



THE KITE & 

TALLOWWOOD

CHRISTMAS CROSSOVER

N . R . WALKER

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BLURB

Harry and Asher are living peacefully on the North Coast of NSW. Life is quiet, boring, and utterly perfect. Though coming from a life of danger and excitement, Harry worries that Asher will grow bored of the “normal” life. He misses the adrenaline, the action, and most of all, he misses his “baby.”

So Harry goes against his own better judgement and organises a special Christmas gift for Asher.

Life has been picture-perfect in the sleepy little town of Tallowood. Since the horrors of the murder trial ended, Jake and August couldn't be happier. Tallowood was unassuming and uneventful—just how they liked it.

Even the town's newest residents are decidedly normal. On paper, that is. In person, August isn't so sure. He'd done background checks on them when they'd first arrived and found nothing, but something about them was off.

But when the Coffs Coast Gun Club sends an application for a Christmas gala day and a familiar name catches his eye, August is determined to meet the newcomers in an official capacity. He wants to see if his hunch is correct.

What was a surprise Christmas gift, might just unbox a whole can of worms.



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CHAPTER ONE

HARRY WAS DOWN by the water tanks trying to fix the valve for the connection to their rainwater. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, December eighth, and thirty-eight degrees. Hot and humid enough for him to notice anyway. He stood up to his full height to stretch his back and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. The air was still, not a lick of breeze, and he could feel the heat coming up from the ground through the soles of his boots.

He'd been in hotter places. He'd endured worse.

In fact, he loved it here. His and Asher's house in the middle of the North Coast hinterland. Private and secluded, just like them.

A bead of sweat rolled down his spine and he could hear the whole forest around them. The hum of insects, the crack of a twig somewhere not too far away, birds singing, the sound of an Australian summer.

It was their second Christmas in the house. Their second Christmas in Australia with new identities and new lives.

Harry wondered when they'd first arrived if he'd get bored. He worried that Asher would grow restless and want to leave.

But no.

They'd settled into a quiet "normal" life so easily.

Well, they did still play a bit of cat and mouse through the forest on their land. They played some catch-and-fuck games

for an adrenaline rush every now and then, though Harry was almost certain Asher let him catch him on purpose.

So he'd take his prize, right there on the forest floor or over a fallen log.

Not that Harry minded.

At all.

But sometimes Harry caught Asher staring out over the veranda, lost in his thoughts. Lost in his memories. He knew some were good; most weren't.

They'd lived very dark lives, passing in the shadows under the cover of night and being no more than a blank face to anyone they'd met. And now they were living as husbands with fake names, fake histories, outside a small peaceful town where everyone waved and smiled and said hello. Where kids played in the park and dogs chased frisbees and folks at the local shop talked about the rain or the local football.

It felt almost surreal.

And Asher swore he was happy. This was the quiet life he'd only ever dreamed about. He'd literally dreamed about the road to this place. This was where he was supposed to be.

But every time Harry saw Asher staring off into the distant horizon, he had to wonder . . .

How long it would last.

And what he could do to make Asher happy.

If the Christmas gift he'd organised for him would make him happy or if it'd make it all worse. The gift itself was a one-day thing. Would he not want a temporary fix? Would it be like giving a kid a toy to play with for just one day?

Would the itch for their old lives become too hard to ignore?

But no, Harry had to put it out of his mind. He trusted that he knew Asher well enough to know . . . he was going to love it.

Sure, he'd want it more and possibly permanently. But this was Australia. Things had to be done a certain way, and Harry was certain one phone call to Yunho and he'd have crates arriving the next day . . . but he couldn't risk someone asking questions.

"Hey, handsome," Asher called out.

Harry looked up at the veranda where Asher stood. He hadn't realised he'd zoned out and he hadn't realised he was being watched.

The old Harry would never have zoned out, would never *not* know when someone's eyes were on him.

The new Harry was losing his touch.

The new Harry would be dead.

He tried to shake that thought off.

"You okay down there?" Asher asked. "You weren't paying attention."

Of course Asher would have noticed that Harry was slacking.

Asher raised his hand, pointing his finger like a gun and aiming it at him. "You're losing your touch, my love."

Harry looked down at his own hand, kinda surprised to find he was holding the wrench.

"Enough sun for you," Asher said. "Come up and get a cool drink."

Good idea.

Harry conceded with a nod and came up to the house, kicking the dust off his boots at the front door. He slid the wrench onto the kitchen counter and Asher handed him a glass of iced lemon water. He drank almost all of it while Asher stood there, appraising him.

"While I'm not a fan of the dirt you bring in on my nice clean floors, I am a fan of you being all dirty and sweaty."

Harry smirked at him, then very deliberately lifted the hem of his shirt and wiped his face, giving Asher a view of his abs and chest.

Tit for tat.

“Unless you intend to deliver the goods, don’t tease me,” Asher said, pouting a little.

Harry laughed and finished his drink. “Thank you for this.”

“You were very distracted down there,” he noted. “I was watching you and you made that face.”

“What face?”

“Where you look rather murderous and sexy, but it’s really just you thinking. Was it math? I get it, math can be hard.”

Harry snorted. “No, it wasn’t . . . I can do maths just fine.”

Asher sighed dramatically. “So was it anything I should know about?”

“No, nothing.” Harry shook his head and wiped his brow again.

Just then, Mala’s bell jingled as she dashed out onto the balcony. There was a swooshing of air and shadows, and Asher darted out and scooped up the cat.

“This is why you wear a bell,” he said, holding her to his chest. “Your daddies are the hitmen in this house, and if anyone does any murdering, it’ll be us. Not you, little miss. You keep your little paws clean.”

Harry laughed, but then Asher looked to the end of the veranda. “Harry, come look,” he whispered.

Harry slipped out, ready for what, he wasn’t sure, but he put himself between Asher and whatever he was looking at.

Instinct to protect what was his.

Asher poked his head around Harry’s arm. “Are they . . . what are they?”

Harry couldn’t quite believe it. Not that wildlife was uncommon, they were surrounded by it. But birds didn’t often

come this close.

There on the veranda railing, just a few feet away, were two kookaburras.

“They’re kookaburras,” Harry murmured.

“Are they dangerous?” Asher whispered.

“Nah, not really. They’ll steal your food if you’re not careful, but they won’t hurt ya.”

They stood there a moment, just watching them, and the two kookaburras just watched them right back.

“What are they doing here?” Asher asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry mused. “Getting out of the heat, maybe. Maybe we should put out some water or something.”

“Good idea,” Asher said. He went back inside, gently dropped Mala to the floor, and went to find a container for some water.

Harry got a little closer and the birds made no attempt to move. They didn’t seem threatened at all. In fact, one even hopped along the railing closer to him. He was puzzled, that was for sure. It was just so random, so uncommon.

Then Asher called out from the kitchen, his voice low and serious. “Uh, Harry? We’ve got company.”

Birds forgotten, Harry ducked back inside to look for himself, and he saw a white Land Cruiser coming through the trees, down the drive, to their house.

No one came to their house.

Ever.

And it wasn’t just a white Land Cruiser.

It had red-and-blue lights on top and the word POLICE in big blue letters down the side.

“Shit,” Asher mumbled. “What do we do?”

“We just play it cool,” Harry said, aiming for a calm he didn’t quite feel. “We play the part of boring husbands.”

Asher scoffed. “Shouldn’t be difficult, because that’s what we are. Boring, I mean. We’re not technically husbands.” He sighed wistfully. “Yet. I mean, we have that fake certificate, and I do like the feel of this ring on my finger...” He held his hand up, thumbing the wedding band on his ring finger.

The fake certificate... They’d once talked about making it official, with Asher’s real name on the certificate. It would be the only documentation he’d have with his real name, and Harry would love to give him that, no matter how impossible it seemed.

One day, maybe.

Before Harry could reply, the cruiser came to a stop and he could see two figures inside the vehicle. And suddenly, his instinct was back. He knew where his weapons were, not that he’d need them. He could take down two men with his bare hands without breaking a sweat.

And with a deep breath in, the calm that had been absent just a moment before washed over him. He’d do whatever he needed to do.

The cruiser doors opened and two officers got out, and on the back veranda, a kookaburra laughed.

CHAPTER TWO

JACOB WASN'T sure why August had been so insistent they both go, but it wasn't every day they got to work together, so Jake didn't mind.

A request had come into the Coffs Harbour police station for a special permission grant at the shooting range, and the address was in Jacob's jurisdiction, so August had passed it along.

"I'm going with you," August had said, leaving little room for argument.

Not that he'd have argued . . . Well, he probably would have.

"What do we know about these two?" August asked as they began down the drive.

The driveway was a kilometre long, winding through the woodlands, and Jacob drove the cruiser slowly. August's question felt almost like a test, like he had to answer clinically.

"Michael and Joshua Hill," Jacob replied. "Moved to the Tallowood area just on two years ago. Retired, came into some money, apparently. Bought into the whole tree-change lifestyle, got a place that was no more than a shed. Spent a fair chunk of change at the hardware store doing it up, making it liveable. Word around town is that they're quiet, nice enough. The big guy looks mean and grumpy. The younger guy is nice and chatty." Then Jake grinned at August. "Kinda like us."

August gave him a flat stare. "I don't look mean."

Jake laughed. “And we’re not rich.”

August looked out the windscreen as the shed in question came into view.

“But you know all this,” Jake said. “So what are you really asking for?”

His eyes flinched in the way they did when he was dead serious. “I don’t know what it is about them. Something feels off.”

Jake frowned at him. They knew everyone who lived in the Tallowood district, and no one seemed a hair out of place to Jake. Everyone was just normal, living life. “What do you mean?”

“Joshua Hill, thirty-five. Michael Hill, thirty-six. Married six years ago. Michael is a retired builder, never had a speeding fine, never got a parking ticket. Records are impeccably—”

“You did a background check on them?”

“When they first moved here,” August admitted. “Both vehicles bought two years ago when they sold their place in Sydney.”

“Yeah, when they came into money,” Jake reasoned.

“One flash car worth one-fifty K, one pile of junk.”

“Oh my god, they are us. Because I’m telling you, if we become gazillionaires, I’m so buying a flash car and you can keep your pile of junk.”

August rolled his eyes, but Jake had made his point.

“Come on,” Jake said, grabbing the papers. He got out of the cruiser and fixed his police cap, and August was quick to fall into step beside him. Jake was in his summer uniform, of course, long blue cargo pants with a short-sleeve blue police shirt. August wore his boring detective long brown trousers and a long-sleeved white shirt with the sleeves rolled.

The house was kinda humble from the front. Sure, it looked like a shed, given it was Colorbond steel, but the

grounds were immaculately kept, the gardens well-tended, and under different circumstances, Jake might have been envious.

The home was surrounded by tall gum trees and there was nothing but woodlands for kilometres. There was a shed to the left where the cars were parked and a smaller work shed to the side. There was a rather new-looking excavator parked behind the shed.

Jeez. They definitely had money.

Before they got to the front door, it opened and a man with short dark wavy hair appeared with a smile. "Afternoon," he said. "Do you need to come in? Please get out of this heat."

Jake knew this was Joshua.

There was an accent but Jake couldn't place it. Something European. He had olive skin and dark sharp eyes, was handsome in a smooth and stylish way. He wore flowy linen pants and a T-shirt that Jake guessed was way more expensive than it looked.

But inside the house . . .

It was open plan, timber flooring, a nice kitchen to the right, but the view.

The back of the house was all veranda; the land below sloped down, giving the views into the valley below. It was shaded by the tall trees, and yeah, Jake was definitely jealous.

"Wow," he said. "What a difference from the front of the house to the back. Hard to believe it's the same house."

"This view is what sold us this house." A tall man came in from the veranda. Well, tall and wide. Huge, even.

Jake had seen him from a distance a time or two, recognised him as Michael Hill, but he'd never seen him up this close before. He had a hard face with old scars like he'd played professional football and copped too many hits.

He had short sandy hair, stubble along his jaw, and sharp eyes. Not like Joshua's. Joshua's were sharp in a way that never missed a thing. Michael's eyes were sharp in a way that could cut glass.

Jake would never have thought him to be handsome, but the more he looked at him, the more handsome he became.

He smiled at Jake, and at least August remembered what they were doing. He cleared his throat. "I'm Detective August Shaw, this is Senior Constable Jacob Porter," he said. "We received an application for a special request at the shooting range. For a McMillan Tac-50 with a twenty-round discharge."

Joshua's gaze cut to Michael's, and Michael winced. "Well, that was . . . that was supposed to be a surprise Christmas present."

Joshua's whole expression changed into a grin, disarming and boyish. "I'm sorry, what?!"

Michael let out a sigh. "Well, it was supposed to be a surprise, but that just went out the window."

Joshua buzzed with excitement, and he threw himself at Michael, wrapping his arms around him and kissing his cheek. "You did that? For me?"

Michael blushed, embarrassed, but his arm went around Joshua's waist with a familiar ease that Jacob didn't get to see often.

Another gay couple.

It made him smile.

August, on the other hand, wasn't smiling. "It's an odd request," he added.

"Did the application get knocked back?" Michael asked.

Jake held up the letter-sized envelope. "No, it's all here."

"It's just an odd request," August repeated. "May I ask why?"

Joshua spun to face him, and Jake might have been alarmed if Joshua wasn't grinning and so animated. "What is not to love? A Mac 50 is—"

"He watches *Jason Bourne*," Michael interrupted. "And all those war-action, sniper movies. It's terrible."

Joshua sighed and rolled his eyes. “My love for gun movies started with Al Pacino in *Scarface*. I can’t be blamed for that.”

Jake smiled at him. “That’s fair.”

Michael gave August an apologetic grimace. “I saw the gun club advertised a gala day, and Joshua said he’s never fired one before, so I made some calls.” Michael winced again. “Sorry if it popped some flags.”

“You both have a gun licence but no registered weapons,” August continued. He really wasn’t letting this go, and Jake tried to side with him. He trusted August and his gut feeling, but damn, Jake liked these two guys.

“We applied when we moved here,” Michael said. “Figured we might need a rifle for wild pigs, but—”

“And snakes,” Joshua added. “I love it here, but I’m so scared of snakes!”

Michael kept talking as if Joshua’s flamboyant interruptions were part of the norm. “But we’ve never needed it. I guess they’re due for renewal?”

“Not yet,” August said, looking around. “So you have no weapons here?”

Michael shrugged, not concerned. “None. Got an axe in the work shed for firewood. And a long-handled shovel for the snakes.”

August nodded to the kitchen counter. “And a wrench.”

Michael groaned. “Ugh, yeah, the valve on the water tank is stuck. We’ve just had a bore put in for groundwater for the gardens, and I should be able to switch ’em over, but I can’t get the valve to budge.” He held out his hands and gestured to the state of his shirt. “That’s what I was doing two minutes before you got here.”

“I made him come in for a cool drink,” Joshua added.

There was a glass with melted ice, condensation, and dirty hand marks next to the wrench.

“You got a nice-looking excavator out there,” August added.

Damn.

Michael pointed his thumb towards the veranda. “Uh, yeah. We had to dig for a septic tank and drainage line. The council inspected that. Got the approval somewhere. And there’s about a thousand fence holes that need re-digging. Got an auger fitting for that.”

August nodded slowly, and Jake wasn’t sure what to make of their eye contact.

But then Joshua scooped up a small cat as it tried to escape onto the balcony. “And this is Mala.”

“Cute,” Jake said. “We have a cat too.”

“Oh, how lovely.” Joshua nuzzled the top of the cat’s head, giving her a kiss. “She’s not allowed out there because she wants to eat the kookaburras.”

Now *that* had Jake’s attention.

“Kookaburras?”

“Two of them,” Joshua replied brightly. “We’ve never had them before. Then just before you arrived, two land on the railing right there.” He pointed to the veranda. “Michael gave them some water, thinking they might be troubled with this heat.” He walked over to the sliding glass doors. “Oh, look, they’re still here!”

Jake followed him to the door, and sure enough, there were two kookaburras on the railing at the end of the veranda. One squawked, not a trademark laugh, but a call all the same.

Jake looked back to August, and his gaze was guarded, serious.

Jacob realised then, with a cold shiver, that August was right. He was always right, Jacob allowed. He should have trusted his judgement.

“It’s so strange that they just turned up, don’t you think?” Joshua asked, looking from the birds to Jacob. “They are

beautiful, don't get me wrong. And they did that loud laugh just as you drove up."

Jake smiled at Joshua and handed him the envelope. "It's not strange at all. But we'll be on our way. You two have a good day. The gun club will call you with details of the gala day." Then he looked up at Michael. "Good luck with the valve. Might try it again once the sun goes down. Metal cup links tend to swell in the heat." Jake tipped his hat to them both and gestured to August that they should leave. "Thank you, both. Enjoy the rest of your day." He got to the door and stopped, offering them a smile. "And welcome to the Tallowwood area. It's, uh, it's nice to have another gay couple in town." He nodded to August, then smiled at Michael and Joshua. "Have a merry Christmas."

"You too," Joshua said, walking them out. "And thank you for the approval. I'm very excited. You should come to the shooting range and try it with us. It will be so much fun!"

"We might just do that," August said.

And they walked to the cruiser, got in and buckled up, and were halfway down the drive before August spoke.

"Do you believe me now?" he asked.

Jake relented a nod, as much as he didn't want to. "Something doesn't quite add up. At first, I thought they were a cute couple. Joshua's fun. Michael is the big grouchy bear." Then he sighed. "But yeah. Michael's eyes. That man has seen things."

August shuddered like he was shaking off a bad feeling. "The hairs on the back of my neck were on end the whole time. Like we were in danger. And then the kookaburras. . ."

Jake let out a breath through puffed cheeks. "Yeah. That was a sign, for sure."

August's eyes hardened. "I'm telling you, whatever intel we have on them is fabricated. They are not who they say they are."

CHAPTER THREE

ASHER WATCHED the police cruiser disappear through the trees and he was positively buzzing. “That was so much fun!”

Harry looked at him as if he’d gone and lost his mind. “The older cop, the detective . . . he knows something.”

Asher was too excited to care. He threw his arms around Harry’s neck and jumped up, wrapping his legs around Harry’s waist. “You got me a Mac 50?”

Harry held him easily. “Not to own. Just to use at the shooting range, under supervision. Like a fun day, other people will be able to use it as well. But I booked you a session.”

Asher planted a kiss on his lips. “Such a fun day!”

“No, like a day when people can come and try different weapons. Like a gala day. It’s kinda strict and there are rules. I knew it was risky, but I didn’t think the cops would pay us a visit.”

Asher wriggled and writhed, kissing down Harry’s neck, trying to elicit a reaction. “But you did it for me,” he murmured. “Oh, Harry.”

“Yeah, but I think—”

Asher gripped Harry’s hair and pulled his head back, glaring down at him. “You are going to get so lucky, mister.”

Harry chuckled. “Did you hear what I said? I think we’re going to have a problem.”

Asher clung to Harry's neck, pressing his forehead to his. "If you don't take me to bed right now, you're going to have bigger problems."

Harry clearly got the message. Still carrying Asher, he walked them to their bedroom and dumped Asher onto the bed. He crawled on after him, Asher's legs already spread wide and welcoming.

Harry loomed over him like a predator stalking his prey. Asher loved that feral side of Harry. But he loved the softer side of Harry too. The side he'd been showing more of these last few months. The Harry that took his time and made love to him. Slow and tender.

Regardless, Harry was always in complete control and that's what Asher loved the most.

He loved every side of Harry.

And he never knew which side he was going to get.

But he found out in the next breath when Harry flipped Asher over on the bed and pulled his pants down to expose his ass.

Oh yes.

Rough Harry was in charge today.

Asher straightened out his arms and turned his head, but Harry was quick to lean his forearm against Asher's shoulder blades, holding him down. He spread Asher's thighs wider with his knees, pinning him with his body weight, and whispered in his ear. "I know how you like it, and I know you can take it."

Asher closed his eyes and felt all tension leave his body. He was about to get thoroughly had, and he welcomed it.

He tried to lift his hips to offer his ass, but Harry's huge hand gripped his hip and held him. "You'll get it when I give it to you."

Ugh.

Okay, so teasing Harry was Asher's least favourite.

He pushed off him, placing his knees on the outside of Asher's thighs, and pushed his legs together. Then Harry began to massage Asher's ass cheeks, gently prying and stretching.

Hmm. Yes, please.

Harry reached over and grabbed the lube, quickly pouring some down Asher's crack. Then Asher heard the familiar pop of a button and the soft zip of the fly.

Asher's blood warmed, and his belly tightened. He lifted his hips, but then Harry's flat palm pressed in the middle of his back. "Stay still," Harry demanded before he pushed the fat head of his cock against his hole.

No preparation, no preamble.

Just straight to the fucking.

It was Asher's favourite.

He bit back a plead, an order to do it faster, and it came out as a whine instead.

Harry inched into him, pushing through the resistance with a shuddering breath.

Asher wasn't sure he'd ever get used to the size of him. "Fuck."

But Harry wasn't relenting. He was unforgiving.

He held him down and pushed all the way in. Asher was pinned and impaled, pain intertwining with pleasure until only bliss remained.

Harry went slow at first, gracing him some time to adjust, but soon he was fucking him, hard and without mercy. He slipped an arm under Asher's chest and lifted him up, arching his back. He kissed his neck, sucking hard and scraping his teeth, biting and marking him as he fucked him.

Harry owned him so thoroughly. With his body, with his heart.

Asher loved every second of it.

He thought of it as a gift every time Harry came inside him. Like he was claiming him as his own, reminding him of to whom he belonged. Like he was telling him he loved him more each and every time.

It was Asher's favourite part.

Then Harry pulled out of him, and Asher was about to protest until Harry rolled him over, lifted his legs up, and sank back inside him.

Asher's eyes rolled back at the new angle, and Harry kissed him roughly, tangling their tongues. Asher was full of him at both ends, taking his cock and his tongue, and then Harry's hand wrapped around Asher's dick . . .

No, this was Asher's favourite Harry.

He brought him undone with a few quick strokes, still buried to the hilt, still plunging his tongue into Asher's mouth. His orgasm was intense, consuming him like wildfire.

Harry held him while he rode out the waves of pleasure, collapsing in the heavy aftermath.

And for all Harry's roughness, he was gentle afterwards, like he always was. Attentive and sweet, adoring.

Three descriptions Harry would vehemently deny, but Asher revelled in.

Until Asher's ringing phone brought reality back.

"I'll get it," Harry said, jumping up and disappearing out the door. He came back, holding the phone up. "It's Yunho." Without asking permission, not that he needed to, he answered the call. "Hello."

He put it on speaker, and Yunho's smooth voice came down the line. "Ah, Harry. I thought I called Asher."

"You did. He's . . . indisposed."

Yunho laughed. "I hope he's thoroughly so."

Asher laughed. "You know him so well," he said loud enough for Yunho to hear.

“Well, I hate to interrupt, but your local constabulary has been busy.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. Thought he might be. We had a visit about the application.”

“Yes. Internet searches of your alias names, dates of birth, driver’s licences . . . gun licences.”

Asher bounced up on the bed. “Oh, you know what Harry organised for my Christmas gift?”

“Of course I know, darling.”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“And I expected the application to raise a flag or two,” Yunho said. “Everything will be fine. Enjoy your date with your beloved Mac.”

Asher laughed. “Oh, I will.”

“Harry,” Yunho continued. “What do you want me to do about the policeman looking into you? It’s your name he searched the most.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Nothing. For now. He’s . . . he’s an older cop. Seems like a decent guy. By the book but means no harm. The younger cop came off a bit green.”

“He was delightful,” Asher added. “Handsome, gorgeous smile.”

They knew everything there was to know about the local cops. They’d known the day they’d found this place. Yunho had a full profile within the hour. They knew about the cold cases. They knew about the high-profile court case and how the younger cop, Jacob Porter, had almost died a few years ago. They knew they were together, married just last year.

On paper, they were harmless. But now they’d met them, Asher knew Harry’s opinion of them had changed. The older one, August Shaw, was insightful and inquisitive. Intuitive.

“Don’t underestimate them,” Yunho said calmly. “I’ll keep a watch. And if they stumble into anything they shouldn’t, I’ll let you know.”

Asher sighed and got off the bed and took his phone. “Enough of the small-town policemen. How are things with you?”

“Very well. And you?”

“Marvellous. Harry’s taking me Christmas tree shopping tomorrow.”

Harry shot him a bewildered look. “Harry agreed to no such thing!”

“Sorry,” Asher amended. “Michael is taking Joshua shopping tomorrow. We’re getting a tree and decorations to get in the festive spirit. He’s also buying me a gift, and he’s buying me lunch.”

Yunho laughed and Harry rolled his eyes. “Does he get a say in any of this?”

Everyone knew he didn’t.

“Sounds like fun,” Yunho added.

“I’d rather be interrogated by the Saudi special forces,” Harry said flatly.

Yunho laughed. “Same.”

Asher sighed. “Give Lucas our love.”

“I will. Speak again soon.”

Asher ended the call and tossed his phone onto the bed. He was sated and he was getting a date with a Mac 50 for Christmas, and not even Harry grumbling about having to go shopping could ruin his mood.

OKAY, so shopping in the Christmas crowds in the summer heat could ruin anyone’s mood. Add a hot and bothered, cranky Harry into the mix and it was a volatile situation.

But despite that, Asher was still buzzing.

Plus, watching Harry push a shopping cart through Target would never not be amusing.

Especially a shopping cart with a huge Christmas tree box in it, plus more Christmas decorations than they probably ever needed, and given the cart wouldn't steer properly . . . it was funny.

And every time Harry stopped and took a deep breath in, his knuckles on the cart handle were so white Asher wasn't sure how he didn't crush it. He thought he heard something creaking, but that could have also been Harry's teeth.

There were small children running and yelling, some crying. Parents were frazzled, and the staff were fraught. It was a special kind of hell.

He had to remind himself that he'd been in actual war zones that were worse than this.

Harry couldn't seem to take one step without bumping into someone, almost running into someone, or almost taking down a display or two.

He was getting crankier and crankier every minute.

Asher thought it was hilarious.

Some shitty kid came running out of an aisle and ran into their shopping cart, and the mother had the audacity to sneer at Asher. "You should watch where you're going," she barked.

Asher didn't even have to reply because Harry stepped in and snarled, and the woman took one look at him and backed the fuck up. Much like any animal in the wild when it knew instinctively it was not the most dangerous animal in the fight.

Asher gave her a cheerful smile and waved her and her feral child away. Though he had to give Harry some credit. His patience was second to none. "They'd do well to know you could kill any one of them with both hands tied behind your back and still snap their necks like a rabbit's." He wrung his hands and made a popping sound. "I'd dearly love for them to know."

Harry almost smiled. "So would I."

“Are you ready to leave?” Asher asked, rather rhetorically. “I’m hungry and I want one of those . . . what do you call them? Pub feeds.”

Harry was already on his way to the checkout.

HARRY DIDN'T HELP PUT the tree up. For two reasons: first, there was a fence that needed restringing, and the second, more pressing reason, was that Asher wouldn't let him.

But he did smile when he came in and saw it standing proudly in the corner, worthy of a magazine cover, if Harry'd ever seen one.

Asher stood there holding Mala. “Why didn't we do this last year?”

Harry gave the cat a scratch under the chin. “Because this shithead would've torn it to shreds.”

“She's already tried,” Asher admitted. “Which is why I'm holding her.”

“Put the fire grill around it.”

“I tried that. It just gave her a launching pad to jump from.” Asher gave the very spoiled cat a kiss. “We should have got her her very own tree, Harry. We'll have to go back.”

The look Harry gave him put an end to that.

Asher sighed instead. “I miss real Christmas trees,” he said. “Not that I ever really had one, growing up or whatever. But the stores would have them . . .” He closed his eyes, smiling every so briefly at some distant memory. “When I was a boy, Zagreb Glavni kolodvor, the main train station, would put up the most amazing Christmas trees. Massive, and the smell.” He inhaled deeply. “I would always see the trees in the rich department stores and stations and wish that, one day, I would have my own.”

Harry stood stock still, sorry now he hadn't bought the whole damn store for him.

Then Asher brightened and gestured to their tree. “And now we do.”

“And it’s perfect,” Harry murmured, kissing the side of Asher’s head. “Next year we’ll see about getting you a real one.”

Asher frowned at him. “But we have this one.”

“We can have two. One in every room if you want.”

Asher’s eyes lit up, and Harry knew he’d probably live to regret saying that, but for now, to see Asher smile at him like that . . .

Totally worth it.

“Whatever you want,” Harry murmured.

“What I want,” Asher said, “is to go play with the Mac 50. How many more sleeps?”

Harry snorted. “Five.”

They became the longest five days of Harry’s life. And he’d once spent two full days and nights in the Algerian heat, holed up in a small room with nothing but sweat and flies, and the measure of every breath, to help him count the minutes before he could take out a target.

That was easier than this.

Being stuck with a knife in Vienna and sewing himself up was easier than this. Being shot in Budapest was easier than this.

Asher’s impatience and constant whining for the days to hurry up made Harry almost miss the old days of death and violence.

Almost.

CHAPTER FOUR

“YOU READY?” August asked.

“Of course,” Jake said, pulling his blue police hat on.

“Remember, we’re just there to witness, to chat with the locals. An act of goodwill, even.”

Jake mimicked shooting a fully automatic rifle. “And maybe get some free shots?”

August bit back a sigh. He was nervous about today, and Jake’s joking—be it a coping mechanism or not—wasn’t helping.

“And to keep an eye on the charming and lovely retired gay couple who are not charming, lovely, or retired builders.”

Well, Michael was supposedly a retired builder, though the fact he didn’t know that a metal valve would expand in the summer sun either meant he wasn’t a very good builder, or he’d never been one.

Joshua, on the other hand, had no work history at all. Not in Australia, anyway. Now an Australian citizen, his records declared him an ex-national of France, but August wasn’t sure that was true either.

He wasn’t sure why.

Their records were too clean. On paper, they looked like wholly normal, law-abiding citizens. They paid taxes, donated to some charities for LGBTQ folks and to the RSPCA. Hell, Michael had even registered with the local rural fire department for summer fire watch.

Was it all too clean?

August wasn't sure.

But damn, when he'd met them . . . he felt like he'd been dropped into a tiger's cage. That sixth sense, gut feeling of something being incredibly wrong, put every nerve in August's body on edge.

He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, they were in the company of a very dangerous man.

Michael Hill.

If August would have to guess, he'd say ex-military. But it was no more than a guess.

August wasn't sure about Joshua. He seemed aloof, carefree, a little fem, and dramatic. But he had the eyes of a hawk, dark and sharp.

And something told August, he didn't know what—that voice whispering in the back of his mind—that maybe he should fear him the most.

The North Coast Shooting Range putting on the gala day wasn't unusual. They did it once a year. They'd bring in special weapons and approved applicants could test them.

All it took was a mile of paperwork, appropriate gun licences, waiting periods, background checks, and money, of course.

Granted, Joshua and Michael weren't the only ones who'd applied to try the McMillan 50. There were a few local gun enthusiasts, all too keen to get their hands on it.

And August could appreciate that.

It was a remarkable rifle, and the wannabe Rambo's got to play pretend snipers for a few hundred bucks and take out shooting targets at various yardages. In a strictly controlled environment, highly supervised. The applicant would be assisted the entire time, never left alone. In fact, they'd have quite the audience.

But August wasn't going to see the other locals.

He was going to keep tabs on Michael and Joshua Hill.

WHEN THEY ARRIVED at the shooting range, Jacob put the police cruiser into Park and cut the engine. He turned to August and held out his hand. August took it, of course, threading their fingers.

“Today’s gonna be fine. We’ve been to these gun fun-days before. It’s all controlled and restricted, and—”

“I know.”

“And there will be nothing illegal or dangerous,” he continued. “And Michael and Joshua Hill will be fine. Nothing will go wrong. Okay?”

August scowled out the windscreen. “Mm. Let’s hope so.”

“Now, I gotta go chat with the owners, make sure everything’s up to scratch—which it’s going to be,” he added quickly when August looked about ready to interrupt. “It always is.”

August grumbled.

“Now, you go and try and look inconspicuous, and stay out of trouble.”

August bristled. “When have I ever—”

Jake put his hand up. “I’m the leading officer today. You’re here off duty, merely to observe and assist if necessary.”

August rolled his eyes. He got out of the cruiser and sighed as they walked across the car park to the entry. Jake found the owners and went about double-checking paperwork and whatnot.

August noted a few locals already milling around, waiting. The gun club was on a decent-sized piece of land in the woodlands. There were perimeters, of course, and huge mounds of earth behind the targets on the short range.

Down on the longer range, there were two men—gun-sales reps, August assumed—setting up the machine guns.

No sight of Michael and Joshua yet.

More members of the gun club arrived, waving to the owners, who were still with Jake, on their way in, then quickly joining in conversations with the other members.

There was much excitement.

One man was getting a new pistol today, all legitimately, of course. His application had been approved, but the gun itself had been delayed. The sales reps had it with them today, apparently.

August never much understood people's obsession with guns. What drove them to want to own one, to come down to the range and practice? He appreciated it was like any sport, no different from archery or clay shooting, he guessed.

But August had a gun. State-issued, required-to-carry Glock 22. And he hated the damned thing.

He hated that he'd had to use it. He hated knowing one day he might have to use it again.

The difference was these gun club members used paper targets. August wasn't that fortunate.

Jake's smooth and reassuring voice was suddenly beside him. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure," August said. "Just watching."

Jake followed his line of sight to the two sales reps, gun techs, whoever or whatever they were, down on the range, setting up the Mac 50.

And the crowd watched in excited anticipation.

August felt uneasy.

And when he heard the owners greet more members, August found the reason for the grease in his belly.

Michael and Joshua Hill were here.

Michael wore jeans and a T-shirt, and August watched as the owners sized him up, joking about lifting weights. He laughed them off, made small talk, and they presented their IDs. Though why, when he looked so normal and pleasant to others, did August feel like he was in the company of a time bomb, August couldn't say.

His gut feeling.

Joshua, on the other hand, could barely contain his excitement. As if he wanted to bounce up on his toes like a kid on Christmas morning, but he kept reminding himself to play it cool.

After their IDs checked out, they all shook hands and Joshua spoke to them, grinning and using his hands, animated. August could tell the two owners were trying to decide what to make of him . . .

Michael looked at Joshua fondly though. There was no mistaking that.

If their identities were false, their relationship wasn't. August was sure of it.

But something about them was off.

As the gun reps came in, August focused on the job at hand. They spotted Jake in his police uniform and came over, and quick introductions were made. Chris and Phill were their names, and they obviously did this shit all the time and were used to dealing with local law enforcement. At least they respected and appreciated the need for regulations.

But then Chris looked at his watch. "Well, we better get this show started," he said, giving a nod to the owners.

Michael and Joshua went to the other side of the waiting room. Michael never looked their way, but Joshua gave them a smile, and even though Michael kept his back to them, August was certain he was talking about him.

"Keep it cool," Jake murmured. "Christ, you'd be no good undercover. You'd give yourself away in a second."

“It’s why I like cold cases,” August mumbled. “Less people.”

Jake laughed just as Chris and Phill came back with a clipboard. “Will Schentz?”

The man who’d been waiting for his new gun to arrive stepped forward. “That’s me.”

“You’re up first.”

They walked him out and down to the long range while the audience followed them to the viewing station.

There was a buzz in the crowd, maybe now thirty people. August and Jake stood at the back, while Michael and Joshua stood to the right. Joshua’s smile was now a grin as we waited for Will Schentz to get himself positioned on the ground with the gun like a sniper would.

The screens in the viewing station showed the targets at the different yardages.

Not that August watched them. No, he watched Michael.

There were procedures, of course. Chris had a red flag up, and when he swapped it for a green, it meant the shooter could fire.

When the first shots were fired, August was surprised by the muted sound. There was no silencer, of course, but it was just quieter than he’d expected. The screen showed the first shots went to the right, barely even making the target.

But it was Joshua’s reaction that alarmed August the most.

He closed his eyes and smiled. A look of serenity, almost like he’d heard the voice of an old friend.

How odd.

Yeah. Something didn’t add up for sure.

CHAPTER FIVE

ASHER HAD to wait an eternity for his turn.

An eternity!

Every minute was an hour.

Every bullet not fired by him was torture.

It'd been too long since he'd heard the purr of his baby.

His favourite baby.

And it was almost comical that he'd have an escort. Two escorts, who were no more than company salesmen. They weren't experts. They weren't in tune with the weapon; they didn't respect the weapon.

They just sold them.

Asher hated them both.

But instead, he smiled and acted the part.

Harry had been telling him all morning to calm down, to remember their new roles.

He wasn't Asher Garin anymore. He was Joshua Hill.

And Harry was Michael Hill. The man with the same name as a generic jewellery brand in Australia to make googling as murky as possible.

So he played the part.

Even though it almost killed him.

And when the first man came back in, Will whatshisname, he was boasting and telling everyone how the gun handled, how the sight rested, how the trajectory fared.

He was full of shit.

A fucking amateur with no clue.

Asher murmured so only Harry could hear and in French. "I want to hurt him so bad."

Harry fought a smile. "Be nice."

They spoke in French and Italian every so often, merely to keep practising. Joshua Hill was a Frenchman, apparently, Yunho had done that purely to annoy him, Asher was certain.

Asher was good with many languages, but he needed to practice. Living in Europe and crossing borders every other week had always put his linguistics to good use. Here in Australia after a few years, he needed to work at it.

So, in public, he was French.

The second guy who got to use the gun wasn't much better. His shots went wide and to the right at 400, 1000, and 2000 yards, worse with every shot. The 2000-yard attempt missed completely.

It made Asher irrationally angry.

"They don't deserve to touch my baby," Asher mumbled, still in French, pouting.

Harry gave his shirt a bit of a tug. "Behave. And it's not your baby."

"You want to see me misbehave?" That was in Croatian.

He normally only spoke Croatian when he was really mad or really horny. Harry didn't need to guess which one this was.

"It'll be your turn soon. And you get more rounds than them, remember?"

So Asher waited and pouted some more while Harry pretended to watch the target screens, when he was really watching the two cops.

Until it was Asher's turn.

"Joshua Hill?" Chris read the name on the clipboard.

Asher jumped up to his feet, light on his toes and so excited he almost did a little wiggle.

Some of the other club members stifled their laughter, though Asher ignored them. He didn't care what they thought of him. That he was too camp, or too gay, to like guns?

He'd show them.

Though the fact Harry stood up and walked over to the middle of them all with his arms crossed shut them up.

He pretended to be looking at the screens, but they all sure as hell stopped laughing.

If only they knew who he was. How dangerous he was. How he could take them all down on his own, including the two cops and the two gun-club owners, without even breaking a sweat?

Asher sometimes wished people knew just so they'd show Harry the respect he deserved.

But that could never happen.

Not with a happy ending, that was for sure.

He put all that out of his mind and focused. Walking out to the long-distance shooting range with a civilian escort was almost funny.

What was he ever going to do to him? There was nothing they could possibly tell him he didn't already know.

"So you like the Mac 50, huh?" one of them asked when they'd reached the end.

"Oh, yes," Asher said, with more French accent than was necessary. "Very much."

"And this is a Christmas gift, is that right? That's what the owners said."

"Yes, my husband buy for me," Asher replied, acting ditzy. "Sorry, not English too good."

And that put an end to the small talk.

Thank god.

And finally, finally, they reached the rifle mound.

The guy who'd been waiting with the Mac 50 gave him a smile and proceeded to ask him some questions and run through some specs that Asher tuned out.

“Ah, English isn't his first language,” the first guy added.

The second guy balked, and eyed Asher as if he was stupid. “Oh.”

Asher held up his hand, fingers outstretched. “English is fifth language.”

So fuck you, basically.

“Oh,” he replied, sharper this time. “Okay then. So, what you're going to do—”

Asher was looking at the gun. “What's the surface temperature here?”

Both men were quiet.

“The humidity?”

Did they not know any of this information?

How could they not know this information?

Amateurs.

Asher put his anger at their incompetence aside.

“The men who shot before me all aimed right. More so over longer distance,” Asher noted. “I would guess the scope is out a quarter of a degree. But perhaps the humidity and wind factor. Is it two knots today? It's very still.”

Both men were still staring at him. The one with the clipboard read his name again. “Uh, Mr Hill, you seem to be familiar with this weapon . . . ?”

Asher gestured to the rifle on the mount. “This gun?” As in, this *actual* gun. “No.” He gave him his best smile. “May I?”

They both looked a little hesitant. “Uh, sure . . .”

Asher grinned, his heart about ready to burst. He’d waited so long for this.

“Merry Christmas to me,” he said, then went to the ground, and for the first time in far too long, he held his baby in his hands.

HARRY HAD to wonder if this was a good idea. Asher had been so damned excited, so freaking happy . . .

But this was risky.

Asher had barely been able to contain his excitement. Harry might’ve suggested a Valium if they’d had any.

And he was a good actor. He’d played the part of Joshua Hill perfectly for almost two years.

But as he watched him walk away with the guy holding the clipboard, Harry had to wonder if Asher would be able to keep it all reined in.

Having those idiots in the gun club snicker as Asher had walked out had been a good distraction for Harry. His rage at them was better than worrying about Asher.

He watched on the screens as Asher and the salesman talked and Harry had to wonder what the hell they even talked about. They seemed to take longer with him than they did the others, though Harry wasn’t sure if he imagined that.

Possibly.

Every second longer it took, he started to think this had been a *really* bad idea.

But then Asher went to the ground, sidling up to the weapon. The guy put the red flag up—and the irony was not lost on Harry at all.

Asher Garin holding a Mac 50 was the biggest red flag known to man.

Harry'd almost smiled until August Shaw came to stand beside him. He didn't look at Harry. He kept his eyes on the screens like everyone else did.

All the other gun club members were watching too, probably to see how the gay man handled the gun, but not August. He was watching much more closely.

"Was he still excited?" August asked.

"Like a kid on Christmas morning," Harry said, his voice gruff. He crossed his arms and kept his eyes on the screen.

The first shots would be at the 400-yard target, and everyone watched the screen, waiting . . .

The guy raised the green flag and then a neat little black circle appeared in the bullseye.

A bullet hole.

Not just one, but five shots fired, each shot in the exact centre.

Goddammit, Asher.

"What the . . . ?" one of the members said. "Did he fire once?"

"No," the gun club owner said quietly, getting in close to the screen. "He hit the same mark five times."

"Dead centre," someone else whispered.

Will Schentz, the first man, sputtered it was "nonsense. Impossible."

August kept his eyes on the screen, though Harry had to wonder how bad he wanted to face him.

The 1000-yard target was up next. Green flag up. Everyone held their breath.

One perfect shot.

Followed by another four. The last one off by a millimetre or two.

Asher would be pissed about that.

“What the fuck,” someone whispered.

August let out a slow breath. Not quite a sigh but a measured exhale. “A fan of action movies with guns, huh?”

Harry kept his arms crossed, his eyes on the screen. “Yep. And textbooks. He reads a lot of textbooks.”

The 2000-yard target was next and now everyone was glued to the screen. No one breathed. But the red flag stayed up for too long, and Harry was beginning to worry—what was being said down there, what risk there was.

Harry tuned out the world, concentrated on his own breathing while he watched Asher down on the range, wondering if shit was about to go sideways. If the life he’d lived these last two years was about to be over. The life he’d loved. He was surprised by how ready he was. Even after two years out of the game.

In one moment, he knew if it came down to protecting Asher, Harry would take down the world. Without hesitation. He’d be back in the world of death and shadows in a heartbeat. He’d raze it all to the ground, never bat an eyelid, and never stop. If something happened to Asher, he’d have no reason to stop . . .

A bead of sweat ran down his spine.

Then the green flag went up and Asher fired.

And there on the 2000-yard target appeared a tiny black hole.

Bullseye.

Harry exhaled, and August gasped beside him.

Then Asher fired four more rounds, each one as perfect as the first.

Show off.

Though honestly, 2000 yards was nothing. He could do 2000 metres. Hell, he could do two miles.

If the wind was right.

And probably even if it wasn't.

AUGUST KNEW IT. He damned well knew it.

He *knew* something was off about them. Joshua Hill didn't just make an expert sniper shot; he made it with exact precision.

Textbooks, my arse.

There were only a handful of people in the world who could make shots like that.

But having his suspicions confirmed didn't make August feel any better. Now he felt sick. Terrified, even.

Because now he knew he had one, if not *two* killers living on the outskirts of Tallowood.

But then Joshua came back up from the range, cool as a cucumber. He kinda smiled at the locals who now gave him amazed stares from a safe distance. Michael held the door for him, and they walked out without a word. Chris and Phill were now talking to the gun club owners with disbelief and concern.

But August didn't take his eyes off Michael and Joshua. He watched them through the door, and as soon as Joshua was in the car park, he did an excited jumping dance and threw his arms around Michael.

The big guy laughed and spun him around, kissing him, then put him back on his feet. Then, they simply got into their old 4WD and left.

Jake and the club owners, along with the two gun reps, came over to where August stood.

"That was some unreal marksmanship," Phill said. "I've only heard about shit like that."

Chris nodded. "And that's not all." He looked at August and Jake. "When he was done, still layin' on the ground, he disassembled the gun in a split second. Like he'd done it a

thousand times without thinking. Muscle memory.” He shook his head. “He kinda looked like he surprised himself by doing it. Like, *oh shit, I didn’t mean to do that* kinda thing.”

“I asked him,” Phill added. “I kinda asked what the fuck? Because honestly, what the fuck? And he jumped up and said something like, ‘What? You don’t do that after every time?’ And then he was pissed that we didn’t look after such a beautiful weapon.”

Chris shook his head slowly. “I dunno who that Joshua Hill is, but he’s not just some gun enthusiast. He’s a pro.”

“Jesus Christ,” Jake breathed.

August gave him an unsettled look. “Believe me now?”

Jake nodded, his face grim. “Oh, yep. Without a doubt.”

CHAPTER SIX

CHRISTMAS MORNING WAS like any other summer morning. Harry woke to the sound of the ceiling fan whirring and birds chirping and the smell of coffee under his nose.

“Wake up, Santa’s been,” Asher said. Asher offered him the cup. “Coffee is not the only thing he got you. He also made you breakfast.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. “Sounds good.” He sat up and took the coffee, sipping it gratefully.

Asher ogled Harry’s bare chest with a heated appreciation. “Maybe breakfast can wait . . .” Then he made a pained face like he couldn’t decide. “No, let’s do gifts and breakfast first. Then you can spend the rest of the day doing delightfully obscene things to my body.” He clapped his hands. “I insist.”

Harry chuckled.

Breakfast was fried ham, eggs, and hash browns, with some cut fruit and more coffee. They sat at the veranda table, overlooking the forest, which was already hazy with the heat.

It was so ridiculously normal and lovely.

The kind of life Harry had never thought he could have.

“Do you want to know what I got you?” Asher asked. “Do you know how hard it is for me to keep secrets from you?”

He didn’t give Harry time to answer, he just leapt up and darted inside. He came back holding a large box wrapped in Christmas paper, and it even had a gold bow. Asher was also now wearing a red Santa hat.

“Merry Christmas, my love,” Asher said. “For you.”

Harry got such a rush, a real bloom of warmth filled his chest as he took his gift, surprised by the weight of it. It didn't even really matter what the gift was. Having Asher and this life together was all the gift he'd ever need . . .

Their last Christmas had been a quiet affair. Just barely one year into their new lives and maybe it all felt foolish and trivial. After all, how could two hitmen celebrate Christmas? Asher had never really even had a Christmas before, so it was all a bit much to take in.

But this year was different.

Like they'd settled into their new lives and dared to hope for this to be real.

Harry opened the box as delicately as he could, appreciating the time and thoughtfulness Asher had taken.

Inside was a weathervane.

It looked custom made, wrought iron. The four cardinal points with a big arrow, and in the middle was a wrought iron compass.

It was . . . it was beautiful.

“Do you like it?” Asher asked. “Please say you like it. Do you know how hard a man you are to buy for? You don't like material possessions, so . . .”

Harry glanced up at Asher. “I love it.”

Asher's grin was instantaneous. “I thought it could go atop your work shed, and we could see it from this veranda. I was going to go with the standard rooster in the middle—” He made a face. “Because a rooster is a cock, yes? And we both love cock.”

Harry laughed.

“But then I wanted something with meaning,” Asher said. “The north, south, east, and west, for all the corners of the world we've been. For all the corners of the globe I'd go for you. So I went with the compass, for us . . .” His eyes met

Harry's. "For our home. This is our home. And I know you worry that I'll get bored with this life, and I worry the same for you. So, if we ever do become lost, Harry, this is where we'll come home to."

Harry wasn't prepared for how emotional that made him. He had to blink back tears. "Asher, baby, I . . . I don't know what to say. It's perfect. I love it. I love it so much. And I love you. Thank you."

Asher took Harry's face in his hands and kissed him. "I love you too."

"Do you want your gift now?"

"All day in bed, yes. Yes, I want that."

Harry snorted. "No, your actual gift."

"But you gave me my gift. The day at the shooting range."

"Of course I got you something else." Harry stood up. "Come on, I'll show you."

Asher's face lit up. "Another surprise?"

Harry pinched Asher's chin between his fingers and pecked his lips. "How could I not get you something else when I see how happy it makes you?"

Asher's excitement gave way to confusion, then possibly anger. "How did you keep it a secret from me? How did I not know?"

With a laugh, Harry took his hand and led him through the house to the front door. "Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

Harry led him down to the water tanks, where the second tank had been converted. He unlocked the false door and hit the light switch. The overhead buzzed and the stairs down to the bunker lit up.

"I don't like it down here," Asher griped. He wasn't a fan of confined, dark, underground spaces. He also wasn't a fan of when they'd dug the bunker out and they'd disrupted a nest of

brown snakes. He was certain he'd come down here one time and find it full of them.

At the bottom of the stairs was a single room. Four metres by four metres, reinforced concrete walls, with ventilation and lights . . .

And rows of different guns. Smaller pistols, mostly. Harry's favoured weapons of choice. Not one of them was registered or legal.

But in the middle of the room was a wooden crate.

"For you, my love. Courtesy of Yunho, of course."

Asher stood there, staring at it. "Is it . . . is it?" His eyes met Harry's. "Did you . . . ?"

Harry laughed. "Open it. Merry Christmas, baby."

Asher lifted the lid, and there, in all its glory, was a brand-new McMillan 50.

Asher's eyes grew misty.

"You got me a new baby!"

Harry laughed. "I did. After seeing how happy it made you, I told Yunho he had to do whatever it takes. At first, I'd suggested we try and get your old baby here, but he said it would be easier to get you a new one. And faster, given I wanted it here by Christmas Day. I know leaving your old baby behind was hard. We had to leave a lot of things behind . . ."

"But we got so much more," Asher said. "Here, in Australia, we have more than I ever dreamed of having."

Harry nodded to the rifle. "Now you can have this too."

Asher lifted it off the stand in the box, holding it like it was the Holy Grail.

"How did Yunho get this into the country? With Australia's gun laws?"

"I told him I didn't want to know."

Asher conceded a nod. "Probably just as well."

Harry ran through some specs. “Removable, adjustable integral cheekpiece, four flush-mount cups with one-and-a-quarter-inch sling loops, an A1 bipod, decelerator pad, fixed LOP barrel. Twenty-nine-inch threaded muzzle, threaded muzzle brake, 1:15 inch twist. And the trigger set at 3.5 pounds. Adjustable, of course.”

Asher was teary-eyed again, running his hands over the stock, looking at every single part.

“Where can I use it? Surely I can’t use it here without someone hearing it or reporting us?”

“We’ll figure that out.” Then Harry thought he should add some ground rules. “It will need to stay down here with the others.”

Asher nodded. “I know.” Then he frowned at Harry, his chin wobbly. “I’m so happy. I can’t believe you did this for me!”

“I would do anything for you.”

“And all I got you was a stupid weathervane.”

“Hey, don’t call my weathervane stupid.”

Asher gently put the Mac back in its crate as if he were putting a baby to bed. “We need to go back upstairs,” he said seriously. “You need to do some very obscene things to me.”

Harry laughed. “Okay.”

“I mean it, Harry. All day. Santa insists that you do.”

Harry laughed again. “Merry Christmas to me.”

JAKE AND AUGUST were getting ready to leave for Christmas lunch with Jake’s family. August was wearing the new shirt Jake had bought him, and he’d cooked a killer glazed ham he couldn’t wait to try.

There would be loud and happy kids, too much food, and serious discussions about the cricket Boxing-Day test match

and the Sydney to Hobart sailing race.

August couldn't wait.

He needed to get back to normal, to stop thinking about Michael and Joshua Hill.

He'd run all the records he could, and he'd made some calls, and apparently, he'd touched a nerve.

A very classified nerve.

Because yesterday afternoon he'd received a phone call from ASIO ordering him to cease all investigations.

Fucking ASIO.

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation.

They gave nothing away but August's suspicions were confirmed. Coming from ASIO, it meant Michael and Joshua Hill were definitely ex-military, highly trained, and extremely dangerous.

And untouchable.

"You ready?" Jake asked, putting the lid on the ice cooler. "Food and beer await. And an impatient niece and nephew who want their presents." He nodded to the bag of gifts for August to take. "And I want my mum's trifle. Oh, and your glazed ham, of course."

Had he told Jake about the phone call from ASIO he'd had yesterday?

Nope.

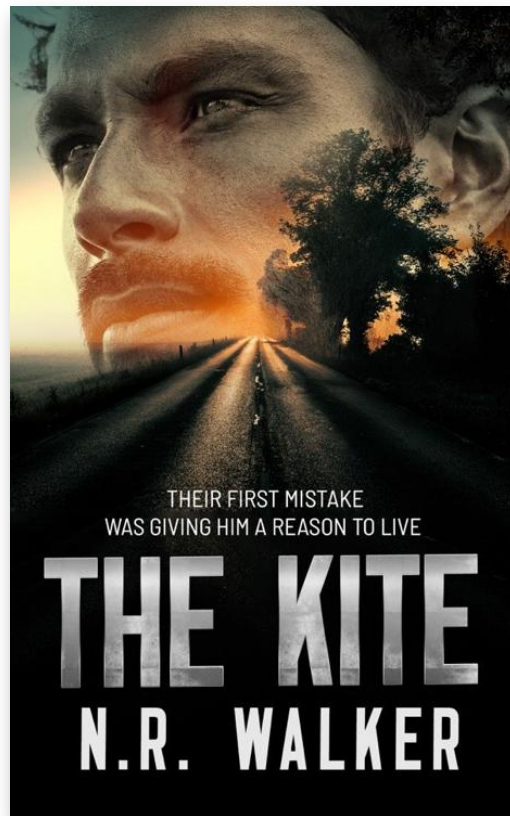
He figured it could wait a day, letting Jake enjoy Christmas Day with his family. It made no difference anyway. He'd been told to drop it, and he would.

So with nothing left to do but enjoy Christmas Day, August put everything else out of his mind and focused on what really mattered. He gave Jake the best smile he could manage. "I'm ready."

THE MERRY END

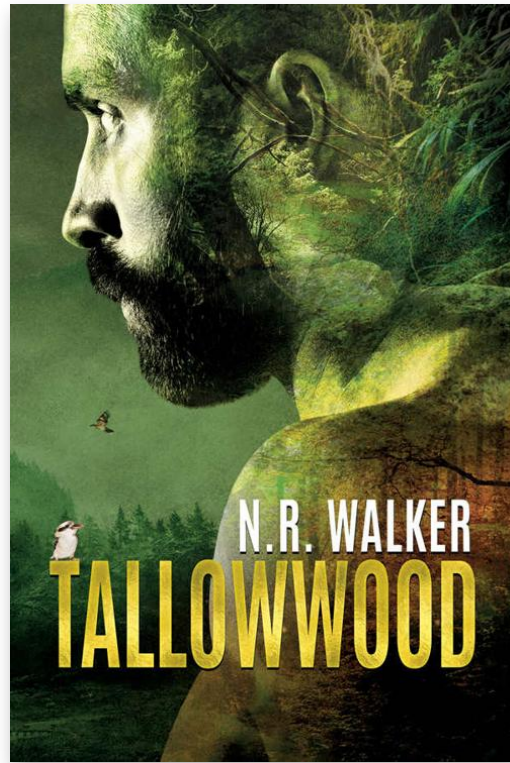
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

N.R. Walker is an Australian author, who loves her genre of gay romance. She loves writing and spends far too much time doing it, but wouldn't have it any other way.

She is many things: a mother, a wife, a sister, a writer. She has pretty, pretty boys who live in her head, who don't let her sleep at night unless she gives them life with words.

She likes it when they do dirty, dirty things... but likes it even more when they fall in love. She used to think having people in her head talking to her was weird, until one day she happened across other writers who told her it was normal.

She's been writing ever since...

nrwalker.net



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Series Collections:

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Fiducia Cieca (Blind Faith)

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Preso alla Sprovista (Blindside)

Il giorno del Mai (Blind Faith 3.5)

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Spencer Cohen Serie (including Yanni's Story)

Punto di non Ritorno (Point of No Return)

Punto di Rottura (Breaking Point)

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Images

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French

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Galaxies & Océans

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German

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Thomas Elkin: Leidenschaft in klaren

Thomas Elkin: Vertrauen in bester Lage

Traummann töpfern leicht gemacht (Throwing Hearts)

Sir

So Unendlich Viel Liebe (To the Moon and Back)

Thai

Sixty Five Hours (Thai translation)

Finders Keepers (Thai translation)

Spanish

Sesenta y Cinco Horas (Sixty Five Hours)

Los Doce Días de Navidad

Código Rojo (Code Red)

Código Azul (Code Blue)

Queridísimo Milton James

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El Peso de Todo (The Weight of it All)

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Lista De Deseos Navideños: Serie Navidad en Hartbridge

Feliz Navidad Cupido: Serie Navidad en Hartbridge

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Davo

Hasta la Luna y de Vuelta

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En la Tempestad

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Corazón De Tierra Roja 2

ECB (Enemigos con Beneficios)

Chinese

Blind Faith

Japanese

Bossy

Portuguese

Sessenta e Cinco Horas