That is our next agenda item, I believe."

It felt good to laugh—almost as good as coming. Maybe even better, seeing as how he'd had more fucking than lightheartedness in his life.

Luka rose gracefully, like a dancer, and backed up a few feet. Without letting his gaze leave Aiden's face, Luka unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it onto the floor. He was wearing a sleeveless undershirt, plain white cotton, and he drew it over his head and tossed it aside as well. His chest was hairless, the muscles smooth and sleek, his nipples brown and hard.

Aiden would have liked to touch him but was still on his knees, sort of hobbled by his jeans and underwear. So he had to be content with watching avidly as Luka toed off those pointed shoes—no socks beneath them—unbuckled his plain black belt, and unfastened his trousers. Aiden couldn't tell whether Luka was going commando or whether he pushed his pants and underwear down simultaneously, but it didn't really matter because Luka was finally out of his clothing.

Luka stood still for Aiden, his cock jutting alertly from a neat nest of dark curls. His cock was neither especially long nor thick, but it was perfect. Every inch of him was perfect, actually: the narrow hips, the leanly muscled thighs, the slender feet.

"Fucking gorgeous," Aiden breathed and then was embarrassed over the clumsy endearment.

But Luka only smiled wickedly and turned around, allowing a view of his tapered back and firm, round ass. Aiden's cock, which had never

completely softened anyway, was suddenly hard again.

Without anything like Luka's grace, Aiden got to his feet. Luka looked on with amusement as Aiden tried to take off his shoes, pants, and briefs without falling on his ass. He began to unbutton his shirt—the only real button-down he owned, worn specifically for the book club and date—but gave up halfway through and ended up pulling it off over his head. He didn't have an undershirt, so that left him standing there in his white socks, feeling self-conscious. Not that he wasn't in good shape, because he was. But Luka looked like something mythological, a Greek statue come to life maybe, whereas Aiden, with his hairy chest, jailhouse tats, and assorted scars, looked like an ex-con.

"Oh," Luka said, followed by a phrase in what Aiden presumed was his native language. By the tone of it, Luka was not disappointed, and so Aiden stood a little straighter.

When they moved together this time, the contact was more delicious than ever because it was bare skin against bare skin. Luka's felt as smooth as it looked, and he was slightly cool to the touch, as if he truly had been recently transformed from marble. And he couldn't seem to get enough of Aiden—squeezing muscles, tweaking nipples, inhaling deeply at neck and armpit.

"Bed?" Luka finally asked. His unsteady voice pleased Aiden immensely.

Aiden pulled away, which was almost physically painful, and started tossing cushions off the couch. Yes, he was slightly pathetic, but in optimistic preparation for this evening, he'd spent part of the day at a Laundromat, making sure his bedding would be clean and fresh. He'd even stopped at a drugstore on the way home, the whole time silently chiding himself for being unrealistic in his expectations.

But it seemed his hopes had been met after all, because here was Luka, naked, and Luka was firmly pushing him back onto the newly opened bed. Aiden could have pushed back, of course—he was probably stronger—but he didn't want to, especially when Luka lay down on top of him and began to lick and nibble at every bit of his body.

There had been plenty of sex in Aiden's life. He had fucked or been fucked for fun, for profit, as a victim, to establish power, as a pleasant way

to pass the time. He'd had sex with men of every imaginable shape, age, and description, and a few times he'd even had sex with women—mostly when he was drunk enough not to care too much where he stuck his dick. But every one of those fucks had been quick and businesslike. None of them could ever have been called making love.

But Christ, there was no better name for what he and Luka were doing now, with Luka teasing him, tasting him, goddamn worshipping him, and Aiden writhing and gasping, touching any parts of Luka he could reach. The experience was maddening and excruciating, and Aiden never wanted it to end.

Unfortunately, he could take only so much. Even that first orgasm could only hold him off for so long, and he was fairly sure he wouldn't have it in him for a third. God, his heart was thudding in his chest as it was, and he was drenched with sweat that Luka kept licking away. "Luka...", he croaked desperately. "I need... oh, *fuck* that's good... I need...."

Luka stopped what he was doing, and Aiden almost sobbed in disappointment and relief. Luka's eyes were wild, his lips swollen. There was something almost feral about him, something that might even have been a bit frightening if he weren't smiling warmly. "You are delicious," Luka said. "But perhaps we should move on."

Aiden tried to sit up, which was largely impossible with Luka on top of him. "Rubbers. Lube. There." He pointed at the top drawer of his dresser, because speaking in full sentences was beyond him right then.

With an amused grin, Luka detached himself and hurried to the dresser. He pulled out the cardboard box and plastic bottle and brought them back. "You will not catch anything from me," he said, looking at the package of condoms.

"I've been tested, but..." He'd made a lot of idiot decisions in his life, and safe sex had often been either something that didn't occur to his sodden brain, or else something that was impossible under the circumstances. The tests said he was clean, but he had enough on his conscience already without endangering this beautiful man.

"All right," said Luka, taking out one of the rubbers and tossing the box aside. It landed on his discarded clothes. He fumbled with the wrapper a bit, frowning with concentration. Finally, he held Aiden's cock steady

with one hand and rolled on the condom with the other. His movements were a little awkward, as if he were unused to this particular activity. Well, if he was an exclusive bottom, maybe his partners put on their own jackets.

Once the condom was fully in place, Luka gave a triumphant little grin and handed Aiden the lube. "Your turn." And he straddled Aiden on all fours, spectacular ass pointed enticingly at Aiden's face.

Aiden could easily have spent a long time playing with that ass: patting it, squeezing it, caressing it. But Luka was blowing soft breaths onto Aiden's groin, and those were having almost the same effect as had his hands and tongue. Aiden hastily opened the bottle. He slicked up a finger and slowly slid it into Luka's body.

Luka hissed, said something that must certainly have been an expletive, and wiggled so that he was more deeply impaled. "You need not be too gentle. Rough is... oh, rough is good."

Those were wonderful words to hear, because Aiden wasn't sure how much longer his self-control would last. With an inchoate sort of roar, he grabbed Luka and rolled them over, then reared up so Luka could twist around to face him. Face him. God, that was another thing Aiden had done very rarely. Usually he fucked doggy style, as if neither he nor the bottom wanted to see each other's face.

Luka, however, seemed fascinated with Aiden's face. Their eyes remained locked together as Luka bent his knees and wrapped his arms around them, bending himself nearly double. Aiden shoved a pillow under Luka's ass, lined up his cock, and sank inside in one long thrust.

It must have hurt. Aiden had done little to prepare Luka. But Luka's eyes rolled back and he shuddered, and then he did his damndest to move his hips up to meet Aiden. His hands were clenched into tight fists and his damp cock was smearing against his lovely skin. "Please," he rasped.

Abandoning all intentions to extend their lovemaking, Aiden began to slide in and out, each plunge bringing an answering moan from Luka. With a little repositioning and mustering up the strength of his well-toned muscles, Aiden managed to balance on one arm so he could wrap his free hand around Luka's cock and jack him in tempo with his thrusts. Luka responded with a long string of obscene-sounding words in what was

probably a variety of languages, and his eyes were so bright Aiden could have sworn he saw sparks. The bedsprings creaked, the sofa bed shook.

Luka came first, arching his head back and howling. The muscular contractions around Aiden's cock were very nice indeed, but the slickness in his hand and the expression on Luka's face conspired to send him over the edge. His movements lost all rhythm and he actually saw goddamn fireworks, like the final scene in some cheesy romance movie. He lost any sense of where he ended and the other man began, his skin felt turned inside out, and he bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood.

With a long, long exhale, he collapsed on top of Luka's body.

But Luka was suddenly wild beneath him, grabbing him for a hard kiss and sucking on Aiden's tongue. With their mouths still locked together, Luka shuddered and groaned, and a fresh pool of sticky fluid joined the mess at their groins.

When they finally separated completely to lie side by side, Luka looked as dazed as Aiden felt. But Luka reached over to stroke Aiden's cheek with his fingertips. "Wonderful. I have been waiting a very long time, but you were worth waiting for."

Aiden might have come up with something clever to say in return, but his brain was still stuck in first gear. Probably all the blood flow hadn't yet resumed. He smiled instead and sort of grunted, which made Luka grin.

Feeling lazy and mostly melted, Aiden carefully peeled off the rubber. He should go to the bathroom and throw it away, he knew. Maybe get a damp towel so they could clean up. He would. In a few minutes. Meanwhile, he knotted the rubber and dropped it on the floor, since it couldn't possibly add to the carpet's already deplorable state.

Luka moved closer to nuzzle against his neck. They ended up with arms and legs entwined, Luka lying half on top of him. They managed to pull the covers up too.

Aiden wasn't used to cuddling, wasn't used to sharing a bed, but Luka felt so good against him. Although Aiden was fully aware of the stupidity of the emotion, with Luka there, he felt safe and cared for.

Within minutes, he was fast asleep.

HE WOKE up alone in bed. He wasn't surprised. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was nearly noon. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept so long and peacefully without the aid of drugs.

He padded to the bathroom. Pissed, washed his face, brushed his teeth, decided to shower after breakfast. Scratched a bit at the itchy dried semen on his groin and belly.

The stupid apartment felt twice as crappy and three times as empty as it had before.

But then he spied the paper that had been left in the middle of his tiny table—a sheet from one of the Snooze-Inn notepads he'd lifted from work. He'd only taken a few of them, all of them half used by guests and then abandoned. The paper came in handy for making lists, and he figured his boss wouldn't mind such a petty theft. Probably.

Dearest Aiden, the paper said in neat, careful script. Thank you for, well, everything. I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed our night. I hope that you will forgive my hasty exit. Someday perhaps I can explain. I look forward to seeing you at work. You look very cute when you are asleep. –L

For the rest of the day, Aiden was unable to wipe the cheesy smile off his face.

Chapter Seven

Ms. SIMMONS's older son had a full-ride scholarship at Cal Poly, and the younger one had already had two poems published. Her look of pride when she spoke of them was very similar to the expression she wore as Aiden described his success at the book club.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, squeezing his hand once. "I knew you could do it. There's a fine mind under all that attitude."

He sipped his coffee and basked a little. Objectively, maybe not making an idiot of yourself when discussing *The Iliad* was a pretty small triumph, but he'd been praised so rarely in his life that his parole officer's words felt like precious gifts.

"I know what a big step this is for you, Aiden. You're working really hard. And you know what? For the first time since we've met, you're looking happy. Must feel pretty good."

Wow—she was right. He *was* happy. He grinned before taking another sip.

She smiled back. "You're still tolerating that job?"

"It's okay. Gives me time to think."

"Good. I checked with your boss last week and he has no complaints. Says you're always on time and always do what you're supposed to."

"Yeah, well, it's not rocket science."

"No, but it's your first real job, and you're hanging in there."

He nodded and looked around the shop. On a really good day like today, he held some hope that he might eventually be more like some of the other customers he saw—relaxed, comfortable, dressed in something slightly more stylish than thrift shop and Walmart finds. Chatting with friends.

He remembered Ms. Simmons's frequent warnings that he needed to be completely honest with her. "I, uh, there's something else," he said.

"Oh?"

“I’ve kinda... kinda met someone. A friend, I guess. Luka. He’s a security guard at the motel.”

She gave him one of her piercing looks. “Friend. Like, hanging out with your bud kind of friend or falling into bed kind of friend?”

Dammit, he was blushing. “More of the falling, I guess.”

“Uh-huh. And is he a safe choice for you, Aiden?”

“Christ, I don’t know. Not like I ran a background check on the guy.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m still getting to know him. But he has a job and a decent car and I’ve never seen him drink or get high or anything. He’s... I like him, Ms. Simmons. He’s nice to me. Doesn’t treat me like I’m garbage.” Well, that was more than he’d intended to admit.

But she gave a slow nod. “Good. That’s what I want to hear. Told you already—you’re gonna find this road a whole lot easier to walk with someone at your side.”

“We’re not exactly picking out wedding rings.”

“I know.” She smiled and patted his hand. “But it’s like everything else, Aiden. Gotta start somewhere.”

LUKA had Tuesday night off. The motel was lonely without him. Even though they didn’t spend much time together aside from Aiden’s breaks, when Luka was on duty, they ran into each other several times every hour and exchanged smiles, maybe brief touches. Aiden didn’t know what their time would be like now that they’d had more together than a hello and a blowjob. Fuck, maybe Frank had recovered from his heart attack. Maybe Luka decided to take off, find another job, another place to live, another lover.

Or maybe it will all be okay, said a small voice in his head. A new voice. He kind of liked it. He hoped it would stick around.

After clocking out, Aiden spent an hour in the motel gym and then walked home. He smiled when he saw the note still on his table. He had a quick bite to eat, read a little, and then stripped and climbed between sheets that still smelled of sex and Luka. If he closed his eyes and concentrated, he could almost imagine the feel of another body against his own, soft hair tickling his face, gentle breaths puffing against his skin. He fell asleep

easily, and if he had any bad dreams, he didn't remember them in the morning.

The next day's routine was like any other: jogging, shower, breakfast, reading. He tidied up a little, which didn't take long. He spent some time pacing the room. He was thirsty. Really, really thirsty. That little bit of anxiety over the book club and seeing Luka had awakened the monster, which was now whispering in his ear. *Just a beer or two, it said. Not even whiskey. Light beer. To settle the nerves.* He wished he'd found a sponsor at one of the meetings he'd attended, because right then he could really have used a phone call. He didn't need a lot of hand-holding, just someone to talk to him, to drown out the monster's voice. He even considered dialing Ms. Simmons's number, but what was she going to do but be disappointed in him? Maybe threaten to haul his ass back to prison.

For a very brief moment, he *wanted* to go back to prison, where his choices were few. Where he didn't have to worry about fucking up because, brother, he was already fucked. He remembered something a cellmate had told him once—an old-timer who'd been in and out more times than he could count before landing on twenty-five to life. "I'm cool with it," the guy had said. "You at the bottom of the pit, you don't have to worry about fallin' no more."

But then Aiden imagined Luka showing up for work and finding a new janitor in Aiden's place. And he imagined the book club people gathering in the Steinbeck Meeting Room and wondering where the new guy was, why he'd shown up for just a single meeting and then disappeared. They might miss him a little bit. They might be disappointed he wasn't there.

Oh. This must have been what Ms. Simmons meant when she'd lectured him about forming ties to people and places. The stronger your connections, she said, the more incentive you had to stay straight.

He left for work a little earlier than usual, the sky still purpled with dusk. The neighborhood didn't look quite so awful in that light. He could almost believe that behind some of the barred doors lived hard-working parents who loved their kids and who would someday scrape together enough cash to move somewhere better.

James hadn't started his shift yet when Aiden arrived at the Snooze-Inn, and the daytime desk clerks raised their eyebrows at him. "Nobody's going to pay you overtime, you know," said one of them, a college kid who

clearly fancied himself far superior to ex-con custodians. The other clerk rolled her eyes; from the few interactions Aiden had had with her, she seemed like a decent enough sort.

“I’m just going to sit in the break room and read until it’s time to clock in,” Aiden answered.

The kid sneered. “Yeah? What’re you reading—*Archie* or *Spider-Man*?”

There was a time when Aiden would have erupted with anger. He might even have wrapped his hands around the clerk’s skinny neck. But tonight he only smiled coolly and said, “Even though twenty such as you had come in against me, they would all have been broken beneath my spear, and would have perished.”

“Is that a *threat*?” The kid’s voice squeaked—he was afraid.

Aiden just kept on smiling. “Nope. It’s Patroclus.”

The female clerk was still snorting with laughter when Aiden disappeared down the hallway.

HE WAS mopping when Luka arrived. Luka sailed into the lobby with an enormous smile, not even bothering to glance at James. He came right up to Aiden, avoiding the wet parts of the floor, and didn’t quite touch him. “Hello,” Luka said.

“Hi.”

“I have spent the past hours thinking of you. Missing you.”

“I... me too.” Aiden glanced at James, who’d looked up from his game to watch them with goggle eyes, and then decided he didn’t give a crap. There were no rules against the custodian lusting after the security guard.

“I am looking forward to your break,” said Luka. “I have a gift for you.” And with that enigmatic statement, he turned around and walked back to the door.

Needless to say, Aiden was especially distracted as he worked. He tugged too hard on one of the trash bags and it split, causing the contents to tumble onto the freshly cleaned floor. He almost forgot to wipe down the chairs in the breakfast area, and then he stood in one spot, dusting and redusting the same short length of wooden counter.

He took his break a little early.

As usual, Luka was there almost immediately, filling the little break room with his presence. He didn't have coffee or food for Aiden; instead he handed over a white plastic bag. It was kind of heavy.

Aiden opened the bag and pulled out a stack of paperbacks. *Gulliver's Travels*, *Huckleberry Finn*—they were the books on the club's agenda. He looked at Luka quizzically.

"I saw the list of what you plan to read. I thought you might like to have your own copies so you can mark them up."

"But... these are *new* books."

"You would not want someone else's notes."

Aiden did some quick adding in his head. "These cost you over sixty bucks."

"This is how I wish to spend my money. It would please me immensely to think that I helped add to your enjoyment of these books."

"I, uh...." Aiden was not used to receiving gifts.

Luka moved closer, gently taking the books and setting them on the table before turning to cup Aiden's face in his hands. "I do not want to frighten you. But you must know that I am very serious about you. I have not... it has been so very long since I felt this way for anyone. And I hope that perhaps you are very serious about me."

Aiden tried to speak, couldn't quite manage it, and instead delivered a muted grunt.

"I know that you must be frustrated over my evasions, Aiden. I do not wish to keep secrets from you, truly. But there are things... well, let us say my truths are not to be shared lightly."

"Okay."

Luka smiled slightly and leaned his body against Aiden's. "Give us time, please. I think we hold promise together. Let us see if that promise is kept. If so, I will tell you everything and then... oh, Aiden, I hope then your feelings for me will outweigh your horror and disgust." He gave a small, sad laugh. "It will be a gamble for me, you see, and I am too greedy for you to risk losing you yet. Please forgive me."

Aiden couldn't imagine being horrified or disgusted by this man. What kind of skeletons did Luka have in his closet, and how could they be worse

than Aiden's all-too-uncloseted demons? He decided not to ask—he wouldn't get answers anyway—and instead wrapped his arms around Luka and sighed. "Gambling's one vice I never picked up."

There was a blowjob after that. It was better than the others because this time not only could Aiden feel Luka's mouth around his cock, but he could also clearly picture what Luka looked like under the guard uniform, and Aiden knew the exact sounds Luka made while he was being fucked through the mattress.

And after the sex, during the time that remained for Aiden's break, they sat squished next to one another and tried to decide where Aiden would visit first if money—and parole restrictions—were no object. They didn't reach a choice before the break was over, but that was okay. They had lots of time to discuss it later.

Chapter Eight

AIDEN had spent a good chunk of his life watching time crawl by. He'd waited until he could have the next drink. He'd marked the minutes during mandated counseling sessions and marked the days during his incarceration. There were times in which an hour seemed to last an eternity.

Not now.

Now the days flew by as he worked, read, exercised, spent time with his lover. Mondays were especially fleeting, with the lively book club meetings followed by outings with Luka, and a sweaty romp together to wrap the night up. They would fall asleep in Aiden's bed, but Luka was always gone when Aiden awoke.

Aiden grew to know Luka better and better, memorizing the gestures he made when he spoke, the sound of his rich laughter, the taste of his salty skin. They accumulated shared memories and private jokes. Aiden learned the comfort of silence in the company of someone he trusted.

And one afternoon Aiden looked at himself in the mirror and admitted the truth: he had fallen for Luka Gabor. Didn't matter that Luka's secrets were still unrevealed. For the first time in his life, Aiden loved someone.

The monster didn't go away. Aiden wasn't stupid—he knew it would always be there. But it shrank, grew quieter, and now its voice was drowned out by others. Entire days passed without Aiden once thinking about booze, and even when he did think about having a drink, he was able to push the urge away fairly easily.

He grew a little more confident as well. The other members of the book club really listened to what he had to say. When his turn came to lead a discussion, he was scared shitless, but then the two hours sped by in lively debate and Mickey gave him a little hug before she left. The entire club grew used to seeing Luka's Fiat at the curb, and they'd wave at him waiting patiently for Aiden. They insisted that Aiden bring him some of the leftover

treats, although of course Aiden ended up eating them himself. He finally felt like he *belonged*.

He bought a cheap laptop and registered for two online classes at the community college. The classes would begin in the spring: Ancient History and Intro to Psych. His boss gave him permission to use the Internet at the motel and then announced that he'd be giving Aiden a dollar-an-hour raise.

Frank recovered but retired, and Luka was given the Snooze-Inn as his permanent assignment.

Ms. Simmons was thrilled with Aiden's progress. She liked to remind him that his struggles weren't over, but they both agreed that the path had grown a lot less steep.

The time arrived to choose a new list of books to read. Aiden conferred extensively with Luka before coming up with his own suggestions and then was delighted when the group voted in two of his books—*The Great Gatsby* and *Maurice*. Luka bought him brand-new copies right away.

AIDEN was down on all fours, cleaning up the mess in the breakfast area storage cupboard, when he heard footsteps behind him. He looked back over his shoulder to find Luka leering at him. "Lovely view," Luka said.

Aiden wagged his ass a little. "You know, I'm not averse to bottoming every now and then."

"And tonight is only Wednesday. You are wicked."

With an evil laugh, Aiden waved his rump again. Then he turned his attention back to the cupboard. "Gonna have to tell the boss to get some mousetraps. Little shits got in here and chewed up the packets of sugar and creamer."

"I suppose rodents don't care for their coffee black."

Aiden snorted. Luka could be really funny sometimes, but often his attempts at joking were endearingly dorky. That was one of the things Aiden liked about him—that the guy who was normally so smooth and self-possessed and dignified could have the sense of humor of a twelve-year-old. Luka was ticklish too; Aiden had delightedly discovered that recently. Yeah, Aiden had it bad.

“Did you begin reading *The Grapes of Wrath* today?”

“Not really. I got a couple pages in, but then I started feeling a little too Tom Joad-ish and decided to tackle it later.”

“Tom Joad survived all the horrors life could give him and came to stand for what was right. He was a strong man.”

“Yeah, well, so far he’s just a parolee who’s way down on his luck.” Aiden used a rag to sweep mouse droppings and sugar crystals into a dustpan.

“Are you down on your luck, Aiden?”

He was on his hands and knees, wearing an ugly green uniform, cleaning up rodent shit. His back was sore from his sofa-bed mattress, and he needed new shoes but couldn’t quite afford them. His PO was still pressuring him to get some counseling to help deal with his many issues. He looked back at Luka. “Not anymore. My luck changed the day I met you.”

Luka’s answering smile was radiant.

After that, Luka began his nightly rounds. Aiden finished cleaning the cupboard and tidied up the rest of the breakfast area, making sure everything was crumb- and grease-free for the morning and all the trash baskets were empty and freshly lined. He tackled the bathrooms next, first the ladies’ and then the men’s. Scrubbing toilets wasn’t exactly his favorite chore, but he’d survived worse. Hell, Tom Joad would have been grateful for the chance to earn money cleaning piss and pubic hairs off tile.

With the porcelain sparkling, the rolls of TP and stacks of paper towels all restocked, Aiden considered what to do next. He didn’t have much time left before his break, which was a thought to put a smile on his face. It occurred to him that maybe the motel had dealt with mouse infestations before, so he decided to dig through the storeroom to see whether there were any traps. That ended up taking longer than he expected—a truckload of supplies had recently arrived, and the shelves were packed—but he made a triumphant noise when at last he discovered a bundle of the wooden traps with the cheese-scented trigger and the big red V on the base. At least they weren’t the glue kind, like they’d had in some of the places he’d been locked up; those types made him feel sorry for the mice. He would set these traps in the cabinet and then go enjoy his break.

At the same moment Aiden entered the lobby from the hallway, a man walked in through the front door. It wasn't unusual for guests to check in to the motel in the middle of the night—weary drivers with eyes too blurry to see the road any longer, travelers arriving on delayed flights, businessmen or tourists who'd stayed out until the bars closed and were looking for someplace to lay their sodden heads. But those guests carried luggage of some kind; all this man had was a dirty gray backpack hanging on one shoulder.

But that wasn't what made Aiden's heart start to race. This guy was jumpy, eyes too wide, his face flushed and sweaty despite the cool night air. He was coming down off some kind of high. And more than that—Aiden recognized the tense set of the man's body, the way his gaze darted here and there. Aiden had seen that exact posture in fellow prisoners just before they jumped someone. He'd felt it himself right before busting out the window of a car or store or house.

James should have noticed and pushed the panic button that was located near his computer. The button would alert Luka and the cops. But James had barely glanced up as the man entered, and then his attention was back on his goddamn phone. Aiden's own phone was in the break room in his lunch bag; his boss had repeatedly informed him that he was not supposed to carry it while on duty. Besides, nobody ever called him.

"I need a room," the man said loudly, looking back and forth between James and Aiden, walking up close to the desk.

James still didn't look up. "Credit card and ID, please."

Aiden wanted to back away, to make a run down the hallway for his phone, but the man was looking right at him as he fumbled in his jacket pocket. Goddammit! Why wouldn't James fucking *look*?

Aiden started to say something but shut his mouth with a snap. The guy looked half freaked out already—Aiden didn't want to startle him. Especially now that he was pulling a gun out of his pocket. Wasn't a very big gun, just a little black semiautomatic. Which was plenty of weapon to do a whole lot of damage.

"Hey, look," Aiden began.

"Shut the fuck up!" the man screamed, little flecks of spit flying from his lips.

Finally James did look up, but instead of reaching for the panic button, he froze, mouth gaping open. With the gun pointing at Aiden, the robber turned his head to bark at James. “Give me the money. Now!”

The thing was, there wasn’t much money. Almost all the guests paid with credit cards. A few paid with cash—mostly foreigners—but the bills were fed into a safe that the manager emptied when he left for the day. The nearby Denny’s or any of the late-night fast-food places would have yielded a bigger haul. Any thief with half a brain knew that. The fact that this guy was here in the Snooze-Inn meant he was either stupid or desperate, and neither of those would be good news for Aiden and James.

Keeping his voice as soft and even as possible, Aiden said, “Look, man. He’s only got a few bucks back there. Why don’t you—”

“Shut up!” The gun waved wildly, and James made a sort of gurgling noise. All Aiden could do was clutch the box of mousetraps and wish it were a grenade. “Money! Now!” the robber screeched.

James still seemed unable to move. His face had gone deathly white, and Aiden would have been willing to bet that he’d pissed himself. The robber roared with anger, pointed the gun over James’s head, and pulled the trigger. The shot was deafening, but the bullet passed harmlessly into the wall.

Aiden could tell the moment the robber realized his mistake. Even with his brain half-fried, it must have occurred to him that the motel was full of people who were likely to hear a gunshot and either call the cops or come running to the lobby to see what the hell was going on. But he couldn’t quite let go of the notion that he was going to leave with money in his pocket, so he lowered the barrel until the gun was pointing directly at James’s terrified face.

Aiden didn’t intend to be a hero. But almost as if it were a premonition, he could clearly picture the clerk’s big, lumpy body an inert mass on the floor, with brains and blood splattered all over the walls and desk and that ugly landscape painting. Aiden dropped the box of mousetraps and leapt at the robber.

He felt the bullet a split second before he heard the gunshot. The missile went tearing through his upper thigh, and as he shouted and collapsed, all he could think was that he was thankful the guy’s aim hadn’t been a few inches upward and to the right. The pain wasn’t too bad yet—he

knew it would get worse—but hot blood was pooling beneath him on the floor he'd just mopped, goddammit, and it was very possible that he'd been hit in an important artery.

Which probably didn't matter anyway, because now the robber was stomping across the floor to loom over him. Aiden twisted slightly so he could look the man in the eyes. "You're gonna do a lot more time for felony murder than for assault and attempted robbery, dude. Could end up with life. Quit while you can."

For a moment, it appeared as if the man might actually be considering Aiden's words. He blinked a few times and the gun wobbled. Then he shook his shoulders the way he might shake off a fly and took aim at Aiden's face.

He was going to die in the lobby of the Snooze-Inn. Not what he'd planned. Better than OD'ing maybe—he'd seen that, and it wasn't pretty—and better than cirrhosis or AIDS or hepatitis. Better than fading away on a narrow prison hospital bed and ending up buried in an unmarked grave, stuck forever behind barbwire-topped walls. But he'd finally found a reason to live, dammit, and he wasn't even going to learn Luka's big secret. Or tell Luka he loved him.

"I'm sorry," Aiden said. Not to the man who was about to kill him, of course, but to Luka. To Ms. Simmons. To Mickey and the rest of the book club members. And now he'd never know exactly what happened to Tom Joad, and the registration money he'd paid to the community college would go to waste.

The robber hesitated just a second, frowning.

And then there was a terrible roar. It sounded like something a lion might make before it ate you up. Aiden and the robber both turned their attention in the direction of the front door.

Something was running at them.

Its shape was human, but its face was not. Its eyes were huge and glowing like lanterns, and its too-large mouth was wide open, revealing very long, very sharp white fangs.

It was wearing a blue security guard uniform.

The robber swung his arm up and around. The gun rang out—once, twice, three times—and each time, the creature's body jerked back as it was

hit. A dark stain appeared on its chest, spreading fast. But it kept on running in their direction.

Aiden tried to scramble to his feet, but the floor was slippery with his blood and his leg wouldn't hold him. He fell onto his back, screaming at the fresh pain in his leg.

The robber pulled the trigger one more time. The creature jerked and shrieked and almost collapsed, but then it seemed to collect itself, and before the gunman could take aim again, it jumped at him. They both fell and landed almost on top of Aiden.

The gun went off again.

And the creature was on top of the robber, its fangs glistening. Aiden was sure it was going to rip the man's throat out. But instead, it seized the guy's head and twisted viciously. Aiden didn't know whether he really heard the neck snap or just imagined it, but in any case the robber instantly went limp. His eyes were still open, but he was clearly very dead.

The creature climbed off the robber and turned its attention to Aiden, who, for the second time in less than a minute, prepared himself to be very dead as well.

But the creature's face sort of *shifted*—it reminded Aiden of one of those lenticular images that could look like two things at once—and then it was Luka falling to his knees beside him, handsome face drawn with worry.

“Aiden! Oh no! How badly hurt are you, my love?”

Aiden could see the wet bloodstain on Luka's uniform and the small holes that had been made in his shirt. But he couldn't wrap his mind around any of it—nothing made sense.

“He shot you,” Aiden said. His voice sounded strange to his own ears.

Luka didn't even look down at himself. “It is nothing. But you....”

“’Tis a scratch. Nothing but a flesh wound,” Aiden cackled, causing Luka to look twice as concerned. Possibly he wasn't familiar with *Monty Python*.

“I can hear the sirens,” Luka said. “Help is coming. Please, do not move. It makes the bleeding worse.” And he pressed his hand firmly to the bullet hole in Aiden's leg, which hurt like hell.

Aiden was dimly aware of James's voice in the background, babbling hysterically into a phone. And there was a corpse inches away from him, its blank eyes staring up at the ceiling. But there was Luka, touching him, one hand pressing at the wound and the other gently stroking Aiden's face. "You were brave, were you not?" said Luka quietly. "So strong."

"But... he shot you. I saw. And you were... what *were* you?"

Now Luka looked as if he might cry. "It is my secret. It is what I am—a monster."

Aiden tried to shake his head but didn't have the strength. Everything seemed sort of fuzzy and far away. He wondered if shock or blood loss was to blame. "But you're not the monster. I'm the one with the monster. It's in here." He attempted to point to his head but couldn't quite manage to lift his arm.

"Stay still, Aiden. The ambulance is nearly here."

Yeah, there were sirens. Loud ones. And noisy voices in the parking lot, plus murmurs and whispers from the direction of the elevators. But there were things Aiden wanted to know, and things he needed to say. Problem was, he couldn't quite grasp them. "Don't care what Homer thinks, family should outweigh honor. Wish you were my family. Not like Tom Joad—they all die, I bet. Don't even need to read it to know. Oh, but next week was my turn for cookies. Was gonna get good ones. Bakery. Was gonna let you top and I don't... don't do that.... Want to, but I don't trust...." The words tangled in his mouth and he grew silent.

Luka looked wounded. Well, he should look wounded—he'd been shot. No, Aiden had been shot. Or maybe James. Someone had been shot.

And then there were lots of men in blue, and angry police radios squawking, and people were yelling. God, he hadn't fucked up again, had he? He'd been trying so hard and now they were going to lock him up for good.

"The road is too hard," he said. And then he blacked out.

Chapter Nine

THERE were flowers on a shelf near the window—a big arrangement from the book club and a smaller one with a “Get Well Soon!” balloon from the Snooze-Inn management. And there was a big stack of books at his bedside. The book club had sent those too, each person in the club sending him one of their favorite novels. He hadn’t started on them yet because he was still a little too woozy from the general exhaustion of recovery and from the pain. Not wanting to acquire a new monster, he’d been refusing all narcotic pain relievers.

When Ms. Simmons came through the door, she was holding flowers too—yellow and orange ones in a basket. She set them down near the others and then frowned at him. “You look like shit, Aiden.”

“Thanks. And here I was thinking the johnny was kind of my look.”

“Some might appreciate the view if you were standing up.”

He sighed. “Doc says not ’til tomorrow, and then I have to get physical therapy.”

She nodded and pulled a chair closer to his bedside. “How *are* you feeling, honey?”

When had he graduated to honey? He almost smiled. “My leg hurts like hell and I’m bored and I fucking hate hospitals. You finally fall asleep and they come wake you up in the middle of the night. The food’s not much better than in prison.” It was his turn to sigh. “I want to go home.”

“It’s only been three days. Give it a few more.”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s really weighing on you?”

“I’m not gonna be able to go back to work for a while. I don’t have insurance. I’m gonna—”

“Aiden! Don’t you realize what you’ve done? You’re a hero.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t do anything but get myself shot.”

“You did a lot more than that, honey. Your memory might be a little addled, but that motel clerk was really damn clear: perp came in, you tried to talk him down, and when the perp was going to shoot the clerk, you threw yourself at him. Sounds like a hero to me.”

“Hmm.” The cops had already told him what James said, back when he’d finally been in good enough shape to give his statement. Felt a little weird to have the police treating him sympathetically for a change—even respectfully.

“I talked to your boss. Worker’s comp is going to cover all your medical expenses, and the motel is going to continue sending you a paycheck until you’re back on your feet. And when you are back on your feet, you’ve got a promotion waiting for you. Desk clerk. Pays more and the hours are much better.”

“I like the night shift,” he mumbled, looking at the framed print hanging on the wall behind her. It was a seascape and was probably supposed to be peaceful and relaxing, but he thought it was ugly—and kind of a cruel taunt for patients who were stuck inside.

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “Out with it, Aiden Finn.”

Still with the honesty requirement. “Luka,” he said miserably.

He’d started asking about Luka as soon as he regained consciousness. At first the doctors and nurses hadn’t answered, but one of the cops told him that the security guard was unhurt and had backed up James’s story. The robber was dead, though. Broke his neck when the guard fell on him.

Aiden was relieved to know that Luka was okay, but he was confused. He might have hallucinated the... the fangs and shit, but he *knew* he’d seen those bullets hit Luka’s body. Four of them at least. And he’d seen the blood and the holes in Luka’s shirt, and then Luka had said something about his secret, about being a monster.

And he hadn’t come to visit Aiden in the hospital. Hadn’t even sent fucking flowers.

Ms. Simmons looked at him for a long time. “What’s going to happen to you if you two are over with?”

It’ll destroy me. But Aiden didn’t say it. He stared at the seascape instead. He bet it would be nice to live near the ocean. Somewhere cold and

isolated. No people. He didn't want people. He wasn't a people person.

"You can do this," Ms. Simmons said. "You can handle it. Let me tell you, honey, people all over the world—people much weaker than you—their romances fail all the time. And then they pick themselves up and keep on moving."

"I can't even fucking walk!" he snapped and then was sorry. He was always goddamn sorry.

She didn't even flinch but just kept looking at him. "Maybe he's freaked over the hospital. Lots of folks are."

"He used pressure from his hand to slow the bleeding in my leg. I don't think he's the fainting flower type."

"That was in the heat of the moment, with adrenaline flowing. In the morning light, sometimes it's harder to move yourself forward."

Morning light. He'd never seen Luka in the morning light—never seen him during the day at all. Never seen him eat or drink anything... except Aiden's body fluids. Sweat. Come. Blood. Knew nothing about his background except that he knew an awful lot about the world and about history. Luka was a lot stronger than he looked, wasn't he? He'd broken that robber's neck with his bare hands.

Oh, fuck. Luka Gabor was a fucking *vampire*?

That wasn't possible. Vampires didn't exist any more than werewolves and ghosts and ogres and goddamn unicorns.

Fangs. Aiden had seen fangs.

"Are you all right, Aiden? You look like you're going to puke."

"I... my leg's really hurting. Sorry."

"It's fine." She stood. "You need your rest."

"I guess."

She pulled an object out of her purse and set it on his bed table. His phone. She must have retrieved it from the motel break room. "Call me tomorrow. Let me know how you're doing."

"Okay. Thanks for the flowers, Ms. Simmons. And for coming to see me."

"Gotta keep an eye on you, don't I? Make sure you're staying straight." In a softer voice, one he'd rarely heard from her, she added,

“You’re gonna be okay, honey. You really are.”

It was nice that she believed in him, because he was full of doubts.

IT TOOK two weeks before he could return to work. He spent a lot of that time doing physical therapy, reading, and, once he decided to get Internet access at his apartment, watching online porn.

He was hesitant to return to the book club, but Mickey called twice and Richard once, and they told him they’d been waiting for him. When he went back to the Steinbeck Meeting Room, he discovered they really had waited. They’d suspended the meetings in his absence so that he wouldn’t be behind in the discussion. That was one of the sweetest things anyone had ever done for him. His throat got kind of thick and he couldn’t talk for a few minutes.

Yeah, some tough guy.

Day clerk wasn’t a bad job, he decided by the end of his first shift. He worked with that lady he’d seen before, Trina, and she turned out to be funny and smart. She had a wife and a couple of kids, and her only fault was a tendency to go on and on about golf. He could live with that.

He kind of liked dealing with the guests, who’d actually look him in the eye and speak to him now that he wasn’t in a custodian’s uniform. It turned out daytimes were pretty busy, with people checking in and out, people calling for reservations, and guests stopping by or calling down with various requests.

He heard from Trina that Luka was still working nights as a security guard. Aiden wasn’t sure whether he was pleased or upset with that news. Luka had still made no attempt to contact him.

Aiden’s monster wasn’t gone. Sometimes it still whispered at him, and when the whispering got too loud, Aiden attended a meeting. In a weird way, getting shot helped, because he kept telling the monster that if he could make it through a serious gunshot wound without morphine, he could damned well make it through a regular day without a drink.

He was dreading the upcoming holidays—he’d always hated them—but looking forward to starting classes in the spring.

One evening when he'd had the day off and was feeling desperate, he gathered some cash and took the bus to a slightly better part of town, where a tattoo parlor was doing a hopping business with drunken college kids.

"What'll it be?" asked the tattoo artist, trying unsuccessfully to hide a frown over Aiden's amateur ink.

Aiden told her.

Ninety minutes later he was sporting a new illustration on the inside of his right forearm: a rocky road rising up a steep hill, where shadowy threats lurked behind trees. A figure was trudging up that road with his head held high. There was a sign beside the road. *I will survive*, it said. Possibly clichéd for a queer guy, but sometimes he really needed a reminder.

"Nice job," Aiden said to the artist. "Thanks."

She smiled at him. "You know what else is cool to remember? Whatever crap you've been through, you're still here. Helps me." She pulled up her T-shirt to reveal a long scar where her right breast had been. Someone had tattooed the scar, turning it into a train track with a smiling, puffing little train. "It's the little engine that could."

"I think I can," Aiden said, smiling back.

"I *know* I can."

IT WAS Thanksgiving and Aiden was pacing his stupid apartment. He'd received dinner invitations from three of the book club members, which had really warmed his heart. But he'd never been to a traditional Thanksgiving dinner and wasn't sure he could avoid acting like an idiot, so he'd politely declined them all. He'd eaten a turkey TV dinner instead. Afterward he'd tried to settle down to read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but the book did nothing at all to lighten his mood, and he gave it up. Surfing the Internet didn't help either. All the porn seemed trite, boring, and mechanical, the fucking and sucking about as sexy as watching *This Old House*.

He needed a drink.

"Fuck this," he said out loud. Then he punched a hole in his wall.

He didn't bother to bandage his bloodied knuckles. He pulled on his shoes and threw on his jacket and stomped out into the night. The streets

were empty; apparently even gangsters spent Thanksgiving with their families. That was too bad, actually. He had nobody to glower at.

He clomped all the way to the Snooze-Inn Motel, where the skinny college kid who used to work with Trina was sitting behind the desk. Aiden heard that after the robbery James quit and moved back to South Dakota. Aiden wasn't sure what College Kid had done to earn the demotion to night shift, but he couldn't say he was sorry about it.

The kid, however, glared daggers at him. "What do *you* want?"

"Where's Luka?"

"Who?"

"The security guard. The cute one."

The kid sneered and opened his mouth to say something, but then looked at the expression on Aiden's face and thought better of it. Aiden was not in the mood for snotty homophobia.

"I don't know," the kid said, sulking.

But then someone turned the corner from the hallway, caught sight of Aiden, and came to a screeching halt. "Aiden?" Luka whispered.

Aiden looked at him and took a deep breath. "It's time for your break, Luka."

"I do not get a break."

"You do tonight." Aiden turned back to the night clerk. "If armed bandits come in, for Christ's sake hit the fucking panic button." Then he marched over, grabbed Luka by the arm, and dragged him down to the break room.

For what felt like several minutes, the two of them just stood there, staring at each other in silence. Aiden was the first to speak. "What the *fuck*, Luka?"

Luka winced. "I am sorry. I told you that it was a terrible secret and that I was afraid—"

"That's not what I mean."

Now Luka just looked puzzled. "Then what do you mean?"

"Why didn't you come visit me in the hospital?"

"Visiting hours are only during the day. I tried once to come at night, but they would not let me see you."

“I’ve been out for over a month. But still not a word. You didn’t even call. Why not?”

“I thought... I did not know if you wanted anything to do with me anymore, now that you know what I am. I feared if I came to you that you would reject me. I cannot....” Luka’s voice broke and he visibly made an attempt to get himself under control. “It has been so long, you see. I have been so alone. And when people I cared for have seen what I am, they have turned away. They have all turned away, Aiden.”

In his calmest, most rational voice, Aiden asked, “Luka, are you a vampire?” Yeah, that didn’t sound insane.

Luka bit his lip and looked away. Then, with a resigned sigh, he turned his gaze to Aiden again and... and his face did that thing. The lenticular thing. Just for a moment, but when it was done, the planes of his bones had changed. His eyes were large, alien, glowing. And his wide, wide mouth was full of pointed teeth.

“Fuck.” Aiden’s legs felt weak. He clutched the nearest chair for support.

“I—” Luka began. Then he sort of twitched and his face switched back to fully human. “It is easier to talk without the fangs,” he explained.

“I bet it would be.”

“I was just a man once. A very long time ago.”

“Like... how long?” asked Aiden, although he had an inkling of the answer.

“My king’s name was Ur-Nammu.”

“Never heard of him. What was he king of?”

“Sumeria.” Luka gave a weak smile. “When I was born, the great pyramids had already been built. But your Homer with his *Iliad*—he did not exist for another thousand years.”

“Holy crap.” This time, Aiden really did have to sit down. Which was a reasonable response to learning your former lover was four thousand fucking years old.

Luka pulled up a chair and sat as well, but not too close. He looked slightly afraid of Aiden, which was ridiculous. “I was born human. I was a farmer, the son of a farmer. Nothing special.”

“And your name wasn’t Luka Gabor.”

“No. I was Enmebaragisi. But I have called myself Luka for a long time now. It is easier to pronounce, I think.”

Aiden couldn’t argue with that. Plus, he’d bet you’d never find personalized coffee mugs and key chains with Luka’s real name. “How did you become....”

“A monster? I became ill. My teeth were infected, you see. It happened quite often in those times. The agony was... indescribable. And there was very little the doctors could do—rags dipped in herbs, that sort of thing. I was going to die. And I was angry about it because I was young and I had done so little with my life. I had never even fallen in love. I went to the temple and I sacrificed a goat—it sounds barbaric, I know, but we did that then—and I begged the gods to allow me more life.”

Aiden could almost picture the scene. “What happened?”

“The gods have a sense of humor, do they not? The next night I could not sleep for the pain. I went stumbling outside into the dark. I meant to cast myself into the river and drown. But I encountered a man who spoke in a strange accent. He grabbed my hand, drew me to him. I thought he was very strong, but then I was very weak. And I thought he meant to rob me, which would have been foolish, because I had nothing to steal. But he pulled me close into an embrace and then... then he bit me. Here.” He rubbed his neck, right where someone might feel for a pulse.

“And?”

A long, dry sigh was the answer. “And when I woke up, I had become something else.”

“Did this other vampire sort of, show you the ropes?”

“He was gone. I do not know if he realized that he had made me. I do not know *how* he made me. Usually if a vampire sucks the life from a person, that person simply dies. But I did not and I do not know why. The whim of the gods. In all my years, I have met only a dozen of my kind. We are rarities. Flukes.”

Unexpectedly, Aiden was filled with sorrow for Luka. Aiden had felt alone in the world for three decades. How would it feel to be like that for four fucking millennia? “So then... what’s the deal? Are the stories about vampires true?”

“Some of them.” He had the ghost of a smile. “Garlic, holy water, and crosses do not bother me. I cannot turn into a bat or a wolf or any other creature. I cannot place people into thrall or disappear into wisps of smoke. I do not sleep in a coffin.”

“But you can’t go out in the sun.”

“If I do, I begin to burn at once. It becomes terrible after only a few seconds—my skin blackens and—”

“Okay. I get it.” Aiden shuddered. “What about the wooden stake thing?”

“I do not know. I have tried very hard not to discover the truth of that. And I truly cannot enter a person’s home without an invitation.”

“And you drink blood.”

Luka sighed. “Yes. If I do not, the hunger becomes... all-consuming.”

“Like an addiction.”

“I suppose so. When I first became what I am, I... I killed. I would hide like an animal until the hunger was too much, and then I would murder. I did this many times.” He waited for a reaction.

Aiden wasn’t sure how he felt. Luka had been a serial killer centuries before Rome was founded. That was... weird. “You don’t kill now?” he asked carefully.

“No. Not for a very long time. I learned to control it. I need only a small amount, you see, as long as I eat often. I can take just a few swallows and my hunger will abate for a night or two. The trick is to find a source. Animal blood does not suffice. But... I learned that certain other human fluids do. Semen. Sweat.”

“Piss?”

Luka made such a horrible face that under other circumstances, Aiden might have laughed. “No. Not that. But I stopped killing. That man with the gun—he was the first person I murdered in a great many centuries.”

“So every time you gave me head, you were feeding off me.”

“Yes. I enjoyed giving you pleasure as well, but I received... sustenance.”

“And when we fucked? What did you get out of that?”

“The same sort of enjoyment that you did. I may crave blood, but I have other appetites as well. Sex. Companionship.” He looked away and whispered, “Love.”

Aiden said nothing. This was a lot of information to absorb, and it wasn't exactly the kind of stuff his life had prepared him for.

After a while, Luka looked back at him. “Are you disgusted? Furious?” For an ancient supernatural creature, he looked awfully vulnerable.

“No,” Aiden answered. “Just confused. Why the hell would a vampire work as a security guard?”

“It is a job I can perform at night. I still need money, Aiden, for rent and clothing and gasoline and such. And I need... ways to spend my time. A purpose, even if it is a small one.”

Aiden could understand that much, at least. “So I was just handy, huh? A convenient source of dinner?”

“No!” Luka stood very fast and closed the space between them before sinking to his knees in front of Aiden and grasping the arms of Aiden's chair. Aiden wasn't at all frightened. “I have seen so many people, Aiden, and I think I have become a good judge of character. You are very handsome—I saw that at once—but it was your strength that drew me. And when I came to know you, your intelligence. You are as much a rarity as I, but you are no monster. You are special.”

There was a war inside Aiden. Part of him scoffed at Luka's words. Bullshit, that part said. Aiden was nothing special at all and never would be. On a very good day, he might manage not to be scum, but that was all.

But the other part of Aiden... it wanted to believe. It yearned for Luka's words to be true, for the love he saw shining in Luka's eyes to be real.

“Why did you do it, Luka? Why'd you throw yourself at that robber? You must have known he'd shoot you.”

“But I knew I would survive. I have been shot before. My body heals extremely quickly.”

“It still hurts, though.”

“Not as much as seeing... the man I love die.”

“The man you love,” Aiden echoed.

“Yes.” Luka stood again, turned to face the wall. “I know you could not... could not feel the same way for something like me. I have always known that. But I had hoped you might tolerate me. Perhaps even care for me a little.” So quietly that Aiden barely heard it, Luka added, “Please.”

As Aiden remained seated and silent, Luka’s shoulders slumped and he seemed to shrink into himself. Aiden’s heart broke. Which was when Aiden realized he still loved Luka, no matter what he was. And he also realized he had the power to bring happiness to this astounding person—and there was nothing he would rather do.

Aiden rose to his feet, walked a few steps, and pressed himself to Luka’s back. He wrapped his arms around Luka’s torso and rubbed his face against the soft black hair. They fit together so damned perfectly.

Luka sighed and melted back against him. “Aiden?”

“You’d think someone as old as you would be able to figure out when someone’s in love with him.”

That time, Luka made a sound that sounded suspiciously like a sob. He squirmed around until they were face-to-face, and Aiden bent his head down a little so their foreheads rested together. “If you can live with an alcoholic ex-con with a really unsavory past, I think I can live with a Sumerian creature of the night.”

Luka laughed and Aiden joined him. Their voices sounded beautiful together.

They didn’t kiss, not yet. They simply held each other. Supported each other.

“How’s this gonna work, Luka? I mean, if we’re... long-term... I’m gonna age and you’re not, and someday—”

“Stop. These are obstacles, I admit. But if we have overcome so much already, I believe we will overcome these as well. We do not need to face them all tonight.”

“Okay.” Aiden was thinking that he needed an addition to his newest tattoo—another man walking the same road, hand in hand with the first. They would help each other over obstructions. And when one man’s energy and hope flagged, the other would tug him along.

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Chapter Ten

“THIS doesn’t look much like a vampire’s lair,” Aiden said. It didn’t. It was a neat little bungalow, gray on the outside, clean and sparsely furnished inside. “My place looks way more like a vampire lair, actually. Or, well, some kind of lair.”

Luka looked amused. “Would you prefer that I lived in a crypt?”

“Not really. I bet a house is a lot more comfortable.”

“It is. To be truthful, I have spent many years living in places that humans would not find very habitable. But then indoor plumbing and electricity and central heat were invented. I do not need any of those things, but I do appreciate a hot bath and a home that is not frigid in winter.”

“Yeah, okay.” Aiden looked around the living room a little more carefully. There wasn’t much in it aside from a comfy-looking couch, an armchair, and a shelf packed full of books. No personal knickknacks. Certainly nothing to suggest that an ancient supernatural creature made his home here. “How do you afford it?”

“It was not especially expensive—it was a foreclosure and it was in poor condition. I had to do some work on it, but I did not mind. I have daytime hours to kill. And also I have a little money saved. Not much, but a bit. I have been much poorer at times.” He grinned. “And occasionally I have been much richer. Please, sit. I was not... I was not expecting you. I am afraid I have no food or drink to offer you.”

“I didn’t come over here so you could feed me, Luka.” Aiden paused for a moment and then smiled. “Although I might not mind feeding you.”

Luka’s eyes went round and he licked his lips. “I want you to know... maybe it is silly... but in the past weeks, I have not been feeding from anyone else.”

During the drive to Luka’s house, it had occurred to Aiden to wonder about this very issue, and he was ridiculously relieved at Luka’s words.

Luka hadn't owed him faithfulness, of course. They'd never made any promises to one another. And the guy had to eat. But still, Aiden was pleased. "How have you been eating, then?"

"Not far from your apartment, there is a blood bank. I am skilled at picking locks. A few pints last me quite long time."

"So—cold blood in plastic? Sounds yummy." Aiden was still standing, feeling a little awkward. He didn't often visit other people's homes, and this... this thing with Luka still felt fragile. It felt *right*, though. He wanted it to work—more than he'd ever wanted anything in his entire life.

And suddenly he was crying.

It was horrible. He never cried, not in years. Certainly not in front of anyone else. And he couldn't even say why he was doing it now, when things were... a little weird... but maybe finally going his way. He couldn't stop it, though, and he just stood there in the middle of his vampire lover's living room, hot tears coursing down his face.

Luka came to him at once. Aiden tried to turn away, but Luka held him steady—he truly was strong—and wrapped his arms tightly around Aiden to keep him in place. "Why are you crying?" Luka asked. "Are you distressed? Have I done something wrong?"

Aiden laughed and sobbed at the same time. "N-no," he hiccupped. "It's not... God, I d-don't know... I just don't want to fuck this up. Please, Luka. Don't let me fuck this up."

"You will make mistakes. So will I." Luka gave a soft chuckle, and the vibrations rumbled against Aiden's chest. "Between us we have four thousand and thirty years of solitude. It may take some time before we are used to being... not alone. But we will be not-alone together, and we will forgive one another's mistakes."

Aiden's crying turned to laughter for real. He had recently learned that he was possibly more of a people person than he'd thought, and now he concluded that he was most definitely a vampire person.

Luka began to lick at Aiden's tears. Delicately, like a cat. "Do you mind? Even your tears can sustain me, and you taste so exquisitely good."

"I don't mind." In fact, there was something goddamn hot about knowing that he was feeding his lover, making him stronger. Aiden's cock filled, and as Luka continued to lap at him, they pressed their groins

together firmly. Aiden remembered that he'd never had the chance to bottom for Luka—something he definitely wanted to do. And he realized that condoms had never been necessary between them and need never be used again.

Something told him that he and Luka were going to be very busy for a long time.

“I’m gonna ask for a transfer back to nights. Make that asshole college kid really happy, I bet.” Aiden nuzzled happily at Luka’s neck.

Luka squeezed him tighter. “You will not mind working the night shift again?”

Now Aiden was grinning ear to ear. “Baby, I love the night shift. Best thing that ever happened to me.”

Luka kissed him and took his hand to tow him to the bedroom.

KIM FIELDING is very pleased every time someone calls her eclectic. She has migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States and currently lives in California, where she long ago ran out of bookshelf space. She's a university professor who dreams of being able to travel and write full time. She also dreams of having two perfectly behaved children, a husband who isn't obsessed with football, and a house that cleans itself. Some dreams are more easily obtained than others.

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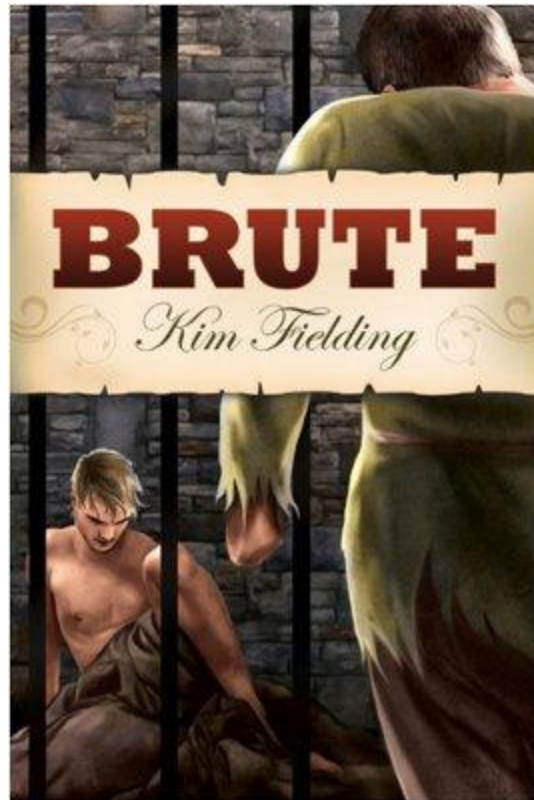
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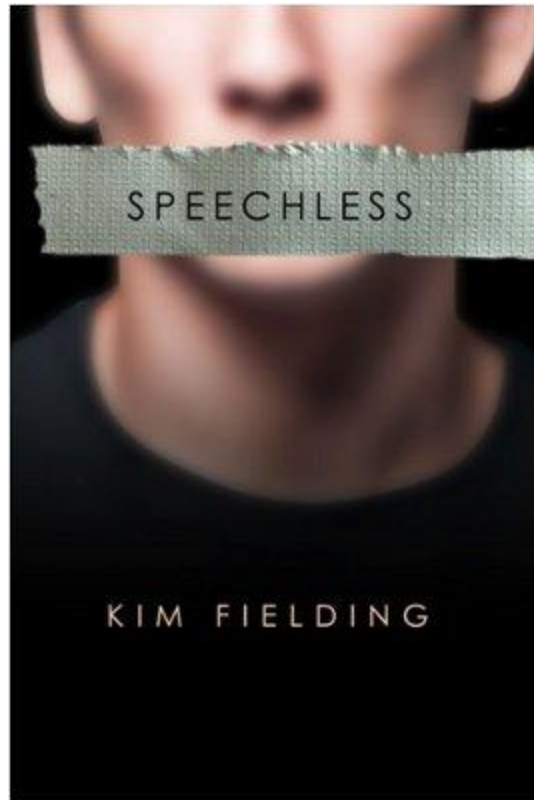
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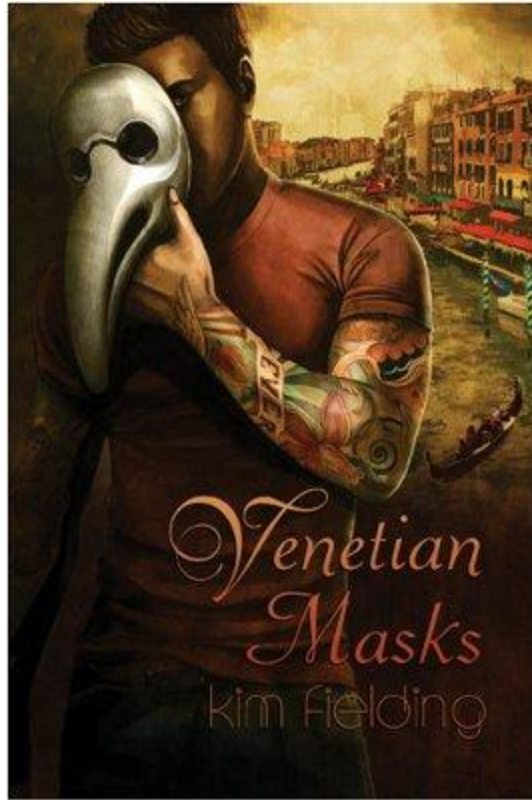
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