

A JON'S MYSTERIES
SPINOFF NOVELLA.

Alan's

**UTTERLY
ACCIDENTAL**
Dream-cute



AJ SHERWOOD

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ALAN'S UTTERLY ACCIDENTAL DREAM-CUTE

A Jon's Mysteries Spinoff Novella

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alan". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop on the 'A' and a trailing flourish on the 'n'.

I had to stop and shake my hand out, my fingers cramping from writing notes so quickly. I usually typed everything in this modern age, but this circumstance didn't allow for a laptop.

The man I was interviewing stopped as well, his blue eyes crinkling up in a smile. He was a handsome man—Jonathan Bane—and a kind one. I could see why my cousin had taken one look at him and fallen hard.

“Sorry, am I going too fast?” Jon asked, his hand idly stroking the purring black cat in his lap.

“No, I'm just not used to handwriting notes anymore. I don't think I've written something down so furiously since I left college.” Don had warned me I'd not be able to bring anything electronic inside the house without fear of it dying a premature death. I'd taken the warning to heart and only brought in a notebook and pencil with me.

But that sort of happens when you're interviewing a powerful psychic. Jonathan Bane had some of the best eyes in the psychic world. The cost to it was that he could touch any piece of electronic equipment and kill it instantly.

As a crime writer, I found his ability fascinating and was here specifically to interview him for the next book I was working on. My focus on this book was psychics and how they

play into solving cases in this modern world. Jon was definitely one of the top psychics in the country for solving cases, as his close rate was at ninety-nine percent.

It was a rather unique situation I found myself in. As Don's cousin, I was of course happy to come in and meet the man he was engaged to. I'd heard many stories about Jon, and this was a nice chance to meet someone who would shortly become family. The main reason, though, was to interview the man who had been part of so many fascinating cases in the past year. Jon's insight into those cases was like none other, with those eyes that could see all.

Don called from the kitchen, "Take a break, Alan. Come have some cake. Mom sent some over for us."

"Cake sounds good," I agreed. I was happy to give my hand a break.

We both joined Don at the island, where he'd already sliced cake up for us onto plates, offering either milk or water to go with it. I took it with glee as Aunt Alani's cooking was second to absolutely no one. Not even Michelin chefs.

We ate peaceably. I couldn't help but study Don in a new light. My cousin had always been this big teddy bear of a man, but no one outside of the family seemed aware of it. The world in general was always a little nervous around Don. His massive build and the scars along his back and arms intimidated most. I liked that he'd found a good place for himself. But what intrigued me was the way he reacted around Jon. Like Jon was a magnet, Don was steel.

I'd never seen Don in love before. I had to say, it was a good look on him.

Don didn't sit but stood opposite me at the island so he could comfortably eat and talk. "Are you really quitting teaching? That's what Mom said."

I gave a shrug. "Being a professor is fun, in a sense. I like many aspects of it. But the politics of holding a professor's position in a university has gotten old very quickly. At this point, I'm making more money off my true crime books than

my salary as a full-time professor. I'm now working about seventy-hour weeks to juggle both careers. It's insane. Something has to give."

Don's eyes filled with understanding. "Ouch, I didn't realize you were working that much. No wonder you're willing to give something up. But really, the books are making that much money?"

"Past two years, they brought in double my teaching salary."

Jon let out a low whistle. "That alone makes it no contest. I'd definitely go to writing full time in your shoes."

"Everyone I've explained this to has said the same." I spread my hands. "I like the research aspect of the career. I'm a history professor to start with. Researching true crime is like history through a microscopic lens."

Don shook his head, smile fond. "You're such a nerd. How did we get such a nerd in this family?"

I stuck my tongue out at him. Because I'm mature that way. "Reading a book wouldn't kill you."

Jon snorted a laugh. "I love how you two are acting like you're oh-so-different when, at the core, you're exactly the same."

That didn't make a lot of sense to me, but it apparently did to Don. His head snapped around, and he asked with keen interest, "What, him too?"

"I really want to know what it is about the Havili family that you produce people like this with every generation," Jon answered. Cryptically, mind you—I had no idea what he meant by that. "And every single member of your family, no less."

I lifted a hand. "Explain to the rest of the class, please."

Those all-seeing eyes landed on me. "You, sir, have the ability to be an amazing anchor."

I blinked at him. Tried to process this. Failed about halfway. "Wait, what?"

“Just like Don. And Brandon. And their parents.” Jon nodded, secure with his conclusion. “They’re all amazing anchors. I can tell by looking at you that you have the same talent.”

I kept staring at him, waiting for the punchline. That didn’t seem to be coming.

Most of my family drew very strongly from warrior genetics. They were tall, strong, muscular men who could (and had) defeat people in one blow. I was not like them in that aspect, not particularly tall or strong. I studied tai chi because I liked the physical poetry of the martial arts form. I liked being fit. But I was not a fighter, not like they were.

As I understood it, part of what a psychic needed above all else was a protector. And they always anchored with someone to help ground their psychic abilities—usually a lover, spouse, or family member. Or so my research had said. Such a bond lasted their lifetime, usually. I understand Jon’s mother was an exception, as she had divorced hers before re-bonding to Aunt Alani.

That was neither here nor there. I wasn’t anything like Brandon or Donovan but was a slimly built man who preferred books over violence, so why would Jon say that?

Don didn’t seem to think Jon’s assessment was wrong. He was intrigued, asking more questions. “He glows that brightly to you?”

“Oh, he matches you with ease,” Jon answered easily. “Damned Havili family is going to turn me blind at this rate. I’m never going to a family reunion with you.”

Don chuckled. “I’ll make sure to put the darkest shades we can find on you first. But that’s amazing, Alan. There aren’t many people Jon says that about.”

“I’m still confused,” I complained. “I’m not a fighter. Isn’t that one of the most important aspects of being an anchor?”

Jon shook his head in immediate disagreement. “No, don’t use me as a yardstick. Or Mack. We’re unique in the psychic field for how much trouble we find. Many psychics work a full

career and never encounter a lick of danger. My mother, for instance. She reads the dead, works in the coroner's department, and goes to work without her anchor most of the time. That's how little she needs one."

I felt my hand twitch for my pen, eager to take notes on this as well. "Really? So what is it about you and Mack that is so different?"

"I piss people off," Jon answered with a resigned shrug. "People don't take it well that I can read them like an encyclopedia. There's more than a few people who come after me in revenge. It's not working the case that's dangerous most of the time. It's the aftermath. In Mack's case, the ghosts he comes up against aren't always pleasant. Which makes sense; he's normally called in because people are getting hurt or experiencing property damage. So he's battling a ghost with a bad attitude, hence why he and Brandon sometimes get scuffed up."

I hadn't considered it from that angle, but part of why I asked to interview Jon was because of this. I had so little knowledge of psychics and anchors, and it was a void I had to fill if I were to branch out into other true crime writing.

Jon leaned in a little toward me, his tone and expression heart-stoppingly sincere. "Alan, have you ever considered this? There are so many psychics in the world who don't have an anchor just because there aren't many with that talent, with a truly good nature. I would never have anchored if Donovan had not come to me."

Don gave him that warm smile, the one that could melt a man. I say that because I saw Jon melting under it.

A part of me still wanted to toss this out the window. If anyone but Jonathan Bane had said it, I might have. But this man's eyes were legendary. Hell, the FBI flew him across the country for a case when he was death to electronics, and that said a lot, right there.

He saw that, too—my hesitation. He shook his head even as he tsked me. "Alan, I'm not saying you have to leap on this and go do it right now. But you shouldn't feel you don't have

the right skill set for it. I wish you could see yourself the way I do. You're supernova bright; that's how intrinsically good you are. What a psychic needs, more than anything, is patience. Patience from their anchor, the one person who understands all their needs and how to accommodate them. You could give that to someone else in spades."

Really? Was that all there was to it?

Don nodded in agreement, gesturing to the house around them. "He's not exaggerating. Ninety percent of the time, that's my job. I handle the things he can't. Sometimes that's phone calls, sometimes that's paperwork, and sometimes that's watching his back so he can work without someone trying to shoot him."

Surely the shooting thing was...

"Why does everyone bring up the shooting," Jon muttered under his breath.

Ooookay, apparently that did happen. Jon really did lead an interesting life. Just as well his anchor was former military. Not much can get past Don.

I still wasn't sure what to make of this. I could accept the sincerity behind Jon's words, but it didn't mean I was inclined to jump into this. For one thing, I didn't know of a single psychic who wasn't already partnered. For another, I didn't have a strong desire to be an anchor. I was just now switching careers as it was; I didn't want to jump into something I barely understood.

However, I also knew Jon could be sneaky and underhanded. "You are forbidden from telling the FBI about me."

He snapped his fingers in a theatrical way. "My evil plan has been thwarted!"

I shook my fork playfully at him. "I heard what you did to Brandon. I know he was looking for a career change, and it all worked out because he met Mack, but I'm already mid-career change. And moving. I don't need any other life complications right now, thank you."

He eyed me sideways like a child sure they could weasel their way in somehow if they were crafty enough. But he also let it be.

Don asked with interest, “You really moving out here?”

“I’m literally the last Havili left in California,” I pointed out. “Everyone’s now in Tennessee. I miss seeing you guys regularly. I know you think the housing market is insane out here, but you should try Cali’s prices. By the time I’ve sold my house and bought something here, I’ll probably come out even or near to it.”

Don shrugged, not disagreeing. “True. It’ll be great having you close by again. Not to mention we can give you all sorts of ideas for the next book to write.”

“That is a handy benefit.” He and Jon got into fascinating cases sometimes and were amenable about telling me the details.

I will never, ever complain about easy research.

We finished our cake, went back to the interview, and my hand was officially done by the time I asked all my questions. It might need a massage and a cold pack, that’s how tired my hand felt. Jon fed me dinner before I left, and of course he was a good cook on top of everything else.

For all that he has shortcomings in daily life, I didn’t see that when I looked at him. I saw a man fulfilled. It was amazing how he and Don looked at each other. A part of me was a little jealous, no lie. A love like that was rare. For a moment, a briefly tempting moment, I honestly thought about being an anchor just for the sole purpose of having a relationship like theirs.

But nah. Who would I even find who would want a book-loving, true crime nut for an anchor? Who also wanted a gay man as a partner.

Nonsense and daydreams, that’s what this was. Jon’s opinion aside, it would take some serious kismet or karma or something that would make the right man cross my path.

I shook the idea off and focused on driving to my parent's house. I was staying with them for the weekend, and I had house hunting to do tomorrow. If I were very lucky, I'd find time to start writing up everything I'd learned today, get a head start on the next book. Moving wasn't cheap by any means, and getting another book printed and out there in the next three months would be a nice boost to my wallet.

Alan

If you've ever wondered what it's like to take a nap at a stranger's house, with them watching, I can tell you. Awkward. Awkward as hell, and draining because you can't relax. You have no sense of security, so it's more like you're resting on a razor's edge.

Unfortunately, doing that comes part and parcel with the job.

Over the years of tracking people, I'd found a few people I could trust to watch over me so this didn't feel so unnerving. One of them was Chloe Lawdwick, an officer with the Nashville PD. She was one of those super athletic women who could kill me without much effort. Her smile was sweet, her right hook strong. I had absolute faith she would mince anyone who dared mess with me.

And it was because of her support I was able to do the job now. Namely, trying to find a missing little girl.

I held the hairbow in my hand, a large purple one, and dropped into a cozy reading chair in the family's living room. Then I deliberately slowed my breathing, relaxed my muscles, putting my brain into the mindset of sleep. After nearly a decade of doing this, I could catnap almost on command.

When my body finally settled into a doze, my ability kicked in strongly, latching onto the psychometric trail Annie left

behind. She'd worn this while going out to play—not far, just the neighborhood park across the street—and had gone ahead of her mother when she shouldn't have. I could distinctly feel her now, the chaotic emotions churning within her, which was a relief.

In kidnapping cases like this, I didn't always get to tell the family their loved one still lived.

She wasn't that far. As the crow flies, maybe a mile and a half north? I could see her in my mind's eye, the situation playing out like a movie screen behind my eyelids. She was in a very narrow tube, almost like a coffin, but it had air conditioning piped in, and a screen above her head with a TV show playing. How considerate of her kidnapper to entertain her.

Of course, they'd also buried her alive, so the TV wasn't exactly what Annie focused on.

I had a fix on her, now. I knew where she was, and I could lead the police there. I gave myself a mental slap to wake up, eyes blinking rapidly as I shifted gears back into the living world.

Chloe was right at my side, watching me anxiously. "Grant? You got her?"

"I've got her." The parents were hovering nearby, sitting on the couch and holding hands so tightly their knuckles shone white. Nice people. I'd gotten that impression earlier. Nice people who were terrified for their daughter's sake. For them, I gave a quick smile. "She's alive and all right. Just scared. But I know precisely where she is."

The father started crying; the mother looked on the verge of it.

"Can we be there when you get her?" the mother demanded.

"I'm sorry, no," Chloe's partner said gently. "Because we have no idea if her kidnappers are nearby or not, and we want to get in there quickly to retrieve her. It doesn't do us any good

if you're in the line of fire next. But we'll bring her directly to you."

The father nodded jerkily. "Please."

Chloe and Brett were cops I'd worked with many, many times. They were used to my ways, and we didn't need to communicate much as we piled into their car, me riding shotgun so I could navigate.

"Where?" Chloe demanded even as she started the engine.

"About a mile and a half due north," I answered, seatbelting in. I didn't just do that because of 'safety first' either. Chloe had never met a speed limit she couldn't crush. "It's an open lot of some kind. They've put her into this fancy metal tube and buried her underground."

Brett swore from the backseat. "Are you serious? Can she breathe?"

"It's got air conditioning, oddly enough, and they piped electricity in so she can watch a mini TV. I think they're trying not to hurt her."

Chloe snorted even as she slammed the gas pedal and tore away from the curb. "Yeah, they're just scarring her mentally for life. Bastards. You get any trace of them?"

"She'd taken off the jacket before they nabbed her. I couldn't get any feel for them, sorry."

"It's okay; she's the priority. You can likely get something from the tube for them."

"True enough, but if you ask me to sleep inside that thing, we'll be having words, Detective."

Chloe grinned and fortunately didn't take her eyes off the road. "I wouldn't do that to you, Grant. I like you too much."

"Good to hear. Take the next left."

She did, and not even on two wheels, which was impressive for her.

Brett was on his phone in the backseat, reporting in and asking for backup. Just the two cops were not sufficient if we

were to get Annie home safely and still go after the people who had taken her.

I didn't understand why they would. Annie wasn't from a wealthy family. I mean, her parents did all right, they lived in a nice home, but they were middle class. A ransom didn't make much sense. That tube they'd built for Annie? That had taken money to make. Quite a bit of it, from what I'd seen.

This really didn't make much sense.

Brett grunted affirmative in the back seat. "Yeah, I'll keep this call on while we're going. We're on...Bell Road now."

I sat up a little straighter. There was an apartment complex being built over here, the land around it disturbed as they cleared out trees and such. This was starting to feel right, closer. "Chloe, slow down. That apartment complex ahead, I think it's past there somewhere."

She slowed, eyes darting to my face. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Yeah, Annie feels really close." My ability didn't shut off completely when I was awake. I needed to be asleep to get the initial fix on someone, but my brain never stopped, even when I was awake. It kept focusing on that person until they were out of range completely. I wasn't guessing when I said she felt close.

Chloe took advantage of a slight break in traffic and darted across the two-lane road and into the gravel turnoff for the complex. It was in the beginning stages; nothing paved or started over here, with them still clearing the trees out. Stacks of logs sat in various places, heavy machinery sitting idly by, waiting for their operators to return. It looked empty, as it should on a weekend.

We pulled in and stopped but didn't get out of the car. Not yet. Not without backup.

"Grant, what's your take on this?" Brett asked in a low tone, his eyes studying the area. "You get the vibe that the kidnappers are close by?"

"I don't...know. I don't think so? Because they had a security camera in there to watch her. I think they might be

doing this remotely, just in case we do stumble across her here.”

“I’d really, really like to get her out of there quickly.”

He wasn’t the only one. “Chloe, you got a shovel in the trunk?”

“I unfortunately hang out with you, so yes, yes I do.” She gave me a sassy wink. “And I’m perfectly willing to watch your backs while we get her out. Brett, how far away is backup?”

“Two minutes, they say.” He wiggled the phone against his ear in demonstration. “Malone and Cary volunteered and are hoofing it over here.”

Ah, two other cops I really liked. Then again, I liked almost everyone in the Missing Persons Division.

“If they’re two minutes out, let’s go,” I urged. I could feel Annie’s panic rising with every minute. It was a strong feeling in the back of my head, disconnected from me but still present. I didn’t want her to have an anxiety attack.

Chloe was in agreement with me as she immediately got out, heading for her trunk.

I went looking for Annie. This whole area was turned over, so looking for a recently dug-up spot didn’t do any good. I had to go by feeling, my tracing ability actively searching for her with every step I took on this uneven ground.

Where, where, where? My eyes scoured the ground as I moved across it. She was here somewhere, dammit; I could feel her getting closer. The sensation was almost strong enough that if I put out a hand, I’d almost touch her.

I took another step, and my ability lit up happily, my psychic ability’s version of ‘you are here.’ I stopped dead and turned, yelling at Chloe and Brett, who were a good ten yards away, “HERE!”

Chloe immediately picked up the pace, the shovel held in front of her like a katana.

I knelt and put a hand to the ground. “She’s shallow, maybe only two or three feet. Thank god, we can get her out quickly. ANNIE!”

Surely with this little dirt on top of her, she could hear me. I yelled as loudly as I could. “ANNIE, WE’RE THE POLICE! WE’VE FOUND YOU! WE’LL DIG YOU FREE NOW! JUST HOLD TIGHT!”

Relief. That was the sensation I got back. Relief and desperation for us to move quickly.

I moved, and Chloe attacked the dirt as if it was the enemy and she was giving no quarter.

Even as she dug, Chloe demanded, “Which direction is she oriented?”

That I didn’t quite know, as I couldn’t feel the tube itself. But I knew how Annie was lying and moved my arms to indicate where she was. “Her head is my left hand, feet at my right.”

Chloe adjusted accordingly and kept digging.

Malone and Cary arrived in a spray of gravel and were out like lightning. They hoofed it up to us, which was saying something. Malone had a lot to love, if you catch my drift.

“Found her?” Cary demanded, his relief obvious on his face. “Thank god. Chloe, give me that, I’ll shovel. You track down the bastards who did this.”

“I can’t trace them until Annie’s out,” I corrected even as Chloe gratefully handed the shovel over, passing the baton. “I have nothing to trace them with until I can get to that tube.”

Malone warily watched our surroundings. “I don’t see any sign of anyone else here.”

“I don’t think they are. They’re watching her remotely through a camera inside the tube. Which means they’ll know the second we get her out.”

“You can still trace them, though,” Malone said with complete confidence.

“I can.” It wasn’t a false boast. My ability didn’t let anyone escape—not unless they were a good two thousand miles away and I couldn’t get a fix on them. That was rarely the case with kidnapers. They liked to keep their victims close.

Chloe was on the phone, already calling for an ambulance. Annie may or may not need it, depending on if shock set in, but I definitely wanted someone to look her over.

Metal struck metal, and I turned to see Cary had gotten enough dirt cleared off that we could see the top of the tube. It was bare metal—no paint or sealant. They must not have expected her to be in there long.

“I can’t see a lid or opening,” Brett muttered. He knelt, hands brushing dirt aside as he searched for it.

I knelt too, on the other side, then moved up. We all did, trying with our fingers to find something. To the eyes, this was a seamlessly welded construction; there was nothing to get even a finger hold on.

Wait. Wait, that had been something. I went back, dug a little deeper around the edge, and found a depressed cavity. A button! I pushed it hard and the top popped half up, the dirt around the edges preventing the full motion.

“Shit, yes!” Chloe grabbed the top and yanked it toward her, pulling it off.

I looked down at the eight-year-old child staring tearfully up at me, her brown eyes red from all the crying, brunette curls in a tangle around her head. She threw her hands up toward me even as I reached down for her, both of us anxious to get her out. Annie clutched at me, her entire body shaking with sobs.

I held her, soothing a hand along her back. “You’re okay,” I promised. “You’re fine, we’ve got you. Are you hurt anywhere?”

She snuffled her nose and shook her head no against my shoulder. “Are you really police?”

“Well, I’m a psychic who works with the police. Everyone else is a cop, though. Your parents called us to find you. Do

you want to go back home?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s do that, then.” I levered her back a little to smile at her. “I’m going to go catch the mean people who did this to you. Can you go with Detective Cary? He’ll take you home.”

She was still upset, tears still trailing over her cheeks, but I could see the temper ignite in her eyes. “It was Mrs. Blatt down the street.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You know the person who did this?”

“Yeah. She said my mom was mean to her, and she deserved to know what it was like to have a child gone, so she was taking me to punish Mom. And if I was quiet and good, I’d go back home eventually.” Annie was angry, the way only a child could be angry, where fairness and righteous indignation were still strong and pure. “You’ll get her for me, right?”

Chloe knelt at my side and gave her a wolfish smile. “I’m Detective Lawdwick, Annie. You can bet I’ll get that bad woman. What’s her full name, do you know?”

Annie shook her head. “She lives four doors down from us.”

“That’s great info, thanks. Let’s take you home for now. We’ll guard your house until we catch her.”

Annie was eager to get back to her parents, so she willingly went with Cary. Cary had Hollywood-good looks. Kids normally liked him for that reason, which was why I’d volunteered him for this.

While I’d talked, Malone had taken something fabric and wrapped it around the security camera. It was quite the setup in there, with a thin blanket and pillow, and a water bottle tucked into one side. Mrs. Blatt, huh?

“Do we need me to do a reading if Annie knows her attacker?” I asked.

“Blatt might be the only person Annie saw, but I can’t imagine one person manhandling this thing into the ground, can you?”

“No,” I agreed thoughtfully. “It’s got to weigh a good four hundred pounds. This thing is solid metal and has all sorts of gadgets in it, to boot. Alright, let me do a reading.”

“Right here on the ground?”

I shot Chloe an exasperated look. “Well, I ain’t climbing in that thing.”

“Okay, suit yourself.”

Did I like stretching out onto rocky clay? No. But honestly, I’d slept in worse places.

I deliberately decided not to remember some of those places as I stretched out, putting one hand inside the tube to touch it as I put myself once again into a catnap. It was trickier this time to settle into sleep, even a shallow one. I felt very exposed out here, the ground was uneven and uncomfortable, and none of this was conducive to sleep.

Eventually, I dropped into a doze, and the impression of two people came to me. My ability allowed me to connect to another person via dreams. It wasn’t a telepathic connection, per se, but it gave me a sense of who they were, what they felt, what they were doing at that moment. I could see them in my mind’s eye. The ones I tracked now were Melinda Blatt and one other, someone with a strong emotional connection to her—Jeremiah Blatt, her husband. Wow, such a nice criminal couple we had. I could feel them both at home, not far at all from Annie’s house. They weren’t currently paying much attention to the cameras but were arguing with each other over something. They hadn’t yet realized Annie was rescued.

Although, that would change shortly.

I gratefully woke back up. Brett offered me a hand up, which I took, passing along the information as I got my feet under me. “Melinda Blatt is her name. Jeremiah, the husband, was also in on it. Both are currently at home.”

“It helps that we’ve got Annie as an eyewitness here. It means I can fast track a warrant.” Brett released me and took his phone out, jogging toward the car. I knew he was calling a judge and giving him a head’s up that a warrant was coming and why. That would allow the judge to sign off quickly.

I let him go, cracking my neck from side to side, feeling the exhaustion down to my bones. These little catnaps did nothing to restore me. I just felt drained, my body promised rest only to have it snatched away, time and time again.

But I was glad to have found Annie, alive and whole. I was glad to know who had taken her, that the police could put those two behind bars before they did anything else to an innocent. That made this all worth it.

Chloe put a hand on my arm, smile sympathetic. “You look tired, Grant.”

“I’m admittedly not at my best.”

“Still no luck finding an anchor?”

I snorted. I hadn’t even been looking in the past year. Who wanted an insomniac psychic to hang around? There were days I even irritated me.

“There needs to be like an online dating service for you psychics to find an anchor.”

I eyed her drolly. “Yes, because online dating works *so well*.”

“You’ve got me there. But for today, go home, get some proper sleep, yeah? Your good looks are suffering right now.”

“I appreciate the insult. And I’ll happily go home.” With the people found and case closed, my brain should let the trails of everyone I tracked today go. I could rest, truly hit a REM cycle, and sleep.

Maybe.

It was either that or my psychic ability would be frustrated it couldn’t lay immediate hands on those people and would spend the entire night trying to reestablish a connection. Which it did. Often.

Either way, home sounded a good option. Maybe a pizza. I'd certainly earned the calories after running around like a madman today.

Alan

Moving from California to Tennessee took about three months, all told. By the time I sold my house, packed, and moved, it took far longer than I'd anticipated. I hadn't even been able to buy a house here, as the market was too hot to get a bid in. I'd ended up in an apartment instead, and focused on unpacking enough to survive until the market calmed down.

If it ever did.

I was ready to get back to work, though. More than ready. I had put my book on psychics as police consultants on hold during the move, and I was itching to get back to it. Jon's interview was the last constructive thing I had done with it, and if I wanted to publish the book this year, I had to get things rolling. The nice part about moving to Tennessee was having a whole new crop of people to interview. Equally nice was that, through Jon, I was able to meet those people and make connections. For instance, Grantland Walker, one of the more interesting psychics I'd ever come across.

I was very excited about this interview, in more ways than one. As I drove down the tree-lined gravel driveway, I tried to keep my headspace in a more professional alignment. So far, it wasn't working.

Grantland Walker was an intriguing mix of psychic abilities that somehow formed this gestalt which made him a super-

finder. He was part psychometric, part tracer, part dreamwalker. I didn't know precisely how his ability worked, only that it took dreaming to initiate it, and that there was very little he could not find once he had a lock on it.

The case I knew him best for was three years old. He'd been part of the investigation into a child-kidnapping ring. The police had no leads, only one suspect, and Walker had locked onto the suspect—and then traced him for three days solid, no rest, before the suspect finally returned to the warehouse where the children were hidden. Grant led police straight to the door and was instrumental in saving a hundred and thirty-six children.

Missing Persons loved him.

Criminals hated him.

He'd worked one or two cases with Jon, and they had a good relationship, hence why I was able to request the interview. Jon said he was the nicest guy ever and that if I wanted to make a good impression, I should bring him green tea. He apparently wasn't big on coffee.

I congratulated myself once again on moving out of California. Here I was, with my feet barely under me here in the South, and I already had a money-making interview. This had been a great decision. All I had to do was find two, three other psychics to interview, and I'd have more than enough material to get the draft done.

The gravel driveway twisted and turned until it opened up into a clearing. It was a lovely wooded lot, the trees old and shading the house. Quite the place, too. An old farmhouse that had been renovated with a wide front porch and white siding. It made for a pretty picture.

I had no impression of the man, so I had no idea if this house suited him or not. I grabbed my laptop case, pen and paper, the gift bag of tea, and let myself out of the car. I didn't get very far before the front door opened and a man stepped halfway out.

Oh.

Well, damn, he was definitely better looking in person. The photos I'd seen of him at crime scenes didn't do him justice.

I'd always leaned a little toward mussable men. The ones with curly hair that made them look as if they'd just rolled out of bed after a good round of sex. He wore black, square-framed glasses framing intelligent brown eyes, his smile giving him the aura of a sweet, approachable man. He was competent and sexy, all in a jean-clad package.

Jon could have at least given me a head's up that Grantland Walker was sex on legs. Was that too much to ask?

A dark suspicion rose to mind. He hadn't done that on purpose, had he? Jon still hadn't given up on the idea of me being an anchor, and he'd be able to read me enough to figure out my type. Suspicious. Very suspicious.

He called out to me, "Alan Havili?"

I mentally shook the thought off to answer him. "That's me." I gestured to the bag in my hand. "Is it safe to bring electronics around you?"

"When I'm awake, yeah." He smiled and waved me up onto the porch. "Come in."

When he was awake...huh? Alright, I'd dig more into that in a second.

I came up and offered a hand. "Thanks for this. I know you rarely give interviews."

"I don't, that's true." His handshake was solid and warm, and he studied me with just as much interest as I studied him. "But you're a different kettle of fish, Mr. Havili. Your books are always very attentive to detail, and I know people get a lot of wrong notions about police procedures corrected when they read your books. I'm happy to help out with that."

"It is one of the reasons why I started writing them," I admitted easily. "And Alan, please. Here, I brought you some tea as thanks."

"Oh." He peeked inside the bag, a pleased smile lighting up his face. "Thanks, I love this brand. Did Jon tell you?"

“He did, in fact.”

“Always sharp, that man. Come in, sit down. I’ve got iced tea, water?”

“Water would be great, thanks.” Phew, he apparently did like me some. Jon had explained that if I walked into a southerner’s home and wasn’t offered anything, I should run like hell because they hated my guts.

The inside of the home didn’t quite match the exterior. I’d expected plain, country-type furniture. Instead, the taste was very masculine and had more of a craftsman style. The wood-and-leather chairs and couch were oriented toward a fireplace with a TV mounted above it. I approved of the rich color scheme and made notes on what he’d done. I’d like to do something similar once I bought a house.

He waved me onto the couch. While he went to fetch me that glass of water, I spread out and got my laptop up and running. I’d record him, too, as I can’t type at court-reporting speed. I didn’t want to miss anything.

Walker came back with two water glasses and handed me one. “Alright, you said over the phone that you wanted to focus on me, not on a particular case?”

“Right. Here’s what I’ve discovered: psychics are a big question mark for most people. They don’t understand how you operate, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and how you help the police. They have no idea how that all ties in. My cousin, Don—ah, he’s Jon’s anchor. I think you two have met?”

“We’ve worked together a few times. Big mountain of a man.”

“That’s him. He’s still playing catch-up and learning about psychic abilities. If he and Jon work with another psychic, the first thing they all have to do is compare notes, figure out how their abilities can play off each other. It made me think a book written about psychic types, with examples of cases you’ve worked, might be truly educational.”

“And sell like hotcakes coming off a griddle,” Walker said knowingly. “Yes, I think it’s a good idea. I don’t know what case I could tell you that would showcase that, though.”

“Don’t worry about that at the onset,” I advised. “That usually comes as you’re explaining things to me. First, do you mind if I record this?”

“No, go ahead.” He waved me on before taking a sip from his glass.

“Thanks.” I set the program to record on my laptop. “Alright, let’s start with the basics. Almost every psychic I know of has one ability, and only one, but you seem to be a gestalt of three.”

“That’s most people’s take on it. Unfortunately, it’s not actually the case.”

I blinked. That, I didn’t expect. “How so?”

Walker leaned forward, his hands pressed together as he focused on me.

Which gave me warm tingles. You try being intently stared at by a handsome man and see how your body reacts.

“What my ability is actually doing is something else entirely. When I sleep, I enter a dream plane that overlays the waking world. This dream plane doesn’t operate on the same rules as ours, so I can focus on just one person and instantly be there with them. My mind forms a connection with them. I know what they’re feeling, where they are, etcetera. And then, when I wake, I retain that information plus the connection I formed with them.”

I was suddenly super glad I’d chosen to record this interview. I’d been so fascinated by what Grant was saying, I’d forgotten to write a single word down. “That sounds remarkably like a shaman’s dreamwalking ability.”

“Pretty sure they were psychics just like me,” Walker said with a shrug. “They just called it by a different name. I think that’s true of all psychics, really. We’ve always existed, we just existed under different names.”

“I can’t disagree with you there. You have a range, I assume?”

“Sure, every psychic does. Mine’s a bit large, about two thousand miles.”

“That is amazingly large. Most psychics don’t go that far out. With power that strong, I assume it has shortcomings?” Probably some rather large ones. An ability like his often came at a price.

“Well, there’s two.” Walker sighed gustily, looking resigned and tired all in the same breath. “The first is that my brain never truly shuts off. It likes to fixate on things, to trace them, even when I’m asleep. You know how if you’re in an area with no signal, your cell phone will search and search until it finds one and drains your battery completely? That’s what my brain does at night.”

I winced. That sounded far from pleasant. “So...does that mean you don’t sleep at all?”

“I do, but I don’t. I don’t hit a REM cycle. Haven’t in years. I basically survive on catnaps, hence my epic panda eyes.” He grimaced and rubbed at his face as if trying to erase the dark circles there. “As a side effect of my ability on search mode, I can’t have anything electronic in the bedroom while I’m sleeping. I’m running on high at that point, so I fry anything in the room.”

Ah. Hence his earlier comment of it being safe while he was awake. Got it. “There’s no way for you to shut this off, I assume. Would an anchor be able to do that for you?”

“Oh sure, in theory. An anchor would be perfect for this. It would give my ability someone to focus on so it could relax and let me sleep.” Walker rolled his eyes heavenward. “But think about it from the anchor’s perspective. He has to be willing to follow around a sleep-deprived psychic with weird hours, be frequently woken up after midnight for some emergency, and live with virtually no privacy because his psychic can feel him and knows precisely where he is at all times. I’m like that psychotic stalker ex-boyfriend.”

“Well, sure, if you put it like *that*,” I said with a shake of my head. “But there are people out there who don’t have secrets to keep, you know? People who would be happy to anchor to a handsome man with a heart of gold—which I know you do since you routinely get up after midnight even when exhausted to find those who are lost.”

He paused and studied me for a second. “The only reason you say that is because of Donovan Havili. Your cousin can’t keep a secret from Jonathan Bane, but it doesn’t seem to bother him.”

“It doesn’t,” I affirmed with a nod. “And he’s part of why I’m saying this, sure. My other cousin, Brandon, is much the same. Good anchors *do* exist; you just may not have found yours yet.”

Walker was still watching me but with this little half-smile now. “How did this turn into a pep talk about me finding an anchor? I think we got sidetracked.”

“Maybe a little, but not much. I do want to cover the difficulty psychics face when finding an anchor. I know Jon had given up before Don walked into his life. Mack considered it a fantasy to have one. I don’t think the world as a whole realizes how much of a challenge this can be.”

“But you see it, don’t you.”

It wasn’t a question. I answered it anyway. “I do. It means finding your perfect match. Not just someone you can work with, but someone who you love to pieces. Someone you’d walk through hell for. Your best friend. It’s all of that, and more.”

“It’s sanity, and safety, and trust,” Walker said in a hushed tone, his eyes sad. “It’s comfort, love, need. It’s finding home in another person. Some of us can find that in a sibling or family member. I’ve seen a few best friends do it with stunning success. Me, I’d have to find the other half of my heart, because whoever he is would be a lover as well. Pretty damn tall order, if you ask me.”

Yes, it was. A very tall order. And I noted his choice of pronoun with interest—he kept referring to a possible anchor as ‘he.’ I hadn’t known Walker was gay, and that wasn’t something I’d put in the book. It was just my gay self taking an interest in a handsome man of the same orientation.

“But you came here to talk about psychic abilities and some of the cases I’ve worked on.” He put a smile on his face and sat back. “Let me start by saying that while dreamwalking sounds very cool, it can be awkward as hell. I sleep in more weird places than an alcoholic.”

“Weirdest place,” I challenged immediately, unable to let that pass.

“Hmm...how does a library bookshelf sound?”

I let out a half-disbelieving laugh. “Oh my god, I’ve got to hear this one. What case was this for?”

He obliged, a grin on his face. Walker, as it turned out, was quite the storyteller. I lost track of my interview notes quite a few times before giving up and ignoring them altogether.

I spent three hours there with him, talking and swapping information, and by the time I left, I honestly liked the man.

It was a shame he felt no one would love him enough to be an anchor. To me, he seemed well worth the time and energy. I hoped someone, at some point in time, would feel the same way. He didn’t deserve to suffer through every day like this.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alan".

This was so damn embarrassing.

Why?

Why the hell did I think taking a nap on the couch—the same couch Alan Havili sat on—was a good idea? Was I touched in the head?

Worse, I had no other case to work on that day, so my brain didn't have another person to switch to. Ugh. I hated my ability some days. Most days, honestly, but today especially.

The upside to this was that at least Alan wasn't aware I had fixated on him. It wasn't like he could feel it, after all. As long as I kept my mouth shut, he'd never know.

The other upside was, he was probably one of the best men I'd ever tracked.

Jonathan Bane had mentioned once that Donovan Havili was one of the best anchors in the known world, and that he was lucky to have Donovan. After working a case with them, I believed it. But I'd bet even money that Alan Havili could give his cousin a run for his money. That's how stunningly beautiful this man's soul was.

Once the psychic community learned properly about this man, he'd get seduced into being someone's anchor rather quickly. Any reader would take one look at him and snatch him up. I was honestly surprised he'd lasted this long. The

overall package he presented was as tempting as an ice cream cone on a hot Fourth of July. I certainly wasn't immune. And that was before I'd even gotten a good read on him.

He'd just been so *charming*. That was the word. He'd sat on my couch and asked me intelligent questions, coupled with sweet smiles that did funny things in my chest. Alan dressed like the former college professor he was, with his slacks and button-down shirt, black hair styled back, reading glasses perched on his nose. I knew his golden skin had to be natural—no way was he the type to be outdoors much.

I may have developed a tiny crush on the man before he even left my house. I have a serious weakness for the intellectuals.

And then I stupidly took a nap on the same couch he'd sat on.

"Brain," I said on a sigh, "can we please not fixate on Alan Havili? He's a nice man, he doesn't deserve to be stalked."

Brain did not agree. Brain liked Alan a lot.

"Screw you. I don't know why I put up with you. You're never helpful."

The phone rang. I picked it up, noting Chloe's name on my screen with relief. Thank god, a case. Never in my life had I been so eager to go to work. I answered with the plea, "Please tell me you need me."

There was a hiccup on the other end. "*You actually sound eager to run out the door and track down a criminal. Uh, bad day?*"

"No, I just did something stupid and now I'm tracking someone I'm not supposed to. Please give me someone else to fixate on."

"*Ah. Well, how does a missing teenager with an older man for a suspect sound to you?*"

"Perfect." I grinned in relief. There, that should be the ticket.



I gave up and opened my eyes to stare at my ceiling.

Fuck my brain.

Fuck it.

And damn my ability to hell while I'm at it.

Why was it *still* fixated on Alan Havili three days later?

I'd done the work thing. And drank the splashy water, and ate the green things, and tried to tire myself out. Then I'd gone to bed, and I should have dropped right into sleep.

Nope. Went straight into dreamland every time. Where my brain spent six hours hovering around Alan Havili, all happy. Granted, he'd dreamed exciting things, some mix of fantasy and an action flick, which had been entertaining to watch. Rinse and repeat.

It was barely dawn, I hadn't slept a wink, and I felt exhausted just lying here. Turning over and trying again to sleep would do me absolutely no good.

I have literally never had this situation happen before. My brain didn't return to someone after I'd switched targets. Why was it bouncing back to Alan? It didn't make any sense whatsoever.

Today, at least, I didn't have to focus on this. I had a court trial to attend, a wrap-up to Annie's case. Melinda and Jeremiah Blatt were up on kidnapping charges, and I had to testify. It was a relief to have an excuse to get out of the house. Maybe if I were extremely lucky, Chloe would have another case for me, and I could get my stupid ability to focus on something other than Alan.

I took a shower, dressed in a suit, and drove to the Historic Metro Courthouse. The laws had adapted a bit over the past year so psychics could give testimony with cases. They still needed corroborating evidence—they couldn't just take our word on it. Still, I was called into the courtroom more often now.

I did my bit, swore in, gave testimony, responded to cross-examination by the defense, and stepped down again to rejoin

the audience. For a trial, this one was rather short. Two hours later, the jury came back with a unanimous verdict of guilty. The judge was not lenient, giving both Melinda and Jeremiah Blatt eleven years in prison.

Which made me happy. Good, let them rot for a while.

Annie recognized me and gave me a hug, beaming. I was glad the experience hadn't dimmed her spirit. I think she'd always remember what happened, but hopefully, it wouldn't scar her.

I left the courtroom with a sigh. Well, that had been a good ending to a scary situation. I felt like lunch might be in order, then maybe I'd call Chloe and beg for something to do. I was tired—and embarrassed—enough not to be above begging.

“Grant?”

Turning, I saw Jon and Donovan behind me. They both wore suits as well, looking cleaned up and professional. Although, Donovan in a suit made him look like some kind of secret agent on security detail. “Hey, how are you?”

“We're good,” Jon answered with a smile. “Here for a trial?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Same. It's weird being in a courtroom now. Most of my career, they didn't bother bringing me in. I'm a little surprised you're here, though.” Jon canted his head, his eyes trailing down toward my chest. “You're tracking someone, so aren't you in the middle of a case?”

Damn readers and their eyes. Did I want to explain to him I was still tracking his fiancé's cousin? No way in hell. “Uh...”

Jon's eyes went a little wider. “Why is that embarrassing?”

“Shit.” I sighed. There was no keeping secrets from Jon. I don't know why the hell the thought had even crossed my mind. “I'll tell you, but...don't tell him.”

“Oh, this'll be good,” Jon said with an evil smile. “Tell who, Grant?”

“Alan,” I answered on a wince.

“You’re tracking Alan?” Jon looked even more delighted, for some reason.

I eyed him warily. I didn’t trust that expression.

Donovan apparently didn’t either, as he was looking at his better half with just as much suspicion. “We were about to go find lunch. Why don’t you join us, Grant, and tell us what’s going on? Assuming I can get this one to behave.”

Jon blinked back up at him, the picture of innocence.

Yeah, you know what, I needed advice. If anyone could help me, it was probably these two. “Sure. Jeff Ruby’s Steakhouse is around the corner.”

“Always up for steak,” Donovan agreed easily.

It was close enough we could walk two blocks and be there, so none of us went hunting for our cars. In downtown Nashville, you kept parking if you had it. I exited the main door of the courthouse building with them, falling into step next to Donovan—the safer choice for my phone—and tried to figure out where to begin.

Jon looked around his lover to ask me, “Is this on purpose?”

“No,” I answered, the sigh coming from my soul. “After Alan came to visit me, I stupidly took a nap on the couch he sat on. I’ve been tracking him ever since.”

“Really. No other cases in between?”

“Here’s the kicker—there have been. Two. My ability goes straight back to Alan after I’ve found the target.”

Donovan’s eyebrows got lost somewhere up his forehead. “No kidding. I didn’t think your ability worked like that.”

“It doesn’t.” I rubbed at my forehead, the headache building in my temples. “It’s never done this in my life. I don’t understand why it’s fixating so hard on Alan. I can’t get it to stop, either. Nothing I’ve tried has worked.”

“Hmm,” Jon said.

It was a very knowing hum. My suspicions dropped back into place. “What do you know?”

“Quite a bit,” Jon answered, eyes dancing. “I’ll take this in order. Alan has all the patience, ability, and talent to be as good of an anchor as Donovan. Oh-ho, you’re not surprised by that.”

I stared him down. “Look, Mr. Reader, I’ve been stalking this man for almost three days. No, I’m not surprised by that. I got Alan’s measure pretty quickly. And?”

“He’s gay and wants a romantic partner,” Jon threw in, all casual-like.

I tripped over thin air and had to grab Donovan’s shoulder to keep my balance. What? Wait, what? That beautiful man was gay? “Now you’re messing with me.”

Jon turned in place to face me straight on, his eyes turning penetrating in a way that made it feel like he could see right through me. He probably could. “He’s incredibly compatible with you. If I was a matchmaker, I would put the two of you together.”

“Jon,” I whimpered, still clinging to Donovan for balance. “Jon, that’s not nice. You *know* what living with me would entail.”

“Alan has the Havili patience; he’d do fine with your crazy schedule.” Jon tsked a finger at me. “Grant, you’re not stupid. Sleep-deprived, but not stupid. *Think*. Your ability has been telling you Alan has the potential to be a good anchor. It’s why it keeps going back to him.”

Ah, shit. He was right. I wasn’t sure if I was in denial or if I’d been too sleep-deprived to put the pieces together. Either way, when he said those words, I realized they were the absolute truth.

Also, did it matter what I wanted? “He doesn’t want to be an anchor, though, right?”

Donovan fielded this question, head canted. “My cousin doesn’t believe he’d make a good anchor because he’s not a fighter in personality. It’s not that he’s seriously considered it

one way or another. If you want him, Grant, you need to make the first move.”

I looked up at him and tried to read his half-smile. “Are you encouraging this? Why?”

“The last time Jon told someone he was compatible with a person, it was Mack. Brandon’s never been happier than he is with his medium. Is it so wrong to want that kind of happiness for my cousin, too?”

That effectively shut me down for a second. I had no good response to that.

I looked at Jon again, ideas and possibilities whirling through my head. “You truly think I should try for this.”

“I do,” Jon responded patiently. “Grant, I promised Alan I wouldn’t report him to the FBI as a good possible anchor.”

I felt a shaft of panic lance right through my chest at the idea. No, please don’t tell other people Alan was a perfect anchor walking around unattached! I absolutely did not want other people to know.

“That said, it’s a miracle no one’s picked up on him already. It’s only a matter of time.” Jon leaned in a little to emphasize the words. “If you want him, make a damn move.”

“But doing that means I have to confess to stalking him,” I protested with a whine. “There’s no good way to say that without sounding creepy!”

“I promise you, he’ll take it well. He’ll probably be flattered once you explain. Alan’s not the type to get huffy about stuff like this.” Donovan patted my shoulder encouragingly. “Come on, let’s eat. We’ll help you plan out what to say.”

“Yeah, okay.” I followed, not sure what else to do. I needed the help, no lie there. Food was a good idea, too, as I had no energy.

Belatedly, I realized that by agreeing, I had just admitted I wanted Alan. Not that it was any surprise to Jon, who saw all,

but Donovan hadn't blinked either. Either I'm just easy to read or...had Alan maybe said something to them?

Please let Alan be just as interested in me as I was in him. Please, oh please.

This would be humiliating otherwise.

Alan

There was a knock at my door. In my two-bedroom apartment, it was easy to hear and impossible to ignore. My train of thought derailed, I popped up and went to answer it. I wasn't expecting anyone, so delivery, maybe?

To my surprise, Donovan stood on the other side. He held up a hand, showcasing a bag. "Hey. Delivery from my mother."

"How did you get sucked into being delivery boy?"

"I might have mentioned I was swinging by to talk to you, and she started putting stuff in my hands."

"Ah. That would do it." I took the bag and gave the interior a quick peek. Ooh, yummy-looking things. As expected from my aunt. "Here, come in."

Donovan stepped inside and looked around curiously. Aside from the day he helped me unload the moving truck, he hadn't been inside. The furniture was all in place, at least. A row of boxes still lined the dining room, waiting for me to unpack them.

Did I have the motivation to do that? No.

Still, it was clear enough that Donovan could sit on the couch, me in a chair next to him, without needing to shift a million things first. I'd tackled that much over the weekend. I

couldn't work in a space too cluttered and messy. It affected my concentration.

I put the bag on the coffee table before looking back at him. "So, what brings you here?"

"Grantland Walker." Donovan said this as if the name held all the secrets to the universe, including the Bermuda Triangle.

I eyed him suspiciously. "I have not brought him up at all—to anyone—so what gives, Coz?"

"I did you a favor by not bringing the person who sees everything with me," Donovan said with a certain pointed expression. "So do me a favor and be honest with me, yeah?"

"Answer me first. Why bring him up at all?"

"Because I saw him yesterday and had lunch with him."

"Oh. Um..." I looked away, blowing out a steady stream of air. "Shit, okay, I'm too curious. What all did he say?"

"Well, quite a few things. He said—actually, I'm not sure if I should tell you everything that's going on. I will say you need to talk to him. Things are not as they appear."

"You sound like the man behind the mirror right now. Just spit it out."

Donovan eyed me as if gauging my reaction. "Grant looked like a zombie shuffling around. He was so sleep-deprived, his panda eyes almost got him admitted to a zoo."

I winced. "He wasn't that bad when I saw him."

"He hasn't slept since your interview with him. After you left, he took a nap on the couch and accidentally formed a connection with you."

I jolted upright in my chair. I wasn't sure if I was alarmed, surprised, or some other emotion entirely. "Wait, that was three days ago!"

"I know." Donovan was still weighing every twitch of my facial expressions. "He's guilty as hell, but his ability won't stop doing it. He's not able to sleep because of it."

“Shiiit,” I groaned, flopping back. “He was pretty sleep-deprived before I interviewed him, too. Wait, with how his ability works, he shouldn’t be able to do that. Once he started tracking someone else, he should have lost his connection to me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. That’s usually how it works.”

I sat back up again, looking at my cousin with new eyes. “He’s still doing it. He’s somehow coming back to me even after tracking someone?”

“Two people, according to him. Which makes no damn sense—unless you factor in that his ability no doubt recognizes you as an anchor candidate and is trying to latch onto you.”

I felt my breath freeze in my lungs. Grant’s ability liked me that much? It stubbornly retained the connection even after all this time? But, I...surely I wasn’t the best candidate?

Donovan’s hand landed on my shoulder. “Alan. Jon told you flat out you were a good anchor candidate, didn’t he?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Grant can sense quite a bit about you while he’s tracking you. He explained how his ability works during the interview, right? He’d know enough to judge whether he wanted you or not. His ability is not shutting up about it. The question is, how do *you* feel about all of this?”

“Mostly...flattered?”

“That it?”

“Well, no, really confused, too. Overwhelmed by the idea.” I blew out a breath, staring straight ahead as my brain whirled. “I’m not going to pretend the prospect in my face is something I want to ignore. If I could have a relationship like yours, that would be everything I could possibly wish for. But...” My mind was racing with possibilities, so busy I almost couldn’t string words together. I looked into Donovan’s patient expression and felt almost stupid for asking, but I had to hear the answer. “Am I really what he wants?”

“You are.” Donovan’s mouth quirked up on one side. “Look, Coz, you’ve got to understand the psychics. The truly powerful ones like Jon and Grant especially have some serious hangups. They suffered through adolescence, and people get irritated with them as adults. They don’t want to be an imposition to people, so they’ll often not say what they need. Brandon and I both have had an uphill battle with our men about this. They are both terrible about communicating what they need, to the point we’ve had fights about it. Grant is right up there with them. He’s spent too long trying to manage on his own, had too many people tell him he’s troublesome to be around, and now he honestly believes no one would possibly want to anchor with him.”

My protest was hot and instinctive. “He can’t help how his ability works, how demanding his job is! That’s unfair to expect him to be ‘normal,’ whatever the fuck that is.”

Donovan’s grin winked out at me. “See? You get it. I know you keep thinking you don’t quite have the right personality to be an anchor, but *that* attitude right there is what a psychic needs more than anything. That staunch defense. That patience.”

I blew out a breath and rubbed a hand over my face. I wasn’t sure how to feel about this. With both Donovan and Jon telling me repeatedly that I had the right skill set for becoming an anchor, I couldn’t discount it. It was also telling that Grant had latched onto me.

What troubled me more than anything was what Donovan saw in Grant. He truly had no intention of reaching out to me? Was he that convinced he was too much trouble? “When you saw him, did he say anything about talking to me?”

“He said a lot about not doing that very thing. Jon tried to talk him around, but Grant’s completely embarrassed about this. He feels like he’s been stalking you, and even he’s confused on why his ability has fixated so strongly.” A flash of mischief lit Donovan’s face. “He did confess that you’re gorgeous and he’s upset he couldn’t hit on you.”

My cousin was not a liar. That said... “You’re just pulling my chain now.”

“I might be. A little. What do you think, Alan? On a scale of hotness from one to ten, where does Grant hit?”

“Eleven,” I growled, exasperated. “You’ve got fucking eyes, don’t you?”

“All I can see is Jon,” he intoned.

I smacked him in the ribs, making him laugh.

Donovan was still chuckling as he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Look, I know how scary this is. Being an anchor is so much more than being a romantic partner. A lot of your world changes to accommodate them, and that’s not as easy as it looks. I had to give up some things to be with Jon. That said, it was absolutely worth it. His peace of mind, his happiness, balance everything else out. I mean, look at you. You barely know Grant and you’re already stressed and unhappy about his state right now.”

Dammit, he had me there. I wasn’t sure how to feel about being an anchor. The idea was too nebulous, I guess. I couldn’t get a good visual. Being Grant’s partner, though—that had all sorts of appeal.

“All I’m advising is try to date.” Donovan waved a hand to indicate the outside world. “You don’t need to jump into something with a man you barely know. I took some time with Jon, Brandon took some with Mack. You have to know what you’re getting into, right? All I’m suggesting is try. I don’t think Grant’s going to make the first move. He’s too convinced he’s impossible to live with. I’d be shocked if he reaches out first.”

From what I knew of him, I believed Donovan to be correct. Even in the interview, Grant had already given up on the idea of finding an anchor. It had bothered me at the time, but now knowing everything else? It bothered me more. That sweet man deserved to be properly cared for.

I looked at the engagement ring on Donovan’s finger. He was so much happier, his heart finding a stable home in Jon. If

I could have that kind of relationship—especially with a man as amazing as Grant—wouldn't it all be worth it?

If nothing else, the idea of leaving Grant in that state, where he was sleep-deprived and still trying to function, still trying to save people despite it all, left a bitter taste in my mouth. Even if he and I didn't work out, I wanted to at least ask him to date.

"You're going to do it," Donovan breathed in excitement.

That thought was written so clearly on my face, eh? I locked eyes with him. "I think I have to try. I don't like leaving Grant in this state, and the possibility of having him is too damn tempting to ignore."

Donovan grinned at me. "Good."

"Don, just out of curiosity, how many times has Jon done this? Played matchmaker between psychic and anchor?"

"Three times that I know of."

Jon wasn't the meddlesome sort, so it surprised me he'd done it that many times. "Really. With who?"

Donovan's eyebrows arched, eyes sparkling with amusement. "Mack and Brandon, Mom and Lauren, and now you and Grant."

"Oh," I said faintly. "Oh shit. So, in other words, he's that accurate? Two out of three are already together?"

"He's that accurate. If he ever chose to open up a matchmaking service, we'd be millionaires in the first year. Why do you think I'm sitting here talking to you about it?"

I was speechless. Perfectly speechless. I knew Jon's eyes were good, but to read compatibility that well? I was perfectly amazed. Don was right; if Jon ever did switch to matchmaking full time, people would be beating down his door.

In that case, I really shouldn't doubt what Jon told me. If I had the ability to be an anchor, if I was that compatible with Grant, I shouldn't hesitate to try dating and see where it led. It was still scary to take that leap of faith, no lie. The one thing I'd never lacked in my life was courage. I wouldn't falter now,

not when such a tempting possibility stretched out in front of me.

My mind made up, I asked, “When did you see Grant?”

“Lunch today.”

It was past dinner now. I looked at the clock and made some mental adjustments for my plans for tomorrow. I had a feeling none of them would pan out. “If he doesn’t call me tonight, I’ll contact him tomorrow. He might be on a case for all I know. But I won’t let this situation linger.”

Donovan gave me a light, happy slap against the shoulder. “Good luck, Coz. You might need it. I’m always here for advice.”

“Thanks. I might take you up on it.”

One way or another, I’d approach Grant tomorrow. Now, how to approach this without embarrassing him further.... That was the question.

Alan

Jon and Donovan were great over lunch. Super supportive and patient as they worked me through what to do, what to say. I still felt conflicted, though. I believed Jon and what he saw, I just...felt conflicted.

I got thrown into another case after lunch that kept me up and moving until almost midnight. With that going on, I had no real time to think until I got home. I tried to go to bed, to sleep, but of course my ability didn't want to sleep. It wanted to fixate on Alan.

Not helpful, brain. Seriously not helpful.

I really wanted to try and ignore this. Mostly because it was embarrassing. But another part of me wanted to figure this out. It had been four days since my interview with him, and this situation wasn't improving. Only getting stranger. I was growing more exhausted battling it.

Besides, didn't the man deserve to know I was stalking him?

Ugh, maybe not use that word. Yeah.

I texted him because it was ass o'clock and most people wouldn't be awake at this hour. I kept it short and sweet, just a request that he call me when he could. Then I rolled out of bed

and headed for the shower. Hot water to work out the kinks in my neck sounded good.

I showered, the water as blisteringly hot as I could stand it. Got out, toweled off, only to hear my phone ringing.

Seriously, no missing people today. No bad people either. Grant needs today off.

I fetched the phone from the bathroom counter, only to blink in surprise. It was Alan.

Oh god, what if I hadn't figured out what to say to him yet?

Sorry, my ability thinks you're temptation on two legs?

Yeah, maybe not lead with that.

I cleared my throat. "Hi, Alan."

"Hi, Grant. What's going on?"

"Um. So. I maybe did something stupid. And then it turned weird. After you left, I took a nap on the couch and kinda... fixated on you? Sorry."

"Fixated how? Are you tracking me still?"

"Yeah. I...yeah, sorry."

He laughed good-naturedly. *"Oops. It's alright, I don't mind."*

I felt like hugging the man. "Thanks, seriously, but it's more complicated than that. Since then, I've gone on three different cases, tracked people, the works. But when I'm not actively tracking someone, my ability goes right back to you. This has literally never happened before. I've never had my ability fixate on someone like this."

There was a digestive pause. *"So your ability likes me is what you're saying."*

"It loves you. It wants to marry you and have your babies. And I do not quite understand how it's even doing this, to be honest. Whatever aura you left on the couch is long gone, so how am I ping-ponging back to you, time and again?"

“It’s a truly interesting question. Tell you what, let me eat breakfast, put real people clothes on, and I’ll come down. I want to help you figure this out.”

Oh thank god. I thought about refusing because it was a huge imposition and not his problem, but I was at my wit’s end. Surely a college professor would be smart enough to figure this out. Jon and Donovan hadn’t even tried, just told me to chase him. While I liked the idea of dating Alan—who wouldn’t?—it didn’t make my ability behave or explain how this was happening, and I really needed that answer. “Please.”

“I’ll be there in a little over an hour. Hang tight.”

“Okay. Bye.” I hung up. And then looked down at my naked self. Maybe breakfast and real people clothes were a good idea for me, too.



Alan arrived an hour and twenty-six minutes later, looking unfairly refreshed with his soft Henley shirt and jeans. If he hadn’t been here to help me, I would have hated him a little for being able to sleep well at night.

I wasn’t the nicest person when sleep-deprived.

Opening the front door, I greeted him with, “I felt you every minute of the way here. This isn’t *normal*.”

Alan came bearing a thermos, which he promptly handed to me. “Green tea, figured you’d need it. Sit on the couch and walk me through this again. I was only mostly awake when I called you.”

Considering it was just now seven in the morning, I wasn’t surprised. I accepted the thermos like it was an offering from heaven and sipped at it. Wow, that was good tea. He knew how to brew it right. I drank more deeply as I let him in.

“So you took a nap on the couch after I left, connected to me, and your ability keeps coming back to me no matter how many times you retask it.” Alan went to the couch and sat down, watching me the entire time he moved. “You said you don’t hit a REM cycle when you sleep. Have you been tracking me even in your sleep?”

I sat on the couch with this man I had a teensy tiny crush on and felt perfectly willing to crawl into a hole and die of embarrassment. “I, uh...maybe am doing that.”

“I have weird dreams,” Alan said with a grin. “So that must have been entertaining for you.”

Oh thank god. Look at that smile; he wasn’t bothered at all. I felt like crying in relief. “They were interesting dreams, alright.”

“Okay, tell me what you’ve tried. Holding onto another person or object while sleeping?”

“Object, no dice. I can’t sleep next to people. My brain gets all hyper and excited, like a golden retriever with the promise of ten balls to chase. I literally can’t lie still.”

Alan gave a thoughtful hum, rich brown eyes studying me thoughtfully. “So you can’t force it to refocus on someone else while sleeping. Interesting. Grant, forgive me for saying so, but you look exhausted. Have you slept at all since I was here last?”

“I’d been up for about twenty hours before you came for the interview,” I said wearily. “I haven’t slept properly in five days.”

Alan did not like that answer. That was mucho clear from his frown. “That’s unhealthy. Hm. Alright, let’s try something. Your ability seems to be breaking all the rules with me, and I want to see how far outside the norm it’s going. Grab that afghan and lie down with me on the couch for a few minutes.”

He couldn’t possibly be suggesting what I think he’s suggesting. “You want me to take a nap. With you.”

“I do.” He arched an eyebrow, mouth quirked in amusement. “I assure you, having a handsome man snuggled against me isn’t a hardship.”

Oh. Oh, damn, he was attracted to me?

Did I want that information?

Because now that I had it, I really wanted to do something with it.

No, focus, problem-solving first. “Okay, I don’t mind. But what exactly are you testing?”

“To see if you can rest next to me. You said normally you’re too wired to do that. But I think you’ll have the opposite reaction with me.”

He might well be right. He’s broken every other rule so far. I was game to try it, at least, just to see. “Alright.”

Alan took his wallet and phone from his pocket, kicked off his shoes, and laid everything aside. I took off my glasses and laid them on the coffee table. Then it was a matter of arranging ourselves on the wide couch, him flat on his back, me tucked in between the couch’s back and his side. We took a minute to settle, as it was awkward on some level to be snuggled in with a man I barely knew—even one my brain had been fixating on for days. I wasn’t sure what to do with my hands or if it was alright to pillow my head on his shoulder. Finally, Alan adjusted to me, hands encouraging me to settle, and I followed that silent direction, awkwardness lingering a bit as I found a position next to him.

He was surprisingly comfortable. I liked men who were a little soft like this, not all hard with muscles. They were super cuddly. He draped the afghan over us, and part of me wondered if this would work. I had those nervous butterflies in my stomach, the type that formed when you touched someone you liked. It was hard to lie there, unmoving.

Then his hand came up, smoothing along my back, and it was like my ability suddenly had permission to relax. The object of its fixation was right there with me. I had his full approval to read him.

Oh. That was nice. I’d never had that before.

A certain lassitude crept over me. He smelled fantastic, too, and it wasn’t cologne. Just warm male skin and a hint of mint soap.

He turned his head a little and spoke against my forehead in a soft, rumbling tone. “How is it?”

“Mmm,” I said in full approval.

I don't remember anything after that.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alan".

He was asleep.

Sound asleep. I could tell from the snores.

Well, now, this was interesting. Grantland Walker, the psychic who never properly slept and couldn't do so while in contact with someone, was currently snoozing away in my arms without a care in the world.

I maybe enjoyed holding him. A lot. But I was trying not to focus on that. He'd called me for help, after all.

I wasn't quite sure what to make of this. I'd need to experiment more and ask a lot of questions. However, I had a two-part hypothesis. One: of course Grantland's ability liked me—I wasn't a criminal or someone in distress. It must feel like a vacation to track someone who was generally happy on a day-to-day basis.

But the other part felt like the true answer to this equation. I was a good potential anchor.

Jon had said that flat out to me several months ago. With his eyes, there was no question of whether he was right or wrong. Grant's ability worked differently, but he could no doubt sense what Jon had seen. I had all of the makeup to be a good anchor. To someone like Grant, who desperately needed one, why wouldn't his ability latch onto me?

I didn't take Donovan's warning lightly. My world would no doubt take a dizzying turn if I anchored with Grant. My schedule would no longer be my own. I couldn't wake up in the morning predicting what would happen throughout the day. I wouldn't be able to write on a schedule. I'd have to squeeze my work in between his. All of that would be a challenge.

I didn't know how that would take a toll on him or me, but I did know it wasn't enough of a deterrent. I had quite a few things to talk about with Grant, but I wasn't waking him up to do it. Let him be for a while. I could read a book on my phone to pass the time.

I had my phone in my hand before I remembered—Grant fries electronics in his sleep. I froze, staring at the screen with concern. Um, are you alright, phone?

The phone didn't act like anything was amiss, working and functioning as it'd always done. My watch was ticking away just fine, as well. Interesting. Was this something else of Grant's ability working outside the norm?

Or...wait, he said his ability runs on high all night because it's not tracking someone and is in search mode. Maybe it's not doing that right now because I—the person he's been tracking—was right here. Maybe my electronics were safe at the moment.

A little warily, I kept the phone in my hand, giving it a minute. When nothing happened, I pulled up a good historical romance I was in the middle of and picked it back up. My mind sometimes wandered back to the man in my arms. Grant was just so cute while sleeping, and I liked holding him.

Poor man, I could tell he was so embarrassed by this whole situation. And grateful I wasn't mad at him about it. It's not like he has perfect control over his ability. There were psychic types who were 'on' all the time; they couldn't shut the ability off. He happened to be one of them. I wasn't going to hold it against him.

I did feel a little awkward about it, in truth. Grateful he couldn't read my thoughts, but still, he probably had picked up some interesting emotions from me. I was also very, very glad

I hadn't been dreaming of him because I didn't know how I'd even begin to live *that* down.

Time slipped past, and I marked it in how my stomach started perking up, nudging me about lunch. It was nearly noon, and me at the end of my book, before I felt him stir, making snuffling noises.

I whispered against his skin, "Awake?"

"Mm," he sighed happily. Then abruptly went tense. "Um."

"Shh, don't panic." I stroked a hand up and down his spine reassuringly. "You needed the sleep."

"But...I mean, I never sleep next to someone. It's impossible. And I can tell I hit a REM cycle because I feel honestly rested for once. Did I snore?"

"Very lightly, more like a heavy purr."

"Holy shit," he said reverently. "I haven't snored since hitting puberty."

Grant levered himself up, sitting up, and I agreed it was a good idea. Plus, my shoulder was a little asleep, not that I was about to tell him that. I sat up as well, putting the afghan and my phone aside.

He looked at me as if he'd found Buddha, practically glowing. To him, I might as well be. I promised him rest when nothing else in his life came even close to that. And god, that was an addictive feeling. To be so important to someone else. I'd never felt like this before, and it was heady stuff. I had to pull myself back from it before I got lost.

Before he could start, I held up three fingers. "I've got three things to share with you, two of them a hypothesis for what's going on."

He was intrigued by this, nodding readily. "Okay, Professor, hit me."

"One, my guess is that on a day-to-day basis, you only work with criminals and cops. You don't sleep over at anyone else's house, right? So connecting with me no doubt felt like a vacation compared to what your brain normally tracks."

Grant considered that for a second, then nodded slowly. “Yeah, come to think of it, it would be. You give off a pleasant vibe.”

I preened a little under that compliment. “I think that’s partially why your ability zeroed in on me. Now, before I share the second hypothesis, I should tell you something. Several months ago, Jon told me I had all the potential to be a good anchor. I think your ability recognizes my potential, which is why it keeps coming back to me. It’s seeking grounding.”

Grant didn’t look surprised, but then, he’d talked with Jon and Donovan about this yesterday. I only said it to emphasize that I knew it, too.

“You wouldn’t make just a good anchor,” he refuted finally. “You’d be fucking *fantastic*. Jon is right about that.”

I blushed. Somehow it felt different coming from Grant.

“I think both hypotheses are right,” he continued, turning to look blindly ahead.

And now he didn’t know what to do about it. It seemed like a bit much to leap ahead and say, ‘I’ll be your anchor.’ I barely knew this man. On the other hand, I couldn’t see how getting to know him better was a mistake. He was the epitome of the type I liked to date, not that I normally had good luck meeting men like this.

He might be too shy or embarrassed to prompt the next step. I wasn’t. “Grant, I should say I find you very attractive. I don’t know if you’re interested in dating, or—”

His head snapped around and he blurted, “Are you insane? I’d love to date you!”

Oh. Well. That just put a glow in my ego. “You would?”

Grant’s eyes closed, and he groaned. “I could have said that more smoothly. Yes, Alan, I’m very attracted to you, too. I think dating would be amazing. But remember how I said my life is insane?”

“Isn’t one of the points in dating to learn about each other? We can’t predict how well I’ll adapt to your schedule until we

try. I'm a bit of a night owl anyway. I don't anticipate that being as big of a problem as you think it will be."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay, good point. And, um, you'll act as an anchor while we're dating?"

"To see how well this all works, yes."

A baffled expression came to his face. Which, considering the red sleep lines still in his skin, made him look very adorable. "Really? Just like that? You don't want to think about it?"

"I half-suspected something like this was happening since you called this morning. Don and I may have already spoken about it. Trust me, I've had time to think about it. Honestly, I've been thinking about it since meeting you. I hated that you didn't have an anchor, that you'd given up having one. You do so much to help people, and it comes at a cost. I want to offset that if I can."

He scrubbed at his face. "You're made of niceness. I'll swear to this. And I feel like I'm taking advantage of it."

Ah, hence the hesitation. Alright, switch tactics. I had to fight to keep a naughty little grin off my face. "I have a very convincing argument."

Grant dropped his hands to look at me. "Yeah?"

I slid one hand along his jawline, tangling into that curly hair, even as I leaned in. His mouth was parted a little in surprise as I kissed him, and I might have taken advantage of that. After that first, startled moment, he groaned and leaned into it, kissing me back with fervor as his hands came around my waist.

Damn, this was better than I expected. He tasted so fine, the skin underneath my fingers smooth from a recent shave, and whatever hesitation he had was gone now. His tongue slipped into my mouth and tangled with my own in a hot glide.

I only pulled back to tease him. "Are you convinced yet?"

His skin was flushed, eyes bright with passion. "You can't turn my brain off and then ask me serious questions. That's not

nice.”

I laughed, amused.

“Are you seriously asking me if I’m convinced? After a kiss like that? Our chemistry is off the charts. I’ve never wanted to bone someone so badly in my life. Alan Havili, you are...so completely unexpected. I feel like I’ve been swept up in a summer storm. Still, are you sure? This is a lot of work you’re letting yourself in for.”

I didn’t discount the warning. Still, I shrugged. “Anything worth doing involves work. And frankly, I’ve now seen two of my cousins become anchors. Saw what that did for them, how it changed them. They became fulfilled, happy men after meeting their partners. The chance to have something like that isn’t one I’ll easily pass up.”

Understanding filled his face. “That’s why you’re eager to try this. Because of them.”

“I’ve had one of the best readers in this country tell me I can do this. I don’t think he’s wrong. I’m certainly willing to put in the effort to try. But I can’t force you, Grant. I know you didn’t wake up this morning expecting any of this.”

“No,” he whispered, the word husky from strong emotion. He had to look away, eyes bright. “No, I only dreamed of it all my life. Alan, you are a temptation in so many ways. I’m... I’m honestly a little scared to try.”

Ah. That’s what it was. Not disinterest, but nerves. For him, this had to be scary. If this didn’t work out between us, to me, it was just a breakup. But for him, the fallout would be so much more. “Do you want to think about it? You don’t need to decide anything right now.”

“No.” He blew out a breath, visibly gaining control over his emotions. “No. If I think about it, I’ll overthink it. I know I will. Let’s date, Alan. And try this. Because god knows, I want you, and I really want this to work.”

“That’s the spirit!” I kissed him again, unable to resist. He was just too sweet to kiss, his pleasure so obvious.

He ended the kiss with reluctance, choosing to kiss me twice more before truly drawing back. “Lunch? My stomach is growling. And we can properly sit down, compare schedules, all of that.”

“Lunch and planning is good. But I’m saying this now—from now on, I’m sleeping over on a regular basis. Sex or no sex. I want you to have a proper night’s sleep.”

Grant promptly threw out a hand. “Twist my arm.”

I twisted, prompting him to chuckle. “Good. Now, lunch. I’m hungry too. I need to get my laptop out of the car, as I want to take notes while we’re talking.”

“Sure, Professor,” he said indulgently. “Take notes all you like.”



As it turned out, Grant had no food in the house, so we ended up going out for lunch. He took me to a little café in Bell Buckle, a very small, charming southern town not far from his house. The road was lined with large trees, like an enchanted forest. To my California eyes, the place was rich with green.

The café was charming, a timeless place that could have been built a hundred years ago, or ten. We looked over menus listing out greasy foods that could clog an artery, then placed our orders. When I looked back up, Grant wore a strange expression, as if sure he was dreaming, afraid he was, and trying to convince himself it was all real.

I couldn’t let any of that slide. I picked up his hand, lifting it gently to my mouth, where I pressed a kiss on the back of his fingers. “Penny for your thoughts.”

Grant was a little flushed, but the smile was back, the fear abating. “You have no idea how long it’s been since I even tried dating, and here I am, sitting down to lunch with you. You’re not shy about touching me in public, are you?”

“No. Probably because I came out and lived in California for so many years, I don’t have much in the way of inhibitions. But if I make you uncomfortable—”

He immediately shook his head. “To hell with any bigot who doesn’t like us. I’m not making myself miserable to make a stranger comfortable. Touch me whenever you like, honey.”

I liked that answer. “Good. Now, while we’re waiting on food, tell me what you need. I want to develop good habits from the onset.”

Grant sucked in a deep breath. Blew it out. “You know, for all I’ve wanted an anchor for years, I don’t even know where to start? How to explain it all.”

Ah. I could see why he might not have mentally ever planned this out. I tried to give him a starting point. “Walk me through a job. You get a call from the police, they need you to find someone. Then what?”

He kept hold of my hand, a thumb gently rubbing over my skin as he answered. “It’s usually Missing Persons calling. I can help them find the victim quickly and, as you know, every minute counts in those cases. I know most of the department well. They normally give me an address of the victim’s last known location, and they meet me there with the last thing the victim held—a jacket, a toy, whatever it is. If they don’t have that, then they try to maneuver me into the last place the person sat. Something to give me the psychic connection I need to find them.”

I itched to take notes, but I wasn’t letting go of his hand. He liked touching me, and I liked holding hands with him. I could always get him to repeat something later, if necessary.

“And that’s where things get fun.” Grant’s face screwed up in a grimace, resignation mixed in with aggravation. “I have to take a nap, right there, to get the connection. It’s beyond awkward, as I’ve got forensics, upset family members, police, you name it. They’re all around me and watching, and trying to sleep in that situation is not easy. I’ve gotten better at it, but still, I need someone I trust right at my side to stand guard before I can get comfortable enough to sleep.”

I tried to picture this mentally. I couldn’t imagine ever falling asleep in that kind of crime scene chaos. “Who normally does that for you?”

“There’s about four cops I trust implicitly. I’ll introduce you to all of them.”

“Okay, I look forward to it. How long are your naps?”

“Depends on where the person is. The further out they are, the longer it takes me. Still, I’ve never gone over thirty minutes.”

“So these are catnaps, then.”

“Oh yeah, always.” Grant paused, then picked back up. “After I get a lock on them, we typically load up and blaze to that person’s location. I’ll either describe where they are or, if I know no one else is nearby, I’ll help pull them out. Forensics doesn’t always like it when I do, but my priority is the victim.”

“Understandable. After the person has been found, you’re done?”

“Eh, not quite. Sometimes I help track the kidnapper too. After that, I go back to the station and write up a report of everything I did, sensed, where I found the victim, etcetera. I submit that, put in an invoice with accounting for my time, and then I’m done. Sometimes I attend the court trial and stand as a witness.”

I ran that through my head, looking at it from different angles. “So, what you’re saying is, the only thing I can do to support you is to watch over you while you’re defenseless.”

Grant snorted as if I’d said something amusing. “Honey, you have no idea how huge that is to me. Don’t make it sound like it’s barely anything at all. And that’s definitely not the only thing you’re doing for me. You’re grounding me right now, in fact.”

“I’m what?” I was just sitting here holding his hand. I wasn’t doing anything.

“Normally, my ability is sniffing around looking for something to get into.” Grant waved a hand to indicate the world in general. “It’s like a dog looking for treats. It’s worse at night when I’m not out and about, but it’s always on a low-key search if I’m not actively tracking someone. But right now, at this moment, it’s not. When you touch me, my ability

basically goes, ‘It’s ALAN!’ and glomps you. It really, really likes you. It’s perfectly happy to lock onto you and just stay there.”

“It can’t be just that, though. Right? That I’m compatible with your ability. Otherwise, you’d have connected somehow with other potential anchors.”

Grant couldn’t quite meet my eyes when he admitted, “I’m attracted to you, too. The emotions on my side might be influencing things.”

“Ah. I suppose that explains it.”

My eyes fell to our fingers, loosely clasped on the table. No wonder he’d held on after I initiated. I was giving him something he needed, even with something as simple as this.

It made sense. Everything initiated for him by touch, usually touching an object, granted, but it started with touch. His ability needed touch from me before it could engage. Well, hell. This made my job easy. “I can stay in contact as much as you’d like.”

“Do,” he requested with a smile. “It’s incredibly restful. Aside from that, I don’t know what else you can do. Those are the two things I need more than anything.”

“Then we’ll start there.”

When our food arrived, I let go of his hand to give room for the plates, but I shifted my leg at the same time to put my foot next to his.

The smile he gave me was blinding. Like I’d offered him a priceless gift just by playing footsie with him under the table.

There wasn’t much I wouldn’t do to keep that smile on his face.

I did harbor some worries about what might happen in the future, what twists and turns fate would throw at us. I didn’t know him well enough to predict how Grant reacted to stress. My guess was well, considering his profession, but I didn’t know for sure. I was only certain on one point.

I wanted this to work. He wanted this to work.

Surely that, more than anything, would see us through.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alan".

I did not wake up this morning anticipating I'd get Alan Havili as a boyfriend. But thank you, dating gods, for finally coming through for me. It may have taken twenty-eight years, but when you deliver, you do it with style.

He was such a quick study. We barely got out of the café before he took my hand in his. Even now, as we drove back to my place, he kept holding hands with me. My brain hasn't gotten this much of a vacation since I was thirteen. It was so *relaxing*.

Not going to lie, though—I liked holding hands with him for an entirely different reason.

I don't normally put out on the first date, but could I please have that option? Alan hit all my buttons in the best ways. I wanted to strip off those clothes and figure out just how far that golden skin went.

My phone rang, pulling me out of planning *The Seduction of Alan Havili* by yours truly. My car's display informed me my mother was calling, so I hit accept on the steering wheel's button. "Hey, Mom."

"Hi, sugar. I swung by the house to give you some tomatoes. Your sister's garden has gone insane this year, and we've got them coming out our ears. But I don't see your car in the drive. Are you out working?"

“Uh, no, I was out with”—a silly grin took over my face —“my new boyfriend.”

There was an audible pause. “*Grantland James Walker, are you being serious? Tell me you didn’t do one of those mail-order grooms.*”

Alan snickered into one hand.

“Thanks, Mom. Love that opinion of me. No, I’m serious. He’s sitting here listening to this call.”

“*Oh, good mercy, you could have said that!*”

“Mrs. Walker, I’m Alan,” he introduced himself. “We’ll be back to the house shortly, I believe. If you’d like to wait, I can properly meet you then.”

“*Alan, that sounds lovely. I’d like to meet you. I’ll just wait here, then.*”

“House isn’t locked, go on in,” I said. On this hot summer day, I didn’t want her sitting in the car.

“*I will. See you in a few.*”

I cast Alan a glance as I hung up. “Normally, people date longer than two hours before meeting the parents.”

Alan shrugged, apparently not bothered. “This isn’t a normal dating situation anyway. I’ll be your work partner as well. I’m sure your family will rest easier if they meet me first.”

I wanted to kiss him for that. He was exactly right.

“How many members are in your family?” Alan asked.

“Father, mother, two sisters, one older brother. I’m the baby of the family. We’re all pretty close in age, though. Mom had a kid a year for four years running before they stopped. Her body couldn’t handle any more pregnancies.”

“Four children is a good-sized family,” Alan observed. “I’ve got an older sister, father, and mother in my immediate family. Of course, you’ve already met one of my cousins.”

That I had, and I liked Donovan quite a bit. It gave me a good indication of what his family must be like. “You said you came out already. I assume you were accepted by everyone?”

“Oh yes. Donovan and Brandon are both bisexual, I’m gay, and the whole family is more invested in us finding good people than worried about gender. I’m incredibly lucky that way. You?”

“Family’s totally accepting.” I paused and re-phrased that. “My immediate family is, anyway. I get trouble from other members of the family from time to time. But I also don’t see them all that often.”

“I see. Then I won’t worry about it.”

I cast him a glance as we got off the main road, turning onto the country road that led to my driveway. “Can I ask how old you are?”

“I’m thirty-five,” he answered readily. “You can’t read that off me?”

Interesting—he was only seven years older than me. I wouldn’t have guessed that. His looks didn’t hint at his age. He could have been anywhere between twenty-five to forty. “My ability isn’t that precise, no. I get a general sense of the person—like emotionally—and if they’re dreaming, I can enter the dream with them. I get identity and location. But I don’t read everything about them.”

“Interesting, what your ability chooses to do. I would have thought you could read a person in more detail.”

“Nope. I consider it bad enough I can follow people like a cyberstalker. One they can’t escape from.”

He tsked me with a gentle smile. “Your ability saves lives. I know it frustrates you, but it’s not a curse.”

We’ll see how he felt about that the sixth time he was woken up at two a.m. and dragged out into the night air.

I turned into my driveway, parking next to my mother’s bright yellow Chevy truck. That was her puttering vehicle,

what she drove when she was getting into things. Reluctantly, I let go of Alan so we could exit the car.

Yes, my ability may have whined in protest. I told it to man up.

My mother was obviously watching for us, as she was out on the front porch before I could even get the car door open. Her eyes were glued to Alan, taking in every detail. I could tell she found him handsome. Her smile brightened a notch.

Alan didn't seem perturbed by the intense study. He went right up to her, a hand outstretched. "Alan Havili. A pleasure, Mrs. Walker."

She took the hand but held onto it. "Call me Trisha, please. Alan, it is such a pleasure. How long have you been dating my son?"

"Two hours, or thereabouts." He chuckled, throwing me that sweet smile over his shoulder. "I may have talked him into it."

"It didn't take much," I pointed out. If this man only grasped the temptation he was to me...

Mom's hazel eyes bounced between us, growing wider. "Two hours! I thought it'd be longer than that."

"Come in, I'll tell you the story," I encouraged.

"I'd do that in a heartbeat, but I'm late as it is. Emmaline is waiting on me. She needs the truck to get a bed full of mulch."

Ah, hence why she was in jeans and a grunge shirt, her ash-brown hair in a messy ponytail. She'd no doubt just been dropping tomatoes off on the way to my sister's house.

Mom pointed a stern finger at me. "Call me later with the story. Alan, I do hope you'll come over Sunday for dinner. I'd love for the family to meet you."

"Sounds great. I'll do that."

I would have felt it awkward meeting the whole family a week into dating, but Alan's apparently made of sterner stuff than I am. Or at least, he's more outgoing.

Mom did not want to leave, I could tell, but she hugged me and whispered in my ear, “He’s *handsome*. Tell me the full story later!”

“Yes, Mom,” I replied, long-suffering. She’d drag every detail out of me, no doubt.

With vast reluctance, she got back in her truck and waved before pulling out. I followed Alan into the house, thinking very naughty thoughts. I could at least get him on the couch for a makeout session, right?

Alan must have had the same thought. He grabbed me by the hips, backing me into the wall right next to the front door, those dark brown eyes hungry. My whole body tingled with anticipation.

Alan really knew how to kiss. He wasn’t shy about what he wanted—or about giving me what I wanted—and it showed in the confident way he kissed me. I tangled a hand in his thick, dark hair, my other hand dropping to his hip and encouraging him to press into me. I wanted more contact with him, wanted him to grind into me, wanted us both hot and breathless, and—

Damned pants were in the way.

No, seriously, screw these pants.

His mouth trailed down to my neck, nibbling like he had a radar-guidance system to my sensitive spots. I loved being kissed there. At this point, I had both hands on his ass, squeezing and playing with it, my own hips grinding into him. This man fit far too well in my arms. It didn’t take much at this point to rile me up.

“Grant,” he murmured against my skin, “you are quickly taking this further than I planned on.”

“I was aiming for a hot makeout session on the couch,” I retorted breathlessly. “*You’re* the one who hit all of my buttons.”

He chuckled, a very satisfied sound.

This man knew precisely what he was doing to me. I had the feeling he was far more experienced with dating than I

was. Then again, that didn't take much.

"Sixty-nine?" he asked artlessly, as if I wasn't dying to strip him naked and go down on him.

"Yes. Hell yes, right now. No, wait, let's go up to my bedroom. That's gotta be more comfortable."

Alan kissed me hard, then was gone again just as quickly, pulling me away from the wall. "Where's your room?"

I got three steps away from the wall, barely to the stairs, when my phone rang. And not just any ringtone—it was the Avenger's theme song.

DAMMIT.

My head flopped back, despair washing over me. Fuck my life. Just, fuck it.

"I take it that's a call you need to take?"

He didn't sound too upset, at least. "It's the ringtone for the PD." I dug the phone out of my pocket, saw Chloe's name, and honestly felt like crying or punching something. "You know what? I'm going to just go drop this accidentally in water real quick. I'll be back in twenty seconds."

Alan kissed me, distracting me long enough to take the phone out of my hand. Then answered it, the rat.

"This is Grantland Walker's phone, Alan speaking. Can I help you?"

The volume was up high enough I could hear Chloe clearly. She sounded surprised and a little suspicious. "*I need to speak with Grant.*"

"Give him just one moment." Alan eyed me, gauging my level of sexual frustration. "I take it you need him for a case?"

"*Yes, that's right. I'm sorry, who are you?*"

"His anchor-in-training."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Chloe's tune changed entirely, becoming animated and excited. "*Are you really? When did this happen?!*"

I took the phone from Alan, reasonably sure I would no longer go baptize it on purpose. Maybe. “Very recently, in fact. Chloe, you’re kind of stomping all over a moment, here. Please tell me this isn’t urgent.”

“*Sorry.*” She did sound very contrite and understanding. “*But this one’s bad. Two-day-old infant went missing from his hospital crib.*”

My sexual frustration flew abruptly out the window. That didn’t even compare to the life of a child, one so utterly defenseless. “FUCK. Alright, which hospital?”

“*StoneCrest. They reached out to us for this one.*”

Made sense. Chloe was Nashville PD, but StoneCrest was in Smyrna. Different station, but they’d call for help on a case like this. “I’ll be there in forty-five minutes. Absolutely do not let anyone touch that bed.”

“*I’ll guard it myself. Come quick. And bring that anchor-in-training with you.*”

“Count on it.”

Alan

Grant missed his calling to be a drag racer. He tore out of his driveway like a bat out of hell, hit the freeway, and then sped up. If we were doing less than a hundred, I'd eat my shoes. A flashing light on top of his car helped us cut through traffic.

It was a little surreal for me to be in the vehicle just then. I hadn't wrapped my head completely around the idea of being an anchor, and yet here I was, being thrown right into the middle of things. I tried to snap into the moment, as Grant would need me very shortly, and I still only had a limited idea of what to do. As much as I would have wished for a good three-week crash course on being an anchor, it looked like all I would get was about thirty minutes. I didn't want to fail right out of the gate. I was anxious and somewhat nervous about this.

As he drove, I started with the pertinent questions. "When we get there, what can I do?"

"Guard me while I'm sleeping, and pay attention to what people are saying. Sometimes, they get upset and offended if they see I'm asleep. They don't always understand the quick explanation given to them. I've had people charge me before, and the cops on scene have to force them back down."

I could see how it would happen. Panicked, upset people didn't make the world's best listeners. The type to emotionally respond would be very upset to see anyone sleeping on the job.

I studied him from the corner of my eye. Grant's expression looked pinched and unhappy. "What? Something bothers you. Is it the age of the victim?"

"I hate it when kids are messed with. I seriously do, which is why I'm always willing to fly to the rescue. But it's more that you're so new to this. I wish we'd had more than two hours together before I threw you into the deep end. I'd hoped to at least introduce you to people and get you a consultant badge, before we had to dive in like this."

Ah, true. I certainly would have preferred to do an orderly approach. But Grant had also warned me from the start that nothing about his life could be scheduled or planned. He was a first responder; that was a given. I wasn't going to complain or hold it against him when this was outside his control.

I didn't want him to think I regretted things. I didn't. I was just a little nervous about being put into a position I had no experience with. I was outside my comfort zone, was all. My affection for him, my need to help him made me focus as nothing else could.

I did put a hand to his arm, stroking it gently. "It's fine. I'll roll with it. Focus less on me and more on the baby."

Grant blew out a low breath. "Tell me something, Alan. Because Donovan's like this, too. Are all of you Havilis so patient?"

"Kinda a family trait, yeah."

"I would love to meet them all."

"That's easy to make happen. My family will love to meet you."

"Much like mine's going to love meeting you?" Grant flashed me a quick smile. "I'm going to get serious mileage snagging a handsome professor who also writes true crime. Like, all the mileage."

I chuckled, amused. “Is that something to brag about?”

“Oh yeah. You’ll see why when you meet the rest of the family.”

When we hit Murfreesboro, the traffic abruptly picked up. Grant stopped talking, his entire focus on driving. I let him be. It was dangerous to distract him now.

Smyrna seemed only a minute past Murfreesboro. We were almost there before I realized it. Then again, I was still getting familiar with all the roads. The hospital in question was visible from the freeway, and Grant was quick to take the exit and blaze right into the hospital parking lot, pulling in next to a squad car.

I hopped out as quickly as he did, staying right at his heels as he ducked under crime tape, beelining for the front door.

A tall, statuesque woman in slacks and a green blazer, a badge and gun in plain view on her hips, stood near the door. She waved to Grant and called out, “You got here fast!”

“Sped the whole way,” Grant admitted, slowing down to a power walk. “How long has the baby been missing?”

“Time frame is anywhere between one to two hours. Nurse found an empty bed odd, as mom’s not doing all that great and isn’t keeping the baby with her for extended periods of time. Apparently, it was a very rough birth. Nurse immediately combed the hospital, came up empty, and the hospital director called us. And hello, who are you?”

Grant put a hand to my back as he introduced me. “Alan Havili, this is Detective Chloe Lawdwick. She’s one of the four I trust implicitly.”

I extended a hand, taking her in more carefully. She was a striking woman, cheekbones sharp, but with a friendly look to her all the same. “Hello, Detective, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Same, Mr. Havili. I have to ask because of the last name. Any relation to Donovan Havili?”

“My cousin.”

Her eyebrows rose sharply. “Oh-ho. Well. Isn’t that interesting. Grant, I want all the details on how this happened later. But come up with me. Let’s find that baby first.”

We followed her through the hospital lobby and straight toward the open stairs. As I went through, I couldn’t help but wonder what she meant. Just how many people did Donovan know, anyway? He’d only been working out here about two years, right? And yet this cop knew him? I’d call him after this and ask.

Well, I’d like to call him after this, anyway. Just to arrange some one-on-one training on how to be an anchor. Grant didn’t seem to know how to direct me very well. But Donovan could tell me. After all, he trained Brandon.

The hospital seemed to still be functioning as a hospital, which made sense. Not all patients could be put on hold because one had gone missing. The OBGYN ward was in chaos, though, with many parents asking questions about the missing baby, clearly worried about their own child and its safety.

When we reached the nursery, it was clear more than one parent had taken their child out. The room looked desolate, not a single baby left, just a row of empty cribs. There was one in particular with crime tape wrapped around it like a sloppily dressed present and a man standing next to it. He had detective written all over him with the brown suit, badge at his hip, and gun.

He greeted Grant with, “Hey, what’s this about you having an anchor?”

“Anchor-in-training,” Grant corrected, weaving his way closer to the crib. “Alan, this is Brett Kulinski, Chloe’s partner. Brett, Alan Havili.”

“Havili, huh. Any relation to Donovan Havili?”

“My cousin,” I answered again. Seriously, I needed more background information here.

Brett’s dark brows rose a little. “Well, isn’t that interesting. Welcome, Alan. We’re glad Grant’s at least trying to get an

anchor. We were worried he'd become a zombie with his sleep patterns."

Grant sighed. "I felt like one, most days."

"Speaking of which, you're a bit perkier today?"

"I got in a very excellent nap," Grant intoned. "Thanks to Alan. Now, how do you guys propose I take a nap and touch this crib? Cause I gotta tell you, I don't think I'll fit."

"Probably not, although I'd pay good money to watch you try." Brett snickered at his own joke.

"How about you just take the sheet and blanket out, lay on the ground?" Chloe suggested. "That's got to be easier."

"Good idea. Let's do it. Alan, make sure not to touch me while I'm forming the connection."

Because his ability would latch onto me instead. I understood what he meant and nodded reassuringly. "Got it."

Grant promptly took both out of the crib and stretched out on the cold, white tile without care. He scooted about a bit until he was on his back, one arm tucked up under his head as a support. He breathed in, out, doing this a few times.

And then he was out, snoozing.

I blinked down at him. "Does he really fall asleep that fast?"

"Normally. Sometimes the area is too prickly to be comfortable. Then it takes him longer. He is the king of power naps." Chloe gestured to him. "Fortunately. Otherwise, I think he would have been dead from sleep deprivation long before this. So Alan, how did you two meet?"

I didn't see the harm in answering her. We were waiting for Grant to wake back up, anyway. "I'm a true crime writer. I requested to interview him."

She looked intrigued. "True crime, really? Oh...wait. I know you! *Murder Under the Bridge*—that was yours, right?"

I blinked, a little startled. That was one of my better-selling books, granted. "Yes, that's mine."

“I have that one on audiobook. Seriously a good case. I loved all the little details you had in it.”

“I had to do a great deal of research on that one. But I was lucky most of the people in that case were willing to divulge the details. They really wanted that story to be told accurately.”

“A writer, huh?” Brett scratched at one cheek. “Anchors come in all types, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a writer before. That’s cool. You’ll get lots of material by following Grant around. He gets into fascinating cases.”

“It’ll be a nice perk,” I agreed. “Not my main focus, though.”

“No, your main focus is Grant, and that’s how it should be.” Chloe gave me an approving nod. “We’ll run you through the ropes after this, get you more situated. I’m honestly very excited to meet you. Grant’s needed an anchor badly.”

I was pleased by this warm welcome. “I’d love to—”

“Why the hell are you just standing around?!” a woman screamed.

I jerked around, tracking the source. Three people had burst in through the doors. The woman looked young, maybe early twenties, wearing a hospital gown and robe. The mother of the missing child would be my guess. A man near her age came in with her, and then an older woman who looked similar to the young mother. Husband and grandmother?

They were clearly distraught and rushed toward the crib, their eyes taking in the sleeping man on the floor.

“He’s sleeping!” the grandmother gasped in outrage. “You’re taking a nap while my grandson is missing?!”

Grant’s warning earlier came blazing back in a hot second. I saw what he meant, now. In their shoes, without the right context, I could see how it would look truly wrong. I’d be just as outraged. But my boyfriend was napping on the floor, defenseless. I wasn’t about to let them anywhere near him.

Chloe was quick to move, as was Brett, going directly for the upset trio.

“I realize this looks strange, but he’s a psychic tracer—” Chloe started soothingly.

“He’s sleeping!” the mother screamed. “You said you’d find my baby!”

“I promise you, we’re doing precisely that. Just breathe for me—”

I oriented myself in their path, standing at Grant’s feet and eyeing the three. I didn’t think they’d be content just to stand there and yell. My own adrenaline was up, fight instincts kicking in. I wasn’t a fighter like Donovan or Brandon. I was more the bookworm of the family. That said, I could hold my own. I’d been doing tai chi for decades. I knew how to combat someone. I’d not done it out of a dojo, but I was sure of my skills. They weren’t going to attack Grant—not while I drew breath.

The father made a break for it, his eyes zeroed in on Grant. “I’ll get his lazy ass up, you move—”

His hands were up to shove me out of the way. It gave me the perfect opening. I could see Chloe chasing after him, not far behind at all. But he was too close to Grant for my comfort, and I could at least block him until she got hands on him.

After so many years of practicing the motions, the move was entirely instinctual. Muscle memory kicked in, my right foot planting at a forty-five degree angle, back straight. I had one arm up in a guard, the lower hand in a brace. He hit me dead on, and I got my shoulder under his armpit, throwing his balance off and forcing him back with both of my hands. I felt the impact in my shoulders and hands, as he was slightly larger than me. But he moved as I intended him to. My weight was planted. His wasn’t.

The father reeled back a few feet, catching his balance. Chloe grabbed him from behind, locking his arm with hers and forcing him back. The look she gave me was only a glance, but it said I’d impressed her somehow.

I mean, what did she expect me to do? Just stand by?

Chloe grabbed the man by the ear and locked eyes with him. “The psychic on the floor is a dreamwalker. He’s literally tracing your baby’s whereabouts right now. If you wake him up, he loses the connection, and our odds of finding your little boy hits the negative digits. For the love of god, CALM DOWN.”

The father stared at her as if only half those words made any sense. “A dreamwalker?”

“He connects with people via sleep, then is able to trace them while awake,” I explained, trying to be patient. “He’s an expert at finding those who are lost. Just give him another minute.”

“We called the absolute best when we heard of this case,” Chloe promised them, addressing the whole family. “Grant’s range is insane—two thousand miles. Your child can’t have gotten that far. We’ll find him.”

There was a noise behind me, like a short breath and a sigh, the sound you might expect of someone waking. I turned sharply to see Grant blinking up at me, a satisfied smile on his face. Hopeful, I asked, “Got him?”

“Got him. Good god, you won’t believe this one.” Grant rolled up, holding a hand to ward me off when I reached for him. “Don’t touch me, please. I’ll lose the connection with the baby. My ability likes you too much; it’ll lock onto you instead.”

“Okay, I’ll be careful.”

Turning his head, he addressed Chloe and Brett. “Baby was snatched by an older woman. Looks like she’s in her sixties? She’s not far from here, a trailer park just down this road. But there’s someone in the room with her who knows it’s not her baby, and they’re standing guard over him, calling the police when I woke up.”

“He’s alright?” the mother demanded, clutching herself around the waist.

“Oh, he’s peachy. Just snoozing away, couldn’t care less what everyone is yelling about.” Grant flashed her a reassuring smile. “Hold tight, Mama. We’ll get your boy back.”

That seemed to be the signal. Chloe and Brett quickly escorted Grant out, me on their heels, racing back down the hallway and the stairs. As we rushed down, Chloe called ahead to the police officers standing by in the foyer.

“Got his location. He’s down the street. Kidnapper still with him.”

“We’ll follow you there,” the black officer assured her.

It was a mass movement of six cops, me, and Grant out the door and quickly loading into vehicles. Grant didn’t take his own car, taking the front seat of an unmarked police cruiser instead. I took the back with Brett. Chloe seemed to be working from Grant’s playbook; she hit the gas and tore out of the parking lot.

“You said down the street from here. I assume Sam Ridley?”

“Yeah,” Grant answered. “I wouldn’t go in sirens blazing, by the way. The kidnapper is saying some crazy stuff. Like how she needs the baby, and it’s hers now, crap like that. The other woman in the room is treating her like she’s volatile.”

“Is that why you stayed asleep for so long? If the baby is this close, you should have been awake again in seconds.”

Grant gave her a nod. “I was assessing the situation. I don’t know what’s going on in there, but I don’t think the woman’s mentally ill. That’s not how she was coming off. I think she’s one of those privileged people, where they feel they can take anything due them. She stole the baby and has no intention of giving it back.”

“Oh boy. Okay.”

Brett listened, but he was also watching me with curiosity. “So, Alan, what martial art do you practice?”

“Caught that, did you?”

“Kinda obvious, man. And it was very smoothly done.”

Grant turned in his seat to look at us, confused. “What?”

“You missed it,” Brett said. “The father was rushing at you, determined to wake you up. Alan pivoted into a guard position and then blocks the guy, forcing him back. It was obviously a martial art move, the way he did it. So Alan, what style?”

I shrugged. “Tai chi Chuan, Yang style.”

Brett just kept looking at me. “Are all the Havilis fighters?”

“I’m a bookworm,” I corrected with amusement. “I just do tai chi for exercise. This is the first time I’ve had to use it outside of a dojo.”

“Huh.”

Grant watched me with open intrigue. “You really are a martial artist? Damn, what other secrets are you hiding?”

“See?” I teased him. “This is why we have to date a while. There’s so much we both don’t know.”

“Seriously.”

“Ok, lovebirds, focus,” Chloe commanded. “Grant, you said trailer park, but which one?”

Grant refocused. “Just past this intersection. See it?”

“Ah, yeah, there it is.” Chloe put on a blinker to signal to the following squad cars and drove us in.

Grant pointed to the first trailer on the right. “The white one, here.”

“Okay.” Chloe parked behind a Jeep Cherokee, blocking it in the driveway.

I didn’t think it was wise for me to move from the car. After all, I wasn’t cleared for the scene, and I wasn’t trained for situations like this. I told the others, “I’ll stay planted right here.”

Brett flashed me a grateful smile. “Thanks. Hopefully, this will be quick.”

Alan

This wasn't a situation where I should enter, and frankly, the trailer was too small for multiple bodies anyway. Chloe, Brett, and two uniformed officers were quick to hit the door. In a minute flat, they were back out again, the baby securely in Brett's arms, still sound asleep.

When did people lose that talent? To just sleep through anything, anywhere? Even I couldn't do that.

Can I have that ability back? Please?

Brett slid back into the backseat, cradling the baby in the crook of his arm. "He's a cute little guy."

I turned in my seat to get a good look. "He looks okay."

"Yeah, I think he's fine. I'm sure a doctor will look him over, but he's not looking hurt. The lady inside is an asshole, you're right on that. She kept insisting it was her baby, that she deserved him. She even said—"

At that point, the woman in question came out of the trailer with both hands handcuffed, being forcibly dragged out by the elbow. She was screaming as she came, her white hair wild around her head.

"You can't take him from me! That's *my* baby, mine! I have the right to have him! That woman, she's young—she can have more!"

Alan stared out the window with a poleaxed expression. “She thinks she can just take this little boy, and the mother will have more kids and forget him?”

“Like I said, not a nice person.” I shook my head in disbelief. Unfortunately, a lot of criminals were like this. The criminal mindset was all ‘I deserve this.’ It’s how they justified doing some terrible things.

Chloe slung herself back into the driver’s seat. “They’ve got her. Let’s deliver the baby back to his parents first, then go to the station. Alan, I’ll need you to write up a report, too, of what you saw and witnessed since you’re acting as an anchor.”

“Sure,” Alan agreed amenably.

Hopefully, as a writer, he was good with paperwork.



Alan was not only amazing with paperwork, he was also efficient. He got done in what felt like a minute flat, then told me he’d swing by his place and pack an overnight bag. I gave him my car keys, as I was going to be stuck here another hour at least, and he had more than enough time to do that.

Besides, I liked the idea of him spending the night with me. He might be doing it just so I could get a good night’s sleep, but part of me—we’re talking the lion’s share part of me—hoped we could pick back up where we left off. I liked having that man’s hands on me.

Damn, stop daydreaming about that, me. You can’t get nookie if you’re stuck writing this damn report all night.

Fueled by the power of lust, I focused, got the report done in record time, and was all set to boogie out of there when I heard a hail behind me.

“Hey, Grant.”

I turned to see Donovan Havili waving at me, making a beeline in my direction. He looked like a man on a mission, so I paused and waited for him to catch up.

“Have you seen Alan?” he asked. “Last I heard, he was heading to your house to do...something—no one’s sure what

—and he’s been only sporadically responding to texts since then.”

Oh. Uh. Hmm. How does one respond to this? ‘Your cousin is my new boyfriend, possibly anchor, and we’re still feeling that out’ was a bit much to drop on someone right in the middle of the bullpen.

But where there was Donovan Havili, there will be a Jonathan Bane. Those two were beyond joined at the hip. I didn’t even get my mouth around a response before Jon showed up.

Of course, when he showed up, I saw Alan coming in through the back door, and those two things happening simultaneously were like a neon sign to the reader.

Jon’s eyebrows shot into his hairline, taking in me, then Alan, then back to me. “What in Big Bird’s name, Pikachu-loving, funky Pac-Man, M&M lovers is going on here?”

“Why are all of those things yellow?” That was not what I meant to ask, but it was the first question that got out of my mouth, somehow.

“Because your meridian lines are all yellow!” His eyes took me in from head to toe, then went back to Alan, and I could visibly see the pieces fall together. “Oh, *really*.”

Alan sauntered back to me, his hand naturally finding mine, facing both of his cousins down with a very smug smile. The Cheshire Cat had nothing on his expression. “Thank you, Jon, for the advice. Turns out you’re right. Or at least, we’re in the process of proving that.”

Donovan’s jaw dropped, delight exploding all over his face. “Oh my god. Alan, did you start that this morning?”

“I did, in fact. We figured it out very early this morning that his ability likes me. It’s basically using me as an anchor already.”

“That’s an understatement,” I muttered. “My ability fucking loves him. He can’t even touch me if I’m doing a reading because all it does is latch back onto him instead. But yes,

thank you, Jon. If you hadn't told him he had the ability to do this, I don't think it would have occurred to him to try."

"It probably wouldn't have." Alan shrugged as he admitted this. "I'm more of an observer than a doer."

It would have been a rotten shame. Mostly for me because I'm very much enjoying having him, and I haven't even had him a full day yet. It's why I hoped and prayed with everything I had that he and I would make it.

Jon saw something in my lines because he grew pensive for a moment, almost as if he were seeing something that bothered him on a personal level. He leaned in and murmured for my ears only, "Call me later. I'll talk you through that."

Through...oh. He could even see my doubts? Seriously?

Well, he was one of the best readers in the country. I guess I shouldn't underestimate what he could see.

Donovan was avidly curious, prompting Alan. "You've got to tell me the full story. I'm dying to know how this all worked out."

You know when you tap a video to see how much longer it has left? I wish you could do that to people when they were talking. It's not that I minded the question so much; it's just that I was out of people-juice at the moment and wanted alone time with Alan. I'd promised myself repeatedly that as soon as that baby was found, I could have Alan time. I'd *earned* it, dammit.

"Let me catch you and the family up later," Alan suggested. "This one hasn't had enough sleep in the past five days, and I want to take him home."

Donovan's eyes bounced between us, and bless the man for his sense and brains, he immediately nodded. "Sure, I can see how you want to be home. Catch me up soon."

"Absolutely."

Alan towed me out of the precinct, and I was happy to follow. Even happier that he didn't care who saw us holding

hands. Must be a Havili trait, as Donovan had never given a shit either.

I got the keys back from Alan and slid into the driver's seat. It was a great feeling to finally be going home. I noticed as I got in that his bag was in the back seat. It was quite possibly the largest overnight bag I'd ever seen. It gave me hopes. Delicious hopes.

The traffic gods smiled on us. I was able to get out of the precinct without any trouble, and we were on the freeway with no hiccups. I tried to take this as a positive sign because that was damn near impossible in Nashville traffic.

As focused as I was on getting back to my house, our run-in with Donovan and Jon did beg a few questions. "So...if you announce you're now going to be a crime writer and possibly an anchor, how is your family going to take the news?"

"Probably with, 'What, another one?'" Alan chuckled, shaking his head. "In the past two years, Donovan, Brandon, my Aunt Alani, and now myself have all been snatched up by a psychic. Those are some pretty interesting odds, considering my family is only about a dozen people."

I let out a low whistle. "Yeah, that's a very high percentage coming out of one family. Okay, so maybe surprised but not really?"

"I think so. They'll be happy I've found someone to date, too." Alan shot me a sideways look. "My last attempt was... rocky. I had a partner for about three years, but we were in constant disagreement. He found my fascination with true crime to be morbid. When I published my first book, he gave me the ultimatum that I could take the book down or break up with him. It embarrassed him that I'd written it and dared publish it."

How the hell did you find that embarrassing? I didn't get it. Then again, considering what I did for a living.... "I take it you told him to take a hike."

"I told him loving someone means you can't pick and choose which parts to accept. This was something I loved

doing. If he couldn't accept it, then he didn't love me. He took himself out." Alan paused before adding, "By that point, I didn't care if he went or stayed. I hate conflict, and our relationship had become so strained he gave me anxiety."

"That says a lot."

"It does. That was several years ago, now. I'm well over it, but I think the family assumed I was scarred for life since I didn't really attempt dating again after that." Alan snorted, amused. "It was mostly other factors entirely. I was so busy juggling two careers I didn't have the time or energy to go out. And no one caught my interest, anyway. Not until a certain psychic with a sweet smile caught my eye."

I preened. "I will take that compliment."

"As you should. I'm very much a straightforward person. Are you?"

I didn't even have to think about that to answer. "I absolutely am."

"Good. Then I'll be blunt. I hope once we're back to your house, we can pick up where we were interrupted."

Right then and there, I wanted to kiss him so badly. If traffic hadn't been pretty heavy on the I-24, I would have snuck a kiss in. Since that was a bad idea, I grabbed his hand instead and kissed the back of it, enjoying the warm skin under my lips. "Please. This is one of those things I'm nervous about. We're going to get interrupted—a lot. Sometimes the mood will break, or we'll come in exhausted. That's just going to happen. And it's okay. But I really wanted to pretend like we didn't get interrupted today."

He leaned in and placed a kiss on my neck, just under my ear. His voice was low and throaty as he promised, "We can do that."

That simple touch sent tingles coursing all the way through me, with shivers chasing each other over my skin. My hand on his tightened, and I wished we didn't have another thirty minutes to the house. What had I done to piss off the dating gods? Seriously.

You know what, I was going to channel my inner NASCAR driver. I was getting us the fuck home, pronto.

Alan

We made it up to Grant's bedroom this time before I lost all control and pinned him to the wall again. Something about this man drew out the alpha male in me, and I just had to put my hands on him. The way his breath always hitched when I manhandled him told me he liked it. A lot. And that just fueled me.

I took little notice of his room as I put Grant's back to a bare patch of wall. It had a bed—that was as much information as I cared for. Well, and a clear path to the bed. Also important.

I fed off Grant's mouth, tongue thrusting inside of it like I was fucking him, grinding my hips into his. He clamped both hands onto my ass, pulling me in tighter, making the most delicious moans and gasps. The sounds only egged me on, my usual control spiraling away. Maybe flying out of the window. I didn't care enough to think about it.

There were far too many clothes on him, on me, and it was frustrating me beyond words. I pulled back enough to get my shirt off and then his, but he looked so dazed with lust I couldn't keep my hands off him for long. I dove back in for another kiss, working my way down to find that spot behind his ear again. That had been a revelation in the car, as he'd visibly reacted when I touched him there.

Grant arched into me, a hoarse gasp caught in his throat when I sucked hard on that spot.

This man was going to ruin me for other men. I could feel it happening right now. He loved everything I did and didn't even try to hide it. Having sex with him would be marvelously fun.

"Al—Alan," he panted, squirming in my grip. "Fuck me."

That sounded more like a demand than anything. I was more than happy to oblige. I maneuvered my hands to Grant's waistband and got it open enough to dip a hand in and give his cock a little love. He groaned and arched, his hips thrusting into my hand. I figured he'd like that; my own wanted attention badly enough at the moment. I slid my hand out enough to pull it around to his back, then dipped it in again, finding that tight ring of muscle and giving it a light, teasing stroke.

Grant shuddered in my arms, his hands tightening on me to the point of bruising. Oh, he definitely liked to bottom, this one. I throttled back a wicked chuckle.

"Condoms," he groaned. "Lube. Drawer."

I pulled back enough to glance behind me. Nightstand drawer, I had to assume. That was nearest the bed. "Strip and face down."

He obeyed with alacrity, clothes flying off as he landed on the bed with a bounce, more than eager to get what he wanted. I tried to be just as quick in divesting myself of shoes, socks, pants, and underwear. I had one eye on him even as I moved because I was helpless not to look. That creamy skin was all natural and sleek, inviting me to stop and linger. And that ass—I had to get my hands back on that.

I went for the drawer, yanking it open, but quickly got brought to a stop. There were so many things in here—mostly paperbacks—I couldn't immediately see what I was looking for. Condoms and lube were in here?

"Shit, not top drawer. Bottom." Grant flopped onto his belly, reaching down and opening the second drawer, grabbing

what we needed with unerring accuracy. He pulled both out and plopped them on the bed beside him.

Then he reached up, grabbed me by the waist, and yanked me onto the bed with him. I went with a laugh, willingly flopping down where he pinned me. I loved his eagerness.

“Shit, all that golden skin is natural?” Grant ran an admiring look over me from top to bottom, a smile blooming over his face. “You are such an impressive sight.”

I didn’t think so. It wasn’t like I was built like my cousins were. I was trim and fit but not muscular. But I like that Grant enjoyed the view, and it was clear he did.

He kissed me, hard and quick, then his mouth moved lower, passing over nipples and warm skin, learning me. I gave way to his hands, pleased to have his attention for a while.

Then his mouth landed on my dick, tongue rasping against the underside, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head. Damn, that felt good, a pleasant thrill that went from my groin to the rest of my body in a warm rush. Grant could keep doing that for the rest of the year; I would not complain.

Well, no, I still wanted to top him. That urge hadn’t diminished any. I grabbed him by the shoulder and managed to string words together, somehow. “Turn your hips this way.”

Grant pulled off long enough to maneuver, throwing a leg over my chest and getting his ass properly lined up with my head. Then he went back to sucking me, mouth working up and down in a—ngh—god, he was good at that. I absolutely had to get him to do that more often.

But I couldn’t let myself be distracted now. I got the lube open in my hand—that was something of a feat with all my brain cells much further south—and over my fingers. Huzzah! I promptly put one finger into Grant, finger fucking him.

His mouth hummed around me, loving what I did and not shy about telling me.

His body had accepted one finger easily enough, so I put another in, pushing and stretching, sliding my fingers down

with a slight crook to touch the front interior wall as far as I could reach.

Grant's head threw back on a gasp, his entire body clenching and shuddering. "Alaaaan, shit, uh, you're... you're..."

When a man can no longer string a full sentence together, you know you've done your job. I grinned and kept stroking him, trying to warm and prep his ass as much as I could. Truthfully, I was at the breaking point myself. I wanted inside him rather desperately.

He apparently felt the same. Grant pulled himself off my fingers, then jerked around, quickly reorienting himself so he could put himself into a position to ride me.

As he did that, I grabbed a condom—I didn't think he had the wherewithal to remember it just then—and pulled it on with a snap. None too soon, either. He dumped lube over my upright cock, and then he was settling down on it a second later, pushing himself onto me with his head thrown back, his expression pure ecstasy.

I watched him, felt him, breathed in the scent of his passion and warm skin, and felt the moment crystallize in my mind. I'd never forget this moment. I prayed I'd never want to, either.

My hands found his hips as he bottomed out, and I gripped him there, desperately wanting him to move but knowing he probably needed a second. It was hard. He felt so hot and tight around me, gripped me so perfectly, as if he were made for me.

Those gorgeous eyes turned down, locked with mine, and he looked just as wild as I felt. His hips lifted up, body balancing as he moved so he could ride me.

"Yes, 'ofa'anga," I rasped, encouraging him, then groaned as he came back down again. Hard and without mercy.

"You feel so good." He came up again, down, eyes closed with ecstasy. "So hard and hot. So good."

“Come on, come on.” My breaths came in pants, much like his. The way he moved was perfect. I never wanted this to end. I wanted to stay suspended in this moment with him.

I could already feel that tingling, tightening clench in my groin that meant a climax was coming. I didn't want to finish first. I snaked a hand around his cock, the one still slick with lube, and worked him hard and without mercy, my thumb right at the sensitive spot on the head.

Grant's head snapped back and he came with a hoarse shout, hard and hot over my chest. As he came, he clenched tight around me, slamming his hips into mine, and it was exactly what I needed to send me over the edge as well. My hips thrust up into his on instinct so that I was deep inside him as I climaxed. I shuddered a little under the force of it, my vision dark around the edges, breath rapid in my mouth.

Boneless under the wave of afterglow pouring through me, I collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Grant promptly did the same, sprawled over my chest, both of us panting to catch our breath. I was flaccid but still partially inside of him, which might get uncomfortable at some point, but for now, I decided to enjoy his weight on me.

I stroked a hand up and down his spine, soothing and easy.

“It's always the quiet ones,” he muttered against my skin.

“Sorry?”

“It's always the quiet ones you have to watch out for,” he clarified, sitting up a little. Not far, just enough to look me comfortably in the eye. “You, sir, are dangerous.”

I preened under this compliment. “I do try.”

“Try any harder, and I will have no brain cells left. They'll melt right out of my ears.” Grant leaned in to kiss me gently, once, twice, the third one lingering. He pulled back, a hand carding through my hair, eyes evaluating me carefully. “Just to avoid future arguments...are you a dedicated top?”

“Hmm, I lean that direction, I should say. About twice a year I get in the mood to bottom, but most of the time, I prefer to top.”

“Yeah?”

“You look relieved I said that?” I hoped he felt that way, at least.

“Fuck yeah, I am. I really like anal penetration and”—I could feel him smile as he leaned in to kiss me again—“I liked riding you very much.”

So we were compatible in bed, obviously. Thank everything I could name for it, too. I’ve experienced when that was not the case, and it did cause problems in the relationship I’d rather avoid.

I kissed him back, returning his smile. “Feel free. Anytime. But for now, let’s clean up, cuddle?”

“Mm, yeah.” He pulled free with only a slight wince, then rolled off me and onto his side.

I dealt with the condom, then went into the en suite bathroom to find a towel to wet and wipe off with. It was a nicely done bathroom, not new, more in a vintage style that fit the house. I eyed the clawfoot tub with interest as it did look big enough for us both to fit. Definitely something we needed to try.

Coming back to the bed, I cleaned him up, and I could tell he enjoyed the attention. The way he hummed happily in his chest was an excellent indication. I liked that he wasn’t so independent he would take the rag out of my hands. I liked being attentive to my lovers.

I rolled back into the bed with him, and he wasted no time in cuddling against my side, his head pillowed on my chest. I encouraged this with a hand at his waist, pressing a kiss against his forehead. With the fan lazily spinning over our heads, it was a quiet, perfect moment. I felt far better connected to him than I had been this morning, and I only hoped for that to continue.

“Thank you for today,” he said softly against my skin, the words stirring up the fine hairs on my chest. “Not just for agreeing to date and being with me, but everything else you

did. You dropped everything and prioritized me, and that meant a lot.”

“Being your anchor will mean a fine balancing act. I know that, and we’ll need to figure it out, but today especially, I was happy to have you as the priority.”

He placed a kiss against my skin, expression soft with happiness. “Can you stay for several days?”

“That’s my plan. We might need to go back up to my place if I’ve forgotten something. But I’m too new to everything right now, I want to properly get my feet wet and figure this out before something serious hits us and I don’t know how to respond.”

“Hmm, that’s fair. I’ll give you a proper crash course later.”

The words were slurring a little, and slowing. I tilted my head toward him, trying to see his face better. “Grant, ’ofa’anga?”

“Mm? What does that mean, anyway?”

“Sweetheart, roughly. Are you falling asleep on me?”

He breathed in deeply, nuzzling in a little more. “You’re just so...mmm...com...for...”

Deep, heavy breaths.

Annd he’s out. If anyone was sleep-deprived on this planet, it was Grant, so I probably should have expected this. But it did make me wonder if pillow talk would ever be a thing for us.

Ah well. I wouldn’t mind a nap myself.

And I had plenty of time later to figure out what he needed from me—hopefully, all the time in the world.

This was not a man I ever wanted to let go of.

I held him close and slept with him, trusting the future would be as we made it.

Thank you for reading *Alan's Utterly Accidental Dream-cute!* They were an adorable pair to write, and it's always fun playing in the Jon's universe.

Speaking of, have you read about Jon and Donovan and where it all started? Jonathan Bane is a licensed psychic who consults for the police due to his ability to read people. The downside? Criminals really don't like him. Oh, and he can't be near electronics of any kind because he fries them. Having an anchor and partner is wishful thinking, right up until Donovan Havili appears. And then? Well, wishes do come true.

[Jon's Downright Ridiculous Shooting Case](#)

Want some ghosts in your life? FBI medium Mack Lafayette has plenty to share. No really, he'd gladly take any form of relief he can get. Thank god anchor-in-training Brandon Havili shows up to help. (And that's he a giant teddy bear.)

[Brandon's Very Merry Haunted Christmas](#)

Looking for a funny (cracky, let's be honest), slice of life read? Poor Ross is up to his ears in supernatural problems, which is what happens when you're a PA for a supernatural clan. It's a good thing his vampire boss is so sexy. And gives him hazard pay. That helps too.

The Tribulations of Ross Young, Supernat PA

Books by AJ Sherwood

Gay 4 Renovations

Style of Love*

Jon's Mysteries

Jon's Downright Ridiculous Shooting Case

Jon's Crazy Head-Boppin' Mystery

Jon's Spooky Corpse Conundrum

Jon's Boom-Shaka-Laka Problem

Mack's Marvelous Manifestations

Brandon's Very Merry Haunted Christmas

Mack's Perfectly Ghastly Homecoming

Mack's Rousing Ghoulis Highland Adventure

Unholy Trifecta

How to Shield an Assassin

How to Steal a Thief

How to Hack a Hacker

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The Warden and the General

Fourth Point of Contact

Zone of Action

Short Stories

Marriage Contract

Single Titles

Alan's Utterly Accidental Dream-cute

The Tribulations of Ross Young, Supernat PA

Books by AJ Sherwood and Jocelynn Drake

Scales 'n' Spells

Origin

Breath

Blood

Embers

Wish (a Christmas novella)

*Coming soon

Author

Dear Reader,

Your reviews are more important than words can express. Reviews directly impact sales and book visibility, which means the more reviews I have, the more sales I see. The more books I sell, the more I can write and focus on producing books that you love to read. You see how that math works out? The best possible support you can provide is to give an honest review, even if it's just clicking those stars to rate a book!

Thank you for all of your support. See you in the next book!



AJ's mind is the sort that refuses to let her write one project at a time. Or even just one book a year. She normally writes fantasy under a different pen name, but her aforementioned mind couldn't help but want to write in the LGBTQIA+ genre. Fortunately, her editor is completely on board with this plan.

In her spare time, AJ loves to devour books, eat way too much chocolate, and take regular trips. She's only been outside of the United States once, to Japan, and loved the experience so much that she firmly intends to see more of the world as soon as possible. Until then, she'll just research via Google Earth and write about the worlds in her own head.

If you'd like to join her newsletter to be notified when books are released, and get behind-the-scenes information about upcoming books, you can join her [NEWSLETTER](#) here, or email her directly at sherwoodwrites@gmail.com and you'll be added to the mailing list. You'll also receive a free copy of her book *Fourth Point of Contact*! If you'd like to interact with AJ more directly, you can socialize with her on various sites and join her [Facebook group: AJ's Gentlemen!](#)