



Pumping
Iron

ZACH MORGAN

Pumping Iron
by Zach Morgan

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Chapter 1

“Excuse me,” I asked the man in the suit, “can you tell me where the IT center is?”

The man stopped in his tracks, his shoulders slumped forwards.

His querulous voice said, “The Eye Tea center?”

He turned, a clean-shaven face looking at me, with wrinkled eyes behind classically round and old-fashioned spectacles. He planted a cane that I hadn’t noticed in his hand on the ground and leaned against it, folding his hands.

“I don’t know quite where you mean, my dear fellow. If you need spectacles to replace that pair you’ve got on, there’s the glassmaker up the road towards the dockside. And if it’s tea you’re after, we’ve got a mighty fine cup down at the Sea Side Tavern—”

This was the peril of doing my research here: Living history.

I raised both my hands before the performer could get much further. I knew what it was like - I’d applied for a similar job at this very place, a couple of years earlier, in the summer before I decided to go for my doctorate.

Smiling at him, I wished I could somehow transmit that easily, but this wasn’t a quiet and empty street where I would feel comfortable coaxing him to break his character. Already behind us were a family of tired parents and sullen children.

“Thanks a lot, sir - I’m sorry, though, I said it wrong. Can you tell me which way to the town library?”

“Oh, yes, certainly,” he said, pivoting to gesture with his cane in a grand way. I was reminded of a ringmaster in the circus.

“Follow this road here down to the old meeting-house, and then turn to your left. The library’s a stout brick building, you shouldn’t be able to miss it. Good fortune to you, sir!”

I headed off to follow his guidance, even as the family behind me came up. I could distantly hear a question about ice cream and it made me smile.

Long Neck Sound was one of those nooks and crannies of New England where there was so much history laying around that they'd opted to mine it out and sell it to the public.

"The Historic Sound," which is where I was, resembled part of the old waterfront from some mixture of the Civil War and the period immediately afterwards, both the only times when things had gotten exciting in the neighborhood. It had, evidently, been a swamp during the Revolutionary War... and not even one that had a campsite from General Washington.

The fellow in the old fashioned suit was a living history performer. Much like me, he was a student of history - if probably a much older one.

His job was to play a helpful role as a classical townspeople and demonstrate how people had lived in the past, giving out useful advice and historical facts to visitors, such as myself.

It sounds silly, but I had gotten into historical studies like this thanks to a man who drove an authentic wagon around Williamsburg, down in Virginia, when I was a child. Living history was a blessing.

But I wasn't here to enjoy the sights. I had a major research project to work on, and "The Historic Sound" wasn't just a theme park for antiquarians, history buffs and people who liked gazebo concerts. That historic brick library I was seeking contained hundreds of years of historical archives, and hopefully, plenty of digital equipment.

Clutching my laptop bag a little closer, I wheeled around the squat low shape of the old meeting-house. There was no sidewalk, only this narrow street - the only sidewalk in this entire place was down near the docks.

It was kind of a trend. Everyone wants to live near the water, and it wasn't any different in the past.

The nameless actor had actually done me a favor; this wasn't a crowded street. I saw a couple of older folks pausing to read off of an informative plaque on the other side, but otherwise it was still.

I wasn't certain if I heard the surf in the still air, or if that sound was the noise of the crowds nearer to the sea.

Or perhaps it was the wind in the elegant trees.

It was not a short walk, though. I couldn't spot a single brick building as of yet, and the trees were veiling my view of the skyline, such as it was.

I passed that plaque and its observers. I was thinking that perhaps I should bear to the left - get back on the main walking route, in case I'd actually taken the turn at the wrong church. There were five in The Historic Sound - two of which were authentic old buildings, and three of which had gotten brought here and reconstructed for the sake of historical preservation.

I pivoted on my heel, resolving to take this diversion from my suggested route, and I immediately paid for it.

A haft of wood jammed into the meat of my shoulder, and I staggered back even as I got a hearty, "Hey now!"

The back of my leg hit a brickwork planter and I felt myself toppling. I had an impression of dark hair and brawny shoulders, and then a firm, slightly yielding tightness around my waist.

My laptop bag hit the soil as it slid off my arm. The glasses I wore slid loose as well, though I couldn't hear them fall.

The world was upside down.

I felt my heart beat twice, swiftly.

"Say now, say now," came that same voice.

I was gently guided upright, with my backside resting on the edge of the planter. I could smell leather, coming from the man-shaped blur in front of me.

A hand rested on my unbruised shoulder and favored it with a squeeze.

“Forgive me for being familiar there, sir, but I was afraid you’d be taking quite a tumble!” The voice was rich, and beneath the joke I could hear concern.

The arm around my waist drew back. I saw the bright shape of whoever-it-was moving around me, straightening back upright. From this angle, he was quite tall; I was in his shadow.

“And here’s your case, sir, and your spectacles,” he said, placing the first in my lap and the second into my hand. I felt a rough finger run over my palm as he did; I couldn’t tell which one.

I blushed, and kept blushing. It must have been the heat of the day, or the embarrassment of having pivoted to my left like a marching-band asshole and slamming directly into someone.

“Will you be well?” he asked then, voice slightly more concerned.

“I,” I said, and found myself faltering.

Unfolding my glasses, I shook loose a clod of dirt on the left lens and raised them to my eyes. “I think I’ll be fine,” I said, as I looked at him.

Tall. Tan. He was wearing a loose white shirt, home-spun and hand-sewn or giving the good appearance of same, as well as a battered-looking leather apron.

The source of that prod into my shoulder was a hammer he’d had over his shoulder - a sledgehammer-sized tool, although he handled it with ease.

As I watched he slung it forwards, resting the head on the graveled road with a weighty, satisfying sort of thump.

His eyes met mine. I wondered for a moment how his eyes got so gray.

His voice became more careful. Deliberate. “Can I ask you what year it is?”

Oh boy. He'd thought I'd hit my head.

Taking off my glasses to wipe off what was left of the dirt on the front of my shirt, I said with a smile, "Two thousand and fifteen."

Relief was clear on his face when I put my glasses back on. I could practically read what he was thinking: *good, he's not concussed.*

"And here I'd thought it was eighteen-sixty-eight," he replied, but with a smile. "And who is the president of the United States?"

"Either Andrew Johnson or Barack Obama," I replied.

His smile grew wider. "Barack Obama, you say? I've heard such a name. It sounds quite peculiar, but if it were two thousand and fifteen, who's to say you couldn't have such a name for president?"

The tall man cleared his throat, and extended a hand to me. "Still and all, it would be rude of me not to introduce myself, good sir, for I must take some blame for the blow I've struck you against your shoulder there."

I reached up to take his hand, not clearly thinking about it. I was wondering - something, I don't know.

I answered him, feeling the words pop loose. "Oh, it's a pleasure to meet you. Please, don't worry about it. No harm done. I bumped myself on my car last week, hurt more than that did. Ha ha!"

God, I sounded like an idiot. This wasn't helping my blush.

"Well now," he said, "I suppose I should be more careful when I'm toting around my tool, shouldn't I?"

He hoisted the hammer up, holding it in both hands. "I'm Hiram, and I am a blacksmith by trade, or at least I shall be when my father gives me the shop. Til then I suppose I'm the assistant, even if I do most of the laboring of late... but you know how it is with fathers; they get set in their ways."

I could tell he was an actor, but I didn't feel like getting up just yet. "Oh, I do. So what kind of work do you do in the shop there? Where is it?"

"To answer your second first," Hiram said, "it's down near the dock at the side of the *McHeary*." That being a three-masted ship that was kept afloat as a museum.

"As for the first, I'd say all sorts; not so much horseshoes and so forth, that's more the farrier's business. But we prepare the ironmongery for the ships. Why, just last month we'd made a new anchor chain."

"Really!"

"Ayuh," Hiram said, with a bit of deliberate practice. Hefting his hammer up, he met my eyes again - and his voice was a little quieter, more intense, as if he was speaking to me directly.

Which is ridiculous, of course. Naturally he was speaking to me. Who else, the trees? But it was a different sort of tone - he was addressing me, particularly, not me, the visitor.

"You're really alright?"

I nodded once. Rising off the brick, I grasped my laptop case again. Holding it before me, I felt vaguely absurd, like a schoolboy. (But in a sense I was a schoolboy, wasn't I?)

His eyes changed, just a bit. Wrinkled, and his lips pulled back into a huge grin.

"Well then sir, may I have the pleasure of your name?" His hand stuck out towards me.

Taking it, I felt a little absurd. His hand felt - *broad* - warm and with rough callusing.

"Oh," I said. "I'm Scott."

"If you've a mind, come by the forge in about an hour. I'll be showing a few things to the interested folks, once we've gotten everything at sixes and sevens."

I wanted to. But...

“I don’t think I’ll be able to... Hiram. I’m ah, I’m researching something.”

Hiram’s head tilted back just a bit, a small and secret smile on his lips. He gave my hand another squeeze and let go.

“A travelling scholar. Will you be here for a while?”

“At least a week,” I said.

“Then drop by whenever you’ve got the chance, Scott. The offer’s good.”

With that he slid his hammer over his shoulder and walked off, waving with an indifferent, confident ease over his shoulder - it reminded me of Walt Whitman, somehow.

I watched as he walked.

The library wasn’t that far, I told myself. I could get there, get my laptop plugged in and charging, and then go see what was to be done. It would be ridiculous to come all this way and *not* do any touring.

And now... I was curious.

Chapter 2

Getting settled in the library took longer than I thought.

Fortunately, once you went through the booksellers' shop, with its living-history performer and a small selection of authentically hand-pressed pamphlets and copies of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, the place was modern.

But it was definitely small and archival. These places have a sort of compact and fragrant air to them; shelves packed densely and walkways that aren't grand.

You don't visit archives like this to find an interesting story to read, or to look up a book full of facts on astronomy or recipes for beef.

You come here in order to mine out history - if the Sound was an open working mine, selling history to visitors by the cart-load, this was the mother-lode.

The archivist showed me to a carrel for visiting scholars such as myself. It was small - there was a high window, frosted and with the shadow of some tall planted grass outside resting on it. She showed me how to crack the window if I wanted some breeze, and where to connect my computer.

When I asked if they got a lot of traffic, she said there had been some - but usually, people were coming in to try to do genealogical research, rather than the scholarly sort of work I was doing.

Which, frankly, was looking a lot less interesting than that blacksmithing demo that Hiram invited me to.

I'd learned my lesson about getting directions, at least - I got one of the cute little hand-printed maps and asked the archivist to tell me EXACTLY where the blacksmith shop was relative to the library.

Despite this, I still managed to get lost.

I blame the way the streets were laid out; they LOOKED straight, but they managed to wriggle around just enough...

Getting up to the waterfront put me in the great mass of people exploring these historical delights and their immediate nearness to cooling breezes, which slowed me down further yet. I could tell that an hour had already passed by the time I wriggled my way past the crowd surrounding an authentically-dressed, if slightly anachronistic, preacher discoursing on the sin of free silver, and how it would be a wreckage on the nation. Something like that, at least. It might have been the other way around.

But silver wasn't what I was interested in. I wanted iron.

I could smell the faint sweetness of charcoal coming from the chimney in the stout wooden building clearly labeled and with a propped-open wooden door.

The inside looked dark as pitch from the dockside. I had to blink when I slipped inside, plunged into sudden coolness and the lingering scent of iron in the air.

Have you ever noticed that smell? Sometimes it's present in auto garages, but rarely in other places nowadays. Most of our metal is worked in factories, I suppose.

It's a distinctive scent. I hadn't ever really encountered it before then; I suppose it comes from the tiny bit of metal that turns to vapor whenever a blacksmith turns up the heat and gets that metal glowing hot.

It lingers in the air, like a perfume, cool and rich. Like Mars's cologne... it's heavy and subtle and just the tiniest bit painful to smell - it reminds you of the scent of bloody noses, understandably enough.

"Ah, Scott!" came Hiram's voice from within the gloom.

I squinted towards where I had heard him, as my eyes adjusted from summer sunlight to the darkness of the place.

We weren't alone in here. There was a tourist with a camera out, taking pictures of the racks of tools, blocks, and other

pieces of equipment that filled the space. The viewing area for we casual visitors was fenced off with some waist-high iron railing and a latched gate that led into the forge proper.

Scott had taken off his shirt, which I could see hanging from a nearby peg amongst all of the wood and iron. The apron was still where it had been, protecting his chest and, I suppose, his pants. His arms were bare and thick, with a faint burn mark on one bicep - it looked fresh, but minor.

“This is the friend who I’d mentioned, sir,” he told the tourist, indicating me with a pair of metal tongs he’d had in one hand. “If you’d care to stay and see me do a bit of a commission piece for him, you’re welcome to do so.”

Commission piece? I hadn’t asked for anything. I came in closer, letting the door swing mostly shut behind me.

“Oh, that’s alright,” the tourist said, flipping off his camera. I could hear it whirr with surprising clearness as he slid past me, smiling, and stepped back outside.

He was more polite than I was... he took pains to close the door behind him.

“Well, that saves me a little shouting,” Hiram said with another breath.

“You found the library alright?” he asked me then, giving me another wide grin.

I answered “Sure, of course.” I stepped closer, let my hip rest against the railing, looking at him. “But what’s this about a commission piece?”

“I felt bad for smashing into you like a runaway horse. I thought I might give you a little something,” Hiram said. “If you’d been here a bit more promptly I would have worked it into the demonstration, of course. It would have been a very effective bit of work to show off the secrets of blacksmithing to the curious.”

My face flushed, slightly. “Sorry about that.”

“Tis nothing,” Hiram said then, as he walked past me, reaching up high to grasp hold of a handle dangling from a thick piece of rope.

“What were you going to make?”

Hiram pulled down on the handle, and I saw a giant leathery bellows that had been skulking up in the rafters rise and then descend, with a great whispery gasp.

The air it pumped went down into an unassuming space which flared to life, embers and coals bursting into a fiery red life.

Hiram repeated the operation as he answered. “I’d noticed you have that case for your briefs, and I’m sure that if it weren’t so balmy and warm outside you’d have a coat as well. Is that fair?”

“It’s fair,” I answered. Even if it was just us, he seemed to be playing in character.

“And how are they hung, then?”

“Excuse me?”

Hiram grinned at me, in a way that made me feel as if he’d made some subtle joke I hadn’t quite gotten. “Your coat and your case. How do you keep them off the floor or out of your chair?”

“Usually I don’t,” I said.

Hiram pumped the bellow one last time, before reaching over onto what had looked like a stack of scrap iron put in wire racks on the far wall.

“Well then! What you need, Scott - if you don’t mind me being familiar, but it is how you’ve introduced yourself - is not another chair, but rather a stout hook to put on your wall.”

I wasn’t sure where I could put such a thing, since I had a lease, but the thought was certainly nice. “I guess that would be useful. So how do you do that?”

Hiram had drawn a bar of iron off that stack on the wall. He shook it at me slightly; it was bending, very slightly, under its

own weight. “The first thing that I do is get hold of the right material. You see this? It’s about as thick as a carrot, isn’t it?”

A skinny carrot, I thought, but I nodded.

He set it down on a table, talking over his shoulder as he reached over for a pair of immense scissors. “Of course I’m not going to be able to use a whole bar for one coat hook. If I were making a whole wrought-iron coat rack, of course, say for the Larishes or a farmer family inland from the Sound, I might use quite a bit. Of course, wood is better for THAT, but there’s always fashions...”

“Do you make the iron yourself?” I asked, gesturing towards the bars. Might as well play along.

“Hah! Who do I look like, God?” Hiram said, looking up at me with another grin.

“No, we get it in from the ironworks in that form; we could melt down what we have for scrap, and sometimes when we need a particular thickness or length we take what we have and forge it together. But for the most part, it’s easier to start from those bars, especially when we’ve got to work quickly,” Hiram said.

He lowered those mighty scissors down with a visible strain of his arms. There was a rattling sharp sound, and then the larger part of that bar rolled over on the top of the table. A smaller piece fell to the ground; Hiram bent and plucked it up.

“Here, see,” he said, coming over and holding it out to me.

“Touch it if you like.”

What an invitation. I reached out. The metal was eerily cold - except at the smooth tip where he’d recently cut it. It was about a foot in length. Rough. “It looks rusty,” I said.

“That’s just the outer surface. It’ll fade,” Hiram assured me.

Taking the bar over to the forge, he stepped round so that he could face me, pausing to give the bellows another pull and stoke the flame further.

He must lift; he had that cut definition that came from deliberate effort in the gym, though I supposed some of it might have been that he'd been a little dehydrated, working in here.

Reaching down, he pulled up a pair of tongs, grasping the length of rod and holding it into the fire. "I imagine, if you're anything like me, you've stuck a stick into a fire or two in your time, eh, Scott?"

"No... well, not exactly," I answered.

"Ah, well then. But you've seen a stovetop grow red hot, yes?"

As he spoke I could see that the dark metal was lightening. I watched it as it reached a cherry-red glow, even as Hiram kept speaking.

"This iron's much softer than the steel you might be used to, though you'd hardly know it, most of the time. But heating it like this, it'll grow quite soft - like taffy, almost."

He picked up another pair of tongs, shifting the grasp on the metal and twisting his wrist. As he did, the metal turned - what had been a square bar turned a full quarter, the edges sharp and curved now.

Hiram slid the rod back into the hottest part of the flames.

"This is the bit that's a little boring," he said, looking up to meet my eyes with a smile.

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Scholar. What brings you to the Sound?"

I watched the metal heat up, composing my answer in my head as I did. I thought perhaps I shouldn't challenge the performance, even if it was in private, but how could I easily articulate it in terms that wouldn't be too strange? The challenge made me smile, even as Hiram turned the metal within its fiery nest.

"You know how they keep the paper up at the library, don't you? Every issue?"

“I did not, but I suppose it’s the sort of thing a library might do,” Hiram replied.

“Well, I’m here to read up on them and make notes on what the political news here was like over the last few decades.” Which was true, as far as it went; I was tracking the political news.”

“D’you mean speeches and so on?” Hiram said, as he drew out the bar and pressed it against the side of the stone of the forge for a moment, putting a bend in the metal. He held it once more, and his eyes turned to focus upon it rather than me.

“More or less,” I said. The details were more complex than what I said when I elaborated: “It’s a study of how the citizens who fought in the Civil War experienced life and grew into their roles as members of a democracy.”

“Seems a peculiar thing to study,” Hiram mused. “But if it’s to your profit, I suppose there’s no harm - unless you end up choking on the dust on the old newspapers!”

I laughed in reply. I doubted THAT would happen, since the old newspapers were all on microfilm now - or, increasingly, digitally scanned, where hopefully they’d be even more long-lasting than the microfilm had been.

Some of the originals were still around, of course, but those were usually for memorable occasions rather than every issue of the half-dozen papers that had come out now and again. Sometimes it was worrisome - microfilm didn’t last forever, and without the originals around, some material might be lost for good.

Having gotten an answer from me, Hiram seemed content to be silent. I watched what he was doing, joining him in the silence.

Hiram reached up to tug on the bellows again, though only half as strongly as he had before. The flames rose up again, and the metal was starting to... run, almost, like a thick gelatin instead of steel itself. I marveled at how he was doing all of

this while wearing very little in the way of protective gear - but I supposed this wasn't as dangerous as it might be. Was it?

Or was Hiram really that dedicated to his performance, or his craft?

He lowered another pair of tongs, these ones thinner, and started drawing and twisting the tip of the metal; it thinned, but he pinched it and wrapped it round, dipping it back into the flame now and again. What was forming was a rounded ball at the tip, along with a subtle curl to the metal.

Suddenly he turned and plunged the bar into a trough of water at the end of the forge. I jumped at the sizzling, squealing heat of the metal - or at least of the water vaporizing.

The steam had a denser scent of iron to it. Hiram chuckled, and asked, "Not used to the forge, are you?"

I laughed, to cover up the embarrassment and the blushing feeling on my cheeks. "Don't you worry about it breaking when you do that?"

"Oh, not for something this size," Hiram said. "But anything large enough where that might be a problem would be getting done up at a steelworks, you know; it's not likely to concern the likes of us, making horse tackle, ships' chains, or coat hooks."

Hiram brought out the bar then, though now it was more of a hook. Grasping it on the fat end, he held the unworked side in the fire again.

"What are you doing now?" I asked him.

"Oh, you'll see." Hiram twisted the metal, held it close. I watched it glow again, brighter and brighter.

"Reach over to that table," Hiram said, pointing with his chin. "Do you see that one bit there, resting loose?"

I walked over, balanced on the rail, leaned over and plucked up my prize: "This?"

"Aye," he said. "Put it on the anvil."

He brought the red-hot hook over, then, and picked up a hammer. “Step back,” he told me.

It was a good suggestion, as it turned out. Setting the metal down, he struck it with an immense ringing blow which made me jump again.

At this Hiram laughed. “First time’s always rough, huh!” he said, smashing down again, twisting the bar over, striking another blow...

Sparks flew, and I laughed, a little nervously, seeing how they landed on the ground. But it was pounded soil, apparently; nothing to catch fire, I hoped.

Watching him move was hypnotic. The way he raised the steel hammer and struck a blow; seeing his muscles move, seeing the faint hint of sweat on his skin, hairless and smooth underneath the persistent heat of the forge. It was quite the show; he turned to heat the metal up several more times as he pounded it, finally smashing it into a nearly-circular disk at the top of the hook, the size of a playing card.

A few more taps, and he picked up that bit, holding it up for me to see. “Now, step in here,” he said, “this is a bit tricky, but we can get it done in a couple of blows if you’ve got a little courage in you.”

“Is that really alright?” I said, and I felt a hot bloom of shame in my gut at it. I had practically squeaked.

Hiram waved me in with one hand, and I couldn’t resist. I slid the gate open and stepped forwards, even as he loosened the tongs, twisted them around, and put his hammer down to grasp my hand.

I felt my breath quickening.

“It’s simple, Scott. Just hold this here. You don’t have to do anything more, just hold it as still as you can. Why,” and here Hiram laughed, “you could say you’re serving as a *visé* blacksmith, if you’re inclined to such a joke.”

My face reddened again, part from the heat of the nearby forge and part from something about Hiram.

Close as he was, I could smell the faint hint of sweat clinging to his short-cropped hair. The metal was burningly, glowingly hot, but all I had to do was hold still. I wrapped my other hand around the tongs, gripping tight as Hiram lowered the steely bit of metal down against the dully glowing disk of iron at the end of the hook.

Tap... tap... “Here we go,” Hiram informed me, before he drew his hammer up as high as Thor and *struck*. I felt the blow ring all the way up my arms, from my wrists through my biceps up into my shoulders. It took my breath away.

“You alright there? Just once more,” he said, and I nodded urgently. My eyes turned down to the floor of the smithy as that tap... tap... came.

Hiram explained as he did, “This tapping business is to sink the punch into the metal a bit, so that I’ve got my aim true. And here we are —”

Another ringing, heroic blow, and with that Hiram was reaching forwards, his arm brushing against mine, taking the tongs - and the hook - away from me. I could feel the still glowing metal’s heat as it nearly brushed my wrist, but nearly was not close enough to hurt.

I heard another singing hiss as the iron landed in the water; this time, Hiram had dropped it the iron in, not just dipped it.

Hiram wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist, as I slowly let go of the tension I hadn’t noticed. I watched him move.

His hand came down, and he met my eyes.

Our gazes locked for a heartbeat. Then for another.

I felt an electric tingle up my spine again. That tension that left me was coming back again. Was he —?

It was a question that formed in my head, but couldn’t even complete itself. I didn’t know what I was afraid - or hoping -

that Hiram looked for.

And just like that the connection broke. He turned away from me, with a small smile on his lips, and reached down into the water to pluck out the twisted hook of metal. He held it up, and picked up a file to smooth out a rough edge.

“To answer your question,” Hiram said as a few sparks flew between us, landing down on the packed earth of the floor, “the punching is so that you’d have a place to hang your hook. Nail it to a wall, perhaps. I’ve heard tell they’ve made screws to the same end, haven’t they? Perhaps that would be more to your liking.”

“So to speak,” I said.

Hiram laughed.

He laughed, and then he dipped the hook in the water again. Reaching into his leather apron, he took out a linen rag and wiped it clean and dry.

Holding it out to me, he said, “Here you go. A memento of your time here at the Sound. You may wish to clean it a bit, but it’ll last. I hope you’ll remember us here... fondly.”

I took it. The metal sat in my hand, a little rough. It felt heavy, though not uncomfortably so as I turned it over and ran my thumb along the side, feeling where the metal had puckered inwards and twisted underneath the ministrations of his hammer and his tongs.

I looked up to Hiram - and only met his eyes for a moment, smiling as I did, and feeling another blush bloom on my face, spreading to my neck and the back of my ears.

“I’ll be seeing you around, then,” he said.

Chapter 3

I wish that Hiram had been right.

The hook accompanied me back to the library and sat on my desk as I read through a huge range of old scanned stories and

the ancient moldering forms of newspapers from the distant past.

It was long enough ago that some of the s'es were still looking more like f's, at least until I realized that I'd been dealing with papers that had been mislabeled.

But that wasn't much time wasted, and it gave me a better impression of how life had been here at the Sound.

At least, that was the idea - it was what I told myself to justify making such a mistake. But I'd actually made this something of a vacation and had brought enough money that my little motel room would last me for an entire week and several days afterwards - I'd thought I would only really *need* three or four of those days.

That thought had assumed I was able to work productively.

I wasn't.

I read through the newspapers and I took notes, and I toyed with the hook that Hiram had made. I turned the piece of iron over in my hand, rubbing my thumb along its length, feeling its weight. I even twirled it on my finger, before it threatened to leap loose and smash into my laptop, at least.

The scent of the iron when it warmed in my hand lingered in my mind.

I found myself getting more and more restless, and on the third day of my tenure at the Sound's reading room, I realized I was getting absolutely nothing whatsoever done. Not a single thing.

I put everything away. I ate my lunch, washed my face in the bathroom, stared in the mirror and told myself to put everything possible out of my mind. I was going to work hard. I was going to *produce*.

I was going to make it through an entire five years' worth of newspaper front pages that day, if it killed me. I had four and a half hours left in a working day.

I could do it.

But in the end I didn't. Within an hour I was toying with that piece of heavy, firm wrought iron again and staring into space.

My mind kept going back to the blacksmith's shop. Remembering the smell of the iron, the way it permeated everything. The subtle hints of everything else there. Wood, I suppose. Oil. Sweat. A thousand tiny traces.

That place felt more real than all of these ancient newspapers scanned into digital lights. Even if it was just a bunch of acting.

But acting could tell truths, couldn't it? Like a novel, or a play or a movie or -

I couldn't stay there in the carrel any longer. I closed my laptop, zipped it up, and left it there. I slid that metal hook into my pocket and walked out into the sunny streets of the Sound.

I didn't know what moved me, but I knew that the agitation I felt in my gut had something to do with Hiram. If I saw him, talked to him, I would know what this meant. I'd understand SOMETHING. Maybe he'd just gotten a rise out of me, maybe I wanted to be in living history. Maybe I just wanted to know more about blacksmithing.

It was so strange to be at loose ends like this. It was almost liberating - I'd come here to work on a paper for my publication record. I was aiming to become some kind of a professor - something academic, definitely. Normally I would love immersing myself in the archives like this, but walking down this street, with the only things that spoke of the modern day being visitors...

Perhaps I really was drawn to this career, to the Sound or a place like it.

That had to be it. I wasn't sure why I thought Hiram would be such a great route to finding out more, but it stood to reason, right? If nothing else, he could give me an honest opinion. He seemed so much... so much like me - I couldn't put my finger on it, but I had to restrain myself from skipping down to the blacksmith's shop.

The door was invitingly open. I stepped inside of the cooler air, and I closed my eyes for a moment. I was going to see nothing until my eyes relaxed anyway, so I might as well appreciate the ambiance of this place.

Maybe Hiram would teach me how to work iron. That sounded fun, the way I felt right now. I'd never done anything fancier than change a tire... but I could learn. I was very good at learning.

"Well hello there, stranger!" came a hearty voice.

I opened my eyes. It wasn't Hiram.

The old man who was standing on the other side of the anvil was smiling cheerily, holding a hammer and tongs much as Hiram had. He was still in a shirt, thankfully enough, although he couldn't have been more than sixty. Still, white and combed-back hair certainly made him look like a grandfather.

And not Hiram. That seemed terribly important to me. Disappointment washed through me, disappointment and a watery feeling in the knees. I put a hand on the railing for the observers, the same railing I'd crossed over so merrily a little while ago, to steady myself.

"Hot day out there?"

I swallowed. "Definitely," I replied, trying to figure out what to do now.

"Ah, it's always difficult when the heat's fierce," he said, setting down his piece of metal and walking across to a table. "We get the privilege of our shade in here, of course, and that can be mighty comfortable, but the forge doesn't exactly keep you cool. Care for some lemonade?"

"Oh, well," I began, at which point he laughed, coming up to a pitcher of what did look to be authentic lemonade. Or at least, it was definitely yellow, and next to a cluster of ceramic mugs. Filling one, then the other, he let ice slosh into it.

"No, you don't really have to," I said -

He came over, nonetheless, and pressed the mug into my hand.

“To your health,” he said with a grin that probably should have had fewer teeth if he was really striving for authenticity, and with an invitation like that, I found myself drinking.

I have to admit that it *was* good lemonade. Tart, a little sweet but not terribly so. The pressure of the chunk of ice that had slipped into my mug was oddly soothing, after that walk in the glowing warmth of the day.

It was enough that I asked, “Where did you get this?” The ice clanked as I lowered my mug.

“Aha,” the white-haired man said, “that’s quite a good question, isn’t it? Wouldn’t expect to find ice in a hot summer’s day, but you’d be quite wrong to think we haven’t thought of this before.”

Oh no, I thought.

“But we plan ahead for these sorts of a situation, my good fellow. Every winter, why, the duck pond and the lake a few miles up the road towards the north freeze over, nice and thick, and the ice-men carve out that ice. Ten, twelve inches thick in good hearty blocks - and then they lay it up in cellar, coat it with sawdust, and seal the door quite tight. And just as sure as the air stays cool in here, when we’re not working the forge of course, it stays nice and cold in those sealed-up cellars. And when it gets as hot as it is now, why, we just open the cellar up and draw out a block of ice - chip off as much as you please!”

I hoped, quite fervently, that whatever I was drinking in this water didn’t come from an actual duck pond. For one thing, it would have had entirely too much duck in it for my taste.

For another, this was distracting me from my goal. While the fellow was refilling his cup, I asked - quickly - “Can I ask you a question, sir?”

“Of course! It’s always a pleasure to answer questions from interested parties such as yourself who have come down to visit us here at the Sound,” he said, raising up his mug. “I’ve been working this smithy for nigh on thirty-six years now, and

I'm hoping that sooner rather than later I'll be able to give it over fully to my son."

"Would your son be a man named Hiram, by any chance?" I answered, finding myself slipping into those rhythms of speech. Ugh: bad voice.

I suppose it was a natural instinct to want to talk like the person you're talking to, and set them at their ease, but right now I really didn't want to get roped into another lengthy discussion.

That lemonade had been sweet, but that strange, urgent, anxious feeling in the pit of my gut was still there, and this man probably knew who Hiram was. Where he was, in point of fact.

"Ah, you've met my lad, then," he said, sipping his lemonade. "Why yes, of course; I've known him since he was a child, you might say!"

I smiled, weakly. The old man smiled back, and less weakly.

"Well, Hiram's out of the Sound for the day. He's taken the carriage up to the capitol, you know, though I'm hoping to see him back before sundown."

My brow furrowed. "Really?" I suspected this was a cover story for 'sometimes you have a day off.'

"Oh, yes, really so," the old man said. "Have you been to the capitol?"

I assumed he meant the state capitol, not, you know, Washington DC. "Of course," I said.

"Do you remember the great big iron gates on the doors? I've seen them three times myself," he said. "Once when I was a young man, and once when I went up to get my marriage papers all well and truly filed away, and -"

"It sounds fascinating," I said, trying not to show my impatience.

Unfortunately, I was successful.

“Well, now, as you’ve doubtless noticed, you being a young man and all - they’ve been rusting away into garbage with the wet and the exposure, if you understand me.”

I could recall the ironwork he was probably talking about. Come to think of it, it had seemed pretty ancient the two times I’d gone up there. I even remembered once, which was during a protest in my undergraduate days, a bunch of rust had flaked off when someone had pounded on the gates with their bare hands.

“Well now, it seems they’ve taken it into their heads up there to replace those doors, and instead of getting some new-fangled pressed steel nonsense from over at the mills in Ohio, they’re wanting to make the same decor, but with new iron, if you understand me.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” I said.

“Aye, well,” the old man said, rubbing the back of his neck, “yes, perhaps I’ve said a bit poorly, do forgive me. What I mean to say is that Hiram has gone up there to take measurements and look at the old blueprints and so forth, if they should have them, because we’re going to make them a new set of doors.”

I blinked.

“So if you’re looking for him,” the old man said with an air of finality, “that would be where he’s gone off to. Is he expecting to hear from you, Mr. -”

“Call me Scott,” I said.

“And... no,” I said further, a moment later.

“Ah. Well then,” he said, with a faint hint of a smile.

It was a mysterious look - sly, knowing.

It made that knot in my stomach tighten again.

“If you’d like to leave a note, I’d be glad to pass it on.”

“Is there any chance I could just...?”

He straightened up, and his tone changed slightly - flattened, almost. "I'm afraid we'll be closing up soon here at the Sound, sir. Some work to be done for the summer parades. You understand of course."

My face burned, but I fumbled a scrap of paper out of my pockets and scribbled down my name, my room at which motel (*why* had I put that there? I asked myself, with no good answer), and after a pause, cursing myself silently for having gotten that into the old-time living history performance style, adding my cell number.

"Here," I said to the old man.

He took the note. "I'll be sure he gets it, sir. Have a good afternoon."

His tone was clear: You've drunk my lemonade and didn't care about my act, so please don't darken my doorstep any further. I was happy enough to oblige him, and soon enough I was out again into that timeless, almost-summer sun.

And I didn't feel even the slightest bit better.

Chapter 4

Have you ever felt embarrassment in slow motion?

It's a peculiar feeling, one that comes out of communication that's indirect but aimed. I don't imagine it was felt by most people back in the days when you talked to someone either to their face or - maybe - through a third party. I imagine instead it got started when people began writing letters, and it has only accelerated since then.

If anything, it's gotten worse. If I had been wanting to get in touch with Hiram about... about whatever it is that I wanted to do - hang out, I guess; ask him about how to do blacksmithing - a hundred, or a hundred and fifty years ago, there would have been very little tension after I had sent a letter, or perhaps a telegram.

Because I knew of course that he couldn't receive it for hours, perhaps a day or two at the best. Maybe longer. The reaction would come, but it wouldn't come *immediately*.

Nowadays, of course, it was worse.

Hiram could call me at any moment. Or he might not - and I would have absolutely no way to know, perhaps for the rest of my time at the Sound's archives, how he'd reacted. Maybe for the rest of my life.

The thought haunted me as I sat in a corner table in a local pizzeria, one well outside of the immediate reach of history and far more firmly set in the modern day. The pizza was good, I suppose, but I hardly tasted it.

It was the sort of a pizzeria that also has a rotating rotisserie where they cooked chickens, I suppose to go with meals or provide a healthier option for people who cared for that. They were rotating around underneath a glowing coil of red, steadily cooking and drying out as they did, dripping sweaty bullets onto a steel plate beneath them.

I knew how they felt.

I kept looking at my phone. Constantly. I had a book with me, a paperback novel I'd wanted to get through - something light I'd brought along to distract me in my off hours, or to help me wind down to sleep. I'd read approximately fourteen pages in the lengthy period between my arrival, my order, and my food arriving. And I am not a slow reader.

When I found myself thinking: OK, I'll just finish this paragraph and then check again, I realized that I had a problem.

Two, really, since Hiram hadn't gone away.

Of course, the phone must have picked up my thoughts, because at that point it immediately buzzed. The number was unfamiliar and local, but the message was simple.

Three letters. All lower case.

hey

My heart skipped a beat and made up for lost time afterwards. I picked up the phone, slid my thumb over the pass code, and immediately put in a reply: *hey there*

scott, right?

It was ridiculous. Two words of electronic text.

My heart soared anyway. *yeah*, I replied.

got your message.

I couldn't help it. I picked up the phone and punched the button to call that number, heard it ring as I picked up a crust from my pizza slice and crushed it into greasy crumbs between finger and thumb.

One ring. My heart was still pounding, quietly but with enough force that I could feel the pulsations in my temples. I felt like I would burst asunder with whatever suppressed tension was inside of me, as if I'd rip apart and spill out all over the pizza plate, the placemat, and my battered paperback.

Two rings.

Three.

It clicked to voice mail. I heard a voice - obviously Hiram's - speaking. "Yo," that recording said, "it's James, leave a message. I'll hit you back."

Then a chime.

"Hey," I said, trying not to squeak. "It's me, Scott, from uh, from the Sound. You made me a coat hook? Anyway, um, get me back when you can. 'Bye.'"

Off with the phone.

As I lowered it, I heard the phone buzz. I looked down in case it was a call back - the phone could be mysterious at times, and sometimes it would buzz before the ring tone started.

But no: it was a new message from that same number.

dont call me.

That feeling of cracking open and spilling out teetered on my inner edge. I did want to burst open. My eyes watered and blurred, but I did not, at least, get to the point of crying— or doing the properly manly thing and ordering the first in a long series of beers to go with my increasingly cold pizza.

But I was in a spin; I was just in a space where my feelings hadn't yet settled on where to rest next. And I knew they were going down. I felt the world lurching, I felt blood slowly running to my face.

My phone buzzed again.

My eyes turned down and saw five words that threw me into an entirely different direction.

you've got a cute voice...

What the living, blue-blooded Hell did that mean?

Obviously, I had to reply immediately. *what's that supposed to mean?* I added a *haha* at the end there, not quite sure why I did... I suppose I didn't want to feel like I was jealous or

defensive. Maybe he'd just meant, you know, cute because I was squeaking. Either way, I hit "send."

lol was the reply.

Maddening... but it seemed he was typing more.

what did you want to talk to me about?

I tapped back: *I don't know. You seemed pretty cool.*

I try...

That was you I called, though?

yup.

I thought you were "Hiram," and the moment I sent that I realized that it was a damned foolish thing to say. Of course he wouldn't have the same name - his job was, in a sense, acting, and did I expect Leonardo DiCaprio to have all of his characters share his name? No, I didn't.

funny story, he replied.

Oh? I answered, and ate some of my pizza now with a little bit of a renewed appetite. I still felt an odd cold shiver - I'd had a pretty close scare there, in a manner of speaking. I didn't know why it had loomed quite so large to me. Why exactly it still did. But I knew that, now that it had cooled off for a few moments, I had been utterly terrified to hear his reply of "Don't call me."

The waitress came by and I had just asked for another glass of water when my phone buzzed. In fact, twice.

"Oh, you look like you're getting big news," she said with a smile: "Good luck with it!" And then she'd sauntered off?

Did I really look that far gone?

Probably. Either way I looked at the phone, and I saw the story spelled out in the course of a few texts. This wasn't something very casual, even if it did seem that Hiram - James? - wasn't very focused on the use of his shift key.

hirs actually my middle name. james is my first name of course, nobody asks much about what H. stands for when you're james H. so forth

when i got hired, we developed the character a little after i did some time as an extra. you know, walking around and giving directions. i have a little biography on the sound website, which has my schedule etc. i wrote it. it was pretty fun.

you seemed to have a professional interest in me. thinking of trying to get a job? more exciting than reading old newspapers... ;) at least i think so.

I swallowed.

I sent back: *It sounds like you're trying to recruit me. maybe so.*

Why me though?

i think we'd look good together...

My heart skipped a beat. The hell did THAT mean?

Could he have meant -

The thought was formless in my head, but he was still typing. I still was breathing heavily now, my face red all the way to my ears.

and i know you can take a pounding. after all, i already clocked you with my hammer and you seemed to take it pretty well lol

I wasn't sure if I was relaxing or tensing up further to read that. On the one hand - he seemed to be talking about how well I'd endured his blows, of course, and on the other hand...

On the other hand... well, what he was saying was -

"Are you alright?" said the waitress as she dropped off my water. I startled in my seat, the phone nearly flying out of my hand.

"Oh," I answered, "I'm completely fine!"

"Talking to your girlfriend?" she said, with sympathy.

She must have seen something in my eyes, because she looked as if she'd just asked whether or not I had fond feelings for Adolf Hitler. Stepping away, she flipped her empty tray over and said, hastily, "I'll ah, I'll just get you your check in a little while, okay? Thanks!"

I must look incredibly awful, I thought.

The phone buzzed again.

you still there?

Yeah, I replied. Waitress, sorry.

oh, where'd you go?

Big Sound Pizza.

ahhhh. nice stuff.

Yeah, it's pretty good, I lied, because I'd barely tasted it. I probably could've eaten plain white rice and would have tasted about as much as I had here, now. I felt like I had a fever. A fever would have been more sensible. It could have been explained...

any chance i could make you bring me a slice?

Where would I be bringing it? I replied.

you can come by the sound. i had some stuff to work on in the shop anyway.

It's closed, isn't it? That was a lot of why I'd gone out - or at least, the way I'd rationalized things in my mind to explain why I had left so early to go and swing by and try to see Hiram. James. Whatever.

not for us. you can use the employee entrance. you bring a to-go box they won't even ask, just say you're bringing it to the blacksmith.

Ugh. I knew I had already decided to do this, even as my fingers turned the phone over in my hand. It's a funny feeling when that happens, when the inevitable has already happened and all you can do is rationalize it, and go along for the ride.

Alright. I'll do it for you on one condition.

yeah?

Pay me back. Now... tell me what you want.

that would help, wouldn't it? ;) alright...

“Here’s your check,” the waitress said a few moments later.

“Actually,” I answered her, “I’d like to add something to go...”

Being a delivery boy wasn’t so bad, really... and at least it meant Hiram would have a reason to stay put. In a sense, I had him right where I wanted him.

In another sense entirely, of course, that was meaningless. I didn’t know how I wanted him.

‘How I wanted him.’ The thought made me shiver, made me almost blush. My heart pounded again. I felt giddy, and stupid, and definitely at risk of unsafe driving on my way back to the Sound.

Chapter 5

Somehow, of course, I survived.

Walking down the roads towards the smithy was an eerie experience. The site had cleared out early that day, and without anyone walking around in their wrestling T-shirts and looking at their cellular phone, the illusion that the Sound tried to present - a vision of the past - worked. Mystical shades of red and orange and pink streaked out from a gorgeous sunset, the long shadows casting visible dark streaks upon the glittering waves out to sea.

The buildings themselves were canvas for this dimming paint, glowing in a dozen shades of pastels as shadows rested on whitewashed walls.

With the roads empty and the air still, I walked through time. No engines were out there, no planes were flying overhead,

and nothing - other than, perhaps, the slightly anachronistic bronze plaques and a few other little touches of museum business here and there - seemed to be made from the twenty-first century.

I could hear the wind, and very faintly, the sound of a hammer striking iron. Even from three blocks away the subtle hint of Hiram - James - whatever; HIS presence was there.

Ringling in the air like a clear sharp bell.

Of course, there was an anachronistic element or two here and there. While the streetlights weren't on - I knew they were there, but they were a little less bright than the usual sort - I did feel very aware of my modern tennis shoes, the phone in my pocket, and the foil wrapped slice of pizza sitting in a flimsy cardboard box.

That sense of being out of my element - out of my depth - crept up behind me as I came to the main seaside road. I paused there to look out to sea, the wind tousling my hair.

Then a left turn, to that smithy. It was dark enough now that I could see it was lit from within, not by electric lamps or, I think, even by something suitably old-fashioned as a lantern or a candle lamp.

No: The glow that came from inside those authentically made windows was dark and ruddily red, as if the entire building itself was a volcano. As if the wooden walls, battered and slightly dingy as they might be, were but a disguise over the raw heat of the Earth itself. Brought up here, so close to the sea.

I bit my lip. Save it for English class, I told myself, and walked up to the door.

The sign said 'Closed.'

I didn't knock; I opened it. I was invited, after all.

* * *

James met me. He was inside of course, and the door hadn't been latched. Even so, it was hard to think of him as James.

He was dressed like he had been the last time I met him here. His hair was slicked back, held by the sweat that had dried in the furnace-heat of the forge. He looked at me with an expression of naked hunger when I came in... But that probably had a lot to do with the loaded slice of pizza I had for him.

“Excuse me,” he said, “if I’m a little bad-mannered here.” After that, he devoured the pizza as I looked around the now-familiar inside of the forge.

As I did, he reached over and opened the gate for me, swinging the latch that had kept it shut around one of the bars. That little dividing fence, meant to corral tourists and observers, was now opened for me. He waved me in, casually and then with urgency.

I wasn’t going to argue with him. Not when he had his mouth full! I stepped through that gate, sidling carefully past all of the tables and racks of clamps, tongs, raw material, hammers...

Everything seemed menacing now, in the dim glow of the firelight.

Menacing isn’t quite the right word, though. It was more of a projection - the image, the presence of all of these tools surrounding us, the smell of iron lingering in the air with the mixture of charcoal smoke and the hints of honest sweat.

It wasn’t like anywhere else I’d ever been. It felt more like a temple than a workshop, especially as the sun faded and we were left with only that glowing furnace-light to illuminate us.

As he dabbed his mouth, James (Hiram? I still couldn’t decide) breathed out. “Thanks, Scott. Probably means I can finish my project tonight, now that I won’t have to go and eat supper.”

“Oh, it’s no problem,” I said. “What are you working on?”

His eyes turned to mine and he smiled.

“I’m not quite sure yet, actually. It’s still in development. It’s something of an artistic piece, I’m doing it for my own satisfaction.” His voice shifted, a little, growing more like the tone I was used to. “I’m sure you know how there’s a different attitude when you work for business instead of pleasure.”

I leaned against a table, even as he reached up and pulled on that rope that worked the bellows. I lost my train of thought as his arm raised and lowered, gazing at that smooth skin - his arm was bare, working shirtless once again.

“I guess so,” I ended up saying.

“You guess,” he said, head leaning forwards.

I squirmed slightly, eyes turning down to the dirt of the floor. The heat was rising; I could feel the furnace’s heat radiating onto me. Or heat on my face at any rate; perhaps it was coming from me.

But why?

“I’ll be honest that I’m curious, about what you do in here, but I’m not - I mean, I’m not familiar with this at all. I can barely change a tire on my car, to say nothing of working with iron,” I answered him, forcing myself to look up, to look in Hiram’s eyes. (Hiram felt right.)

“Oh,” Hiram answered, “I can tell you’re curious.”

He stepped nearer to me then. Closer than he’d stood before. Not too close, but his gaze hadn’t moved. I could see a hint of a smile on his lips.

That hot feeling on my face got stronger.

“I know it’s a reversal of our usual sort of relationship, here at the Historic Sound,” Hiram said then, “but I’d like, if I might, to ask you a question or two, Scott.”

“Certainly,” I said, reaching up to press my glasses further up the bridge of my nose.

“You’ve seemed to have a very strong interest in me,” Hiram said, and up this close I thought that I could feel his breath on

my cheek. That was ridiculous, of course; it must have been some eddy of the air, or maybe some tiny crack in the brickwork of the furnace.

“I’m not used to getting that sort of interest on a regular basis. What do you mean by it?”

No; it was my face. I was turning red again. Red and flustered. Hiram’s steady voice was making my heart beat pick up again.

I swept a hand through my hair. “Well I don’t mean anything in particular by it,” I managed to reply. “It’s just been a lot more interesting than messing around in the archives. That work gets dry, it’s kind of —”

“Unsatisfying?”

“Exactly!”

A smirk crossed Hiram’s lips.

“And I seemed more interesting than whatever you were doing,” Hiram said then. “Is that right?”

For some reason it felt like a trap. My heart was racing now. I was sweating, I think, but the heat was enough that it didn’t stick.

“Wow, ah - is it - can you make the furnace cool off a little? I’m really cooking up in here...”

Hiram leaned just a bit closer. “Does my question make you uncomfortable?” Now I COULD feel his breath on my cheek, I swear.

“Yes,” I admitted, without thinking.

Before I could feel like a complete ass, Hiram leaned back, just a bit. I thought that was ominous though I couldn’t tell why. “Interesting,” he said.

“Would you like to know what I’ve seen here, Scott?”

“Oh, certainly,” I said again on pure reflex, feeling my stomach tighten up.

Hiram's weight shifted, even as he didn't move. He was leaning against the table as well, now, and I could tell that he was mirroring me — echoing how I stood.

“Let's go back to the beginning, shall we? I'm on my way here to get ready for the early afternoon demonstration and I accidentally stumble into a gentleman with glasses,” Hiram said. “Now, he's not an old fellow, nor is he a child; he's not far off from me in age. If we compared birthdays I'd be surprised if there's more than two years between us...”

“This gentleman,” he continued, “stumbles back and loses his glasses, and I notice that he seems rather distracted by my presence. It's a particular kind of distraction, a particular kind of confusion, which I'm familiar with.”

My heart was pounding.

“But these things happen,” Hiram said, “and a mistake could be made. I'm well aware of that. I've made plenty of mistakes here in the workshop, and when you make a truly bad one, why, there's nothing to be done agonizing over it. You just have it thrown on the scrap heap, and you melt it down for slag. But what I saw then wasn't like that, I don't think - because that same fellow, glasses, hopeful look, and all... He comes by to the demonstration I'd told him about!”

Hiram laughed, and it sounded like silver and iron both. “Do you know how rare that is, Scott? It's terribly rare. You had only the one other fellow in there, but we had a great maximum of *six* that day, and two of them just wanted to take a picture of me hitting a piece of metal to see if it would throw sparks! It did, you might be curious to know.”

I couldn't answer.

“And after that meeting,” he said, leaning closer to me, “after all of that, where I even give him a little something to remember me by, I find out that he's come back days later... and he's left me his number.”

Hiram reached up now. He touched my face. Running his thumb along the line of my jaw, reaching up with a brushing of

his strong, agile, callused fingers to push my glasses just a bit further up my nose. The lenses steamed over slightly.

I could hardly hear myself breathe. Or think.

“So I text him,” he says, “and when I ask him to come by, he agrees. Now, Scott, I’m going to be a little more forward here - a little more frank. I don’t think you’re asking after me like this, because you want a matching set of coat hooks, do you? You’re not after my skills - you’re not after what I produce here, with my hammer and my tongs and my anvil. No, you’re looking for me in particular.”

My voice clogged in my throat. I couldn’t answer him, though I wanted to.

Hiram’s hand slid down to cup my cheek.

“You’re not used to things like this, are you,” he said - and now, I know for sure, I felt his breath on my cheek, because his lips were barely two inches away.

But I found my words. “No,” I said.

“Do you even understand how you feel?”

My heart pounded like a jackhammer. I was afraid it would wear a groove in my sternum or leap out like an angry frog. My mouth stayed open, gasping for breath.

Hiram’s hand slid down. It rested on my chest, a warm presence, radiating out through the knit cloth of the polo shirt I wore. His eyes lowered as well and I saw a secret and knowing smile on his lips, one that made him seem almost like a tempting, hungering devil in the infernal light radiating like a fountain from that stoked-up forge.

“You said I needed to pay you back,” Hiram murmured to me. “I remember that clearly.”

“Y-yes,” I answered.

“I’m a little short of cash,” Hiram said. His weight shifted forwards, nearer to me. I felt his leather apron brushing against my trousers.

“Do you mind if I repay you with another little clever trick of mine?”

“Ah,” I said - I’d meant to say “Alright,” or perhaps “Ah, if you have to.” I couldn’t tell, I couldn’t remember. In a moment I was filled with electrical heat, a hot dam within me breaking and giving way, surging through me with the repressed tension and pleasure that Hiram had brought out of me.

Hiram, you see, had not meant that he was going to make me another trinket with his clever work with forge and hammer. He certainly didn’t mean that he was going to get me a job here at the Sound, or at least, not yet.

Hiram’s trick turned out to be something simple and direct, something that had snared men throughout history (appropriately enough) and for which millions had died, millions more had lived, and billions had dreamed and hoped and pined.

He pressed forwards, raising his hand again to gently cradle the back of my neck and draw me inwards, pressing me against him in turn. And then he pressed his lips against my own.

Hiram kissed me.

And I loved it.

Chapter 6

“Love” is a strong word, of course. I don’t use it casually.

It was the first time I’d ever been kissed - and the second time in my life I’d kissed anyone outside of the schoolyard or my parents. I’d done some desultory dating in high school, sure, and a little in college, but my heart hadn’t ever really been into it.

I knew now, in a single electrical instant, what I’d been missing. Why people went crazy and spent hours and days and weeks and months and years chasing and yearning for the embrace of another. Hiram held me close and I felt electric heat arcing through my spine.

I felt every motion of his lips. I hadn’t known just how sensitive my lips were until now, where the merest touch of his tongue, running over my lower lip, felt as aching and vivid as an entire backrub, as a hot bath, as that moment of exhilaration when you cross a finish line.

I tensed up, tightened up in Hiram’s grasp. I tensed in places I didn’t know I really had.

He pressed me back against the table, his lips pressing against me now, searching, hungry. His tongue ran over my lower lip again and now slid further. The warm, strong hand at the nape of my neck rubbed there, light and leisurely.

That tension I felt started to fade as Hiram’s tongue drifted into my mouth. Teasing past my teeth, touching me... and then he broke that kiss with a soft wetness, an intimate and fleshy sound over the dull roar of the furnace.

I could hear Hiram breathe.

He murmured into my ear, “So, Scott, let me ask you...”

I couldn’t reply, my lips still parted. I felt weak, and tight, and rigid.

“Do you think that was enough to pay you back?”

His hand slid down my neck, around my collarbone, over my shirt.

Hiram breathed into my ear, his lips nearly touching me. “You’re probably feeling kind of... wobbly, aren’t you?”

God, was I. “Yes,” I answered, feeling how hesitant, how shaky my voice was.

“Sh-h-h,” he soothed, stroking along my stomach. “It’s alright. Did you like it felt?”

I swallowed, his taste still clinging to my lips.

“Because that’s what I’ve been getting from you, Scott. That’s what I picked up when you gave me that big, hungry look the day we met. For a moment I thought you might just have been squinting without your glasses, but I don’t think that was the case, was it?” Hiram murmured. “Even then, you knew. You could feel it.”

“Feel what?” I managed to gasp out.

Hiram chuckled. “You really don’t know?”

I had a dark and subtle guess in the back of my mind. Could it possibly be -

Hiram’s hand slid round to rest on my hip.

“It’s attraction, Scott. That animal connection between two people. In your case, between you and a guy like me.”

My face burned, and Hiram leaned in to kiss my cheek.

“Sounds real scholarly when I put it like that, doesn’t it? But I bet I can tell you how you’ve been feeling in the last few days. I can read you pretty well, I think... Want me to make a guess?”

“Try it,” I said, trying in my own turn to regain some confidence. I could smell his skin, the subtle tang of his sweat, the leather, the iron on him.

“Given how... surprised you’re acting,” Hiram said, his voice almost gloatingly tender in my ear, “I’d say that you’ve been

feeling really... tense. There's probably been a lot of distraction. You've thought about me, about my body, but it hasn't really been in open and overt terms."

His hand stroked my hip. "Getting warm?"

"Y-yeah," I breathed.

"I can tell," he murmured.

"I have to applaud you, though," Hiram said.

"Why's that?"

He leaned in, kissing my neck lightly and lowering his other hand to my side.

"Because," Hiram said, "you've lasted... how long, exactly? You've been here at least the better part of a week. If I was in your shoes... I'd have barely lasted til the second day."

I blushed, not sure how to take that. Then Hiram let me go and stepped back, though I wished with a sudden, cold and squeezing intensity that he hadn't. But I wasn't cold, at least.

It was impossible to be cold here.

Hiram met my eyes as he reached behind himself, tugging loose the straps on his protective apron. The thick leather came off as he slid it over his head, tossing his hair back and hanging it on a peg on the side of the stone mound that held the furnace.

I had never seen him this way. His shirt and then the apron had both concealed his chest from me. It was a travesty now that I could see what lay beneath.

Hiram was ripped. His pecs weren't the thickest, but his arms were powerful and well shaped, with the contours that I thought must come from real, genuine work that builds muscle and power rather than the chiseled perfection you might get in a gymnasium.

His abs, though, were tight, a visible six-pack of definition that glowed in the forge-dim room. The loose pants he wore beneath them sat low on his hips.

“Now you,” Hiram said.

“Me?”

“Yeah,” Hiram said, his eyes gazing into mine. I knew whatever he asked me was going to happen, and the thought of it made me tremble.

“Take off your shirt and your pants.”

“Both?” I managed to gasp out.

Hiram’s eyes gleamed as he smiled at me, hungrily. “Both,” he answered.

I slid out of the polo shirt and let it puddle on the table near me. The pants took a little more work, enough that I didn’t feel quite as hypnotized. I felt enough of myself to say, “Is this your first time -”

“Heh. Do you honestly think this is my first time with someone, Scott?” he answered.

And that relieved me when I was able to answer, “You didn’t let me finish.”

Hiram’s eyebrows lifted up, and he nodded once, as if to say *go on*.

“Is this your first time having an... an encounter like this,” and I almost faltered then because I knew where this was going, I could guess where this would end up. And I was agreeing to it, I was playing along, and —

And I’d be damned if I just let myself roll over and squeak again like a freshman. Hiram was gorgeous and handsome, and I wanted him, in some way I couldn’t quite fully define even if I knew perfectly well just what kind of way we’d get to know each other better.

But that didn’t mean I was a little girl. I was a scholar, dammit.

I cleared my throat. “Your first time having an encounter like this... here in the workshop.”

“Do you want the answer that gets you hot,” Hiram murmured, “or do you want the truth?”

“The truth,” I answered, meeting his eyes as I stepped out of my pants. It was a slightly ridiculous thing to hold his coal-hot gaze while raising up my own pants to put them on a historically authentic wooden table, but love - was this love? I guess it was close enough - is a ridiculous business at the best of times.

Hiram smirked. “Yeah,” he said. “First time in the workshop.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little unsafe?” I said, as I stepped closer to him.

Hiram was nearer to the forge than I was. That’s what it really was. That was the logical explanation for the heart-pounding heat that I felt coming from behind him, but I couldn’t help but think that it was really from him. I felt my entire body shift underneath that pressure. I felt myself tighten, a shiver running up through my groin. I could feel my balls lift, to get crass about it. And I knew that in these boxer briefs, Hiram wasn’t going to have any problem seeing that.

His eyes turned down, over my chest. I wasn’t as ripped as him, but I’m glad to say that I was in decent shape.

Hiram ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip as he looked back up and seized my gaze again. I stared back at him, with something that was perhaps a little closer to anxious motivation than real courage, and he murmured, “I like to take a few risks now and again.” And with that he reached down to slide loose his belt.

He didn’t take his slacks off the way that I did. That hand-tooled leather belt and its heavy buckle - steel or perhaps silver - hit the ground with enough force that I heard them.

Hiram stepped forwards, closer to me. He had nothing on beneath those pants - he’d been free and independent this entire time, his cock freely swaying.

As he put a hand on my thigh, near my own package, I felt another thrilling jump. I forced more bravado out of my lips,

murmuring to him, “Nothing underneath, huh... Is that in my honor?”

“If you’ll forgive me being a little anachronistic, Scott, I’ll just go ahead and quote the Boy Scout motto at you,” Hiram said, his lips curling up in a faint smirk.

“Be prepared?”

“Exactly,” he said, sliding a hand down over his own abs. I watched his fingers glide. I watched them clearly enough that I missed him reaching into the pocket of his leather apron, drawing out a quite anachronistic foil-wrapped... condom.

I was going to do it, I realized with a sudden tension in my gut. My eyes went wide as the reality of it slammed into me. I was going to fuck him - another man - here, right now.

That tension got matched by the tightness in my groin, my cock swelling up in its cotton-wrapped constraints.

Hiram stepped forwards, reaching up to rest a finger on my chin and tilt my head to the side, kissing me again as he ground his stiff shaft against my own. The feeling of his heat and stiffness against my own was electric again, another arc of pleasure running up my spine. I felt myself dripping, just a little, as our hips writhed against each other; as shaft rubbed against shaft.

Hiram’s tongue was welcome in my mouth now. I sucked on it, and dared to slide my own forwards; he growled low, in pleasure, and returned the favor. After a long moment, he broke the kiss, and held me round the waist with one arm.

The other reached up above us.

Hiram pumped the bellows, once, twice, a third time as he murmured, “It’s funny how things look by firelight, isn’t it?”

The fire itself roared as air was forced into it, the burning coals going from a glowing smolder to a roaring blaze. The light grew brighter, less smoky. The coals glowed like Hiram’s eyes, and he pulled away, fingers sliding down along my stomach again.

He reached into my briefs, drew out my shaft, and held it firmly. “So you’ve never done anything like this before?” he asked in a low murmur.

I was too full of the heat, the scent of leather and iron and coal in the air, the sparkling grinding intensity of his touch... I wasn’t going to be clever. “Never,” I answered.

“Then I’ll walk you through it,” Hiram murmured. “If you’re ready.”

I swallowed - was I? Was I really ready to indulge myself like this?

One long, lingering look at Hiram’s body, his chiseled abs, and the stiff swelling of his cock, answered the question for me. I’d wanted to be with him, and I’d been interested in his thoughts and his words and his job and his role in life, his dreams and his ambitions. All of that was true. But it was only the fuel, the heap of coals. The potential.

What had turned that from a possibility to a blazing passion in my body was *his* body.

“I’m ready,” I breathed, like I was whispering in a confessional.

Hiram leaned in and kissed me again, brief and light. His cheek was faintly raspy against my own, with that hint of stubble from a long day. “Good,” he said.

“Now get on your knees.”

I was already sinking to one knee before I asked, shakily, “What are you... What do you want me to do?”

“Step one,” Hiram said, raising up the condom and ripping the pouch open with an experienced flick of his brawny wrist. He slid it out, and held it to me. “Put this on me. All the way down.”

He was so hard... I put the condom there, rolled it down with my hand. Stroked it backwards, felt the rubber tighten around his shaft.

The rubber, glistening with the slightly greasy lubricant, added another note to the industrial heat in the forge now; a sharp one, almost piquant as it warmed on his dick and in the fires of the coals.

I slid further, and found my fingers still working as the base of the condom stopped unrolling. Hiram groaned above me, the thick ring of the condom's base an inch or two from the trimmed thatch of coarse, masculine hair.

I could feel him throb under me.

"Are you ready for step two?" he rumbled.

"Yeah," I breathed.

"Suck me."

I breathed out, sharply. Suck him...

I was going to. I knew it, even if the unfamiliar size and bulk of his cock looming in front of me made me hesitate. It wasn't out of a lack of desire, it was simple inexperience... and it faded when Hiram put his hand on my head, curled his fingers in my hair, and gently - firmly - nudged me forwards.

Nudged his slippery tip against my mouth and then I knew I wanted it. My mouth opened and I let him slide inside, the hot stiff shaft more like his tongue than the huge, jaw-wrecking, lip-stretching force I'd feared.

"Don't bite down," Hiram murmured. "Just relax. We're not gonna be here long..."

I wrapped my lips as best I could nonetheless, and I sucked.

The clinging rubber shifted and Hiram stiffened. His hips swiveled, the tip of his prick grinding down wet and slippery against my tongue.

Hiram's hand stroked the back of my head and pressed down, guided me. Held me. I was in his hands, quite literally; under his control, even if he only guided. Like the reins on a newly-shoed horse... but I had no reason to defy him, no desire to do so. I sucked hungrily. I felt myself drool in my lust.

I don't know quite how long I nursed at Hiram's cock... more than moments, and it seemed like forever. Feeling him throb like that was addictive.

But Hiram's fingers curled in my hair and he tugged me back. My lips clung, the noise sinfully wet. It echoed in the air.

Finally, I was free. My lips ached. Hiram's cock glistened before me.

"Do you want it gentle," Hiram murmured, "or do you want it rough?"

I looked up at him, feeling my heart flip inside me.

His hand stroked my cheek, that rough thumb of his running over my temple, down along the curve beneath my eye. I wondered just how many other faces that hand had touched; how many times that rough firmness I felt had pressed against hot metal, rough tools, or more. I could tell he was not soft in any way; the biggest, hardest sign was right before me.

"I think," Hiram rumbled, "I'm hearing... 'rough.'"

I couldn't answer. I looked up, met his eyes, gasped.

"All you have to do is say Yes, Scott," Hiram murmured, his fingers relaxing as they rested on me. "I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't want to do... and I know you're probably really wound up."

'Wound up' was an understatement.

"But," Hiram said. "I want you to say it - to tell me that you want it. I'll handle everything else... but I have to know." His fingers curled round the line of my jaw, holding my gaze upwards. I could see his cock, still hard, so near to me. "I need to know you want it. That you want *me*. Because it's not always easy... even if it's worth it."

Worth it.

Was it worth it? God, fuck - yes it was, I could hear myself think. I was only teetering on the edge because I was anxious, uncertain, unsure. Hiram wasn't - he was sure as hell, sure of

everything, sure of his own sure-ness. I could tell it in his eyes, in the way his hand stroked over me. Even the jutting stiffness of his hard shaft was decisive, commanding, ridiculous as the idea might be.

It didn't seem ridiculous here, now. I could feel the heat pouring off his body. All I had to do was say one word. One simple, short word. My lips, so recently occupied in sucking cock, struggled to let it pass, and I could see Hiram leaning in, attentive and eager. He wanted to hear that word, and I wanted to say it, and only a dwindling fear made it linger. Just a little more and -

“yes,” I breathed.

It was a confession. Hiram breathed in sharp and fast as I said it, even as the rest of that breath turned into a soft groan from me. Before I could hesitate, I was pulled upwards into his arms, hugged briefly, kissed fiercely. I felt my cock slide with that same electric aching need along his own. I felt his lips suck on mine, and then I heard him breathe words in my ear.

Words of command.

“Bend over there. On the anvil.”

“The anvil?” I said, glancing towards the long low iron shape that he'd pounded that coat-hook into shape on.

Hiram's fingers ran along my hip. “The anvil,” he said.

I put my hand on the metal there, feeling how shockingly cold it was.

“Turn around,” Hiram told me.

Shivering, I did as he asked, as he told me. The anvil itself was smaller than the images you might have suggested - but it wasn't small, not at all. I leaned forwards, even as Hiram's hands came up to rest on my ass, on my hips. I didn't have to stretch far to rest my hands on the railing, which made Hiram snort in a moment of laughter.

“Getting ready to hold on tight?” he teased me, and while I still couldn't quite speak, I felt myself shiver in a curious

wriggle of delight, at his warmth and his authority.

Especially when he breathed in my ear, “Good idea.”

My lips tightened as Hiram reached between my legs. My balls were hanging loosely, my cock still hard and pointing up with enough urgent stiffness to practically mash against my belly.

His hand cupped my balls, letting the skin of my sack drape freely, not weighed any more thanks to his support. The touch put another, different current of pleasure up my spine, and the way that his shaft nudged against the space just behind them...

I was tightening and relaxing at the same time. I felt like my entire body was breathing. Hiram leaned forwards, kissing the back of my neck and up further, trailing a line to my ear, which he sucked upon. His shaft was still hard, hard and wet as it slid between my cheeks.

The sensation when he ran it upwards, passing over my ring, was almost beyond words. I felt myself tighten, but it wasn't fear, it was an effort to clasp him, to cling to him, to hold him — to draw him in.

“You're pretty eager,” he murmured again, breath hot as the furnace.

“Y-yeah,” I was able to say.

He ran one hand over my stomach now. I felt vulnerable as he did, but it was the good kind of vulnerability. I was exposed here, like this.

He ran his palm underneath my shaft and I groaned. And that is when his shaft, sheathed and smooth, nuzzled up against my asshole.

I felt myself relax, letting his tip nestle in against the opening, and then tighten - gripping him. I squeezed helplessly like that as he ground inwards, claiming ground steadily, slowly.

Relentlessly might have been more accurate.

The hot pleasure of his shaft sliding into me was undeniable. The hot shivers of pleasure were turning into a steady knot of overwhelming sensation as his smooth shaft dug its way in. The pleasure didn't simply linger in my ass; it ran up along me in thrilling waves, through my chest and up to my neck and even to the hair on my head. My cock stayed hard, throbbing hard and fast in time with my pulse.

Hiram kept sliding inside of me. Deeper and deeper. He let out another hot sigh, his weight shifting... pressing down on me. His fingers ran lightly over my shaft as he pushed inside, deeper yet.

Finally they curled around the base of my cock. I couldn't tell how deep he was inside of me, but the sensation of his penetration, the feeling of having *him* so profoundly within me, was keeping me from thinking straight in any possible sense of the term.

Hiram held me close. "Ready?" he murmured.

"Yes," I said - the third confession. It felt good to say it. Easy, simple... and terribly, intensely hot.

Hiram kissed the back of my neck tenderly.

His hips thrust forwards, *hard*, and he was inside me, deeper. The feeling had a little twitch of pain floating in an ocean of pleasure; he thrust hard and harder and harder yet as he rode me, the wet sound of our flesh sliding together rising in the forge-lit heat of the shop.

While Hiram didn't stroke me, I found my own hips moving forwards, my cock surging in his hand. His movement was hot and deep, and I was echoing it - my body was under his control, under his command, being held and restrained there. I was throbbing harder than I thought I could possibly ever be inside of his grasp, and my cock felt as if it was being stroked from both ends - the familiar forward tip and an achingly needy backdoor entrance I'd never known I had until now.

Hiram moved faster yet, his balls slapping against my thighs as my legs twitched, tightening up. A steady rhythm, slap-

slap-slap, turning into a deeper, faster tattoo as he groaned out his pleasure against me. I felt his cock twitching inside of me moments before my own lust got drowned, the hot pleasure and power of his shaft inside me wildly careening over the edge.

I felt like I was falling forwards, my hands clutching with sudden anxious strength against the iron railing I'd been contending with. My entire body thrashed, the cold anvil beneath me warming, the hot body behind me glowing harder. I glistened with sweat as he groaned, "Fuck... Scott...!" into my ear...

I erupted, hard and sharp and fast, onto the floor of the workshop; Hiram erupted inside of me as well, moments later. I felt him swell inside me, shake, and those long sharp moments of utter blind-white ecstasy which burned through both of us.

I thought 'being one' with your lover - your partner - was a happy romantic myth, but feeling our bodies tighten together in that pinnacle moment, feeling our cocks pulse in synchronicity, I thought for that single blind perfect moment I knew exactly what it meant.

The peak faded, slowly, dying down like coals. Hiram lay atop me as the gloom of the Historic Sound stretched out through the authentic window, only a few dim lights providing anything like a lamp. We were alone here, but not really; we were now together, after all.

After he drew out of me, Hiram told me to straighten up. I did, my ass aching - understandably so, I'd say - but I was still beyond words now, the intense pleasure's echoes ringing through me like a recently-struck bell.

I watched him as he walked to the quenching tub, picking up a metal dipper. He slid it into that masculine-scented water, stirring lightly and raising it upwards. He'd slid the condom off - I couldn't say quite where or when, but his shaft, still half-hard, was glistening bare.

Walking nearer, he looked me in the eye, holding that dipper of water.

Raising it up, he placed it at collarbone level on himself and leaned in to kiss me. I pressed into the kiss, wordlessly, as he poured it out, the shockingly cold water rich with the scent of iron pouring over my chest. Rinsing me, cleansing me of the sweat and dirt I'd ground into myself. Washing his cock free of his last dripping moments, I imagined.

It felt like a baptism.

Breaking the kiss finally, Hiram murmured to me: "Good?"

"Yeah."

"How good?"

"The best," I confessed.

"Do you want more?"

"Yes. But, if - you mean, now, I think..."

"You think you'd tear apart?"

"Yeah," I breathed out, face glowing.

Hiram caressed my cheek again. "Don't sweat it," he said.

The scent of iron and man was strong in the air.

"I'm sure we can take it nice... and slow."

Chapter 7

I stepped out of the house and onto the Sound's streets. Nobody was around but the trees, which wasn't that shocking. First day of the season, after all; the wind coming off the sea was still cold enough to feel like winter, not spring.

The sun was bright, at least. I wished I'd brought a jacket.

Oh well: couldn't be helped.

"Ah, if it isn't the new lad!" said a familiar voice as I walked, and I turned my head to peer at him. Where had I seen him before? The face and the outfit was familiar, but he hadn't been at the orientation-

Before the irony of "orientation" could really make me smile, it came back to me in a flash.

This fellow in his period-proper costume was the same man I'd seen a year before.

Walking up to me with a great deal of favoring of his cane, he said with glee, "Well now, well now! Are you finding your way around the Sound easily enough, then?"

"I am," I replied.

"And are you looking forward to this weather getting warm now!" he continued, speaking quite voluminously. I could see a couple of people with windbreakers and cameras rounding a corner and looking at us with curiosity.

"Oh, I don't know, a good steady breeze is nicely refreshing," I answered, reaching up to adjust my new spectacles. I was still getting the feel for them; round and heavy as they were, they *were* correct for my prescription. But they had a weight to them that was unfamiliar.

Not unpleasant, though. Well, around the edges, maybe.

"You're a young man," said my old friend. "You can handle such things. But these old bones, they're going to freeze up one day if I'm not careful!"

“Oh, I don’t think it’s as bad as all that.”

“Get to my age and then you can tell me that,” he said with a chortle, before turning to face the approaching photographers. “Do excuse me, good folks - a nice chat warms you up on a day like this, doesn’t it? Welcome to the Sound, and I hope you’ve had a fine time -”

I left him to it, continuing my way down these streets. The path this far wasn’t too familiar to me - I knew, of course, where the library was, but it was three “blocks” to the west. I’d emerged from something much closer to the Sound’s outer boundaries.

Walking along the sea-side was chilly enough that I thought my old friend was onto something, worrying about his bones freezing. Even so, I wasn’t going to be out here long, and I had somewhere to be that was going to be plenty and adequately warm.

I found a cluster of people wandering around just outside of the blacksmith’s shop, and as I came near, I raised my voice a bit to be sure I could be heard over the breeze: “Make way, if you please, good folks!”

“Are you going to be doing a demonstration?” asked one of them, an older lady, as I edged my way up towards a familiar door. It had been painted over the winter, so it looked quite bright now.

I lingered there and looked at them. “We’ll be demonstrating things in about half an hour for your edification, good folks. Until then I’d ask for your patience.”

Questions came from them - Why the wait? (We have to warm things up and get ready for the day), Where else can we go? (Why not the boat maker there, he’s getting ready to make a new longboat) - and I thought, as they drifted along, that I’d done OK by it.

Guest relations was a tricky art. But now I’d done it.

I opened the door and slid into that darkness - in this weather, it felt more warm than cool. My eyes adjusted to the dim light,

and to the hearty welcome from Hiram.

Which might suggest a hearty shout or some kind of greeting. In this case it involved him dropping his hammer where it was, vaulting over the railing, and coming up to me.

You see, he'd figured it out - or so he'd told me. The windows that were there to admit light and give you a way to see outside weren't facing anywhere that the public could see — if you were standing right where the visitors would stand to watch the demonstrations. Presumably this was where horses were led in, or wagons backed up, in the original design. Now, it was a place of strange security.

That was important, because Hiram was being pretty anachronistic.

He greeted me with a tight embrace, one that went from comradely to intimate in a moment. His hand ran down my back, thrilling me; the other rose up, cupping the back of my head as he leaned in to kiss me, a hungry suckling at my lower lip. His eyes were shut, and I felt mine close as well as he held me tight, as his hands slid along me.

We'd only gone a few days without seeing each other, and he was already this hungry. I felt flattered, honored... and turned on. Being desired is a powerful aphrodisiac.

Not that Hiram was bad himself.

He broke the kiss, coughing delicately and reaching behind me - I heard the door creak *all the way* shut, and I felt myself blush.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi there."

"Doing alright so far?" he asked me.

"Mm. Yeah."

"I'd missed you," he said, stroking my back.

"It was less than a week."

“But I got *used* to you,” he said with a smile. “I’m a creature of habit. Hell, look how old fashioned I am in my ways here.”

I snorted in laughter. “I still can’t believe you got me this job,” I said.

Hiram kissed my forehead. “I didn’t get you this job, *you* got you this job. Okay— I helped a little. But nothing made you fill out the application.”

“Yeah, something did,” I replied.

Hiram met my eyes. “What did?”

“You did, dumbass,” I said, trying not to laugh. I made myself shift a little away from him, as much as I wanted to stay in his embrace. Perhaps forever.

“I’ll accept it for now,” he said, ruefully... just as reluctant to let go of me.

“We should get ready.”

“For the day?”

“Yeah. First day of our time together.”

“Our time together here, you mean,” Hiram said, drawing away and resting a hand, rather meaningfully, on the flat surface of that anvil where he’d...

Well, it had been the first time. It wasn’t the last. I blushed even so.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Hey, Scott,” Hiram said as I stepped through the gate again, already walking towards the racks of metal rods and ingots.

I paused. “Yeah?”

Hiram put his hand to his chest. “I love you, boy.”

My face blossomed again even as I grinned back. It was theatrical and he claimed it came from a story about Walt Whitman, who we’d spent a lot of time reading together.

I returned the salute. I felt my heart racing underneath my chest; the thrill of knowing I would be beside him.

“I love you too.”

“Just as long as we’re clear,” Hiram replied.

“Let’s get to work,” I said, and sure enough, the day was perfect — side by side with him in this hot and steamy workshop, it couldn’t be anything else.

Author's Note

Thanks for reading! I hope that you enjoyed this story. It was thrilling to write it out, and almost twice as much fun to revise it. If you really liked it, feel free to leave a review or hit me up on Twitter, which I am just now figuring out. You can find me here, [@zachmorganauth](https://twitter.com/zachmorganauth) — come and say hi!

I got inspired for this story while visiting a living history site, which I bet is a huge surprise, huh? Well, I knew the guy doing the blacksmithing was handsome as hell, that's for sure. Some of the details here are in fact drawn from life. (Unfortunately, I haven't, yet, had the privilege of a life as a living-history performer with my own personal Hiram. Here's hoping.)

While I've got you here... If you liked Scott and Hiram's tete-a-tete, take a look at some of my other works of gay romance.

["Feeling the Burn"](#) - Aiden is a professional. His fitness center runs smoothly, and he makes sure all his customers are safe. He absolutely never falls for a client.

So when Hoyt enters the gym, all cowboy swagger and bad attitude, Aiden's taken by surprise with his feelings for the newcomer. Hoyt's going to hurt himself if Aiden doesn't step in, but Hoyt's damn sure he doesn't need anyone's help.

Hoyt has problems of his own: problems that have led to him lying to himself about who and what he is for most of his life. He sure doesn't need someone like Aiden to come and re-awaken the feelings he's struggled to bury.

Can Aiden help Hoyt move past his fears, or will Hoyt be angry and alone for the rest of his life?

[“Fire Up My Heart”](#) - Paul trained hard to get where he is, and now he’s the sous-chef in one of the city’s best restaurants. Everything’s great. Well, almost everything.

Paul’s boss, Ethan, is tightly-wound, outspoken in his views on homosexuality, and incredibly hot. As Paul falls for Ethan, everything he’s worked so hard for could go out the window in a flash.

When a local gay couple book out the entire restaurant for their wedding reception, Ethan is forced to confront his own feelings before he makes the biggest mistake of his life.

Can Paul possibly persuade his own boss to overcome his personal demons, or will he be forced to keep his professional distance lest he lose his job?

[Heating his Blood](#) - Jay Harper is a real estate agent. He doesn’t want to be, but it pays the bills. Life is good... except for the matter of helping a reclusive, and VERY wealthy, client find a place to live in the big city.

That’s what has sent Jay on a boat to the bay island where this man - with the name of Vukomir Korolenko - dwells in misty isolation.

When Vukomir’s dark and hungry secrets rise, can Jay find a way out for both of them - or will they both be consumed?

[By His Side](#) - Soren’s worked hard to get into grad school, and he takes his work seriously. Teaching undergraduates about ancient history? No sweat. Reading ancient inscriptions? No problem.

Al Greenberg, though... He’s a problem for Soren. Kind, funny, and smoking hot, he’s also Soren’s faculty advisor... and graduate students and professors are definitely not supposed to date.

When an accident puts everything Al's worked for in peril, Soren's forced to reach within his own heart and extend his hand. Can he save the day - and find out how Al really feels - or will both of them be left in ruins?