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Hybrids 1

ADAM

*Gale Stanley*

## Hybrids 1

### Adam

Adam is a wolf hybrid, the result of a secret military research project splicing animal DNA with human DNA to create the perfect soldier. He was never meant to see the outside world, but a freak gas explosion gives him a chance to escape. Now a hunted man, Adam trusts no one, and he expects to spend the rest of his life alone.

Journalist Chaunce "Chance" Philip Hollis III is unlucky in love and stuck in a job he hates. Then he meets Adam. It's lust at first sight, and Chance is sure he's found the perfect man. Adam is determined not to involve Chance in his life, but it's already too late. The bad guys are hot on his trail and just as determined to use Chance for bait. To save Chance, Adam will have to show his true colors and use the only weapons he has—fangs and fur.

**Genre:** Alternative (M/M or F/F), Contemporary, Paranormal, Vampires/Werewolves

**Length:** 30,769 words

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**Gale Stanley**

**EROTIC ROMANCE  
MANLOVE**



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance ManLove

ADAM

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# DEDICATION

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**ADAM**

*Hybrids 1*

**GALE STANLEY**

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# Chapter One

*“Attention! All eyes to the center of the room for Special Training.”*

“For crying out Pete!” Adam muttered at the blaring speaker, but he obeyed immediately and started walking toward the glass wall of his cell to watch the *training*. What a joke! Directly across the room, three armed guards were about to enter the cell that faced his. The glass wall slid open and the black-garbed *trainers* surrounded the prisoner, a young blond, who backed away snarling.

Adam seethed helplessly as the boy struggled to keep his hands from being cuffed. Watching somebody else being *trained* depressed Adam more than being the recipient of a beating, but he had no choice. If he didn’t obey, the boy would only get a worse beating, and Adam would end up on the receiving end as well.

At first Adam had fought the guards, too, but after being dragged out of his cell and whipped too many times to count, he’d learned to accept his lot in life and obedience had become second nature. The only way to survive this hell was to cooperate, but sometimes he wondered if surviving was really worth it.

Suddenly, the blond wrenched himself away from the guard behind him. The others moved in quickly to subdue the boy and Adam moved his lips in a silent, heartfelt plea. “Don’t fight them, Loki.”

Loki wasn’t his real name. The boy was just another number in a classified database. But Adam, who immersed himself in mythology and legends, likened the boy to the Norse god, a shape-shifter and a notorious troublemaker. Adam admired the boy’s spunk, even though it only earned him more punishment.

Loki lashed out and lunged at Gerard, the biggest one of the three guards, kicking him in the groin. The man’s eyes went wide and he sank to his knees, holding his testicles and rocking back and forth. Gerard looked like he wanted to throw up.

Adam’s lips twitched in a small, secret smile. *Good for you, Loki!*

The smile disappeared as Ford, smaller than the other guards, but just as mean, lifted his gun and pointed it at Loki. He shot at close range, and the Taser probes found their mark easily. Loki dropped to the floor and his body jerked and shuddered. Kurt, the third trainer, kicked Loki before rolling him to his back. He and Ford cuffed the boy’s wrists and yanked him roughly to

his feet. Adam could see the burns on Loki's naked body where the gun's probes had hit. Electricity, the favored method of subduing the prisoners, was effective, but non-lethal.

Their mutual misery made Adam ache for the boy. Loki had to know resistance was futile, but he never gave up. How long before the bastards beat all the spirit out of him? Adam placed a palm on the glass wall of his cell. If only he could talk to the boy and let him know that someone cared. They'd all suffered at the hands of their abusive guards, but Adam's memories of a loving mother kept him grounded. He'd only been five when she died, and now he had trouble remembering what she looked like, but the affection she'd lavished on him had left a lasting impression. Adam clung to his few memories of her ferociously.

Movement across the laboratory drew Adam's attention and he put all thoughts of his mother aside. Frustration made his heart race as he watched the boy being shoved toward the door of the cell. If only he could get Loki out of this hell. He deserved his freedom. They all did.

Two of the guards flanked Loki. Gerard, still recovering from the blond's attack, followed at a slower pace. Although the guards were all tall men, the blond towered over them, his face like a mask as the procession approached the padded bench. But looks could be deceiving.

Three feet from his fate, the blond stopped short and refused to move, his calm façade all but gone. The bastards must have withheld his sedatives to make sure he felt every stroke of the lash. Gerard caught up and tackled him from behind, trapping him in a tight hold. Adam saw it all in slow motion—Loki struggling against the guard's heavy weight, his mouth open in a silent scream as Kurt attacked with a flurry of fists to the boy's face. With his wrists shackled, and his arms pinned, Loki was helpless. A wave of nausea washed over Adam.

Finally it stopped and the three men dragged the unfortunate boy to the bench, kicking and screaming. Adam couldn't hear him, the transparency of the cell wall gave the illusion of freedom, but the barrier was just as confining and soundproof as the solid steel of the other three walls. Adam didn't need sound. Loki's bruised and swollen face told the story. Finally, the guards manhandled their captive to the whipping bench, laid him on the padded top facedown, and restrained him with his arms over his head.

Daric, the commander of the guards, and the most sadistic of the lot, stepped up, a long rattan cane in his right hand. The man was a monster

who enjoyed inflicting pain on the hybrids—Adam and Loki more than the others, but for different reasons. Daric hated Loki because the boy showed spirit and fought back. A few weeks earlier, Loki had refused to eat, and Daric had shoved the boy's face into his plate so hard, he broke Loki's nose. The break had healed quickly but it must have been painful.

Daric's features twisted into a malicious smile. He flexed the cane as he spoke to the boy, making him wait. It was all a show, as much about psychological torture as physical. Adam knew only too well that the humiliation hurt more than the flesh wounds.

Suddenly Daric brought the cane down and made contact with the victim's buttocks. The young man fought the restraints and jerked with each blow, but he couldn't escape the lash. Years of practice had given Daric a good aim. Welts formed immediately and reddened within seconds. Adam could imagine the whistling sound of the cane as it sliced through the air, finally landing on that bruised flesh. He didn't need to hear the screaming and pleading of the boy, it echoed in his memory. He'd been the recipient of Daric's expertise more than once.

Daric paused between strokes, all part of his sadistic game. One interval lasted longer than the others and Adam hoped the boy's torture was over, but Daric was only inspecting his handiwork. Once again he lifted the whip and let it fly through the air. Finally, Daric stepped back and let the cane fall to his side. He glanced around the room, his expression a warning. *Disobey and this is your fate.* Then sneering triumphantly, he looked straight at Adam. Refusing to back down, Adam pressed his palms against the thick security glass that separated him from the rest of the laboratory and bared his teeth. Daric's mouth took on an unpleasant twist and his expression turned more resentful. Adam's pedigree always brought him more punishment than the others, but he didn't care anymore. He'd already been beaten countless times for insignificant infractions. What more could they do to him?

The nameless blond lay motionless, his white flesh a mass of raw, bloodied meat, his long blond hair matted to his face by tears and sweat. He hung limply as the guards lifted him from the bench. Each guard gripped an arm and he stumbled between them. Locked away in his cell, the youth's physical wounds would heal quickly, but the emotional ones would grow and fester. How many wounds could anyone sustain before his entire system became infected?

Inside Adam seethed. *This is my home—a cubicle in a laboratory.* Cells lined all four walls of the large chamber, surrounding a space equipped with monitors and research equipment. White-coated technicians returned to work as if nothing had happened, and the laboratory became a swarming beehive of activity.

Everywhere Adam looked he saw men bent over test tubes and computers. They were mad scientists turning humans into animals. When they looked at Adam through his glass wall, all they saw was a lab rat. *No. I'm a man, not some failed experiment that can be discarded like toxic waste.*

But Adam had to face the truth of his situation. Trapped behind glass, he would never see the outside world again. The days, months, and years of being poked and prodded weighed heavy on him. He'd seen enough of this house of horrors to last a lifetime, and watching his jailers moving about freely while he was confined to a space twelve feet by twelve feet was far worse than any beating he'd ever had. His existence was as silent and cold as the frozen tundra he'd seen in his geography lessons.

The only furnishings in his isolation cell were a narrow iron bed, a sink, a toilet, and a monitor on the wall. No sounds penetrated his prison, except what *they* wanted him to hear—transmissions on a monitor, and lessons designed to educate him about a world he couldn't see. The glass wall and fancy surveillance equipment allowed the scientists, guards, and trainers to study his every move, and the moves of the others, the ones he saw when the guards took him out of his cell for showers and exercise or *Special Training*, their euphemism for punishment. The sight of the others made him cringe, because he knew he looked just like them. They were all caged animals, stripped of clothes, dignity, freedom and hope. Vulnerable and impotent, they lived behind glass, their cells lining the long walls of the laboratory. Compliant lab rats, never knowing anything but confinement, happy with a pat on the head or a special treat at mealtime. Their only value was as tools of the government.

*I might share their fate, but I'm not like them.* Adam's upbringing set him apart from the others. He hadn't always lived in the lab. Once he had a different life, and a mother who cared for him. Twenty-five years ago, Adam's father was a young military scientist doing research in genetic engineering. When Dr. Joseph Shepard's wife became pregnant, the scientist saw it as an opportunity to try out his dream of mixing genes from

different species to create perfect soldiers for the military. Shepard added wolf DNA to the developing embryo, and after the birth, he christened his son, Adam, the first of his hybrid creations.

Adam barely remembered his mother, just the image of a woman with kind eyes who tucked him in at night and sang to him. When she died, Adam's father brought him to his new home under the ground and handed him off to strangers. As a terrified child, he blamed himself. He thought that if he had behaved better or tried harder, his mother wouldn't have been taken away. The loss must have been his fault or his father wouldn't have brought him to this horrible place. Adam wanted to go home desperately, so he did everything in his power to please the doctor. Now he knew better. His fate had been sealed before he was born.

Others came after Adam, males sired by anonymous sperm donors and born of nameless women. The infants were raised and later educated in the dorms and classrooms of the *academy*. If they became troublesome adolescents, they were removed for observation. Flawed creations ended up in the glass-walled cells. The guards called it the kennel because the first hybrids were genetically modified with canine DNA.

*A rose by any other name...*

Names meant nothing to Adam. What mattered was what something was, not what it was called. Home, laboratory, or kennel, it was all the same—a prison.

Being the doctor's offspring didn't make Adam's life any better. In some ways his bloodline made life worse. The guards went out of their way to show him he wasn't special.

Unlike Adam, the *others* had been raised in the military complex from birth. Sometimes Adam thought they were better off because they didn't know any other life.

As a child, Adam looked forward to his father's rare visits, filled with excitement and the hope that his father would take him home. Instead, the doctor would check the progress of his studies and order more tests. More than anything, Adam wanted his father's love, and the doctor's indifference only made him try harder to be perfect. Despite Adam's doglike obedience, Shepard treated him as coldly as the others.

For Adam, life at the academy had passed in a blur of academics, physical training, and military exercises. He was older than the other boys and kept to himself. Adolescence, the period of transition between child and

adult, brought predictable changes—and some not so predictable. Adam grew tall, strong, and sexual. One day, a trainer, armed with the ever-present Taser, caught him masturbating in the dorm bathroom. Adam launched himself at the guard before the man could raise his weapon. Shape-shifting in midair, Adam pounced. Two huge paws landed against the guard's chest, pinning him to the floor. Baring his canines, Adam had lowered his muzzle, dripping saliva on the terrified man's face. Adam didn't know who was more surprised at his transformation to a wolf. He didn't have time to think about it. A tranquilizer dart stopped him cold. When he woke in humanskin, he was in solitary confinement. There was no more contact with the other boys.

Shape-shifting had not been part of Dr. Shepard's original plan. The hybrids were only supposed to acquire strength, cunning, and enhanced senses from the animal kingdom, but eventually the others displayed the same unique ability to shift into the animal whose DNA had been spliced with theirs. One by one, they arrived at the lab and *animal training* replaced their classes.

Adam tried to obey, but he couldn't always control his shifts. His father decided that conditioning had been started too late, and he kept his volatile creations under control with beatings and drugs, ensuring they wouldn't cause trouble while he studied them. He'd never considered any of them human, but now they weren't even good enough to be soldiers, and they were definitely too unstable to be selectively bred. Adam had fallen short of his father's standards and he would never get the approval he craved. It was only a matter of time until the doctor decided his creations were of no further use.

Although Adam grew to be a six-foot-five pillar of muscle, escape was out of the question. The handlers, trainers, and technicians guarded him too closely, and his fangs and claws were useless, kept under tight control by the drugs they fed him. He almost wished they would terminate him and get it over with.

Pacing his cell like a caged animal always brought unwanted attention, but frustrated by witnessing Loki's punishment, Adam couldn't help it. The drugs weakened his body, but his mind still worked perfectly and it upset him to see how badly the blond had been hurt. A growl worked its way up through his chest. Adam glanced through the glass and saw three men on the other side watching him. A technician held a wire basket containing his

meds, and beside him stood Daric gripping an electroshock weapon. The third man, tall and gaunt in a white coat, the angles of his face harsh in the artificial light, was Adam's father.

The glass at the edge of his cell slid open and Adam stomped toward it, fists clenched and nostrils flaring. He knew what would happen next but he couldn't stop himself. The projectile, a barbed dart containing a small high-voltage battery, sent pain coursing through his body. Momentarily paralyzed and rubber-legged, his muscles started twitching when he hit the floor. Strong hands grabbed him under the arms and dragged him to his bed.

Adam lay there growling softly but helpless with the gun pointed at his chest ready to discharge again. He shut his eyes, letting the effects of the electroshock dissipate.

The familiar smells of formaldehyde and alcohol wafted through the open doorway. Adam's brow furrowed at the underlying odor of rotten eggs, faint but easily detected by his ultra-sensitive nose. When he opened his eyes, he saw his father staring down at him. "Father—"

"Punishment doesn't seem to work with you." The man's icy glare froze Adam to the core. "You're stubborn, and you can't control your feral instincts. That makes you dangerous." Not an ounce of caring showed on the doctor's face. "I take full responsibility for the failure—and for the remedy. Twenty-five years ago, I didn't know any better. Genetic material was randomly inserted into the host genome. Today my new technique allows the genetic material to be inserted at specific locations. At least you can take comfort in the fact that you were helpful in paving the way for the future. The succeeding hybrids will be far superior."

The blood left Adam's cheeks. He'd expected this, but it hurt to hear the words from his father's mouth.

"This pains me greatly, Adam. Admitting failure is never easy." Brushing back a lock of white hair falling over his brow, he nodded at the guards and turned away.

The doctor's only regret was losing time with a failed experiment. Losing his son meant nothing to him. Rage flowed through Adam's veins like molten lava and he bolted up. "You bastard. What gives you the right to play god? Why should we die for your mistakes?"

"I'm on the brink of a major advance in medical science. There's always a risk of collateral damage during research."



The doctor left Adam's cell and Daric shoved him down and aimed the gun at his chest, while Gerard attached a needle to a syringe. He injected it into a small vial and an unfamiliar blue liquid filled the barrel. He reached in the basket for an alcohol swipe—

And all hell broke loose. A flash of light. A muffled boom. Daric, horror etched on his face, rushed out of the cell yelling orders. A fireball burst off to one side of the lab and took on a life of its own, swelling with heat and power. A mass of flames set off another series of deafening explosions that drowned out the sound of alarms. A brilliant display of fireworks set off the sprinklers, but they barely helped. Pandemonium reigned.

Everything unfolded in a matter of seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Hypnotized by the raw power and beauty of the firestorm, Adam considered staying put and letting the fire finish what his jailers started but then he thought of Loki, the boy who never gave up. Waiting for death was a coward's way out. Fate had given him a chance to escape, why not take it? If it didn't work out, he'd die fighting.

Adam glanced around, for what he hoped was the last time, at the barren walls that had housed him most of his life. He had nothing personal to take with him, not even a picture of his mother. Naked, Adam turned his back on his past and walked out into the laboratory.

The fire had spread everywhere, and the oppressive heat and thick smoke were much worse outside Adam's cell. The fumes burned his nose and he rubbed at it with his forearm. Flames licked the walls, equipment smoked, and shattered vials, their contents hopelessly contaminated, littered the floor. Screaming men in white coats ran for the exits, trying to save themselves, not giving a damn about the more seriously injured. *Cowards*. Adam looked at the chaos, hoping his father's work had been destroyed forever, but knowing the data must be backed up off-site.

Adam didn't have a plan. He only knew that before he tried to escape, he had to know that the others, especially Loki, were safe. Looking around, he saw that the cell doors had all opened automatically, and most cubicles were empty. Pushing through the dense black smoke, Adam looked in each cell, and finally he spotted the blond. The boy, still dazed by the agony of his beating, lay face down on the bed.

"Loki! Get out!" Adam screamed at him, but the boy ignored him.

*For crying out Pete! The boy only answers to 107.* Adam, realizing his mistake, ran into the cell, picked up Loki, and threw him over his shoulder.

The boy grunted with pain, but didn't protest when Adam carried him out of the cell.

Adam passed his father's workstation and he had a sudden urge to grab the doctor's computer and toss it into the flames, but he had Loki in his arms. Then he spotted a flash drive in one of the USB ports. Adam had used computers in his studies and he knew information was stored on memory sticks like that one. If the drive contained information about what went on in this house of horrors, it might help Adam understand the changes in his body. Flames were about to engulf the desk, but Adam knew he could reach the computer quickly. He set Loki down and told him to stay put.

The flash drive was attached to a lanyard. Adam pulled it out of the computer, put it around his neck, and hurried back to the spot where he'd left Loki, but the boy was gone. Panicked, he looked around wildly but couldn't find him. Adam stifled a curse and forced himself to move on, hoping Loki's courageous spirit would help him escape.

Pressed in on all sides, Adam let the surging crowd push him toward the main exit of the lab. His luck held out and no one stopped him. The guards were too focused on reaching the door, clawing at each other to get to safety. Carried through the doorway, Adam found himself in unfamiliar territory. The wide hall was filled with gray clouds of smoke, making it even harder to find his way. But it proved to be a blessing in disguise. No one questioned him in all the confusion. He opened door after door until he found a supply closet with scrub suits and white coats. Dressing quickly, he looked for a window. There were none. He would have to find the stairs and get to an upper level. It seemed everyone had the same idea.

Smoke filled the upper floor as well. Both uniformed soldiers and men in white coats were abandoning the fire extinguishers as the flames raged out of control. Heat had shattered the glass in every window and Adam ran for the closest one. A breath of cool night air funneled in and a glimpse of the moon and stars beckoned him.

He heard loud footsteps behind him and someone shouting "*Stop.*" Smoke obscured his vision, and he couldn't tell if they were yelling at him. It didn't matter now. He'd never get a second chance. He had to take this one. A rush of adrenaline gave him added strength. Adam grabbed the sill and prepared to pull himself up.

His joy was short-lived as a muscular figure emerged from the smoke. "*Stop!*"

No! Adam spun around to confront his pursuer. He didn't recognize the guard, but the man knew him.

"You'll never make it out alive, freak."

Adam let out a growl, and bared his teeth. The blood drained from the man's face, and Adam hoped he would back down, but the guard drew his weapon and raced forward.

Fury took Adam like never before. He was ready to die, but not like this, not when he was so close to freedom. Only the beast inside him could save him now. He hadn't asked for any of this, but he would use it to his advantage if it would gain him his freedom. His captors had missed a dose of the drugs that kept his wolf at bay. Let it be enough, he prayed fervently. Adam stared at his enemy and gave free reign to the smoldering anger inside him until it turned into a raging inferno.

Sweat poured over his feverish brow, and his heart pounded painfully against his ribs. Intense pressure squeezed his body and his tendons reacted painfully. Bulging muscles tore his clothing until the garments hung in tatters. Limbs contorting, he dropped to all fours, shuddering as black fur raced up his body. His face lengthened into a muzzle, and he could taste blood as sharp fangs burst from his gums. His nails grew into heavy claws, deadly weapons that could rip the guard to shreds. The man drew back in horror, but it was too late. Adam leaped, taking him to the floor.

"Oh my God!" The gun flew from the guard's hand and clattered on the tiles. The coward shut his eyes tight and turned his head.

The scent of the man's fear was a potent stimulant. For once in his life Adam held all the power. He opened his jaws and lowered his muzzle.

"Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name..." The man's voice cracked into a sob.

Adam froze.

*I'm not a savage beast. I won't prove them right.*

He turned away with a snarl and leaped through the window. Cold fresh air poured over him for the first time in twenty years. Adam ran like the wind and never looked back.

## Chapter Two

Adam stopped, lifted his snout to the sky, and inhaled his first taste of freedom in decades. This is what he'd been longing for—a chance to experience the things he'd taken for granted as a child—fresh air, the moon, the stars. Being outside the kennel walls felt like a dream. He hoped it wouldn't turn out to be a nightmare. According to the doctor, the world outside their underground complex had been swallowed up by war, and only a new breed of soldiers could save it. Combat didn't scare Adam. Remaining here meant certain death. He would take his chances with an unknown enemy. Even a few hours of freedom would be worth fighting for.

After twenty years of confinement, Adam felt giddy with disbelief. Every passing second felt more surreal than the last. Tears of joy clouded his vision when he realized his confinement had really come to an end.

But he had no time to savor any of it. This newfound freedom could be snatched away at any moment. Scanning the area like a cornered animal, Adam faced the reality of his situation. Already guards and uniformed soldiers were gathering in groups and brandishing weapons. His wolf's nervous system reacted to the threat and primed Adam for fight-or-flight. Determined to have his taste of freedom, he looked around for a way out. Unfamiliar with the ways of his wolf, escape required an intense effort by his transformed body. Adam's hackles rose, his heartbeat accelerated, and his pupils dilated.

The grounds were surrounded by an eight-foot electrified fence. Hopefully the fire had knocked out the power, just as it had inside the building. Adam could deal with the barbed wire. He started off in a run just as three guards gave chase and pursued him at full speed. Adam wasn't used to moving on four paws and the guards were gaining on him. As Adam neared the fence, one guard got ahead of him and drew a weapon. Badly frightened, Adam drew on every bit of animal strength and agility he possessed and jumped over the man's head. Shots barely missed him as he skimmed the barbed wire. Adam left a piece of wolf flesh behind, but he struck the ground running and kept going.

A loud noise caught his attention and he directed his wolf eyes overhead. Flying machines? Helicopters, he thought, though he'd only seen them in pictures. They were flying toward the brick complex. Adam didn't

have time to worry about his injury. This remote area of New Mexico didn't afford much cover. Survival instinct told Adam to head for the hills. Leaving a trail of blood, his wolf ran with determined focus. Hounds bayed in the distance, and a fear of being caught propelled Adam forward with a surge of speed that strained his muscles.

Adam's luck held out. He made it to the mountains, and a shallow stream provided a quick, cool drink. Then he let the water cleanse his body, and wash away the blood. He didn't care about the injury itself, only about leaving a trail and losing a few precious hours of freedom. In the end what difference would it make if he lived or died? Who would miss him anyway? There was no place in this world for someone like him. He would leave his survival to fate.

As he passed through the mountains, Adam grew dizzy with fatigue, and almost missed an excellent hiding spot. The rounded entrance to a cave was partially obscured by overhanging rock, and it provided a nicely camouflaged refuge. The interior was warm and dry, with a gently sloping floor and an unusual rock formation at the back wall. Adam chose that spot to bury his one and only possession, the memory stick that still hung from his furry neck. He dug a hole, worked the cord off, and pushed the drive into the hole. Then he covered it with dirt, and smoothed over his handiwork with a paw. Hopefully, his memory and sense of smell would help him find his way back some day. Returning here would be dangerous, but he couldn't take the chance of losing such an important piece of evidence while he was on the run.

At last Adam sprawled out on the floor, but sleep didn't come easy. He couldn't help thinking that he wasn't much better off than he'd been before.

His elation at being free dissolved as thoughts of his past filled his head. The pure humiliation of being locked up like an animal was enough to break anyone's spirit. The hybrids had no sense of who they were. Their only identity was a number in a database. The toxic shame of their situation was geared to make them feel truly worthless and less than human. Some of Adam's nameless brothers, the ones who only cared about avoiding conflict and getting their needs met, had used the system to their advantage. Adam had seen evidence of it in the showers, where they used the only commodity they possessed—sex—trading blowjobs for small favors from the guards. More privacy, less beatings...

Adam didn't blame them. He knew it was their way of trying to have a little control over their lives, but it was not something he would do. The only thing he owned was his self-respect and he clung to it fiercely. In his heart, he knew Loki felt the same. He hoped like hell the boy had escaped. Nobody deserved a chance for a new life more than Loki. After a time, Adam couldn't fight the bone-deep weariness, and his eyes fluttered shut.

*Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump...*

Startled, Adam's wolf woke and looked around, but he didn't hear any helicopters. He must have been dreaming and woke himself up. Still, he took it as sign that it was time to move on. Staying in one place too long was not an option, but first his hungry wolf needed food.

Sun filtered through the entrance, and Adam feared leaving the safety of the cave to hunt in daylight, but hunger gnawed at him. Finally, he could lie still no longer. Stretching out his front legs, his canine rump lifted high in the air. Then the wolf extended his hind legs to relieve the unfamiliar muscles he was still adjusting to. A growl of satisfaction rumbled up from his chest, and he pushed off the dirt and sprang to his paws. Still nervous about going out, he started to pace the small chamber like a caged beast.

*Did I trade one prison for another?*

Cautiously, Adam ventured outside where the scent of a wild rabbit made his stomach rumble. The thought of killing anything, even a simpleminded animal, didn't appeal to Adam. Sure, he'd eaten meat before, and a lot of it, but exchanging nervous stares with his dinner before devouring it was a first. It's the law of nature, he told himself, survival of the fittest. But catching the nimble critter wasn't easy, and it took a lot of Adam's energy.

*Maybe I'm not as fit as I thought.*

Or maybe he hadn't tried all that hard. His heart wasn't in it. In the end he won out, but the sight of the mangled carcass made him sick. He didn't want to think about the furry creature that had fought so hard to stay alive.

*I'm not human, and I'm not even a good wolf.*

Adam forced down the raw meat before he could change his mind, and then retreated to the cave to rest and wait for dark.

Staying one step ahead of his captors was Adam's primary concern. That meant he needed to keep moving before the search parties found his hideout. He didn't know what he feared most, being caught or taking care of himself for the first time in his life. For twenty years, the military facility

had been his entire world. He'd always been told what to do and when to do it. Now he had to make his own decisions. Living in the free world would take some getting used to. Humans had a lot to deal with in their lives. A prey animal only had to worry about eating, or being eaten. Adam felt safer and more capable inside his fur, so he chose to remain in wolfskin. Besides, he had no desire to walk on two feet like the man who gave him life. During the day, Adam slept in caves or abandoned animal dens. He traveled by night, always moving northeast. He'd read about Canada's protected reserves for wild wolves, and he had some crazy idea of making his way there.

Weeks passed with no sign of his captors, and Adam felt safer. As he moved out of the mountains and into more civilized areas, he looked for signs of warfare. There were none. Suddenly things clicked into place. All the talk of war had just been another of the doctor's lies to justify his monstrous experiments. There'd never been any real purpose for Adam's existence. His spirits took a steep nosedive, but Adam kept moving.

One thing Adam could not get used to was the growing amount of traffic in the populated cities. From a protected spot in the underbrush, he'd watch the cars stream by and wonder how he could get across the road. The vehicles moved much faster than he did. The humans who stood on the side of the road with their thumbs out amazed him. Weren't they afraid of getting hit? After days of watching these men climb into cars and speed away without expending their own energy, Adam conceded that it might be a better way to get around.

But after weeks of traveling on four paws and avoiding human contact, Adam realized he was afraid to shift back to human form. He had no clothes, and no experience conversing with humans. Would they accept him at face value, or become suspicious? He couldn't wrap his mind around his new reality. In order to survive on the outside, he'd have to support himself. That meant finding a job and a place to live. Could he adjust to life outside a prison? Right now, he was running through a world that had previously been forbidden to him, and everything appeared confusing and frightening.

Surviving was simpler as a wolf, but could he retreat to the animal kingdom permanently? Hunting disgusted him, and he missed his books. On four paws, Adam saw life in black and white, but he wanted to experience this strange new world with a full palette of colors. What if he waited too

long and his wolf took over permanently? The idea of living the rest of his days as a beast frightened him.

But in the end, it was thoughts of Loki that made him shift. The boy wouldn't act so cowardly. Adam imagined Loki looking him in the eye, and saying, "You're a man, act like one."

Really, he had no choice. Living inside wolfskin was just another form of prison. When Adam saw an opportunity to steal some old clothes from an unlocked shed he'd slept in, he shifted, dressed quickly, and took off on two feet.

Remembering the gentleness of his mother, Adam intended to look for women drivers, and he headed toward a busy highway. According to the signs, he was on the wrong side of the road if he wanted to go east. A lull in the traffic gave him a chance to cross over. He started sprinting—

Horns screamed, there was a sickening thud, and Adam found himself flying through the air. A weird somersault spun him around, and landed him on some shrubbery at the side of the road. Dazed, he lay there, trying to make sense of what happened.

A blue pickup truck pulled to a stop several yards away, and a lanky young man, wearing a checked shirt, jeans, and a baseball cap, jumped out. "Don't move," he yelled, as he ran towards Adam. "Geez, I'm sorry. Ya came out of nowhere, dude."

Adam stared at the baseball player, not sure how to respond.

"I'd rather not call the cops. Da ya think ya need a doctor?"

*Doctor? Cops?* "No! I'm okay." Adam jumped up. "Just got the air knocked out of me." He shook his arms, and shuffled from one foot to the other as proof. "I'm in a big hurry," he added quickly.

"Me too," The baseball player confessed. "Maybe that's why I didn't see ya. Look, ya need a ride? I'm going all the way to Illinois." The man stuck out his hand. "I'm uh...John. John Smith."

Adam had huge trust issues, but this man seemed genuinely sorry about what happened. Even better, John didn't want to involve anyone else. *Riding firearm with John might be the safest place for a fugitive like me.*

"I'm Adam." He frowned as he stared at John's outstretched hand. "Yeah, I need a ride."

John smiled and lowered his hand. "Thanks man, I really can't afford to get sued, or any of that shit."



Adam had no idea what John meant, but he followed him to the truck and climbed inside. Accepting the ride turned out to be a good idea. John didn't talk much, and he didn't seem to mind Adam's long silences or Adam's odd choice of words when he did speak. And John was really sorry about the accident. He even paid for a meal along the way.

Quincy, Illinois was the end of the line. As a parting gift, John handed Adam a business card. "If you get to Chicago and need a job...The owner's a good Joe."

Adam glanced at the card. Nowhere on it did he see the name Joe, but he shrugged and stuck it in his pocket. Getting hit by a car had been a stroke of good luck. John Smith had gotten him further away from his father, and the hours they spent together had given Adam a little confidence. For the first time Adam felt like he might be able to survive among humans.

\* \* \* \*

Adam needed new clothes, a decent pair of shoes, food...Those things took money. When his next ride dropped him off in Springfield, the state capitol, he hit the pavement and tried to find work. He was prepared to do anything, but no one would hire him. Discouraged, Adam put his hands in his torn pockets and found the card John Smith had given him.

*The Cell Block. Chicago's Best Bar.*

Adam didn't have many options. This might be his one and only chance to get a job. It was time to move on. His thumb got him a ride practically to the door. And mentioning John Smith's name got him inside the door. The Cell Block was a gay bar and the owner needed a bouncer. By the tone of the conversation, Adam surmised that credentials were not a priority. He was right. Adam had no social security number, and he didn't even know how to fight, but the owner hired him on the spot, telling Adam that his looks were enough to scare off most guys. The pay wasn't much, but the room he rented on the second floor was cheap, and he didn't have to worry about taking transportation to work.

His first night on the job, Adam was jittery and apprehensive because he didn't know what to expect. He wasn't there an hour before two guys started fighting. It was all bullshit. One claimed the other bumped him and made him spill his drink. Adam separated them easily, and then he tossed

them both out the front door. The way he handled the situation sealed his reputation. After that, all he had to do was let a deep growl rumble up his chest and it would stop most guys in their tracks. He wasn't crazy about playing zookeeper at a seedy gay bar, but it was either that or live in wolfskin.

Every day was a struggle, but Adam concentrated on the positives. Now he could buy his food, and sleep on a bed instead of a dirt floor. No more padding around in wolfskin. He wore clothes of his choosing. Well, maybe that part wasn't so great. He preferred being naked, and clothes were hard to find in his size. Expensive, too.

But if wearing clothes allowed him to stroll the streets of the city and take in all the wonders, like shopping malls and libraries, then it was worth the bother. It amazed him that he could walk into a store, and no one could tell he was different. Sometimes women tried to pick him up—men, too. The men were tempting, but getting too close to a stranger was a big no-no. Anyone could be a bounty hunter, and letting his guard down could get Adam captured or killed. Physical relationships were highly overrated anyway. The brief encounters Adam had witnessed in the kennel showers were rough and humiliating. The hell with all of it. If he felt horny, he masturbated.

Every day Adam learned a little more about life. He'd worked on computers, but had no access to the Internet. The mysteries of social media were beyond him. Didn't matter. He'd rather read, and he knew enough to go to the library and find books on mythology or Shakespeare's plays. As the weeks went by, Adam settled into a routine and started to relax in his new life.

\* \* \* \*

*For crying out Pete!*

Adam's heart lurched as he watched the blond enter the bar. There was something about him...The long hair hanging to his shoulders, or maybe it was his walk, a confident strut that said don't mess with me. It was Loki's walk, Loki's hair.

Adam knew it wasn't Loki. That would be impossible. The odds of them ending up in the same place were astronomical. But damn, this kid

had that same spark of brash attitude. Normally Adam didn't allow himself to dwell on the past, but he couldn't take his eyes off the boy.

Adam glanced up at the clock. His shift as bouncer was over, and he should leave. Instead, he sat at the bar. He never drank hard liquor or beer, but he couldn't just stand around gawking at the boy. He asked for a bottle of water. It was stupid, he knew, but he felt like he'd just spotted a long lost family member.

The blond was already dancing.

Adam took a swallow of water and watched the men grinding on the dance floor. He only had eyes for the young blond, the one who reminded him of Loki. There was an intensity about the boy that demanded attention.

The electronic beat of the music made the dance floor vibrate. The boy's white T-shirt was already soaked with sweat and clinging to his chest. Skintight denim hugged his butt and thighs, enhancing every twist and turn of his body as he danced. Other men were looking at him with hungry, lustful eyes, and Adam didn't like it. It reminded him too much of the way the guards had looked at Loki and some of the other hybrids. No one had looked at Adam that way. Maybe it was because he was bigger than most. Or maybe it had more to do with his parentage. Few had dared to cross Dr. Shepard.

The music finally slowed down and the Loki lookalike reached out for his dark-haired dance partner and drew him in for a kiss. The action provoked a chorus of catcalls and wolf whistles from the other patrons. It caught Adam's attention, too, but not in a sexy way. He admired the boy's carefree attitude, something that had been lost to him. That Adam was forever buried in the belly of the beast.

Thinking about the past gave Adam a headache and the music didn't help. Maybe he should retreat to the room he rented upstairs. Most of his salary went to pay for food, drink, and the roof over his head, but what the hell. He had nothing else to spend it on anyway. Adam put some money on the bar and drained his bottle of water. Suddenly he sensed a presence behind him, and he watched warily as the blond slid onto the stool next to him.

The Loki lookalike smiled seductively. "They're playing our song. How 'bout a dance?"

Adam choked on the water he'd just swallowed and lifted an arm to wipe his mouth. "I don't dance."

“Then how about a private dance? I’ll do all the work. You won’t have to do a thing, except sit still and watch.”

“Go home,” Adam told the kid.

“Don’t have a home.” The blond kept darting anxious looks across the room.

*Who’s he afraid of?* Adam followed Loki’s line of sight and saw a burly man leaning against the far wall, staring back at them.

“He came on to me, but I’m not interested.” The blond put a hand over Adam’s. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

Adam had an animal’s innate sense of impending danger, a biological warning system that made the hair rise on his body. In the kennel it had been muted by drugs, but now Adam felt his hackles rise. He glanced around the bar and realized that except for the three of them, the place had emptied out. Even the bartender had disappeared. In that instant, Adam knew without a doubt that the Loki-lookalike and the barrel-chested man were after him, and not for sex. *Shit*. How had they found him?

Adam slapped a palm to his forehead. A sudden flash of insight hit him like a Taser shot. John Smith wasn’t the friend Adam thought he was. *How could I be so stupid?* It didn’t matter now. *Crying over spilled drinks won’t change anything*. At least he learned some valuable lessons. One, don’t trust *anyone*! Two, life was fragile. And three, Adam did want to survive. He just needed to be more careful.

Loki made a move on him. Adam blocked it, but still he hesitated to return the punch. It’s not Loki, Adam told himself and he let the rage grow inside him. Adam’s pulse rose and his heart started beating faster, sending adrenaline coursing through his blood stream. It took every ounce of concentration to keep from shifting, as he countered with a sharp knee to the blond’s gut that made the smaller man crumple like a jackknife. Not wanting him to recover, Adam grabbed him by the neck and slammed his head against the bar.

“Don’t move. I will shoot you.”

Adam felt the cold muzzle of a gun against the back of his head. Without even thinking, he dropped to the ground, spun, and with as much speed and force as he could muster, threw his leg hard at his attacker’s ankles. The element of surprise sent the man to his knees, and the gun skittered across the floor.

Adam hadn't even realized how much he'd been aching for revenge. He went into attack mode with fists and feet, unable to stop himself until both men were lying still as rag dolls. Panting, he looked down at them. Could these weaklings really be the monsters he'd been running from? They were no match for him. Adam looked over his shoulder as he walked away. He felt a twinge of regret when he saw the blond try to lift his bloody head. Adam shook it off. It's not Loki, he reminded himself, just a human who deserved what he got.

Adam collected his few belongings and disappeared into the night.

\* \* \* \*

*Six months later.*

Adam adjusted his goggles, picked up the sledgehammer, and checked to make sure the area around him was clear. Swinging the eight-pound weight felt good. Every time the hammer came down on one of the wedges he'd inserted in the rock, he imagined himself pounding on one of the guards from the kennel.

He'd never pictured himself a quarryman, but it turned out to be the perfect job for a big, angry man who had a bone to pick with the world. The work was hard but it kept him in shape, and working outside after spending most of his life in captivity appealed to him. An added plus, his boss, James Hale, was a standup guy who didn't ask a lot of questions.

When Hale bought a piece of land in Indiana ten years earlier, he hadn't planned on doing anything with the old abandoned quarry that came along with it. Jim had a degree in natural resources, but no experience extracting stone from the ground. Out of curiosity he'd started visiting other quarries and decided he preferred working with rocks and stone rather than people and animals. When a quarry owner offered to take him on as an apprentice, he gave up his job at a state park and never looked back.

Jim ran a small operation, and for the most part he worked alone. Heavy equipment made the job easier, but if he got a big order, he'd hire part-time help. Adam had come along at the right time. His strength and enthusiasm won Jim over and earned him a chance to learn a trade. The quarry owner paid him a small stipend and allowed him to stay in a rundown old shack on

the property—an “independent contractor” arrangement that saved Jim the paperwork and kept Adam from needing ID that he didn’t possess.

Adam took off the goggles and sat on his heels to inspect his handiwork. He’d chiseled something from the earth that took millions of years to create. It was a sobering thought, and one that made his problems seem smaller in the grand scheme of things. Pleased with the thin, flat rocks, he wiped sweat from his brow and stood. It took skill to split the rock smoothly without shattering it, and he took pride in his work.

Adam didn’t own a watch. He judged the time by the position of the sun. He saw Jim climbing down from the backhoe excavator, but he knew it wasn’t quitting time yet. Figuring his boss might have a problem with the equipment, he walked over. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. It looks like I have customers.” Jim jerked his head up toward the building that served as plant and office. A plain black sedan had just pulled up to the door. “Or it could be the state inspectors. They’re supposed to make surprise routine inspections every year, but they haven’t been around for a while. Today might be the day.”

Two men in black suits got out of the car. Something about them didn’t look right and Adam’s fight-or-flight reflex went into high alert.

“I’m going up to meet them.” Jim told him. “I’ll try and keep them out of the pit. Should be easy. It doesn’t look like they’ll want to get their shoes dirty.”

Adam nodded, but inside, his guts were churning. Jim might think his only problem was hiring an undocumented worker, but Adam’s instincts told him these men were not from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. As much as he hated leaving Jim without a word of explanation, he had no other choice. Adam waited until the men walked inside the building, then he scrambled up the pit and took off.

## Chapter Three

Chance Hollis hung his suit jacket on the wall of his cubicle so it half-hid the entrance. He sat in front of his computer and turned it on. As soon as it booted up, he opened a work file. Then he logged on to his favorite game and muted the computer volume. Just as he was about to kill two pigs with one bird, a gravelly voice behind him called his name and he missed his shot.

*For crying out loud!*

Pretending he hadn't heard, Chance minimized his computer screen and stared squint-eyed at the suddenly revealed spreadsheet.

"Hollis?" Flynn, the fucktard, leaned his head into the cubicle, and Chance looked up with an annoyed expression, as if Flynn had just interrupted him from completing some important company business.

Flynn gave him a suspicious look and moved behind him to inspect his monitor. "Is that the Steiner file?"

"Does a bird fly?"

Flynn snorted. "Make sure it's on my desk at the end of the day."

*Prick.* Chance saluted Flynn's back as he made his exit. *Well, that was close.*

Only 9:30 and Chance already had that antsy, defeated feeling in his gut. Hell, he'd had it before he left his apartment this morning.

Chance's epic struggle for survival began every day at 7:00 a.m. when the alarm went off. It wasn't the hour that bothered him or even the bone-jarring clangor that could wake the dead. No, it was knowing what lay ahead, a day of mind-numbing torture. No wonder waking up always felt like a climb out of a deep, dark hole.

Every morning, Chance resisted the almost overpowering urge to crawl back under the covers. He would drag his resistant butt out of the warm bed and into his bathroom to shower and shave. Then he'd walk the half mile to work, stopping at Dunkin' Donuts for coffee and a muffin. Sometimes he ate in the park, an urban oasis that provided a brief reprieve before he entered the dehumanizing atmosphere of Concise Communications.

Not ready to start crunching numbers, Chance brought up the game screen and engrossed himself in an animated world that helped him forget where he was—prison. His cubicle was intended to be a customizable work

environment, but in reality it was an urban jail cell, cutting Chance off from the real world and suffocating every bit of creativity in his body.

Yeah, Chance was happy that he had a job, but why did work have to be so boring and isolating? If it took playing games to make cubicle life less torturous, so be it. Everyone needed some down time, Chance just needed a little more than most. With a few flicks from his nimble fingers, he could take out his frustration on a bunch of pigs instead of going postal and freaking out his coworkers.

Somehow Chance survived the morning. Despite the games and a constant barrage of annoying questions from his coworkers, he even completed his assignment. When he looked up at the clock, it was 11:20 and he was more than ready for lunch. It was too early, but the hell with Flynn. Chance logged out of his computer, grabbed his jacket, and headed down the back staircase to the lobby.

\* \* \* \*

Chance wasn't hungry yet. Besides, he wanted to be outside. As he approached the park's entrance, he decided to use the extra half-hour to enjoy the fresh air and maybe get some writing in. He knew exactly where he was headed. His favorite bench was up ahead just around a curve in the path. As the bench came into view, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was empty.

Chance took a seat and looked around. Except for the occasional dog-walker or jogger, his only companions were the pigeons. As long as he didn't feed them, they would leave him alone. This morning he'd woke with a story in his head and now he racked his brain trying to recall it.

*Why didn't I write it down when it was fresh in my mind? Now, I remember—*

A flock of cooing pigeons circled his feet. The dumb, smelly birds were too close for comfort and brought up images of an old horror movie. Chance looked up in alarm and saw an old man sitting at the far end of the bench, tossing out breadcrumbs to the scavengers.

*Where the fuck did he come from?*

Chance couldn't very well ask him to leave, nor was he ready to give up his seat when he'd been there first. Choosing to ignore the interloper, he pulled out his Moleskin journal and turned to a blank page. A rogue breeze



dotted the lined paper with water spray from the fountain. He rubbed it dry with his arm and then searched his pockets for a pen.

A thickly veined hand, with long, dirt-encrusted fingernails thrust an old ballpoint under his nose. Chance's nostrils flared as he tilted his head and caught the old man's eye, realizing with a shock, the fellow wasn't as old as he'd first thought.

"Take it. It won't kill you."

Chance took the pen and tried a few scribbles on a blank page. It worked. "Thanks," he said trying to hide the annoyed tone in his voice.

"Don't mention it. Most people think being down on your luck is catching."

Chance summoned a tight-lipped smile. "I'm already down on my luck."

A pair of sharp blue eyes looked him up and down, taking in his polished wingtips, neatly pressed suit, and designer tie. "Well, it's all in how you look at things, isn't it?"

"It isn't always about money." Wanting to change the subject, Chance gestured at the man's tattered fatigues. "Were you in the military?"

"Yeah, the army. Did two tours of duty in the Middle East." The man extended a shaky hand. "The name's Bill."

"I'm Chance." He reached out gingerly and shook Bill's hand. "Do you mind my asking what it was like? Over there, I mean."

Bill thought for a few minutes. "Long days in the Iraq heat, with nothing to do but count flies, then defending the base against insurgents. Watching my buddies die..." His eyes took on a faraway look.

Chance tried to imagine being in this man's shoes. He couldn't. Suddenly his lousy job and distant, disapproving father didn't seem so bad after all. He'd let his father talk him into a career he'd never have chosen for himself because finding work as a journalist was a crapshoot and becoming successful was as likely as winning the lottery. But he couldn't let go of his dreams completely. He still wrote articles for the local papers. It was a newsman's innate nosiness that made him prod Bill for more of his story. "What happened when you came home?"

"What home? A friend let me sleep on his couch while I looked for a job. At first I went out every day, but it was always the same story. Times are tough. We're cutting back. Leave your number. Finally I gave up. I'd wait until my buddy left in the morning, then I'd close the blinds and drink

myself to oblivion. When I started waking up at night screaming, I wore out my welcome. Now I come here most days. At night I sleep in the subway. I put my life on the line and then I come back home to nothing. That's what I came home to, nothing."

Ideas started popping in Chance's head. Tired of writing filler stories about local politics and Philly sports, he saw potential here for a human-interest story that would garner a lot of sympathy. He'd call it "Homeless Heroes" and Bill would be the face behind the story. With a little luck, the notoriety would get the vets some much-deserved help.

"I write for the newspapers, and I'd like to interview you for an article. Would you be interested? I'd pay you of course."

"I guess that would be okay."

"How can I get in touch with you, Bill?"

"If the weather's good, you can find me right here."

They sealed the arrangement with a handshake and Chance took off. He had just enough time to grab a burger and ogle the eye candy at the fast food joint. Chance had one hell of a crush on the new cashier and he needed his fix. One glimpse of the beefcake would provide Chance with enough daydream material to get him through the afternoon. Halfway to Big-Top Burgers, an attack of guilt hit Chance hard. He should have brought Bill with him. Too late now. Next time he would stop for lunch first and bring the man a sandwich.

\* \* \* \*

"Do you want fries with that?" Adam asked, trying not to gag on the smell of grilled meat, fried onions, and burnt coffee. It was a far cry from the organic diet he'd been fed at the laboratory. Hell, feeding in the wild had been better than this. Adam ate junk food because it was free to the employees, but having to smell it cooking all day made his stomach queasy.

"Just gimme what I asked for."

Adam kept his eyes down and took a deep breath. He never could figure out why the fast food chains were so popular. Some humans would eat anything.

"Hey, asshole, make that sometime today."

*Seven dollars an hour for this. I should quit now. My days are numbered anyway.* The CEOs at Big-Top Burgers were planning to install touch-screen

kiosks to handle the cashier duties, making him and the rest of his coworkers obsolete. It didn't matter. He'd be gone long before the transition. It was only a matter of time before the company figured out he'd given them a bogus social security number. He longed for his old job at the quarry, working outside and only Jim to answer to. Forcing himself to leave Indiana had been tough, but he couldn't see any way around it. He'd packed his few belongings in a duffle bag and hitched his way to the east coast. Maybe getting lost in a big city like Philadelphia would keep him off the radar.

"Next."

"Cheer up! It might never happen."

Adam froze. *For crying out Pete!* The gentle, honeysweet voice sent a shiver along his spine. He looked up from the computer where he'd been punching in orders and made eye contact with big chocolate eyes that reminded him of his mother. His heart twisted. The memories were merciless, triggered by a kind look or a sympathetic word, striking at odd times, usually when he was least prepared to deal with them. But the bad memories surfaced as well. He'd left the old life behind him, but he was still held prisoner by the years of abuse and conditioning. If only he could forget...

"Burger and fries." The customer actually winked at him. "And I like everything super-sized."

Adam's lips drew tight in a soundless snarl. It was the suit, the same guy who'd been in every day this week. He always sat at the same table, watching every move Adam made. Nobody came here in a suit. If Adam's stalker was a PI, he needed a new line of work.

The smile on the customer's face faltered. "Is there a problem?"

Adam snorted. *If you only knew, buddy* "No problem. That'll be four seventy-eight." Adam reached for the ten in the man's hand. The brush of the stranger's fingers against his set off shock waves, and Adam pulled his hand away as if he'd been burned on the grill, which he had been, many times. His fingers were constantly covered with Band-Aids so no one would notice how quickly he healed.

He'd never reacted like this before, not to anyone. Of course, for years, the sex suppressants had put a lid on his libido. After his escape, when he'd finally shifted back to his human body, he'd awakened with his first real hardwood in years and realized the drugs hadn't left any residual effects.

Rediscovering the joy of jacking-off gave him sexual release. He couldn't afford to let anyone get close—hell, he wouldn't know what to do with someone else.

Hitchhiking across the country had taught him a lot he hadn't learned from books and computers. He'd met a lot of truck drivers, worked a lot of odd jobs, and learned how to take care of himself. He had to, because for the first time in his life, nobody told him when to eat, when to sleep, when to pee. Being his own master felt good, damn good, except when he got lonely.

All his life, he'd lived in solitude and thought he was immune to feeling lonely. Yet now he felt more cut off than ever. It was sobering to look around and realize that although he was surrounded by people, not one of them was like him. Lately, he found himself thinking more and more of the others, the ones he left behind. Not the scientists or the guards or even his father—the others like him. He worried about them, his motherless brothers. What happened to them? What happened to Loki?

Adam tried his best to find out. He couldn't afford a TV or a computer, but the city had a big public library and he spent a lot of his free time there. A helpful librarian had taught him how to search the archives for back issues of the newspapers, but he'd only found a small item about a gas explosion at a military facility in the Midwest. Could it have been the laboratory? He'd never know for sure. The experiments were all cloak and dagger, classified top secret. He hoped the others all escaped, saved themselves, and managed to make a new life the way he had. It might not be much of a life, but at least he was free and he'd never go back. If that meant hiding and being constantly on the move, so be it. If it meant dying... well, that was all right, too. Better than going back there.

The stalker's order came out and Adam slid the tray across the counter.

The man offered an uncertain smile. "Thanks. *Illegitimus non carborundum.*"

*Don't let the bastards grind you down.* Adam's lips parted in surprise then smiled in approval. He never thought he'd get to use his language lessons. "I'll try not to." *Somebody who knows Latin, even if it is Dog Latin.*

The stalker responded with a devastating grin that set Adam's pulse racing. His cock wanted to stand up and crow. Something about this guy just got under his skin.

Adam tamped down his feelings. In his world, thinking like that could get him killed. He couldn't let his guard down for even a second. *Adam, face it, you're a lone wolf. It is what it is.*

But damn, his customer was cute. It couldn't hurt to look. This guy could inspire some seriously wet dreams. Despite the harsh treatment he'd received at the hands of men, it was always the image of a faceless, but definitely hard, masculine body, that got Adam off when he masturbated. Females just didn't attract him physically. Up until six months ago, the only woman he'd been around was his mother. He'd met a few women while traveling, the ones who weren't afraid to pick up a hitchhiker or hire him to do some odd job around their houses. A few had even hinted they wouldn't mind getting to know him better, but he kept them all at arm's length.

Caught up in his thoughts, he forgot the customer's change and had to call him back. "Wait."

The man turned, and easing his weight from one foot to the other, he cocked a caramel-colored brow. Adam's gaze shifted below the belt and his breath caught at the way brown-eyes filled out his slacks. The man was maybe five-ten and slender, but the bulge at his crotch revealed a good-sized package and had Adam licking his lips and wondering if he might have inspired the impressive erection. The customer cleared his throat and Adam looked up, his face flaming with heat. "Uh...You forgot your change."

"Keep it." Those eyes radiated a message that took Adam's breath away. Then the man turned, running his hand through an unruly mop of honey-colored curls.

Adam watched the stranger's retreating back. Watched him slip into a chair, unwrap his burger, and take a bite. Adam couldn't take his eyes off the man's mouth. Chewing had never looked so sexy before. He pictured that mouth closing in on his...Impossible. Adam had never kissed anyone before.

*I'd probably get excited and bite those luscious lips. I might look human, but I'm still a wolf in ram's clothes.*

But Adam couldn't stop his imagination, and his jeans became uncomfortably tight. He reached down and adjusted them—

"Hey buddy, I only get a half hour for lunch." A sharp sarcastic voice interrupted Adam's drooling inspection and he tore his gaze away and got back to work. It took a real effort not to look at the curly-haired man every

chance he got. His eyes kept straying to the table in the center of the room, and every time they did, those incredible brown eyes were staring right back at him. Finally, the man flashed a lopsided grin across the room, and nodded toward the door, as if to say, *meet me outside*. Adam's heart skipped a beat and he looked away pretending he hadn't seen him. Was this guy putting him on? Or flirting? With *him*?

He had no clue and he didn't want one. He didn't dare want anything like that.

Friends and lovers were not in his future. He had no business bringing anyone into a life fraught with peril. He was a wanted man. He had no idea if his father had died in the fire, but if the old man was still alive, he would move heaven and earth to get Adam back. His creations, especially the flawed prototypes like Adam, were not meant to be walking around in the general population. He could only imagine the price on his head. Bounty hunters were combing the country looking for him. Brown-eyes didn't look dangerous, but then neither did the blond in Chicago. The stalker was probably acting all nice and friendly just to gain Adam's confidence so he could lead him into a trap. Why else would he come here every day? If Adam was stupid enough to take the bait, he'd deserve everything he got. Yeah, it was time to move on. This would be his last shift at Big-Top.

\* \* \* \*

Chance was still hungry when he walked out of the restaurant. He'd barely forced down half of his greasy burger, and only so he'd have an excuse to take up a table. Big-Top had to be the filthiest fast-food joint on the east coast, maybe in the country. The customers were pigs and the management didn't seem to pay for cleanup. Discarded bags and burger wrappers always littered the Formica tables and squashed chips crunched underfoot. He sighed. *The things I do for lust*. Still it had to be fate that brought him in contact with the most attractive man he'd come across in a long time.

At the beginning of the week, Chance got caught in a downpour and he took refuge in Big-Top Burgers. The hot guy behind the counter was a complete surprise. That man could perk up anyone's spirits, and maybe a few other things as well. The dark Adonis was a powerful incentive to eat at

the greasy spoon, and the next day, Chance found himself going back to ogle Tall, Handsome, and Grumpy.

Every time he'd glance up at the cashier, green eyes stared back at him. Green eyes flecked with gold and framed by two rows of thick, black lashes. He could drown in those eyes. And the muscles under the chartreuse Big-Top Burgers shirt had to be unfuckingbelievable. The rest of the man's body was hidden behind the counter, but he had no doubt the view below the waist would be every bit as delectable as what he saw above. The guy was a gorgeous six-foot-five hunk. Why was he working in a fast food joint? Surely, he could get a better job. Hell, he could be on the cover of GQ. Chance had to know this guy's story.

Tall, dark, and handsome might be a cliché but it fit—sort of. This guy walked a narrow line between handsome and rough, and Chance found that combination extremely sexy. This rough around the edges diamond made him want to throw good sense right out the window. But rough always got him into trouble. Did he want to go there again? With this guy?

Hell, yeah.

Unfortunately, the object of his desire didn't seem interested in making a connection. Shy? Or not into guys? Unless he was badly mistaken, he'd bet on shy. The look of lust in those extraordinary eyes all but shouted *I like cock*.

Chance could have stared at the cashier all day, but duty called. He still had a job to worry about, and there was always tomorrow.

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## Chapter Four

*Another day, and another struggle to get through it.*

Chance had snuck out early yesterday with no repercussions, so why not do it again? At 11:00 a.m. his boss was in a meeting, and the coworker across the aisle took a bathroom break. Chance saw his opportunity and he took it. This time he left his jacket hanging on the cubicle wall, so it would look like he was still in the building.

Even so, Chance felt a little nervous, and he kept looking over his shoulder until he was safely inside Big-Top Burgers. *Shit*. Green-eyes was not behind the counter. Chance checked the men's room, and even peeked into the kitchen but the man was not there. Surprised by the depth of his disappointment, Chance ordered two burgers and fries, took the bag and headed to the park. Now if Bill didn't show up, his day would really go down the toilet.

But Bill didn't disappoint. The not-so-old old man was sitting on the same bench, tossing crumbs to the bottom-feeders at his feet. Chance was glad to see him. Even the pigeons didn't put him off. He sat next to Bill and offered him the bag of food.

The homeless man squinted at him. "You eat already?"

"No. One of those burgers is for me."

Bill grinned. "Okay then." He took a burger and handed the bag back.

The man could talk. Between mouthfuls, he spoke of his childhood and the vague memories he had of a father who went off to Vietnam and never came home. "At least I'm alive," he told Chance. "But sometimes I think my father was the lucky one. It's real disheartening to come back and be treated like a worthless piece of garbage. And I'm not the only one."

Chance was amazed and appalled at the number of vets living in shelters or on the streets. He wanted to know more, but when he finally looked at his watch, he was shocked at how quickly the time had gone by. His lunch hour had stretched to three. Reluctantly, Chance said good-bye and headed back to work.

The walk back to his office was all too short. On the best of days, he had no desire to do time inside the minimum-security prison known as Concise Communications. Today it would be nearly impossible to keep his mind on business when he'd much rather be writing Bill's story or daydreaming about black hair and broad shoulders. Images of the hot



cashier he'd been drooling over yesterday teased his mind and his libido. The man was a sex god and from all appearances, he had no idea how attractive he was. Sometimes he acted surly and forbidding, but underneath that gruff exterior Chance saw a vulnerability that made him ache to know more. So where had green-eyes been today?

Maybe he had a day off. Maybe he had a partner. So what if he did? He had the look of lust in his eyes. You can't fake sexual chemistry. Chance knew in his gut this attraction wasn't one sided.

The first time Chance laid eyes on the man, he'd been ambushed by a physical hunger so strong it made him ache inside. That intense, gut-ripping lust had been absent from his life for too long, but he hadn't forgotten what it felt like. It might be completely unreasonable, and barely controllable, but damn it felt good to want someone again. Chance really needed to feel that someone pressed up close against his skin and lips, but it would never happen if he kept lusting after this guy from afar. It was crazy, acting like a horny teenager at his age, but he'd been too afraid of being rebuffed to make a move. It was time to man up. He'd been caught ogling the guy, and sooner or later, the object of his lust would either call the cops or beat the shit out of him. Chance wanted green-eyes to know that he was serious, not just some stalker. Tomorrow he would make it happen.

Having no love life and a shit career at the same time was the pits. Stuck in a dead-end job he hated had turned him into a self-absorbed blockhead. Most days he actually hoped to get a summons for jury duty so he'd have a legit excuse to take off from work. How pathetic, and how had he come to this? A storyteller at heart, all he ever wanted to do was write. He'd dreamed of becoming Chaunce Philip Hollis II, journalist extraordinaire and world traveler. His name would be so well known, people would remember there was a *u* between the *a* and the *n* and even his father would be proud of his success. What a pipe dream. The odds of that happening had been astronomical and now he was stuck in a cubicle, the next best thing to a death sentence. Why had he allowed his father to pressure him into taking this job as a staff accountant?

Because Chaunce, Senior, the business tycoon, insisted that his son would never make any money studying English Lit. *You'll end up unemployed and homeless. Grow up. You have a lucrative business waiting for you! I'll never have grandchildren to run the company. I'd hoped I could at least depend on my only son.* Dear old Dad threatened to withhold

tuition money and threw roadblocks in his way wherever and whenever he could. With the man's connections, it was a threat he could easily make good on.

Chance had changed his major and settled on English as a minor. Writing part-time was better than not writing at all. His father forced him to learn the business from the ground up. He gave Chance a job in the accounting department maintaining the purchase order system, processing accounts payable, assisting with the payroll, putting up with all the bullshit from the senior accountant—and all for the grand sum of thirty thousand a year.

Chance knew now that accounting was not his thing and never would be. Sighing, he took a shortcut through Love Park, nicknamed for the sculpture that overlooked the plaza, a big red LO with the O canted sideways over the VE. Love was highly overrated, at least in his experience. He always fell for the wrong guy—straight, taken, sadist. Been there, done that. He had a thing for bad boys and somehow he always ended up getting his heart broken or the shit kicked out of him. Eight months ago, he'd had a brief hookup with a man who was into dominance and submission. It only took a few weeks to realize he'd made a mistake. He wanted a strong partner. He *didn't* want to be ordered around and controlled.

The fling had ended badly and he'd been celibate ever since. Not by choice, but he wasn't into anonymous fucking, and he hadn't met anybody he wanted until he spotted green-eyes behind the fast food counter. That man would bring a stone-cold statue to life.

Looking at his watch, Chance cringed. His father might be CEO of one of the bigger corporations in the telecommunications industry, but if Chance didn't get a move on, he'd be sleeping on Bill's park bench. Chance took a few precious minutes to stop at the newsstand on the corner and bought a paper. Fingers crossed, he checked his lottery tickets. *Fuck!* Off by one number. He had no luck. He'd have to go back to work.

Concise Communications had relocated from a sprawling office park in the suburbs to a modern high-rise in the downtown area. The move suited Chance, who lived in center city and enjoyed the urban lifestyle. Now he could walk to work instead of taking the train. The new location was one of the few pluses about his job.

His heart beat faster as he approached the front entrance. Hoping his luck had held, he headed for the elevator and jabbed the button.

*If it doesn't come in two minutes I'll turn around and go home.*

One minute and fifty-five seconds later the doors opened, and Chance stepped inside. As soon as he got off on the eighth floor, the receptionist gave him a thumbs-down. *Uh-oh.*

Chance steeled himself for a confrontation. He and Flynn had never liked each other. If he had to describe his supervisor in one word, it would have to be *dick*. Chance never used his father's name to get special treatment but the man resented him anyway, even refusing to call him by his nickname. Flynn was a jealous, obnoxious homophobe who walked around all day with a stick up his ass, probably overcompensating for his micro-penis. Nobody ever said a manager had to love every employee, but a little respect would be nice. The man had absolutely no people skills—

“Nice of you to drop by, Chaunce.”

*Fuck all!* The asswipe was lying in wait in Chance's cubicle.

“You're thirty minutes late.”

*What is this, the fucking inquisition?* “Sorry, the restaurant was crowded.”

“That's not an excuse.”

“I'll make it up later.”

“Your father asked me to treat you just like any other employee. You're not asbestos, Chaunce. I can fire you and I will if this keeps up.”

*Shit!* Fed up and frustrated, Chance slammed his hand on the desk. Fired by an egotistical prick for a lousy thirty minutes. He'd quit first. “I quit.” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

Flynn's mouth dropped open then twisted into a satanic smirk. “Don't worry about giving notice. I think we can manage without you.”

That was stupid. He'd played right into the man's hands, done exactly what Flynn wanted him to do. Chance watched him walk out then sank into the chair his ex-boss had just vacated. He clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back looking around the cubicle for the last time. No big brother watching over him, no grating voice in his ear telling him what to do. Maybe it was for the best.

Feeling oddly relieved, he started clearing out his desk. Nope, he wouldn't miss any of it. He shouldn't be reacting this way, but he actually felt good about leaving. He should have done it a long time ago.

\* \* \* \*

Chance bypassed Human Resources. What was the point? Flynn had probably gone straight to his father to gloat over the prodigal son's defection. What he really needed was a drink and someone to talk to. He took the long way home past the burger joint, just in case green-eyes was working a later shift.

There was no sign of the big cashier so Chance headed home. He'd been lucky to find such a great apartment on a quiet tree-lined street, a middle ground in Center City's mix of high-priced townhouses and low-rent projects. He took the elevator up to three, unlocked his door, and tossed his jacket over a chair.

Stretching out on the couch, Chance tried to concentrate on a book, but soon put it aside. It had been one hell of a day and now that the relief had completely worn off, he couldn't stop worrying about money. How much longer would he be able to afford this place? His savings would cover maybe two months' rent and then what? Self-pity and negative thinking gave him a headache and weren't helping his situation. He needed to look at this as an opportunity, not an obstacle. Maybe now he could do something he loved, something he could be proud of. Maybe write a book. Head pounding, he headed to the bathroom for aspirin and washed down two with some water. Then he ran a shower.

Chance moved aside the rainbow-fish shower curtain and adjusted the water until billowing clouds of white steam filled the room. The water pulsed on his shoulders and back, easing some of the tension from his muscles. It was just what he needed. Closing his eyes, he blocked out everything but the sound of running water.

Finally he reached for the soap and started to wash. His cock filled at the first slip and slide of his lathered hand. His other hand fondled his sac and the sensitive skin behind it. His ass clenched, begging for attention and he was suddenly preoccupied with images of a tall, dark Adonis with emerald eyes.

His soap slick hand worked his cock roughly, the way he imagined the big cashier would handle him, and a shiver of excitement rippled up his spine. Yes, he was hopelessly captivated by the man, so he gave in to his fantasy.

He stroked and tugged, picturing the bigger man in the shower with him, pressing him up against the tiles, bending his dark head to rub his lips

against the back of Chance's neck as he fucked him. *Oh God!* He imagined a long thick cock filling him, thrusting inside him over and over. His legs went rubbery, heat suffused his body and he pumped harder, his entire body felt engulfed by heat. *Fuck, yes!* Streams of white cum splattered across the shower and his legs almost folded under him. Leaning back against the tiles, he watched the spray rinse the evidence of his lust down the drain.

\* \* \* \*

Adam once again lived underground. His one-room efficiency wasn't much bigger than his cell at the laboratory, but the space was all his and he could come and go as he pleased. He took the stairs down to the basement, unlocked the door, and tore off his clothes on the way to the futon. He tried to maneuver his tall frame into a comfortable position and ended up throwing the mattress on the floor. When he shut his eyes, an image of his curly-haired stalker popped into his head. Was it just coincidence the stranger had come to his station every day? Maybe the man wasn't following him. Maybe he was a legitimate businessman who, for some weird reason, liked Big-Top burgers. *Or maybe he likes me.* No, why would he? Echoes of the doctor's voice clamored insistently inside Adam's head. *You're not human, Adam. You're an animal and no matter how hard you try, you'll never be anything else.*

Even if Adam wanted to take a chance and talk to brown-eyes, his wounded ego and insecurity ran too deep to allow it. The scars of abuse inflicted by his father would never heal. Adam had always known he'd be alone in life. Besides he was leaving, so what was the point?

Still, brown-eyes had made quite an impression on him, in more ways than one. Almost absentmindedly, he gripped his cock, a thick handful, even flaccid. He pretended the other man's hands were on him, and his cock continued to swell even bigger in his palm. His thumb circled the tip, spreading the moisture leaking from the slit. Horny enough that his balls ached, Adam fisted himself and worked his hand up, then down his length, the images in his head urging him on, faster, harder.

Thinking about the curly-haired man sent ripples of want up his spine. He started pumping into the hole he made with his fist, while his other hand rolled his heavy sac. Panting now, his balls went tight and he needed to let

go. One more hard stroke and a thick string of white cum arced up, spraying his chest with the longest, hardest orgasm of his life.

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## Chapter Five

Chance felt positively buoyant when he woke up with no alarm clock blaring in his ear. The whole day stretched before him, full of promise and devoid of office gossip, unremitting boredom, and fucktard Flynn breathing down his neck.

Today Chance intended to make contact with the man he'd been crushing on. Hopefully green-eyes would be back at work today. Anxious to see the cashier before he lost his nerve, Chance would have gone to Big-Top for breakfast if they served it. They didn't. Big-Top opened at 11:30 for lunch, and Chance dressed carefully for his appearance. There'd be no suit today, just a simple white shirt, dark blue jeans and chukkas.

Chance fully realized that his fantasies about the big dark-haired man could be just that—fantasies. The guy could turn out to be a real creep. Planning for a future romance that probably wouldn't happen was stupid, but Chance couldn't stop thinking about him. Wondering what he looked like with his clothes off, what he smelled like, how he tasted...These feelings had to be explored regardless of how silly it might seem. Chance didn't want to have any regrets, not this time.

Love was Chance's number one regret. He believed in happily ever after and it always stung when a relationship didn't work out. A painful romance could scar a guy for a lifetime if he wasn't careful. Chance had been there. More than once. His first real love had left him with so much regret that he'd been sure he'd never fully recover from it.

It happened shortly after he started his freshman year in college. He'd been bartending to pay for classes and one night a guy he'd never seen before ordered a drink and never left. Peter was a few years older, gorgeous, and so full of life that the world went silent when Chance wasn't with him. Chance fell hard, but the supposed love of his life took Chance on a destructive journey of drinking and drugs, before ODing seven months later. Chance wanted to die, too.

That's when Chaunce Hollis, Sr. stepped in and laid down his ultimatums. Chance was too sick, emotionally and physically, to argue with his father. He agreed to clean up his act and change his major. In return his father paid his tuition and used his influence to keep Chance from flunking out freshman year. Sometimes Chance regretted ever getting involved with Peter. This time he knew he'd have regrets if he didn't get involved.

Of course, there were a few problems. First, Chance couldn't tell if tall, dark, and sexy was actually interested in him. Any response to Chance's weak attempts at flirting had been slight. Some might even say he'd been rebuffed. Chance refused to accept that and move on, not without giving a meeting a fair try. But he was a little intimidated by the big man and not sure how to get to the point. Just in case he froze and couldn't spit any words out, Chance had a note folded in his pocket. On it was printed his name and phone number. He would slip it to the cashier and leave the ball in his court.

At eleven thirty, Chance locked the door behind him and made his way to the burger joint. As soon as he walked inside, he looked for green eyes. A skinny, gangling kid stood behind the counter. Once again, Chance found himself checking the bathrooms. Empty. Chance checked the stalls just to be sure. *Fuck!*

This time Chance wasn't going to leave without asking a few questions. He got in line and when his turn came, the kid tried to take his order, but food was the last thing Chance wanted. "I'm looking for someone."

The boy cocked his head and moved his gum from one side of his mouth to another. He looked over Chance's shoulder. "You're holding up the line."

"I just need to find the tall man who worked here earlier in the week."

"He ain't here."

"What time does he come in?"

The boy shrugged. "You gonna buy something, or not?"

"Yeah, a burger. Now can I talk to the manager, please?"

"Harry!" the kid yelled.

A redhead about Chance's age came out from the kitchen. "What now?"

"This guy's looking for Adam."

At least Chance could put a name to the face. Adam. It suited him.

The manager squinted. "What for? He skip out on his rent or something?"

Tension pulled at Chance's temples. "No. No, nothing like that. I owe him some money."

"Your buddy left me high and dry. Quit without a day's notice."

Chance's jaw dropped. "He's gone?" *No. Not possible. Chance, you idiot. You waited too long.* "Do you have an address for him?"

"No." Harry stumped back to the kitchen.



“So, you want that burger, or not?”

“Not.” Chance blurted. He spun on his heel and went out the door. Walked across the street, sat on a bench at the bus stop, and gave himself hell for being hesitant. God, he was so sick and tired of all the *if onlys* in his life.

\* \* \* \*

Adam sat at the scarred wooden table in the corner of his apartment that served as a kitchen. It wasn't much, but then he'd never had much. He stacked his bills in a neat pile and separated the coins by denomination. No matter how many times he counted his cash, it always came out the same—not enough. He needed that last paycheck. The manager would be pissed and not likely to hand over any money but he had to try. One more visit to Big-Top and he'd be on his way.

Adam locked the door behind him. Not that he had a lot to protect but he didn't want any surprises when he came back. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and avoided the liquor bottles and used syringes that littered the rundown block he called home. No big deal. The rent was cheap and he could walk to the burger joint.

It was lunchtime but the weather was turning bad and the restaurant was almost empty. Harry was still pissed and not at all happy to see him. “What do you want?”

“I'm sorry. I have a family emergency and I need my pay check.”

Harry laughed in his face. “I don't have your money. You know the pay checks come from the main office.”

“But I need to leave town—”

“I can't help you. Call Personnel and have them mail it.”

“Thanks for nothing.” Adam yelled over his shoulder as he headed for the exit. *Damn! Should I wait for the check?* He really didn't want to stay in town any longer than necessary.

Halfway out the door, Adam saw the suit. Only he wasn't in a suit today. Sitting on a bench across the street, brown-eyes looked good, dressed in jeans and a white shirt, his curls blowing in the breeze. Their eyes caught, held, and warning bells went off in Adam's head. Tamping down a spark of attraction, he averted his eyes. Why wasn't the stalker inside eating? But Adam already knew the answer. *Because I wasn't in there*

*working today.* Without a doubt, there was a thug behind that boyish face, a bounty hunter, somebody the doctor paid off to find him. And somehow the bastard had done it. Right now he was laying a webby trap for Adam. *Well, sorry to disappoint you, boy, but this fly isn't taking the bait.*

Adam forced himself to calm down and turn away. He started walking. Fast. If it were night, disappearing would be so much easier. His best bet might be to duck into an alley and shift. Fleeing on four feet would give him an advantage. Footsteps sounded behind him. How did brown-eyes catch up so quickly?

Suddenly Adam detected a scent that made his blood run cold. His faculty of smell, more canine than human, stored a large repertoire of odors. This one triggered nasty memories. Adam's past had caught up with him again, and this time his father had sent the big guns to bring him in. Adam's hackles rose and a low growl rumbled up his chest. He'd been right to suspect the brown-eyed stalker. The man must have been in close contact with his father all along. *I hope you were paid in advance for finding me, because you're not bringing me in.*

Adam picked up speed, moving quickly down a deserted side street. The footsteps behind him kept pace. Coming up to an alley on his right, he thought again about ducking in, but he decided against it. His pursuer was too close. Guard or soldier, the man would be armed and ready to shoot. Where to go? Adam looked around wildly. The decision was taken out of his hands when a man stepped out of the alley in front of him. *Gerard!*

And who knew how many others. Adam should have left when he had the chance. The money was no use to him if he was captured or killed. Well, he wouldn't make it easy for them. Adam looked over his shoulder trying to find an escape route or a defensible position.

*Daric!* Cornered, Adam froze.

So brown-eyes was just the informer, he didn't do the dirty work. At least Adam would be spared ruining that pretty face.

The two attackers flanked him like bookends. Adam glanced back and forth between them checking one, then the other, gauging his best route of escape. To the right was the alley. Left seemed to be his only option. If they drugged him, he was done for. *Do it!*

He broke to the left and sprinted across the street for the park. In one smooth move, he vaulted over a hedge bordering the west perimeter. One of the men following didn't make it over the bushes and he cursed as he went

down. A projectile whizzed by Adam's ear, just missing him. The sounds of street traffic disappeared as he ran deeper into the park, weaving around trees with ease. Branches lashed his face. He ignored them. The pounding footfalls behind him sounded farther away.

The wind started picking up. As he passed the fountain, water spray carried on the breeze moistened his face. The sound of cracking undergrowth ahead caught his attention. A shadow moved on his right. A third man? How many more were there?

Heart slamming against his ribs, he dove behind a wide cedar trunk and gulped air, trying to slow his breathing enough to hear his pursuers. Back in the direction he'd come from, branches snapped as the men gained on him. *Shit! Think, Adam. Which way?* If he stayed here, he was as good as dead. Maybe not. If he shifted, could he take all three? *Let's find out.* He moved away from the tree—

The next few seconds unfolded in a stop-motion illusion. Gerard and Daric, weapons in hand, sprinted through a break in the trees. From the corner of his eye, Adam saw a third man running toward him, a long thick branch in his hands. *Oh, hell.* Why did it have to be brown-eyes?

Adam closed his eyes and gave free rein to his anger, and his wolf. An unsettled feeling, like a gathering storm, churned in his gut. His muscles flexed and contorted—

Adam's eyes snapped open at the sound of breaking bone and a scream. A gun flew toward the underbrush beside him and he snatched it up. Brown-eyes was yelling at him, "Cover them. I called the police. They'll be here any minute."

Adam didn't stop to think. He looked at Daric. "Drop your weapon!" He didn't know how he'd gotten the upper hand in this situation, but it felt great.

Daric tossed his gun to the dirt and brown-eyes grabbed it. "You're making a big mistake, pretty boy."

"It looks to me like you made the mistake."

Daric ignored him and turned to Adam. "Send the boy away and we can talk about this like civilized men."

Adam snorted. Daric had never treated him as anything other than an animal.

"I'm serious. There's no need to involve anyone else."

"Don't do it, Adam." Brown-eyes had a note of steel in his voice.

“Stay out of it, kid,” Daric cautioned. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.” He turned to Adam. “You’re crazy if you think you can get away.”

Adam snorted. “I’d be crazier not to try.”

Sirens sounded in the distance. Gerard held a limp arm to his chest. He sneered at Adam. “Hear that? Do you really want the police involved? Shoot us and they’ll arrest you for murder.”

Dealing with cops was not an option. If the police arrested Adam, the doctor would use his influence to have Adam released in his custody. Adam kept the gun pointed at Daric. “How can they arrest someone who doesn’t exist? Take off before I change my mind.”

“This isn’t finished, Adam.” But he and Gerard started backing away.

Adam watched them, already regretting letting them go. It might have been worth it to have them dead. He looked over at brown-eyes, absurdly happy that the man hadn’t been working with his assailants.

The smaller man was shaking. “Who are they?”

Tell him the truth? No way, he couldn’t handle it. “Thugs?” Adam shrugged. “I owe money to some bad people.”

Adam’s rescuer didn’t look convinced. “You sure? It sounded personal.”

“For crying out Pete!”

Brown-eyes chuckled.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his curly head, opened his mouth, and then shut it.

*This guy doesn’t give up easy. Time to shift gears.* “Thanks for getting my back.”

“You’re welcome.” Chance stuck out a hand. “I’m Chaunce Hollis. Most people call me Chance. “

“Adam, uh...Wolfe.” He took the offered hand. The man’s palm felt warm and soft and he held it a beat too long, reluctant to give up the comforting touch. “Why?”

Chance shrugged. “I saw them chasing you. Two against one is unfair odds in my book.” The police sirens sounded closer. “The cavalry is here. We should probably leave.” Chance raised a brow. “Unless you want to press charges?”

“No. No police.”

“Okay then, follow me.” Chance was already turning. “I know a shortcut.”

Good sense told Adam to run in the opposite direction. Run and never look back. He ignored the voice of reason and followed Chance through the dense, overgrown section. “You came this way?”

“I know this park inside and out.” Chance threw over his shoulder.

Chance led him through the trees and they emerged on a narrow side street. An awkward moment of silence passed.

*This is where I tell him, “Nice knowing you,” and leave.* Instead Adam blurted, “You could have gotten yourself killed. I should walk you home.”

“Yeah, you should.” Chance grinned at him and scouted the street carefully as they walked. “So could you. Have gotten yourself killed, I mean.”

Adam shrugged. “I’m used to taking care of myself.”

“Everyone needs help once in a while.”

“Not me.”

“So sue me.” Chance gestured across the street to an elegant five-story building. “We’re home.”

*Home...* A lump formed in Adam’s chest. “Go on, I’ll wait till you get inside.”

“At least come in for a drink.”

“I can’t.”

“Please. What if they’re waiting inside?”

Adam suspected Chance might be faking the fear, but whether he knew it or not, he had good reason to be afraid. *And I owe him.* “Okay, let’s go.”

Chance grinned like a boy and Adam couldn’t help returning a smile.

The shorter man’s hands trembled as he fumbled with the keys. Adam took them, trying to ignore the tingle when they brushed fingers. For a minute, their eyes locked and his stomach dropped like a runaway elevator. This was a bad idea. He’d check around and leave. “I’ll go first.” The small foyer had a narrow curving staircase and an elevator. It was empty.

He motioned for Chance to follow. “Let’s take the stairs—”

Chance was already jabbing at the elevator button, the doors opened immediately and he got in. He looked at Adam expectantly. Adam hesitated. He hated confined space, had sworn hell would freeze over before he ever got in an elevator. But how could he act like a baby after what Chance had done for him? Adam took a deep breath, stepped inside, and the walls

started closing in on him. He clutched the sticky metal handrail, the breath locked in his lungs. He was aware of Chance staring at him. How could the smaller man feel so at ease in this airless box? The elevator lurched to a stop at the third floor and he sighed in relief.

\* \* \* \*

*He's afraid of elevators.* For some reason the big man's vulnerability only made him more appealing. Yeah, Chance was most definitely taken with this guy. Stupid, since Adam was obviously involved with some shady characters. Well, Chance had been around plenty of thugs, it came with a reporter's territory, and assholes didn't scare him. Not much, anyway. Not enough to write Adam off. "This is my floor." Chance walked down the hallway, willing Adam to follow him. Adam was so skittish, Chance feared he would turn around and the man would be gone. He couldn't blame him, what with two armed men after him. *I don't care what he says, that was no ordinary mugging.*

Adam still held his keys. "Wait here." He unlocked the door, went in, and was back out in a minute. "All clear. You can go in. Lock up after me and don't open for anyone."

Chance didn't move. Pride and dignity were pretty hard to come by, for him anyway. They were also highly overrated. Neither would keep him warm at night or—he smiled to himself—give him an orgasm. He looked up at Adam, begging him with his eyes. "Stay with me tonight."

"I can't."

"Please." It occurred to him Adam might be heterosexual. "You're gay, aren't you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Probably."

*Bi-curious.* Chance sighed in relief. "Just come in and talk for a while. I don't want to be alone."

"You don't understand. You'll be safer here without me."

"Not if your friends come back."

"What makes you think I'm better than them? You don't know me—"

"But I want to." Adam was waffling. Encouraged, Chance pressed on. "Please don't make me beg, not any more than I already have. Just one drink."

"I don't drink, but okay, just for a minute."

Heart thudding against his ribs, Chance watched Adam make a more thorough inspection of his living room. He went right to the bookshelves lining an entire wall.

Adam selected a volume of Shakespeare and thumbed through the pages. A rare smile lit up his face. "You have a nice collection."

*A man who looks like a Greek god and reads Shakespeare. If I'm dreaming, I don't want to wake up.*

"You're welcome to borrow whatever you want."

The smile disappeared as he replaced the book. "I won't be in town long enough."

Chance felt his heart sink again. This rollercoaster ride would kill him for sure. "Uh, have a seat. Do you want a drink? Water?"

"No, I can't stay long." But he did sit on the big overstuffed chair Chance's father had given him when the old man bought new furniture. Chance sat across from him on the mismatched couch. Adam regarded him quizzically. "I have to ask you something, Chance."

"Shoot."

"Why in god's name do you eat in that horrible burger joint every day?"

Chance burst out laughing. "I'm looking at him right now."

Adam looked totally taken aback. No one could fake that kind of surprise. The big guy gripped the arms of the chair then started to hoist himself up. "I think I'd better get—"

Chance rushed over to Adam and put his hands on his shoulders to keep him from getting up. He'd been expecting this response but he had no intention of letting Adam get away.

When Chance stepped back, Adam leaned over, rested his elbows on his knees and cradled his head in his hands. "You don't understand. And believe me, it's better that way. You don't want to get involved in my problems."

"Too late. I think I'm already involved." Chance got down on his knees and grabbed Adam's hands. He might get the shit knocked out of him, but it wouldn't be the first time. "You don't have to tell me all the details. Not until you're ready. Just stay the night."

"Bad idea."

"No, good idea. Those creeps might be waiting at your apartment to finish what they started."

Adam's eyes opened wider as if he hadn't considered that thought.

Chance pressed on. "As for me, I haven't been this attracted to a man in a long time. I'd like to see where it goes." He squeezed Adam's hands.

Adam pulled his hands away and the rejection stabbed at Chance's heart, but he refused to give up. He climbed onto Adam's lap, straddling his thighs. Trying to control his trembling hands, Chance gripped Adam's face, and pressed his mouth to the full sensuous lips in front of him. Those lips remained tightly shut, but only for a few seconds. Then Chance's thrusting tongue coaxed Adam's mouth open and darted inside to explore. Adam relaxed, gripped Chance's hair, and held him in place, returning the kiss eagerly. A kiss had never tasted so good, felt so right, or made Chance so hard.

They broke for air and Adam whispered against his lips, "*The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss. A dateless bargain to engrossing death!*"

A chill went up Chance's spine at Adam's words, Romeo's last kiss, his good-bye to Juliet. Who the hell were those guys in the park, and what did they want with his Romeo? Chance had a horrible premonition that if he let Adam out of his sight, he'd never see him again.

He fumbled with the zipper of Adam's jeans and felt a big hand closing over his, stopping him. Fat chance. Nothing could stop him now. He kissed Adam's eyes, his nose, worked his way down the stubbled jaw. Adam groaned and squeezed his hands before releasing them. Chance took it as a yes and lowered Adam's zipper, reaching inside to release his erection.

The first touch of silky skin over steel almost made Chance come right then. Christ, the man was big all over. His thumb circled the purple head, spreading pearly fluid. Chance wanted to taste, suck, swallow him whole. "Does this feel good?"

Adam sighed and covered Chance's hand with his, moving their hands up and down the shaft together.

"I can make it even better. I want to suck your cock."

Adam stilled and turned beet red. "I don't want...I mean I want to, but..."

"Stay with me tonight. Let me show you how good it can be."

Chance had been afraid he wouldn't measure up, but Adam seemed even more insecure and vulnerable. He had a moment of panic, wondering if Adam would decide he didn't want this and split. God, he hoped not. Chance leaned over and nuzzled Adam's throat. "Do you want me, Romeo?"



A strangled groan was his answer.

“You know where the bedroom is,” he whispered into Adam’s ear. “Jesus!” Literally swept into the air, he wrapped his legs around Adam’s waist and clung to his neck. He hadn’t been carried since he was a little kid.

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## Chapter Six

The touch of lips had been a delicious sensation, every bit as pleasurable as Adam had imagined it. Chance's kiss had started gentle, but turned fierce quickly, and the passionate contact had sent Adam spiraling out of control. It might be the death of him, but he wanted more.

Adam carried Chance into the bedroom, laid him crosswise on the bed and followed him down. Chance groaned along with the bedsprings as the full weight of Adam's body landed on top of him.

Afraid he'd hurt the smaller man, Adam pulled back.

Suddenly unburdened, Chance looked up in surprise.

"God, I'm sorry," Adam blurted. "Sometimes I forget how—"

"Don't you fucking move." Chance growled, wrapping his limbs around Adam like an octopus and grinding his hips in ecstatic pleasure. "Not unless it's to take your clothes off."

Stunned, Adam froze for a few seconds then grinned as he settled back down. Just this once he wanted to feel like a real man. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Sometimes a little hurt can be a good thing. If you were really hurting me, you'd know it."

"I don't ever want to hurt you, Chance."

\* \* \* \*

The expression on Adam's face turned Chance's insides to mush. A big, deep, passionate kiss followed and a throbbing ache started in his groin. This time Chance pulled away and Adam grunted in protest.

"Tell me what you like, Romeo. Do you want to fuck me?" *God, I hope I have condoms.*

"I don't know."

"It's okay to be confused. Just tell me what you want. I'm up for anything."

"I shouldn't have stayed. It's not safe—"

"Playing completely safe means not playing at all. That's not acceptable. Not to me. Don't worry, I think I have condoms around here somewhere..." Chance struggled to reach the nightstand.

"Condoms?"

Chance's heart sank. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"I've never done this before." Adam blurted out the words like they left a bad taste in his mouth.

*A virgin!* That was a heavy responsibility, but one Chance was only too happy to take on. "It's okay, Romeo, we'll take it slow and you don't have to worry, I'm clean."

"Clean?"

"I've been tested. I'm HIV negative. No sexually transmitted diseases."

"I'm not diseased either."

"Good." Sometimes Adam had a strange way of expressing himself, but it was quirky and cute, and one of the little things Chance liked about him. "Now we need to get these clothes off."

Adam didn't look entirely convinced, but he struggled out of Chance's stranglehold, stood, and offered Chance a hand. "You're the boss."

Adam had to be joking, but his face was dead serious. Adam looked like a superhero, but sometimes he acted more like a man who was used to following orders. Chance wanted to assure him that he didn't expect anything Adam wasn't willing to give. "There are no bosses here. If something makes you uncomfortable, tell me and we'll stop."

"I don't think there's anything you could do to me that I wouldn't like."

Chance's heart swelled in his chest. Having someone trust him so completely was an incredible feeling. He had never wanted anyone more. Or wanted so much to please a lover. Anxious and apprehensive at the same time, Chance eyed the straining erection poking out of Adam's jeans. A shudder ran down his spine. Chance had taken some well-hung lovers in his time, but none of them could compare with Adam.

Grinning foolishly, Adam toed off his shoes and hooked his fingers in Chance's belt, pulling him closer. "Like what you see?"

"I like it just fine." He groped Adam and all fears were forgotten as they attacked each other's buttons in a frenzied attempt to get naked.

Finally, their clothes littered the floor and Chance drank in Adam's glorious body from broad shoulders, to hard chest, to fuzzy, flat stomach. A dark line of hair led from Adam's bellybutton to his pubes. Chance licked his lips in anticipation. Then adolescent insecurity took over. His cock was nowhere near as big as Adam's. He looked down at his feet, afraid to see disappointment on his lover's face.

Adam made a strangled sound and Chance looked up. His breath caught in his throat at the predatory look on Adam's face. Overly long, shaggy hair framed eyes full of savage, sexual heat. "You are so beautiful." Adam's hoarse voice and heartfelt words were like a sleek, reassuring caress, making Chance's body vibrate and his cock weep with lust. "The most beautiful man I've ever seen."

Suddenly wrapped in strong arms, Adam's mouth, hard and bruising, came down over his. The aggressive kiss overpowered him, and he loved it. Sucking at the long tongue thrust between his lips, he willed it to go forever.

Then he was pulling at Adam, urging him back toward the bed, and straddling his thighs when they landed hard on the mattress.

\* \* \* \*

Adam groaned again. He couldn't seem to help himself. *This is really happening.* Chance's naked body pressed against his felt better than anything he'd experienced on his own. The friction between their stiff dicks created a fire hotter than any Adam had set off by rubbing two sticks together.

Chance brushed his lips over Adam's, then took a path across Adam's jaw and down his throat. Instinctively, Adam tilted his head to give Chance better access. Chance took advantage of the silent submission and sucked on his neck.

*Oh, God!* Adam gripped the sheets and told himself to relax, but it was impossible with Chance nibbling at his flesh. Then warm breath fanned Adam's ear and Chance was whispering flowery words of endearment from Shakespeare.

Adam let out a shaky breath. No one had ever treated him like this before, and it sent a wave of unfamiliar sensation coursing through his body. Chance lifted his head then captured Adam's mouth in a sweet kiss. In all his time at the lab, he'd never seen a kiss between men. It was such an intimate act, and Adam loved the feelings it brought out of him. He had a burning desire, an aching need, for more and his arms came around Chance's shoulders to pull him closer. A savage harmony existed between them, and it overrode any lingering inhibitions Adam possessed.

They stopped to take a breath and Adam stared at Chance's flushed face, his wild hair, his swollen lips, and thought his heart would burst.

Chance smiled and brushed Adam's long hair back from his brow. Adam expected another kiss, but Chance bent his head to Adam's chest and licked at a nipple. Adam gasped as Chance nipped, then sucked at the nub of flesh. Heat curled in his belly, and his cock leaked drops of fluid. Chance teased his other nipple with slender fingers and Adam whimpered with pleasure, only the tiniest bit embarrassed by his reactions.

A hand circled Adam's cock, and then Chance slid down his body and a hot, wet tongue lapped up the fluid leaking from the slit. Nothing in Adam's limited experience had ever felt so good, certainly not his own hand. Could he do the same for Chance? He wanted to try.

"Hmm..." Chance murmured with pleasure. "You taste so good."

Adam marveled at this miracle. Chance thought his seed tasted good. The words made him burn hotter. If anyone could make him forget the past, it was Chance.

\* \* \* \*

Chance was in heaven. Adam's cock was perfect, long, and thick, cut... just perfect. Shifting position, he tongued the slit for another clear pearl of pre-cum. He took the spongy head in his mouth and sucked, then let his lips slide up and down the thick shaft, taking as much as he could and wrapping his fist around the rest. His own cock pulsed with the need to come, but he ignored the climax building up inside him, to concentrate on Adam's pleasure. Releasing Adam's shaft with a wet pop, he gave attention to the heavy sac, licking and sucking, taking each ball into his mouth. Then he went beyond, circling the puckered rim with his tongue.

Adam moaned and keened under the attention. The harsh, guttural growls, coming from deep in the big man's chest, thrilled Chance to the core. He loved hearing Adam's animal noises, knowing how desperate the man was for him.

Adam pulled on his curls. "Ahhh...I'm going to come."

"Not yet, Romeo. I want your cum." Chance swallowed the thick length, deeper than he'd ever thought possible. Sucking and pumping in tandem, he felt Adam's balls tighten and then the salty splash of cum against the back of his throat as Adam cried out his name. Chance sucked him dry then curled up alongside him. Adam's climax had pushed him right to the edge and he fisted his cock.

“Uh, let me. I want to do this for you.” Adam pulled Chance’s hand away and replaced it with his own. “I hope you’re not disappointed. I’ve never done this before.”

Weirdly happy that he would be Adam’s first blowjob, Chance pulled him in for a quick kiss. “Are you kidding?” Chance breathed, arching his hips for more contact. “I’m ready to blow now. I’ll probably go off at the first touch of your tongue.”

Adam shifted position, licked his lips, and bent his head to Chance’s groin. Chance hissed in a breath of air when a long sandpaper tongue licked a wet path up his shaft and swirled around the head of his cock. Before he could let out a moan, wet warmth enveloped him. Adam took him deep, swallowing him until his nose pressed against Chance’s pubic hair. Adam’s hands gripped his buttocks, squeezing and holding him steady as he tried to mimic Chance’s moves. Adam might be a novice but he was born to suck cock. It was an embarrassingly quick orgasm, and the best one of Chance’s life.

Adam seemed bent on sucking Chance’s brains out through his cock. Chance had to tug on his hair to get him to stop. “Oh, God, Romeo, that was so good.”

“Really?” Adam moved up to lie beside him.

“Really.” Chance could hardly believe a man like Adam might have performance anxiety, but there it was. He leaned into Adam and laid an arm across his chest. “You were more than good. You made me feel amazing. I’m glad you’re here.”

Adam lay very still, a faraway look in his eyes, long legs stretched out in front of him, his cock hard again and pointing straight up at the ceiling like the mast of a ship. One strong arm anchored Chance to his side.

Being with Adam made Chance feel safe and secure—and horny. He rubbed his burgeoning erection against Adam’s hip and his cock stiffened at the friction. God, he wanted Adam to fuck him. He’d never been so smitten, so quickly. Knowing so little about the man didn’t temper his feelings in the least. On the contrary, the mystery only made Adam more desirable in his eyes. Wriggling out of the big man’s grasp, he buried his face in the pungent nest at his groin, yelping when Adam gripped his hair and pulled his head up.

“What’s the matter, I wore you out already?” Chance complained.

“Not hardly. I’m just thinking of you. What time do you have to get up for work?”

“I don’t have a job.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “You always wear a suit to a burger joint?”

Batting his eyes, Chance tried out his most seductive grin. “Only when I want to impress someone.”

Adam laughed and pulled him close. “You don’t need a suit to do that.” He kissed him soundly, before releasing him. “In fact, I’m much more impressed with your birthday suit.” A big warm hand slid over his hip. “What’s the real answer?”

“I quit.”

Running a hand through the curls on Adam’s chest, Chance tweaked a nipple, pleased to see his Romeo’s eyes darken with renewed lust. Adam stilled his hand. “What happened?”

This time with Adam was special and Chance refused to ruin it by talking about Concise or his father. “My ex-boss is a jerk and a homophobe, we never got along...” He shrugged. “It’s been coming for a long time. Now I’m all yours.” He leaned in for a kiss. “Timing is everything. We’re both jobless, it’s gotta be fate.”

“Some fate,” Adam said tightly. “You sure know how to pick ‘em.”

“I think I made the right choice. You have a lot going for you, Adam. A man who can quote Shakespeare shouldn’t be working in a dump like Big-Top.”

“And why were you working a job you hated?”

“I like to eat.” Chance nuzzled Adam’s neck and nipped his earlobe.

Adam’s eyes filled with naked longing. “God, you’re beautiful.” Pulling his head down, he kissed Chance soundly.

Chance thoroughly enjoyed the kiss and might have let it go on forever, but his curiosity demanded a few answers. He nipped Adam’s bottom lip as he pulled away. “You can’t change the subject so easily. Just one question?”

“Only one?”

“Promise.”

“Shoot.”

“I already did.” Adam’s chuckle pleased him. Few signs remained of the surly man he’d first met in the burger joint. That Adam had been unsmiling and gruff. The Adam in his bed smiled and laughed, whispered love poems in his ear, and made the most amazing sounds when he came. If

Chance didn't know better, he might think he was already in love. He wriggled out of Adam's grasp and propped himself up on an elbow. "So why were you working in Big-Top Burgers?"

Sighing, Adam appeared to consider his next words carefully. "I read a lot and I have a good memory, but not having a degree makes it tough to get a good job. Besides, I'm always on the move."

Chance felt his chest tighten. "About that."

"Uh, uh. You said one question."

"It's not a question." *Fuck, how do I put this?* "I don't want you to leave. Not yet." *Not ever.*

A wistful expression passed over Adam's face, almost instantly masked by guarded withdrawal. "I get bored staying in one place too long. There's nothing here for me."

The words cut deep and Chance didn't have a response. Rolling over, he buried his face in the pillow and waited for Adam to take them back. Silently, his lover cuddled him but the words remained a barrier between them.

\* \* \* \*

Adam lay in the dark, enjoying the sound of Chance snoring softly beside him. He'd never had a bed partner before and he discovered he liked the intimacy of sleeping with someone. Not just any someone. Chance was special. He made Adam feel like a new man, free from the past. Free from his father. He wished he could hang on to that feeling forever, but it was an impossible dream.

He'd lied to Chance. Boredom had nothing to do with him leaving, and Chance was more than enough reason for him to stay, but a relationship was not in the cards. Not for him. Already, Adam regretted hurting a man he'd come to care for, but it would be worse if he let it go on any longer. The alarm clock on the nightstand said two in the morning. He'd allowed himself the pleasure of sharing a bed with Chance for a few hours, but now he had to go.

It would have been smarter to walk Chance home, make sure he was okay, and leave. A little voice inside his head whispered, "He'll never be okay now, thanks to you."



Yes, he would. As soon as Adam got out of town and led his attackers away from here, Chance could go back to his old life.

Twirling a gold curl in his fingers, he looked down at his sleeping lover, regretfully. *I don't want to go, Chance, but what I want doesn't matter. If I stay, I'll put you in danger and I can't let that happen.* His hands shook as he tucked the blanket around Chance. Then he slipped out of bed as noiselessly as a cat.

Cautiously, he opened the bedroom door. The hinges whined and he stopped to listen. The room was silent, except for the snores coming from Chance. Adam pushed the door another inch. He could see Chance was a deep sleeper, but he was still afraid of waking him. Adam couldn't afford to be careless tonight. He looked over his shoulder once more before leaving the bedroom. Chance was sleeping on his back, curls spilled over the pillow, the thin sheet tangled around his spread legs. So beautiful, he took Adam's breath away. His eyes took in every detail, committed them to memory. God, he missed Chance already. It took all his will, to keep from climbing back into bed with him. Knowing he was doing the right thing didn't help. Leaving still felt all wrong.

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## Chapter Seven

The hotel room smelled of deodorizers, cigarette smoke, and sweat. It wouldn't surprise Gerard if the place was infested with bedbugs. He sat on one of the full size beds, the mattress shook, and he spilled scotch down the gauze on his arm. "Motherfucker!"

Daric came out of the bathroom and looked over at him. "Now what?"

"Every time the fucking elevator goes past this floor, the room shakes like a plane ready for takeoff."

Daric laughed. "We won't be staying in this fleabag much longer."

"Calling this a fleabag is an insult to the fleas." Gerard griped, wincing. "How about a refill?" He held out his tumbler.

Daric narrowed his eyes. "How's the arm?"

Gerard shook his head. "How do you think it is? It hurts." He cradled the arm to his chest. "The tape helps some," he admitted grudgingly. "We should go back today. Let the doc set my arm and then come back with reinforcements."

"No way, I'm not splitting the reward with anyone else. We tracked the freak this far and the money belongs to us."

"Yeah, yeah—and if we end up dead, what good will the money do us?"

"I have no intention of dying or going back without him. I spent twenty years of my life in that freak show and I deserve every penny of the bounty. This is my retirement plan."

"Well, getting my arm broke and being stuck in the Discomfort Inn was not part of my plan. This place is ready for the wrecking ball."

"Stop griping, it's your own fucking fault you let the kid get one over on you."

"Hey, he took me by surprise. How was I supposed to—"

"Forget it. We'll get the freak and take care of the kid, too. I have a plan and we won't need a fucking army."

"I'm listening."

"Ever hear of Beauty and the Beast? Our beast is in love. All we have to do is pick up the pretty boy and hold him as collateral. We'll leave notes in both apartments. The freak comes to the rescue and we're gold."

"Sounds good, except for one little detail. What if the freak doesn't bite?"

“He’ll go for it. Just dangle a bone, or in his case a boner, in front of his nose and like any good dog, he’ll come running. I wonder if the kid knows exactly what he hooked up with. Ah, well, it doesn’t matter. He won’t live long enough to tell anyone.”

Daric poured himself a drink and touched his glass to Gerard’s. “Cheers.”

\* \* \* \*

Chance woke at dawn and reached out for Adam. Instead he discovered a cold, empty space beside him that froze his heart.

*Dear God, please don’t let him be gone.*

Chance had never fallen so hard, so fast. In the short time he’d known Adam, he’d bonded with him in a way he never had with anyone else. He wasn’t ready to give that up, but in his heart he knew Adam was already gone. He had to check anyway, first the bathroom, then the rest of the apartment. Not a sign remained that Adam had ever been there, not even a good-bye note. Romeo had ended their relationship before it even began. This kind of thing always happened to him. Every time something good came his way it turned out to be too good to be true.

*I should have seen it coming, but why me? Am I so undeserving that I can’t catch a break?*

Disappointment was nothing new to Chance. He’d been on autopilot to the land of dashed hopes since he’d been born, but this time he couldn’t let it go. No way could he pretend he was cool with this outcome.

Disappointment turned to anger.

*Well, fuck him! He isn’t the only man in town.*

Tonight Chance would go to a club, meet somebody new, and let him fuck his brains out.

*Yeah, that’ll show him.*

Chance knew it wouldn’t happen. He hated clubs, and he didn’t want anyone else. Something had told him Adam could be “the one.” Wrong. People always let him down. Well, no more. Never again would he put his trust in another man. From now on, he would make it on his own.

Resolved to forget Adam, Chance took a shower, brewed a pot of coffee, and sat down in the living room to watch the news.

*“This spring has been one of the most violent in Philadelphia. Large numbers of muggings, carjackings, and homicides are forcing citizens indoors and politicians to confront the city’s crime problem.”*

An uneasy feeling roiled in the pit of Chance’s stomach. Had Adam been the victim of a simple mugging? He didn’t think so. Adam had been hiding something from him. Chance was sure of it. He had a nose for news, and right now it was telling him there was a story here.

His eye fell on the book of Shakespeare’s plays. Romeo had a good heart. Trouble was dogging Adam, but it wasn’t of his making. And he was just the type of man who would want to protect Chance from whatever shit he’d gotten involved in. If Chance hadn’t been so focused on himself, instead of Adam, he would have realized it sooner.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

You’re a journalist, he told himself. He knew how to find people. Somehow he would track Adam down and help him. And he would not take no for an answer.

Chance grabbed his keys and cell, but before he could leave the apartment, his phone vibrated in his hand. He looked at the display. Shit, his dad’s lawyer. Chance debated ignoring it. The old bastard had probably disowned him because he’d quit his job. It would be just like him to have his lawyer do the dirty work and deliver the news. He really didn’t have time for this now. Chance shoved the phone in his pocket and went out the door.

An uncomfortable feeling of being watched came over him. Chance scanned the block, but no one was out. His street was pretty isolated today, come to think of it. Middle of the workweek—of course, the gossiping neighbors were off at their jobs. Still, his flesh crawled as he neared the middle of the block and still didn’t see anyone, and his palms felt just a bit sweaty. Maybe this was a bad idea. What did he really know about Adam? He should let sleeping dogs lie and just try to forget about this man, but he knew he’d regret it if he did. He’d always wonder what might have been.

His breath caught in his throat at a scuffling sound behind him. Heart slamming against his ribs, he whirled around, relief flooding over him at the sight of a rat foraging around somebody’s trash bin. When he was safely back in his apartment, he’d laugh about being so nervous, but right now, he didn’t feel much like laughing.

Flustered, he shoved a hand in his jacket pocket. His cell phone was right there, he could call for help. And wasn't Adam worth the risk? It had been years since he felt this way about anyone. He wasn't ready to give up on the man. Was it so wrong to want to see where these feelings might lead him?

Chance's first stop would be Big-Top Burgers. He'd play on the manager's sympathy and try to get an address for Adam. If that didn't work, Chance would offer him money. Best-case scenario, he'd head to Adam's apartment and find him there. If not, Chance would go to his contacts at the newspaper and enlist their help. Once he had Adam's social security number, tax documents, and other ID, he'd be able to track him.

Chance entered the fast food joint full of hope, but the manager was on a break, and wouldn't be back for twenty minutes. He considered ordering something, but the greasy burgers didn't smell appealing. Chance glanced through the window and spotted the bench at the bus stop. He could wait there and watch for the manager's return. By the time Chance crossed the busy street, commuters had taken over the bench. Annoyed, he entered the park to look for Bill. The homeless vet wasn't there, but Chance had a little time to kill. He sat on the bench to wait.

The cell phone vibrated in his pocket and Chance pulled it out. The lawyer. Again. The man would not give up. Chance might as well get it over with.

*Your father...heart attack...sorry for your loss...*

Stunned, Chance only heard every other word. He combed a hand through his unruly hair and was surprised to find his face wet with tears. Disconnecting the call, he covered his face with his hands and cried like he was five years old.

Chance composed himself and tried to make sense of a world suddenly turned upside down. His father was dead, and the powerful emotions bombarding Chance had caught him completely off guard. He hadn't even known the old man had a heart condition. *Would I have acted any differently if I'd known?* They'd never been close in life, but they were undeniably connected.

By the time Chance had entered first grade, he'd made up his mind that he didn't like his father. He saw him as stern and remote, a man who laid down the law. Chance was a rebellious teenager, and when his mother died, the relationship between him and his father only got worse. The horrible

things they'd said to each other...Would he ever be able to forgive himself for all the times he wished his father dead? He'd said it out of anger, never really meaning it. If he could take it back, he would.

The lawyer had said something about arrangements. A funeral. It was all spelled out in the will. The will. It suddenly occurred to Chance that he was now a rich man. When he'd gone along with his father's wishes and taken a position at Concise Communications, his father made him the primary beneficiary of his estate. Now Chance could write full-time and never have to worry about paying the rent again. The thought brought a wry smile to his face. The old man would turn over in his grave if he thought his son was using Hollis money to follow a dream.

Chance could fulfill a lot of dreams with that money. An important human-interest story had been his goal, and still was, but now he could do more. He could really help Bill and others, too. Chance had a mission. He envisioned a group started by veterans for veterans, maybe an Outreach Center that would provide a network of support for the homeless, the sick, the alcoholics...He'd get Bill to talk to other vets, while he started looking around for a storefront. Adam could help him.

*Adam.*

Chance looked at his watch. The manager should be back by now. Maybe he should give up this obsession with Romeo. Concentrate on his father's affairs and Bill. After all, Adam had said, in no uncertain terms, he was leaving because there was nothing here for him. That included Chance. Why couldn't he accept the words at face value and move on? Maybe he was kidding himself, but he didn't believe them. The way Adam looked at him, his tone, everything gave lie to his words.

Besides Adam needed him, and right now Chance needed Adam just as much. A void had opened up in his life and he needed a friend, an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on. He would deal with the arrangements later. Now he'd play PI.

Mind made up, Chance stood and headed for the exit. He hadn't gotten far when a hand clamped down on his shoulder. *Bill?*

"Don't turn around. There's a gun at your back."

Something hard pressed against his spine, and Chance knew the man wasn't lying. His legs went rubbery and he had an urge to go down on his knees and cross himself.

A second man appeared, and Chance grinned humorlessly at his taped arm, glad that he'd been the one to break it. He should have known these pricks would be back for him if they couldn't find Adam. Chance scanned the area, wondering if he could make a run for it.

"Just do as you're told and maybe you'll get to see your boyfriend again."

*Oh, fuck!* Chance's heart stuttered. They already had Adam? "If you hurt him, I'll—"

"You'll what?" The man behind him laughed then reached in Chance's pocket for his keys and cell phone. He tossed them to his friend. Then he nudged Chance toward a black SUV. "Let's see if Adam is as concerned about your welfare."

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## Chapter Eight

Chance felt sick, so fucking sick. He tried to focus, but his face was throbbing and his guts were aching. He'd bitten clear through his lip and the coppery taste of blood in his mouth threatened to make him heave. He must have passed out. It could have been a few minutes or a few hours, he had no idea. He was glad he didn't know much about Adam. They wouldn't be able to get anything useful from him no matter how much they beat him.

"Ah, I see our guest is awake." The voice echoed out of the dark, and a tall shape unfolded itself from the shadows. A spotlight came on as the man approached and Chance squinted in the sudden light. "Are you ready to talk now?"

"Fuck you!" Chance spat out the words in a spray of blood.

"Suit yourself, pretty boy."

Chance tried to move but his hands and feet were duct-taped to a chair. He licked at his puffy lips and tried to look around. One eye was swollen shut, the other wouldn't focus. *Get a grip. Figure out where you are.* Wherever he was, the place smelled of oil and gas. A garage?

"Make yourself comfortable, pretty boy. You might have a long wait. What do you think? Will your boyfriend show?"

*Yeah, I think so.* "He's not my boyfriend. You assholes picked the wrong bait."

"I don't think so." The man's eyes glittered as he ran his fingers through Chance's thick curls with a hum of appreciation. "Pretty hair."

The one-armed man approached, swinging a tire iron with his good hand.

The fingers in Chance's hair tightened and Chance's head was pulled back. "Don't you think his hair is pretty, Gerard?"

Gerard growled in response and hefted the iron.

"He's not very happy with you, Chance. It was all I could do to keep him from breaking your arms. I finally convinced him we should wait for Adam to join the party."

The threat made Chance's heart jolt, and he was afraid his bladder might fail him. He was pretty sure he wouldn't get out of this alive.

"And while we're waiting, I'll tell you a story to pass the time. Once upon a time, there was a mad doctor who used his knowledge of the human body to perform freakish experiments..."



\* \* \* \*

Night had fallen. It was time to go, time to blend into the darkness and find a Greyhound station, get a ticket to anywhere, and start laying a trail that would lead Daric and Gerard out of town and away from Chance.

Adam wasn't used to worrying about someone else. The emotion made his chest ache and his nerves fray. He wondered if Chance felt the same. He was being foolish. Chance might hurt now, but it wouldn't last. His life would go on. A sweet, good-looking guy like him would have men falling all over themselves to get in his bed.

A possessive growl rumbled up Adam's chest and he forced it down. He had no right to be jealous. *Forget about him.* Adam should be worrying about himself. Not only was he in deep shit with the bad guys hot on his heels, but now he'd experienced something that made him realize just how lonely and miserable his future was going to be.

The best thing he could do for Chance would be to get out of town and get out fast. To hell with his last check, he'd get by somehow.

All his belongings fit into one small bag. He slung the duffle over his shoulder, and took a quick look around to see if he'd forgotten anything. He wouldn't miss the apartment, it was a dump, but it had been nice having his own space, where he could come and go as he pleased. He took the stairs to the first floor landing and checked his mailbox for the last time.

Only one envelope waited for him. No stamp, no postmark, no name or address, just a plain white envelope...reeking with a scent that turned his stomach to ice. His hands shook as he opened it and pulled out a sheet of lined paper.

*If you want your boyfriend to live, come to the garage at Fifth and South.* Adam fingered the gold curl taped to the paper and felt his heart twist.

The hair held the scent of blood. Chance's blood.  
He would go. He had to.

\* \* \* \*

The windows of the abandoned garage were boarded up, but the back door had been left unlocked. Adam felt his hackles rise as the door creaked

open. The stink of gas and oil overwhelmed his sensitive nose, but even in the dim light, he could see well enough to spot a man tied to a chair in the back corner, a curly head slumped forward against his chest.

Adam's heart ached. *This is my fault.* He approached the corner, every sense attuned to hear the faintest breath sounds. Was Chance even alive?

"That's close enough."

Adam turned toward the voice and found himself looking down the barrel of a gun held by Daric.

"Let him go. He has nothing to do with this."

Daric laughed, a cold sinister sound. "What, no 'Hello'? No 'Long time, no see'? No 'How are you, Daric'? And after all we've meant to each other. I'm truly hurt."

"What have you done to him?"

"Gerard."

The other man came in through the open door, walked over, and twisted his fingers in Chance's hair to yank his head up. "Say something, Chance, so your boyfriend knows you're okay."

Chance's eyes were wide with fear, his face swollen and battered. "Run." It was all he could get out. Gerard let him go and his head wobbled.

"You bastards," Adam spat at Gerard. He took a step toward Chance and the gun went off. Chance's head jerked and for a minute Adam thought he'd been hit, but that hadn't been Daric's intention.

"Do as you're told. Next time, I won't miss."

Adam knew he meant every word. "What do you want?"

"You, of course. You were never meant to see the light of day. Your father wants you back, and he put a huge bounty on your head. I spent the best years of my life in that hellhole, training you, and the others. I deserve compensation for those years. A live specimen will bring a higher price from your father, but I won't hesitate to shoot if you give me any trouble."

"I won't give you any trouble. Let him go and I'll come quietly. You'll get all your money."

"I'm afraid it's not that easy. He knows too much."

"You miserable..." Adam made a move toward Daric, but stopped cold when Daric pointed his gun at Chance and pumped a bullet into the chamber. "Don't make me kill him, Adam." Daric moved closer to Chance, his free hand playing in the man's curls. "He is a sweet boy, Adam. Even now he's worrying about you instead of himself. I've grown rather attached

to him. In fact, I've decided to keep him. I've been wanting a pet to warm my bed. He'll do nicely."

Adam's lip curled back and he growled, a low, inhuman sound. His nails bit into his palms.

"Ah, yes, pet, see, I didn't lie to you. The beast is fighting to get out. Look up and watch it."

Chance lifted his head and looked at Adam.

"You should have told him, Adam. He had no idea what he'd gotten himself into, but that's what happens when you sleep with dogs."

Adam's throat went thick, he was afraid to look at Chance, to see the revulsion in his eyes. "Please let him go." He wasn't above begging for Chance's life. "I'll do anything."

Daric kept the gun pointed at Adam. "You'll do it anyway, knowing I have your boyfriend under my control. Face the truth, Adam. You have no say, and no rights. You're not human and just because you've passed for one doesn't make it so. Legally, you don't even exist. You have no birth certificate, you're just an entry in a registry."

Adam's muscles quivered and pulsed. A tiny spark ignited inside him, but he remained silent. "You're so predictable, Adam, a liability, just like your mother, and you'll cry and beg for your life just like she did."

Adam recoiled as if he'd been hit by a truck. A spark shot along his nerves like fire in tinder. The hair on his arms stood on end. "*My mother?*" he snarled, holding himself in human form by sheer force of will.

"Yes, your dear, departed mother. I killed her myself, on your father's orders. And with her dying breath, she begged—for your life. So selfless. So weak. She really believed he would let you go."

Something snapped inside, the spark exploded into a raging inferno, and Adam let the wolf spring free. He lunged at Daric, powerful hind legs propelling him through the air. Two black paws hit Daric's chest, knocking him to the floor. A gun went off and the smoke burned his nostrils, but there was no stopping Adam as he sank sharp fangs into the man's throat and crushed the windpipe between his jaws. He held his grip, feeling Daric struggle until he had no more breath left in his body, then, satisfied, he licked his muzzle clean.

\* \* \* \*

Aching and half-blinded with tears, Chance wasn't sure how much of what he was seeing was just his imagination, but his ears told him that a big, snarling animal was loose in the garage. Adam seemed to be having some kind of seizure. His body wavered and twisted in the dim light.

Chance narrowed his good eye, blinked, blinked again. The dark hair on Adam's body was spreading. A sable pelt advanced up his chest and down over his hips. It was like watching a time-lapse sequence, except that what he saw *could not* be happening.

Adam dropped to all fours, and Chance realized the snarls were coming from *him*. Gunshots rang out. The thing that used to be Adam leaped into the air, all raw power and muscle. The black wolf knocked Daric to the floor and lunged forward. Chance screamed. It had all happened so fast, he still couldn't believe it was Adam inside that animal.

He closed his eyes, but he couldn't block out the sounds. Screams and cracking bones. Another gunshot.

When he finally opened his eye, the black wolf was standing astride Daric's body. It lifted its head and fixed amber wolf eyes on him. Its nostrils flared and it bared its teeth, revealing sharp-pointed fangs stained crimson. Another body lay on the ground, a few feet away.

"Dear God," Chance moaned.

\* \* \* \*

Adam shifted back to human form, sick at the sight of Daric's torn throat. He couldn't even look at Chance. What could he say? He'd never wanted Chance to see him like that. He'd wanted Chance to remember the screams of pleasure, not terror.

Chance was silent as Adam got on his knees and ripped off the duct tape that bound him to the chair. He freed Chance's hands then got to work on his ankles. The touch on his shoulder made him jump, and he looked up in surprise, steeling himself for the fear or revulsion Chance must be feeling.

"You saved my life," Chance said softly, a hint of admiration in his voice.

Adam's jaw dropped. "I almost got you killed! Didn't you see what just happened? I'm a monster!"

“*Almost* only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. I’m all right.” Chance scanned Adam’s bloody body. “Are you hurt?”

Adam moved out of reach when Chance tried to touch him. “I’m okay, the bullet just grazed me and I heal fast. Most of it’s not my blood. Gerard is dead. Daric’s shots went wild and one of them hit Gerard.”

“And Daric?” Chance looked down at the mess on the floor. “I can’t say he didn’t deserve it. Adam, we have to move fast. Somebody’s bound to call the police after those gunshots. Their van’s out back. I think Gerard had the keys. Mine, too.”

Adam looked around in a daze. “I need to get you to a hospital.”

“No hospital, no police. And put your pants on first, okay?” Chance frowned at the bodies on the floor. “Don’t leave anything of yours, and get the duct tape they used on me. All the evidence will say Daric shot Gerard, but Gerard must’ve had a pit bull or something, and the dog killed Daric and ran off. We’ll be out of it.”

Adam admired Chance’s ability to think under pressure. If Chance wasn’t here, Adam would probably curl up in ball with his tail between his legs. He was still shaken with horror at the memory of how Daric’s windpipe *crunched* in his mouth.

“Adam. Now.”

Chance’s voice sent him into action. He retrieved his jeans. They were still wearable, but his shirt was worthless. Adam went through Gerard’s pockets and found two sets of keys. He held them up, and looked over at Chance. “Can you drive?”

“Can’t you?”

“No. Never learned.”

“Then I guess I can. Help me up, big guy.”

Happy to let Chance take control, Adam helped him to his feet and supported him as they made their way out of the warehouse.

Chance slid behind the wheel. “I think if we wipe off the steering wheel and anything you touch, we can just leave this van unlocked on the street and hope someone steals it by morning.” He put the key in the ignition and turned it. Chance was shaky, but managed to drive well enough to get them away from the scene before they heard sirens.

“Where are you going?” Adam blurted out.

“Where else? We’ll go to my place.”

“You can’t be serious. You really want me in your apartment?”

“Aren’t you housebroken?”

Adam blinked, opened his mouth, shut it again.

“It’s a joke, Romeo,” Chance chided him. “If there are more of them coming after you, we should get out of town, but from the way they were talking, those two were alone. They wanted the reward all to themselves. We should have a day or two. Is that a stop sign?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks. I can’t see too well. Good thing we missed rush hour.”

They were both quiet for the rest of the drive, Chance concentrating on the road and Adam sunk in his own thoughts. They left the van, keys in the ignition, on a small side street behind Chance’s apartment. Adam helped Chance through an alley that led to a back entrance. As he carried the smaller man up the back stairs to his apartment, Adam breathed a sigh of relief. He felt safer, but sad, too. Once the shock wore off and Chance came to his senses, he wouldn’t want Adam around. They’d been through a lot together and the thought of losing Chance made Adam’s heart ache. He never thought he could feel this way about another person.

“Stop sighing. You can put me down now.”

“What?”

“I know I’m not as light as I look.”

“I can handle it...Didn’t you see me change?” Adam asked hesitantly.

“Yeah.” Chance sighed. “I wish you’d given me a hint, but I probably wouldn’t have believed you anyway.”

Adam lowered his head. “I’m so sorry, for everything. I never meant to put you in danger.”

Chance nestled against his shoulder. “You didn’t. I make my own decisions and I chose to get involved.”

“But you didn’t know who you were getting involved with. You’re right, I should have told you.”

“It’s done. And it wouldn’t have changed anything.” Chance grabbed Adam’s hair, pulled him close, and smothered him with slobbery kisses. At least Adam thought it was slobber, it might have been tears.

Adam pressed him back against the wall while Chance’s lips explored his stubbled face. Chance nipped at Adam’s lower lip, then sucked on it in a way that made Adam’s pulse race and his cock fill. And the way Chance kept muttering Adam’s name over and over and over again—

A door slammed and both men panicked and turned toward the sound.

An older woman approached and gave them a disapproving look. “Get a room.”

Chance looked at Adam and busted out laughing. “She’s right. What the fuck are we doing out here? The key’s in my pocket.”

“Sure you want me to come in?”

Chance gave him a look of pained tolerance. “I’m sure. We need to get cleaned up, eat, rest. Then we can figure out what we’re going to do next.”

“You’re not thinking clearly. There is no *we*. I’m a monster.”

Chance smiled. “Yeah, but you’re *my* monster.” He leaned over and kissed Adam’s cheek. “And my man.” He tried a wink with his good eye but couldn’t pull it off. “And if you want to act like an animal in bed, I won’t complain, but don’t expect me to feed you kibble.”

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## Chapter Nine

Adam and Chance had gone from strangers to collaborators in record time. Chance had saved Adam's life, and almost gotten himself killed for it. *Who does stuff like that?* Chance was special, no doubt about it. He lit up Adam's world. Adam had never had a friend or a lover, but he had strong feelings that made him believe Chance could fill both of those roles. *If I wasn't a monster.*

Yeah, they were star-crossed lovers, all right. And if Adam stuck around, his presence would lead to some tragic outcome, just like in Romeo and Juliet. He wouldn't think about that right now. Chance was hurting, and Adam wanted to make him better.

Adam carried Chance straight to the bathroom, sat him on the toilet, and started to remove his clothes. He wet a towel and tried to wipe the dried blood from Chance's face. Chance winced and put a hand over Adam's to stop him.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"It's okay. Run a shower. We can get cleaned up together."

Adam hesitated. Most of his life he'd showered with other men, but it had always been in a big gang shower with ten showerheads and wall-mounted body dryers. He stared at the small enclosed space with one nozzle. Would they even fit? It was what Chance wanted so Adam turned on the water and in a few minutes billowing clouds of steam filled the room. He helped Chance in and they both relaxed under the soothing heat. Bending his head, Adam let the pulsing stream pound away some of the tension in his neck and shoulders.

Hands rubbed shampoo into his hair. Surprised, Adam looked up and got soap in his eyes. "Hey," he told Chance. "I should be washing your hair."

"And you will. After I do yours. Come on, bend your head again, I can't reach too high with these sore ribs."

Adam didn't want to argue. He tilted his head and Chance's gentle massage produced a thick lather. No one had washed his hair since his mother died. It made him feel incredibly cared for. If only he could do the same for Chance.

Chance rinsed off the lather and gave Adam a quick kiss when he lifted his head.



“Now it’s your turn,” Adam whispered. His cock was stiff and throbbing, but he ignored it and reached for the shampoo. Squeezing some into his hand, he rubbed it onto Chance’s scalp. Chance wiggled his hips so Adam’s dick slid along the crease of his ass. It felt so damn good, Adam reacted instinctively, grabbing Chance’s hips and pulling him back firmly.

Chance moaned. “Fuck me, Romeo.”

Adam released him so fast, Chance slipped and almost fell. “You’re hurting.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my ass.” Chance wiggled his butt.

“No. There isn’t.” Adam gave the tempting butt an appreciative look. “But, I could exasperate your injuries.”

Chance gave him a rueful grin. “I’m already exasperated.”

“Sorry.” Chance’s easy attitude toward sex scared Adam. He could never be that relaxed, could never take anything for granted. What if fucking Chance felt so good that he lost control? What if his wolf came out in a wild frenzy like it did at the warehouse. If the beast emerged and hurt Chance, Adam would never forgive himself.

“Nevermind.” Chance turned, moved closer, slid his slippery, wet body against Adam’s. “How about exasperating my dick with your hand?”

“You’re impossible.” Adam groaned as Chance stared into his eyes and ground his hips against Adam’s. *Touch him, don’t touch him, touch him...*

Chance took matters into his own hand. He stood on his toes, leaned in for a smoking hot kiss, and fisted Adam’s hard cock. Adam groaned and slid his tongue into Chance’s mouth. When he pulled back, he saw frustration in Chance’s eyes, and he vowed to make it go away. Adam wrapped his fingers around the base of Chance’s cock. He moved his left hand slowly up and down the shaft, while his right cupped Chance’s balls and squeezed gently.

“That’s it, Romeo. Christ, it feels good.”

Encouraged by his lover’s words and little whimpers, Adam started a rhythmic stroking from head to base. The cock swelled in his hand, and pre-cum leaked from the tip. Chance looked up at him with pleading eyes. Adam went to his knees and opened his mouth. Chance’s cock-head slid past his lips, and Adam licked and sucked with loud slurps. Chance moaned with pleasure and Adam let out a sigh of contentment as Chance guided his head up and down, gentle fingers threading in his wet hair.

Adam looked up. Chance appeared mesmerized as he watched his cock disappearing into Adam's mouth. Adam relaxed his throat muscles, and Chance's cock slid deeper. The mushroom head hit the back of Adam's throat, and Chance's thrusting took on a wild intensity.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck!"

Chance came with a shout and filled Adam's throat with his cum. Adam swallowed hard to keep up. Then he stood and pulled Chance into his arms, and held him tight. He'd never felt so close to anyone in his life.

\* \* \* \*

Chance lay across the couch, his head on Adam's lap, a bag of frozen peas on his eye. After their shower, Adam had dried him gently and taped his broken ribs, but he could tell Chance was still hurting with every breath. *And I'm about to hurt him more.*

"I have to leave, Chance. You can see why. My father won't rest until I'm captured or dead."

"We've been over this, again and again. We'll go to the authorities—"

"Who, Chance? Who will we go to? These people *are* the authorities, a top secret branch of the government. You have no idea who I'm dealing with. My father works for some kind of top-secret military project and he has unlimited resources to track me down."

"Jesus Christ, your own father."

"He never thought of me as his son, not really." Adam couldn't believe how easy it was to talk to Chance. He never thought he'd tell his story to anyone, but Chance wasn't just anyone. He'd seen Adam shift and still accepted him. God, he loved him. And he should prove it by getting out of his life.

"You were slaves," Chance said softly. "They used you. Your father is the monster, not you. We can't let him get away with it. I'll take your story to the papers, we'll go public."

Adam froze. "Is that what this is about? A story? No one would believe it anyway. There'd be a massive cover-up. They'd kill the other hybrids and move the lab." He ran a hand through his hair. "I don't care about my life, but I can't let you play journalist and put the lives of the others in jeopardy."

Chance bolted up, winced, and put a hand on his taped chest. "Do you really believe I would use you to jumpstart a career?"

Adam smiled sadly. "You could win a Pulitzer, you have all the proof you need right here."

"If you really believe that, you don't know me at all." Chance's face turned red and blotchy with his anger. "You think I don't know what it's like to grow up unloved? Maybe my father didn't lock me up and treat me like a lab experiment, but he never accepted me. Never." Tears streamed down his face, and Chance struggled to get away but Adam held him down.

"I'm so sorry, Chance. I've lived my entire life without being able to trust anyone. Living with me would be hell."

"Living without you would be worse."

"What can I say to convince you that you're putting your life in danger?"

"Nothing." There was a long pause as they looked warily at one another. "With or without you, I'm in danger. In fact, I'm probably safer with you. If you think we need to leave, that's what we'll do."

Adam's mouth hung open. "This isn't a game, Chance."

"I'm not letting you run away, not this time. We go together."

"What kind of life will you have? I have nothing. No home. No job. No money."

"And I have nothing keeping me here. We're perfect together."

"I'm about as far from perfect as you can get. I'm a mistake, a failed experiment, a freak. I can't control the wolf. What if I got angry at you one day and shifted? I could kill you."

"You wouldn't, it's not who you are. I'm not afraid of you. You're my fantasy man, the big, bad wolf with a sweet vulnerable side, who quotes poetry and likes to travel. Like I said, perfect."

"A man you'd be constantly on the run with."

"It sounds like the exciting life I always wanted."

"You'll have that life someday with a real man." Adam sighed heavily and rested his head against Chance's. "Besides, there's something I have to do. I want to look for the others, the ones like me. I won't rest easy until I know what happened to them."

"I understand, and I can help you. I grew up with a cold, hostile father. I spent half of my life trying to please him and the other half trying to prove how different I was from him. Suddenly he's dead and I'm a wealthy man. I

want to put the bitterness behind me and live life on my own terms. I have plans for some of the Hollis fortune, people here in the city that I promised to help. I can help you, too. Investigations are expensive, inquiries, surveillance, travel, papers, all that takes money. I have money and I can't think of a better way to spend it."

Adam started to shake his head and Chance kissed him. "We belong together. Stop fighting it. I know the real you, the part no one else gets to see, and I love you."

Adam's jaw dropped. "You love me?"

"Yes. I'm serious, Adam. I can't live the rest of my life wondering where you are, who you're with, whether you're dead or alive."

"I love you, Chance." The words were so soft, Chance almost missed them.

He threw his arms around Adam. "Say it again."

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## Chapter Ten

Adam leaned back against the seat of the Lincoln Town Car and tried to relax. The vehicle pulled away from the hotel where he and Chance had been staying, and reality hit him. They were finally leaving the city.

It had taken some time for Chance to oversee his father's funeral and tie up loose ends, and neither one of them had felt safe in their apartments. Chance had no desire to step into his father's shoes, but he couldn't leave things unsettled. He'd called a board meeting and the company's chief operating officer was named the new CEO. Now maybe they could start fresh and stop looking over their shoulders everywhere they went.

An elbow nudged him in the ribs. "Stop sulking."

Adam shifted around in his seat. "I'm not sulking."

"You are." Chance raised a brow. "What's the point of being majority stockholder and Chairman of the Board if we can't enjoy the fringe benefits that go along with the titles?"

Adam had no qualms about taking advantage of executive perks. It was just that he'd rather be traveling by rail or bus, anything but a plane, and a small plane at that. Flying a commercial airline required ID and entailed security checks, then boarding with a crowd of strangers, any one of whom could be a threat. Logically, Adam knew that a private plane was the best option, but he was still trying to wrap his head around it.

The limo drove through the gates of Northeast Philadelphia Airport where the ground crew was waiting to greet them. Everyone was friendly and professional, but Adam's stomach twisted with nausea. He'd barely gotten used to riding in an elevator, and now this. Fueled by a dread of closed-in spaces and lack of control, his anxiety was turning into a full-blown panic attack. As far as harrowing situations went, it was hard to picture anything worse. Man had no business being up in the clouds. Adam forced himself to watch as their luggage was loaded into the cargo hold of the twin-engine plane. "It looks small. Are you sure it's safe?"

"Are you kidding me? It's a Learjet with a two-man crew, and it can seat seven. Just watch your head when we board." Chance squeezed his hand and gave him a reassuring look.

"It'll be fine, Romeo. I'm right here with you."

Adam's heart ached every time he looked at the fading bruise on Chance's face. The one person in the world he loved had been hurt because

of him. He wouldn't let it happen again. Chance's safety was his number-one priority and the main reason he agreed to climb inside this metal contraption and be transported thousands of feet above the earth. They were on the move. Afraid to put Chance in more danger, Adam hadn't told him about the evidence he'd buried in New Mexico. The computer data would have to wait until things settled down. Their first stop was Florida to check out an unconfirmed report of an unusually large mountain lion roaming the everglades. Chance said most likely it was just one of the Florida panthers, but Adam had to see for himself. Loki was a cougar changeling, and Adam wouldn't sleep easy until he knew for sure. Besides, they needed to get out of the city, and Florida was as good a place as any.

Chance flashed his *I know you're worrying again, cut it out* look. Adam smiled and met him halfway for a kiss. Maybe his lover's *I don't give a shit who sees us acting like horny teenagers* attitude was rubbing off on him.

The pilot of the plane turned and waved to them. Adam hesitated, and Chance tugged on his arm, mouthing, "Don't be a baby."

"For crying out Pete! Stop treating me like a pet dog."

Chance chuckled. "Just trying to be helpful. You're still *green* behind the ears, Romeo."

Adam frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Damned if I know." Chance released his arm and walked ahead. Adam straightened his shoulders and trailed behind, trying to look like he flew every day of the week.

\* \* \* \*

The passenger compartment had a comfortable layout with four leather track and swivel seats, two facing each other on each side of a narrow center aisle. Chance took the seat opposite Adam and watched him fidget and squirm. Sweat glistened on his brow and he was chewing on those sexy lips. His eyes closed tight and he leaned back in his seat, gripping the armrests as if they were life preservers. *Poor baby, he looks so uncomfortable.* Smiling to himself, Chance leaned toward him and put a hand on his knee. "You okay?"

Adam's eyes flew open. "Yeah, fine. Why?"

"I think I heard something about turbulence." Right on cue, the plane dropped and Adam turned green. The hull squeaked and shuddered as the

wind caught at the wings.

“Hope you’re buckled up back there, boys,” the captain’s voice said over the tinny speakers.

“Oh, God,” Adam said.

“Try to relax, you’ll be fine.” *There must be some way I can distract him.* Chance hid a grin.

As soon as the fasten seatbelt sign went out, Chance leaned over and unbuckled Adam’s belt. His lover’s eyes flew open and Chance was lost for a few seconds.

“What’s wrong?” Adam asked with a note of apprehension.

“Nothing, we can move around now.”

“I don’t know...”

Chance leaned back in his seat and rubbed his hand over the bulge at his crotch. Hard already. All he had to do was look at Adam and Chance would start salivating like Pavlov’s dog. His cock pushed against the fabric of his jeans, and Adam’s eyes focused on that area between his legs. Now that he had his lover’s attention, Chance undid the button on his jeans and lowered the zipper. Slipping a hand inside, he released his prick and stroked it for Adam’s viewing pleasure. His partner’s intense gaze made his pulse quicken and his cock grew even harder and thicker under Adam’s scrutiny. Chance teased the tip with his thumb and coaxed a bit of pre-cum from the slit. Then he popped the moist finger in his mouth. “Want a taste?”

A vein pulsed in Adam’s temple and he looked around nervously.

“You worry too much,” Chance told him. “The captain and the co-pilot rarely come out of the cockpit. They know the passengers have important business to conduct.” He flashed a seductive smile and shoved his jeans and boxers over his hips. Adam’s eyes went wide and he swallowed hard.

Chance cupped his balls, squeezing and rolling them. He let out a little moan. “God, I need to come.”

“Do you want me to suck you off?” Adam said in a strangled voice.

“You know what I want.”

Adam shook his head in dismay.

Chance kicked off his shoes then shed his pants. He straddled Adam’s lap and pressed his lips against Adam’s ear. “Hey, sexy,” he whispered. “Want to try the mile high club?”

Adam put a hand on his stomach and grimaced. “I don’t think I could eat anything. My stomach is messed up.”

Chance bit his tongue to keep from laughing. "It's not a sandwich, baby," he said patiently. "It's like a...like an association of people with similar interests."

Adam gave him a sheepish look. "Oh, sorry." He leaned his forehead against Chance's. "What do I have to do?"

"It's easy. Really it's the easiest club in the world to get into. All you have to do is fuck me in an airplane that's flying at least one mile high." Chance looked out the window. "I think this qualifies."

Adam shook his head. "I'm not up for it."

"I think you are." Chance slid a hand along Adam's thigh. "You know we have to do it," he goaded.

"No, we don't." Adam said firmly, stopping Chance's hand before it reached his crotch.

Chance nipped his lobe and whispered in his ear, "You'll love it." He licked and sucked at Adam's neck. His need grew and he pressed his erection against Adam's stomach. And he wasn't the only one in need. Adam's hands slid up his arms, to his shoulders, and anchored in his curls. Chance parted his lips and Adam stole his breath away with the depth of his kiss and his plunging tongue. When they parted, breathless, Chance murmured into his mouth, "I need you, Romeo. Fuck me."

"It's not a good idea."

"It's an excellent idea. Are you going to deny an injured man what he wants?"

"Speaking of which, I thought those ribs were still hurting you."

"I took a painkiller." Chance was not above using whatever he could to gain his objective. Adam would not get out of fucking him this time. Blaming his reluctance on Chance's injuries and telling him he was afraid he'd hurt him didn't fly anymore. That might be part of it, but Chance thought Adam's inexperience was holding him back. That and his ginormous dick. Adam probably still thought his wolf might take control and pulverize Chance's ass. It was time to put that worry to rest. Chance wasn't knocking mutual masturbation and blowjobs but he needed more. He wanted to feel Adam's thick cock inside him, stretching him..."Please." He gave Adam's obvious bulge a good squeeze and kissed him, cutting off any more protests.

Their eyes locked and Adam nodded. Chance slid off his lap, turned, and leaned over, grasping the back of his seat. "There's K-Y in my bag," he



muttered hoarsely over his shoulder. "Hurry, baby."

Adam rummaged around in the duffle and found the lube.

The sound of Adam's zipper going down was music to his ears.

Adam slid a hand over his hip. "God, you have a beautiful ass." He leaned over covering Chance's back, his teeth nipping at his earlobe. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Jesus Christ, Adam. Fuck me!"

A long sigh warmed his neck. "I've never done this before. I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me, baby, please. Just use your fingers first."

The first touch of the cool lube sent a shiver down Chance's spine and his cock twitched in anticipation. A long, slick finger pressed inside him. It was heaven and very gentle, but not nearly enough. "More, please, more."

Another finger joined the first. Then a third. "Are you okay?"

"Yes..." he hissed, arching back against Adam. Adam nipped the tender flesh where his neck met his shoulder, then soothed the spot with his tongue. Words and murmurs of appreciation poured out between bites and licks. "You are so damn sexy, you take my breath away."

"Adam, please," Chance groaned.

Adam withdrew his fingers, and Chance hissed as Adam's cock pressed for entrance.

"Try to relax," Adam murmured in his ear, working the head of his dick past the tight rim of muscle. "Tell me if I'm hurting you and I'll stop."

Chance bit his lip and took a long, slow breath. Even with the lube, there was a painful burn, but he wanted all Adam had to give. Adam took it slow, and soon the hurt turned into pleasure, and Chance was pushing back until Adam was buried deep inside him. Chance's own cock throbbed between his legs and he wanted to stroke himself but he knew if he did he'd come and this would be over much too soon. "God, I love having your cock inside me."

Adam gripped Chance's hips and moved in a primal rhythm that heated Chance's blood and sent it rushing through his veins.

"Oh, fuck..."

"Is this what you wanted?" Adam shifted forward, thrusting harder.

"God yes, that's perfect." Chance groaned.

Adam's pace picked up, his hips rocking Chance and driving him higher. His mindless growls and guttural sounds drove Chance wild.

“You feel so tight, so fucking good...I don’t think I can hold off much longer.” Adam’s ragged breath was warm on his neck.

“Me, too. Touch me,” Chance gasped.

Adam reached around, grasped Chance’s swollen cock in his hand, and started pumping him. Chance groaned as Adam started moving faster. One more thrust and Adam shuddered and let out a howl. Chance felt the pulse of Adam’s release filling him and his own orgasm building deep inside. A fine burn raced up his spine and sparks burned behind his eyelids. Arching his back, he relinquished control, let out a hoarse cry, and came in hot bursts of pleasure. For a few minutes they were locked together, panting and spent.

Then Adam pulled away, and Chance suddenly felt too empty. He turned and Adam pulled him into a tight embrace, claiming his lips with a hard, possessive kiss.

“Are you sure you never did this before,” Chance asked hoarsely.

“You inspire me.” Adam grinned with pure male satisfaction. “God, Chance, I love you,” he growled.

“I love you, too,” Chance whispered back.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Never better.”

“Do we have time to do it again?”

Chance raised a brow. “What did you do with my Romeo?”

Adam shrugged. “I need to practice.”

“The hell you do.” Chance laughed, thrilled his little diversion worked so well. “Sorry, big guy. It’s a short flight. We better get cleaned up.”

Adam looked so disappointed, Chance almost reconsidered. He looked at his watch and shook his head. “We have the rest of our lives, Adam.”

Now, Adam didn’t seem nervous at all as he moved about the plane. They squeezed into the lavatory and managed to wash up with a fair amount of groping.

As they made their way back to their seats, Chance snickered and whispered in Adam’s ear, “Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks?”

Adam growled.

Chance laughed. “I think I created a monster.”

**THE END**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gale Stanley is a hopeless romantic, who grew up in Philadelphia, with her nose buried in a book of fairy tales. If a story ended badly, she created her own happily ever after. Now, she writes romance, in all its many splended facets, because she believes the world needs more love and happy endings.

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