

WHAT'S SANTA GOT TO DO WITH IT

A BENT OAK, TEXAS NOVEL

BIX BARROW

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to apologize to my readers and especially to my future audiobook narrator for naming two side characters who are frequently in the same scenes "Cole" and "Cal". Cal started out as "Calvin" in *Holding On to a Hero*, and at the time I hadn't planned exactly how his character arc would play out. "Calvin" just doesn't fit him now.

But if you think "Cole and Cal" is difficult, just wait until Cal gets his own book and has to have scenes with the side character "Callie" (who will absolutely be going by her full name by then)! Don't worry, I am doing a much better job of double-checking my name usage these days!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you again to Chloe Archer for allowing me to mention *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade* and its characters.

Meghan Maslow, this book would have been very different if you had not repeatedly assured me that a Christmas novel would only be improved by the addition of a dead body. As usual, you were right!

Thanks to Wicked by Design for the amazing cover!

Lee Blair, DJ Gainer, and Beck Grey, you have my eternal gratitude for the brainstorming assistance!

NOLAKim, thank you for your support with social media and generally getting my name out there!

Thank you so much to my beta readers Beck, Lisa, Kim, and Will. Your feedback is forever helpful and enlightening.

And thank you to the amazing Amy Pittel, deep beta reader extraordinaire!

Love, as always, to the Sparrows!

CONTENT WARNINGS

- Main character is estranged from his family (not due to homophobia)
- Main character is a widower
- Christmas and Christmas music are mentioned frequently
- Mention of off-page violent deaths (method not specified) of many, many villains and henchpersons
- Brief description of evidence of torture on the bodies of minor side characters who were murdered off-page
- On page death of a villain by handgun
- Discussion of a death due to complications from burns over a large portion of the person's body
- An animal is in a scary situation but is not harmed
- Brief description of scars on an animal from abuse
- Discussion of a child being abused at home

If you find any typos or continuity errors in this book, please email me at <u>bixbarrow@gmail.com</u>. Reporting errors through Amazon does not trigger an alert to the author.

If you're interested in more from the Bent Oak, Texas series, please check out these titles!

Holding On to a Hero (Will, Cole, and Jason's story)

<u>Heart Me Up</u> (Craig and Foster's story)

<u>Head Over Feels</u> (Felix and Malcolm's story)

<u>I Touch Hoses</u> (Wesley and Keson's story) – free when you sign up for my newsletter!

We Don't Need Another Santa (Phillip and Lucas' story)

WHAT'S SANTA GOT TO DO WITH IT

BY BIX BARROW

A late-awakened bi guy and his secret crush try to play Santa for some kids. But there's a hitman blocking the chimney...

Have you ever been locked out of your apartment shirtless, holding a wet rabbit and getting served with legal papers right when your super-hot neighbor walks by?

Maybe it's just me.

After Baz stops to help, I finally have a chance to show him there's more to me than the loud parties and one-night stands he's witnessed over the years. And I find out he's more than just an aloof work-from-home accountant. Who would've guessed we both love superheroes and have big hangups about Christmas?

When Baz finds a bunch of letters to Santa in the recycle bin, helping those kids' holiday wishes come true is the perfect way for us to spend time together.

But we didn't expect to get yelled at by the kids' neighbors. (Okay, maybe the binoculars were a bad idea.) And we didn't expect my estranged brothers to show up and take over Baz's apartment. (Okay, but as a side effect, he's staying at my place...)

And we never expected to interrupt a hitman in the middle of a job.

What's Santa Got to Do with It is a semi-low-angst, humorous holiday romance featuring a bi-awakening, a chonky rabbit, learning work-life balance, forced proximity, avoiding THAT Christmas song, reconciling with (some) family, interfering friends, and a hitman with a heart of gold.

What's Santa Got to Do with It is part of the Bent Oak, Texas series but can be read as a standalone. Characters from previous books do make an appearance but knowing their backstories is not necessary to enjoy this book.

WHAT'S SANTA GOT TO DO WITH IT

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

"Kane," Gio's urgent voice rasped in my ear before I'd finished greeting him. "I need your help."

"Anything," I told him without hesitation. He'd saved my life more than once back in our days at the CIA.

"How soon can you get here?"

I stood up, my quads and glutes flexing against the worn denim of my threadbare jeans. "I'm in Santa Fe. If I don't need weapons, I can fly, so four to seven hours, depending on whether I can leave from here or if I have to go through Albuquerque. Twelve hours if I need to be armed." I could check a handgun or two on the plane, but the TSA would pull me for questioning if I brought more than that. No way could I bring explosives.

I put the lid on the can of paint I'd just opened and jogged into the bedroom to grab my go bag.

"Kathy's packing and we're going to a safe house. I'm... Everything's gone to shit, Kane. I can't handle it by myself." His breath caught on a sob.

Weapons would be required then. I dropped my go bag by the door to the garage and headed for my first stop, the gun safe in the spare bedroom. The more specialized items were behind the false wall in the office.

"I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll also call Wrigley. He can help too. Tell me what happened." "I... I started gambling. It was the only thing that eased the memories, you know?"

I knew. The things we'd seen. Hell, the things we'd done. And it wasn't like the CIA offered therapy benefits after you quit.

"I understand, Gio. Let's get you out of this mess, and we'll figure that part out later." My muscles strained against the seams of my black t-shirt as I lifted the section of paneling to reach the combination lock on the hidden storage closet.

"Thanks, man." He breathed heavily for a few seconds. "I owe this guy a lot of money. Roberto Quintano. He runs one of those underground gambling rooms. I didn't have the cash to pay him in full, so I stole something to make up the difference."

Fuck. Why hadn't he just come to me? Time for that later.

"What'd you steal, and who'd you steal it from, Gio?"

"A diamond ring. It's a wedding band. The individual stones are decent-sized, so it's worth about \$600k." He paused. "It's a family heirloom. Sergei Ostap."

I paused. Fuck, this was bad. I added two more grenades and three additional suppressors to my duffel bag.

CHAPTER 1

STEVE

"I SEE WHAT YOU MEAN."

I frowned. Cole's voice didn't belong in outer space, much less in Lord Vardox's quarters on his ship.

My neck ached from the restraints Lord Vardox had expertly tied around me. Maybe it was time to use my safeword. Lord Vardox wouldn't want me to be this uncomfortable.

What was my safeword?

I opened my eyes. My head was resting on my left bicep, my arm flung out across the desk. My right forearm lay limply next to my keyboard.

"He lives!"

I blinked at Cole, who was scowling at me from the doorway. The scar down the side of his face didn't detract from his Alist handsomeness, but the frown wasn't doing him any favors. Not to mention he might have been trying to incinerate me with his deep green eyes.

Cal, my best friend and business partner, hovered behind him. Cal wasn't pretty like Cole, but his brown eyes and cute round cheeks were always glowing with affection for me.

Except right now. Now he seemed to be glowing with anger.

I slowly sat up. "Peppered parrot on a plate!" My back was stiff and the crick in my neck wouldn't be going away any time soon. I turned my entire body toward the window. The sun was high enough to make it mid-morning. How had I slept so late?

I turned—slowly—back to the two men in the doorway. "Is our weekly meeting this morning? I'm sorry. I just need a minute."

Cole Washburn, a former action movie star, was the third partner in our company. He'd provided the startup capital Cal and I needed to get our dating app, Rogues Gallery, in development. He left most of the day-to-day decisions up to me and Cal, but the three of us had a weekly meeting to go over statuses and make big picture decisions.

I rubbed my face and swiped my hand through my hair. "Yeah, um, let me run to the restroom and I'll be right with you."

Cole gave me a look I couldn't interpret. "Go do what you need to do, Steve."

I put my hands on the desk and pushed myself to my feet. My back needed a little encouragement to straighten out, but I managed to walk steadily past Cole and Cal. Cal patted me on the shoulder as I went by, so whatever I'd done to tick them off couldn't be too bad.

In the restroom I splashed water on my face and used my damp hands to calm my hair down. I ignored the dark circles under my eyes. I was wearing a button-down over a t-shirt, and neither of them were too terribly wrinkled. Plus they covered up how my jeans gapped at the waist these days.

"Okay, you can do this. You can CEO today." I nodded decisively at the mirror and headed to the break room to get some coffee before going back to my office.

My office, where Cal was sitting at my desk looking at my laptop, and Cole was leaning over his shoulder.

Alarm raced through me. "What are you doing?"

Cal shot me a grim look. "We're going through your meetings and cancelling them or reassigning them to me or Kurt."

My heart almost stopped. "What? Why? I need to be in those meetings!"

Cole straightened. He pointed at the guest chair in front of my desk. "Sit down, Steve," he said in a gentle tone.

Almost automatically I moved toward the chair. "What's happening? Am I being fired? Why does this feel like I'm being fired?" My throat tightened. I'd been doing a good job; I knew I had.

Cal and Cole both shook their heads. Cal put out a hand in a calming motion and said, "No, Steve. You're not being fired."

"Whew." I dropped into the guest chair, my heart still racing. I set my coffee down on the edge of the desk. "Okay, so if I'm not being fired, why are you cancelling my meetings?" I was proud of how even my voice sounded.

Cal exchanged a look with Cole. Cal must have lost whatever silent argument they were having because he turned and faced me. His broad face was lined with... worry?

"Steve, this is an intervention."

I jerked back in the chair. "For what? I'm not doing drugs or anything."

"No, but you're working yourself into the ground." Cal thrust his forefinger at my computer. "We've talked about this more than once. Development is ahead of schedule, and our launch date is four months away. There's no need for you to kill yourself working 18-hour days, seven days a week."

"I don't! I work shorter days on the weekends. And we have the meetings with the other potential investors next month. All of our ducks need to be in a row."

Cole folded his arms and frowned at me. "Our ducks are fine. And two weeks ago in our status meeting you promised you'd give us a list of the job duties you could offload onto someone else."

I huffed. "I can do all of those things faster and better than anybody. Besides, who would I give them to? Cal's got too much on his plate already. Kurt's finally up to speed, but he needs to focus on wrangling the developers. I'm the only one left."

Cole scowled at me. "You're deliberately forgetting we have a plan, an official document with target dates for adding staff.

We're weeks past when we were supposed to hire people for operations and marketing."

"And an admin," Cal piled on.

I threw up my hands. "But saving on labor costs is the easiest way to stay under budget. And a lean organization will be more attractive to the investors."

Cole tilted his head back and blew out a breath. He rubbed at the scar along his face before looking at me again. "Steve, any future investors will want to see the business being operated efficiently but also sustainably. They're going to notice we're *too* lean and ask questions about how we get things done. If they find out you're doing the majority of the work, the first question they'll ask is about our plan for hiring more people."

I looked to Cal for support, but that traitor said, "Steve, you can't go on like this. All your work will be for nothing if you don't take care of yourself. I can't remember the last time you took an entire day off."

I opened my mouth but had to shut it again. I couldn't remember either.

Cal pointed at me. "See? And last night wasn't the first time you've fallen asleep at your desk." Then he brought out the big guns. "Felix told me you haven't done more than text him in over a month. How long as it been since you saw him in person?"

I focused my eyes on the carpet. I couldn't remember. Felix and I had become friends while we were both working at the call center. Felix had left to become a pet massage therapist, and Cal and I had started Rogues Gallery with Cole. Up until a few months ago, Cal, Felix, and I had hung out at least once a week. Before I'd made work my first priority. My only priority.

"I've got another question for you, Steve." Cole was frowning again. "When was the last time you ate a decent meal? You know, not at your desk. And with vegetables."

I fiddled restlessly with the hem of my button-down. "A few days ago." Maybe.

"Uh huh." Cole exchanged another look with Cal before they both turned back to me.

Cal clasped his hands together on the desk and leaned forward. "Steve," he said, staring intently into my eyes. "Today is December 15th. You're going to take the rest of the month off work, and we'll see you back here on January 2nd. I'm cutting off your access to the network, and I'm auto-forwarding all your emails to me."

I gaped at him. "That's over two weeks! You can't.... The app...."

"Kurt and I will take care of everything," Cal said in a tone like Felix would use on a nervous animal.

Cole interjected, "And we're going to look at your workload." He gestured at my computer. "We'll figure out what positions we need to hire first to help you out."

I narrowed my eyes. "You can't hire anyone without me meeting them."

He crossed his arms. "We won't make any offers until you get back. But, Steve, we *will* be hiring people."

"Fine." I was maybe just a little bit relieved. But I'd been doing okay on my own.

Cal said, "And Cole and I are going to put rules in place about your work-life balance."

Wait a minute. "What? What does that mean?"

"We'll decide how many hours you'll be allowed to work each week, and you'll have to ask us if you think you need to go over those hours."

My face burned. "You're treating me like I'm a little kid! What are you going to do if I don't follow your rules? Spank me?"

Cal rolled his eyes. "We won't have to. I'll just shut down your access again. If you follow the guidelines we set up, then we'll ease the restrictions until you can manage your own schedule without burning yourself out."

Embarrassment turned to rage. "How dare you! I'm an equal partner in this business, and how I conduct my *work-life balance*," I made air quotes. "Is my decision."

Cole sighed. "It's your decision until it negatively impacts the business."

"What?" Roaring filled my ears. "How have I negatively impacted the business?" I clenched my fists, and my breath came in quick pants.

"You haven't. Yet." Cal pulled out his phone. "But, Steve, I calculated you spent 125 hours in this building over the last seven days. Which comes out to an average of over 17 hours a day."

"So?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "So, what did you do during the not even eight hours a day you had left? Assuming you even got five hours of sleep a night, that left you less than three hours to eat, what, one meal at home? Shower? When did you get groceries? Spend time with friends? I know you haven't been out with me or Felix. When did you last watch a movie or read a chapter of Captain Starblade?" He blew out a breath and wrinkled his forehead in concern. "Steve, your brain and your body need rest, need to do something other than work for at least part of the day. Otherwise you won't have any energy or creativity when you need it."

I pressed my lips together and stared out the window.

Cal kept talking. "We need you here, Steve. But we need you in top form, with your usual energy and strategic thinking. We don't need this version of you." Out of the corner of my eye I saw him wave a finger up and down in my direction like a judgy GIF of Tyra Banks. "Right now you couldn't strategize your way out of a cardboard box. When you come back, we'll discuss what parts of the work you've been handling we recommend delegating. But you'll oversee the people doing the work."

I snorted. No one would do things like I wanted them done.

"Steve." Cole's voice was gentle again. "You're exhausted. You're reacting with your emotions and not your logic. Take this time off, and we'll discuss it when you return."

"Fine," I bit out. I stood up and snatched my phone off the desk. Leaving my laptop behind for the first time in months, I walked out of the office with my head held high. I gritted my teeth and smiled at Kurt, our Director of Software Engineering, and the developers who were working in the office today.

I strode outside, trying to exude confidence. I got in my pickup truck and pulled out of the parking spot, driving sedately but purposefully toward my apartment.

All the while my mind was seething with anger and resentment. Who did they think they were? How could they do this to me? Did they really think Cal and Kurt could get everything accomplished without me?

I deeply regretted the detailed to-do list on my calendar app. No doubt Cal had turned off my access already, but that list was their cheat sheet for everything that needed to get done. No matter, they wouldn't know the nuances of how to accomplish everything successfully. Cal and Cole would see first-hand how I was the key to the company running smoothly. They'd regret coming up with this senseless time off idea.

I was feeling much calmer by the time I pulled into the apartment's parking lot. I got out of the car, but before I could take a step, dizziness overtook me and I staggered a little. Whoa, maybe I was a little tired. And I hadn't had breakfast. Or dinner last night. A nap might be in order. Then I'd be able to decide what to do with my unexpected and unwanted vacation time.

I trudged toward the building. My next-door neighbor, Phillip, was heading my way towing a large suitcase.

Phillip. What a disappointment of a neighbor. He'd only moved in about a month ago, and my first impression of him had been positive. He'd been friendly, and it didn't hurt that he was attractive, shorter than me and older, but with firm

muscles under his dark brown skin. I'd only realized I was bisexual in the past year or so, and I was catching up on the joys of ogling men's butts. I had to admit, Phillip's was perfection.

But one day—okay it was late at night, but whatever—not long after I'd met him, Phillip and I had ridden up in the elevator with the lesbian couple who lived one floor below us. When they'd exited on their floor, Phillip had turned to me and said, "It would have been nice to know there were people like *that* in the building before I signed the lease, don't you agree?"

I'd stared at him for a beat, then I said, "I find diversity among the tenants makes the building more attractive to live in, not less."

We'd kept our interactions to a minimum afterward, but I tried to be overly polite when we ran into each other, just to irritate him.

Today I didn't have the energy.

I managed a nod in Phillip's direction but kept walking toward the elevator. If I could make it to my apartment, I could lie down. I wished I had some food in my fridge, but Cal hadn't been wrong about my not having time for grocery shopping. Not that he was right about much else.

Behind me I heard Phillip call out a greeting. As if my day wasn't already horrifyingly awful, the responding voice belonged to Baz, my neighbor across the hall.

Baz, who had deep brown eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses, careless scruff along his jaw, and dark, shaggy hair.

Baz, who usually worked from home but about once a week headed to the office wearing form-fitting gray dress pants and a tight button-up that made me wonder what his body would feel like in my hands.

Baz, who'd been the first person to make me question my sexuality.

Baz, who looked at me as if he thought I was a waste of space and he wished I'd move out as soon as possible.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

I breathed slowly through my nose. "Okay, you stole a family heirloom ring from Sergei Ostap. Does he know it was you?"

"I haven't lost that much of the old skills," Gio snapped. "I'm worried about Quintano, not Ostap."

"Okay, go on." He might not be worried about Ostap, but I was.

"The ring is worth more than the entire debt, but Quintano said he'd take it instead of the remaining cash I owe and we'd be square. I was supposed to hand it over tomorrow, but—" He choked back a sob.

"What happened?" My large hands worked with brisk efficiency to arrange the weapons and various accessories in two canvas duffels.

"My brother and his family visited last week. My niece, she left her Barbie here, and it was sitting on my desk, waiting for us to mail it to them." He took a big breath. "Quintano has a real hard-on for that ring. He knows it was Ostap's. Anyway, not important. I suspected Quintano might not wait for me to deliver the ring tomorrow, so I didn't put it in my safe."

I nodded. A safe would be the first place anyone would look. But I didn't like where this was going.

"The Barbie was sitting on my desk. It had a sparkly dress and braids with a tiara. I pried the head off and put the ring

around the Barbie's neck. You'd never know those were real diamonds."

"Okay?" I threw the go bag and the two duffels of weapons into the hidden storage compartment of Sarah Connor, my custom bulletproof Volvo XC 90.

Gio said, "Kathy...."

Oh, fuck.

"This morning Kathy decided to mail the Barbie back to my niece. She took it to the post office."

I paused before I raised the garage door. "So it's in the mail? I can bring enough cash to put Quintano off until the package gets delivered. Then I can intercept it at the other end."

I jumped out of the SUV and hot-footed for the primary bedroom. I'd bring a million. It wouldn't be too bulky, and better to have it than not.

"No. Kathy was in a hurry and the clerk knows her, so she just left it on the counter with the mailing address on a sticky note. The clerk was going to put it in a box. When Kathy got home and I realized the Barbie was gone, I had to come clean with her. She might divorce me, but that's the least of my problems."

"Gio, what happened?" I swung the duffel bag of cash over my shoulder.

"We went back to the post office, but the clerk couldn't find the Barbie. She didn't know what happened to it. She hadn't gotten around to boxing it up, and it should've still been on the counter."

"Did she take it?"

Gio said, "No. The sticky note with the address on it was still there. And she was visible on the security camera the entire time after Kathy left."

I took my go bag and one of the weapons duffels out of the hidden compartment and put the duffel of money in. The SUV's windows were tinted dark enough no one would be able to see inside.

"When Kathy was in the post office, there was a class of elementary school kids milling around. I guess they were doing a field trip to tour the place. We think one of the kids took the Barbie. The security cameras didn't cover that corner of the counter, so we don't know which one it was."

"Fuck, Gio." I shut Sarah Connor's rear hatch and strode to the driver's side door.

He sobbed again. "The clerk knows the teacher is named Ms. Frost. She's pregnant. That's all we've got. I just.... I can't think anymore. I need you to help me."

"Fuck. I'm leaving now, Gio. I'll be there before morning." Exiting the garage, my running shoe pressed hard on the gas. When I stopped to refuel, I'd change into the tactical boots I had in my go bag.

Gio started to say something but cut himself off. Then he said, "Dublin must be pretty this time of year."

My blood ran cold. He wasn't alone.

CHAPTER 2

BAZ

"ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANT TO COME TO COLORADO? There's a trundle bed in your Aunt Rhonda's room."

I stifled a groan. She means well, I told myself.

"No, thanks, Mom. I'm good here. I've got plans."

"Baz, you can write your stories from here just as easily. You know I worry about you all alone in that apartment."

This time I couldn't stop the eye roll.

"Mom, you know I wouldn't be able to focus with all of you coming and going. And you'd try to get me to do family activity things. I'm staying here so I won't be interrupted."

She huffed in indignation. "I don't see how spending time with people who love you is an *interruption*."

Because you'd never let me be alone, so I wouldn't get any writing done at all.

"I'm fine, Mom. If I want to see people, Flo and Selina are in town."

"Promise me you'll schedule something with them."

"Mom."

"I'll make them call you if you don't."

Ugh. "Fine, Mom. I'll meet them for dinner or something." If only to get her off my back. Which was of course her intention.

"We'll be home on Tuesday."

"Yes, Mom. You've told me your schedule."

"We planned it so even if there are flight cancellations, we'll be there in time."

"I appreciate that, thank you." Which was true. As much as my parents—and it was both of them, for all my mother was the most intrusive—worried constantly that I was withering away from loneliness, I was fine 364 days of the year. It was only the one day, Christmas Eve, when I needed everyone around me. Even my parents.

The call with Mom had felt interminable, but I wasn't even halfway back to my apartment. No matter. I was still officially on vacation. The rest of the month was *mine*.

My firm's annual holiday breakfast had just ended. The entire staff was given the last two weeks of December off work, and the breakfast was the partners' version of a celebratory send-off. A mimosa or two and some eggs benedict accompanied by a nice end-of-year bonus check. Lots of accountants complained about the firms they worked for, but I was pretty happy with mine.

And now I had two weeks of free time all to myself. Well, except for Christmas Eve.

But right now, my parents were out of town skiing, and my sister Selina and my best friend Flo didn't get the same kind of time off from their jobs that I did. Suckers.

So I could do whatever I wanted to. And I had plans for my free time. Big plans. Plans that didn't have anything to do with Christmas.

None of that, I reminded myself. I was trying to get over my aversion to the holiday. If he could have, Warren would've haunted me in a hot second for my bah humbug attitude.

Last year I'd forced myself to go to my parents' house for not only Christmas Eve but also Christmas Day. This year I'd add something else. Something small. Like a Christmas resolution instead of a New Year's resolution.

A Christmas song came on the satellite radio. Perfect. This year I'd focus on trying to enjoy holiday music again. I'd even

play it on my phone when I was home, I promised myself.

Then I recognized Wham! singing "Last Christmas", so I changed the channel. Then I got "Do They Know It's Christmas?". On another channel, "Fairytale of New York" was playing. Fuck, I was trying to get Christmas to have a happy connotation in my head again, not to make me cry in the car. Where the hell were the happy holiday songs?

Eventually I landed on one of those all-Christmas-all-the-time channels and Annie Lennox was singing "Put a Little Love in Your Heart". Finally. I was getting close to home, so only had to endure this one plus one more song. That'd be enough for my first day of holiday music.

The next song was just as upbeat, one of Warren's favorites, the slightly racy, tongue-in-cheek anthem, "Santa's Secret Stocking". I kept my focus on the lyrics and not the memories of Warren serenading me with it. What was that therapy method where they made you expose yourself to the thing you were most afraid of?

Reaching my apartment's parking lot, I pulled into a space and shut off the car. I thought I'd be relieved at the absence of Christmas cheer, but the silence was almost oppressive.

Nope, not going to be sad today. I opened the car door and got out. I had over two weeks off work, and I had things to accomplish. Tilting my head back, I lifted my arms toward the sun. Or at least where the sun would be if it wasn't covered by clouds. But the temperature was only in the sixties, so I couldn't really complain. December in central Texas usually made it worth enduring August. Something else to be happy about.

Humming, I walked jauntily toward my apartment building. Yep, this was me being happy.

Ahead of me was Steve, my neighbor across the hall, also heading in from the parking lot. I didn't care for Steve. He'd lived across from me since I'd moved in two years ago, and he was inconsiderately loud in the hallway, always with friends or a hookup. Weekend nights meant some girl or other would be giggling outside my door while Steve laughed about trying to

find his key. Though, come to think of it, I hadn't heard any girls in a while. And it'd been even longer since he'd had one of his parties with the music blaring and the people coming and going until all hours. He must be partying elsewhere these days, thank fuck.

I'd been so focused on Steve I hadn't noticed Phillip, who lived in the apartment next to Steve's, leaving the building hauling a large suitcase behind him. Unlike Steve, Phillip was a model neighbor. He was friendly but didn't make any demands on my time—well, after that one initial interaction at least. But I never heard a peep out of his apartment—no loud music, video games, or parties—and in the month he'd lived here I hadn't seen any visitors at all. Maybe it was his age—he was in his late thirties at least. But whatever the cause, I appreciated it.

Phillip passed Steve, giving him an unsmiling nod. Huh. If living across the hall from Steve was unpleasant, I could only imagine what it was like sharing a wall with him.

When Phillip caught sight of me, though, he smiled and greeted me.

I smiled back. "Off on a trip?"

Phillip's grin died. "I'm off to Florida. My grandmother passed away."

Automatically, I replied, "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that." Internally I forced myself to stay in the present. Phillip needed support; he didn't need to know about anyone else's loss.

"Thank you. We weren't very close, but it's still a shock, you know? Hey, sorry, but I've got to catch a flight. I'll see you when I get back."

I nodded and he strode quickly past me toward the parking lot. I vaguely wondered about coverage for his job, not that it had anything to do with me. Phillip was an elementary school teacher. Wasn't the pre-holiday time really busy? Hopefully they'd find a substitute. But again, it wasn't my problem.

Shaking my head, I continued toward the elevator. Steve was waiting there, staring at the ground.

"Hey," I said neutrally.

He glanced at me and nodded. "Hey."

At least he didn't try to make small talk. I faced the elevator doors and started humming again.

When the doors opened, we waited for the two women who lived above me to exit before we went inside. It wasn't until Steve turned to punch the button for our floor that I got a good look at him. He had *walk of shame* written all over. His clothes were wrinkled, his blond hair was uncharacteristically messy, his dark red lips were chapped, and his normally bright blue eyes were dull and sported purple bags underneath. Damn, I might not like the guy, but I hoped for his sake he didn't have to work today. He had some sort of tech support call center job that occasionally had odd hours.

Though maybe Steve was ditching work. Well, it wasn't any of my business either way. I turned my thoughts to my afternoon plans. My mood lifted and I found myself humming once more.

"Can you please not hum that?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

Steve looked at me blearily, squinting like the light hurt his eyes. "You're humming 'Santa's Secret Stocking'. Can you please pick something else?"

I blinked at him. "You hate 'Santa's Secret Stocking'?" I might have avoided it due to memories, but how could anyone dislike that bright poppy tune with its fun lyrics?

He sighed and shook his head. "It's got bad associations for me." The elevator slowed and gave a loud ding as it reached our floor. "But don't worry about it."

The doors opened and he hurried ahead of me, pulling his keys out.

I rolled my eyes, following slowly. What kind of bad associations could a guy like Steve have? Had his favorite bar run out of beer? Did a girl turn him down for a hookup?

Steve didn't look at me again as he unlocked his door and rushed inside.

I ignored the little niggle of concern in my gut.

Steve was fine. All he needed was a little sleep and he'd be ready to party again.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

Gio and Kathy's house was dark. I'd parked the next block over, and my black jeans and jacket blended with the night. I donned black nitrile gloves and a black watch cap as I approached. The stubble covering my jawline was blond, but it would still provide additional camouflage.

I'd debated heading for the airport as soon as Gio alerted me about the intruder, but whatever was going to happen would already have happened by the time I got there, even if I could walk onto a flight right away. Driving meant I had resources and options I wouldn't if I'd flown.

It wasn't like Gio to have forgotten to arm the security system, so the intruder must have overridden or disarmed it. Since I knew the layout of the motion sensors across Gio's yard and driveway, I wove my way around the sensors' beams, sleek as a cat, just in case it was armed again.

The back door was unlocked.

I slithered inside and flipped on the kitchen light. Any hostiles would be long gone, and while the neighbors wouldn't bat an eye at a light on in the house, they might call the police if they saw a flashlight.

The kitchen and living room were clear. Gio's body was in his study.

I clenched my jaw against my grief and anger. I needed to examine the scene to find out who was responsible. Could be Quintano, could be Ostap. Could be someone else entirely.

Gio had been tied to his desk chair with zip ties. They'd broken all the bones in his hands and ripped off one ear. Then his throat had been cut.

I couldn't go very far into the room without disturbing the bloody footprints Gio's murderers had left. Cheap tactical boots. Didn't rule any of my suspects out or in.

I followed the trail of bloody bootprints into the primary bedroom. Kathy was on the bed with her hands and feet ziptied. She had the same wounds as her husband. Her clothing wasn't disturbed, which was something to be grateful for.

Nothing left to see here, so I carefully exited the house, turning off the lights as I went.

CHAPTER 3

STEVE

AFTER SHUTTING OFF MY PHONE AND SHOWERING, I'D FALLEN face-first into my bed. Had there ever been a better feeling than snuggling into the sheets and blankets, the pillow soft and cool against my cheek?

I'd awakened hours later, starving.

When I turned my phone back on, my notifications told me I had several text messages and a voicemail. Maybe Cal and Cole had realized they couldn't do everything without me after all.

Well, those assholes would have to wait. My stomach was the priority right now.

The fridge contained an empty peanut butter jar and some wilted celery. In the pantry I found a recently expired box of cereal, so I ate that by the handful as I ordered Chinese food. Maybe later I'd go to the grocery store.

With the food situation temporarily under control, I took a deep breath and opened my text messages.

CAL

I didn't tell Cole, but I had a dream where you passed out in the middle of a meeting

I didn't bother to reply.

I opened Felix's message next.

Cal told me he and Cole made you take some time off work. Malcolm's sister and her family are visiting, but they're leaving Sunday. I hope we can get together next week. I miss seeing you! Call me anytime if you want to talk.

The prickle of tears behind my eyes and the tightness in my throat were unexpected. Apparently I wasn't ready for anyone to be nice to me right now. Maybe I'd call Felix tomorrow.

Taking a deep breath, I clicked on the phone icon. The voicemail was from an unknown number. Tapdancing tuna, did I want to put myself through that today? Maybe it'd be a telemarketer.

But my day couldn't really get any worse, could it?

I took a deep breath and played the voicemail. The familiar voice filled my ears.

Steven, you've left me no choice. You haven't responded to my repeated offers for a civilized solution, so I have been forced to go through the court system. I saw in the news Cole Washburn invested in your little company. If you've tied up my father's money in that risky venture, it's going to be too bad when the judge hands it to me. Remember, you can always take my offer and resolve this amicably.

Welp, it turned out my day could get worse.

Mechanically I ate lunch, trying not to stress about the voicemail. Fortunately I had other upsetting events going on in my life I could focus on instead. The Chinese food didn't sit easily on my stomach.

After eating, I dragged myself to the grocery store to stock up on... everything. It took four trips to empty the car, but I was set for the next week or more.

Once the groceries were put away, I cleaned. Bathroom first—yikes—then kitchen. I vacuumed and threw my sheets into the washing machine before finally collapsing on the couch.

Okay, I had food and my apartment was habitable again. But it was almost 6pm, so now what? I could always watch TV or read. I needed to get caught up on *Captain Starblade* for sure, but shouldn't I make an effort to see people?

Back when I'd been at the call center in my unfulfilling tech support job, it seemed like I'd gone out and met friends at bars or someone's apartment almost every other evening. I'd had people over to my place more times than I could count. We'd had drinks, played video games, shot the breeze, whatever we felt like. I even used to be part of a semi-regular D&D group that Cal ran.

Back when we were holding user focus groups to define the app features, I vaguely remembered Cal asking me if I wanted to join them a few times. I'd declined so I could work instead. Did they still meet?

It didn't matter. Cal was the last person I wanted to see right now.

Felix was busy with his boyfriend Malcolm's family. I'd texted him back to let him know I was alive, but that was it.

I wasn't in the mood to rehash anything about my forced vacation. I needed to hang out with someone who didn't know Cal or Cole.

Eddie, Renata, or Justin. Any of them were good for a drink or hanging out, and they'd do the heavy lifting of inviting the rest of the gang. Perfect.

I searched for my text message thread with Eddie. Had it really been five months since I'd heard from him? And he'd messaged me four times before giving up.

I'd been a bad friend.

Hastily I checked my convos with Renata and Justin. I'd let the same thing happen with them. Both had reached out to me multiple times and I'd ignored them. Guilt sat heavily on my back. I tossed the phone onto the coffee table and leaned back into the couch cushions, covering my eyes with my arm. Sure, work was important, but I could've spared five minutes a week to respond to text messages.

And why hadn't I? I *liked* those friends. And I'd been dropped enough in my own life I knew what it was like. I wouldn't have thought I'd be a person to do that to somebody else.

Well, I had time to text them now, didn't I? I flung my arm off my face and sat up to reach for my phone. I messaged all three of them at once.

Hey, sorry for the silent treatment. Turns out getting an app off the ground takes a crazy amount of time! I'd love to catch up. Any of you want to hang out tonight? I'm buying

There. We'd have some drinks and all would be back to normal.

I picked my tablet up off the side table. It needed charging, so I rummaged around until I found the cable at the back of a drawer. How long had it been since I'd charged it? Based on the software update it wanted to install, too long.

My phone pinged. Good. Maybe Eddie, Renata, or Justin was messaging me back. I'd have something to occupy the rest of my evening.

Justin had responded.

JUSTIN

Glad to hear you're still among the living. I'll let you know the next time we're having a party, but I'm spending most of my time with my new girlfriend now

I frowned. Couldn't he just bring his new girlfriend with him? My phone pinged again. Eddie. Yeah, I'm hanging out with a whole new friend group these days. You don't know them. I see Renata is on this chat. She's moved to San Antonio. Sorry. Maybe I'll see you around one day.

My frown deepened. I'd thought these guys were my friends. Sure, I hadn't been as close with them as I'd been with Cal and Felix, but I'd seen them at least once a week for years.

But real friends don't ditch you just because you go incommunicado for a few months.

Right?

"I guess I don't need them anyway," I said to the empty room. Great. I'd only been off work for eight hours, and I was already talking to myself.

I was hungry again, but I didn't feel like cooking any of the groceries I'd bought. Pizza it was. I placed the order then tossed my phone down.

Restless, I stood up and went to the balcony door. Were those storm clouds? I gratefully latched on to the distraction and slid the door open.

A cold wind whipped into the room, and a spatter of icy raindrops hit me in the face, even with the shelter of the balcony one floor above me. Hugging my arms around my chest against the temperature drop, I ventured outside. The parking lot lights were already on, and the cars and pavement below were wet with rain. I must have been so focused on cleaning I'd missed the storm moving in.

As soon as I stepped out onto the balcony, my socks soaked through instantly, and I grimaced.

A loud *bang* of thunder surrounded me, and I jumped, my heart pounding.

The shriek of a small child split the air even as the echo of the thunder rang in my ears. I whirled to my right, but I couldn't see anyone on Phillip's balcony. The railing around our

balconies was made of thick metal bars with roughly two-inch openings between them. I would see a person for sure, even if they were small.

I shivered uneasily.

"Hello?" I called. Phillip's apartment was the only one between me and the end of the building. And the scream had been too close to have come from above or below me. I walked cautiously over to the railing, my socks squelching in the frigid water. The rain was coming down harder now, and I hunched in on myself as it spattered on my face and arms.

There wasn't a child on Phillip's balcony. No one at all. Through the gaps in the railing I could see the concrete floor. There was something blue on the side closest to me, as well as a cardboard box toward the other end. Straw or hay was scattered about. I leaned over the edge to get a better look, then I gasped.

A bright blue litterbox sat a foot or so from the railing. And nearby a bag of some sort of pet food had been ripped open and spilled out, but I was sure it was just wet mush at this point.

There had to be an animal inside the cardboard box.

When had Phillip gotten a pet? We were allowed to have them in the building, but I'd never seen any evidence of Phillip owning one.

My memory flashed to Phillip leaving that morning with his big suitcase, and anger roiled through me. That fluffing jerkface had left his pet on the balcony? Even if he'd hired a pet sitter—and based on the evidence I doubted he had—leaving a pet outside in December was just cruel.

A gust of wind blew more rain into my face. I needed to get the animal, whatever it was, inside and fast.

"Hang on, little buddy, I'm going to get my phone and I'll be right back." I thought I heard a thud, but I wasn't sure. I ran back inside and, ignoring the trail of footprints my wet socks were leaving on the carpet, I grabbed my phone, pulling up the contact info for the apartment office.

Voicemail. Noodle nuts, it was after hours. The outgoing message provided a phone number for emergencies, but how long would it take for someone to get here? I stuffed my phone in my pocket.

I'd have to rescue the animal myself.

"Okay, okay. I can do this." I went back outside. My railing was separated from Phillip's by a gap only about a foot wide.

But I was on the fourth floor.

I felt a little dizzy and deliberately didn't look down. I backed up against the wall next to the door.

"Okay. If I had a rope, I could tie myself to something so I wouldn't fall."

I didn't have a rope.

Thunder boomed again, and the animal shrieked.

"Farting Frost Giants!"

I just had to go for it. Not allowing myself any time to have second thoughts, I went back over to the railing nearest to Phillip's balcony. I didn't want to face the drop to the parking lot, so I put my right hand on my balcony's railing fairly close to the wall. Then I leaned over and put my left hand in the same spot on Phillip's railing.

"Spiderman, take the wheel!" I shouted.

Gripping the wet metal of the railings with all my might, I swung my left leg over both barriers with enough momentum to carry my hips onto Phillip's balcony.

My left foot landed in the sodden litter box, which immediately slid on the wet concrete. I was too far onto Phillip's balcony to keep hold of my balcony's railing anymore, and I screeched when my fingers lost their grip on it. The animal shrieked in solidarity. My flailing right hand managed to grab Phillip's railing alongside my left, but my left foot, trapped in the litterbox, continued to slide. My right calf hadn't cleared the top of the railing, and as my left foot slid away, my right heel caught on the curved metal lip of the horizontal bar.

"Fu—funhouse fishsticks!"

I'd never done the splits before.

The litterbox stopped sliding when my body could stretch no further, but I didn't have any leverage to lift my foot out of it. My thighs shrieked almost as loudly as the animal had.

I could probably drag my left leg—along with the litter box—back toward me, but I still wasn't sure how I'd lift my foot to get it on solid ground. And without being able to stand securely on my left foot, I wouldn't be able to get my right one off the handrail.

Plan B it was.

Gritting my teeth, I carefully let go of the railing with my left hand and put it on the concrete floor of the balcony, directly in the middle of a slurry of freezing water, straw, and mush I really hoped was just pet food.

Leaning as much of my weight as I could on my hand, I used the leverage from my right ankle to drag my left leg back toward me. My thighs cried out in relief, but my ankle was not happy.

After making sure I wasn't going to crush the box where the animal was hiding, I slowly bent my left elbow. I let my right hand release the railing and barely got it under my chin in time to keep myself from face-planting into the muck. I rolled my hips, pulling my right foot free, and my left knee hit the ground. The litterbox tipped over and of course the contents spilled across the lower half of my sweatpants.

I stayed on my hands and knees for a couple of minutes, catching my breath and giving thanks to the spirit of Tom Holland.

A rhythmic thumping came from the box. Rabbit, maybe? Poor little guy.

Okay. I reached for my inner Tony Stark and hauled myself to my feet. I was covered in whatever had been on the ground and in the litterbox. My socks and sweats were muddy and wet, and my shirt wasn't much better. I patted my pocket to make sure my phone was still in there. If Phillip had locked his sliding glass door, I'd have to call the fire department to get me and the rabbit off this balcony.

Gingerly I reached out to push at the door. It slid open. Thank the mother of Captain Marvel. I reached inside and flipped on the balcony light.

Not willing to risk the possibility of being accidentally locked out on the balcony, I left the sliding door wide open even though the rain was getting inside. Sorry not sorry, Phillip.

I slogged over to the little cardboard box, which was getting soggier by the second. I leaned over and peered into the open side. Like me, the rabbit was streaked with mud, but under that it had a white face and body, with black ears and an adorable black splotch over its nose. It thumped its back leg against the bottom of the box.

"Hi, there, little guy. How about we get you inside, huh?"

I would've preferred to just lift the entire box, rabbit and all, but the cardboard was too wet. I'd have to pick up the rabbit. I'd never even been in the same room with a rabbit. Where was Felix when I needed him?

"We're going to call your Uncle Felix as soon as we get you safe and dry," I told the rabbit. "He's the animal expert."

I debated going inside and finding a towel, but thunder rolled in the distance. Right. Speed was more important. I jerked my muddy, half-damp, half-dry t-shirt over my head and knelt in the muck, my knees and thighs protesting loudly.

"Okay, little guy. Or girl. Or non-binary bunny. I'm gonna pick you up now."

My hands covered by the t-shirt, I reached into the box. The rabbit backed into the corner but didn't try to struggle or bite me when I grabbed it under its forelegs. It was heavier than I'd expected. I wrapped it in the t-shirt and pulled it out of the box.

I cradled the rabbit against my chest. Groaning, I clambered to my feet. "Okay, Rocket Rabbit. Here we go." I sloshed through the mud to the door. Looking at Phillip's light beige carpet, I shrugged. This was his fault. I went inside and slid the door closed behind me. The rabbit trembled in my arms.

"It's okay. We'll get you warm and dry. Maybe a bath. Can rabbits have baths?" I could tell I was going to spend a lot of time talking to Felix and googling information about rabbits tonight.

I shuffled toward the kitchen, leaving a trail of muddy footprints. My thighs, along with the rest of my body, asked when we could have a warm bath of our own.

I turned on the overhead light in the breakfast area and glanced around Phillip's apartment in case there were rabbit supplies visible, but I didn't spot any. I'd have to come back and do a more thorough search after I got the rabbit and myself cleaned up.

"Worst case you can eat vegetables tonight and we'll go to the pet store in the morning, huh?" The rabbit tucked its head into the folds of the t-shirt as I pulled Phillip's front door open.

"I've got a nice big zucchini...."

I came face to face with Baz, who stood in the hallway, staring at me with his mouth hanging open.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

So far I hadn't killed Roberto Quintano or any of his thugs. But I wanted to. Badly.

Unfortunately I'd already decided he wasn't the one responsible for Gio and Kathy's deaths.

But I didn't like him.

"I swear, it wasn't on my order," Quintano said, eyeing the point of my KA-BAR as I held it idly in my left hand. My right was occupied with my Glock 19.

Knocking out the three thugs in Quintano's house had been laughably easy. They'd been wearing cheap tactical boots, but a different brand than Gio and Kathy's killers. I tried to tell myself it didn't mean anything—these could still be the culprits. Quintano might require a different boot based on the day of the week.

I'd seen stranger things from men in power.

I'd zip-tied Quintano to his desk chair. I felt it was fitting to mirror what had been done to Gio. But Quintano didn't seem to get the reference. A couple of questions, and I was convinced I was talking to the wrong bad guy.

Gio must have left a trail, and Ostap had followed it to get the ring back.

"Look," Quintano wheedled. "I won't ask for the money Gio owed me. Just tell me what you know about where the ring is.

I'll have my guys track it down. Then Gio's debt will be wiped clean, and you won't have to pay me out of his estate."

I raised one sharply-defined eyebrow at him. Ignoring the ludicrous idea of Quintano having a claim against Gio and Kathy's estate, I said, "You want to try to find a ring belonging to Sergei Ostap? Isn't that a little dangerous?"

Quintano sniffed. "He lost it, so it's fair game now."

I doubted that was the way Sergei Ostap viewed things. Was Quintano so stupid he couldn't figure out why Gio and Kathy had been killed?

But I was wasting time here. Ostap would try to go after the schoolkids from the post office, and I needed to take him out before he could.

But first I had to remove Quintano from the equation.

I pointed the business end of the KA-BAR at Quintano. "How much did Gio owe you?"

His eyes went crafty. "\$700,000."

I snorted. "He told me it was \$600,000."

Quintano shook his head. "It was \$600, but then he missed his deadline for paying it back."

The man's audacity was impressive.

"The deadline was today."

Quintano smirked. "Well, yeah, but it's not like he's going to make it now."

I slid the knife into the sheath along my thigh and picked up my duffel. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to pay you \$600k. You will consider Gio's debt cleared, and you will not pursue Ostap's ring. Agreed?"

Quintano scowled. "\$700k and I won't go after the ring."

I sighed. I needed to get going. Sergei Ostap had to die, and I was betting that would take planning.

"\$650k and you won't go after the ring."

Quintano beamed. "I knew you were a reasonable man."

CHAPTER 4

BAZ

My writing wasn't going anywhere. Half a day into the precious time I'd set aside specifically to work on the final book in my Kane Thorsson series, and I only generated more ideas for the detective series I planned to work on next.

Accounting paid the rent, but novel-writing was my happy place. A couple of years ago, writing had been the only thing to get me out of bed some days.

The sound of thunder made me look at my phone. This would be a good evening to curl up on the couch with some popcorn and an Agatha Christie movie.

The storm was coming in from the north, and my windows faced south. I could tell it was getting darker and we'd had some rain, but I couldn't see the thunderclouds moving in. I decided I'd go get my mail and look at the storm.

Maybe Kane could fight off some attackers in the rain, I mused as I put my shoes and jacket on. This storm might be the inspiration I needed.

Energized, I grabbed my keys and left the apartment, making sure to lock the door behind me. I'd just turned to head for the elevator when Phillip's door opened, and I heard a guy say something about a zucchini.

I'd seen Phillip leaving town, so I knew it wouldn't be him who came out. We didn't have a lot of crime in these apartments, so maybe a friend watering his plants?

I wasn't prepared to see Steve, soaking wet, shirtless, and covered in mud. We were on the fourth floor, for fuck's sake.

How had he gotten muddy? He was wearing navy blue sweatpants and socks that had probably started out white, but now they looked like he'd walked along the shore of Lake Travis in them. He was holding something wrapped in a t-shirt against his chest. His naked chest.

I finally realized I was staring and snapped my eyes up to meet Steve's. His expression seemed to waver between amused and resigned.

"Hi, Baz," he said. "How's it going?"

Then he turned and casually pulled Phillip's door shut, rattling the knob to make sure it was unlocked.

"Shouldn't you lock that?" was what came out of my mouth. Not *Are you okay?* or even *Why are you wet and covered in mud?*

Steve's body stiffened. Under the streaks of mud his back was attractive. Broad shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist and a juicy butt. He could stand to eat though. I could count his ribs.

Steve turned around again, adjusting the bundle in his arms. His eyes had lost all humor. "No, Baz. I don't have a key and I need to get back inside in a minute. Do you happen to have a key?"

"To Phillip's place? No?"

He nodded once, as if he'd expected this, and walked the few steps to his apartment door without another word.

I should've just turned and left, but I couldn't take my eyes off Steve.

He reached for the knob on his apartment door and froze. Then he dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

"Wolverine's wilting wisteria!" he said in a frustrated voice.

What the hell? "Are you locked out?" I *definitely* didn't have a key to Steve's place.

I vaguely registered the elevator door chiming and then opening behind us, but nothing was more interesting right now than Steve.

He brought his head back down but didn't look at me. Instead, he stared down at the fabric bundle in his arms and heaved a deep sigh. "I am indeed locked out." He turned back toward Phillip's door.

"Steven Derryberry?" a man asked.

I spun around, startled. A clean-cut guy wearing a Santa hat, a red button-down shirt, and jeans stood in the middle of the hallway holding a large envelope and a dripping green umbrella.

"That's me." Steve sounded resigned.

The guy gave him a sympathetic smile, then walked forward and handed Steve the envelope. "You're being called as a witness, and you've been served." Steve nodded dejectedly. "Have a good night!" the process server called out as he strode back toward the elevator.

"Yeah, yeah," Steve muttered.

I spun around again. "You're a witness? Like, to a crime?"

Steve carefully stuck the envelope between his door and the doorframe with the hand not holding his bundle. Then he brushed past me on his way to Phillip's door.

"See you around, Baz." He didn't look at me as he pushed the door open.

"Wait," I said, almost involuntarily. "What the fuck is going on? Why are you even in Phillip's apartment, much less all...." I waved my hand up and down at him.

Steve paused in the middle of Phillip's doorway. For a brief second it was like a mask fell away, and he became an exhausted shell of himself. But almost instantly he rallied. He smiled confidently at me, but his bright blue eyes were cold.

"Don't worry about it, Baz. It's between me and Phillip."

Um, no. That was *not* going to fly. I moved closer so I could see past Steve into the apartment. A trail of muddy footprints

led from the balcony door into the kitchen and out again before fading as they neared the door where I was standing.

The door Steve had just walked out of.

The mud was from the balcony? From the rain?

He'd said he didn't have a key to Phillip's place. Realization dawned. "You came in through the balcony? We're on the fourth floor! You climbed over the balcony on the fourth fucking floor?"

Steve's fake smile turned even more brittle. "That's right. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go back the way I came."

Then the fucker tried to shut Phillip's door in my face. Uh, no.

I put my hand out to stop the door from closing, and on top of that I made sure to get my foot in the door frame. Shrugging, Steve turned away, abandoning the door and heading for the balcony.

Thunder crashed outside. Steve walked through the apartment. His filthy socks didn't make mud tracks on this trip.

"You can't climb over the balcony, especially in this weather. Doesn't anyone else have a key to your apartment?"

Steve didn't respond, but he hesitated, fiddling with the bundle of cloth.

"Can I at least help make sure you don't fall to your death?"

He looked over his shoulder as I approached. "You wanna help?"

"Please. I couldn't handle watching you die." I flashed to a hospital room, but Steve distracted me.

"Fine. You can hold Rocket."

He held out the bundle of cloth, which I could now see was a t-shirt wrapped around a... rabbit?

I approached cautiously, then reached out and took the animal, automatically cradling it in my arms. I'd never been this close to a rabbit before, much less touched one. Its slightly damp head was white, but its ears were black and it had a black spot

over its nose. It was way heavier than I expected, but despite its trembling it didn't struggle to get out of my hold.

"What the hell? Where did it come from?"

Steve strode to the balcony door, pulled it open, and gestured grandly at the rainy night. "From here."

I goggled. "Phillip kept a rabbit on his balcony? It's almost freezing! And the rain...." I hugged the rabbit closer.

Steve nodded grimly and pointed. "Look. He only had a cardboard box for shelter, and Phillip just left the open bag of food on the concrete."

A frigid wind pushed across the balcony and sprayed rain into the apartment. The cardboard box was so wet it sagged. I could see the bag of food, but its contents were mixed with hay, water, and whatever had been in a turned-over litter box. I stuck my head outside to look at Steve's balcony. It was about a foot away from Phillip's, just like mine was from my neighbor's. The metal railing gleamed with rain. The ground was very far away.

Steve had crossed over that gap in the rain and thunder to rescue this rabbit?

And based on the mud all over Steve, he hadn't had an easy time sticking the landing.

I didn't like Steve, I reminded myself. But he'd been brave to go over the balcony to rescue the rabbit. And I didn't want him to get hurt or worse. "Hey, why don't you let me do it? Climb over to your balcony, I mean."

Steve looked at me like I was talking nonsense. "I'm already wet and dirty. You stay here with Rocket."

I put up a hand. "Looks like your last trip was difficult." I gestured at his mud-covered body. "I'm a little taller than you, so maybe it'll be easier for me."

Steve gave a short laugh and shook his head. "It was only hard because my foot landed in the litter box. I'll be fine."

With that Steve went out onto the balcony in his socked feet and splashed confidently over to the side nearest his apartment. I held my breath as he put one hand on each balcony's railing and didn't hesitate to swing his right leg over. His left followed like he'd practiced it again and again for some Olympic gymnastics event.

I swallowed against my dry throat. "Wow. That was impressive."

Steve bent over and tugged off his filthy socks. "Thanks. How about I meet you in the hall? I want to get Rocket warm and then look to see if Phillip has any extra rabbit food or anything."

"Sounds like a plan." I pulled Phillip's balcony door shut. The carpet around the door was even dirtier and damper than before, but there was no help for it. And really, any guy who would leave a poor defenseless animal outside in the freezing rain deserved a lot worse than to have to deep clean his carpet.

I paused. Phillip was going to know immediately who had taken the rabbit. And if he cleaned everything up, he could accuse Steve of stealing the little guy.

"Hang on there, friend." I transferred the rabbit to my left arm and dug my phone out of my back pocket with my right hand. After sliding the balcony door open again, I took photos, including lots of closeups, of just how the poor rabbit had been forced to live. Then I took pics of the carpet, so Phillip couldn't claim it was worse than it was.

Phillip's furniture was inexpensive and strangely bland. He spoke as if he'd grown up with money—all multi-syllable words when short ones would do—so I would've expected him to have some higher-end items or maybe travel mementos lying around, but there was no hint of luxury or personality.

I was almost finished taking pictures when Steve came through the front door holding a bath towel, his expression worried. He had flip-flops on his feet, and he'd changed into a different pair of sweatpants. He must've dried himself off a little because the mud on his chest was mostly gone. He hadn't bothered putting on a shirt. His nipples were pebbled with the cold.

"Hey, what happened? Did you find anything?"

I forced my gaze up to his face—crap, that was the second time I'd been caught ogling his chest—and covered my flustered state by waving my phone at him. "No, I was documenting everything. Just in case Phillip tries to be an ass."

Steve stopped short, then shook his head and blew out a breath. "Thanks. I should have thought of that."

He jerked his head toward Phillip's kitchen. "I'm going to see what I can find in there. Are you okay holding Rocket, or do you need to take off?"

I pocketed my phone and ran a finger down the rabbit's forehead. "His name is Rocket?"

Steve turned a little pink. "Um, I don't know. I just started calling him that. Because, you know, in the MCU Thor calls Rocket a rabbit all the time?"

I grinned. "Right. I like it."

Steve's face turned a little redder. He held up the towel. "Here. That t-shirt is soaked."

Steve helped me unwrap Rocket, who turned out to be mostly white with black feet and ears, along with the black spot covering his nose.

"Wow, no wonder he feels heavy."

Rocket was not a svelte rabbit. He had to weigh over ten pounds, and most of it was in his belly.

He allowed us to swaddle him in Steve's towel, then he just huddled in my arms and trembled while we looked through Phillip's kitchen.

Steve started opening cabinets at the far end and I took the near end. Phillip did not have a lot of kitchenware. In the first cabinet I found one pot that might have been large enough to boil a package of instant ramen. The second cabinet contained one cereal bowl and one dinner plate.

Steve came back toward me, frowning. "There's no rabbit food here, but I've got veggies in my fridge. I'll go to the pet store tomorrow and get whatever else Rocket needs."

I agreed and we turned off the lights and left Phillip's apartment. I couldn't believe Phillip—or anyone—would just leave an animal out on a balcony with so little shelter. Sure, the weather had seemed fine this morning, but Phillip would be gone for a while if his grandmother had passed away.

I stood aside and watched Steve push the button lock on Phillip's doorknob and make sure it caught. I was still marveling over how he hadn't thought twice about crossing over the balconies to get to the rabbit.

Maybe I shouldn't have judged Steve based solely on the behavior I'd observed in the hallway. Clearly there was more to him than being a vapid party boy.

I'd been an ass for my simplistic assumptions, and I needed to make up for it.

Steve started to walk toward his apartment but hesitated. He looked at me, down at the rabbit in my arms, then back up at me. I could tell he was about to offer to deal with the rabbit on his own. That wasn't happening.

It was suddenly very important—urgent, even—that I grab this opportunity to get to know Steve better. My writing could wait.

I said, "Why don't I help you get this guy set up with something to eat and maybe a, um, pen of some kind?"

The elevator door opened, and a girl in a rain jacket carrying an insulated pizza delivery bag came out.

"Oh, hey," Steve called. "That's for me. Steve Derryberry."

The delivery girl kept walking toward us but was clearly having doubts about getting too close. I couldn't imagine what she thought of us, with Steve being half-dressed and still slightly muddy, and me holding a wadded-up towel.

I turned so she could see Rocket's head. "I wonder if rabbits like pizza," I said.

The delivery girl immediately relaxed and, smiling, handed Steve the pizza.

"Thanks," he said. "I put in a tip on the app."

The girl said, "Thanks!" and made kissy noises at Rocket before turning back toward the elevator.

"Come on in," Steve said. "I hope you like pepperoni and tomatoes. And I have some beer if you want one." He led the way into his apartment.

Unlike Phillip's place, or mine for that matter, Steve's apartment was a riot of color. Not the furniture—Steve owned exactly the unimaginative black leather couch and chrome and glass coffee table I'd expected him to have based on his frat boy demeanor.

But the walls were covered in framed superhero fan art. I smiled at a large poster of The Flash. The overflowing bookshelves along the far wall were a surprise. And smaller floating shelves near the breakfast table held what appeared to be D&D miniatures and Funko Pop figures.

"Let me get Rocket some food and water, then we can find something to contain him."

Steve went into the kitchen, dumping the pizza on the counter. I hovered uncertainly next to the breakfast table, holding Rocket up so he could watch Steve pull vegetables from the fridge.

Steve set everything down on the counter, then made a face. "Okay, pretty sure rabbits can have carrots, but squash? Zucchini?" He pulled his phone from his pocket. I tried not to stare at the line where the skin of his back went under the waistband of his sweatpants.

Steve's eyebrows went up as he looked at his phone. "Okay, no potatoes or mushrooms." He tucked those back into the drawer in the fridge. "Everything else I've got should be okay."

He chopped up a little bit of everything onto a plate then set it on the floor in the corner of the kitchen along with a bowl of water. "You're going to let Rocket roam free?" I asked.

Steve shook his head. "I figure we can build some sort of barrier so he can stay in the kitchen. That way he'll be able to move around but the floor will be easy to clean if he has an accident."

"Makes sense." I set Rocket on the ground near the food and carefully unwrapped the towel. Rocket took one hop then stilled, eyeing me warily. I left the towel on the floor, not wanting to scare him with the fabric flapping if I picked it up.

Rocket didn't seem afraid of Steve though. As soon as I'd backed an acceptable distance away, Rocket hopped over to the water and started to drink. Steve was mere feet from him, opening and closing the refrigerator, but Rocket didn't even twitch.

"You want a beer?" I jerked my head up. Steve held out a bottle of Shiner Premium toward me. He'd already popped the cap while I'd been staring at Rocket.

"Nice. Sure, thanks." I took the bottle and slugged back about a third of it on my first go. This was turning out to be one of the more interesting evenings I'd had in a while.

Steve took a smaller sip of his own beer before looking down at Rocket. "Uh. Uh oh."

Rocket was eating. And pooping. At the same time.

I glanced around and then handed Steve the roll of paper towels that had been sitting on the counter near me. He tore off several sheets then folded them and slid them under Rocket's back end. Rocket didn't bat an eye.

"He's handling all of this pretty well."

Steve nodded, fiddling with the label on his beer bottle. "When I went outside on the balcony earlier, the thunder boomed, and he made this horrible screech." He shook his head, chuckling. "I thought it was a little kid or something at first."

"I still can't believe you went over that balcony railing. In the rain."

He grinned at me. "I need to learn how to pick locks so I won't have to do that in the future."

I shuddered. "Anything would be better than watching you do that again." I set my beer down on the counter. "Okay, what would make a decent litter box? I don't have an Amazon box or anything right now."

Steve perked up. "Sometimes people leave them by the recycle bin next to the garbage chute."

Glad for a task to let me feel useful, I said, "Good idea. I'll go check. Maybe there's two and we can make one into a bed."

"Get some paper if there's any in the recycle bin. We can tear it up for the litter box. The paper towels won't be enough, I don't think." He held up his phone. "I'm going to call my buddy Felix. He's a pet massage therapist. He'll have some advice."

I blinked. "He's a what?"

"A pet massage therapist. Like for animals who have muscle injuries and stuff."

"Huh." Immediately I imagined Detective Hartwell, the main character of my upcoming mystery series, meeting a pet massage therapist. Musing the possibilities, I left Steve's apartment and walked to the garbage chute vestibule next to the elevator. Each floor had a hatch in the wall you could open to drop your regular garbage down into the dumpster. Next to that was a green recycle bin. Some tenants were better about sorting their trash than others, but I always made sure to separate mine.

Several Amazon boxes were lying on the floor, too large to go into the recycle bin. Technically we were supposed to take those downstairs to the larger recycling container on the ground floor, but hardly anyone made the effort. I picked out three boxes of varying sizes so we'd have options. Then I opened the lid of the recycle bin to get some paper.

Right on top was a stack of printed memos with the logo for Bent Oak Elementary on them. Wasn't that where Phillip worked? Well, it was only appropriate for Rocket to relieve himself on Phillip's papers. I pulled the stack out.

Underneath was a small white cardboard box full of envelopes. Were they letters?

"What the hell?"

The white box had "To the North Pole!" written in red across one side. The top was open, so I pulled one out. The flap wasn't sealed. The sender's return address said it was from Gus Barrons who lived here in Bent Oak. And the envelope was addressed to Santa Claus at 123 Elf Road, North Pole 88888.

I thumbed through the other envelopes. There were fourteen of them. They were from different people—kids, I supposed—but all were intended to be sent to the same address. Each envelope was written in different handwriting. None of them had stamps.

As if my impression of Phillip wasn't bad enough after he'd left his rabbit on the balcony, now it was even lower. These kids were expecting their letters to be mailed to Santa and he'd thrown them away? Surely the school had stamps and mail pickup.

Cursing Phillip's name, I set the box of letters inside the largest of the Amazon boxes and headed back to Steve's place. I was looking forward to sharing Phillip's latest misdeed with him. He'd be pissed, I just knew it.

Again I marveled at how my understanding of Steve's character had been spun on its head. He might be a dedicated party boy, but he had more depth to him than I ever imagined.

Too bad he was straight.

I stopped in my tracks, right in the middle of the hallway. Three years. Three years had passed, and I hadn't been interested in anyone. Sure, I'd had more than a few furtive means-to-an-end bathroom hookups at clubs, but no one had caught my attention romantically.

And now my brain—please, not my heart—decided to break that streak for a straight guy?

Well, shit.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

Sergio Ostap lived about an hour north of San Antonio in a walled compound guarded by six men, with more inside. Even someone with my skills and arsenal would have a difficult time dealing with all of the guards, as well as Ostap, without any advance intel. How the hell had Gio stolen that ring?

But Quintano hadn't had Gio and Kathy killed. Which meant it'd been Ostap.

I'd have to take Ostap out sooner or later. Sooner would be preferable, since he knew about the Barbie, and he knew about the kids.

One option was to find the ring, request a meeting with Ostap to return it, and kill him at the meet. Or I could tail Ostap and his guards, figure out their schedule, and take him out away from the compound.

Both options required time. And the kids were in danger. Finding the ring would at least give me access to the kids, and I'd be able to tell if someone else was watching them.

I rubbed the thick blond stubble along my jaw. I knew the name of the teacher and that she worked for Leaning Oak Elementary. If I could get into the school's computer system, I could find the names and addresses of the kids in her class.

But Wrigley, who was my go-to for computer shit, was in the middle of a hack to take down a huge human trafficking

syndicate. He didn't expect to be free for three or four more weeks.

I'd have to access the school's network the old-fashioned way.

CHAPTER 5

STEVE

"But if I can't give him a bath, how do I get him clean?"

I heard the door open as Baz came back in from his box hunt.

"Rabbits like being brushed," Felix reassured me. "And if that isn't enough you can get a pet-safe dry shampoo."

I frowned as I entered the notes into my phone. "Isn't it weird Phillip didn't have a brush? We didn't find any pet supplies at all, actually, except what was on the balcony."

Baz set three Amazon boxes down next to me on the floor. I gave him a thumb's up. He put a white box on the kitchen counter, but I couldn't get a look at it from where I was sitting. Rocket was cuddled in my lap. My thigh muscles were still screaming from their unwanted stretch earlier, but it was worth it to comfort the little dude.

"Did you look in the bathroom or bedroom closets?"

"No, but I guess we should've."

Felix's voice became sharper. "We? Who's we?"

I made an apologetic face at Baz, who could hear everything Felix was saying on the speakerphone.

"Sorry. Baz helped me. He's my neighbor across the hall." Who I had *never* mentioned to Felix or Cal, though I thought Cal had seen Baz in the hallway a time or two. "Baz just came back with some boxes. Baz, this is my friend Felix. Felix, this is Baz."

"Hey, Felix. Nice to meet you." Baz leaned against the counter and picked up the beer he'd been drinking earlier.

"Hi, Baz. Nice to meet you too."

"Okay, Felix. I've added a brush and some dry shampoo to the list for the pet store tomorrow. I've also got hay, food, newspaper-based litter, and a litter box. Can you think of anything else I might need?"

"No, not when you're just starting out. But, Steve, this is a lot of effort for someone else's pet," Felix's tone was cautious.

I made a scoffing noise. "Baz took pics of the balcony where Rocket was being kept. No way is Phillip getting him back."

We could hear a low voice speaking to Felix. "Hey, guys, I've got to go. We're taking Malcolm's family out to dinner. I've got some work appointments tomorrow, but I can come see Rocket this weekend if you want. Though if you end up keeping him, he needs a vet checkup."

I said, "Got it. Thanks for all the help."

We hung up. "Thanks for getting the boxes," I told Baz. "Felix said we should fill one with hay or torn paper and give Rocket a place to dig for treats."

Baz smiled. "Sounds like he'd enjoy that." Then he paused. "I found something in the recycle bin. I think Phillip put it in there."

He pointed at the papers in one of the Amazon boxes. "Those were on top, and they're from a school, so probably Phillip's."

I reached out and snagged the box, pulling it over. "Bent Oak Elementary" was across the top of most of the pages, which seemed to be memos about school hours and assemblies.

"Underneath those, I found this." Baz lifted the white box he'd put on the counter earlier. I put my hands under Rocket, preparing to stand, but Baz shook his head. "I'll join you." He handed me the box and lowered himself to the ground while I examined it.

"To the North Pole!" was written on the side, and the box held envelopes. Letters to Santa.

I gaped at Baz. "He threw away his students' letters to Santa?" And I thought *I* had a grudge against Christmas. "What a festering flatulence."

Baz grinned. "Well said."

Suppressing a smile, I rifled through the envelopes. "They're all addressed, so why not just mail them?"

He shrugged. "That was my question. I mean, the school would probably pay for the postage, right? Or they could send the letters home with the kids to be mailed from there. Why go to the trouble to bring them home from school just to throw them away?"

"Weird."

I pulled out an envelope. The sender was Danielle Rivers. The flap of the envelope was temptingly open. I looked up at Baz. "Is it wrong to read these, do you think?"

Before he could respond, his stomach growled. We both laughed.

"Why don't we have some pizza?" I suggested. "We can read the letters while we eat."

"Sure"

I set Rocket down next to the boxes so he could explore them. Baz and I washed up, and I got plates out. We took the pizza and the box of letters over to the couch and set everything on the coffee table.

"Okay, let's see what these kids want Santa to bring them." I didn't know why I was so excited to open the letters. Baz picked up his slice of pizza and waited for me to read one to him.

I pulled Danielle's letter out of the envelope.

Dear whoever,

This is boring. I don't believe in Santa but Mr Downs is making us do this. I already told my mom I want the LEGO Marvel Superheroes 2 game Thanks,

Danielle

"Um." I said. "Okay, then."

I carefully folded up Danielle's letter and put it back into the envelope.

Baz finished his slice and wiped his hands on a paper towel. "Eat. I'll read the next one."

That one was from Wendell Corbett.

Dear Santa who's not real,

Mr. Downs said we had to write something. I like Mr. Downs better than Ms. Frankel but don't tell her I said that. Jeramy is writing that he wants to go to Disney World so I want to go with him.

Thanks.

Obi-Wen

"Awww. That's so cute. We should really do something for these kids, even if they don't believe in Santa."

I finished off my pizza and wiped my hands in preparation for reading the next letter.

Baz *hmmmed*. "That would be fun. Especially since they have such a jerk teacher."

I glanced at him, and Baz's eyes flicked up to mine. Had he been looking at my chest? Surely not. I was imagining things and I needed to get over myself.

The next two letters were similar in vein but these kids seemed to believe in Santa. Alice said she'd like a Barbie princess doll, and Rafael said he wanted the new Hot Wheels video game.

The fifth letter, from Seth Clements, was completely different.

Dear whoever opens this letter,

Mr. Downs said he wasn't going to read our letters to Santa because they're private. I know Santa won't be reading them, but I hope somebody else will. My brother and I need help. I can't use a phone or computer other than at school. Alan broke Robin's phone and Robin can't afford a new one. Mrs. Frankel laughed when I asked her to contact Lucas McCord for me, but it's not a joke. Mr. Downs is nice, but I know he'll laugh too.

Robin told me not to waste my time but if I were Lucas McCord I'd want to know I had nephews that needed him.

I've almost figured out how to get around the blockers on the school computers, but I'm better at math than coding.

If you're somebody opening letters to Santa, please please email Lucas McCord the actor with this message:

Robin and Seth Clements are your sister Rachel's sons. She died in January. Robin and Seth live with their stepfather Alan Shackleford. Robin can't go to school anymore because he has to work 2 jobs to pay the rent since Alan won't. Alan gets drunk and hits Robin. Robin's only 17 and he says Child Protection Services won't let him have custody of Seth. Please help. 1819 Farnham Way, Apt. 327, Bent Oak, Texas

Thanks,

Seth

I finished reading the letter to Baz, then handed it over to him when he stretched out his hand. I fumbled for my phone. One search and I confirmed it. "Lucas McCord's birth name was Hiram Clements, Jr."

Baz made a face. "I'd have changed it too." He glanced at the letter then back up at me again. "If this guy is hitting the kid, I think we should call Child Protective Services. They can get in touch with Lucas McCord."

I shook my head. "What are the odds some overworked social worker is going to believe an eight-year-old that they're related to a famous actor?" I waved my phone at him. "I'll see if Cole knows Lucas McCord. That'll be the fastest way."

Baz's eyebrows shot up. "Cole?"

I nodded as I typed out my text. "Cole Washburn."

A pause. "The actor? How do you have his phone number?" I held up a finger then finished typing.

Do you have a way to get in touch with Lucas McCord?

Then I told Baz, "Cole's one of my business partners."

Baz cocked his head and scrunched his eyebrows. It was adorable. "I thought you worked at a call center."

"Nah, not anymore. My friend Felix, from earlier? He works with the animals out at Cole's rescue ranch. My other friend Cal and I went to visit Felix at the ranch, and he introduced us to Cole and his boyfriends. Cal and I are developing a dating app and Cole provided our first round of funding."

My phone pinged before Baz could reply.

COLE

Yes. Why?

My neighbor is a teacher. He tossed out a bunch of letters to Santa instead of mailing them. Lucas McCord needs to see this one. If he says it's not legit we'll contact CPS.

I took the letter back from Baz and sent Cole a photo of it.

"Cole will take care of it," I said confidently. I might be pissed at him and Cal right now, but I knew he wouldn't let this slide.

Baz shook his head bemusedly. "It's just so... unexpected, I guess, that you know somebody famous."

Hah. If he only knew.

My phone pinged again.

COLE

I'll handle it. Don't contact CPS or do anything else until you hear back from me first.

[Thumbs up emoji] Thanks

"See?" I said to Baz. "Cole's taking care of it."

I put Seth's letter back into its envelope and set it aside. "Well, that was exciting. And upsetting. We'd better make sure there aren't any other surprises in here."

"No shit." Baz put his empty beer bottle on the coffee table.

I said, "You want another beer? And would you mind getting me one?" I pointed at Rocket, who was now snoozing peacefully in my lap. "I can't get up right now."

Baz chuckled. "Sure." He leveraged himself to his feet and went to the fridge.

I picked up the next envelope. "Okay, this is Wendell's friend Jeramy Stone. Let's see if he really does wants Santa to send him to Disney World."

That was when Cole messaged again.

COLE

How many letters were there?

14

COLE

Are the others just asking for toys and stuff?

We're not done opening them but most are. Two kids want to go to Disney World

Across from me, Baz had his eyebrows raised again. I shrugged. "Not sure what he's getting at."

Who's we? And can you find out more about the kids? Like their ages and socioeconomic level? Maybe I can do something for them as a class since they have a teacher shitty enough to throw out their letters to Santa.

I'll see what we can do. BTW, look what else the teacher threw out

I snapped a pic of Rocket in my lap.

[photo]

My phone rang. I grinned at Baz and put it on speaker. "Hi, Cole. I'm here with my across-the-hall neighbor Baz. He's been helping me." Baz's eyes went wide.

"Hi, Baz. What do you mean that fucker threw out a rabbit?"

I hummed. "Threw out' might be a little strong. He went out of town this morning and left the rabbit on his balcony with only a cardboard box and a ripped-open bag of food."

Cole's voice rose an octave. "In this weather?"

"I guess it was nicer this morning, but yeah. It's all good; I got him off the balcony. I'm just glad I heard him."

Baz nodded emphatically in agreement.

Cole said, "Wait a minute. How did you get him off the balcony? Tell me you have a key to your neighbor's apartment."

"It wasn't a big deal, Cole. Hey, do you know anything about rabbits?"

"Steven Derryberry, you'd better not have climbed onto your neighbor's balcony. You live on the fourth floor! It's raining and there's lightning. And you slept at your desk last night!"

Baz made an "o" with his mouth.

I *tsked*. "Cole, you forgot to add *young man* to the end of that. It was an almost perfect dad rant." Or so I imagined. My dad had never cared enough to rant about my safety.

Before Cole could respond, Baz grinned. "Mr. Washburn, this is Baz. Steve is avoiding telling you everything he did."

Cole paused, then said, "So, Baz, are you saying Steve was just as reckless as I'm afraid he was?"

I narrowed my eyes at Baz. I bought you dinner! I mouthed at him.

His eyes twinkled as he said, "I'm sure it was worse. He climbed over the balcony *twice*."

"Twice! Steve! You have people who care about you. Did you even think to ask for help before you did something so reckless?"

Rocket was moving around on my lap, so I tried not to raise my voice. "The apartment office was closed. The rabbit was screaming every time it thundered. Who was I supposed to call?"

Cole's voice took on a biting tone. "Oh, I don't know? How about the guy who runs a fucking rescue ranch where sometimes we, you know, *rescue animals*? And whose boyfriend owns a fucking security company? You think no one there knows how to pick a lock?"

Well, suffering snickerdoodles, I hadn't thought about that. We heard murmuring in the background, so I waited to respond.

"Fine," Cole said. "Jason pointed out we could also have called one of the many people in law enforcement we know. They could've tracked down your apartment manager."

"That would've taken hours, Cole. You didn't see the water and mud this poor bunny was living in. And there was lightning!"

"I know," he whispered, the audio quality sounding like he was cupping his hand over his mouth to talk into the phone. "I just have to let Jason think after the fact that we would've gone the legal route. If you'd called while that bunny was still out there, I would've convinced him to break in."

Baz laughed softly into his beer.

Cole sighed. "Anyway, I've left a message for Lucas McCord to contact me, so don't worry about Seth and Robin for now. Do you need us to take the rabbit?"

I cuddled Rocket closer to my body. "No, I think I might keep him. Baz took some photos of the conditions on the balcony, so Phillip, my neighbor, can't demand we give him back."

"Good." Cole's voice was rich with approval. "And I'm glad you have something other than *Captain Starblade* to occupy you during your vacation."

I groaned. "We are not discussing my *vacation*. Bye, Cole. Thanks for the help."

He was chuckling as we ended the call.

I put Rocket on the floor and stood up, thigh muscles protesting. "I'm going to clean up and get Rocket settled for the night. You want to read the rest of the letters while I do that?"

Baz got up too. "I'll help. It'll go faster."

I was tired enough not to protest.

After Baz put the remaining pizza in the refrigerator and I stacked the plates in the dishwasher, I put a throw blanket in one of the Amazon boxes for Rocket to nest in. We blocked him in the kitchen by flipping my cheap rectangular breakfast table on its side and shoving it into the gap between the cabinets. It closed off the area nicely with a barrier about two-and-a-half feet high, and we could still see Rocket over the edge of the table.

Baz and I got fresh beers and sat next to each other on the couch. Well, not *next* to each other, but like, on separate cushions. I was painfully conscious of every inch between us.

Baz gestured his beer at my bookcase and said, "I see you're a reader. Looks like mostly science fiction and fantasy?"

I swallowed before agreeing. "Plus some video game tie-ins."

He nodded. "I'm more of a mystery and thriller man myself, but I like all of those. What was that *Captain Starblade* Cole Washburn mentioned? Is it a book or a show?"

"Oh! Um..." I could feel my cheeks turning red. How to explain *Captain Starblade*?

Baz stared at me, his eyebrows rising. I was taking way too long to respond.

"It's, um, this online serialized sci-fi story."

"Oh, yeah?" he said. "I'll have to look it up."

"No!" I instinctively tried to put my right hand out in a *stop* gesture. My fingers lost hold of my beer bottle, and it went flying toward Baz, hitting him in the chest and splashing beer all over his t-shirt and flannel button up.

"William Shatner's shutters!" I dashed toward the kitchen and stepped carefully over the table barrier. I grabbed a dish towel and lobbed it at Baz so he could dry off. "I am so sorry," I said as I came back to the couch.

"It's okay," Baz said. He dabbed at himself with the towel.

"Do you want me to wash your clothes? I can put them in my washing machine." I was mortified when it hit me what I'd said. Baz was going to think I was trying to get him to take his clothes off. Because it wasn't like he had his own washing machine right across the hall or anything. I was such a dumbass.

"No, it's fine. I can wash them later." He handed me the dish towel and picked up his beer. "But now you *have* to tell me what *Captain Starblade* is about."

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

"I'm just in town to settle my friends' estate, so a three-month substitute position would fit nicely with my schedule. As you can see, my background makes me more than qualified."

Wrigley had carved out time to alter the employment history of one of the aliases I already had an address and social media presence for. "Karl Thomas" was now an experienced elementary school teacher, the perfect guy to replace Ms. Frost while she was on maternity leave.

And if the slimy Principal Blackwood didn't hire me today, well, I was confident a search of his home would turn up some interesting information I could use to pressure him.

But, as I'd anticipated, Principal Blackwood wasn't about to pass up an easy solution to his problems.

"I think you're just what we're looking for, Mr. Thomas. May I call you Karl?"

"Of course," I assured him, flashing my killer grin with the disarming dimples.

"Well, Karl, let me be the first to welcome you to Leaning Oak Elementary." Blackwood stood up and extended his hand across his desk. I allowed him to squeeze my fingers as hard as he could without squeezing back. Karl Thomas was no threat to Principal Blackwood.

Physically at least.

Because while I was waiting for access to the kids' home addresses so I could search for the ring, I might just see what I could see inside Principal Blackwood's house.

CHAPTER 6

BAZ

Steve was already red in the face, and I watched in fascination as his cheeks, throat and even his upper chest flushed even darker. He started to speak, then stopped.

Feeling sorry for him, I said, "I'm guessing from your reaction this is some sort of porn story? Women in chains kidnapped by a space pirate? That sort of thing?"

Steve went pale. Like, one second he was tomato-red, and then the next second he was pasty-white. He dropped his head to stare down at his beer bottle, and he started picking at the label.

Crap, what had I stepped into?

I put my hand on his forearm. "Steve," I said. "I'd never shame anyone for what they like to read." I chuckled a little. "I actually write some not-great thriller novels in my spare time. People pay money to read them, even though I'm no Lee Child or David Baldacci." I shrugged. "I can't shame those people for reading my less-than-stellar stories, so I'm not about to shame you for what you like." Steve met my eyes but remained silent. Shit. "But this is obviously upsetting for you, so you don't have to tell me."

"It's two men," he blurted out. His eyes widened, and he looked back down at his beer bottle. Picking at the label again, he said hesitantly, "Or at least two male characters." One of his shoulders went up. "One's an alien. He has... tentacles."

My mouth had dropped open while he spoke, and I made myself shut it. As casually as I could, I nodded. "Tentacle... stories are very popular right now." I wasn't sure if Steve was

trying to tell me he was bi or if he was questioning or what, but I wanted to make this as easy for him as possible.

I told him, "I'm not sure if you're aware, but I'm gay."

His head jerked up. "You are?"

"Yep. I was married to another man and everything." Oooh, not a good direction for this conversation. Divert! Divert! "My hitman-slash-spy character in my novels is gay. He hasn't ever had a romantic interest though."

And the reason for that was far from some big mystery my new character Detective Hartwell had to solve.

I rambled on. "I'm not telling you this to get you to make some sort of statement about your sexuality, just to—"

"I'm bi," he said, almost loud enough to qualify as shouting. Then he hunched his shoulders and avoided my gaze again.

"Oh. Well, uh, I appreciate your telling me." I was fucked. Just fucked. When I'd thought Steve was straight, my attraction to him had been disconcerting, but safe.

Now it wasn't safe at all.

He nodded down at his beer bottle. "Nobody knows." Then he snorted. "Who am I kidding? Cole and my friends Felix and Cal have to suspect. We're all reading *Captain Starblade*."

I was so going to look that up as soon as I got back to my place.

"If they're your friends they won't push you."

He flashed an odd smile but nodded. "They haven't."

Rocket made a noise in the kitchen, and I took the opportunity to change the subject.

"Is there anything else we need to do to get Rocket comfortable for tonight?"

About thirty minutes later Rocket had another blanket for burrowing into, a bowl of vegetables, a makeshift litter box that the internet gave us no hope of him using, and some cut up pieces of cardboard to chew on.

"Okay," I said. "I'm going to head home. What time were you thinking about going to the pet store in the morning?"

Steve looked surprised. "You want to go with me?"

I smiled. "I do. I'm off work til the new year, and I'm supposed to be writing my next book. But inspiration hasn't struck yet, so I'm at your disposal."

"Oh. Well, in that case, you can help me stand in the aisles and debate about what I need to buy."

We agreed on a time, then smiled at each other awkwardly. "Okay, see you in the morning."

He nodded. "Thanks for your help tonight."

I ducked my head a little. "I'm glad I was around."

He let me out and I hurried across the hall to my apartment. As soon as I got inside, I pulled out my phone, flopped on my couch, and called Flo.

"What's the matter?" She sounded tense and urgent.

"What? Why are you asking that?"

"Dude, it's almost eleven o'clock at night. You never call this late."

I checked the time. "Oh, shit. Sorry. Do you need to go to sleep?"

I heard rustling. "Nope. I was reading. What's up? Is Kane the himbo hitman in a pickle you need help getting him out of?"

I scoffed. "I wish. I don't even have a plot for this book yet."

"It'll come to you. It always does."

"Yeah, but now is when I have the free time to write."

"Well, if you haven't been writing, what have you been doing?"

I laughed. "You'll never believe it. Remember me telling you about my neighbor Steve from across the hall?" I told her about Steve rescuing Rocket and the letters to Santa.

"Wow, Baz, you sure had some evening."

"Yeah, I...." I stumbled over the real reason for my call.

"What?"

"I'm attracted to him. Steve. Like, sexually, but also...."

Her tone was tender. "Romantically?"

"Yeah," I whispered.

"Oh, honey. It's natural to move on, you know? But Steve must be special to catch your attention." I could hear her amusement. "Especially after the way you've complained about him ever since you moved in."

"I was an ass."

"Orrrr," she drawled out the word. "You were attracted to him, and your subconscious didn't know how to handle it."

"No way. He's been much quieter lately, but my subconscious didn't make up all the people he used to have over, not to mention the girls he brought home at all hours."

Flo was silent.

"What?"

"Baz, listen to yourself." Her voice was gently chiding.

Mentally I replayed what I'd said to her.

"Holy shit," I breathed as realization smacked me in the ass.

"Yep. You were jealous. A jealous little turtle, just hiding in your shell, not ready to come out and play yet."

I ran my free hand through my hair. "Fuck."

Flo laughed. "Our brains are scary, aren't they? How is yours dealing with being interested in someone new?"

"I don't know? I mean, I thought I'd feel guilty, but I don't. And to be honest that makes me feel, well, a little guilty."

"Baz, those are all perfectly reasonable feelings. You're adjusting to a change. But you told me you'd been hooking up—you never felt any kind of way about doing that?"

I sighed. "Not really. Well, the first couple of times were tough. I think I wasn't ready but I *wanted* to be ready, so I forced myself to do it. But since then, it's just been like taking care of business."

"But this thing with Steve—you want more than just a one-off."

I pictured doing couple-type things with Steve. Taking him out to dinner, going to a movie, holding hands while we ran errands, sitting on the couch with Rocket and watching TV. Introducing him to my family.

"Yeah. I want more."

"And Steve is into men? I've only ever heard you mention him bringing women home."

"He is, though he's not out yet."

"Oh, but he told you?" She was getting excited.

"Yeah."

"Excellent. I'll be over tomorrow to meet him."

"What?" I yelped. "No, absolutely not."

"Hmmm. You know, I should see what Selina is doing for dinner tomorrow. This is the perfect excuse." Flo had had a crush on my sister since we were in high school. Selina was oblivious.

"No."

"Oh, you can't stop us. We'll just pop by to meet the rabbit."

"No."

"I've already sent her a text."

Fuck me.

I had trouble calming down after my call with Flo—who had *not* talked me out of being interested in Steve like she'd been supposed to. I thought about working on my book, but I didn't have any new ideas for a story.

Hah, I should just put a rabbit in it. Not for Kane, though. A rabbit would fit Detective Hartwell better. An abandoned rabbit he has to find a home for? Or Hartwell finds the rabbit and tries to return him to his home? Maybe the rabbit is covered in blood?

I drifted over to my laptop. What if the rabbit's owner was Hartwell's neighbor? Didn't Steve say Rocket had screamed when it thundered?

I opened the laptop and powered it on.

10am came way too early for me, but I was elated at my progress on the book last night. I hadn't gone to bed until 3am, but I'd roughed out the first four chapters.

Of course that book wasn't the one I *should* have been writing, but whatever. Maybe Kane's fans would be patient.

Hah, no. They were extremely demanding about getting this final story.

I took a quick shower and sucked down a cup of coffee. Maybe I could talk Steve into driving through somewhere to pick up breakfast.

"It's open!" Steve shouted in response to my knock.

I walked in to find him leaning over his breakfast table, which had been returned to its original upright position. Steve, I noted sadly, was wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt this morning, along with jeans. The jeans hugged his ass nicely at least. He'd spread a light blue bedsheet over the table and was holding a tape measure against it.

I looked around but didn't see Rocket.

[&]quot;What's up?"

He glanced at me over his shoulder and grinned. "I'm making a pet sling for Rocket. That way we can take him to the store with us to make sure we get everything in the right size."

"Uh. Okay?"

Steve set the tape measure on the kitchen counter and picked up a pair of scissors. "I watched a YouTube video—it's easy. But don't worry, I'll get a more secure one at the pet store."

Steve cut a large rectangle out of the sheet. As the pieces fell I saw Rocket hanging out under the table.

"Did he do alright overnight?"

Steve made a face. "We definitely need a litter box. And some hay. I made a list. But he slept in the box with the blanket. I didn't hear a peep out of him all night."

I crouched down and cooed at Rocket. To my surprise, he hopped over to me. "He was probably exhausted from the storm and everything."

"Yeah. I'll get him a real bed to sleep in tonight."

Steve lifted the long rectangle of material in the air then took the narrower ends and tied them together. He slid his head and one arm through the loop he'd made, then he arranged it so the knot was on his shoulder and he had a kind of pouch under one arm. Loose threads hung off the edges of the fabric, but otherwise it looked like it would work.

"Huh," I said. "Impressive."

I scooped Rocket up and we eased him into the pouch, making sure he was calm the whole time. He shifted around a little then settled. There was enough fabric to cover him up, but he could stick his nose out if he wanted to.

"I hope we're getting him some sort of harness," I said.

Steve grinned. "It's on the list."

I drove so Steve didn't have to remove the sling. Sorting the seat belt was interesting, but we made it work.

The weather had cleared up, thankfully. Sunny skies and low humidity with temperatures back up in the fifties.

I begged Steve to let me drive through the Tacodeli that had recently opened in Bent Oak, and he agreed. I bought him a cup of coffee as a thank you.

I still hadn't quite wrapped my brain around my attraction to Steve, but for today I'd just ignore it.

Except, I wouldn't be allowed to ignore it. Fuck.

"I should warn you," I said with a heavy sigh. "My best friend Flo and my sister Selina want to come over tonight and meet Rocket."

Steve's eyebrows went up. "Okay?"

I shrugged. "I promise I'll shoo them out as soon as I can."

He sipped his coffee then said, "I don't mind. Rocket and I don't have anything better to do." He straightened in his seat. "Hey, do they like Indian food? Because I haven't had it in ages."

"They do, but that'd mean you'd be signing up for even more time with them. Flo in particular is not for the faint of heart."

Steve laughed. "I can handle them. After last night, I can handle anything."

"Okay, balcony-boy. I'll remember you said that."

The pet store had almost everything on Steve's list. They did not, however, have any suitable pet slings in stock. Steve would have to order one online.

Rocket had not enjoyed trying on several harnesses to see which would fit best. The store clerk was very helpful, though, and when we found one that worked, we just left it on him and the clerk removed the tags for us.

I'd still had the car radio set to the all-holiday channel, and when we got back into the car after stowing the purchases in the trunk, "Santa's Secret Stocking" started to play.

I shot Steve a glance. He had his lips pressed together and he was staring fixedly out the window. His hand was clenched around the material of Rocket's makeshift sling across his chest.

I flipped the radio back to KATE-FM.

When he heard Tina Turner's powerful voice instead of Melodious Moon's cheerful tones, Steve relaxed. Without looking at me, he said, "Thanks."

"No problem."

As I backed out of the parking space, I hummed along with the song. Next to me, Steve was nodding along to the beat and making a noise that might have been singing, but there was no real melody to it. Could he not carry a tune?

I glanced over at him, and he caught me. He immediately stopped singing. "Sorry. I shouldn't try. No one wants to hear me."

I frowned. "Don't be self-conscious. If you like the music, go for it. That's what music is for. Not to see who's got the best voice or something. It's about what you feel inside. If other people try to make fun of you for enjoying yourself, well, fuck them."

Steve was silent for a few seconds, so I looked over again. He was staring at me with a little smile on his face. "Thanks. That's actually kind of beautiful. No one's ever said that to me before."

Looking out the side window, he cleared his throat. "Uh, I was thinking. When your friend and your sister come over tonight? Instead of ordering in, we could, uh, go out?"

I chuckled but held up a hand. "I'm not laughing at you. It's a great suggestion and I'm sure they'd love it. Especially Flo." I laughed again. "Sorry, but the more Flo can pretend tonight is a date with Selina, the happier she'll be."

"Pretend?"

I nodded, still smirking. "She and I have been best friends since high school. And the first time I brought her to my house, she fell in love with my sister."

"But they're not together?"

I shook my head. "No. Selina has no idea Flo has a mad crush on her. From Selina's perspective, they're friends who do stuff together occasionally. Flo goes into a tragic depression every time Selina gets a new boyfriend. Selina's single now, but Flo won't ask her out, and she won't let me say anything to her either."

"Is Selina completely straight?"

I shrugged. "As far as I know, but I swore I wouldn't ask."

"Well...." Steve's grin was sly when I glanced over at him. "I haven't sworn anything."

I pointed a finger at him. "Do not get me in trouble with Flo."

He put a hand over his sternum. "I promise, she won't suspect a thing."

I wasn't so sure about that, but as long as I could claim innocence, I wouldn't try to stop Steve. Flo's infatuation with my sister was closing in on two decades. Something needed to change.

When I turned into the apartment's parking lot, a police car was parked near our building.

"Huh," I said. "I hope nothing bad happened." I paused. "I mean, they wouldn't be here because we were in Phillip's place last night, right?"

Steve looked at me, wide-eyed. "How would they know? I didn't see an alarm keypad or anything. Did you?"

I shook my head. "It's probably something else on a completely different floor."

Between me and Steve, we were able to carry all of our purchases. I took the lumpy ones—the box of hay and the container of litter—so Steve wouldn't bang them into Rocket accidentally. Rocket was getting pretty restless by that point, and in the elevator he tried to wriggle out of the sling. Steve had to shift his bags to one hand and hang on to Rocket with the other.

When the elevator door opened on our floor, four people were standing in the hallway outside Phillip's door. They all turned to stare at us.

The only person I recognized was Marina, the apartment manager. Next to her was a woman dressed in a grey business suit and heels. The other two were police officers.

"There he is!" Marina cried. She pointed at us. "That's Steve Derryberry. And that's Baz Allen, who lives across the hall." She gestured toward my apartment.

Alarm shot through me. What was happening?

The elevator doors began to close, so Steve and I roused ourselves from our surprise and caught them before they shut. We shuffled into the hallway with our bags and rabbit.

"What's going on?" Steve asked. He held his bags in front of himself as if he were hiding Rocket. He probably didn't remember the bags were printed with the pet store logo.

The female police officer said, "Mr. Derryberry, we're investigating a break-in at Mr. Down's apartment."

"Break-in!" I said. Shit, maybe Phillip did have an alarm system we hadn't noticed.

The woman in the business suit sneezed.

"Mr. Derryberry, I'm Officer Gallegos and this is Officer Pham." Then she indicated the woman in the suit. "This is Elena Hutchins, who is the acting Principal at Bent Oak Elementary school."

Phillip's school. What was this about?

"Hi," Steve said warily.

Rocket wiggled under Steve's elbow and stuck his head out of the sling. As soon as he saw all the strangers, he ducked back inside.

Ms. Hutchins sneezed again, covering her nose with the back of her hand. She said, "I'm thankful to see Mr. Bun is alive and well." She sneezed again.

Steve and I froze. "Mr. Bun? You know this rabbit?" I asked.

She shook her head and began backing down the hall. "It's a classroom pet. I just took over as acting Principal yesterday, and I didn't get Mr. Downs' voicemail about his grandmother

passing and him leaving the rabbit on the balcony until this morning. Apparently one of the students was diagnosed with lice and all the classrooms had to be disinfected immediately. So Mr. Downs had to take the rabbit home." She sneezed again, more violently this time.

"Uh, do you want a tissue or something?" Steve offered.

She nodded, then sneezed again.

"Let me," I said. "She seems to be allergic to Rocket. Um, Mr. Bun, I mean."

My heart ached for Steve. He'd been so excited about his new pet. Heck, I'd been getting a little attached as well.

I dropped the hay and litter in the hall and rushed to my apartment. Once I'd unlocked it and gotten inside, I ran into my bathroom and grabbed the unopened box of tissues from the cabinet.

When I returned to the hallway, Steve had put his bags on the ground as well and was holding Rocket—Mr. Bun—up so Officer Pham could pet his head. Ms. Hutchins had walked even further down the hallway. I took her the tissues.

"So," I said to her, loudly enough for Marina and the officers to hear. "You came to get the rabbit. I don't understand why the police are here."

Officer Gallegos turned to Steve. "Mr. Derryberry, did you retrieve the rabbit from Mr. Downs' balcony?"

Oh, shit.

Steve cuddled Rocket to his chest. "Yes. Last night, when the thunder started, I heard him screaming. Did you see the balcony? He was covered in mud and water. And it was freezing!"

Officer Gallegos put out a hand. "No one is upset about you rescuing the rabbit."

Steve stilled. "You're not? Then why are you here?"

Officer Gallegos glanced at Marina, then Ms. Hutchins. Right.

I said, "Maybe we should figure out what's happening with Rock—Mr. Bun before we get to all that."

Ms. Hutchins grimaced. "My understanding is that he was donated to the school a couple of weeks ago. None of the permanent teachers wanted him in their classrooms so Mr. Downs, being a substitute, ended up with him."

Steve scowled. "Well, Mr. Downs left him out on a balcony with no protection from the weather. He's not getting him back."

She nodded. "In Mr. Downs' defense, he left the voicemail yesterday morning, probably assuming former Principal Lockwood would hear it right away." She sneezed again, then blew her nose. She was clutching the box of tissues to herself much in the same way Steve was clutching Rocket.

Since no one seemed willing to be the first to voice the obvious solution, I intervened. "It doesn't sound like the school is a great place for a rabbit to live. Steve is willing to keep him." I pointed at the pet store bags. "And, as you can see, Mr. Bun will be completely spoiled."

Relief shone from Ms. Hutchins' face. "Mr. Derryberry, are you sure?"

He grinned. "Absolutely. This little guy and I are already great friends." His face brightened. "Why don't you give me your contact info and I'll send you a video for the kids of, uh, Mr. Bun playing and having fun in his new home?"

She beamed. "That would be wonderful." She pocketed her used tissues, then tucked the tissue box under her arm so she could dig through her purse for a business card. I took it from her so she wouldn't have to get near Steve and Rocket.

I said, "Just keep the tissues. You'll probably need them for a while longer."

She thanked me and hurried past Steve, pausing only to exchange business cards with Officer Gallegos. When the elevator doors opened, she practically jumped aboard.

After the elevator hummed its way downward, Steve asked the police officers, "Do you mind if we go into my apartment so I

can let Rocket run around? He's been in this sling for a couple of hours now."

Officer Gallegos said they'd meet us inside, so Steve and I gathered up our purchases and took everything into Steve's apartment.

After setting his bags down, Steve let Rocket out on the kitchen floor. Rocket hopped to his water bowl and started drinking. "Crap, I feel bad for keeping him in the sling so long."

"He's fine," I assured him. "Let's get him set up with the litter box and some food."

We sorted through the bags, and Steve whispered, as if the officers could hear us from the hallway, "What do you think they want to talk to us about?"

I shrugged. "No clue. Seems like Marina or Ms. Hutchins must have called them, though. But if it was something in the apartment, I didn't see it last night."

Steve was tense as he set down the litter pan and poured the newspaper-based litter into it. Based on a suggestion Steve said he'd seen online, I put a handful of hay in one end of the litter box. Rocket immediately hopped inside and did the eating-and-pooping thing he'd done last night.

I shook my head and chuckled. "Is it weird I find that incredibly cute?"

That got a smile out of him at least. "It's cute, and it keeps the poop in the litter box. Win-win."

We heard knocking and the officers came inside. Steve cleared the remnants of the blue sheet off the breakfast table and invited them to sit down.

Officer Gallegos looked at me. "Mr. Allen, right?" I nodded. "Were you also inside Mr. Downs' apartment yesterday evening?"

I nodded and she asked me and Steve to sit with them.

"Please tell us what happened last night."

Shrugging, Steve launched into his tale, and I added details of what I'd seen. Officer Pham took notes. When we got to the part about leaving Phillip's apartment for the last time, Officer Gallegos stopped us.

"Go back. Tell me everywhere you went inside the apartment and what you may have touched."

My eyes widened. "Did something happen inside Phillip's apartment?"

Steve twisted his hands together. "I was only able to use the button lock on the doorknob since I didn't have a key for the deadbolt."

Officer Gallegos said, "Don't worry about that. Just tell us where you went."

Steve snorted. "Well, you can see exactly where I went the first time I walked through, from the footprints I left on the carpet."

Officer Gallegos didn't look amused, though Officer Pham chuckled. We talked them through our search for rabbit supplies in the kitchen.

She said, "Did anything look out of the ordinary in the apartment?"

Okay, this had gone on long enough. "No. Why? What exactly happened?"

"Someone broke into Mr. Downs' apartment and pretty much destroyed most of his belongings."

My mouth fell open in shock. "What?"

Steve shook his head. "Catwoman's canoe, I didn't hear anything last night. Rocket might have, but he didn't make any noise."

Officer Pham said, "We believe they were searching for something. Did you notice anything that seemed odd or out of place while you were in the apartment?"

"Oh, shit," I said, slapping my pockets to find my phone. "I took pictures. Here."

I opened my photos app and handed the phone over. Gallegos and Pham leaned their heads together to examine the pictures.

"Why did you take these?" Officer Gallegos asked suspiciously. Her face relaxed when I told her how we didn't want Phillip to blame us for causing any damage to his place.

"Officers, I swear Baz and I didn't destroy anything in Phillip's apartment," Steve said.

Officer Gallegos nodded. "I believe you, but Mr. Downs might not."

Steve and I exchanged looks. "Phillip likes me. We can vouch for each other. It'll be fine," I assured him.

I texted the photos to Officer Gallegos. She pushed back from the table and said, "We're waiting to hear back from Mr. Downs. If you see or hear from him, please ask him to get in touch with us."

Steve said, "Wait. Don't you need our fingerprints or anything?"

Officer Gallegos gave him a wry smile as she stood. "Our department doesn't have the budget to justify fingerprinting in break-ins unless an item is missing or damaged that is of enough value to qualify as a felony theft. We've left our cards inside the apartment, and Mr. Downs can contact us to verify whether anything was stolen."

They left a few minutes later, after handing business cards to both of us.

Steve shut the door behind them, and he and I stared at each other for a moment.

"Wow," he said. "What the hello goodbye would Phillip have that someone would break in for?"

I shook my head. "No clue." Then I shivered. "Steve, what if... I mean, the person who broke in had to have seen your footprints. What if...."

He looked grim. "What if they think I might have taken the thing they were after?"

I nodded. "It wouldn't hurt to take some precautions tonight. Or you're welcome to sleep on my couch." Like Steve, I just had one bedroom.

"Hmmm. Thanks. I'll think about it," he said in a tone that told me he wasn't planning to take me up on my offer.

Deciding to raise the issue with Steve again later, I followed him into the kitchen to check on Rocket, who was sacked out in his new bed. He'd had a big day, so it wasn't any wonder he was tired.

I noticed the box of letters to Santa sitting on the counter. I pointed to them and said, "We never finished looking at those last night."

Steve's shoulders sagged. "Let's do that later. I'm beat. I think I'm going to take a nap."

I remembered what Cole Washburn had said about Steve sleeping at his desk the other night. Then he'd had a stressful evening yesterday, and the police this morning. He must've been exhausted.

"Do you want me to make you a sandwich or anything?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks. But I am still up for dinner with your sister and your friend." His face brightened. "Maybe they'd like to help us go through the Santa letters before dinner."

I grinned. "Flo and Selina will be all over that."

We settled on them coming to Steve's place at 6:30pm. I'd text Flo and Selina when I got back to my apartment. And I could probably use a nap as well.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

I locked the door to the apartment I'd rented for Karl Thomas' stay in Leaning Oak and slipped the keys into the pocket of my baggy khakis.

I could've stayed in Gio and Kathy's house of course, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to get it cleaned yet. I'd only stopped by to get the mail a couple of times.

This place was nice enough, and the rented furniture and décor wouldn't attract any attention from the maintenance people or apartment management.

Wrigley had referred me to a buddy of his who agreed to run background checks on the other tenants in the building. No red flags. For fun I'd had him run a check on Principal Blackwood. That info, combined with the stuff he'd had lying around in his filing cabinet at home, was enough to send to the Leaning Oak School Board and get him fired. I needed to send it soon because those kids deserved better.

Right now, I was off to my first day as a substitute teacher. Ms. Frost—also squeaky clean, though she could've picked a more reliable husband in my opinion—was going to train me today and tomorrow, and then she'd be on leave after that.

There wasn't much I could do about my above-average height or my bulging arm and chest muscles, but I'd tried to downplay the rest of my looks. The khakis were slightly ill-fitting to help hide my tree-trunk thighs and my substantial manhood.

I'd also grown my blond beard out a bit and added some square-shaped glasses. Those had helped on previous jobs.

I'd read some blog posts and found third-grade lesson plans online, but—like any job—I wouldn't know what I was facing until I got there. Exuding confidence would get me through almost any situation.

CHAPTER 7

STEVE

AFTER A QUICK SNACK OF CHEESE AND CRACKERS, I PICKED Rocket up out of his bed. I laid down on the couch and settled him on my chest. When I pulled a throw over us, he made a weird little purring sound for a minute before yawning and going to sleep. Did rabbits purr? I'd look that up later. After my nap.

We ended up sleeping for three hours. I was probably still catching up after spending the night at the office. I had some time before dinner, so I luxuriated in just lying there on the couch, petting a sprawled-out Rocket, and having zero responsibilities.

I couldn't deny I was feeling better. But I was still mad at Cal.

Alright, fine, I could admit he'd had his heart in the right place. I just wish he'd talked to me about it instead of getting Cole involved.

But, he *had* talked to me about overworking myself, hadn't he? They both had. I just hadn't wanted to listen.

I decided to make an overture. I grabbed my phone off the coffee table. I was sure Cole had told Cal about Rocket by now, so I didn't add any text to the photo I sent both of them of Rocket splayed across my chest.

The replies were almost instantaneous.

COLE

He's adorable. What did you name him?

Cute! I can't wait to meet him

His name is Rocket

I ran a finger absently over Rocket's forehead. Taking on a pet was a serious decision, but I hadn't had any doubts Rocket was meant to be mine. Talking to Ms. Hutchins had confirmed it. What kind of life would he have had living in a classroom anyway? He was much better off here where I could spoil him rotten.

My heart warmed, thinking of how Baz had gone with me to the pet store and helped hold Rocket as I tried harnesses on him. After spending so much time with Baz during the last 24 hours, my former crush-from-afar had morphed into a fullblown infatuation.

Especially now I knew he was gay.

And I'd told him I was bi. My whole body flashed cold, thinking of how I'd just blurted that out to him. I'd only admitted it to myself a little over twelve months ago, and I just couldn't seem to tell anyone else. Even though, as I'd said to Baz, I was sure it wouldn't come as a surprise to Felix and Cal.

But I'd told Baz I was bi, and the world hadn't ended. Though he hadn't reacted in any particular way.

Would he be interested in me? He'd mentioned he'd been married, but he'd lived across the hall from me for a couple of years, so he had to be over his ex by now, right?

Did I dare make a move on him? If he'd been female, I wouldn't have hesitated. I had no problems making an overture to a woman and politely backing off if I got rejected. Surely it would be similar with a man?

What would it be like to put my hand on Baz's neck, feeling the stubble on his jaw as I moved closer for a kiss? When I kissed women after I hadn't shaved for a while, they usually ended up with a little beard burn around their lips. Would I get beard burn? How would the heat of Baz's mouth contrast with the rasp of his scruff against mine?

Rocket butted his head against my hand, and I realized I'd stopped stroking him.

"Sorry, bud." I began petting him again. "I'll try not to imagine making out with Baz when you're around."

Thinking about kissing Baz was jumping ahead of myself anyway. "I should find out if he's interested in me before I attack him with my mouth, right, Rocket?"

Rocket wiggled his nose, which I took as agreement.

"Maybe I should ask him on a date. If he says no, I'll just put him in the friend zone and move on." Hah. That'd be easier said than done. But at least I'd know where I stood.

I didn't want to ask a guy out before I told Cal and Felix about my attraction to men. Even if I hadn't explicitly talked to them about my bisexuality, they'd been there for me as I wrapped my head around how I was feeling. Heck, Cal and Felix had introduced me to *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*, which had gone a long way toward helping me accept my place on the rainbow.

I opened my text thread with Cal and Felix. Without giving myself time to second-guess my decision, I typed and hit *Send*.

BTW, I've been meaning to tell y'all I'm bisexual

My heart raced as I waited for a response. I'd barely started petting Rocket again when Cal initiated a FaceTime call from our group text.

"Hey," I said.

Cal squinted as he peered at the screen. He was in his office at work. "Dude... wait, hold on for Felix."

Felix's face showed up next. He was outside somewhere, his hair matted down with sweat and bits of straw. "Steve! You can't just text stuff like that!"

I snorted. "As if y'all didn't know already."

Cal grinned. "Yeah, your appreciation for Lord Vardox was a little intense for a straight guy."

"So, Steve..." Felix said. He was interrupted by a brown and white horse's head appearing over his shoulder. The horse shoved its nose into the screen of Felix's phone. Cal and I laughed while Felix yelled, "Madeline! Stop it!"

He pushed the horse out of the way and rubbed his phone screen across his shirt. There was still a smear of... something making him look a little blurry, but I decided not to mention it.

"Sorry," he said. "She's just mad I stopped petting her."

I frowned. "Do you need to get back to work?"

He gave me an exasperated look. "I wouldn't be on the phone if I didn't have time to talk." He walked a few steps, and behind him I could see a white barn. He was at the rescue ranch Cole ran with his boyfriends.

"Okay, Steve, back to what I was trying to ask. Are you telling us now for a particular reason? Maybe your neighbor? What was his name? Baz?"

I turned bright red. Not only could I feel my skin get hot, but I could see it in the thumbnail on the screen.

Cal hooted and Felix grinned. "So that's a yes, then?"

"Wait," Cal said. "Which neighbor is Baz?"

"He lives across the hall."

Cal lit up. "Oh! The hot one with the brown hair and glasses?"

I smiled and probably turned even redder. "Yeah, that's him."

"And he's into guys?" Cal asked.

I nodded. "He told me he used to be married to a man."

Felix asked, "And does he know you're bi?"

"He knows. I'm just not sure if he's interested or not. We've, uh, been a little busy." I got Cal caught up on the details of my rescue of Rocket, and then I told both of them about the principal saying I could keep Rocket and also about Phillip's apartment getting broken into.

"Baz is bringing his sister and his best friend over here tonight," I told them. "They want to meet Rocket and we're going for dinner."

"Oooh, he wants you to meet his family!" Felix enthused.

I rolled my eyes at him. "I don't think that's what this is."

Cal nodded. "That's exactly what this is. You need to make a move as soon as the sister and the friend are gone."

"I'm not going to *make a move*. I don't know if he's interested. I'm going to ask him out. Then if he turns me down it won't be awkward."

"Okay," Cal said soothingly. "That'll work too. Either way, we're rooting for you."

"And thank you for telling us," Felix said.

I sighed. These guys were the best, even if I was still a tiny bit mad at Cal for sending me home from work like I was suspended from school for misbehaving.

"Thanks for being there for me while I figured things out."

Both of them smiled at me. Felix said, "You did all the work. And congratulations!"

After a few more minutes of chatting, we hung up. I laid there on the couch for a while more, just idly petting Rocket. Finally I couldn't put off getting up.

"Okay, Rocket. Enough couch time. I need to clean a little if we're having company over."

I lifted him as I sat up, then I put him on the ground. He took off toward the kitchen, giving a weird little kick with his hind legs as he did so. It was almost like he was giving me attitude.

When I got up off the couch, my legs reminded me of my inadvertent attempt at doing the splits last night. I'd soaked in a bath before bed, but I might have to do that again tonight.

Having cleaned everything yesterday, I just did a quick wipedown of the table and kitchen counters. I set the box of Santa letters out so we could look at them later.

I hesitated when I picked up the envelope the process server had delivered. I hadn't opened it yet. Did I want to? Well, no, of course I didn't *want* to.

Deciding to just rip the bandage off, I slid my finger under the seal of the envelope then pulled out the enclosed pages.

Blah, blah Court, blah, blah. Here we go. Oscar Derry was contesting his father's will, citing undue influence by me. Of course. I was called to testify and provide a statement and any supporting documentation.

I needed a lawyer. Maybe Cole knew one.

Resolving to contact Cole about that tomorrow, I resolutely stuffed the document back into the envelope, then I put it on the desk in my bedroom. I was going to focus on dinner and friends for the rest of the evening.

Baz showed up a few minutes early. "Hey," he said. "Flo texted, and she and Selina will be here soon." He was wearing a burgundy long-sleeved t-shirt and faded jeans I couldn't wait to see from the back.

We discussed options for dinner. I was still a little tired, and staying in sounded much better to me this evening. Baz didn't think the women would mind.

He opened a bottle of wine. In between sneaking glances at his ass—which looked just as good in his jeans as I'd imagined—I chopped up some vegetables for Selina and Flo to feed to Rocket.

Rocket himself was in a good mood, tossing around some cat toys Baz had bought him. I'd tried to tell Baz I'd pay for everything, but he'd told me the toys were gifts for Rocket, not supplies. I'd thrown up my hands at that point.

Baz poked through the box of letters to Santa and pulled out one of the envelopes. "Hey, maybe we shouldn't show the girls this one. Seth's letter, I mean." He waved the envelope, grimacing. "Selina is a big Lucas McCord fan, even with his reputation for all the partying and drugs. I don't know if she'd be able to keep her mouth shut about it."

"Oh, yeah. That's a good idea. Um, I'll just put it in the bedroom." I took it from him and hurried to set it on my desk.

When I was coming back through the living room, knocks sounded at the door, so I detoured to open it.

"Hi!" I greeted the two women standing in the hallway. "You must be Selina and Flo. I'm Steve. Welcome and come on in!" It was easy to tell who was who. Selina was slim, almost as tall as Baz and had the same dark hair and brown eyes. She was dressed in knee-high boots over her jeans with a nubby red sweater. Flo, on the other hand, was shorter and rounder, all black hair and pink cheeks. She was cute next to Selina's elegance. She was wearing black jeans and a black sweater with white snowflakes and an image of three reindeer copulating.

"Thanks for having us over!" Flo gushed. She looked me up and down, then turned her attention to the apartment. "Oooh, Marvel and DC! *Hold up*, you have The Flash!" She rushed over to the poster in question.

"Um, yes?"

Selina laughed, and said, "Thanks for letting us invade you." She handed me the bag she'd been holding. "This is for your rabbit. Can we meet him?"

Flo seemed more interested in inspecting my books, but I said, "Thank you, and sure. He's this way."

Baz came out of the kitchen and gave both women hugs. "Rocket's in here. Go on in. We've got some wine out if you want any."

The women gushed over Rocket, sitting on the kitchen floor and competing to see who could get him to come to them first. Rocket was no dummy. He positioned himself in between them to get maximum attention.

"Wow, he's kind of chonky," Flo said.

I nodded. "I don't think he got much exercise when he was living in the classroom."

I opened the gift bag and laughed. They'd gotten Rocket a bunch of carrots, complete with green trailing leaves. I pulled one out and handed it to Selina. "Here, he can have one. I'll put it in the fridge when he's eaten as much as he wants.

Rocket was thrilled with the treat, and Flo and Selina cooed to see him crouch down and nibble on the carrot.

Everyone was in favor of Indian food. Once I'd placed the order, Baz showed Flo and Selina the box of letters to Santa. When he asked if they wanted to help us read them, Flo waved her arms in the air in a mock dance. "This is the best dinner party I've been to all year!"

Baz rolled his eyes but smiled fondly at her.

We all washed our hands and went to sit in the living room. For seating I only had the couch, which was against the wall the living room shared with the bedroom, plus one semicomfortable armchair perpendicular to the couch at the end opposite the balcony. I brought over one of the chairs from the breakfast table and sat in that one. Baz put the box of letters on the coffee table then took the armchair, leaving the couch for Flo and Selina.

Flo sat first, only a little bit to the right of the center of the couch. Selina sat next to her, close enough so their shoulders brushed even though there was plenty of room nearer to the arm of the couch. *Hmmm*. Maybe Flo's crush wasn't as one-sided as Baz thought it was.

Time to do my part to find out.

"Oh!" I said in mock surprise. "Sorry. Baz didn't tell me you two were together." I waved my hand between Flo and Selina.

Flo straightened, her eyes wide with horror. Her mouth opened but before she could deny everything, Selina said, "We're not. At least not *yet*."

No one spoke. I held my breath as Selina turned to Flo, whose eyes had gotten even wider, but this time with something more like hope and amazement.

Selina said, "I was going to ask you if you wanted to go to the fundraiser with me next Friday. As my date."

Flo squeaked but nothing else came out. I looked over at Baz, and he jerked his head toward the bedroom. Since the kitchen was open to the living room, hiding in the bedroom was the only way to give Flo and Selina privacy without leaving the apartment. I nodded and we hurried out of the room.

Baz preceded me into the bedroom, and I shut the door behind us. I was glad I'd at least made a half-hearted attempt at making the bed this morning.

In this room I had even more fan art displayed, though I'd tried to make the rest of the space look like an adult lived here. I'd learned the hard way that Captain America sheets could be mood-killers for most women.

Would Baz feel the same?

"Um, you can sit in the desk chair there while we wait," I told him, sitting down on the end of the bed.

Instead he wandered around, taking in the fan art that was slightly racier than the stuff in the living room. The posters and prints in here depicted the same superheroes—Captain America, Batman, Thor, The Flash, Dick Grayson, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, and Hawkeye—but in these illustrations each of them was intimately embracing one of the other characters. A couple of the male characters were entwined with other male characters.

"The Flash and Captain America?" He walked over to get a closer look.

I asked, "Is Flo into The Flash? She seemed excited about my other poster."

"Oh, hah. It's kind of a running joke between us."

"A running joke?" I chuckled.

He groaned. "Flo would've laughed at that too."

He continued to examine the poster up close, so I went over to see what had caught his attention.

I stopped just behind his shoulder. Baz must not have heard me walk up, because when he turned, he startled back, his eyes wide.

"Sorry!" I reached out to steady him. His arm was warm under my hand. Only the thin cotton of his t-shirt was between me and his bare skin. I swept my thumb across his bicep.

"Steve," he croaked.

My gaze darted up from looking at my hand on his arm. His eyes were intent on mine, his pupils dilated. His breathing became heavier.

This was it. I was sure. It was time.

I was going to make a move on Baz after all. I'd ask him on a date later.

I ran my hand up over his shoulder to cradle the back of his head. His arm came around my waist on the other side and he took a small step to close the distance between us.

Our heads tilted, my eyes closed, and my lips met his.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

Ms. Frost—"Call me Marnie"—took one look at me and didn't care what my qualifications were.

She shook my hand and was so busy ogling my chest she forgot to remove her fingers from mine.

I was severely disappointed to learn that as a substitute I wouldn't be allowed access to the students' records. This was going to take more time than I probably had, but it was still my best option to find the ring.

There were fourteen students in my class, most of them eight or nine years old. Marnie gave me a roster of the kids so I could learn their names.

She talked me through the day's schedule and showed me where she stored all the supplies. Fortunately she'd made lesson plans for the entire three months she'd be gone.

Not that I'd be here that long.

Eventually we heard kids shrieking and Marnie said that meant the first bus had arrived. She'd given me a list of her—now my—scheduled days to stand with the kids at drop-off or pick-up.

Marnie shook her head at me and tsked. "The single moms are going to be on you like lionesses on a gazelle."

I laughed and told her, "I'm gay, so they won't get very far."

She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I think we only have one set of gay parents this year—Alicia Romano's dads. At least they're married, so they won't hit on you."

I decided not to educate Marnie on the realities of human behavior.

CHAPTER 8

BAZ

IN MY OPINION, IT WAS A PERFECT FIRST KISS.

And there would have been a second one, if my sister hadn't shouted from the other room, "You can come out now! The food's here!"

Steve's eyes blinked open, unfocused and confused. I tightened my grip on his hip. Damn, it was hella hot that after one brief kiss he looked dazed, like we'd barely slept after a night of nonstop fucking.

"Was that okay?" I asked him.

He blinked again, and his eyes sharpened on mine. His hand, which had been gripping my neck, slid down to my shoulder. A slow smile crept over his face. "Oh, yes."

A fist pounded on the bedroom door, and we both jumped. "Did you hear me?" Selina shouted. "Food's here."

Reluctantly, I released him. "We'll talk later."

Steve threw me a look over his shoulder as he led the way to the bedroom door. "Talk?"

I grinned.

We entered the living room. Selina was arranging the takeout containers in the middle of the breakfast table, and she gave us a bright smile. "This looks great!"

Flo was slumped in one of the chairs, her cheek propped up on one fist as she stared dreamily up at Selina.

"Um, everything okay out here?" Steve asked.

Selina gave us a triumphant, self-satisfied smile. "Everything's just fine."

Steve went into the kitchen, but I stopped next to the table. "I have questions."

"Nope. Not tonight." She gave Flo a fond look and then winked at me.

Steve brought over a second bottle of wine and topped off my glass, which someone had moved from the living room. "Thanks," I said. "I'm going to need that."

"Don't drink too much," he cautioned with a grin. "Or you won't be able to make it home after dinner." He wiggled his eyebrows.

He turned away to refill the rest of the wine glasses. I knew Steve would be kind about my need to take things slowly, but I also didn't want to disappoint him.

Then I mentally slapped myself. He hadn't even said what he wanted or how far he'd be comfortable taking things tonight. I was overthinking everything. I needed to just relax and see what happened.

Flo and Selina, on the other hand, couldn't take their eyes off each other. Selina had sat down next to Flo, and they were holding hands and touching each other's hair.

"Is it getting hot in here, or is it just me?" Steve asked with a smirk.

Those two hadn't even glanced at the food.

"Maybe we should pack their dinners to go," I suggested.

Steve frowned. "Can they drive like this? Should we call a rideshare for them?"

I pointed a finger at him. "Good idea. Why don't you put their dinners in some bags, and I'll call a car?"

He nodded and stood up, closing and stacking a couple of the takeout containers. I pulled out my phone and opened the rideshare app. Eyeing the googly-eyed couple, I picked Flo's place as their destination. It was closer.

The car was three minutes away.

"I'll walk them down," I told Steve.

He handed me the bag of food, then looked over at Selina and Flo before leaning in and giving me a quick kiss on the mouth. "Hurry back." He winked and went back into the kitchen.

I groaned, then resolutely turned toward my sister and my best friend. I rapped my knuckles on the table, and they jumped apart.

"What? What's going on?" Selina asked.

"I called you a car. You're going to Flo's house. Come on." I raised the bag in the air, as if the sight of their dinner would be any incentive.

Selina blinked once, then nodded. "Good plan. Come on, love."

Love? They hadn't even kissed until ten minutes ago.

Selina shoved her chair back, tugging on Flo's arm as she stood. Flo came willingly.

I wished I was recording this. I'd never seen Flo act so... pliant.

Selina put her arm around Flo's waist and guided her out of the apartment. Shaking my head, I lifted both their purses from the counter and followed.

Selina and Flo did not speak on the way down in the elevator. They each had their arms wrapped around the other's waist. I was interested to see how they would separate to get in the car.

We exited the building just as the small silver sedan the app had told me to expect pulled to a stop.

"This is you," I told Selina and Flo. Selina nodded.

The back door of the sedan opened, and a guy who looked like he was auditioning to be a rock star got out. Black jeans, motorcycle boots, black leather jacket with silver studs all over it, black backpack, shoulder-length wavy hair, dark sunglasses, and—of course—a guitar case. But he couldn't have been much out of high school, if that, so the entire effect came across as a kid wearing a Jake Lord costume.

I snorted to myself. As if a kid his age would even know who Jake Lord was. Bent Oak's resident rock legend was way too old to interest a teenager.

Selina and Flo ignored the baby rock star as they floated toward the car. I gave the kid a nod but had to focus on getting the women inside. They both made little whining noises when they had to release each other to sit down, but they quickly joined hands and that must've been enough to satisfy them. I put their purses on Flo's lap since she was closest.

"One of you call me tomorrow, please. Or I'm calling you!"

No response. I shut the door, and the driver pulled away. Whatever. I had more interesting things to worry about for the rest of the evening.

After that kiss—that perfect, perfect kiss—I hadn't had any more doubts about whether I wanted to pursue something with Steve. Sure, there was no guarantee things would work out, particularly since I had loads of emotional baggage and he'd never been with a guy before, but I was ready to try.

And, dammit, I was going to try hard. Very, very hard.

Reminding myself to repeat that innuendo to Flo once she rejoined reality, I halted next to the baby rock star dude waiting for the elevator. It reminded me of running into Steve just yesterday morning in the same spot.

I was so lost in reliving that moment, wishing I would've been nicer, it took several seconds for me to realize I'd started humming "Santa's Secret Stocking", just like yesterday. I needed to ask Steve what his issue with the song was.

"Sorry, but do you have to?"

I jumped a little, then regarded the rock star dude. "What?"

He eyed me up and down. "Look, I'm sure you think you're being cute or something, but it's been a long day, so if we could just pretend I'm a nobody like you, that would be great."

I was still goggling at him when the elevator doors opened. He did look a little familiar, so I supposed I should've recognized him, but I didn't.

Shrugging, I trailed after him into the elevator. He pulled out his phone instead of pushing a button, so I hit the one for the fourth floor. He glanced up at the button panel, then over at me with a sneer.

"Are you trying to be cute again? Is this some sort of ploy to pretend we have something in common?"

I tilted my head to the side. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"You picked the floor I'm going to," he huffed.

Both my eyebrows flew up. "Uh, I live on that floor, sorry. Nothing to do with you."

The elevator came to a stop, and when the doors opened, he gestured for me to precede him. Rolling my eyes, I headed for Steve's place.

I didn't try to see where baby rock star dude went. When I got to Steve's door I just turned the knob and entered his apartment while calling, "I'm back!"

He responded, "In the kitchen! I'm heating up the food."

I took in the dim lighting, the low, sultry music playing, and the lit candle on the table. I smiled. Steve was making his intentions clear, and I was here for it.

I pushed the door closed behind me without looking, so when it hit something—some *one*—instead of shutting, it took me a second to register the problem.

I turned to find the baby rock star dude standing in the doorway staring at me. Or at least he was staring in my direction—the sunglasses made it hard to tell.

"Can I help you?" I asked snottily.

He pulled the sunglasses off, and the bright blue eyes were unmistakable. Well, shit.

"Uh, Steve?" I called. "You have a visitor!"

I heard Steve come out of the kitchen behind me, and I stepped to the side so he could see... his brother?

Steve didn't say anything, so I glanced over at him. He looked stunned. He finally blinked and found his voice.

"Dirk? What are you doing here?" Dirk? Who names their kid *Dirk*? Though the name was pinging something in my brain....

"Hello, brother dear. I'm impressed you recognized me." Dirk sauntered forward. I'd have bought his cocky act if I hadn't noticed how tightly his fingers clutched the strap of his backpack.

Once Dirk passed me, I shut and locked the door. Then I leaned back against it and waited. I'd ask Steve if he wanted me to leave in a minute, but this reunion was tense, and they didn't need me interrupting them.

Steve folded his arms. "What brings you to Texas? Did our father send you?"

Dirk's back straightened. "Hardly. He doesn't know I'm here. Drake is covering for me."

Wait, *Dirk* and *Drake*? There was only one set of siblings on earth with those names, I was sure. And that meant this kid was a rock star.

And I suspected I knew why Steve refused to listen to "Santa's Secret Stocking".

Dirk leaned over to set his guitar case and backpack down. "Dad's been crowing about his bullshit lawsuit contesting Grandfather's will."

Was that what the process server had been about?

"And, uh, Drake and I were talking...." He rubbed the back of his neck. "We miss you, you know?"

Steve stepped back like he'd been struck. "You *miss* me? You —all y'all—told me I'd turned Grandfather against you." His voice broke with hurt. "None of you believed me when I told you Dad was lying."

Dirk gazed to the side but nodded. "I know. You're right." He looked at Steve again. "I'm *sorry*. Drake and I didn't understand what was going on. We were eleven years old, for fuck's sake. All we knew was you were finished with high school, but you wouldn't move to California. Dad said you didn't want to be part of the family anymore. He said you didn't love us, that you were jealous of us."

Steve pressed his lips together, but unbent enough to say, "That's not true. That was *never* true."

Dirk nodded, sniffling, and rubbed his eyes with the back of one hand. "I'm sorry I didn't question it. I didn't question *him*. None of us did."

"You and Drake were young. It's understandable." His face hardened. "The others, not so much." He crossed his arms. "So what changed?" Steve's tone made it clear he knew his siblings hadn't had a sudden epiphany of brotherly love.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

Marnie introduced me to each child as they came into the classroom. I got a lot of wide-eyed stares, but a few of the kids were ready to interact right off the bat.

"Mr. Thomas, why are you so tall?"

"Mr. Thomas, do you work out a lot?"

"Mr. Thomas, do you know Captain America?"

When they were all seated, Marnie had me do roll-call—attendance, whatever—so I could start matching the faces to the names. But I'd honed that skill behind enemy lines, and it only took me a few minutes to have everyone's identities locked down.

One of these kids had stolen the Barbie that Gio had used to hide Sergei Ostap's ring. The theft itself didn't bother me, and I would never blame the kid for Gio and Kathy's deaths. But until the ring—which probably meant the Barbie—was found, that kid and their family were in danger.

CHAPTER 9

STEVE

DIRK SHUFFLED HIS FEET AND RUBBED HIS LEFT HAND OVER HIS right arm. "Um." He glanced over his shoulder at Baz, who was leaning against the door with his arms crossed and a blank expression on his face.

I said, "Dirk, this is Baz. Baz, Dirk is my youngest brother."

Dirk turned slightly so he didn't completely have his back to Baz anymore. "Hey."

Baz relaxed enough to say, "Nice to meet you."

"Um." Dirk grimaced awkwardly. "Sorry I was an asshat in the elevator. I didn't know you were Steve's boyfriend."

I opened my mouth to correct him, but Baz just said, "No worries. I didn't know who you were either." He still had a bland expression on his face, but when Dirk turned back to me, Baz winked.

At least Dirk didn't seem to care about me being into guys. I'd correct him about Baz being my boyfriend later. Right now I was exhausted, and since Flo and Selina had left early I'd been looking forward to a private dinner with Baz so we could get to know each other better. I wasn't prepared to deal with my family's malarkey tonight.

I said to Dirk, "We'll talk about this more tomorrow. Baz and I were about to have dinner. We've got enough to share if you're hungry."

I shot Baz an apologetic look. He gave me a *what-can-you-do?* shrug, then mouthed *Want me to leave?* and jerked his thumb behind him toward his apartment.

I shook my head firmly. "Come on, both of you. Dirk, do you want to wash up?"

Baz started toward me, but Dirk was looking around the apartment for the first time. "Uh oh. Based on the mood lighting, I'm guessing I interrupted your date night. Sorry."

Me too. "You didn't know."

Dirk gave me a wicked grin. "Damn, I just realized. If you're gay, that means every one of Dad's kids is somewhere on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. I love it."

I wish I could've said I hoped that would be something Dirk and I would have in common to bond over, but I was too tired to care.

Dirk chuckled darkly. "Dad cuts our allowance if we're caught with someone who doesn't present as the opposite sex."

Now *that* I cared about. "Hunter, Heath, and Mona have been letting him do that?"

Dirk wandered over to my bookshelves. "He had them convinced it hurts our brand if we're seen as anything but straight."

I scrunched up my face. "But...."

Dirk shook his head. "I'm telling you, those three are all about the music. Everything else—finances, personal lives, whatever—they're just as happy to have someone else make the decisions for them."

While Dirk and I were talking, Baz had pulled our takeout containers from the microwave. A third place setting had appeared on the breakfast table, and the candle had vanished.

"I hope you like Indian food," I told Dirk. He followed me toward the kitchen, but I stopped when I heard him gasp.

Dirk was pointing toward Rocket, who was sitting up on his hind legs on the kitchen floor. "You have a rabbit?" Dirk tiptoed slowly closer. "Is he friendly? Can I *pet* him?"

"Sure. He likes it if you sit down on the floor so he can get to know you."

Dirk's face lit up, making him look years younger. I thought wistfully of the last time I'd seen the twins. I'd visited them in California right after I'd graduated from high school. The band had been about to leave for yet another world tour, and Dirk and Drake had almost cried they'd been so happy to see me.

Foolishly I'd thought we'd all keep in touch, but two months later I'd noticed I was the only one texting and making phone calls. By Christmas every one of my siblings, Dirk and Drake included, had messaged me that they didn't see me as part of the family anymore and I should stop contacting them. My father didn't bother with any explanation. He just stopped answering the phone.

Funnily enough, my siblings freezing me out started almost immediately after Grandfather told Dad he thought the rest of the kids had plenty of money, so he was leaving his entire estate to me.

Dirk removed his leather jacket and tossed it over the back of one of the chairs. Then he dropped down on the floor a couple of feet away from Rocket, who regarded him with some trepidation.

"What's his name?" Dirk whispered.

"Rocket."

Cautiously Dirk held out his hand. When Rocket didn't shy away, Dirk gently brushed his fur with his fingers.

"He's so soft."

"If he comes over to you, you can put him on your lap."

I walked past Dirk and Rocket to see if Baz needed any help with the food. He handed me one of the containers and, after a quick look behind me at Dirk, he mouthed, *Are you okay?*

I shrugged, blinking away sudden tears. I was just tired, really. But the concern in Baz's eyes deepened, and he reached out to pull me into him. I held the takeout container awkwardly to one side and sagged into Baz's solid warmth.

"I'll stay until you tell me to leave," he whispered into my ear.

"Thanks," I whispered back.

"And I promise I'll never listen to Melodious Moon again."

I chuckled. "Figured it out, did you?"

I felt him smile. The scruff on his cheek against my neck was an interesting sensation, and I shivered.

"The names were kind of a giveaway." Ugh. I was fortunate to have been named after my grandfather, but my siblings were victims of my dad trying to make them *memorable*. The media enjoyed listing all of them off—except me of course—so everyone in the world could say the names of my siblings in their birth order.

With a sigh, I released Baz, giving him a grateful smile. I wasn't sure what we were doing—or more like what I was doing—but having him here while I dealt with Dirk showing up was possibly the only thing keeping me sane tonight.

I grabbed the other takeout containers from Baz and walked them over to the table. Dirk had managed to get Rocket on his lap and was smiling down at the rabbit as he petted him.

"Dirk, I've got water or Coke. Which do you want?"

He made a face. "I'd rather have a beer."

"You're only eighteen. Coke it is."

"I'm on it," Baz said.

"Thanks, would you pour me one too? I need the caffeine after the last 48 hours."

Dirk looked up. "What happened in the last 48 hours?"

I hesitated. I didn't know why Dirk was here. He'd said some negative things about our father, but my instincts were telling me not to trust him with any information.

Baz nudged me out of the way as he carried our drinks to the table. "There was a break-in next door. The police came and everything. And we took Rocket to the pet store." He snorted. "I don't know how people take their pets to work with them all the time. It was so stressful having to worry about him on even a short errand."

Wow, Baz was smooth. No wonder he was a writer in his spare time

I blinked and forced myself toward the table. "Dirk, you want to eat something? Rocket's not allowed at the table, sorry."

Dirk made a sad noise then picked Rocket up, kissed him on the top of his head, and set him to the side. Baz and I seated ourselves and started dishing out the food while Dirk washed his hands.

He joined us at the table and almost immediately shoveled a couple of heaping forkfuls of korma into his mouth and practically swallowed them without chewing. Then he asked, "What got stolen in the break-in next door?"

Baz and I shrugged. "We don't know," I told him. "The police said all of our neighbor's belongings were trashed so they couldn't tell if anything was missing. They're trying to get hold of him but he's in Florida for his grandmother's funeral."

Dirk nodded, eyes focused on his food. "So how long have you two been living together?"

I straightened in my seat and opened my mouth to correct Dirk, but Baz calmly said, "Not long."

Dirk nodded down at his food again, so I bugged my eyes out at Baz. And that lint licker winked at me! Then he said, "In fact we're just testing the waters with it right now. I've still got my own apartment across the hall for the time being."

What the Helena Bonham Carter was he doing? I tried to convey my confusion with laser eyes and telepathy, but he just smiled blandly at me and said, "I think it's going pretty well so far, though, don't you?"

Well, two could play that game.

I nodded and as casually as I could I said, "I agree. Don't forget, you need to bring more clothes over."

Baz pointed his fork at me. "Dirk should stay at my place tonight."

Dirk's head finally lifted, and together he and I both said, "Huh?"

"I have the fold-out couch," I protested weakly.

Baz flicked this idea away with his fork. "At my place Dirk would have a perfectly comfortable queen-sized bed. And he'd have his own bathroom." He made a slight face and told Dirk, "Maybe give me ten minutes to run over there and do a quick cleanup. Change the sheets and such."

Dirk smiled at Baz. His first real smile since he'd arrived, not counting the ones he'd aimed at Rocket. He and Drake had my mother's smile, and I had to turn my head to deal with the wave of emotion roiling through me. Mom would've been devastated to see what Dad had done to her family.

"That'd be great, thanks," Dirk said.

So that's what we did. After dinner I gave Dirk my TV remote, and he sat on the floor with Rocket. Then Baz and I went across the hall to his apartment to get it ready for his impromptu houseguest.

Baz opened the door and gestured me inside.

"You know you don't really have to—"

Shutting the door with his foot, Baz tugged me against him. "Do you really want your brother on your fold-out couch if the burglar comes back?" he asked as he crowded me into the wall.

"Well, no, but—" I sucked in my breath as he pushed our groins together and I could feel his hard dick for the first time. He didn't speak. He just slowly, carefully thrust his dick against mine. I gasped.

Baz put one hand on the back of my head and the other between my shoulder blade and the wall. Then he leaned in. "And," he growled into my ear, "Absolutely no pressure, but if your brother is across the hall, he won't be able to hear anything we might do."

"Yeah," I gasped out. "Okay." I gripped the waistband of his jeans, unable to generate the brainpower to move more than that much.

Baz took my earlobe between his teeth and bit down gently. The little flash of pain arrowed through my body straight to my balls.

My hips jerked involuntarily, and I started panting.

"Hela's hedgehogs!"

Baz pulled back and ran a thumb over my bottom lip, pulling it down. My whole body trembled.

"Damn, Steve." He stared into my eyes. His were filled with confusion and... wonder? I didn't have time to examine them further because he dropped a single kiss on my cheek before stepping back.

I stumbled, not prepared to support myself again. He reached out and braced my arms until I was steady on my feet.

"You okay?"

I nodded. "Um, yes. And, uh, that sounds like a good plan. For Dirk, I mean."

Baz backed up another step. "Good." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Let me change the sheets and pack up some of my stuff."

I shook my head, trying to get my brain back online. "I'll help you."

I followed him through his living room. He had essentially the same layout I did, but he'd put his desk against the far wall of the living room instead of in the bedroom like I had.

His furniture looked like an adult with decorating skills had purchased it. The couch was large and comfortable looking, a dark camel color with maroon and blue throw blankets across the armrests at either end. Two large blue armchairs faced the couch across the wooden coffee table.

Baz owned one bookshelf, but it was much taller than mine. I walked over to check it out. The spines of his books were more muted colors, mysteries and thrillers with moody gray and black covers with white lettering and blood-red accents. My books tended toward black and silver sci-fi novels and colorful fantasy titles, all gold and jewel tones.

On the eye-level shelf, a framed photo sat in front of the books. Standing on a beach, Baz was hugging a grinning chestnut-haired lumberjack-type, who'd probably have looked more at home in jeans and a flannel shirt instead of the tux he was wearing. He and Baz had bare feet and rolled-up pant legs. They both wore boutonnieres.

An awful dread coiled in my gut. You didn't display your wedding picture if you got divorced.

"That was Warren," Baz said from behind me.

I touched the frame. "He looks nice."

Baz moved closer, wrapping his arms loosely around me and putting his head on my shoulder to gaze at the picture with me.

"He was nice."

I considered my next words. I had multiple questions, but right now Baz was just someone I'd made out with a couple of times, so I didn't feel like I had any right to ask them.

Baz said, "He died almost three years ago."

I clasped his hands where they rested on my belly. "I'm sorry. That must have been awful."

Baz made a broken, choked laugh sound, so I spun around in his arms and hugged him as tight as I could. I remembered the horrible pain of my mother's death, and the endless howling of *Why?* in my soul for years after she passed. I couldn't imagine losing a spouse.

"Sorry," Baz gritted out, not loosening his embrace.

"Take your time. I'm here."

Eventually he took a deep breath and stepped back. His eyes were dry, but his lips were trembling. "Thanks. I guess I needed a hug," he said.

I nodded and gave him a small smile. "Anytime."

After a sharp nod, he said, "Right." He looked around the room. "Sheets. I think the place is in decent shape otherwise."

I followed him into the bedroom and helped him strip the bed.

Baz was silent at first, but as he handed me the clean set of sheets he said, "You know, we should make sure Dirk doesn't try to sneak Rocket over here."

I chuckled and agreed. Then I said, "I feel for him, though. Our father didn't allow animals in the house, so he probably hasn't had much exposure to pets."

I put the new sheets on the bed while Baz packed a duffel bag with his clothes and toiletries. He made sure to leave soap and shampoo for Dirk, which was kind of him.

After Baz gave the bathroom a quick wipe-down with some cleaning spray and paper towels, he put his laptop and power cords in a backpack, and we were ready to go.

I picked up the duffel bag and was heading for the door when Baz said, "Wait."

He went into his closet and collected an armful of shirts still on their hangers.

He smirked. "This will help sell the story that I'm living with you."

I shook my head at him. "Why is that even necessary? What difference does it make whether he thinks we're living together or not? You could've offered to have him stay over here even if he thought we lived apart."

He gave me a sheepish smile. "I told him in the elevator I lived on the fourth floor, and then I went straight to your apartment. It's not my fault he assumed I lived with you." Baz hitched up one shoulder. "You don't have to go along with it. But, Steve." He stopped in front of me, reaching out to put his hand on my bicep with the arm not burdened by a load of shirts. "I saw your face. You don't trust Dirk, and he hasn't said what he wants."

Baz examined me for a moment. "I needed an excuse to be there for you when he drops whatever drama bomb he's got." He looked uncertain. "Um, as long as you want me there, of course."

I blew out a breath. It'd be nice to have someone in my corner to help me deal with Dirk. And Baz was thinking the same

thing I was; Dirk had a reason for coming to see me, and I probably wasn't going to like it.

"Yeah. I want you there if you're willing."

He gave me a brilliant smile, then leered. "I'm very willing."

I rolled my eyes but smiled to myself as I continued out the door and across the hall.

Back in my apartment, Dirk had abandoned the TV in favor of taking the box of Santa letters off the kitchen counter and spreading them across the coffee table. He'd opened one and was reading it.

"Barton's bushtits, those are private. You didn't have permission to read them. Do you usually go around opening things that don't belong to you?"

Dirk flushed as he dropped the letter, but he immediately sneered at me. "I can't believe you're still using those stupid phrases instead of cursing like a real person."

I felt Baz come up behind me. He didn't touch me, but I could feel the heat of his body against my back.

I paused, letting Baz's support steady me. "I'm sorry you didn't have enough time with Mom to let her teach you how to have fun with cursing instead of using it to fit in."

Dirk's hands clenched into fists, but he didn't respond, just gazed blankly at the letters.

I breathed in and out slowly.

"If you want to stay here, you need to respect Baz and my property. That means no opening drawers in the bedrooms or desks. No touching anything you don't have permission to. Do you agree to abide by that rule?" Which I shouldn't have had to spell out. And it wouldn't keep him from nosing around if he really wanted to, but at least I'd made myself clear.

Dirk glared downward, but finally said, "Yes. I'm... sorry." That last part was choked out like he hated saying it.

"Thank you," I said.

I moved toward the bedroom to drop Baz's duffel bag off. As I walked, I said casually, "Baz found those letters in the recycle bin. We haven't finished reading all of them, but we were thinking of doing something nice for those kids for the holiday." He didn't say anything, and I didn't look back. I headed down the hall and called over my shoulder, "You didn't tell me how long you'll be staying, but you can help if you like."

A faint, "Uh, sure," came from the living room.

I tossed Baz's duffel on the bed and sat next to it, dropping my head into my hands.

"You did good," Baz whispered as he passed me. He said louder, "Let me hang these up, then I could use a beer."

He dropped his backpack on my desk chair. Then I watched Baz open my closet door as if he did it all the time. He shoved my shirts to one side and hung his own next to them. His fake living-together scheme was odd and completely unnecessary, but I wouldn't complain about getting more time with Baz. More alone time with Baz. Possibly naked time with Baz.

And my brother was in the next room.

I stood up, my eyes falling on the Lucas McCord Santa letter on my desk. I needed to hide that from Dirk. If he was here as some sort of spy for our father, I couldn't risk Dad getting his hands on it.

I picked up the letter and cast about for a safe spot to put it in. Maybe a coat pocket in the closet?

Baz saw what I was doing, and whispered, "Do you have some tape?"

I nodded and pulled open one of my desk drawers, then handed him the tape dispenser. He ripped off a small piece, then took the letter from me. He strode over to the picture of The Flash and Captain America and lifted it away from the wall. Then he taped the letter to the back.

I gave him a thumbs up, and he smiled before taking my hand and leading me back into the living room.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

Today was my first day of teaching without Marnie. I didn't have to monitor pick-ups after school, so I was hoping to leave in time to follow one of the buses.

I'd had to put Sarah Connor in storage; no elementary school teacher would've been able to afford her. Instead I was driving a bland light-blue Honda SUV. No one would look twice at it.

The kids were thawing toward me more quickly as the day went on. Yesterday they'd been worried about Marnie leaving, but we'd crossed that emotional bridge this morning and they were getting used to me.

Yesterday and today a large number of kids hadn't ridden the bus, but instead their parents had accompanied them to drop them off at the classroom. I even had a few repeat parent visits—those were the lionesses Marnie had warned me about.

I needed to buy some looser shirts. Their eyes were lingering on my chest the most, so the khakis were doing their job, but the polos would have to go.

One of Alicia Romano's dads had brought her to the door this morning. She'd said, "Dad, this is Mr. Thomas. Is he a bear or a bull? I couldn't decide."

Mr. Romano had turned bright red, muttered something about having to get to work, and run off.

Over the past few days, I'd started to get to know the kids' personalities, which would help me build profiles to see which

ones might not have any problem taking something that didn't belong to them.

Andrea Jang, a perky, bright-eyed kiss-ass, had asked me several times if she could help with things—setting up the room, handing out papers, etc. I'd let her help once, but the other children rolled their eyes and didn't interact with her for the rest of the activity, so the next time she'd volunteered I'd told her the duties had to be rotated among the students.

Ramon Gutierrez was a budding athlete. He'd asked me if I played any sports and if I was going to help coach the Pop Warner football team he was on.

After that Darla Ridlaw announced she was going to ask her parents if she could play football. Ramon had protested that girls couldn't be on a football team, and I'd had to lead them through a conversation about tradition vs. capabilities. I was sweating by the time I'd brought the discussion to an end. This was fucking third grade, not a college course.

One child I'd noticed, mostly because he barely spoke to me or anyone, was Sean Cleary. I'd tried calling on him during lessons, but he gave one-word answers and then kept his eyes on his desk. I'd seen a couple of the other kids talk to him briefly on the way to recess, but he'd sat under a tree instead of playing with them. I needed to find out what was going on with him. If anything. Maybe he was just introverted.

CHAPTER 10

STEVE

DIRK WAS STILL SITTING ON THE COUCH, ARMS FOLDED AND staring into space.

"I'll get you a beer," Baz told me. He squeezed my hand before dropping it and heading into the kitchen.

I went over to the couch and sat next to Dirk. "Where's your phone?"

He groaned. "Drake has it. Dad has a tracking app on it—on both of ours—so we decided to leave it there for now."

I gasped. "You don't have a phone? You flew out here with no phone? What if you'd gotten stranded somewhere?"

Dirk rolled his eyes. "Freak out much? I already have one overbearing father in my life, fyi. Like, I have a burner phone. I can call Drake. But it's a flip phone, so it's not good for much else."

I drooped in relief. Baz chuckled as he dangled a beer in front of me. "Give your brother a break, Dirk. He's still getting to know you."

Dirk stared longingly at my beer. "Drake and I planned this whole trip so Dad wouldn't know about it. Low profile all the way. We got our own credit cards and bank accounts on our eighteenth birthday. Dad doesn't have access to them."

Something about what Dirk had just said bothered me, but I couldn't grab at the thought fast enough to figure out what it was.

"Hey, you want to look at the rest of the letters to Santa?" Baz sounded a little over-enthusiastic, but it was nice of him to try.

"Sure."

I sorted through the letters and handed the ones we'd already read to Dirk. "Here, we've gone through these already. Some of them we can make happen. Not sure about the others."

Dirk accepted the envelopes and said, "So, like, you're planning to leave a wrapped present outside their door or something? If I was a parent, I'd think that was sketchy as hell."

Hmmm. He had a point.

Baz said, "Well, Cole told us he'd get involved. Maybe he could write a letter to the parents saying he'd decided to grant all the wishes from Phillip's class or something?"

"Maybe," I said. "As long as we can figure out some justification for it only being Phillip's class."

Baz snorted. "A justification that doesn't involve telling the parents the teacher threw their kids' letters to Santa in the trash?"

"We'll think of something."

Dirk said, "Wait. You really know Cole Washburn? I thought Dad was making that shit up."

I grimaced, remembering my father's tirade on my voicemail. "I do. He's a partner in my software company. My friend Cal is the other partner."

Dirk raised an eyebrow. "Cole and Cal? Doesn't that get confusing?"

I raised my eyebrows back at him. "Dirk and Drake?"

He chuckled. "Fair."

After Dirk had caught up with the letters Baz and I had already read—not counting Seth's letter hidden in my bedroom of course—we started on the rest of them.

Dawayne Erwin wanted a bicycle. Unfortunately, he made it sound like his parents wouldn't approve.

"Discounting his parents' feelings about a bike, how tall are third graders? I don't want to get him a bike that's too big or too small," I said.

Baz suggested, "We could ask the principal."

Dirk scoffed. "What principal would give you personal details about a kid? Plus, are you even going to tell the principal you're doing this?"

Baz and I shrugged at each other again.

"And why exactly are you making this your project? You could just mail the letters, you know. It'd be a lot less effort."

I fiddled with my beer, feeling defensive. "It's the holidays, and we felt like these kids got shafted, having Phillip for their teacher. We wanted to kind of make it up to them, I guess."

"Plus, it gives me and Steve something to do together during our vacation." Baz reached over and took my hand. "It'll make a great memory for our first Christmas together."

Dirk gagged dramatically. "Fine." He held up Dawayne's envelope and pointed at the return address. "A little light surveillance will answer all of your questions."

Automatically I opened my mouth to object, but then I couldn't think of a reason to. Cole already wanted to know what the kids' living situations were like. I looked at Baz.

He held his hands palm up. "I don't have a better idea."

I thought a minute. "Okay. If we're going to do this, we're doing it right. We need to document the data we have and make a plan."

I went into the bedroom and brought out my personal laptop.

"All right, y'all read off the kids' names and addresses to me, and I'll make a list with what they're asking for."

In short order I had a spreadsheet going. "Okay, who's next?"

Baz gestured at Dirk to open an envelope. Dirk made a production of shutting his eyes and selecting one at random.

He read off the name, Rudy Zdenko, and his address. Dirk read silently for a moment, then said, "Rudy is eight years old. He wants a Nintendo Switch, but mom can't afford it, so he's hoping Santa will bring it to him. It sounds like he's asked Santa for one for a few years now."

Baz and I both went, "Awww." I didn't think Cole's generosity would extend to a gaming system, but I made notes in my spreadsheet anyway.

Baz said, "The accountant in me is really turned on by your spreadsheet skills."

I gave him slow elevator eyes. "I can't wait to see you do my taxes. That'll be hot like fire."

Dirk made a face. "Eww. Please, no sex talk in front of me."

I laughed. "No promises. Next envelope, please!"

I got an eye-roll, but he pulled out another letter. Gus Barrons. I entered Gus' name and address in my spreadsheet while Dirk removed the letter from the envelope.

"Gus wants a skateboard." He grinned. "Gus' parents are also not fans of Gus' idea."

The next letter was from Bette Flowers. Dirk said, "Aww. She wants a baseball glove. She says her dad takes her to the college team games in the spring, but when it's off season she wants something they can do together."

In short order we'd filled out most of the list. T'Kayla Quan wanted a chemistry set. Rafael Guerro wanted, we figured out after some internet searching, a set of blow-up bubble suits he and a friend could wear and bounce off each other. Ava Jeong wanted an American Girl doll. Liam Carter wanted a gaming computer.

Dirk pulled the final letter from the box with a flourish. I was ready to finish this for the evening, so I could kick Dirk across the hall and get to bed. With Baz. Exhaustion warred with arousal and a good bit of trepidation.

I knew Baz would let me set the pace for whatever we did tonight, but I couldn't decide how far I wanted to go. I didn't have any doubts about whether I wanted to do something with him, but what? Internet porn couldn't be relied on for real life applications.

"Steve?"

I started. "Oh! Sorry, Dirk. I'm getting a little tired." Which he might have bought, but I could feel the blush covering my face and neck. Galloping Green Lantern.

Dirk raised his eyebrows but didn't comment. "Right. Anna Friedmann." He read off the address, and I focused very hard on making sure I entered it correctly in the spreadsheet.

He grinned and said, "Listen to this:

Dear Post Office,

Santa Claus doesn't exist. I'm only doing this for Mr. Downs because he's really nice. My mom will get me presents.

But my mom needs a boyfriend if you know anyone.

Thanks,

Anna

I chuckled at the comment about Anna's mom, then said slowly, "It's weird. Phillip threw away these letters, but it sounds as if the kids like him."

I still didn't agree with his leaving Rocket on the balcony. Even in the best of weather, that could've gone badly. Why not just lock Rocket in the bathroom?

And then there was the whole homophobe thing.

"Well, the mystery of Phillip will have to wait for another day. It's time for bed." Baz stood up and started collecting our beer bottles and Dirk's glass. "Come on, Dirk. I'll take you over to my place and get you settled."

"Sure. I need to call Drake anyway." Dirk gathered the envelopes and put them back into their box.

I stood when he did. "Just come over when you wake up. We'll go for breakfast or something."

Dirk gasped dramatically and clasped his hands under his chin. "I was researching before I came here. Can we go to Kerbey Lane Cafe for breakfast? And later on, can we go see some bands? I mean, if we have time." He pointed at the box of envelopes. "I know we have to do the surveillance. But I read about an armadillo festival or something that has art and live music. Can we at least stop by?"

I laughed. "Yeah, there's the Armadillo Christmas Bazaar in Austin, and Bent Oak has the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown, which is similar but a little smaller. They're open every day and night through Christmas Eve, so we can make time for both if you want."

Dirk smiled his genuine smile again. "Great. Thanks. And, uh, I guess I'll see you tomorrow." He gave me an awkward wave and walked over to pick up his backpack and guitar case. Then he followed Baz across the hall.

I texted back and forth with Cole about the kids and what they'd asked for in their letters. In between texts I emptied my cabinets of pots and pans and put them on the floor next to the balcony door.

After making sure Rocket had his new bed, hay, food, and a clean litter box, I turned the breakfast table on its side and blocked off the kitchen again. Eventually I might let Rocket roam free at night, but this would do for now.

Baz came back as I was stacking the pots and pans on the balcony under the railing next to Phillip's place. "Nice alarm system. Good call." He handed me the last few items and shut the door behind me after I hurried inside. Another cold front seemed to be moving in.

"Did you get Dirk settled?" I asked as took one of the chairs from the breakfast table and propped it against the front door under the doorknob. I mentally debated about where to go and what to do next. I wanted to kiss him, but I also wanted to talk about things.

Baz nodded, his lips quirked. "I told him I wouldn't say anything if one beer went missing from my fridge, but if more than one is gone, or if any of my hard liquor has been touched, then he's on the hook for several hours of chores of my choosing."

I walked back over to where Baz was standing by the couch. "How did he react to that?"

He shrugged, looking smug. "He agreed."

Baz stepped closer to me. He tilted his head toward Rocket in the kitchen. "Both of the kids are in bed. Now it's adult time." He peered at my face. "You want to talk about it?"

I felt a rush of relief that I didn't have to suggest that. "Please. Do you mind?"

He closed the distance between us and hugged me. How did he know what I needed?

He said into my ear, "I meant what I said earlier. No pressure." But then he exhaled his hot breath across my ear and neck.

And now I was hard. "Easy for you to say," I told him, nudging his hip with my cock.

He groaned and released me. "That's just mean." But he had a teasing light in his eyes. "Why don't we get ready for bed?" Then he looked worried and rushed to assure me, "Or we can sit on the couch with our clothes on. Either way is fine with me."

I smiled. "Let's get ready for bed." Then I faltered. "Um, with pajama pants?"

Baz grinned and kissed my cheek. "You got it."

He spun around and led the way into my bedroom. I was grateful I'd spent so much time cleaning yesterday.

"Hey, Baz?" I called as I rummaged through a drawer for my pajama pants. Why did I have so many that were worn and faded?

"Mmm-hmm?" He came to the door of the bathroom. He was still dressed, and he had a toothbrush in his mouth. But what made me stare was he'd taken his glasses off.

"Oh," I said, instantly forgetting what I wanted to ask and absolutely unable to look anywhere else. Without his glasses Baz seemed younger and softer.

Baz scrunched his brows at me then ducked back into the bathroom to spit and rinse. He came back out, this time wearing his glasses.

I might have made a noise.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Is it the glasses? I think I look weird without them, but some guys prefer me to wear contacts. They make my eyes itch, though, so I hope it's not a dealbreaker for you." By the end of that he was standing right in front of me.

I managed to unglue my tongue from the roof of my mouth enough to say, "Um, no. The glasses are hot. Sexy. I love the glasses. I just...." I made an awkward wave of my hand. "I hadn't seen you without them and I was... you're beautiful that way too. Both ways. I love you—I mean your face—um, with or without. I'm bi in that way as well, I guess...?"

My heart was pounding from my almost-declaration, and it took me a moment to come back from Panicville and register Baz's smirk. I scowled and whacked him on the chest. "Shut up. I was overcome with lust or something. You can't laugh."

He laughed. "I think I can."

I whacked him on the chest again and, clutching my balled-up pajama pants in one hand, I tried to shoulder past him, but he put out an arm to catch me around the waist and draw me close. "Thank you," he said, nuzzling my ear. "That was one of the nicest compliments I've ever had."

"Oh," I said.

He kissed my cheek then slapped my ass. "Go get changed."

"Hey!" I protested. I rushed into the bathroom to the sound of his chuckles.

I quickly stripped before realizing I hadn't brought a fresh t-shirt, so I put the one I'd been wearing back on. Then I debated whether to wear my boxers, since I hadn't brought any clean ones into the bathroom either.

I pondered the issue while I brushed my teeth. After I rinsed, I whispered to myself, "Okay, Derryberry. Are you planning on getting naked tonight or not?"

I thought about Baz. If I got naked, I'd get to see Baz naked. Was I ready to see his dick? Was I ready to *touch* his dick?

Every part of my body, particularly my own dick, responded with a resounding *Yes!* to that question.

No boxers then.

Ignoring my erection, I pulled on my pajama pants, tossed my clothes into the hamper and resolutely exited the bathroom.

Baz was waiting for me wearing a t-shirt and pair of plaid pajama pants that had been cut off just above the knee. His feet and legs were also on the list of things I'd never seen before, along with the prominent bulge at his groin. When Baz noticed me staring, he spread his feet apart and put his fists on his hips in a Superman pose. "You like? Still sexy enough?"

"Um, yeah," I said a little breathlessly, still unable to tear my eyes from his crotch.

"Steve?" He walked over to me. "Are you okay?"

I forced my head up so I could meet his concerned gaze. "Yes?"

He put his warm hand on my neck. "What's the matter?" I could smell his toothpaste. Why did that turn me on even more? I couldn't remember ever having this reaction to any of the women I'd slept with.

"Um, nothing." I licked my lips and he groaned.

He said, "I changed my mind. We'd better go sit on the couch for this conversation."

It was my turn to groan.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

Stephanie Ferry, the cheerful, outgoing party girl who lived in the apartment next to mine, cornered me and two of our downstairs neighbors in the elevator.

"Y'all have to come! It's Saturday night. People will start getting there around 8pm, but feel free to drop by whenever."

Sandra and Alexis, a couple who lived one floor below Stephanie and me, said they'd look at their schedules and let her know. They exited the elevator in a chorus of cheerful goodbyes.

Stephanie turned to me. I'd tried to be careful not to draw her attention up til now, as she was the type who wanted to be friends with everyone she met. To her credit, she hadn't checked out my ample package, but that could be due to my new wardrobe of loose and unflattering clothing.

"What about you, Karl? Can you join us on Saturday night?"

I gave a dismissive glance toward the elevator doors the women had just walked through. "Sorry. Not if people like that will be there."

Stefanie's eyebrows slammed down over her nose, and she got in my face. "What the actual fuck? You're a homophobe?"

I liked her for that, but unfortunately I needed to keep people away, not make friends.

Damn, I wanted to go back to being retired.

CHAPTER 11

STEVE

THE ONLY GOOD THING ABOUT BAZ HAULING ME INTO THE living room was his hand, comforting and sure around mine. I must've held hands with some of the women I'd dated, but at the moment I couldn't remember a single one.

The sight of the couch, though, and the balcony door beyond it, did make me remember something.

"I meant to ask you earlier," I said. "Do you think we should sleep on the fold-out couch instead of in the bedroom in case the burglar or whoever shows up?" I pointed at the balcony.

Baz pulled me down next to him on the couch and put his arm around my shoulder. We were almost the same height, so I had to lean a little to get in close.

Baz said, "Well, he'd have to get over the railing and the pots and pans you put out there. By then he'd be able to see us if we slept here."

We both shivered. I said, "Yeah, no. What if he has a gun? At least we can lock ourselves in the bedroom and call the cops from there."

Baz leaned his cheek on the top of my head. "Can we talk about the kissing now?"

I *hmmmed*. "First tell me what changed for you? I always had the impression you didn't like me."

Baz coughed and shifted under me. "Um." He squeezed my shoulder. "I may have made some assumptions about you based on your parties and late night, um, dates."

I scrunched up my face. "Assumptions like I enjoy having people over and sex?"

He sighed. "No, more like you were noisy and inconsiderate of your neighbors, and therefore a shallow, selfish person."

I felt myself blushing again. Why did he always make me blush? "Um, well, to be fair, I may have deliberately, um, been loud in the hallway with some of the women I brought home."

Baz pulled his head back a little to look down at me. I gave him a sheepish smile.

"Why?"

I shrugged, then admitted, "I was attracted to you. I'd never been attracted to a guy before, and I didn't know how to handle it. So I acted like a child and did a kind of *look-at-me-I-don't-need-you* thing."

A smug smile formed on Baz's face. "So you had a crush on me?"

I poked him in the side, and he flinched back, laughing. "Maybe."

Then Baz frowned and smoothed my hair back. "You haven't had any parties or girls over that I've noticed in a while though. Cole mentioned you've been working a lot?"

I wrinkled my nose. "It's been necessary, no matter what Cole and Cal say." I did *not* want to talk about work right now. "But I have the next two weeks off, so I think we should discuss what I could do with all that free time."

I tilted my head and surged up to meet his lips. He engaged with enthusiasm, and I found myself being dragged across his lap, my legs stretched to one side. A thrill went through me, and my dick heartily endorsed being manhandled. I wondered if Baz would like me to do that to him sometime. I'd always had to be careful with women. But another man wouldn't break if I threw him around. Huh, my dick loved *that* idea too.

Sitting across someone else's legs was interesting as well. I shifted my thighs a little, and... oh. Well, I'd found another benefit to making out with a guy. I shifted again

experimentally. Straddling him would be even better, but I didn't want to stop kissing him to make the move.

Then Baz wrenched his mouth free of mine. "Fuck," he said, clamping one hand on my hip to keep me still. "We're supposed to be talking."

We panted into each other's mouths. I could still feel his erection next to my hip, and all I wanted to do was wiggle around against it. Or rub mine against it, like I'd seen in a couple of porn videos. I stared down at Baz's lips, shiny with spit and surrounded by his beard stubble. So hot.

Talking. We were supposed to be talking. "Fine. Talk."

He chuckled. "Alright, I'll go first." Then his face turned serious, and he ran his thumb across my cheek. "I haven't done more than a quick hookup with anyone since Warren died. I'm interested in dating you, in seeing if we can have something real."

Everything I'd wanted since I'd first laid eyes on Baz was being handed to me. I couldn't stop myself from kissing him. "Okay," I said. "I'm interested in dating you too. And, um, in something real." Was I blushing *again*? Apparently, based on the way Baz was smiling at me and caressing my hot cheek.

He pulled me in for a hug. "Good," he said into my shoulder. Then he tensed a little. "But, um, will it be a problem for you, dating a man publicly?"

I pushed back so he could see my face. "No. My two best friends are gay. Plus Cole is bi, with two boyfriends. I'm ready to hold hands in public and I'm up for whatever PDA you want to throw at me."

Baz's smile was brilliant. But then it turned into a smirk. "Whatever I want to throw at you, huh?"

"That won't get us arrested," I clarified.

He laughed. "Okay, deal. But now it's your turn. What did *you* want to talk about?" The *before we get back to kissing* was heavily implied.

I grinned. "Well, you took care of the *where is this all going* part of the conversation, so I just wanted to add that I'd really like to get naked with you right now and, uh, get off together." My blush was back, but I maintained eye contact this time.

Baz gave me a quick kiss then grinned against my lips. "Sounds like a great plan."

Before he could find something else to talk about—okay, I admit I'd requested the talking, but that was when we were both standing and fully clothed—I grabbed the hem of Baz's t-shirt and pulled it up over his head, carefully avoiding his glasses.

Then my hands were on his chest, feeling the muscular pecs instead of soft breasts, the dark crinkly chest hair narrowing to a thick line that vanished under his waistband.

"My turn. Arms up," Baz said, and I vaguely registered him tugging at my t-shirt. Reluctantly I removed my hands from his body, and I resented the short second the fabric needed to go over my head because it blocked my view of him.

As soon as I was free of the shirt, my hands were back on Baz, thumbing his nipples. I started to lean in to taste one, but Baz put his hands on my chest, and I forgot what I was going to do.

His hands were big, and he stroked my skin firmly. He tweaked my nipples harder than anyone had ever done before, and I gasped, almost doubling over from the lightning bolt of pleasure that shot to my dick and balls.

"Damn, Steve," Baz chuckled. "I guess you're sensitive there?"

I peeled my fingers from his shoulders. Hopefully I hadn't left bruises where I'd clutched him. I kept my gaze on his belly button.

"Um, I didn't know." And here came the blush again. I couldn't believe I was acting like this was my first time having sex.

Baz put his hand behind my neck and kissed me. His tongue on mine had me forgetting my embarrassment. I ran my hands around his waist. I couldn't get enough of touching his skin. My hips made aborted thrusts, and while I could feel Baz's erection under me, I was getting frustrated with my sideways position on his lap. And my hands were too busy touching Baz to be spared to stroke my dick.

Baz broke the kiss and patted my hip. "Stand up for a sec."

My legs were a little shaky but I managed it.

Baz didn't get up. He just put his thumbs under his waistband, lifted his hips, and shucked off his pajama pants. He tossed them to the side somewhere, but my attention was riveted by his hard and swollen cock.

He was cut, a little longer and a little thicker than I was. Precum leaked freely from his tip, leaving a smear on the fur of his happy trail.

I licked my lips and moved between his legs. "Can I?" I reached out to touch, and his cock jumped in anticipation.

"No. Wait."

Startled, I looked up at Baz's face and took a step back. "What? What's wrong?"

He smiled tenderly at me. "Nothing's wrong, except you're not naked."

I blinked. Oh. Right.

Swiftly I divested myself of my pajama pants, stepping out of them and kicking them under the coffee table.

I made to move back between Baz's legs, but he put his hand out. "Wait. Like this."

He guided me back onto his lap but straddling him this time. As I lowered myself, I watched avidly as my balls and dick met Baz's. We both groaned at the heat and skin-on-skin sensation. This was even better than I'd imagined.

Tentatively I circled Baz's cock with my fingers and explored him gently. He felt amazing in my hand. I couldn't wait to get my mouth on him.

"Mmmm. Harder. Like you'd do to yourself," he said.

I ran my thumb through his precum. Not enough for what I needed.

I sat up and, hanging on to Baz's shoulder with one hand, I leaned back and opened the drawer in the coffee table with the other. The tube of lube was right where I'd left it.

Come to think of it, Baz had been the inspiration for that last jerk-off session. The real thing was soooo much better.

Baz's chest heaved and he flexed his hand on my hip as I drizzled the lube into my palm.

I was grateful my fingers were long enough to gather both of our cocks in my grip. "This okay?" I asked. The feel of his length sliding along mine was incredible, and I couldn't stop myself from thrusting up into my hand. I put a couple of my fingers between our dicks as we moved, and Baz groaned at the added sensation.

He put his hand around mine, helping me squeeze us tighter. "More than okay." He nuzzled his lips against my mouth, and as much as I wanted to keep staring at the heads of our cocks peeking rhythmically through the circle of our fingers, I needed Baz's kiss more.

But I could barely keep my mouth on his. My focus kept straying to my throbbing cock and the heat and slick rub of Baz's dick against it. I could feel the friction of our balls, the crinkly hair mixed with lube ratcheting up my arousal.

I was so distracted I almost didn't notice the fingers of Baz's free hand on my nipple. But when he twisted it—even harder than before—my entire body bowed into him and I came, shouting and pulsing.

Baz must have come too, because when I blinked back into awareness, our cocks were soft within the circle of my limp and sticky fingers. I had my arm around Baz's back, pressing our chests together as we breathed heavily.

Baz stroked his palm down my spine, and I sensed he'd been doing it for a while. I made myself sit up, easing back from our embrace.

"You okay?" he asked. His voice was gentle with concern, and his brown eyes were intent on mine.

I flushed. Hercules' horses, but this constant blushing was annoying. "Um, yeah. Are you?" I peered at him. "You said you hadn't done much since, um, Warren."

He cocked his head and looked off into the distance for a few seconds, then his eyes zoomed in on mine again. "I'm good. I kind of wondered if I'd freak out, but I guess not." He smiled and brushed his fingers along my arm. "Apparently my brain likes you."

I raised my eyebrows. "Your brain, huh?" I held out my cumcovered hand. "I think I rate highly with other parts of your body as well."

He laughed, then kissed me. "You're so hot, earlier I was struggling not to come in my pants. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Oh," I said breathlessly.

Then Rocket started gnawing on some cardboard in the kitchen, and Baz and I were forced back to reality.

I said, "I guess we should get cleaned up. I'm for a shower."

I had to kneel on the couch to peel myself off Baz's lap. I worried I'd cut off the circulation in his legs, but he told me he was fine. Which was important to know since I wanted to do that again sometime soon.

"I hope you don't mind company," he said, following me into the bedroom. "I'm a big fan of shower blow jobs."

I tossed him what I hoped was a flirty grin. "Same."

Unfortunately, the apartment shower was barely big enough for the two of us to get clean. We had to switch out who got to stand under the spray, and afterward we spent way too much time cleaning up the water that got splashed all over the floor.

The blowjob Baz wanted to give me had to wait until we got back into the bedroom, and I just didn't have the energy to reciprocate. He assured me that jacking off all over my chest was just as satisfying, but I was skeptical. Even my untried oral skills had to be better than a handie. Maybe tomorrow.

I barely registered Baz spooning himself around me before I slipped into sleep.

I dreamed about work, about the enormous list of tasks to be done and strategic decisions to be made. The list kept growing and growing, and all the while Cal and Cole told me over and over I wasn't meeting their expectations, and if the company failed it would be my fault.

When something whacked me in the face, I was relieved to wake up.

Well, relieved but alarmed.

I sat up, heart pounding, and looked around. Baz stirred next to me, but I could feel his arms were tucked under the sheet. The blinds were closed, so the room was almost pitch black. I should've left the bathroom light on or something.

Baz said, "Steve? What's wrong?" Then he sat up fast. "Did you hear something outside?"

We both shouted "Aaaah!" when Rocket hurtled onto the bed next to me, raced across our laps, leaped down on the opposite side, and ran out the bedroom door.

"Fuck." Baz's profile was barely visible in the dark. He ran his hand over his face. We both tried to get our breath under control.

Rocket zoomed back through the door and took a flying leap onto the bed. This time he crossed behind us, over the pillows. That must've been the move that woke me.

I chuckled weakly. "I guess he got out of the kitchen."

Baz rumbled a laugh. "I guess."

Rocket careened into the room again, soared onto the bed, circled me and Baz, then leapt off and was out the door. The

entire circuit took mere seconds.

I laughed, and Baz laughed too. Rocket barreled through the room another time, and Baz and I laughed some more. Soon we were hanging off each other, roaring uncontrollably.

Eventually Rocket hopped into the room at a slower pace, then jumped on the bed and approached us for petting.

I grinned down at him, running a finger over one ear. "Thanks, buddy. I needed that laugh, even at 3:30am."

Baz groaned. "Maybe we should get a giant hamster wheel for him."

I considered. "I didn't do anything today to intentionally exercise him. I'll try to tomorrow."

Baz lifted Rocket and put him at the foot of the bed. Then he fell back against the pillows and tugged at me until I did the same. "Let's get some sleep. We've got a long day tomorrow."

Rocket circled a couple of times before settling against my ankle. I sank into the feeling of his soft weight on my leg combined with Baz's warmth along my arm and shoulder.

Sleep came in minutes.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

I hadn't run into Bastien Allgood, the neighbor across the hall from Stephanie, until today. He'd exited his apartment as I'd walked out of the elevator.

I'd read the summary of information from his background check of course—widower, good credit score, financial analyst who worked from home—but I hadn't seen him in person.

The photo the hacker had sent over had not done him justice. His lush hair, the color of leaves in the fall, fell softly across his forehead. His eyes were brown, but I didn't have a word to express their liveliness and clarity. Bastien's body was toned—nothing like mine of course—and I could tell he took care of himself with regular workouts.

I waited for him to approach, and I said, "Hi, we haven't met yet. I'm Karl."

"Bastien," he said, and extended his hand.

When my palm touched his, I felt lightning run from my hand to my heart. My breathing stuttered, and I couldn't think.

The plan had been to come on to him, to invite him for a quick fuck. He'd either be up for no-strings, just-casual sex, or he'd turn me down kindly. In either case, we'd part ways as friendly acquaintances and avoid each other in the future.

But I forgot the plan. I just stared at Bastien, frozen in a way that would've meant my instant death on any other op.

Bastien dropped my hand and said, "Well, it was nice to meet you. Welcome to the building."

Then he walked away without a backward glance.

I wanted him. I'd never had such a visceral reaction to someone in my entire life.

But I was on a job. Distractions could get me killed. Or get Bastien killed.

Besides, Bastien was probably friends with Stephanie, and she'd tell him all about my supposed bigotry.

Fuck, I hated this life.

CHAPTER 12

BAZ

Steve's phone buzzed on the breakfast table next to my laptop.

"Can you please see if that's Dirk?" Steve called out, then rattled off his phone passcode. He was laying bacon strips on a foil-lined baking pan.

"Sure."

I picked up his phone and looked at the text message.

CAL

When did your brothers get here????!!!!?

Before I could say anything to Steve, another one came through.

CAL

And tomorrow you have to tell me why y'all are huddling behind a hedge. I'm dying to know!

"Uh, Steve?"

Dirk knocked on the door as he opened it. Steve had unlocked it before he started breakfast. "Are you guys decent?" he called out as he came in and shut the door behind him.

"Hey," I said, checking out the date of Steve's last text exchange with Cal—a couple of days ago, in this thread at least. Cal had had a dream Steve had passed out in a meeting. Fuck, Cole had mentioned Steve was sleeping at his desk, and

Cal was worried enough to dream about it. No wonder Steve was taking some time off.

I locked Steve's phone so I wouldn't be tempted to snoop any more.

"Sup." Dirk sauntered in. Today he was dressed in jeans, a dark green long-sleeved t-shirt, and Converse. The leather jacket was slung over one shoulder like he was walking down a fashion runway. His sunglasses were hanging from his shirt collar.

I casually turned Steve's phone face-down and set mine on top of it.

"Hey, good morning," Steve said. "I know you wanted to go to Kerbey Lane Cafe, but it's too cold to sit outside and we can't leave Rocket alone until we have a crate for him." He pointed to Rocket, who was in the living room chewing on the leg of one of Steve's end tables.

"Oh, right. No worries. We'll go another day."

Steve smiled. "Great. Breakfast will be ready in about ten."

"Cool beans." Dirk pulled out a chair across from me and sat down before leaning over and making kissing noises at Rocket to encourage him to approach.

Sighing, I shut my laptop. I hadn't made any progress on my novel this morning. I'd been too busy helping Steve feed Rocket, talking to Steve, watching Steve walk around the apartment, finding excuses to touch Steve, and thinking about Steve.

I got up and put the laptop next to the couch so I could set the table. I was burning to know about the text from Cal, but I wasn't sure I should bring it up in front of Dirk.

He'd said "brothers". Plural. Maybe it was a typo. Or Steve could have left him a voicemail or texted in a group conversation about Dirk, and Cal had assumed it was both twins visiting.

Though I didn't know what the hell Cal had meant about the hedge. What hedge?

Immediately my mind brimmed with ideas of how a character could solve a murder from clues in some inscrutably random text conversations. I grabbed my phone off the table to make notes. The idea didn't really work for Kane's character, but Detective Hartwell would love it.

"Baz? Baz!"

"Huh?" I looked up from my notes to see Steve standing next to the table, which was still without any place settings, holding two plates of food. "Oh, shit, sorry!" I felt my cheeks burn as I shoved my phone in my pocket. "I had an idea for my book, and I didn't want to forget it."

I rushed into the kitchen and dug out the placemats and utensils.

"Baz is a novelist in his spare time," Steve told Dirk.

I hurried to get the placemats on the table so Steve could set the plates down. "Sorry," I told him again.

"You're fine. No harm done." Steve put the plates in front of me and Dirk.

"I'm sorry too," Dirk said. "I guess I should've helped. We have a private chef at home so it kind of doesn't occur to me to offer." He shrugged as if this was an ordinary struggle Steve and I would be able to relate to.

Dirk was polite enough to ask about my books, though. I told him and Steve that I'd be incorporating a rabbit into a future one, and they were enthusiastic and had a bunch of ideas I couldn't ever use. But it was nice to have someone interested in my hobby besides Flo and Selina.

Speaking of....

I asked Steve, "How early do you think I can text Flo and Selina without being a jerk?"

Steve grinned. "That was something else last night." He explained what had happened to Dirk. "I'd give them another couple of hours at least."

Pouting, I grumbled, "Fine."

Steve grinned. "After breakfast I need a few minutes to find a route optimizer and put the kids' addresses in it so we can get to as many of them as possible today."

I blinked at him. "Route optimizer? That's a thing?"

He nodded and sipped his coffee. "Lots of companies use them so their drivers don't waste time in traffic. I'm sure I can find a free one online."

The spreadsheet Steve had created last night had felt like something he and I had in common, a way for me to connect with him. But now for the first time I saw Steve as capable of running a business. Damn, that was sexy. Maybe I had a slight competency kink.

We relocated to the living room and Steve pulled out his laptop. Dirk produced a tablet from somewhere and, after asking Steve for the wifi password, occupied himself with scrolling and typing.

Steve found the route optimizer he needed and quickly copied and pasted the addresses into whatever app he'd downloaded. Seconds later we had our itinerary.

My phone chimed. "I sent the route to you," Steve said.

"Great. I'll drive."

"Excellent. Dirk, do you want to wear Rocket's sling?"

Dirk glanced up from his tablet, a genuine smile on his face. "Really? Can I?"

"Sure. He can be just on the harness in the car, but he needs to be in the sling when we're walking around. I don't know what kind of dogs we'll run into."

But when Steve produced the bedsheet-turned-rabbit-sling, Dirk curled his lip.

"Dude," he said. "What is that?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "It's what people on a budget do when they unexpectedly acquire a pet." He shook the sling at Dirk like a parent trying to get a small child to put their coat on. "If you don't want to wear it, I will." Dirk glanced at Rocket, who was gnawing on a leg of the breakfast table. Yeah, he wasn't getting left here unsupervised. Optimized route or not, if we saw a feed store or large pet store while we were out, I was stopping to get Rocket a crate. We should've bought one yesterday, but we'd purchased so many other things Steve had decided to put it off.

"Okay, fine." Dirk put on his jacket then took the sling from Steve and pulled it over his neck and arm. He then examined the pouch it made. "Huh."

Steve was packing up his laptop to take with us, so I went into the kitchen to get Rocket's harness out of the newly-dedicated rabbit supply cabinet. On my way back to the living room I scooped Rocket off the floor. "Here," I said to Dirk. "You hold him, and I'll put the harness on."

Soon Rocket was happily ensconced in the sling. Steve stuck a small sack of hay and rabbit food into his backpack and handed Dirk a throw blanket to spread across the back seat.

I suddenly had a vision of Steve and I getting a couple of small children ready to go on an outing. The image was so clear, so *real*, I felt like I'd been punched.

Warren and I had vaguely discussed having children someday, but it hadn't seemed urgent. Now I wasn't sure I'd be able to think of anything else. Apparently my biological need to procreate had woken up and decided Steve was the perfect partner.

I turned away, staring into Captain America's two-dimensional eyes to distract myself. When I looked back, Steve was tucking his phone into his pocket.

Grateful for the distraction, I said, "Oh, hey, that text earlier was from Cal. It was... odd."

Dirk didn't react, too busy cooing at Rocket. But Steve looked alarmed and jerked his phone back out instantly.

Steve read the text, and his eyebrows climbed his forehead. He typed something quickly before locking his phone and putting it back in his pocket. He glanced at Dirk then mouthed *Tell you later* at me.

Fair enough.

Steve and I put our jackets on, and then we all headed out.

As we piled into my sedan Dirk said, "Hold up. I know we're going to get a look at some of the kids for size, like the one who wants a bike. Why are we looking at all the others again?"

Steve nodded. "Good question. Cole wants us to see how the kids live, and if we can figure out something we can do for all of them and maybe the families that won't be too over the top."

Dirk chuckled. "No Extreme Home Makeover?"

Steve laughed. "Exactly."

I plugged my phone into the car and Google Maps came up on the dashboard screen. I clicked on the first destination Steve had sent me, and we were off.

"Okay," Steve said. "Our first letter-writer is Bette Flowers, who lives in the Overcrest Apartments in unit 206. Bette asked for a baseball glove, remember?"

We reached the Overcrest Apartments in seven minutes—thank you, route optimization. Unfortunately, the apartments had a security gate. A closed security gate.

"Son of a bitcoin! Why didn't I look at them on Google Earth last night?"

I patted Steve on the leg. "We didn't think of it either. Let's see if we can access it from the other side."

I drove past and circled the block. Another apartment complex, also gated, backed up to the Overcrest Apartments. I drove on, and after we passed the Overcrest building again, I pulled into the strip mall on the next block. I parked with the car facing the street so we could see back the way we'd come.

"Well, that was a bust," Dirk said.

Steve made a *hmmm* noise but didn't contradict him.

I got out of the car and stepped over to the sidewalk. Steve followed me, but Dirk stayed in the warmth with Rocket.

I pointed. "See the apartment complex across the street? It doesn't have a gate on the parking lot."

He squinted. "So we park there and, what? Stare at the second floor of the Overcrest Apartments until we see some movement?"

I rolled my eyes. "Well, first we go get some binoculars. Then we set a time limit for how long we look at it to see if we can even figure out which unit is 206."

Steve *hmmmed* again. "Right. Because if it's on the back of the building we're screwed."

"Yep."

"Okay." He gave one sharp nod. "Binoculars will be useful at our other stops as well. Let's go."

After some googling Steve found an Academy Sports only a mile or so away. They allowed leashed dogs inside, so we decided to just walk in with Rocket in the sling and let them kick us out if they didn't like it.

Dirk kept his sunglasses on when we entered the store. The teenager at the return counter just gave him and Rocket a long look, then shrugged and went back to staring at his phone. Not paid enough to care, most likely.

We found a couple of pairs of binoculars for less than thirty bucks each. We were heading back to the front to check out when Steve grabbed my arm. "They have a pet section!"

We hurried over, and sure enough, they had all sizes of crates. Steve picked one out, and Dirk insisted on buying Rocket a bed—camo-colored, of course; this was a hunting store after all—with a flap on top he could burrow under.

The same teenager who'd eyeballed us as we walked in was the one to check us out. He didn't make any comment on our purchases or on Rocket. He only spoke to ask if we wanted a bag for the binoculars. We declined.

Soon we had the crate—luckily it came collapsed flat—and the pet bed in my trunk. Steve opened the binoculars' packaging while I drove us back to the Overcrest Apartments.

I parked across the street as planned, facing the Overcrest building. Steve handed me a pair of the binoculars, and he and I each aimed ours at the second floor.

From the back seat, Dirk said, "Good thing no one can tell you're trying to look at a kid, or else we'd all be arrested."

The apartments on the second floor all had balconies. Some had curtains across them, but most didn't.

I said, "Hey, Dirk, can you time us five minutes? If we don't see anything by then we need to move on to the next kid's address."

"Roger that," he said. Next to me, Steve chuckled softly.

I made a mental note to arrange some alone time for Steve and Dirk later. They needed to work on their relationship. Maybe I'd stay home with Rocket this evening while they went to the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown.

But right now I was supposed to be looking for a kid. Or at least the kid's apartment. But even though the binoculars gave us a clear view into the uncurtained units, none of them had any movement we could see. And no apartment numbers were visible anyway.

I said, "Dirk, how much—"

Steve, Dirk, and I all shouted when a loud rapping came from my window, and someone yelled, "Hey!"

I turned to the elderly woman standing next to my window. She had on a long puffy coat and a dark blue knit beanie with a pom pom on top. She was glaring at us.

I rolled my window down an inch. "Yes?"

She shouted, "This is private property, and you need to leave before I call the police on you for being Peeping Toms!"

Hastily I handed my binoculars to Steve.

"Sorry, ma'am. We were just about to leave anyway."

She sniffed. "I took a picture of your license plate, so don't come back!"

She didn't move while I reversed out of the parking space, and she stared at us with folded arms as we exited the parking lot and sped down the street.

"Shit," Dirk said.

"Well put," I said grimly.

"It's okay," Steve said. "We tried. And at least it's easy enough to get what Bette wants, if that's what we decide to do. The apartments look nice, so the family doesn't seem to be on the edge of poverty or anything."

I handed him my phone to bring up the address of our next destination.

It was going to be a long day.

Liam Carter, who'd wanted a gaming computer, lived in an obviously lower-income area. Liam's house had a sagging porch and peeling paint, and the grass was dead in the front yard. But unlike the neighboring homes, the yard and driveway were free of clutter, and there were poinsettias and a small inflatable snowman by the front door.

We'd parked across the street in front of a derelict-looking house. Steve took photos of Liam's house and the neighborhood.

"We should find out where all the parents work," Dirk suggested. His wide eyes made me think he'd never been in such a run-down neighborhood before. "Maybe we could help them get better jobs."

Steve tilted his head thoughtfully. "I'm not sure that's within our abilities, but it wouldn't hurt to have the information. Cal can probably do some research. Or Felix knows a guy I think is a hacker."

The mention of Cal had me looking around for a hedge, but I didn't see one.

Dawayne Erwin's house, our next stop, was only a few streets over, and the houses were in a similar state of disrepair. A few kids were kicking a ball around in Dawayne's front yard. I wasn't an expert, but they looked to be around eight or nine years old, so maybe one of them was Dawayne. They seemed happy enough. I drove by slowly, and we held our breaths as Steve took some pictures, but no one seemed to notice or care.

"Um," Dirk said hesitantly. "He wants a bike, right? Am I the only one worried his bike is going to be stolen within a week of him getting it?

Steve and I exchanged a look but neither of us commented. Somberly I drove on to the next stop.

Danielle Rivers lived in a nice house in a middle-class neighborhood. Dirk relaxed back against the seat as we left the poorer area. I didn't know him well enough to understand whether he was just uncomfortable in an unfamiliar environment, or if he was worried for the kids.

For once we lucked out. We were able to pull over across the street and one house down with a clear view of Danielle's driveway, where a woman was walking with a little girl behind her toward an older-model minivan. The girl had her nose in a book, and she was smiling.

Dirk said, "Well, she didn't ask for anything, but I guess we could get her a gift card for a bookstore."

Steve shrugged. "Sounds good to me." He made a note in his phone.

I said, "Gift cards are so impersonal. I'd rather get her an actual book. Maybe we can find something recently released, so she won't have read it yet."

Steve made a face and said, "Ugh, homophobic or not, Phillip would be the best person to ask about this."

I whipped my head around to stare at him. "What do you mean, homophobic? Phillip's gay."

Steve reared back in his seat. "What? No, no way. He told me he would've preferred not to live in the same building with *people like* Amber and Colleen from the third floor."

I wrinkled my nose. "Really? Because I ran into him right after he moved in, and he had a bag of pastries from Sweetish Hill. I told him my late husband used to like to go there. That's when he said he was gay and he was always up for...." I shot Dirk a glance, but he was smirking. "Uh, you know."

"Sex?" Dirk offered dryly.

"Uh, right. Anyway, I turned him down, but he didn't seem upset about it. He was perfectly friendly and not pushy or anything when I ran into him after that."

"What the hellmouth of Sunnydale?" Steve and I blinked at each other in confusion.

Wendell Corbett and T'Kayla Quan lived in the same neighborhood as Danielle, and neither house had any visible activity, so we crossed them off the list quickly.

Before we left for our next address, Dirk said, "Can we go to a park or something? I think Rocket needs to spend some time in the grass if you know what I mean."

Steve chuckled. "Whatever you do, don't feed him anything right now."

I still had Google maps up, so I swiftly found a small green space a couple of blocks over.

"We're one minute out. Hang on."

I pulled up along the curb and Dirk had Rocket out of the car in seconds. Fortunately I didn't see any dogs, but about twenty yards away a couple of kids were running around while two women sat on a blanket.

"I could stand to stretch my legs and get some fresh air," Steve said.

I nodded. "Me too."

When Steve opened his door, Dirk called, "You might want to shake out that blanket in the back." He threw us a cheeky grin

then returned to watching Rocket hop around.

The blanket was on my side of the car, so I opened the rear door and folded it up carefully to keep any rabbit droppings from escaping. After shutting the door and locking the car, I walked over to a nearby bush and opened the blanket. Thankfully Rocket hadn't peed on it.

Steve was digging through his backpack. "Rocket's chewing on the grass, so we might as well give him some real food."

I held up the blanket. "The other side's clean. You want to sit on the grass for a minute?"

He smiled. "A rabbit picnic? Sure. We should've stopped for some human food." He grimaced. "Except it's a little cold."

I spread out the blanket, careful to put dirty side down. Steve sat and I folded myself down beside him.

Dirk jogged by, arm out with the leash taut as he tried to keep up with Rocket. The rabbit seemed to be on a mission.

Steve handed me a bottle of water accompanied by an affectionate smile, and I again had that odd feeling I was watching us, years from now, this time on a picnic with our children.

"Baz? You okay?" Steve put his hand on my shoulder. He'd leaned a little closer in concern.

I shook myself. "Yeah, sorry." I couldn't say anything more. My throat was tight, and my eyes were filled with tears. I took advantage of his nearness to put my arm around him. I managed to choke out, "I know this is new, but I'm glad I found you."

Steve hugged me back. "Hey, I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I told you I've been crushing on you since the day we met. This is like winning the lottery for me," he teased.

I gave a wet laugh, then I sat up and wiped my eyes on my sleeve. "Sorry. I don't know why I got emotional there."

Steve threaded his fingers through mine. "You're allowed. Anytime."

I squeezed his hand and nodded, blinking back more tears. Fuck, I didn't want to cry in public.

I'd been ignoring the high-pitched shrieks from the kids down the way, but when one of them yelled out "Mr. Bun!" Steve and I both turned to look.

The two kids had plopped onto the ground next to Rocket, and Dirk gave me and Steve a pleading look as the mothers powerwalked in his direction.

Shit.

Steve and I scrambled to our feet. He charged toward the group, and I hung back a second so I could wipe my eyes again. Hopefully no one would notice I'd been crying.

"Hey," Dirk said as Steve and I drew closer. "These kids say this is their classroom rabbit. From Mr. Downs' class?" His voice was tinged with a bit of desperation.

Steve smiled and went on a spectacular charm offensive.

"Wow, you recognized this rabbit?" he said to the kids. Now I was closer I could see they were a girl and a boy. T'Kayla and Wendell? They goggled up at Steve. "That's impressive." He smiled, his charisma wattage on full blast. He said, "I'm Mr. Downs' next-door neighbor. He had to go out of town, so I'm taking care of Mr. Bun for him."

One of the women, a thirty-something in a blue track suit with a tennis bracelet and diamond earrings whose demeanor screamed *Karen*, frowned at him. "Mr. Downs told me he lives in those apartments on Pineview. Why are you over here?"

"That's my fault," Dirk cut in smoothly, taking the conversational baton from Steve. Maybe he'd just needed the script for this interaction. He'd probably had more PR training than most people his age.

He continued, "Steve and Baz were showing me around town, and we decided Mr. Bun here needed a, uh, outdoor break. And this was the nearest park according to Google maps." He smiled Steve's winning smile. "We certainly didn't know we'd run into Mr. Bun's classmates here."

The Karen woman didn't seem satisfied. I could see Steve was about to step in, but Dirk said, "Oh, my apologies for being rude. I'm Dirk." He put his hand to his chest. "And this is Steve and Baz." We were each blessed with a palm outstretched in our direction.

The other woman, a softer, rounder soccer mom-type wearing a red Christmas sweater over stained gray joggers and no jewelry, said, "Dirk? That's an unusual name. And you look like...." Her eyes went huge.

Dirk went into *aw, shucks* mode. "Oh, I'm so honored you would recognize me. Us younger siblings, we're not as well-known as the rest." He put his hand back on his chest and declared, "But, you have me at a disadvantage. What's *your* name?"

"Oh! I'm Jonique." She pointed at her friend without tearing her eyes from Dirk. "That's Reagan."

Dirk looked down at the kids, who were around the same age as the crew playing outside of Dawayne's house. They were doing a great job of carefully petting Rocket. "And what are your names?"

The girl said, "Kayla," without taking her eyes off Rocket.

The boy peered up at Dirk. "Obi-Wen. I like Mr. Bun."

"His name is Wendell," Reagan said. "And, I'm sorry, who are you again?"

Dirk eased back on the personality wattage. I wondered if he'd thought about taking up acting. "Right, sorry. Unlike Jonique here, most people *don't* recognize me. I'm Dirk Derry, part of the band Melodious Moon."

I didn't hear what Reagan said next because I was distracted by the last name. I must've been staring strangely at Steve because he mouthed *What*? at me.

I leaned into his ear and whispered. "Is Derry just his stage name?"

Steve whispered back, "Dad changed all of their names legally when the band started taking off." He looked away. "I was living with my grandfather by then, so he didn't offer to change mine. Not that I would've."

Yet another way Steve was an outsider in his family. I put my arm around him and held tight. I planned on making sure he never felt that way again.

I could be his family.

I squeezed him once before releasing him. We needed to get going.

Dirk was handling the conversation with Wendell and T'Kayla's moms like a pro. "I'm just taking a little me time, you know. Trying to, ah, visit friends, like anybody would."

I intervened. "Speaking of, Dirk, we probably need to get going. Lunch," I said to the women.

Dirk feigned disappointment. "Yes, of course. It was so nice meeting you ladies, and you too, Kayla and Wendell. I hope Santa brings you what you want this year. Why don't you say goodbye to Mr. Bun. He needs his lunch too, and it's getting kind of cold out here."

The kids wailed their goodbyes. Rocket didn't seem to mind their desperate pats, but he also didn't hesitate to follow Dirk back to the car.

I picked up the blanket, and Steve snagged his backpack. We all got into the car without looking at the women and kids again.

I started the car and we drove away.

"Fuck, I hope she doesn't post anything on social media," Dirk said. "Can I borrow your phone, Steve? I need to let Drake know to look for it. Texting on the flip phone is... ugh." He made a gagging noise.

Steve snorted but unlocked his phone and passed it back to Dirk.

I said, "Let's order something for takeout. I can run in and get it, and we can eat in the car."

Since Steve was currently phone-less, I handed mine to him and told him the passcode.

"Hey, Steve?" Dirk said from the backseat.

"Yeah?" he said absently, his head bowed over my phone as he searched for a restaurant.

"I didn't mean to look at your other messages."

Steve's head shot up, and I knew instantly which one he'd found.

"But this one from your friend Cal is weird." Yep.

Steve sighed and said, "I'm sorry, Dirk, but that's none of your business."

Dirk protested, "It seems like it's my business, since he mentioned your brothers. Why does he think more than one of us is in town? And what's this shit about a hedge?"

Steve ran his hand over his face. "Cal has... gifts."

My eyebrows rose. What the hell?

"Gifts? Like psychic gifts?"

Steve said wearily. "I shouldn't have said anything. And it's not your secret to share, okay?"

Dirk said, "I would never. What kind of person do you think I am?" His voice was loud and defensive.

Oh, shit, this was about to get ugly. I spotted a fast food restaurant coming up on the right.

Steve responded in a sharp tone, "Well, I don't know you anymore, Dirk, do I?"

I turned into the lot and parked as Dirk replied, "That's not fair"

I said, "I need to check in with Selina." I jumped out and shut the door behind me, then I walked to the sidewalk about fifteen feet away.

I pulled out my phone and was about to text Selina when I had an incoming call. Mom. Well, that would take up the time Steve and Dirk needed just as well as calling Selina would.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, honey. How's your vacation going? Are you getting any writing done?"

I threw a glance back at my car. Steve had turned around in his seat and he was gesturing at Dirk. Uh oh.

"Um, no. I mean, no writing yet, but I've had some ideas. I'm, uh, helping... a friend with some stuff."

Mom was no fool. "A *friend*? Which friend?"

I blew out a breath and stared blankly at the cars driving by. "Mom, I've met someone. His name is Steve. We're, um, we're seeing each other."

Mom sucked in a breath. "Oh, honey, that's wonderful."

I felt a surge of warmth. She was right. It was wonderful. "Yeah, he's.... You're going to love him." I couldn't keep the smile out of my voice.

Mom called out, "Keith, get over here. Baz has a boyfriend!"

Well, we hadn't used that word. Yet. And were Steve and I even exclusive? I felt a wave of anxiety. I had an irrational urge to see if I could lock Steve down, ask him for a commitment.

And wasn't that... wonderful?

Mom put her phone on speaker. "Son?" my dad's gruff voice was concerned. "What's this about a boyfriend? Since when are you even dating?"

I laughed. "I wasn't looking. It just happened."

"Huh."

Mom said, "When do we get to meet Steve?"

"I'll bring him over when you get back from your trip, how about that?" Then I had an evil, evil thought. "You should invite Selina too. Have her bring Flo."

Mom scoffed. "Like I don't have Flo's number to invite her myself. Have they met Steve?"

"They came over to have dinner with us, but they didn't stay long. They had *other plans*." Come on, Mom. You can connect the dots.

Surprisingly, it was Dad who picked up on my hints. "Other plans? Together? Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Mom gasped.

I coughed. "Well, that should really be Selina's choice to tell you." I grinned at the gas station across the street.

My mom made another gasping noise. "We have hoped for that for so long. Your sister never could see what was right in front of her. What changed?"

I ran my hand through my hair. "Honestly, I have no idea. It's brand new and I haven't had time to grill Selina about it yet."

Dad said, "Well, all this makes your mom and me so glad; we just want you and your sister to be happy." He cleared his throat. "Not that you can't be happy and fulfilled without a partner, but I know I prefer having one, so I can't help wanting the same for you."

"Thanks, Dad. This thing with Steve, I think it's got potential."

We talked for a minute or so more, then said our goodbyes and hung up.

I immediately texted Selina.

How is the happy couple this morning?

I checked the car while I waited for her response. Steve and Dirk appeared to both be looking at something, probably Steve's phone, together. That was an improvement at least.

My phone pinged.

SELINA

Without going into any details, we are VERY happy

I didn't think you were interested in Flo

Remember a couple of weeks ago when you, me and Flo were at that bar and we ran into Lisa and Margot?

Yes

SELINA

Lisa pulled me aside and asked if I knew Flo was in love with me. I'd never noticed, but once she told me, I could see it. I thought about it for a week or so and realized I was interested. I was planning to tell her last night even if Steve hadn't said something

Well, congratulations. I hope it works out

SELINA

[Heart emoji] Me too. I'll have Flo text you once she wakes up. We need to come get the car so we'll probably see you later anyway

Deciding not to think too hard about how it was lunchtime and Flo normally got up long before now, I just thanked Selina and put my phone back in my pocket.

Time to see how Steve and Dirk were getting along.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

I'd written my first math quiz. Okay, maybe I'd copied some problems from other teachers' quizzes on the internet. But the kids were taking a quiz to test their knowledge of the required concepts, so I called it a success. I'd even added an extra credit question.

It was odd how proud I felt of that fucking quiz. I'd taken down drug cartels and saved people's lives, but this quiz, this teaching, resonated with me so differently. It was rewarding in a fuzzy, emotional way, instead of in a thank-fuck-no-more-innocent-people-are-going-to-die way.

Maybe I could do some substitute teaching back in Santa Fe after this.

My heart dropped a little. I'd miss these kids when this op was over.

I scanned the room. From where I was leaning against my desk, I could tell most of the kids were about a third of the way done. Good. If they knew the subject, the questions should take about three minutes each, and there were ten questions plus the extra credit.

Sean Cleary's pencil was flat on his desk, his quiz was turned over, and he was staring out the window. I had no idea how much he'd absorbed of the material. He always finished his homework, and he got perfect scores, but he never raised his hand to participate in the lessons.

I quietly went over and crouched next to Sean's desk. "Did you have any questions about the quiz, Sean?" I whispered.

He started, and when he saw how close I was, he shrank back in his chair. Shit.

I smiled at him and stood, taking a step away as I did. I pointed at his paper. "Are you having trouble with the quiz?" Hell, what if he was dyslexic? I could make accommodations, but someone had to tell me he needed them first.

But Sean shook his head and handed me the paper. "I'm done"

I raised my eyebrows, but took the quiz and said, "Great. You can read a book if you like." Sean usually had a library book with him.

He nodded and reached for his backpack. I held his quiz next to my chest and walked slowly back to my desk. Everyone else was about halfway done, right where they should be.

Sean had finished the quiz in less than ten minutes. I leaned casually against my desk again and examined his answers. He'd gotten every question correct, even the extra credit. He'd also drawn a detailed sketch of a dragon in the blank spot beneath the extra credit question. The dragon had a dialog bubble saying, "The laws of physics don't apply if you're magic."

He'd done all that in ten minutes.

CHAPTER 13

STEVE

I'd have to remember to thank Baz for letting me and Dirk hash our issues out on our own.

I released my seat belt so I could turn around to look at Dirk while I spoke to him. He had his mouth pressed flat as he glared at me, and his arms were crossed. I tried to keep my tone even when I said, "It's obvious you're here for a reason, Dirk. And I know it's not because you suddenly missed me."

And now instead of defensive he looked guilty. Bingo.

But an arrow of hurt I hadn't been prepared to feel pierced my heart. I'd known all along he'd had an ulterior motive, but apparently I'd been hoping deep inside that he was here solely to rebuild our connection as brothers.

I forgot my intention to remain calm. My voice rose and I threw my hands in the air. "So what is it, Dirk? What do you want from me?"

Dirk stared out the window for a moment, then he looked back at me and said, "Let me text Drake again and see if he can get on the phone with us. I promised him he could be part of this conversation."

"Fine," I bit out.

"For the record," he said. "We did miss you. Drake and me, I mean. We argued over who would be the one to come here because we both wanted to."

That did make me feel a little less used. "So how did you decide?"

He grinned. "Rochambeau. Best two out of three. Drake tends to throw rock first."

My phone chimed and he looked down. Then he sat up straight. "Uhhh. Listen to this: Dad found out you were gone cause he wanted to sign us up for some live Xmas Eve thing but H&H said no. Mona didn't say anything and Dad wanted you and me to vote against H&H. I didn't tell him where you went — pretty sure he thinks you're having a sex weekend somewhere." Dirk grinned at that before going on. "I decided no point in hanging around so am currently on a plane to Austin."

I rubbed my face. I couldn't deny being a little excited to see Drake, but I still didn't know why he and Dirk were visiting at all.

"Ask him when his plane lands and we'll go pick him up." If Baz didn't want to make the trek to the airport with me and Dirk, he could take us back to the apartment so I could get my truck.

Dirk sent the text and my phone chimed again. "He lands in 45 minutes."

"Okay, we'll need to leave as soon as Baz comes back." I looked over to where Baz was standing on the sidewalk texting.

"Steve."

I swiveled my head back to look at Dirk. "Yeah?"

He gazed down at Rocket, fiddling with his ear. "I'm sorry I was being a jerk. You *don't* know me anymore, you're right. Our whole family has been shitty to you. Last night I told Drake how cool you were about me showing up and how nice Baz is." He turned his head toward the street, blinking rapidly. "I'd really like to have my brother back, you know?"

I nodded. "I feel the same, but you realize it's not going to be instantaneous, right?"

He swiped his sleeve over his eyes and nodded. "Yeah, I know."

Baz walked over to the car and cracked the driver's door. "You guys need a few more minutes?"

I smiled into his eyes. How had I gotten so lucky to be with him? "No, we're good. But lunch will be delayed. We need to go to the airport."

Drake also arrived with only a backpack and his guitar. But instead of mirroring Dirk's rock star style, Drake chose a singer-songwriter vibe, with shorter hair, a fedora, a white tee, dark gray canvas pants over leather lace-up boots and a slate blue utility jacket. Along with the requisite sunglasses of course.

Drake waited for us at the ground transportation pickup area like he was anybody's brother. I jumped out to help him get his guitar in the trunk. When Drake saw me, he stopped in his tracks.

"Steve."

He was still about six feet from the car, so I had to walk over to him to get his guitar. "Come on. We can catch up once we're on the road."

I pulled the guitar from his unresisting grip and guided him with a hand on his arm. "Get in the back with Dirk."

I turned toward the rear of the car again, but instead of getting inside he said, "Steve."

I looked back.

"Can I hug you?"

"Sure, Drake." I returned to him, and he threw himself into my arms, hugging me tighter than I'd expected him to.

"I'm so sorry," he said with a sob in his voice. "I'm so fucking sorry."

I patted his back, my throat tight. "Me too, Drake. We'll work it out, though."

He gave me one last, even-tighter squeeze and let go. "Okay."

Drake got into the back seat while I stowed his guitar on top of Rocket's crate in the trunk. When I climbed back into the front passenger seat, Drake had already hugged Dirk, introduced himself to Baz, and ended up with Rocket on his lap.

Baz pulled away from the curb and I said, "There's a Kerbey Lane Cafe not too far from here. Do you want to have lunch there?"

This was met with universal approval, so I entered the address in Baz's phone.

"Where does Dad think you are?" Dirk asked.

Drake said, "Fuck if I know. I deleted his tracking app from our phones. We're fucking adults now. Oh, here." He dug in his backpack and handed a phone to Dirk.

It was a little surreal, looking at them. I'd spent so long missing my siblings and wondering what Dad was telling them about me. Just having the opportunity to work things out with them was everything.

But I needed to find out why they were here first.

I turned around as far as I could with the seat belt fastened. "Okay, guys. According to Google maps you have seventeen minutes to tell me why you decided to visit."

Dirk and Drake exchanged a look. Dirk nodded emphatically, Drake slightly tentatively. Then they faced me.

Dirk said, "Dad stole all our money."

I froze, and Baz whistled. "Damn," he said.

Dirk said, "On our birthday, we asked Dad for access to our royalties. He'd always told us he'd been putting everything in investment accounts for us."

I made a face. "Let me guess. It's in offshore accounts only he can access?"

Dirk nodded. "He told us it was to keep our money safe from the government." He rolled his eyes. "I guess Hunter, Heath, and Mona just swallowed it. We all get an *allowance*." His voice dripped with disdain. "Like we aren't adults."

Drake said, "I'm not sure why Drake and I were the only ones who asked for access to our money. The others never cared what Dad did with it as long as he gave them enough to buy whatever new car they had their eye on. We all still live in the same house like some sort of commune."

He blew out a breath. "Dirk and I don't even have a complete copy of the entire contract with the record label, just the parts about what we have to deliver. Hunter, Heath, and Mona barely skimmed it when they went to the signing, and they all let Dad hold on to their copies.

Drake looked down at Rocket and stroked one finger along his cheek. "Dirk and I finally found a way to get through to the sibs. We wrote the math down on a piece of paper. How much our sales are, how much we estimate goes to the record company, what percentage a manager typically would get, etc. The amount left over, even split five ways, was way more money than Dad was giving us."

Dirk said, "They woke up after that. Now they're interested in talking to a lawyer."

Drake straightened in his seat and told me, "Since you'll need a lawyer anyway for Grandfather's will, we're offering to cover your legal expenses if you'll help us sue Dad."

I blinked at him. "I mean, I'm happy to, but what kind of help do you think I can give you? Wouldn't you be better off just going straight to some Hollywood entertainment lawyer?"

Dirk nodded. "We'll get one. But joining forces with you will help us paint a picture of Dad as a cold-hearted douchebag out to steal his children's money, however they got it."

I was digesting that when Drake said, "Once we figured out what Dad was doing, it made Dirk and I really think about why we all shut you and Grandfather out of the family all those years ago."

Dirk added, "Especially because Dad's been ranting about Grandfather's will, and he's trotting out the same lines about how you poisoned Grandfather against us." He grimaced. "Dad was our only source of information. I know I told you before, but I'm really sorry, Steve."

I blinked back tears. Beside me, Baz grabbed my hand and held it in his steady grip. I flashed him a quick smile before telling Dirk and Drake, "Thanks for saying that, but you were really young, so of course you believed Dad. What do Mona, Hunter, and Heath say about cutting me out of the family?" They'd all been in high school when they'd stopped speaking to me.

Drake hesitated, then said, "Just that they were never close with you anyway, since you had different interests than they did growing up."

I hadn't been expecting anything more, but it still stung. To cover my hurt, I rolled my eyes. "Only because I wasn't all about music."

Dirk said, "They understand that what Dad told us was lies, and they want to have you involved in suing him. I don't know if they want to have any sort of sibling relationship with you going forward, but Drake and I do."

That did make me feel a little better.

Drake nodded. Then he deflated. "I wish we'd realized all this while Grandfather was still alive. I miss him." Dirk put his arm around Drake.

"He missed you too," I said. Grandfather had also left an envelope in my care for each of his grandchildren. I was to give those to them in the event they "ever came to their senses". I planned to wait until I'd spoken to all five of my siblings before deciding whether to deliver them.

I asked, "Isn't Dad the band's manager? What are you doing about that?"

Drake and Dirk winced. Drake said, "For now we're leaving him in place, at least until we talk to a lawyer."

Baz, who'd been silent this entire time, said quietly, "We're almost to the restaurant." He let go of my hand so he could maneuver the car into a parking space. The restaurant's patio

area was enclosed by plastic sheeting to keep the heat in. I hoped they'd still allow Rocket inside.

Baz parked by a small grassy area with a tree, so we let Rocket hop around for a few minutes to do his business.

The hostess regarded Rocket's sling dubiously, but the combined force of Dirk and Drake's winsome smiles carried the day, and we were allowed on the patio as long as Rocket stayed in the sling. Drake had begged for the honor of wearing it, and he kept slipping Rocket pieces of lettuce and other vegetables. Hopefully Rocket wasn't pooping in the sling, but that was Drake's problem.

Dirk told Drake about the Santa letters and the surveillance we were trying to do.

Drake asked, "How come you're not just looking at their houses on Google Earth?" He popped a french fry in his mouth and raised his eyebrows at us.

"We wanted to try to see the kids, get a feel for how they live," I said patiently.

After a skeptical look at all of us, Drake said, "It's still kind of sus. Those are little kids."

Baz offered, "We can drop you at the apartment. We'll be done in an hour or so."

Drake shook his head. "Oh, no. I want to see this for myself."

After lunch we got back in the car and resumed our original route. The next stop on our list was Jeramy Stone, who conveniently lived three doors down from Gus Barrons.

The neighborhood was made up of small, two- or three-bedroom houses built in the last twenty years or so. The homes were nice, with fieldstone accents on their facades, but otherwise they had very little architectural personality. No doubt some developer had come in and razed the lower-income homes they'd bought up to build this bland development. Still, it seemed a nice area to raise a kid.

Would Baz want kids one day? I didn't think I was ready for them yet. Heck, I'd only just figured out I was bisexual. No way was I mature enough to be a parent.

But someday, yeah. I could see it. Baz, I was sure, would be a great dad.

"Okay, here we are," Baz said as he pulled to a stop along the curb. We had a good view of both Jeramy and Gus' houses.

"What now?" Drake asked. He had his face pressed to his window.

I patted his arm. "Hey, not so obvious. Here." I handed him one of the pairs of binoculars and gave Dirk the other pair.

Dirk said, "Drake, you focus on Jeramy's house and I'll take Gus'."

Drake looked at the binoculars in his hand and then looked at me. "Binoculars? You told me this was just trying to get a feel for how the kids live. Binoculars make it creepy as fuck."

Baz held his hand out to take the binoculars back. "Don't worry about it. I'll do it. We have a five-minute time limit."

Drake considered Baz's hand then eyed the binoculars again. He shrugged. "Fuck it. I came here to spend time with Steve, and if this is what Steve does for kicks, I'm in. But you're talking to the cops if they show up."

He brought the binoculars to his face and turned toward Jeramy's house.

Baz shook his head at Drake before clasping one of his hands over mine. He bent toward me like he was going to whisper something, so I tilted my body forward. Instead, he kissed me, slow and sweet. I melted into him.

Dirk and Drake conversed about the lack of movement in both houses, but their voices were more like background noise. I was focused on the feel of Baz's lips on mine.

Then Drake said, "Shit!", and rapping on my window made Baz and I spring apart.

"What the fuck are you doing, you perverts?" shouted the very large man holding the leash of a giant dog.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

The last two days I'd tailed the school bus and identified the neighborhoods three of my students lived in. But I couldn't follow them from the bus stop to their house in broad daylight, so I still didn't have their addresses. This was taking way too much time.

Especially since the longer this took, the more opportunities I had to run into the sinfully attractive Bastien Allgood. He used the apartment's gym in the evenings, I'd discovered. And I couldn't help myself, but I'd started going to the gym at the same time. I made sure to wear my tiniest and tightest running shorts, which—unlike the baggy khakis I'd started to hate—showed off every bit of my firm ass and massive schlong.

Bastien looked. He didn't speak much, though, which I took to mean Stephanie had gotten to him with her gossip about me.

But he looked.

I needed some way to break the ice, to start a conversation.

Actually, Kane, I told myself, you need to leave Bastien the hell alone so you don't make him a target.

Sighing, I kept my mouth shut and put my earbuds in.

CHAPTER 14

BAZ

I PEELED AWAY FROM THE CURB, BURNING RUBBER WITH MY heart pounding and enormously thankful I'd never turned the engine off. Dirk howled with laughter in the back seat, but Drake had slouched down as far as he could with his hat covering his face. Steve had his hand over his mouth, trying to hide a grin. At the end of the street I turned right without pausing, only making a quick glance for oncoming traffic.

Dirk gasped, "Were we perverts for spying with the binoculars, or because Steve and Baz were dry humping each other?"

"Both!" Drake groaned, sending Dirk back into gales of laughter.

I told Steve, "I think we need a different strategy."

"No stopping anymore, that's for sure," Steve agreed.

I suggested, "Why don't we take a break and go back to the apartment. We can put Drake's stuff in my place and set up Rocket's crate."

Steve nodded then turned in his seat to look at Dirk and Drake. "Y'all want to go to the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown this evening?"

"The *what*?" Drake uncovered his face and sat up in his seat. "I don't care what that is. I need to go there. My Insta feed will explode!"

Dirk whacked him on the arm. "It's like a Christmas market with live music. It looks cool."

In the rear view mirror I watched Drake roll his eyes. "You think farmer's markets are cool. But it sounds hilarious. I can't wait."

I didn't see Dirk's expression, but his voice was clipped. "You can make fun of it, but I want to go. And I want to spend time with Steve and Baz."

I guessed that meant I wouldn't be bowing out to let Steve spend time with his brothers by himself.

Drake huffed. "I said I would go."

Next to me, Steve was hiding a smile. I patted him on his leg, and we exchanged grins.

By the time we returned to the apartment, got Drake settled into my place, put Rocket's crate together, and just hung out and chilled for a while, it was almost 5pm.

I sat next to Steve on his couch, petting Rocket while watching Dirk and Drake carefully arranging Rocket's bed, food, water, and litter box inside the crate. They bickered about the best placement for every single item.

Steve showed me his phone. He'd been looking at the map of the kids' homes. "Look," he said. "Rudy Zdenko lives on the way to the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown."

I raised an eyebrow. "But we're just driving by, right?"

Steve barked out a laugh. "Yeah, we learned that lesson."

"If this doesn't get us anything useful, maybe we should just Google Earth the rest of them."

With his head inside Rocket's crate, Drake snorted. "Duh."

Steve rolled his eyes but nodded. "At this point I don't see how we're going to give everyone the individual gifts they asked for. Maybe we can think of something to do for them as a group."

I pondered this for a moment but didn't come up with anything. I looked at the twins, but they were arguing over the instructions for a ball that dropped food pellets randomly.

Brothers. Two brothers. "Cal's text. The one about brothers. It came true." I whispered. "He can see the future?"

Steve made a *so-so* motion with his hand. He whispered back, "He has dreams, and they come true, but they're usually not about anything major. And he can only recognize people he's met or seen a picture of, so if there are strangers in his dream he can't tell you who they are."

"Has he had a dream about you before?"

Steve's face broke into a grin. "So many times. But I usually forget to heed his advice, so I end up embarrassing myself or whatever anyway." He paused. "Cal doesn't like for us to talk about his gift. He's always worried people will treat him like he's weird."

I didn't blame him. "Well, I'm not planning on going through any hedges today."

Finally Dirk and Drake were done turning Rocket's crate into a rabbit palace, and they dashed across the hall to change clothes and get ready.

"I can drive this time," Steve offered.

"No," I said. "You need to do some sibling bonding." I arched my eyebrows at him. "And I'm betting you could use a drink."

Steve side-eyed the door his brothers had just left through then let out a heavy sigh and nodded. I gave him a quick hug. I loved how he felt in my arms. "I'll be the designated driver."

Steve made a face. "I'm not going to drink much. I don't want to get all sad and start talking about how my siblings treated me."

"Hmmm. I can see that. But, hey," I caught his hand in mine. "You're allowed to have, you know, complicated feelings about your brothers. It's not going to automatically be sunshine and roses." I squeezed his fingers. "I'm here if you need to vent about it."

Steve raised a hand to my face and leaned in to kiss me. "Thank you. I'm not sure what I did to deserve having you

appear in my life right now, but I'm extraordinarily grateful. I hope I get the chance to return the favor sometime."

Well, I wouldn't get a better opening than that. I leaned into his hand and said, "I should probably give you a heads up about Christmas Eve."

"What about it? Do you have plans or something?" he asked. He straightened away from me, dropping his hands, and standing up. I had to stand up and reach for his wrist to make sure he didn't go too far.

I was about to respond but Steve said, "Because I totally get it if you do. I mean, we haven't been together a hot minute so it's only natural you'd have plans with your family or something. But that's okay. I'll be around after the holiday too. I don't want you to feel like you're obligated to hang out with me or anything."

I gave him an exasperated glare. "Are you done?"

He looked confused. "Yes?"

I huffed and tightened my hold on his wrist. "Come here." I pushed him back down on the couch, and then I knelt on one knee in front of him so he couldn't go anywhere. I held both of his hands in mine and stared into his eyes. "I do want to spend Christmas Eve with you, and Christmas Day too. But—"

The door to my apartment across the hall slammed, and the twins opened Steve's door, chattering about something to do with music. They shut the door behind them and walked a few steps into the room before they saw us and stopped cold.

"Holy shit!" Drake said. "Um, we can leave again." He gestured awkwardly behind him.

Dirk said, "No way! I'm not leaving!" He snagged the sleeve of Drake's black button-down shirt and pulled him toward us. "Have you gotten to the good part yet? Did he say yes?"

My brain screeched to a halt. They thought I was proposing? I was trying to tell Steve about Christmas Eve.

But proposing. Marriage. A staticky buzzing sound filled my ears, and I couldn't move. My breathing got faster. Would I

ever be willing to risk it again?

A knock sounded across the hall, then almost immediately another knock at Steve's door. The knob turned, and the door swung open, revealing Selina and Flo.

"Uh, hi?" Selina said to Dirk and Drake. Then her gaze fell on me and Steve, and her eyes went wide. "Holy shit!"

Selina pulled Flo into the apartment and kicked the door shut. "Looks like we got here just in time!" She pointed at me. "We're going to have words, mister, if you invited these guys —" she eyed Dirk and Drake. "—whoever they are, and you didn't invite us."

Steve asked, "To the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown?"

But his hands squeezed mine. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't move.

Marriage. I hadn't thought that far ahead. If I dated Steve, if we were serious, I'd have to think about marriage.

Selina rolled her eyes. "Go on!" She flapped her hand at me.

Flo said, "Um, Baz...? This can't be what it looks like."

Selina positioned herself and Flo so they were standing next to Dirk and Drake. "Mom and Dad are going to shit a brick."

Steve said in a low voice, "Baz? Are you okay?"

I forced my head back around. His eyes were filled with worry. I opened my mouth but couldn't get any sound out.

Steve's hands gripped mine even harder. He said, "I think we'll continue this discussion later." He scooted forward and lifted our joined hands as if he were about to help me stand.

"No!" three voices shouted. Steve's entire body jerked in surprise.

Flo said, "Baz isn't—"

Steve interrupted. "Guys, this isn't what you think it is."

Right. Because proposing was a big deal. A forever deal. Til death do we part.

I broke out in a sweat.

Dirk said, "Look at Baz's face. I think *he* thinks it's what we think it is. Are you going to answer the man or break his heart?"

Drake said, "Um, maybe we should go and let them talk this through alone."

"No!" Steve cried out. "It's not.... He wasn't.... It's waaaaay too soon anyhow. I mean, I'm not saying never but...." He looked at me helplessly.

I remembered when Warren proposed. He'd been the one on his knee

I wanted to do that for Steve.

If we got married.

Til death did we part.

But the more I looked at Steve, at the concern in his bright blue eyes, the buzzing in my ears faded. I stopped sweating, and my breathing slowed.

I wanted it. I wanted him. I could imagine our future, with Steve tied to me in every way possible. I remembered my visceral reaction to the mental image of me and Steve with kids. Even if it didn't happen, even if it was just him and me and Rocket, I wanted it. I wanted that future.

Not this very minute—he was right, it was way too soon.

"No," I croaked out. I tugged on Steve's hands, and he helped me stand up. I cleared my throat. I glanced at Dirk, Drake, Flo, and Selina before saying, "I wasn't trying to.... We were just talking. No big proposals happening here. Haha."

Steve pasted a smile on his face, but his eyes examined me like he was afraid I was going to fall apart.

I kept his hand tucked in mine when I turned around.

Three pairs of eyes pitied me, still stubbornly believing I'd had my proposal shot down.

Flo just looked worried.

We didn't have a vehicle big enough for all of us to ride together, so Flo and Selina were meeting us at the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown. We'd told them we had a short errand to run on the way, but we'd be there as soon as we could.

Flo and Selina had been chuffed to meet Dirk and Drake, with Selina exclaiming how excited she was to have gotten to witness Steve and my almost-proposal with the twins.

I'd explained—again—that I'd just been trying to have a conversation with Steve, but she didn't want to listen.

Selina had even pulled me aside and said, "I know what it must have taken for you to put yourself out there, but Steve is right that you haven't been dating very long."

I rubbed my hands over my face. This was going to be a *thing*, wasn't it?

"I'm fine, Selina. It wasn't what it looked like, and I'm not disappointed or pining or whatever you're thinking."

It was obvious she didn't believe me, but I wasn't going to expend any more energy trying to convince her. We had a Holiday Hoedown to get to.

We were halfway there before I remembered I should've made Selina promise not to tell Mom and Dad about what she thought she'd witnessed.

Rudy Zdenko lived in the middle of a block of genteelly rundown homes. Jeramy and Gus' streets might have been similar before they were bulldozed for new development. These houses were probably built in the 1960s. Most of them were kept up fairly nicely, but here and there one would have some broken siding on the house or dead shrubs in the front yard.

Rudy's home looked like someone put effort into caring for it. From what I could see in the sunset gloom, the white paint didn't peel, the grass was mown and there weren't any visible weeds in the flowerbeds. But there weren't any flowers either. No potted plants or rocking chairs on the porch. No holiday decorations or kids' toys. No car in the driveway, but a big oil stain showed where one usually parked.

We'd driven past fairly slowly, and I was about to head for the Holiday Hoedown when Dirk said, "Hey!"

He punched his forefinger into the glass of his window. "Pull over. There's somebody sneaking around the side of the house!"

I jerked the car over to the curb. "Are you sure? It could be someone who lives there."

"I'm pretty sure," Dirk said.

I looked up and down the street. Several cars were parked nearby, on the street and in driveways, but I didn't see any people.

We'd driven well past Rudy's house, so we only had a view of the front yard.

"Look," Steve said. He pointed at Rudy's neighbor's house. "We can crouch behind those shrubs and take a look."

I protested, "And get the cops called on us?"

Dirk said, "I don't think anyone's home at Rudy's house or the neighbor's. Can we please just go check? We can come right back to the car if we don't see anybody."

Drake said, "Or we could just call the police."

Dirk shook his head. "I'm not completely sure of what I saw. I don't want to call the cops on a neighbor."

"We should look," Steve said quietly. "A child lives in that house."

Well, fuck.

We got out of the car and hurried across the street. No one spoke. We would've been less conspicuous if some of us had

stayed in the car, but I wasn't going to argue the point.

The four of us squatted down behind a line of short shrubs. They'd seemed taller from the car, but they turned out to be only about three feet high.

The hedge—holy fuck, it was a *hedge*!—separated the Zdenkos' driveway from the neighbor's property starting at the curb and going back to almost even with the porch steps, where a fence took over.

Everything was silent. The Zdenkos' front porch light was on, but I couldn't see any other lights in the house.

Dirk whispered, "I want to go look in that window. That's where I think I saw the person." He pointed at a window on the side of the house overlooking the driveway.

"No," Steve hissed. "No one goes—"

The Zdenkos' front porch light went out.

We all ducked even lower behind the hedge. It was thick enough we shouldn't have been visible to anyone in the house.

But we couldn't see through it either.

My heart was pounding, but even so, the night was still enough I could hear the Zdenkos' front door open and shut very quietly. Faint footsteps hurried across the wooden porch—they should've made a lot more noise—and across the grass away from us. I chanced a look, but all I could see was a figure in dark clothes running through the lawn and then across the street.

He ran for a car parked on the street four houses down.

"He's getting in a car," I whispered to the others, as if they weren't also looking just like I was.

The car started, but the headlights didn't come on. It drove toward us, and we all flattened ourselves to the ground in case they looked our way when they drove by.

But instead of continuing down the street, the car—a big black SUV—stopped right in front of where we were lying in the grass. I didn't breathe.

Then the SUV reversed up the Zdenkos' driveway.

The drivers' door, which was of course right next to where we were hiding, opened. We didn't dare raise our heads to look.

A clunk sounded, then hydraulics. The rear hatch lifting, maybe? Footsteps headed for the house. The front door opened but did not shut.

Dirk whispered, "Should we call the cops?"

Oh, fuck. "Everybody silence your phones!" I whisper-yelled.

I fumbled for mine and heard the other three softly cursing and clicking. We all hid our phones under our bellies for the brief flashes of light as screens brightened and then locked.

"No calling the cops until we're safe," whispered Steve just before we heard a heavier tread on the front porch and the door being pulled shut.

Slow footsteps, so different from the earlier lighter ones, swished through the grass and then hit the driveway.

I was closest to the back of the SUV. I could risk a quick look while the person was occupied with the car.

I slowly, silently eased up on all fours, ignoring Steve's frantic tugging on the leg of my jeans.

I tilted my head and lifted it so only one eye was higher than the top of the hedge.

What the fuck?

I ducked back down and looked behind me at Steve. *It's Phillip!* I mouthed.

He mouthed back, What?

"Phillip!" I whispered.

"Are you saying it's *Phillip*?" he whispered back, his face screwed up in confusion. "No way!"

"It's him!" I hissed. "It's fucking Phillip!"

"Uh, guys?" Drake said in a normal voice.

"Shhh!!" Steve and I turned to stare at him.

Drake pointed above us. "I'm guessing that's Phillip."

Fuck.

Slowly I turned to look. Phillip had two—two!—guns pointed us.

"Don't shoot!" I said, raising my shaking hands over my head. "It's Baz and Steve."

"Yes," Phillip said in a dry voice. "I had plenty of time to recognize you while you were discussing me."

The night was fairly dark at this point, but I could still make out Phillip's face. He looked bored, like he could kill me without being upset about it.

"Who are your friends there?" Phillip inclined his head slightly in Dirk and Drake's direction.

Steve said, "Those are my brothers. They don't even know you. You can let them go. They won't say anything to anyone."

"Brothers." He said flatly. "Okay, everyone stand up but keep your hands where I can see them."

We all got to our feet and stared at Phillip. He was different than I was used to seeing him. Black pants with utility pockets, black, close-fitting jacket over a black t-shirt. He held the guns like he'd been born with them in his hands.

Behind the SUV was an unconscious or possibly dead man lying face-down on the driveway. He was much bigger than Phillip but dressed almost identically.

"Is he dead?" I blurted out. I could've smacked myself.

"No," drawled Phillip. "Or at least he wasn't before you and Steve made me drop him on the concrete."

He spared a quick glance down the street before lifting his chin at us. The guns did not waver. "Okay, Baz, Steve, and Steve's brothers. Out with it. Why are you here?"

Steve ventured, "Um, because we read the letters to Santa you put in the trash and we're trying to figure out something we can do for the kids for the holiday."

This did not seem to be the answer Phillip was expecting. "What?"

I said, "We've been driving around to all the kids' houses trying to see how they live so we can come up with an idea for gifts or something for them."

Steve added, "Some of them just asked for toys, but others didn't ask for anything. And we were trying to avoid giving toys to kids who were going to get them anyway from their parents." He turned his hands palm up.

Phillip shook his head and muttered, "Fucking hell." He backed up a few steps and said, "You two, the brothers. Come over here and put this gentleman in the SUV."

Dirk and Drake looked at each other, then stepped over the hedge and approached the guy on the ground.

"Is that Mr. Zdenko?" Steve asked.

Phillip snapped, "No. And don't feel bad about participating in his abduction. He would've shot you on sight."

Drake put his fingers on the guy's neck and said, "He's alive."

I narrowed my eyes at Phillip. "You're obviously not really a teacher. Are the Zdenkos and this guy the reason you were pretending to be one?"

Dirk and Drake each took one end of the unconscious man and hefted him into the back of the SUV.

Phillip told them, "Excellent, thank you. Please shut the hatch and then you can go back over to your companions." To me he said, "To answer your question, this man is only part of the reason I am in Bent Oak. His boss thinks one of my students has something he is looking for." He tilted his head slightly. "I don't think they do. I cannot find the item, and this gentleman hasn't found it, so tonight I will force his boss to call off the search."

Steve stirred beside me. "The kids are in danger?"

"They won't be by morning," he assured us.

I couldn't stop the question. "Who are you, some kind of mercenary or something?"

Phillip's face went blank. "I used to be an *or something*, but I came out of retirement to deal with this situation." Then he said, "Enough talking. Go back to your car and drive away. If you try to tell the police about this, I promise you I have evidence I am in Florida right now attending my grandmother's funeral."

"I have a lot of questions," I said.

"Too bad. Oh, one thing. Steve?"

Steve stiffened. "Yes?"

"Thank you for rescuing poor Mr. Bun. I came back to make sure he'd been picked up when the weather turned. I was just in time to witness your, ah, athletic rescue. I'm sorry, but I really thought Principal Lockwood would come get him right away." His teeth flashed in the darkness. "As soon as I have time, Lockwood will be appropriately punished."

Steve perked up. "Didn't you hear? He's not there anymore. He's been replaced."

Phillip raised one eyebrow. "Ah. Finally. Thank you for telling me."

He leveled his guns at us. "Now run along."

None of us wasted any time getting to the car. I was astounded the street was still quiet. No cars had driven by, and no one had witnessed our conversation with Phillip. Or him holding his guns on us.

We'd just reached my car when Phillip's SUV left the Zdenkos' driveway and sped away going in the opposite direction.

Once we were all in the car, I turned it on, but just sat there for a moment, looking at Steve. "Fuck," I said.

Steve shook his head disbelievingly. "What in Hellboy's horns!"

"What could any schoolkid possibly have that Phillip and some bad guy with a henchman might want?" My mind whirled with speculation. If I'd written the scene for Kane, I could've gone in twenty different directions from there.

Which was a good way to distract myself from thinking about almost getting shot.

Drake said, "I'm not sure, but speaking of the henchman, does anyone have some alcohol wipes? I've got henchman sweat all over my hands."

Everyone shook their heads. Steve said, "We all also have grass and dirt all over ourselves. Not to mention we're pretty freaked out. Why don't we go somewhere we can clean up and get a drink—uhhhh, some ice cream! There's an Amy's Ice Cream about a mile from here."

I laughed a little frantically and nodded. "That sounds pretty good. We can get something more substantial at the Holiday Hoedown."

"And the Hoedown will have beer for those of us old enough to drink," Steve noted. Dirk and Drake booed from the back seat.

After I texted Selina and Flo that we'd be late to the Holiday Hoedown, we made a restorative visit to Amy's Ice Cream.

We traded off ordering and washing up in the restroom. Drake and I ended up alone at the table. He said, "Hey, um, I'm sorry Steve wasn't ready to make the big commitment today."

I almost asked what he meant but then I realized what he was referring to. Crap, this again.

The problem was, it took my brain way too long to make the connection, so I didn't respond in time to protest.

Drake patted me on the arm. "He'll get there. He seems really into to you. You'll just need to make allowances for how much our family has fucked him up." He made a face. "While we fucked him over."

Now this was none of my business, but it was a conversation I wanted to have. "He was devastated by the way y'all treated

him."

Drake nodded and scratched his thumb over the label on his water bottle. "I don't blame him. I wish.... I wish Dirk and I had come to our senses about Steve before now. But it was so easy just to not think about him, you know? We had our fancy rock star lives with the music and the performances and the recording studios and the fans. Steve was part of the past, and we relied on the story we'd been told that the separation was his fault, he'd been in the wrong. It was easier to believe that, to be the martyr and feel self-righteous, than to ask questions and admit we were complicit in it."

He wiped a knuckle under his eye, darting a glance at the hallway leading to the restrooms.

"You can't wish away the past," I reminded him. "All you can do is change what you do going forward."

He nodded. "I want to have Steve in our lives. I want to be in *his* life."

"Then do it," I said. "But you'll have to show him you're serious. Show him he matters and that you won't just push him aside and forget him when something else grabs your attention." I put my hand on his arm. "Because, Drake, if you can't do that, it would be kinder just to back off now. Deal with the legal stuff and keep your communication limited to that. Because if you and Dirk keep acting like you want to be Steve's brothers for real, and then you drop him again, I don't know if he'll recover."

Drake nodded, his eyes somber. "Got it," he said as Steve and Dirk came out of the restroom.

After getting their ice cream, Dirk and Drake debated whether they should post photos on social media and what the fallout would be if their dad discovered where they were. They ended up deciding not to post, but I was convinced that was because they'd already finished their ice cream more than any other factor.

We walked back to the car in silence, but before we got in, Steve looked around the parking lot, and then said, "Are all of you okay? What happened back there was scary and we didn't talk about it."

Drake said, "I almost pissed myself, though I'm better now." But he crossed his arms and shivered.

Steve was already moving. He got between Drake and Dirk and put his arms around both of them. They hugged him back.

It was the first time I'd seen Steve initiate physical contact with either one of them since they'd arrived.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

"Sean," I called as he slow-walked behind the other kids running like hell to leave school for the day.

"Yeah?" he stopped moving and looked cautiously at me.

I dropped into my desk chair and kept every muscle relaxed like I would reassure a scared dog. "Hey, seems like math comes pretty easy for you."

"Yeah?" He fiddled with the shoulder strap of his ancient backpack.

"You know, the school district has programs where you can be put in an accelerated class, so you can study things like math at your speed and not at everyone else's." I gestured at the other kids' desks.

The naked longing on Sean's face wrenched my heart, especially when it was immediately followed by a blank expression. "That's okay," he said. "My parents have a lot going on. Now's not a good time. Maybe next year."

I cocked my head. Something smelled off there. "Are you sure you don't want me to give you some information about it so you can talk to them?"

"Nah. Thanks, though." He gave me a little smile and hurried out the door.

Well, shit.

CHAPTER 15

STEVE

My knees and hands had stopped shaking by the time we left Amy's Ice Cream. A little sugar boost was good for that sort of thing. I was very much looking forward to a beer, however. Maybe some barbecue.

But Dirk, after researching the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown, had a fixed itinerary for us.

First we had to peruse all of the market stalls—*all* of them. Dirk loved handmade items and, according to Drake, wherever the band went on tour, he would go to flea markets and farmers markets if there was time.

Therefore, only after we'd visited the market stalls, and any purchases had been ferried to Baz's car, would we be allowed to eat dinner and listen to music.

As soon as we arrived, Drake and Dirk took a selfie in front of the giant jalapeño made out of Christmas lights by the entrance to the enormous warehouse space.

"Come on, Steve! You need to be in one too!" Drake called.

I was still staring at him in shock when Baz said, "I'll take it. Three's too many for a decent selfie."

He nudged me forward and I walked automatically toward the twins. They parted, making room for me in between them and circling their arms around my back.

Hugging them earlier had been tough. Afterward I'd wanted a moment to myself to process my frustration, anger, and grief at all the time we'd missed out on. But I hadn't had that luxury, and I was still on edge emotionally.

Based on Baz's look of concern after he took the photo, my smile hadn't been as convincing as I'd hoped it would be. He handed Drake's phone back to him then pulled me to his side.

After kissing me on the temple, he whispered, "You need a minute? I can pretend I left something in the car so you can offer to go get it."

Hawkeye's hamster, this guy. I was half in love with him already.

"Yeah, please," I said, my voice choking up. "I'll come find you."

He squeezed me again before fishing his keys out of his pocket. "I think it's in the trunk," he said loudly enough for the twins to hear.

I tossed the keys in the air and caught them, just like the lonely-but-carefree Steve of a year ago would've done. "Gotcha. I'll catch up."

I heard Baz asking Dirk if there was a dance floor by the stage as I walked back to the parking lot. He could dance?

I shook my head, smiling a little. Baz was an amazing man. Thinking about him was much more pleasant than stewing over my family.

I grinned, remembering Baz's face when the twins plus Flo and Selina had assumed he was proposing to me earlier. The thought of marriage was probably fraught with a lot of pain and melancholy for him. If we ended up together long-term—which I hoped we would—I'd have to give him whatever time he needed before we took that step.

I chuckled to myself. We'd started living together, even if temporarily, after our first date. No need to rush anything else about this relationship. And it *was* a relationship. We'd have to discuss everything of course, but even after these few days, it was obvious Baz and I could have something special.

I reached the car but didn't get in. The night was crisp but not bitingly cold, and the stars were coming out. I leaned against the trunk and looked up.

My mom had loved to look at the sky. At night she'd point out the stars, and in the daytime she'd talk about the clouds. Sunrise and sunset had been her favorites.

She'd have been so happy knowing Dirk and Drake were trying to forge a relationship with me after all these years. I was hesitant though. They acted like they genuinely wanted to spend time with me, but they'd admitted this visit had been motivated by money, by getting themselves and the other siblings out from under our father's financial thumb.

I yearned to believe them when they said they wanted to get to know me. But I'd spent too many years being an afterthought and then an outcast. Even before I'd gone to live with Grandfather, I'd had Dad's clear favoritism for Hunter, Heath and Mona shoved in my face. Mom had tried to mitigate it when she'd been alive, but she couldn't give me musical talent I hadn't been born with.

Hunter, Heath, and Mona had lapped up Dad's attention, but Dirk and Drake had only known what he'd told them. My separation from the family was Dad's fault, not theirs. I couldn't blame them.

But I did.

And there it was. I blamed Dirk and Drake for the way I'd been treated, even though they'd been too young to make rational choices for themselves.

And now when they were trying to make overtures to repair things between us, I didn't trust them.

I ran my hands through my hair. "My brain is twelve kinds of fucked up." I cast an apologetic look to the stars. "Sorry for the swear word, Mom."

I wasn't going to solve anything tonight, but at least I'd figured out why my brain felt like it was going haywire.

"Okay, good talk," I said, still looking at the night sky.

"Steve?"

I shouted—I did *not* shriek—and spun around, landing in a crouch with my fists up.

I blinked at Keson and Wesley, the couple whose property backed up to Cole, Jason, and Will's rescue ranch.

Keson, a former bodyguard, had put himself between me and Wesley.

I slowly stood up and shook my hands out. "Sorry. I'm kind of jumpy. Um, hey. How are y'all? It's been a while."

Over the summer, while Cal and I were working with Cole on getting our software business off the ground, I'd spent a lot of time at the ranch. Keson and Wesley were frequent visitors.

"You okay?" Keson asked. His bald head was covered with a beanie, and his curly black beard was longer than it'd been over the summer. A white sweater covered his muscular chest and arms, but he wasn't wearing a jacket.

"Hah!" I replied. My voice might have been a little high. "It's been a stressful week. Y'all here for the Holiday Hoedown?" I waved toward the building.

They nodded. Wesley said, "I'm supposed to play here tomorrow night, and *someone*," he tilted his head toward Keson. "Wanted to scope the place out first.""

Wesley was also known as Jake Lord, mega-huge rock star, now retired. I knew he was in his fifties, and the white in his hair testified to his years of hard partying before he'd gotten sober and given up the rock and roll life. I always enjoyed seeing Wesley's tall and skinny frame cuddled into his boyfriend's shorter but sturdier body.

Keson made a face at his boyfriend. "I could scope it out more effectively without you along."

Wesley grinned and batted his eyes. "But then I couldn't get barbecue with you. Besides, I have a disguise." He produced a battered straw cowboy hat and popped it onto his head.

I chuckled as we started walking toward the entrance. "Sure. That works great."

"You here by yourself?" Keson asked. "You can hang out with us."

"I—oh!" I looked at Wesley. "Sorry, I wanted to ask, do you have an entertainment lawyer? Like a real shark-type person?"

Wesley stopped walking. "I do, as a matter of fact. Why?"

I grimaced. "My dad is screwing my brothers and sister out of a lot of money." He raised his eyebrows, so I added, "Melodious Moon."

Keson whistled. "Your dad's their manager?"

I nodded grimly.

Wesley pulled out his phone. "Give me your number. I'll send you my attorney's name right now, and I'll contact him in the morning to let him know to expect your call."

"Thanks," I said. "But tomorrow's Sunday. It can wait until Monday."

Wesley grinned wide, showing all of his teeth. "Yiannis would be upset with me if I delay telling him about something this high profile. Especially if your dad is fucking over his kids. Yiannis hates that shit."

"Okay." I shrugged and gave Wesley my number. "Two of my brothers are here, Dirk and Drake. They're already inside with my, uh, boyfriend Baz. Would you like to meet them?" Holy spitballs, I'd just come out to Wesley and Keson.

But it wasn't my sexuality Keson was concerned with.

"Dirk and Drake?" he asked incredulously. "Are those stage names?"

I laughed. "No. Dad planned for them to be famous. I was lucky to be named after my grandfather."

We started walking again.

"Why aren't you in the band?" Wesley asked.

"Hah. No musical talent. Like, at all."

He said, "Are you the only one of your siblings not in the band?"

"Yep."

He whistled. "That must have been difficult growing up."

I swallowed and blinked hard. "Yeah, um." I cleared my throat. "You could say that." I couldn't remember the last time someone I wasn't close to had shown concern for my childhood struggles.

Fortunately that was when we reached the sidewalk in front of the Holiday Hoedown. Several people crowded through the entry doors with us, but none of them gave Wesley a second glance. I guessed his hat was a decent disguise after all.

Inside the doors we were faced with a giant open area. The section directly in front of us was filled with market stalls full of crafts and other goods, many of which were holiday-themed. Beyond that I could hear music playing, and I could smell several types of food as well as beer.

I looked around but didn't see Baz or the twins, though my view of the aisles further down was blocked by the backs of the stalls in front of us.

"Let me text them and find out where they are." Keson and Wesley nodded.

Wesley wandered over to look at a table of pet toys, and I followed him as I texted. Maybe they had something for Rocket.

Baz texted me back that they were on the third row of stalls. Dirk had found an artist he liked.

I messaged I'd be right there and I was bringing a couple of people I wanted to introduce them to.

Wesley completed his purchase of some catnip-filled felt mice, and I led him and Keson through the crowd.

Baz must've been watching for me, because he waved his hand high over the people in between us when Wesley, Keson, and I entered the aisle. I showed Keson where we were going, because Wesley had stopped to look at some artwork that appeared to be mostly brightly-colored scenes with various animals in them. Keson nodded and went to hover behind Wesley while I hurried over to Baz.

"Hey," Baz said, pulling me in for a hug. "You doing okay?"

I nodded against his neck. "I'm better, thanks." I stepped back. "My friends are checking out a vendor. They'll be here in a minute."

I turned to see what artwork had caught Dirk's eye. He was in deep conversation with the woman running the booth. She had mixed-media pieces in muted tones. They weren't my taste, but they appeared well-executed. Drake was at the booth next to hers, which featured carved wooden figurines. He came over as soon as he saw I'd joined them.

"Hey." He said with a chin lift.

"Hey." I gestured at Dirk. "What's he buying?"

Drake shrugged. "Who knows? It'll end up in storage anyway, at least until Dirk and I are able to move out and get our own place."

He glanced idly down the aisle, and then his eyes goggled. "Holy shit! Don't turn around, but I swear that guy over there is Jake Lord!"

I laughed and turned to wave at Wesley and Keson. They waved back and came toward us. I felt Baz stiffen, and Drake's mouth dropped open. He looked disbelievingly between me and Wesley.

When Wesley and Keson stopped at my side, I said, "Guys, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend, Baz, and this is my brother Drake. Baz and Drake, this is Keson and his boyfriend Wesley, who you might also know as Jake Lord."

Baz produced a faint "Hey," but he was drowned out by Drake.

"No way! I mean, wow, it's so nice to meet you, Jake, um, Wesley? Should I call you Wesley? Wow." Some manners finally kicked in, and he addressed Keson. "Sorry, I got a little overwhelmed. Nice to meet you too, Keson."

"No worries, man. I'm used to his effect on people."

"Drake, it's a pleasure to meet you," Wesley said. "Steve told me you're part of Melodious Moon? I love your latest album."

Drake blushed. "Wow, thanks. That's, um, good to hear. I think it's some of our best work, but more than anything I'm glad it doesn't have a Christmas song on it, you know?"

Jake and Keson laughed, and Drake puffed up like he was going to explode with excitement.

Baz was smiling. He said into my ear, "How the hell do you know Jake Lord?"

"Cole's neighbors."

"Ohhh." Then he nudged me. "Think Dirk'll recognize him?"

I turned. Dirk didn't seem to have purchased anything, but he was stuffing a business card into his pocket. I saw the exact moment he clocked Wesley. Dirk froze in his tracks about four feet away and didn't blink.

Grinning, I said, "Dirk, come over here and meet Wesley and Keson"

They all exchanged greetings. Drake bounced up and down on his toes, but Dirk pretended to be calm and collected.

I caught Keson's eye. "We could all use some food. Why don't we head over to the restaurant booths and after we eat you can check out the stage or whatever you need to do."

He nodded and took charge, herding us all like a flock of sheep in the direction he wanted us to go. Wesley tried to dodge toward a booth selling holiday-themed pet treats, but Keson grabbed his arm and muttered, "Later."

We found Flo and Selina camped out at a table that had room for all of us. They handled the celebrity introduction much more calmly than Drake at least.

Baz and I took everyone's order and went to buy the food and a pitcher of beer. Baz was having iced tea, and Dirk and Drake were getting Cokes.

"Sorry to spring Wesley on you," I told Baz as we stood in line. "I ran into them in the parking lot."

He shook his head, smiling. "You're just full of surprises."

I smirked. "Hey, all I did was produce a famous musician. You're the one who almost got pressured into proposing this afternoon."

He groaned and pulled me close, kissing my hair. "That was soooo awkward. And I flailed, I just *flailed*. Selina and Drake have both told me to buck up, you might not be ready now, but you'll be ready eventually."

I chuckled. "Well, I did say so at the time."

Baz stilled. "What? You said *maybe*."

"Right, no promises. And you'd still have to ask and everything." I grinned at his shocked face. "Just putting that on record."

It was our turn to order. I put some extra swagger in my hips as I walked ahead of him up to the counter.

While we waited for the food, I asked him, "What should we do about Phillip? Or his students? I mean, he said they wouldn't be in danger anymore, but I'd feel better if we had some sort of confirmation." I sighed. "Not that we know what they were in danger *from* exactly."

Baz frowned. "The principal has to have his phone number. Maybe we can contact her and ask her to text Phillip. Tell him we have a package for him or something?"

"It's worth a shot."

After we ate, Keson went to find the head of security to discuss arrangements for tomorrow night. Wesley seemed content to sit and watch the up-and-coming local country band on the stage. Drake and Dirk joined him and made occasional comments about chords and instruments that I wasn't even going to try to follow.

Flo and Selina got up and danced. Baz and I stayed, not willing to leave Wesley with only two 18-year-olds to run interference with any fans who might recognize him. Though the straw hat was still doing a good job of deflecting people.

When Flo and Selina came back, flushed and smiling, Baz asked me, "You want to dance?"

I arched my eyebrow in challenge. "Can you two step?"

He gave me a slow, lazy smile. "I can." He stood up and held out his hand.

I took it, reveling in his unfaltering grip, and stood. My thighs were still a little sore from Thursday night, but not too bad. I warned Baz, "I don't know how to follow."

"I'll teach you. We'll switch off," he said confidently.

As we took our places on the dance floor, I was surprised we didn't get many side-eyes or glares from other dancers or people at the tables. For me, it was rewarding just to get to hold onto Baz, feeling his body move next to mine. I would've loved to grind up against him, but this wasn't that kind of venue.

Baz let me lead to start, but the entire time he narrated how he kept his body loose, ready to move the way I wanted him to.

A minute or two into the song, he asked, "You wanna try?"

I took a deep breath and nodded. I slowed, and Baz said, "Just relax and let your body do what I do."

Baz switched our arms so my right hand was in his left, and my left hand was on his right shoulder. I released as much tension in my body as I could, and Baz pushed on my hand to swing us around so he was facing forward and I'd be going backward.

Why had I never appreciated how much trust women had to put in their dance partners?

"Just look into my eyes, Steve, and let my body tell yours where to go."

The approval and affection in those brown eyes could get addictive.

Baz took a step forward, and I automatically stepped back. Slow, slow, quick, quick. Same as I'd always done it, but in reverse.

I grinned. "I think I might prefer dancing this way. It's kind of freeing, not having to decide where to go."

He grinned back. "Think you're up for a spin?"

"I'm game."

In the next step Baz lifted my right hand and led me under his arm. Then we were side-by-side for a step before he spun me back the other direction, returning me to our starting positions.

I couldn't stop a laugh. "That's a lot more fun on this side of the dance, I have to say."

I was sorry when the music ended.

Baz hugged me. "You did great."

I waggled my hand in a so-so gesture. "It was fun, but we'll need to practice some more."

The band was taking a break, so it wouldn't be tonight. Probably for the best; it'd been a long day.

We made our way back to the table. We got there just as Keson walked up with a man wearing a black button-down shirt with the KATE-FM logo over his left chest. Our local radio station was the sponsor of the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown. They only played 80s music. I imagined they were stoked to get Jake Lord on their docket, given his early hits were from the end of that decade.

Keson said, "Hey, y'all, this is Jim Hartigan, the General Manager over at KATE-FM and the guy who's in charge of the music for the Holiday Hoedown."

We all greeted him, and Wesley shook his hand.

"Jake," Hartigan said. "Keson here said you're busy Christmas Eve, but the act I booked backed out today, and I'm in a bind. Is there any way you can fill in? Even an abbreviated set would do. I'm only asking because I know you're local."

Wesley shook his head regretfully. "I'm really sorry, Jim, but Keson and I will be in California. My son and his girlfriend are spending the holidays out there and they invited us to come with them."

Then Wesley's mouth quirked up, and he regarded Dirk and Drake. "What about you two? Will you still be here on

Christmas Eve?"

I leaned forward to hear the answer. *Would* they still be here? I hadn't imagined they'd stay that long.

"Uh," Hartigan said, looking concerned. "Are you two musicians?"

Dirk and Drake stared into each other's eyes, doing that twin telepathy thing they'd been able to do since birth.

Then they both nodded and turned to Hartigan. Dirk said, "We're interested. I'm Dirk Derry and this is Drake Derry."

Jim's mouth fell open. "From Melodious Moon?" His eyes lit up. "Are all of you here?"

The twins shook their heads. "No but we can see who's free and willing to come."

Jim gave a relieved laugh. "Heck, y'all. Even just the two of you would be somethin' special. People will go wild to hear 'Santa's Secret Stocking' on Christmas Eve. We'll be sold out in no time."

Dirk and Drake immediately looked like they regretted their life choices.

I'd admit to anyone that I was resentful of my siblings. They got our father's attention, had close relationships with each other, and they were set for life, money-wise. Hearing "Santa's Secret Stocking" everywhere I went from November through January just reinforced my anger and jealousy.

Suspecting Dirk and Drake hated that song almost as much as I did made me decidedly gleeful.

Which was why I was grinning at them when Drake turned to me and asked, "You'll come, won't you, Steve?"

The smile dropped from my face. "Oh! Um, of course," I said, my hand clamping down on Baz's. I'd never been invited to a Melodious Moon performance.

Desperate for an emotional anchor, I asked Baz, "Will you come with me?"

"Christmas Eve?" His face went through a complicated series of expressions I couldn't follow.

He'd been trying to tell me something about Christmas Eve this afternoon.

"Right. You have plans. I forgot. Don't worry about it." I released his hand and picked up my beer mug.

"No!" he said. "No, I want to come. Um, we might have to invite my family though." We both looked at Selina, who was smiling at Baz like he'd just climbed to the top of Mount Everest

Flo nodded, and Selina said, "We'll be there. We can talk to Mom and Dad when they get back from their trip."

Loki's loincloth, I'd have to meet Baz's parents! Panic overtook me for a moment before I remembered I excelled at parent schmoozing. I'd just never done that with a guy's parents before. No reason it would be any different.

This relationship with Baz was careening ahead like Rocket racing through my apartment. I needed things to slow down a little so we could spend some time just getting to know each other better.

Jim exchanged contact info with Dirk and Drake. He thanked them profusely, then took off.

Dirk surveyed the stage area with a proprietary air. "You know," he said to Drake. "If we can't get the others here, it'd be fun to do some deconstructed versions of the songs." He made a face. "As long as people want to hear something besides Christmas music."

Wesley shook his head ruefully. "You just agreed to play at the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown, kiddo. You'd better brush up on some of the classics."

Keson smirked as he started singing along with the band on stage who'd just begun "The Little Drummer Boy".

Dirk and Drake shuddered dramatically.

Wesley knocked his shoulder into Keson's and offered, "There's plenty of more modern holiday songs you could

choose." His face brightened. "Hey, why don't you play a couple with me tomorrow night?"

After a pause where Dirk and Drake sat there with their mouths open in shock, Drake stuttered out, "Oh, uh, sure."

Flo squeed in excitement further down the table. "We are so going to be here for that!"

As Wesley and the twins hammered out the details of rehearsal time and whatever else was required, Baz leaned over and said into my ear, "Did you see their faces? You made that happen for them."

I shook my head. "It was Wesley."

"Who you introduced them to."

I shrugged uncomfortably. I hadn't done much.

"Baz," I said, clutching at the first topic change I could find, "What were you supposed to do on Christmas Eve? I don't want to make you miss out on your traditions with your family or anything."

"You aren't." He jerked his head at the people around us. "I'll tell you when we get home, okay?"

Wesley and Keson stood up. "It was wonderful meeting all of you. Steve, I'm glad we ran into you tonight. Don't forget to call Yiannis tomorrow." Wesley said to Dirk and Drake, "I gave Steve the name of someone who can help you with your, uh, financial questions."

Dirk and Drake thanked him, hearts practically floating out of their eyes.

Once Wesley and Keson were out of sight, Dirk and Drake, assisted by Selina and Flo, rounded on me, demanding to know how I'd met Jake Lord.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

"Bastien! You dropped your scarf!" I jogged across the apartment building's parking lot waving the oddly long, multi-colored scarf I'd seen fall from Bastien's coat when he'd gotten out of his car.

Bastien turned, then his eyes widened and his expression flashed through horror and relief in quick succession.

"Thank you, Karl," he said, taking the scarf from me and pressing its balled-up length against his cheek. "I would've been devastated to lose this. It was my husband's."

His eyes shot to mine, and I knew he was waiting for a reaction.

"I'm glad I saw you drop it then," I said mildly. I considered flashing my dimples but decided it was too much in the moment.

I started walking toward the mailboxes, and he followed me. It was normal to start a conversation at that point, right? We'd just be neighbors talking.

"Um, if you don't mind my saying," I started.

Bastien's back stiffened. He was waiting for me to spout something ugly at him.

"That's a fucking long scarf."

Bastien burst out with a laugh. "It's a Doctor Who scarf," he said. "The fourth Doctor wore one like it that was just as

long."

"Huh." I considered this. "I've never seen the show, but if I were traveling the universe every day, I'd pick accessories that wouldn't get caught in the hatch of my spaceship. You never know when you'll have to move quickly."

Bastien laughed. His smile was brighter than all the stars in the galaxy.

CHAPTER 16

BAZ

DIRK AND DRAKE WERE STILL ON CLOUD NINE WHEN WE GOT home. Steve, on the other hand, was dragging. I was pretty tired, but Steve's eyes looked hollow, and he was zoning out every few minutes.

Which was understandable, since on top of being held at gunpoint along with the rest of us, he'd had to deal with a lot of emotional issues regarding Dirk and Drake. I hoped Steve's other siblings would come for the Christmas Eve concert. I didn't want him to feel rejected yet again.

Ugh, Christmas Eve. I'd been gearing up to talk to Steve about it since we'd left the Holiday Hoedown, but he was in no shape tonight. It could wait until tomorrow. The twins would be rehearsing with Wesley starting mid-afternoon, so we'd have plenty of time alone.

I'd been surprised the Holiday Hoedown, being a sort of Christmas immersion experience, hadn't triggered any bad memories for me. But it wasn't like any Christmas event I'd been to before. And the live music, even if they'd played several Christmas songs, was completely different than listening to the radio or my phone.

I got Steve changed into sleep pants and made sure he brushed his teeth. Then I plugged in our phones and tossed my glasses on the nightstand.

I let Rocket run free since he'd been in his crate all evening, but I shut the bedroom door so he wouldn't use the bed as the final turn in the rabbit Grand Prix again.

Steve needed a full night's sleep.

Which meant I was ignoring my dick, which was very, very interested in a sleepy Steve.

I turned out the light and got into bed, cuddling him into my chest. I made myself keep a few inches between my erection and Steve's ass. He exhaled once and was out cold. Smiling, I followed soon after.

Something woke me about 4am. I blinked and stared around. Light from the parking lot below filtered in through the blinds. Steve was zonked out, so it hadn't been him. My bladder reminded me about the iced tea I'd had earlier, so I slid as carefully as I could out of bed to take care of business.

But I wasn't as quiet as I'd wanted to be because Steve was sitting up when I got back.

"Sorry," I whispered.

He grunted. "No worries. I've gotta go too." He rolled out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom.

The bed was warm, and the sheets smelled of Steve. And I was hard again, dammit. I tried to bunch the sheets around my hips so it wouldn't be obvious how aroused I was.

When Steve came out of the bathroom, he had his thumbs tucked into the waistband of his sleep pants. They were pulled down slightly, and my gaze was riveted to the spot where his treasure trail widened right before the fabric covered everything below.

Steve had a decided bulge in his pants. I sucked in a breath and gripped the sheets. My eyes flew up to meet his.

He said, "I was thinking...."

I swallowed. "Yeah?"

"I'm pretty awake right now." One of his hands slid inside his waistband.

"Uh huh?" I grabbed myself over the covers.

"I can't stop thinking about your dick. About your skin." His eyes were fixed on mine in the faint light. Steve stroked himself, his breathing becoming harsh. "About what it would

feel like to have my dick in your ass." He paused. "Or yours in mine."

"Fuck. Come here."

I threw back the covers, then levered my butt off the bed so I could yank off my sleep pants.

Steve dropped his own, then knee-walked across the mattress until he could throw one leg over my hips. He straddled me, much like he'd done last night on the couch. But this time he confidently took my dick in his hand, smearing the precum with a thumb across the head. Then he let go and brought his hand to his mouth. My dick jerked when Steve touched his tongue to his thumb.

He canted his head. "Not bad. Pretty much like mine I guess."

I laughed, and he said, "What? Everyone tastes their own spooge."

"You're getting us off track," I admonished him.

His face lit up. "Right."

Fuck, I swear his smile did things to my insides.

I said, "Well, since you're a cum-tasting expert now, how about we try sixty-nining?"

"Oooh, I'm in," he enthused. He raised up on his knees, but then seemed uncertain. "Um, with women, I generally let them be on top so they can control how much of my dick they take." He raised his eyebrows at me questioningly.

I shrugged. "It's up to you, or we can lay on our sides, but it's harder to deep throat that way." Steve looked alarmed, so I rushed to say, "For me! I'm not expecting you to deep throat me on your first go. Or ever. I promise, whatever you do will be mind-blowing."

Steve tilted his head back and forth like he was imagining the different position options. "It's like, 4:30 in the morning. I'm not sure I can do mind-blowing. I just want low-key. Let's try it on our sides."

I nodded and he swung off my lap. After a moment of confusion about which of us would lie down in which direction, we were ready to go.

I stroked down Steve's hip and leg. He was a little tense. But fuck, Steve's cock was slim and pretty, just like the rest of him. He smelled delicious, all warm and slightly sweaty from sleeping. I nuzzled my nose next to his balls, the crispy hair tickling my face.

Steve moved his legs restlessly until he settled on bending his upper knee and putting his foot on the mattress to brace himself.

Then without hesitating he gripped my shaft and licked the head of my cock.

I groaned before retaliating by taking as much of him as I could into my mouth. The angle wasn't my favorite, but I was able to get my nose to his pubes.

"Galloping gargoyles!" His hips jerked before he stilled them. I clasped his ass with the hand I wasn't lying on. Next time I needed to talk him into a different position so I'd have better access.

Then Steve put his mouth around my cockhead, and I wasn't able to think about positions or anything else. He didn't take me very deep, but he used his spit to jack me while he sucked and laved the tip. It felt so incredible I forgot I was supposed to be reciprocating.

Hastening to rectify my lapse, I took him back in my mouth and sucked hard enough to hollow my cheeks. Steve said, "Leaping LARPers!"

Could I get him to lose his cool and say fuck?

I let go of Steve's ass and ran two fingers up the side of his cock until they were in my mouth alongside him. Steve moaned around my dick.

Then I reached over his hip and ran my spit-soaked fingers down Steve's crack until they caught on his rim. Steve's hips jerked again, and I hummed around his cock to distract him.

I circled his hole then pressed lightly against it. Steve let my dick fall from his mouth. "Fuck," he said.

It was difficult, but not impossible, to smile around Steve's cock. I bobbed my head with renewed vigor, and my finger matched my tempo, pressing against his hole ever-so-slightly more firmly each time. Steve's hips twitched and arched toward my hand, then back to my mouth.

My finger breached his entrance, and he came, crying out and pulsing over my tongue.

When he collapsed, I eased my finger out of him and pulled my mouth away. "You okay?" I asked.

"Ngngh."

I chuckled and sat up. Fuck, Steve was a sight. He'd rolled to his back, his knees open to each side. His cock was wet and glistening. But his face—Steve's face was blissful, satisfied and relaxed. "Damn, I love how you look when you're all sexed up. Can I jack off on you?"

Steve opened his eyes and licked his lips. "No. I want to suck you off." He pushed himself up until his head and back were supported by some pillows.

I straddled him, then walked on my knees up his body, bracing my hands on the headboard so I could lean over him and lower my dick into his mouth. "You're in control," I told him. "I won't thrust."

He nodded then wrapped his lips around me. Fuck, this was the sight I'd missed by suggesting we sixty-nine. I committed the image to memory. My dick, shiny and wet, between Steve's red, red lips. His eyes were watering, and he was breathing heavily through his nose. He looked up at me, his eyes still bright blue in the shadows of the room.

"You are so hot like this. Your mouth feels so good, and you look like sin with your lips around my cock."

I was so falling for him. Or, more likely, I'd already fallen.

Steve ran his hands up my thighs, then squeezed my ass with one hand and tugged my balls with the other. That's all it took.

"Shit! Coming!" I shouted, too late to really warn him.

Steve sputtered, the cum flooding his mouth spilling down his cheek and chin.

I pulled back, clutching the headboard and riding the last waves of my orgasm while hunched over Steve, looking into his eyes. The feelings were too big for my chest, too big for my heart. Fuck, it would be so easy to say the words.

"Steve," I choked out.

After he swallowed a couple of times, he reached up and helped me tumble down next to him on the mattress. "Shh," he said. "I've got you."

He hugged me to his chest with one arm, and I felt him pull the sheet up and wipe his face and neck with it.

I chuckled, relaxing into him. "Sorry I didn't warn you in time. It's okay not to swallow, by the way. You won't offend me."

Steve said, "Yeah, I might have to work my way up to that." He wiped his face again, so I forced myself to sit up.

"Come on," I said, gesturing at the bathroom. "Let's go wash our faces and rinse out our mouths. Then we can cuddle."

Steve looked relieved. "I didn't want you to think I didn't enjoy it."

I made a face. "Are you telling me you'd just roll over and go to sleep after having oral sex with a woman?"

He laughed and led the way into the bathroom. "Okay, now that you mention it, no."

In minutes we were back in bed, my head resting on Steve's chest and my arm across his midsection.

The feelings were still present, huge and wonderful.

But I'd worry about them tomorrow.

Steve was still asleep when I woke around 7am. I slipped out of the bed as stealthily as I could, snagging my glasses from the nightstand. After a quick trip to the bathroom, I eased open the bedroom door, ready to deal with whatever disaster Rocket had created overnight.

Instead I found Phillip sitting on the couch with Rocket in his lap, the box of letters to Santa on the coffee table in front of him.

I stepped into the room and carefully shut the bedroom door before spitting out, "What the fuck?"

"Good morning, Baz," Phillip said casually, as if he appeared without warning in Steve's living room all the time. "I'm glad you're awake. I didn't want to disturb you and Steve to make coffee, but I'm getting desperate."

I pulled off my glasses and rubbed my face before putting them on again. It was way too early for this. I wished I'd put on a t-shirt.

I was pretty sure Phillip wouldn't harm me or Steve. What was he going to do from the couch, throw the rabbit at me? Plus, I hadn't had any caffeine either, which seemed a higher priority than whatever threat Phillip might pose.

I sighed. "Why are you here, Phillip? I thought you were going to finish taking care of the problem, or whatever you said last night."

Phillip gave a half shrug. "I took care of the... gentleman Steve's brothers helped me with, as well as his boss, and the boss' organization. They won't be bothering my students again. But after running into you and Steve last night, it occurred to me I'd been remiss not reading the letters to Santa. They might have had a clue regarding the missing item."

"And do they?" I headed for the kitchen.

"The ones in the box don't. But one of them isn't here."

Seth's letter. "Oh?" I said, but my voice came out strangled. Smooth, Baz. Real smooth.

Phillip didn't respond. I started the coffee maker, then rummaged in the fridge. We'd eaten most of the eggs and bread yesterday. I checked the drawer. And the bacon.

I'd have to order something.

The bedroom door opened. "Baz?"

I closed the refrigerator door and spun around, opening my mouth to warn Steve, but he'd already seen Phillip.

"What the hairless harpies are *you* doing here?" Even in my concern over Phillip's presence and my diminished mental capacity due to lack of caffeine, I took a second to take advantage of the view from the kitchen and admire Steve's cute butt in his flannel pajama pants. He'd had the foresight to put a t-shirt on, something I'd have to remedy for myself soon.

Phillip gestured at the box of letters. "I was telling Baz I came to see if I missed anything vital by not reading these."

Steve stared at him a moment, then walked over to the kitchen and threw his arms around me. "Please tell me I'm still dreaming," he muttered.

I snorted. "We aren't that lucky, sorry."

He groaned. "I had so many plans for you this morning."

I smoothed my hands down his back. "I know exactly how you feel"

Steve leaned over to reach behind me for a coffee mug. "I can't deal with him without caffeine."

"Yeah," I said. "And we're going to have to order breakfast in or go out, because we ate all your food yesterday. I don't have anything in my fridge either."

He poured me a cup of coffee, and, after throwing a glare over his shoulder in the direction of the couch, poured one for Phillip.

"How do you take your coffee, Phillip?" I called.

"Just a little milk or cream, please."

Grumbling, Steve added some milk to Phillip's mug.

We went back into the living room and Steve handed Phillip his coffee.

"Thank you." Phillip took a sip and I sat next to him on the couch, leaving the armchair for Steve. But Steve just stood there, drinking his coffee and giving Phillip the stink eye. Rocket wiggled his nose at me but didn't leave the comfort of Phillip's lap and Phillip's long fingers stroking through his fur.

Phillip said, "Steve, before you came out of the bedroom, I was just mentioning to Baz that one of the letters is missing."

Steve froze, then shrugged. "It is."

Phillip did not react. "May I ask what happened to it?"

Steve mimicked Phillip's tone and said, "Baz and I hid it."

Phillip calmly sipped his coffee and stroked Rocket with his other hand. "Will you tell me why you hid Seth's letter?"

I shrugged and said, "Because we didn't want just anyone reading it. The situation's being addressed."

Phillip raised an eyebrow at us.

Steve huffed. "I'll just go get it so we can be done with this conversation." He turned and stomped into the bedroom.

I looked at Phillip. "Why did you pretend to be homophobic to Steve?"

His lips quirked. "The same reason I hit on you. It gave each of you a reason to avoid me."

Steve stomped back in and dropped Seth's letter onto the couch next to Phillip. "Well, it was fucking effective."

I blinked. Steve in a snit was cute. I'd never tell him, of course.

Phillip nodded and set his coffee cup on the end table so he could pick up Seth's envelope. "As intended."

"But what I *really* want to know, Phillip, or whatever your name is, is why you left a poor, defenseless rabbit on the balcony in December. I know you said you thought the principal was coming to get him, but why not leave him in the

bathroom or something? *Indoors*." Steve crossed his arms and cocked his hip. Phillip should have incinerated under that glare.

Phillip pointed at Rocket's crate. "I didn't have one of those. The one donated with him to the school was too big to fit in my car. And I couldn't leave him in the bathroom because he tried to chew on the cabinets. The paint and treated wood could've made him sick."

Steve deflated. "Oh."

I was glad Rocket had left the kitchen cabinets alone when we'd kept him in there. But those cabinets were lacquered. Maybe they didn't taste as good.

"I told you, I did come back to make sure he had been picked up." Phillip smirked, "But you were already on your way to rescue him." He chuckled, softly at first, then louder. "I was watching through my rifle scope." He held up a hand. "Not attached to my rifle at the time." Phillip shook his head, grinning. "That was the funniest thing I have seen in decades."

My eyebrows furrowed. "What was funny about it?"

Steve grimaced. "I thought I told you, the first time I went over, my foot landed in Rocket's litter box."

Phillip added, "And it slid out from under him." He chuckled some more, but then he looked down at Seth's letter.

Grumbling, Steve sat, and we waited for Phillip to read Seth's description of his home life. As he read, Phillip's full lips settled into a grim, determined line.

He looked up. "What did you mean when you said the situation's being addressed?"

Steve said, "Cole Washburn sent a copy of the letter to Lucas McCord. We're waiting to hear if they might actually be related. If not, we're going to call Child Protective Services."

Phillip carefully folded the letter and put it back in its envelope. "Let me know before you do."

I had a feeling Phillip intended to directly intervene with Seth's stepfather, but I decided it wouldn't be prudent to ask.

"A couple of the kids had nice things to say about you as their teacher," I told Phillip.

He picked up his coffee mug again. "I enjoyed it."

"What do you do, um, in your regular life? Like for work or whatever? You made it sound like you'd retired."

Phillip nodded. "I did retire from—" He gave us a small smile. "My former occupation. These days I'm renovating my house."

"Huh," said Steve. "That sounds...." He trailed off.

Phillip sighed into his coffee. "Dreadful. I am excruciatingly aware."

From the hallway we heard knocking on my apartment door. I stood, ready to go open Steve's door and see who it was, when I heard Dirk or Drake say, "Hi?"

My eyes widened in horror when my mother's voice responded, "Oh, are you Baz's new young man? I, uh... he didn't warn us *how* young!"

Fuuuuuck. I raced toward the door, but I wasn't in time to stop Dirk or Drake from telling her, "Oh, no, ma'am, that's our brother Steve. They're living together now, so Baz is letting me and my twin stay over here while we're in town." He said, "I'm Dirk," right as I opened Steve's apartment door.

"Mom, Dad. Hi."

"Oh, honey! There you are!" My mom moved in for a hug, and over her shoulder I saw Dirk take in my sleep pants, bare feet, and bare chest. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and he'd been smart enough to put socks on.

I had to hug my dad next. "Um, what are you guys doing here?" Drake, not only fully-dressed—shoes and all—but looking like a hipster cover model, joined Dirk in the doorway of my apartment. "I see you met Dirk. This is Drake."

My mom exclaimed over how wonderful it was that they were twins. Then she told me, loudly, in the very public apartment hallway, "We cut our trip short after Selina told us about how you tried to propose to your boyfriend. Steve, isn't it?"

Fuck Selina. I was going to kill her. I opened my mouth to explain, but Mom kept talking. "We know how hard this time of year is for you, and your father and I felt you were exhibiting trauma-induced behavior. Dirk here said you and Steve are already living together? It's a good thing we came back so we can help you through the rest of the month."

I glowered at her. "Trauma-induced behavior?"

She patted my arm. "Your father and I learned all about it on a podcast."

Steve came up behind me. He put one hand on my shoulder and reached the other one out to my mother. "Hi, I'm Steve."

"Sorry," I said. "Steve, this is my mother, Donna Allen, and my father, Keith Allen." After my mother released his hand, Steve shook my father's.

Steve said, "Um, it sounds like you need to speak to your parents for a minute. Dirk and Drake, why don't you come over to my place and we'll order some breakfast for all of us. Ah, Phillip is also visiting."

Dirk and Drake's eyes bugged out, but fortunately they didn't say anything. They ducked back into the apartment to grab their phones, then they sidled around my parents and into Steve's apartment. Steve gave me a commiserating look as he shut the door.

My shoulders slumped. "Come on in, Mom and Dad."

I hadn't been inside the apartment since Friday night, and I was impressed at how neat it was. Typical 18-year-olds were slobs. Maybe all the traveling Dirk and Drake did with the band had taught them to keep clutter to a minimum.

"You want some water or anything?" I asked. They declined.

Mom and Dad sat on the couch, and I sat in one of the armchairs facing them across the coffee table.

I kept my body relaxed, once again wishing I'd put a shirt on this morning. "I don't need an intervention," I told them. "You didn't have to come home early from your trip."

Mom frowned at me. "Selina was quite concerned about you."

"Uh huh. And during the conversation where she told you that, did she lead off with her concern about me as the main topic, or did she only bring it up after you grilled her about her relationship with Flo?" Selina and I had learned early how to deflect parental attention.

Mom waved this aside. Bingo.

"Your father and I were already discussing coming home early so we could meet Steve. And then we heard that podcast about trauma survivors—I really must send you the link, Baz. I think you'll recognize a lot of yourself in what the hosts were saying."

"I'm doing much better these days, Mom." I glanced at my dad to see if he'd help me get out of the conversation, but he was staring toward the photo of me and Warren on the shelf.

"I'm sure you are, honey."

I tried to keep my temper in check. She meant well. "Mom, that sounded all kinds of patronizing. I think I can evaluate my own emotional state."

Dad said, "And you're already in love with Steve enough to propose to him?"

I groaned and slapped my hand to my forehead. "I didn't propose. Everyone walked in on us when I was about to tell Steve about Christmas Eve. They made assumptions based on the way we were sitting."

Dad harumphed. "Well, I agree you need to tell him about Christmas Eve before you propose to him."

I blinked once. "Uh—"

Mom said, "Selina told us she doesn't think it'll be long before Steve will be ready, and you can try again."

"Mom, I—"

"Even though we think you're doing just like the podcast said, rushing things with Steve because you're scared of losing someone again, we're excited to get to know him and welcome him to the family."

"You are?"

"Of course, Baz. Selina said he looks at you the way Warren did."

My mouth dropped open, and I fell back in my chair. "He does? Selina said that?"

I looked away to blink back the sudden tears.

"Aw, honey." Mom got up and came over to hug me.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

"For your homework, do the problems at the end of Chapter 14." A unified groan sounded through the room.

I grinned without pity. "And if you want extra credit, I have a handout of five more problems you can try."

Only three students raised their hands for the extra credit. One of them was Sean.

And only Sean knew I'd given him ten problems, not five. He looked up at me questioningly. I winked at him.

Each of his problems was one grade level higher in difficulty than the previous one. The final two were calculus problems. Wrigley had helped me pick them out.

The next day, I wasn't surprised he'd completed them all correctly.

CHAPTER 17

STEVE

BAZ HAD BEEN CRYING.

Fuck, why had he been crying? Baz and his parents had barely gotten inside my apartment before I was in front of him, cupping his face.

"What happened? Is everything okay?" I looked worriedly between Baz and his mother and father. If they'd said something unpleasant or unsupportive to him, I'd set them straight.

Baz smiled and pulled me in for a hug. "It's fine. *I'm* fine." He kissed me on the cheek.

Baz's mother smiled beatifically at me. "We're looking forward to getting to know you, Steve."

"Oh, uh, okay. Yeah, me too."

Baz released me but kept his arm around my waist.

"Sorry about that," he said. "Mom and Dad and I needed to talk about some stuff."

"Of course. Uh, we ordered a bunch of food for breakfast. It'll be here in about half an hour. Do you want to invite Flo and Selina to join us? I'm sure they'd like to see your parents."

Baz's mother said, "Oh, that would be delightful." She patted her chest. "Keith and I are so excited to finally see them as a couple."

Baz let me go to pull out his phone and start typing.

I said to his parents, "Why don't you come in and sit down? Oh, I'm sorry. This is Phillip, our neighbor who lives next door to me, and our rabbit, Rocket."

I waved a hand toward Phillip, who was still sitting on the couch with Rocket on his lap.

"Good morning," he said.

"Phillip, this is Donna and Keith Allen. Um, would y'all like some coffee? Or I have Cokes or water. Or beer."

Donna and Keith exclaimed over Rocket and greeted Phillip.

I walked toward the kitchen to organize drinks, but then I heard Donna squeal, "It's The Flash! Look, Keith!"

I turned to see them both rush over to my poster of The Flash.

I put my hands on my hips. "Baz, what's up with everyone you know being into The Flash?"

"Oh," he said, his cheeks flushing. "Uh...."

"You haven't told him? He's your boyfriend!" Keith rounded on his son.

"It hasn't come up!" Baz said, crossing his arms.

I narrowed my eyes. "I don't know what *it* is, but Flo and Selina both had the same reaction to The Flash. I feel like it's *come up*."

"It's embarrassing," Baz muttered, looking away.

I looked at Baz's parents for explanation.

"Baz is short for Bartholomew," Keith said.

I cocked my head. "Not Sebastian? Okay."

Keith pointed at The Flash and raised his eyebrows at me like I was missing something obvious.

I sucked in a breath and turned wide eyes to Baz. "Barry Allen? Your name is Barry Allen? No way!"

"Nuh uh!" Drake gasped.

Baz huffed but nodded. "Yes," he said in an aggrieved tone.

I stared at him, the poster in my bedroom looming large in my mind.

Keith said proudly, "And Selina's middle name is Kyle."

"Catwoman!" Drake exclaimed. "Y'all are the coolest parents ever!"

Dirk said, "I agree, but I'm guessing Steve didn't tell you *his* middle name?"

It was my turn to blush. "Um." I put my hands in my pockets and forced myself to meet Baz's eyes. "It's, uh, Roger. Steve Roger Derryberry."

Baz gaped at me. "The Flash and Captain America?" His hand came up and pointed at the bedroom. "And you have that poster!"

I nodded, not able to hold back a smile. "It's a big coincidence for sure."

We gazed at each other, grinning.

I heard Dirk and Drake get up off the couch where they'd been sitting with Phillip. They practically ran into my bedroom.

"Uh oh," I said, my smile morphing into an O of horror.

"Keith! Donna! Phillip! You've got to come see this!" Drake shouted.

Phillip called out, "Already saw it, thanks!"

Keith and Donna trotted after Dirk and Drake.

I put my hands over my face and peered through my fingers at Baz. "Your parents are looking at my R-rated fan art while standing next to the bed where we had sex a few hours ago."

He laughed and wrapped his arms around me. "Don't worry, they'll be occupied with deciding your poster of The Flash and Captain America means you and I are meant to be."

I chuckled nervously. "No pressure or anything."

He hugged me tighter. "Not from me. But for the record, I think we've got a pretty good chance."

Selina and Flo showed up a few minutes later. Baz's parents came out of my bedroom to hug Flo and tell her they hoped one day she'd be a legal family member and not just a family member of the heart. Wow, they really liked to jump ahead, didn't they?

Then Donna said, "Maybe you can have a double wedding with Baz and Steve!"

Failing to notice Flo and Selina's wide, panicked eyes, Donna dragged them into my bedroom to see the proof of Baz and my fated romance.

Flo looked over her shoulder at me with a *what-the-fuck* face, and I put my hands palm up and shrugged at her.

"Is it always this entertaining over here?" Phillip asked. "Because, Steve, I had the distinct impression you just worked all the time."

I shook my head as I went into the kitchen. "This only started on Thursday."

When everyone emerged from the bedroom, Baz got Dirk and Drake to help him bring some chairs and a table from across the hall. The food arrived, and we all sat down to eat.

Flo was seated near Phillip, and she'd just found out he was my next-door neighbor. I intervened in Phillip's impending beat-down by explaining why Phillip had put Rocket on the balcony in the first place.

Flo finally got the message that we were no longer angry at Phillip. "Sorry," she said. "I was mad about Rocket."

"I understand," he told her gravely. "I am eternally grateful to Steve for risking his life to save him."

"Okay," she said. "But what about the letters to Santa? Why didn't you mail them?"

Phillip had already told Baz and me he'd just wanted the kids' home addresses to search for whatever it was he was looking for. That'd been his whole reason for taking the substitute teaching job, and he wasn't planning to return to the school now that he'd completed his operation or whatever it was. He

hadn't needed the letters anymore, so he'd just thrown them away rather than take the time to mail them.

"That's a great question, Flo." Phillip gave her an earnest smile. "I wish I had an answer for you." He shook his head. "I meant to leave them for Principal Lockwood to pick up when he came to get Rocket. But I'd just found out about my grandmother dying, and I was rushing around to get things in order so I could leave for several days...." He shrugged. "I must have inadvertently thrown them away with everything else." I could see Flo melting in the face of Phillip's charm and heart-tugging fake story.

He said, "Again, I'm glad Steve and Baz found them. Now we can get them mailed off to Santa this week."

Flo said, "I read the letters, and I was so impressed how often your students mentioned you and how much they like you."

"Oh," Phillip said. It was difficult to tell under his dark skin, but was he blushing? Scary hitman-slash-covert ops dude or whatever was *blushing*! "That's very kind of you, but I'm just doing my job."

Flo shook her head. "You obviously love teaching. I think it's so amazing when someone finds their calling, you know? Most people never do, but you seem to be one of the lucky ones."

Phillip looked thunderstruck. "Oh, uh, thank you."

Flo said to me. "I heard the tour of the kids' homes was a bust. Are you still planning on doing something for them for the holiday?"

I made a face. "We want to, but there are too many barriers to giving them the gifts they asked for, plus some of them didn't even ask for gifts. So we'd like to do something for the class, but we don't have any good ideas.

Flo and I turned to Phillip, but he just shrugged.

"Hey," Drake said as he ambled over. "Phillip and Flo, I already told the others, but you're welcome to come to the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown tonight as our guests." At their confused looks he said, "Dirk and I are singing a couple of

songs with Jake Lord." He grinned and bounced on his toes. "The sibs are so jealous!"

I tried to ignore that I wasn't included in *the sibs*. "Did they tell you whether they'll come for Christmas Eve?" I reminded myself to sit Baz down and make him tell me what the deal was with Christmas Eve. We'd had no time by ourselves.

Drake smiled even wider. "Yeah, they're all coming!"

I was happy for Dirk and Drake. For myself, well, it was going to be a rough night.

Drake said to Phillip and Flo. "You should come to that too! Melodious Moon is playing the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown on Christmas Eve!"

"Wow, awesome! I'll be there," Flo said.

Phillip had a strange look on his face. He turned to me. "Steve, you said you wanted something for the whole class? I mean, you'd have to invite their families...." He tilted his head at Drake.

Drake said, "What? You want to invite your class to the concert?" He frowned, but his eyes fell on me, and his expression changed to... resolve, maybe? He nodded. "It can be done—we'll just need a head count." He stared at Phillip, one eyebrow raised challengingly. "I'll coordinate with you, then?"

Phillip glanced at Flo, and said, "Yes, that would be fine."

I smirked. Apparently Phillip wasn't done with teaching after all.

It wasn't until Flo and Selina got up to leave, which prompted Donna and Keith to announce they should get home as well, that I realized I'd just hosted a party. A low-key, alcohol-free party, where I'd been dressed in my pajama pants and a t-shirt, but a party nonetheless.

And I'd enjoyed it a whole lot more than the last few noisy, drunken revels I'd had at my apartment. No surface-level friendships. These were people I'd have in my life for a long time. I had a feeling even Phillip would stick around.

I wished Cal and Felix could have been here. Which meant I'd forgiven Cal and Cole for sending me home from work like a disobedient child. I could admit I'd benefitted from the time off. I looked over at Baz, who was talking to Dirk and Drake about something, his glasses slightly askew and his bedhead still rampant.

If Cal and Cole hadn't intervened, I wouldn't have rescued Rocket, and I wouldn't have had a reason to talk to Baz. A chill rushed over me just imagining missing out on my relationship with him.

My phone chimed. I pulled it out of the pocket of my pajama pants. At some point I'd need to shower. Baz would need to shower too, heh. That could be fun.

Cole had messaged in the thread he and I had with Cal and Felix.

COLE

Steve, since when are two of your brothers visiting? Wesley said they're playing with him tonight. I didn't know you'd reconciled

We're talking at least. Turns out dad's been embezzling from the band. And since he's contesting my grandfather's will, Dirk and Drake came to see if we could join forces.

CAL

Dude, that's messed up

FELIX

Wait, what? Steve, you didn't tell us about your brothers! That's huge!

Sorry. Dirk showed up Friday night and Drake got here yesterday. Then this morning Baz's parents came over. It's been busy.

COLE

You need a lawyer?

Wesley gave me his lawyer's name - Yanni something

COLE

Yiannis Papadimitriou. He's excellent. Your father should be scared

COLE

FYI, @Cal and @Felix, Steve's brothers are playing a couple of songs with Wesley at the jalapeno holiday hoedown tonight. I already bought tickets

CAL

Sweet! I'm buying a ticket right now. Is Baz going to be there?

Yeah Baz and his family will be there

FELIX

I hope things are going well with your brothers. Malcolm's leg is bothering him but I'll be there

Looking forward to seeing all of you

CAL

Forgot to text you this morning. You're going to be holding some long thing wrapped in brown paper over your head like you're about to whack somebody with it. Only saw a second so hopefully it's no big deal!

I shook my head. Whatever, Cal.

Dirk and Drake waved at me as they left the apartment. Baz came over to where I was sitting in the armchair next to the couch.

"They went to practice for tonight," he said. He looked at Phillip. "So what are your plans?" He held up his hands. "Not trying to kick you out or anything."

Though I had some ideas for what Baz and I could do if we were alone...

Phillip grimaced. "I had not really planned past making sure no one was looking for... the item anymore. And that has been taken care of."

I said, "Well, if you don't have to go back home, wherever that is, you've got the apartment, and your class loves you. You did promise you'd bring them to the Christmas Eve concert." I blinked at him innocently.

He huffed out a sigh. "I guess I can continue in my substitute position until the permanent teacher comes back from maternity leave. At least it'll be more rewarding than completing my home improvement tasks."

"Did you get Officer Gallegos' card so you can let them know whether anything is missing in your apartment?" Baz asked.

Phillip rolled his eyes. "As if I would tell the police if anything was missing. But, yes. I will contact her." He groaned. "The mess will take a while to clean up."

Well, kraken in a canister. But it was the right thing to do, so I resolutely said, "This couch folds out into a bed. You're welcome to sleep here until you get your place livable again."

Phillip glanced between me and Baz. "Thank you, that is kind of you, considering I held you at gunpoint yesterday and broke into your home this morning."

Baz pointed at the rabbit asleep in Phillip's lap. "Rocket likes you, so we're giving you the benefit of the doubt."

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

I entered the apartment's gym, and as soon as I saw what Bastien was doing, I dropped my towel and water bottle and ran over to him.

"Bastien! You shouldn't bench press without a spotter—it's dangerous!" I positioned myself at his head and glared into his beautiful upside-down face.

He glanced—once—at the protruding bulge in my gym shorts and closed his eyes. He let me help him rack the weights.

"It was only fifty pounds. I was going for reps, not weight."

I put my hands on my lean hips. "Even fifty pounds can be too much if you overtire your arms. Promise me you won't do that alone again."

He pressed his full lips together and sat up.

"Bastien! I mean it. Look, I'll give you my number. You can text me anytime and I'll come spot you."

He blinked at me, and his forehead scrunched up. He was so cute. "Why are you being so nice to me? You know I'm gay, right?"

I blushed. Me, a decorated Special Forces operative, then CIA agent, then independent contractor. I've seen the worst of humankind and slept with possibly thousands of people. I fucking blushed. And then I rubbed the back of my neck to stall for time.

Bastien gasped. "Are you... no, you don't have to tell me. But, Karl." He put his hand on my wrist, his slim fingers almost delicate against my thick, muscular arm. My nerve endings stood up and saluted. "If you need someone to talk to, I hope you'll come to me."

CHAPTER 18

BAZ

Officer Gallegos happened to be on duty when Phillip called her. He apologized for "turning off his phone" while he'd "attended his grandmother's funeral". After he assured her nothing had been stolen, she told him to let her know if anything else happened, and that was that.

Steve was on the phone with the lawyer Wesley—Jake freaking Lord!—had referred him to, so after a quick shower I joined Phillip in his apartment to start the cleanup process.

The police officers had told me and Steve that Phillip's belongings were destroyed. They hadn't been kidding. Everything—furniture, the mattress, sheets, clothes, the drab artwork that had hung on the walls—was sliced up and turned over or tossed on the floor.

"I will just call a junk removal service," Phillip said, surveying the living room with his hands on his hips. "I purchased everything from one of those one-stop furniture stores anyway. Easy enough to replace it all."

"Expensive, though." I commented.

Phillip grinned. "My former occupation was lucrative, don't worry."

I said slowly, "Um, not sure if you're aware, but I write spy thrillers in my spare time. Um, under a pen name."

Phillip gave me a *duh* look. "I had everyone in this building investigated as soon as I moved in."

I felt myself turning red. "Oh, right. That makes sense. Um, the thing is, I've been trying to work on a way for my main

character, Kane, to basically ride off into the sunset. He needs to retire so I can write a completely different series. I don't want the readers constantly asking for more Kane stories."

"Okay?"

"Look, I don't want any details, but your, um, situation has given me some ideas. Would you mind if I used it for the basis of my book?"

Dirk and Drake borrowed Steve's pickup to get to the Holiday Hoedown early for sound check with Wesley. When he took the keys, Dirk commented, "Wow, I've never driven a Ford before." Steve managed to keep a bland face, but I saw his fist clench.

I wanted to give him a blowjob as a distraction, but Phillip was in our living room again, so I settled for reminding Steve that Dirk was only eighteen.

He'd smiled at me ruefully. "You're right. I'm probably also subconsciously just waiting for them to reject me again, so I'm looking for reasons to get upset."

I said, "Selina does family therapy—I'm not suggesting you see her specifically, but she could refer you to someone."

Steve nodded. "I'll think about it."

"I'm here for you," I said. That earned me a hug and a kiss. Dammit, we really needed to get Phillip's place livable again so he could move back in.

As if he'd also been reminded of our houseguest, Steve said, "Phillip, we should bring out your sheets and pillows now so we don't have to worry about them when we get home tonight."

Phillip nodded. "I'll get them. I saw them in the closet in your bedroom."

Steve covered his eyes. "I don't want to know when you were in there. Don't tell me. Get the dark blue sheets and as many of the spare pillows as you want."

"On it." Phillip went into the bedroom. Steve walked toward the kitchen, but Phillip came back out. "Do I have to use the blue ones?" He held up a stack of sheets. They were gray with some red, white, and blue on them. The flat sheet was neatly folded, but the fitted sheet had been rolled up in a ball.

Steve groaned. Phillip shook out part of the fitted sheet to show me the large Captain America shields running across it.

"These are wonderful," Phillip enthused, looking like a little kid at Christmas. "I would like to sleep on these!"

"Why don't you have those on your bed?" I asked Steve. "They'd go great with your fan art."

Steve sighed and lowered his hands. "People made fun of them."

I went over and hugged him. Why didn't everyone see how amazing he was?

"I love them. I can't wait to sleep on them with you."

"You will have to wait for your turn," Phillip chortled. "I found them first." Then he shook his head. "Though someone needs to teach you how to fold a fitted sheet, Steve."

Still in my arms, Steve protested, "I could look it up on YouTube if it mattered. But it doesn't."

Phillip snorted. He set the sheets on the armchair next to the couch and went back into the bedroom, presumably for the pillows.

Steve rested his head on my shoulder and tucked his hands into my back pockets. "I like this," he said. "Do we have to go to the Hoedown?"

I smiled and kissed his hair. "Your brothers would be disappointed if you skipped it."

"I guess," he whined.

Phillip dropped two pillows on the couch then sat down and stretched out lengthwise, tucking the pillows behind his head. "These are perfect. Do I have time for a nap?"

I checked my phone. "We've got about an hour. Steve, you want to take a nap?" I winked and he grinned.

"Count me in."

Phillip said, "I should check to see if the person who broke into my apartment damaged my noise-cancelling headphones."

In consideration for Phillip, Steve and I practiced silent orgasms during some very satisfying hand jobs. We were rested and relaxed when we headed for the Holiday Hoedown with Phillip in tow.

The venue was hopping tonight. I wasn't sure if Sundays were typically busy nights for them, but Jake Lord probably brought out a larger than usual crowd.

My parents were bringing Selina and Flo. They were running a little late, but Steve's friends had already arrived.

To be honest, I was a little nervous about meeting Felix and Cal. They were obviously important to Steve, but all I could picture were the dude-bros he used to have over for his interminable parties.

We found Felix and Cal holding down a table next to the dance floor. I relaxed immediately when they waved, their faces alight with pleasure at seeing Steve and curiosity when they looked at me.

Neither of them were dude-bros, thankfully. Cal was a big, beefy guy, with brown hair and round cheeks over a squared-off beard. He wore a blue button-down over a t-shirt that read, "Friendly Neighborhood Anarchist". I was pretty sure I'd seen him in the hallway outside our apartments before. Felix was a cute ginger bear cub with gray eyes, freckles, and adorable dimples. He reminded me a little of Warren. I waited for pain to accompany that thought, but I only felt a glow of warmth and nostalgia.

Steve hugged Felix first, then Cal. He told Cal, "I've forgiven you, FYI. But don't do that again."

Cal made a face at Steve. "As long as you listen to me the first ten times I tell you something, I won't." Steve made a face back at him and they laughed.

Felix shook his head before holding his hand out to me. "I'm Felix. You must be Baz."

"Hey, nice to meet you."

My hand was next engulfed in Cal's large meaty paw. "Hi. Good to meet you."

Steve said, "Our neighbor Phillip will be here in a minute. He wanted to check something out at one of the booths."

Cal and Felix went on alert.

Eyes flashing, Felix asked, "Isn't Phillip the neighbor who left your rabbit on the balcony?"

Steve explained the situation with the dead grandmother and the bathroom cabinets, and they relaxed.

Cal said, "So tell me why y'all ended up on the ground next to a hedge last night."

To give Steve time to come up with some bullshit answer, I said, "Why don't you three catch up and I'll get us a pitcher of beer?"

Cal said, "Smart man. Bribery is the way to a more positive review when we talk to Steve about you later." He wasn't smiling.

"Um, okay. Be right back," I gave them an awkward wave.

"Thanks, Baz," Steve said.

I wove through the crowd until I got to the end of the line for beer.

Someone touched my arm and said, "Baz?"

I turned, and I was face-to-face with Cole Washburn, former A-list action movie star. His green eyes were friendly, and I thought I did a good job of keeping my own eyes on his instead of staring at the scar running down the side of his face and into his dark beard.

Like Wesley had done last night, he was hiding his identity under a large cowboy hat. Unlike Wesley, Cole was getting a few double-takes, but no one approached him.

Stunned, all I could get out was, "Hngh?"

Cole laughed. "We saw you over there with Steve and Felix and Cal. It's good to meet you in person. This is Jason, and this is Will."

How is this my life now? I thought as I shook hands with Cole's two boyfriends. Jason was tall with broad shoulders, reddish-brown hair, and a guarded expression. Will was shorter and blonder, with hazel eyes that told me he hadn't decided if he liked me yet.

"We're worried about Steve," Will said without any preamble. "Thursday morning he was overworked and exhausted, but by Thursday night he's dating you and he has a pet rabbit. Then the next day his estranged brothers start showing up."

"It's a lot in a short time," Jason said.

And just like that, I was over being star-struck.

I glanced behind me to make sure the line hadn't moved, then I put my weight back on my heels and crossed my arms. "I appreciate that you're concerned for Steve, but I'm not going to talk about him or his decisions without him present."

To my surprise, Cole laughed. He nudged Will. "We just got put in our place!" Then he slapped me on the shoulder. "Good man. Let's get some beer."

Slightly bewildered, I was about to respond when Phillip appeared next to me.

"Everything okay, Baz?" He scanned Cole, Will, and Jason. Cole got an extra blink, but Jason held Phillip's focus after that. Hadn't Steve mentioned Jason owned some sort of bodyguard company?

Fuck, all we needed was a pissing contest.

I put my hand on Phillip's taut shoulder. "Cole, Will, and Jason," I indicated each as I spoke. "This is Phillip, Steve and my neighbor."

Cole's entire body tensed, and he snapped, "You're the guy who left the rabbit on the balcony."

Will and Jason straightened up and squared themselves off with Phillip.

But I felt Phillip's shoulder relax under my hand. He apologized and explained about Rocket chewing on the cabinets and expecting his principal to come get him that morning. Cole, Will, and Jason calmed as he spoke.

"I understand. I'm sorry I was short with you." Cole indicated himself and his boyfriends. "We take the treatment of animals very seriously."

Phillip said, "I admire your standing up for creatures who don't have a voice. I have to say, though, I think events worked out well for Rocket in the end. He's much happier as Steve and Baz's pet than as a classroom rabbit."

Jason guided us forward as the line moved.

Will frowned. "How did he end up as a classroom pet in the first place? I didn't think schools did that anymore."

Phillip rolled his eyes. "According to teacher lounge gossip, the former principal was not above, shall we say, doing favors for parents or whoever in return for, let's say, *other* favors. Those other favors might have been financial, or in the case of one rumor, sexual." He shrugged. "I'm not sure what the particular exchange was, but right after I started, Principal Lockwood announced a classroom pet had been donated to the school." He grinned ruefully. "The permanent teachers refused to have him in their classrooms, so he was bestowed upon me, the substitute. Ms. Frankel, who I'm substituting for, will be eternally grateful to Steve and Baz when she returns to a rabbit-free classroom."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Sounds like some parent wanted to get rid of their child's pet."

Cole nodded, then held up one finger and pointed it at me. "Hang on. I thought Steve was adopting the rabbit. Do you have joint custody then?"

I shook my head. "No, but Steve and I are kind of... cohabitating right now. His brothers are staying at my apartment."

Cole's face broke into a big grin. "Cohabitating, huh?"

"Uh, yeah." I felt myself turning red.

Phillip *tsked*. "Oh, no. I heard it was much more serious than that."

My mouth dropped open, and I held up a hand. "No—"

He interrupted me. "Selina—this one's sister," he jerked his head in my direction. "She informed me Baz had proposed but Steve declined the honor."

Three sets of eyebrows shot toward the ceiling, and three sets of eyes widened at me. I held out my hands in a warding-off gesture.

"No. Just no," I pointed right in Phillip's smirking face. "You know it's not true, so stop telling people that!" I turned to the others. "I did not propose. We were talking, and I was holding his hands in mine. That's all." I glared at Phillip. "Even though people keep spreading rumors to the contrary."

He grinned and winked at Cole, Jason, and Will. "Tormenting you is an endless pleasure."

Cole laughed. "I like you," he told Phillip. "You'll have to come out to the ranch sometime when we have people over."

Phillip put his hand over his heart. "Thank you, that is very kind"

Several minutes later we headed back to the table carrying beer, water, and platters of barbecue and sides.

Selina and Flo, trailed by my parents, intercepted us. Selina had trouble not fangirling all over Cole, but Flo kept her cool. My parents had been shopping in the market part of the Hoedown, based on the two very large and long objects wrapped in brown paper in their arms. They were friendly but calm around Cole and only made a couple of comments about their favorite movies of his.

Once I was done passing out the food, my mother pulled me aside. "We noticed Steve didn't have any holiday decorations." She searched my eyes. "Keith and I saw these and we couldn't resist." She gestured at the packages. The more I looked at them, the more they made me think of giant dildos.

"Wow, um, you didn't have to do that. But I'm sure Steve will appreciate them."

She patted my arm. "If you're not ready, it won't upset us if you don't put them out."

I was more concerned about what exactly those things were than that they'd be Christmas-related.

"I think they'll be okay, Mom. Thanks."

I hugged her, and she whispered in my ear, "Does Steve know Cole Washburn through his brothers?"

I smiled, and told her, as if it were no big deal, "No, Steve and Cole are business partners." I ignored her confusion and said, "Excuse me, I need to go talk to Steve's other friends."

Steve had just finished hugging Cole, Jason, and Will when I walked up. Steve introduced Phillip to Cal and Felix, and we all found seats and started passing around the food.

Everyone had a full plate by the time Jim Hartigan came onstage.

"Welcome, y'all. I'm Jim Hartigan, and I'm the General Manager of KATE-FM, your home for 80s music!" The crowd cheered. Jim said, "I know all y'all are revved up to see Jake Lord tonight!" He waited for the cheers to die down. "But before Jake joins you, we have a couple of special guests who're here to treat you to some of their favorite songs." Tentative applause rippled through the crowd, except from our table, where we were all hooting and whistling.

Jim gestured to the side of the stage and said, "Please welcome Dirk and Drake Derry from Melodious Moon!"

After half a second of surprise, the audience roared and applauded.

Dirk and Drake had wide smiles as they took the stage. Dirk was sporting his Jake Lord-style motorcycle boots and leather jacket, but Drake had obtained a cowboy hat and a pair of cowboy boots from somewhere.

"Hello, Bent Oak!" Dirk called out. The audience cheered. Dirk and Drake swung into "All My Exes Live in Texas" and the crowd went berserk. Several people got up to dance.

Steve leaned into me. "I wonder whether Dirk and Drake taught themselves that song today."

"They're having fun," I said.

He nodded. I put my arm around his back.

Next Dirk and Drake sang one of Melodious Moon's early hits. The twins hadn't even been teenagers when it'd climbed the charts. After that they sang "Merry Christmas from the Family". Their back-and-forth delivery of the lyrics was a fun take on the song. Based on the number of phones pointed at them, it'd probably go viral before morning.

When the final notes trailed off, Drake said, "Thank you for letting us sing for you tonight. We have one last song for you before the main event, Mr. Jake Lord, takes the stage."

After the screams from the audience quieted, Drake said, "Dirk and I would like to dedicate this song to our brother Steve."

Next to me, Steve stiffened in his chair. I put my hand on his back.

"Steve isn't quite ready to get married right now...." Drake strummed his guitar dramatically.

Fucking hell. Phillip slapped a hand over his mouth to hide a grin, and Steve shook his head.

Drake went on, "But he's in a great relationship and we have faith that his boyfriend will ask again. Dirk and I figured we should be ready for whenever it happens, so we started practicing this song."

Then those fuckers sang Train's "Marry Me".

I propped my elbows on the table and hid my face in my hands. Steve put his arms around me consolingly. I sat up after a minute. I couldn't wallow through the entire song, even though I wanted to.

On my other side, Phillip was howling with laughter, almost doubled over in his chair. Down the table, Flo looked horrified, but Selina and our parents were smiling serenely and nodding their heads in time to the music.

Across from us, Felix and Cal seemed confused, but Cole, Jason, and Will were trying but failing to keep straight faces.

"This is getting ridiculous," I pouted.

Steve said, "It'll be funny eventually."

I groaned, "Sure, after we're actually married."

Steve, who still had his arm around my back, whipped his head toward me. "What?"

"What what? It could happen. You said yesterday you weren't saying never. Remember?"

Steve muttered something about me trying to kill him, but the rest of it was lost under the music. He leaned over the table so he could see around me. "Hey, Phillip, pass the pitcher down here!" he shouted.

Dirk and Drake wrapped up the song to tremendous applause. A grinning Dirk said, "Thank you, Bent Oak, for having us here tonight! Don't forget, Melodious Moon will be performing right here on Christmas Eve, so get your tickets now!" More cheering. "We'll have a short break, then Jake Lord will be out here to get you rocking!"

Dirk and Drake jumped up and high-fived each other before trotting off the stage. Piped-in 80s music filled the air, and people got up from their seats and wandered around.

Steve said, "Dirk and Drake seemed to be having a great time."

I was about to respond when someone came up behind us.

[&]quot;Excuse me."

We turned around.

A forty-something guy with black hair and bushy eyebrows was standing behind us. He said, "Hi. I'm Alberto Herrera. I write freelance articles about music. I've got an article in this month's *Rolling Stone* if you want to look me up."

"Okay?" I said.

Herrera glanced around our table, his eyes widening when he saw Cole. But he only stared for a second, tearing his eyes away and addressing Steve.

"Are you Steve? The brother Drake Derry was just talking about?"

"I am," Steve said warily.

Our end of the table went silent.

Herrera held out a business card. "I don't want to interrupt your evening, but I think people would love to hear about the Derry sibling who isn't in the band."

Steve shook his head and held up his hands. "I'm not interested in being in the spotlight because of who I'm related to."

"Hold on." Cole had gotten up and was standing between Felix and Cal across the table from us. He reached out his hand for the business card, and Herrera almost fell over in his eagerness to hand it over. Cole said, "Steve, you and your siblings do have a story. You should talk to Yiannis about possibly granting an interview."

Cal rumbled, "And you could mention the app."

Cole grinned. "And you could mention the app." He turned to Herrera. "Are you aware of Rogues Gallery, the dating app I'm helping develop with Steve and Cal Steadham here?" He put his hand on Cal's shoulder. "It's going to be for people who don't quite fit in with the usual crowd on other dating apps. Steve and Cal are the geniuses behind it. I'm just the money guy."

Steve snorted. "And it was your idea."

Cole preened. "And it was my idea."

Wesley's backup musicians were positioning themselves on the stage, so I said, "Looks like Jake Lord's about to play."

Steve nodded. "Thanks for your card," he said to Herrera. "I'll talk to my siblings and get back to you."

"Thanks," he said. "It was nice meeting all of you, and I'll check out that app."

Wesley played for an hour before he brought Dirk and Drake back out. The three of them sang the Beach Boys' "Little Saint Nick" with some pretty decent harmonies, particularly as they'd never played together before today. Then they sang "Please Come Home for Christmas" before Wesley played the opening chords of "Santa's Secret Stocking".

"You okay?" I asked Steve.

He made a face but nodded. "It's still pretty raw for me. But I bet this is the closing number. I'll be fine."

I put my arm around him. "Warren used to like to sing along to this," I said.

"Yeah?"

I nodded.

Steve leaned his head against mine and said, "I like the thought of him getting joy out of this song. I'm glad it has good memories for you."

I hugged him to me and kissed his cheek. Did Steve have *any* good holiday memories?

I resolved then and there that he'd get new ones every year from now on. I'd make sure of it.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

"Okay, class. Today we're going to practice the ancient art of letter-writing."

I'd expected the groans.

I held up a hand. "But to make it fun, you're going to write a letter to Santa, address the envelope, and I'm going to mail them."

I got a couple of eye-rolls, but the rest of the kids appeared excited.

I wrote a sample letter on the whiteboard, with date, greeting, body of the letter, and closing. I drew a big rectangle next to it and put "Your Home Address Here" in the upper left corner. Then I wrote out the Post Office's address for letters to Santa.

I handed out paper and envelopes.

Why hadn't I thought of this before?

CHAPTER 19

STEVE

AFTER WESLEY, DIRK, AND DRAKE TOOK THEIR BOWS AND went off backstage somewhere, Baz and I stayed at the table chatting with everyone. Another party, I mused. Different than the one this morning, but still more fun than the ones I used to host for all of my acquaintances from the bars and clubs.

And that was the difference, wasn't it? Sure, Cal had been my best friend since elementary school, and then in the past year or so Felix had become equally important to me. But I'd mistaken the other people I hung out with—people like Justin, Eddie, and Renata—for friends as well.

And it wasn't their fault. I'd had just as little interest in their personal lives as they'd had in mine. I'd labeled our shared interests in partying and gaming with a deeper connection than it'd actually had.

But these experiences, tonight and this morning, they were the kind of party I wanted more of.

I ended my introspection with a yawn, and Baz said, "Why don't you text Dirk and Drake that we'll see them tomorrow? They drove your truck here anyway, and you need some rest."

Sleep sounded wonderful. I still hadn't caught up from my months of too much work and too little rest. Look at me, being all adult and acknowledging Cal and Cole had been right.

I sent a quick text to the twins, and Baz called out to the rest of the table, "Hey, guys, Steve and I are heading out."

There was a wave of agreements and some protests. I looked at Phillip. "You want to ride back with us, or you want to

stay?"

"I will come with you," he said. He stood up and said goodbye to Jason, Will, and Cole. They seemed to have become friendly when they'd all been in the line for beer with Baz.

So much so that Cole told me, "Bring Phillip with you and Baz the next time we have dinner at the ranch. He seems like a good guy."

I managed not to laugh as I agreed.

Selina and Flo both gave me big hugs. But not as big as the hugs I got from Baz's parents, who presented me with two... items wrapped up in brown kraft paper. Each was about two feet long and fairly heavy, possibly made out of wood or metal. I could feel what might be decorations attached at various points along the... shafts, and they both had flared bases.

"Open them when you get home," Baz's mother told me after I'd thanked her. "We're so happy you're in Baz's life. You're just what he needs. We'll see you Christmas Eve, but keep a close eye on him before then too, okay, hon?"

"I will," I said. Because what else was I supposed to say? Baz still hadn't told me what the big deal was about Christmas Eve, but based on what his mom had just said....

I had that same sense of dread as when I'd seen the photo from Baz and Warren's wedding.

Fuck.

Baz, Phillip, and I got out of the car and trudged toward the elevator. Well, I was trudging. I was too tired to look at anyone else. The days when I'd partied all night and then went to the call center to work a full shift seemed like years ago instead of only months.

Baz was carrying one of the mystery bundles from his parents, and I had the other. When the elevator arrived, we entered, and

I fished my keys out of my pocket.

Baz nudged me. "Hey, I know you're tired, but would you help me bring some more clothes over from my apartment?" He winked. "I have a bunch of shirts but no more clean pants."

I shook my head, smiling. "Sure." I handed the keys to Phillip. He looked at them and raised a sardonic eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah, you can get in without it. You're still a big bad hitman or whatever you are, even if you use the key to open the door."

He frowned. "I'm not a hitman."

I huffed. "Substitute teacher then."

Baz chuckled. "Your former occupation's skillset probably comes in handy, now that I think about it."

Phillip smiled but didn't dispute it.

The elevator doors opened, and even from this end of the hall we heard Rocket shriek.

A woman's voice shouted, "Fuck!" It was muffled, but I could tell it came from my apartment.

Baz and I rushed out of the elevator, but before we got more than a few steps down the hall, Phillip dodged in front of us and held his arms out. "Stay here," he ordered, his voice barely above a whisper.

He crouched and produced a handgun from an ankle holster. Baz and I held our wrapped bundles up like clubs and watched Phillip move, still in a crouch, toward my door.

He slowly tested the knob, then stood up and pulled my key out. He positioned himself to the side of the door and slid the key in very quietly with his left hand, his right holding the gun up and ready.

The deadbolt made a *thunk* as it unlocked. Phillip turned the knob and opened the door with his left hand. His body sank into a crouch with his gun held in front.

I barely breathed.

Phillip nudged the door fully open, then entered the apartment in a duckwalk.

"Should we call the police?" Baz breathed into my ear.

I shrugged. I wanted to, badly. But if this was something to do with Phillip's search for whatever-it-was, he might not appreciate the cops getting involved.

A loud thud came from my apartment. Somebody knocking over the armchair maybe?

I moved forward automatically.

Baz whisper-shouted, "Steve!" but I ignored him.

More thuds. If they weren't using guns, maybe I could help. Or at least see what was happening.

I set my dildo-club down and leaned it against the wall before squatting as Phillip had done. I eased my head around the corner.

Shit. This was bad.

Phillip was face down on the ground, his arms splayed out in front of him. A dark-haired woman in black pants and a black bomber jacket was standing with her feet on either side of Phillip's waist, the gun in her hand pointed at Phillip's head.

My heart seized. What could Baz and I do to help?

He was saying something, but he was talking in such a low voice I couldn't hear him. Which was probably *why* he was talking so softly.

Phillip looked so *small* there on the floor.

I pulled back. Baz had crouched down behind me. I whispered, "Phillip's on the ground, and a woman's got a gun aimed at his head."

Baz showed me his phone, where he'd dialed 911 but hadn't pushed the button to connect the call. I nodded.

Baz pointed at himself then at the trash vestibule next to the elevator. I gave him a thumbs up, and he stood up and walked

softly down the hall while bringing the phone to his ear. He'd left his dildo-club next to mine.

I stuck my head around the doorframe again.

Phillip had twisted his neck so he could look up at the woman, and now I could hear what he was saying. "I let you live when I didn't have to. I hoped you'd take the opportunity and leave the country."

The woman scoffed. "That was your mistake. The ring is enough to set me up for the next ten years. Where is it? Give me the ring, and you can live."

Fuck, Phillip would get shot when he didn't have a ring to give her. That ring must be the item he'd been searching for.

How could I help Phillip? If he got shot when I could've done something, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

I glanced back at the dildo-club. Could I get close enough to bash her on the head with it?

The two of them were in the area between the living room and the breakfast table. Behind the woman the armchair was on its back, and the Captain America sheets were on the floor. The fitted sheet was spread out to almost its entire length across the carpet.

I'd have to walk into the apartment about fifteen feet, then walk across the sheet another six feet before I could get close enough to whack the woman on the head. She was angled with most of her back to the door, so as long as she didn't turn her head to the right at all she wouldn't see me in her peripheral vision.

But maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she did see me. Okay, I didn't want to get shot. But what if all Phillip needed was a distraction? If I could get the woman to turn toward me—hopefully not leading with her gun—then I was sure Phillip would use the opening and take her down.

Looking up at the woman over his shoulder, Phillip said, "I searched for the ring everywhere, just like your boyfriend's goons did. Where exactly do you think I'm going to produce it from now?"

My nerves were screaming, but I had to do something. I reached behind me and picked up one of the dildo-clubs. I turned it in my hands to find the best place to hold it. The kraft paper made a crinkling noise, so I couldn't shift my grip once I went into the apartment.

I faintly heard Baz hiss, "Steve!" from down the hall as I hunched over and mimicked Phillip's duck walk. My thighs reminded me of their ill treatment on Thursday, but I ignored the pain and eased silently into the apartment.

If the woman turned around, I'd be completely exposed.

Phillip twisted a little more so his neck wasn't quite as strained as he looked up at the intruder. He stared straight at her and said loudly, "No!"

She said, "You should reconsider if you want to live."

I crept a little closer.

Phillip, still keeping eye contact with the intruder said, "I have this under control. No."

The woman chuckled. "You have this under control?" She jerked her gun at Phillip. "How does that work exactly?"

I lifted the dildo-club higher and took another step. Only a couple of feet until I was on the fitted sheet.

Still trying to get more comfortable while he talked to the woman, Phillip twisted his body even further onto his shoulder and bent one knee a little out to the side to brace himself. He told her, "For fuck's sake, Steve."

The woman said, "What? Who—"

She started to turn her head in my direction, but Phillip... did something. I couldn't follow it all, he moved so fast. All I knew was he curled up, and I think he kicked his thigh into in the back of the woman's knee. Maybe? But whatever he did, the woman crumpled toward Phillip, and then he had his hands around her gun hand and tucked his head down. I wasn't really sure—it was all so quick.

I did see the woman pull one hand free and punch Phillip in the head. But Phillip twisted his body even more until he was sitting on his butt. The intruder was raining blows on Phillip's head and shoulder, but Phillip kept twisting her gun hand.

Until the gun was pointing at the woman, not at Phillip.

I ducked against the wall under the kitchen counter.

The gun went off.

My ears rang, but I heard Baz shout, "Steve!" and I could feel the floor vibrate as he ran down the hall.

The woman looked down at herself, then slowly fell backward, right in front of me onto the fitted sheet. Her chest was covered in blood, and her eyes stared fixedly at the ceiling.

Phillip flipped the safety lock on the gun and tossed it to the side.

Baz burst into the room, phone in one hand. "Steve!" He stopped short and eyed me. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I croaked. I stood up slowly.

Phillip put the palm of his hand on his forehead. "Fucking hell, do either of you have any sense of self-preservation?"

I reached for Baz, but he held up a hand and spoke into the phone. "Um, hi, sorry. Yes, the intruder is dead." He grimaced apologetically at Phillip. "I don't know. Phillip, our neighbor, shot her somehow. Um, okay. Right."

He looked at Phillip. "Are you injured?"

Phillip rolled his eyes. "No."

I said, "Hang on, she punched you. A lot. And you were fighting earlier."

He heaved a sigh. "Bruises. I'm fine."

Baz reported this to the dispatcher.

Phillip scooted away from the dead woman and got to his feet. *You told them I had a gun?* he mouthed to Baz. Baz nodded.

Phillip sighed and pulled out his phone.

Baz punched a button to mute his call.

"What do we tell them about you?"

Phillip didn't look up from flipping through his contacts list, but said, "Just tell them the truth about tonight. I got back in town this morning and came over when I discovered my apartment had been broken into." Baz and I nodded. "I'd turned my phone off for my grandmother's funeral."

"Got it," Baz said.

Stepping carefully around the dead woman, Phillip walked into the bedroom.

Someone called from down the hall, "Steve? Is everyone okay? I heard a gunshot?"

Alarmed, I dashed to the doorway. "The police are on their way," I called to Patty Greggson, who lived two doors down at the far end of the hall on my side. "Stay back there. You don't want to have to give a statement about what you saw in my apartment."

Patty, a motherly woman who ran the local dollar store, asked, "Is anyone hurt?"

I made a so-so motion with my free hand. "We're okay, but the person who broke in isn't. I'll give you the details later, after the cops are gone."

Kirk Jonas, who lived in between Patty and me, opened his door. Patty went to tell him what was happening.

The elevator opened, and two patrol officers came out. I was disappointed neither one was Officer Gallegos or Officer Pham

Baz murmured into the phone and hung up.

The officers asked us to move into the hallway while they secured the scene. Phillip appeared behind Baz, and he followed us obediently out the door after informing the officers where his gun had ended up after the woman disarmed him.

One of the officers went into the apartment and the other stayed with us. His badge said, *Krakowski*. "What's this?" he asked, pointing at the paper-wrapped dildo-club on the hallway floor.

"Um, I'm not exactly sure," I told him. "There's another one inside. Baz's parents bought them for us, but we haven't opened them yet."

Officer Krakowski looked doubtfully at the dildo-club and nudged it with his foot.

"Oh!" I said. "I forgot. My rabbit's in the apartment. I don't know if he's still in his crate or not." I twisted my hands together. "He was screaming when we came home. I need to see if that woman hurt him. Can I go back in?" I gestured at the apartment.

Officer Krakowski shook his head. "No. Hang on." He leaned into the doorway. "Hopkins, be aware, there's a live rabbit somewhere in the apartment."

A pause, then the other officer called out. "Roger that."

"Officer Hopkins will let us know if you need to come get it before the crime scene techs arrive. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until they're done."

I nodded. "Thanks." I hesitated, then said, "Um, Baz lives across the hall here. Can we wait in his place?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, not til after the crime scene techs get what they need from you. Can't risk cross-contamination."

That made sense.

I walked over to Baz and Phillip. Phillip's transformation, just from his posture and body language, was astonishing. He was a couple of inches shorter than me and Baz, but over the last 24 hours I'd gotten so used to his in-charge demeanor, he'd actually seemed bigger than us.

Right now, though, if I hadn't met Phillip before, I'd have pegged him as a shy introvert, a nerdy academic type who could never hurt anyone.

My mind flashed the scene of Phillip shooting the intruder. I blinked and shook my head.

I wanted to go over to Baz and ask for a hug, but I thought I'd better help Phillip's cover identity first.

Phillip and Baz were huddled against the wall opposite Officer Krakowski. I positioned myself so Phillip was between me and Baz. I put my arm around his shoulder solicitously. "Are you okay?" I asked loudly enough for Officer Krakowski to hear me. "That was freaking scary. I didn't know you knew any martial arts. That's what that was, right?"

Phillip played along immediately. He crossed his arms and hunched into himself. "I took some Brazilian jiu jitsu for a while. I never thought I'd use it though."

Baz crossed his own arms and shifted on his feet. Was he freaked out? Even so, he got with the program. "Are you sure you're not injured, Phillip?"

Phillip shook his head. "I'm fine."

I nodded. The officer was eyeing us, so I said, "You're a hero, Phillip," I said. "You were really brave."

Phillip snorted. "Unlike *you*. You were a fucking dumbass, and I wanted to kill you myself."

I let go of him, offended. "I was trying to distract her so you could get away! I couldn't just stand by and let her shoot you." I'd just found a new friend. I wasn't going to let some asshole intruder take him from me.

Phillip got up in my face. "If she had aimed her gun at you, she could not have missed!"

I protested, "She would've been distracted by you getting away or kicking her or something."

Phillip threw his hands in the air. "She would have just shot me, and you wouldn't have had time to get out the door before she'd have shot you too!"

I was about to retort, but Baz said, "I agree with Phillip."

I rounded on him. "What?"

Baz's face, which for the last few days I'd only seen look at me with caring and affection, was taut and angry. "What the fuck were you thinking?" he shouted. "Or were you even thinking?"

"I was trying to save our friend!" I shouted back. "He was facing that woman on his own, and I couldn't just leave him there by himself!"

Baz's face fell. "What about me?" he asked, his voice breaking. "If you'd gotten killed, *I* would've been left by myself."

I froze.

Fuck. A gaping chasm opened in my chest.

"Baz, I'm—"

"I can't go through that again, Steve. If you're this careless with your safety, I don't know how I can be with you." He took off his glasses and wiped his eyes.

"Baz, I was only—"

We were interrupted by the elevator doors opening, and Baz took the opportunity to walk a few paces down the hall and turn away from me.

Shit. I needed to talk to him. I needed to make this right. My breathing sped up. How could I have forgotten? How could I have put myself in danger when Baz had already lost someone? He didn't want to be with me anymore, and I couldn't blame him.

How could I ask him to give me another chance, when I'd just proved I didn't deserve it?

Oblivious to my anxiety, two guys wearing blue polos covered by dark blue windbreakers came down the hall pulling giant toolboxes on wheels. They barely glanced at us, trading greetings with Officer Krakowski. They stopped next to my front door and took out paper booties, hair coverings and gloves. Once they were suited up, they took their equipment into the apartment. The backs of their windbreakers said, "Bent Oak Police Dept."

I looked longingly down the hall toward Baz. What would make him speak to me again?

Phillip leaned his back against the wall next to me. When I glanced at him, he said in a low voice, "He'll come around."

I rubbed my arm. "I'm not sure. It's not like we've been together very long."

The patrol officer who'd been inside the apartment came to the door. "One of you wanna come get the rabbit?"

Forcing myself not to look at Baz, I said, "Uh, yeah, sure."

The officer, who's name badge said *Hopkins*, gave me some booties and gloves to put on, then led me into the apartment.

I'd hurt Baz. I hadn't put him first. He wouldn't want to see me again, and I completely understood. Hell, he'd probably move away. It's what people who used to care about me did.

And I'd be the one left all by myself. Again.

"It's in here." Officer Hopkins guided me to my bedroom. "Under the bed."

I'd walked right by the dead woman without even noticing.

One of the crime scene techs intercepted us. "Sir, were you in the apartment when the deceased was killed?"

"Yes?"

"I need to swab your hands for gunshot residue, and we need to take your clothes."

"Okay." I went into the bedroom, where my hands were swabbed. They gave me permission to pull out some sweats, t-shirts, and shoes for myself and Phillip. I changed and left the clothes for Phillip on the bed. If the shoes didn't fit, maybe Baz would have something he could use. I resolutely did not dwell on Baz.

I knelt down on the floor next to the bed and stuck my head underneath it. Rocket was huddled against the wall by the headboard. I empathized.

"I know, Rocket. I'm sorry you were scared. I hope she didn't hurt you." I flattened myself on my stomach and scooted far enough under the bed so I could grab him. He must have been shedding his fur from the stress, because there were tufts of it all around him. I put my hands under his front legs and pulled

him toward me as gently as I could. Then I shimmied my hips and used my knees and toes to back myself out.

Once free of the bed, I rolled onto my back and sat up, cuddling Rocket close. I had to brush some of the clumps of fur off my shirt. "Can I get his carrying sling?" I asked Officer Hopkins. "Or his harness?"

"Sorry, no. The crime scene techs cleared this room first so you could come get him. Just hold him for now. After they're done, we'll escort you back in so you can get his stuff."

Before getting up, I checked Rocket over, but he didn't seem injured. He was stiff and shivering, though. I held him close as I stood up. His fat belly felt oddly tense against my arm. He must've been really stressed out.

At least I had Rocket. He'd stay with me, no matter how much of a fool I was.

After I got back to the hallway, the crime scene tech and Officer Hopkins had Phillip follow them into my apartment to change his clothes. When he returned, the elevator door was just opening again, this time on a tall dark-haired guy and a much shorter woman with close-cropped curls. Based on their street clothes, I guessed they were detectives. Felix knew some Bent Oak detectives, but I couldn't remember their names.

The detectives stopped in front of me, Phillip, and Baz. The man said, "Hi, I'm Detective Walkoviac with the Bent Oak PD. This is my partner, Amy Palmer."

We all said hello. I told them, "I'm Steve Derryberry, and that's my apartment." I pointed at the doorway. "This is Baz Allen; he lives across the hall from me." And up until a few minutes ago we were dating. "And this is Phillip Downs, who lives next to me." I pointed at Phillip's door. "Phillip's the one who had a break-in on Friday."

The detectives tensed. "Break-in?" Detective Palmer asked.

Phillip nodded. "I was out of town—my grandmother passed away. Someone broke in and pretty much destroyed everything I own. I'm pretty sure it was related to tonight." He jerked his chin at my apartment door. "I'm the executor of my friends'

estate. They were murdered about a month ago. The woman in there mentioned their names."

Phillip hadn't told me and Baz about his friends getting killed. Was that related to the missing ring?

"I'm sorry for your loss," Detective Palmer told him. She was dressed in jeans and a bright blue quilted jacket. She gave off a kind but businesslike air. "What were their names?"

"George and Katrina Krause."

"Thank you."

Phillip said, "You can go look at my apartment—I just got back in town this morning. Baz helped me clean up some of the mess, but we barely made a dent in it." He gave me a rueful glance. "Steve was letting me stay at his place."

Detective Palmer nodded. "After we check out the crime scene, we'll need to speak to each of you individually about everything that's happened."

The elevator door opened once more. Baz said, "Shit!" and the detectives spun around.

"Steve!" Dirk and Drake jogged out of the elevator, guitar cases bouncing against their backs. They came to a stop a few feet away from the detectives.

"What happened?" Dirk asked. "Are y'all okay?"

I made a face. "We're fine. Um, Detectives, these are my brothers, Dirk and Drake Derry. They're staying in Baz's apartment right now."

Detective Palmer held up a finger. "Derry? Not Derryberry?"

I sighed. "My dad had their names changed."

Dirk interrupted. "But what *happened*? Did *your* apartment get broken into this time?"

I was about to respond when Detective Palmer placed herself between the three of us and Dirk and Drake. "Your brother is fine. He can answer your questions later. Now, you're staying where?" We all pointed at Baz's door.

"Right," she said to the twins. "I'm going to walk in there with you and I want you to tell me if anything looks out of place. Then you're going to stay inside until we give you the okay to come out. Got it?"

Dirk and Drake wilted in the face of her authority. Fish fins, they must be exhausted. I wondered what time it was and if I was allowed to look at my phone.

I handed Rocket off to Drake as they went by. Dirk stared in confusion at Phillip, no doubt thrown off by his body language. I shook my head at him. "We'll tell you the whole story later, I promise."

Detective Palmer escorted Dirk and Drake into Baz's apartment, and we all waited for her to come back out. She didn't say anything to Detective Walkoviac, so Baz's place must not have been disturbed. Both detectives went into my apartment, and Phillip, Baz, and I waited in the hall with Officer Krakowski again.

Baz still wouldn't look at me. I crossed my arms and told myself to keep it together until the police were gone.

How could I have been so stupid? I'd thrown away the best thing that had happened to me, ever. And for what? To try to save Phillip, who hadn't actually needed my help?

I was such a fucking screwup. No wonder no one wanted me.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

I'd made a special box for the letters to Santa to go in. I wasn't going to waste time taking them to the post office, but it helped create a sense of occasion for the kids.

Now that I had everyone's addresses, I could begin searching their houses for the Barbie tonight. Hopefully some of the families would be away from home for at least part of the evening, but most of my searches would have to be done during the daytime when the kids were at school and the parents were at work.

Tomorrow morning I'd call in sick. It might be a 48-hour bug.

CHAPTER 20

BAZ

I was spiraling. I needed to talk to Selina. Would the cops let me call her? For some reason my pride wouldn't let me ask them in front of Steve.

Fuck.

Steve. Steve could have died. I knew—I *knew*—my feelings about Steve putting himself in danger were getting twisted up in my feelings about Warren dying.

But I was so fucking *angry* at Steve.

It was irrational, but right now, I couldn't help it.

Which was why I needed to talk to my sister.

The two detectives came out of Steve's apartment. They stopped in front of Phillip.

"Can you show us your apartment, please?" Detective Walkoviac asked.

Phillip dug into a pocket and pulled out his keys. He led the detectives to his door and opened it for him.

They asked him to join them inside, and I was left in the hall alone with Steve and Officer Krakowski.

I looked at the officer. "Can I go down the hall to make a phone call?"

He said, "Sorry, not until the detectives talk to you. Just a few more minutes, okay?"

I hugged myself and nodded. "Okay." I turned back around so I couldn't see Steve.

"Baz..." he said.

Without looking I shook my head and held up a hand. "I can't right now."

"Okay," he said in a dejected tone.

I put my shoulder against the wall and closed my eyes. I had to control my rage.

I focused on my breathing and examined my feelings like Selina's coworker Lisa had taught me after Warren died.

I was angry, but I also felt sad. Grief. I felt grief.

Grief for Warren had become easier to bear over time, but I'd always carry it with me. But this felt fresh.

Which meant I was grieving for... Steve? For my relationship with Steve?

Was it over, then? Had Steve's actions tonight destroyed any hope I had of being with him? Could I not trust him going forward?

Fuck, I really needed to talk this out with someone.

Phillip exited his apartment, and Detective Palmer said, "Mr. Derryberry, please come in. We'll try to keep this brief and then you can come down to the station tomorrow to make a formal statement."

Steve went inside and the door closed behind him.

Phillip came over to me. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

I barked out a laugh. "Shouldn't I be asking you that? My night was a lot less traumatic than yours."

Phillip eyed me speculatively. "I'm not sure that's true." He glanced at Officer Krakowski, who'd stuck his head inside Steve's apartment and was conferring with someone on the other side of the door.

Phillip said quietly, "You know, when I moved in, I ran background checks on everyone in the building."

I raised my eyebrows but otherwise just waited.

"I know about your husband."

I nodded.

Then he said, "But I also know about Steve's family background."

"Okay?" What the fuck did that have to do with anything?

"What's he told you?"

I huffed impatiently. "I know he was sent to live with his grandfather as a teenager. His mom and his grandfather passed away, but they were from natural causes."

Phillip looked at me like I'd failed a pop quiz. "That was not where I was going with this. His mother died. Within a year, his father dumped Steve on his grandfather because Steve was not useful to the band the father had formed with the other kids. Steve saw his father and his siblings maybe a few times after that during high school, and they cut him off around the time he went to college."

"Okay?"

"And about two years ago his grandfather died."

"Right." Again, what the fuck did that have to do with anything?

"Most of those events happened when he was a child. So while you're thinking about how mad at him you are, and how thoughtless he was tonight, maybe also think about what all of those losses—his mom, his dad, his siblings, his grandfather—felt like to a child. And how that child—"

The elevator doors opened. Two women came out, both wearing black windbreakers. They had a gurney and another big rolling toolbox. The coroner was here.

The two women nodded at me and Phillip, but like the crime scene techs they only spoke to Officer Krakowski. They did the glove and bootie thing, then took the gurney into Steve's apartment. The backs of their windbreakers said *Travis County Medical Examiner*.

I watched the door close behind them then looked at Phillip. He'd been trying to make a point, but I didn't want to talk about Steve.

"How was your interview with the detectives?" I asked. Officer Krakowski was staring at his phone and didn't look up.

Phillip gave me the stink eye but answered. "It went fine. I told them I did not recognize the woman, but it probably had something to do with the break-in. Which probably has something to do with the death of my friends last month."

"I heard you say that earlier. I'm sorry to hear about your friends."

He nodded, looking tired and sad. "They were murdered in their home. I am the executor of their estate, and I took the substitute job so I would have some income while I was here settling everything."

The door to Phillip's apartment opened, and Steve came out. He looked awful, like he'd been crying. Something twinged in my chest, and I had to stop myself from going over and hugging him.

I was mad at Steve, I reminded myself. He hadn't thought of me before he'd put himself needlessly at risk.

Steve didn't look my way, just walked over to stand on the other side of Phillip. He pulled his phone out.

"Mr. Allen?" Detective Palmer gestured at me to join her.

I walked inside Phillip's apartment, and Detective Walkoviac said. "Come into the kitchen. Mr. Downs said you helped him clean it up this afternoon."

I nodded. There was nowhere to sit, but Steve's interview hadn't taken too long so hopefully mine would be the same.

After asking me if they could record our conversation, the detectives had me state my name for the record. Then they had me tell them everything that had happened from my perspective.

When I got to the part about Steve going into the apartment armed only with an unknown Christmas decoration against an intruder with a gun, I had to get up and pace so I wouldn't start shouting.

Detective Palmer's voice was empathetic and comforting. "Okay, Mr. Derryberry went into the apartment. Then what happened?"

I blew out a breath and ran my hands through my hair. "I was on the phone with the 911 dispatcher. I told her he'd gone into the apartment. Then I heard the gunshot."

I yanked on my hair and kept pacing. "All I could think was Steve had been shot. I ran into the apartment."

I stopped walking. Phillip had yelled at both Steve *and* me about our poor impulse control. Fuck, was running into the apartment without checking it was safe any different than what Steve had done? I dropped my hands and shook my head. Something to think about later.

"Anyway, um, luckily Phillip had shot the woman, and Steve wasn't hurt. So, um, that's it."

I turned to look at the detectives. They were making notes on their phones.

Detective Palmer asked me, "How well do you know Phillip Downs?"

I felt myself instantly turn red, and Detective Palmer's eyebrows rose. "Um, I mean, not well. He's lived here a little over a month, I think." I seized at a reason for my reaction. "Um, he, uh, hit on me, uh, when he first moved in. But nothing happened between us," I rushed to say. The detectives regarded me without speaking. "And, uh, I told Steve about it, so, yeah, he knows. No secrets and all that."

Except I hadn't told Steve about Christmas Eve yet, had I?

"Is there something you'd like to add, Mr. Allen?" Detective Palmer's voice was much milder than it had been on her last question.

I looked at her desperately. "I just remembered something I didn't tell Steve about. Fuck. Um, sorry. I mean, I need to tell him. Um, nothing to do with today. It's about my husband."

The detectives froze, wide-eyed.

I held up my hands. "My dead husband. I mean, I'm a widower. Three years ago. And Steve knows that part, right? But I didn't tell him about Christmas Eve. I think I fucked up."

I trailed off. The detectives and I were all silent.

"Okay," Detective Walkoviac said as he put his phone in his pocket. "I think that's it for today. Please come by the station tomorrow to make a formal statement."

I nodded. "I will, thanks."

We all walked toward the apartment door. Just before we reached it, I heard Dirk or Drake shout, "Is there an EMT here?"

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

I got back to my apartment just before dawn. I was pissed. Not to mention scared for the kids. Ostap had been faster than me in getting the kids' names and addresses.

I'd started out the night doing recon, seeing where all the kids lived, and I'd been able to get into three of their homes.

Lyle Cartwell's house had no evidence of Barbies, which was pretty much what I'd expected for a kid with no sisters and who, as far as I was aware, presented as a cis male.

But Bettina Forbes' house was another story. She had Barbie clothes, a Barbie house, even a Barbie dog. And there were two Ken dolls. But not one Barbie. Not in her room, her closet, her parent's room, or anywhere in the rest of the house.

Bettina and her family were obviously spending the night somewhere else, so she'd likely have taken one or more of the Barbies with her. But would she have taken all of them? Based on the amount of Barbie clothes she had, Bettina owned a lot of Barbies. Possibly five or six. Their absence was odd but for the time being I'd just noted the house as needing to be searched again during the daytime when Bettina was at school.

Until I got to Andrea Jang's house. Andrea had even more Barbie paraphernalia than Bettina. She had four Ken dolls, each with a slightly different hairstyle and aesthetic. But there weren't any Barbies. This was now a pattern. And therefore a problem.

I couldn't keep up the teacher persona. I needed to live in my SUV and focus on searching the kids' houses until I figured out where the Barbie was.

I spent a couple of hours deep cleaning the apartment to remove as many of my fingerprints as possible. I knew I wouldn't get all of them, but I'd leave few enough they'd be hard to find.

Once that was done, I called Blackwood's office line and left him a voicemail saying my grandmother had passed away and I needed to go to Florida for the funeral. That would buy me at least a week. I doubted I'd be back to my teaching job, but I'd learned not to cut off options before plans were final.

I took five minutes to send my packet of information on Blackwood to the school board from an anonymous account. Those kids deserved better.

My chest cramped at having to leave the kids. Especially Sean. Last Friday I'd given him a couple of college math textbooks I'd picked up at the used bookstore. He'd been thrilled.

If his parents wouldn't let him take advanced classes, at least he could study on his own.

And of course I ran into Bastien in the parking lot on my way to the car. He was stunning in the morning sun, relaxed and smiling.

His gorgeous face fell when I told him I was leaving town for my grandmother's funeral. The lie was difficult to get out while I was looking into his concerned brown eyes.

Bastien put his hand on the arm I wasn't using to pull my suitcase. "Are you going to be okay?" he asked, his voice full of worry.

My eyes filled with tears. I blinked them back. "No," I told him truthfully. But it wasn't for reasons he'd ever understand.

And then I got in my car and drove away, never to see Bastien again.

I hated this life. I'd tried to leave it behind. I would leave it behind.

CHAPTER 21

STEVE

"THANKS, COLE."

I hung up the phone and turned to Phillip. "We can stay in the ranch's guest cottage."

He smiled. "That should be interesting."

"It's peaceful out there." I'd have preferred to share it with Baz instead of Phillip, but that wasn't in the cards for tonight.

I pulled up Selina's contact info. We'd exchanged numbers this morning, which seemed like months ago at this point.

Can you come get Baz? The twins are in his apartment & we had a break-in at my place. Everybody's OK but Phillip shot the intruder. I'm taking Phillip to stay with Cole, Will & Jason

SELINA

Flo and I are on our way. Do I want to know why Baz isn't going with you? And why isn't he texting me?

He's talking to the cops but he should be done soon. And he's angry with me – I'm sure he'll tell you about it.

SELINA

I'll knock some sense into him

Leave him alone. Tonight was awful for him & I made it worse

We'll see.

"Okay, Selina and Flo are on their way to pick up Baz."

Phillip frowned. "Maybe I should stay with them so you and Baz can work things out."

"Nope," I said, pocketing my phone. "He needs space, but I don't want him to be alone. This is the best solution."

Just then the door to Baz's apartment was jerked open. Officer Krakowski, who'd been lounging against the wall next to my apartment, straightened and clapped his hand to the gun on his hip.

Dirk stuck his head out. "Is there an EMT here?" he said in a panicked voice.

"What's wrong?" I hurried over to him. Behind me I heard the door to Phillip's apartment open.

Dirk pulled Baz's door wider, looking at me with wide, fearful eyes. "It's Rocket. He's—she's having babies!"

"What?" I couldn't process what he'd just said. "Babies?"

Dirk reached out and grabbed my arm. "Come see."

Phillip crowded behind me as Dirk dragged me through the apartment. Drake was kneeling on the floor a few feet from the couch next to a bunched-up throw blanket.

Drake didn't look up but held out his hand palm first. "Stay back," he whispered. He waved his phone in his other hand. "Steve can come over here but nobody else—we don't want to stress her out"

I walked forward as silently as I could then knelt down next to Drake. "Oh, wow," I breathed. Rocket was nosing under his—her—belly where two bright pink hairless baby rabbits squirmed about. Then suddenly there were three.

I looked over my shoulder, my face probably just as panicked as Dirk's had been. I whisper-shouted, "Phillip! Why didn't you tell us she was a girl? And pregnant!"

Phillip spread his hands out and whispered, "How was I supposed to know? Lockwood said his name was Mr. Bun!"

"We've got five," said Drake.

"Cranberry sauce, how many babies do rabbits have?"

Drake glanced at his phone and grimaced. "You don't want to know. Let's hope for less than ten."

"Ten!" I felt faint.

Baz said from a few feet away, "Um, maybe we should call Felix?"

Pushing aside my joy that Baz had spoken to me—or at least spoken in my general direction—I yanked my phone out of my pocket and video-called Felix.

"Six," Drake announced as the phone rang.

Felix answered, his hair in disarray, mouth red and swollen, and shirtless. "Shit, sorry, Felix," I said.

Felix's eyes widened. "What's wrong?"

"Look." I turned the phone's camera so he could see Rocket.

"Oh, wow. I guess Rocket's female."

"Yes, Sherlock," I snapped. "As you can see, we need help!"

"She'll be fine, Steve." Felix's voice was perilously close to placating.

"You don't know that!" My voice, on the other hand, was probably the reason he was speaking that way.

"I promise," he said. "Rabbits have very few issues during labor."

"Seven," Drake said.

"Fuck," I cried out. "What if she's the exception? Maybe we should take her to a vet?"

"No. You can't move her," Felix said. "If you move her, she might not feed the kits."

I felt Baz kneel behind me. He put his hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged him off. I could *not* deal with him pretending

like nothing was wrong or whatever he was doing right then.

He breathed in then said, "Felix, how long do we need to keep her in place? She's on my living room floor. I'd think she'd be happier in her crate or a box, right?"

On the phone's screen, Felix shook his head. "You can try putting some boxes or something around her, but only if you can do it without making her nervous. But don't pick her up or put her in anything for three or four days. And don't touch the babies."

"Eight," Drake said.

From behind me I heard Detective Palmer say, "Guys, we're going to leave you to, um, your growing family. Congratulations and don't forget to come by the station tomorrow to make your formal statements. The apartment is taped off and we're leaving an officer on duty."

Baz said, "Thanks, Detective."

I waved a hand in acknowledgement, but I couldn't tear my eyes off Rocket and her babies.

Felix moved his phone closer to his face. He said, "Was that Amy Palmer? Why is Amy Palmer there? Why do you have to give a statement?"

I groaned. "It's a long story, Felix. Can I call you tomorrow and tell you?"

He huffed. "Fine. But I'm going to hang up now. You can call me back if Rocket has any issues, but I promise you, she'll do great."

I closed my eyes briefly before opening them. "Thanks, Felix."

Baz peered over my shoulder and echoed me. "Thanks, Felix."

I hung up and stood, needing to get away from Baz. Why was he trying to be nice? I was too tired to figure out his hot and cold shit.

I waited around several minutes until we were sure Rocket wasn't going to have any more babies, then I said to Dirk,

"Phillip and I are going to go crash at Cole, Will, and Jason's place. Selina and Flo are coming to get Baz."

"What?" I heard Baz get to his feet, but I was already on my way out. Phillip followed me and he shut Baz's apartment door behind us. I said goodnight to the new officer standing in front of the door to my apartment. I didn't recognize her from earlier.

Fuck, I just needed some sleep.

The elevator doors opened before we got to them, and Selina and Flo came out, both wearing hoodies over flannel pajama bottoms with slippers.

Selina said, "Are you okay? Both of you?"

I didn't have the heart to respond, but Phillip said, "I think we are doing fine, actually. But thank you for asking."

I said, "Baz is in his apartment. The door's unlocked, but please be quiet. Rocket just had babies in there."

They gasped, and Flo made an almost inaudible *squee* noise as she hopped up and down while clutching her hands to her chest.

She trotted down the hall, but instead of following her, Selina caught my arm. "I'll speak to Baz, but if *you* need anyone to talk to, I don't counsel and tell."

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

I shut off Sarah Connor's engine and rechecked my weapons before I got out. Russ Zarko's house was the only one I hadn't searched yet. So far Ostap's thug was ahead of me—he'd obviously prioritized the girls' houses. I hadn't done the same. I had no idea why the child had taken the Barbie, and I wasn't going to assume. I'd searched the homes based on whichever house was closest and empty.

The Zarkos had all left together about twenty minutes ago. I'd give it another five before going in. They might have forgotten something and come back.

It was only about 7pm, but it was full dark. I'd parked four houses down from the Zarkos' house on the opposite side of the street, so I had a clear view. I'd been watching the house for about two hours, waiting to see if the family would go out.

I had my fingers on the door handle to open it when I saw movement in the Zarkos' front yard. Shit, could I get lucky enough to catch one of Ostap's men?

Swiftly I exited the vehicle and sprinted across the yards until I was directly across from the Zarkos' house. This was a quiet neighborhood, and there wasn't any foot or street traffic. And as long as I moved fast enough—which was never an issue for me—typical doorbell cameras would register movement but wouldn't capture me on video.

Neither the Zarkos nor their neighbors across the street had cameras. I crouched next to a large shrub and waited. In a few

minutes I saw a flashlight moving through the Zarkos' living room.

Amateur. This would be easy.

I loped across the street and down the side of the Zarkos' house. The dumbass had left the back door not only unlocked, but ajar.

I ghosted inside, my Taser at the ready. I wanted this fucker alive.

CHAPTER 22

BAZ

THE DOOR SLAMMED SHUT BEHIND STEVE AND PHILLIP.

I'd hoped I'd have a chance to talk to Steve tonight. My thoughts were a mess, but I was pretty certain I'd screwed up. Big time.

Maybe this was for the best. Maybe I should get my head on straight before I word-vomited an apology that wasn't quite what he needed to hear.

"Dude," Dirk said. "What's that about? A few hours ago, you and Steve were eye-fucking each other, and now he's going to stay at Cole Washburn's place with Phillip?"

I made a face and went back over to where Drake was hovering over Rocket. "We had a... disagreement."

Dirk narrowed his eyes. "Hmmm. Well, you know me and Drake have to take Steve's side in this, right? Does that cause any issues with us staying here in your apartment?"

I sat down on the floor next to Drake. "No, man. You're good. I'm pretty sure I was an ass."

The apartment door quietly eased open. Flo stuck her head inside. "We heard there are babies!" she whispered. "Can we come in?"

Dirk waved her inside, and she tiptoed in her slippers over to me and Drake. Selina slid through the door and closed it behind her before joining Flo in cooing at the baby bunnies.

After a few minutes, Selina and Flo went over to the couch and sat down. Flo said, "Okay, somebody tell me who Phillip shot, and then Selina and I are taking Baz back to our place where we will commence the interrogation about his argument with Steve."

I held up a hand. "Um, our place? Didn't you start dating, like, on Friday?"

Flo pointed at me, then herself, and then me again. She raised one eyebrow.

"Okay, fair," I said.

"Wait," Dirk said. "Drake and I are parched. Who needs drinks?" No one responded. He went into the kitchen and came out with beers for himself and Drake. I didn't have the energy to protest.

Dirk sat in the armchair across from Flo and said, "Okay, go."

I rolled my eyes but told them everything that had happened after we got back to the apartment building tonight. When I told them about Steve going into the apartment to try to save Phillip, everyone gasped and their eyes went gratifyingly large.

Dirk jumped up and walked over to sit next to Drake on the floor. After putting his arm around his twin, he asked me, "How the hell did Steve not get shot?"

I explained how Phillip had used some jiu jitsu moves on the intruder and had gotten control of the gun.

As I spoke, Dirk pressed his forehead into Drake's shoulder. "We just got Steve back. I mean, we're working on it at least. How could he do something like that?"

I heroically resisted the urge to pump my fist in the air and shout, *Exactly!*

I did look at Selina and say, "I might have expressed that sentiment to Steve. Except, maybe less diplomatically."

Selina put on her counselor face. I knew it well from the first few months after Warren died. "Your feelings are valid, of course. But, Dirk and Drake, what have you said to Steve about wanting to rebuild your relationship?" Drake shrugged, and Dirk said, "Well, we told him we wanted to have a relationship with him."

"That's something. And you told him you loved him."

Dirk and Drake shook their heads.

"I see. Steve was supposed to just know how important he is to you by telepathy." Ouch. Selina was on Steve's side here. Uh oh.

Dirk and Drake appeared chastened.

Then she turned to me. "And, Baz, you told Steve about Warren's death.

"Um, we kept getting interrupted?" I looked anywhere but at Selina.

"Uh huh. But you at least discussed how Warren's death affected you."

"Uh, not specifically? But Steve's mom passed away when he was a kid." I winced and said, "Sorry," to Dirk and Drake.

They waved it off.

Selina didn't let this distract her. "But in light of your not telling him those things, do you see how Steve might not have a visceral understanding of how losing him would impact you? Especially since you haven't been dating very long?"

I winced again. "Yes."

"So it's *possible* that—"

Uh oh. Those words were the precursor to Selina doing her counselor's version of Hercule Poirot pointing out a murderer.

"—the three of you are blaming Steve for, in the heat of the moment when Phillip's life was in danger, not considering something you hadn't even told him about?"

Dirk, Drake, and I cringed. I understood then why the characters in those shifter books Warren had loved to read were always baring their necks to the most powerful wolf in the pack.

I said, "Uh, it's actually worse than that, on my part at least."

Selina's gaze speared me. "Oh?"

"Um, after the gun went off I kind of, uh, ran into Steve's apartment to make sure he was okay. And... I didn't, uh, check to see who had the gun before I charged in."

Selina blinked. "Let me get this straight." The counselor was gone, and I was in for it. "Not only are you upset at Steve for not thinking of you before he jumped in to help Phillip, when you haven't told him about your related emotional baggage. But *you* did something equally impulsive and boneheaded only a few minutes later?"

"I was worried about Steve!" I protested weakly. Then I slumped. "But, yeah, I'm a fucking hypocrite. And an asshole. I didn't even think before I yelled at him." The hurt in Steve's eyes. Fuck, I needed to make it up to him.

"Do any of you have Cole Washburn's phone number?" I asked. "Maybe I could take Steve breakfast or something."

Flo sat up from where she'd been cuddled into Selina's side. "No, Baz. This is not the time for some sort of grand gesture or whatever you're thinking. You need to apologize to Steve and talk it out with him. Tell him about Warren, and for fuck's sake tell him about Christmas Eve. And then listen to him. Let him tell you how you made him feel. He's got baggage too, I'm sure." She flicked a glance at Dirk and Drake, who both nodded miserably.

"Okay," I said. "I'll see if I can get him to meet me somewhere tomorrow." I wanted to text Steve tonight, but I was tired and I didn't know exactly what I wanted to say. He'd left here forty-five minutes ago, so he was probably already asleep anyway.

None of us wanted to leave Rocket alone tonight, so we raided my fridge for some vegetables in case she got hungry. Then we spread a bunch of paper towels on the floor next to her. I'd have to make another run to the pet store tomorrow.

I pulled out my air mattress for Flo and Selina. Dirk and Drake were already sharing my king-sized bed, so I took the couch.

But I couldn't sleep. It might've been the adrenaline from the intruder and thinking Steve could have been shot. It might have been worry over whether Steve would ever forgive me. Or it might have been trying to sleep without Steve. After only two nights, I'd gotten used to feeling him next to me, knowing he was with me.

I pulled out my phone. Why didn't I have any photos of Steve? Had we really only been together such a short time? I remembered my dream—or was it a hallucination?—of Steve and I with children. That was certainly a life goal, but I didn't want us to rush there. I wanted all the little moments we hadn't had yet. Going out to dinner, just the two of us. A lazy weekend spent mostly in bed. Binging Steve's favorite show, whatever it was. Me writing my book at the desk while Steve read one of his fantasy novels nearby.

That twigged a memory. I did know Steve's favorite online serial. *Captain Star Lord? Captain Star-something* at least. There were tentacles involved.

A Google search later and I was starting the first chapter of *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade* by someone calling themselves KirklovesSpock4eva.

When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed I was searching for Steve all over outer space while my ship's life support systems were failing.

Selina nodded encouragingly at me. I took a deep breath and hit *Send* on my text.

I'm so sorry I was such a jerk to you last night. I shouldn't have yelled, and I completely overreacted. Will you give me a chance to apologize?

I flopped back onto the couch cushions but didn't let go of my phone. It was 10am, so hopefully Steve was awake by now. I'd gotten up hours ago, too anxious to pretend to rest anymore.

Rocket and her babies seemed to be doing well. I'd slowly and carefully turned my coffee table on its side so she had the couch behind her and the coffee table blocking the view of the apartment door.

Once the babies were more mobile, I'd find something else for the other sides.

Dirk and Drake hadn't stirred yet, which was astounding given how Flo, Selina, and I had been traipsing in and out of the en suite bathroom all morning. We'd ordered breakfast in. I'd managed to choke down a few bites, but I quickly gave up and just drank my coffee.

After ten minutes of silence in response to my text, I snuck into my bedroom and snagged some clothes. After getting dressed, I told Flo and Selina I'd be back in a while, and I left to go to the police station.

Detectives Walkoviac and Palmer weren't there, but a redheaded detective named Callahan took my statement. The entire process took about thirty minutes.

As I was leaving, I said, "Um, this is going to sound strange, but you guys took two wrapped Christmas decorations my parents gave us. They were like this long and wrapped in brown paper." I held my hands out to show him. "We hadn't opened them yet. Um, any way you could tell me what they are?"

Detective Callahan shook his head. "Sorry, this isn't my case; I'm just helping out by taking your statement. Do you want me to have Detective Walkoviac or Palmer call you with that information?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. I'm not sure Steve will want to keep them anyway." I wasn't sure I'd want to either. But whatever they were, I knew I wouldn't be able to bear to look at them if Steve didn't take me back.

Having nothing to do after that, I drove to my parents' house so I could tell them the story about the intruder in person. It went about as well as I'd expected it to—they were horrified.

"You and Steve should move into our guest bedroom," my mother suggested as she plated the sandwiches she'd made for our lunch. "We'll air it out right now so it'll be ready by tonight."

I'd declined, saying Steve had already agreed to stay at Cole Washburn's ranch. If they assumed I'd be staying there too, well that wasn't something I was going to disabuse them of.

I did not tell my parents about my argument with Steve.

Grasping for something to distract them with, I said, "This intruder has had one positive effect. I'm going to use it as part of the final Kane Thorsson book."

They were hooked, so I expanded on some possible plot points I could write based on the little I knew of why Phillip had come to Bent Oak. What was odd was, as I talked through the story with Mom and Dad, it actually came to life in my mind. Kane would avenge his friends' deaths—much as Phillip seemed to be doing—and adopt his undercover job as a teacher for his retirement occupation.

I started making notes in my phone of questions I wanted to ask Phillip. I wasn't sure he'd answer all of them, but I'd never had a resource like him before. Not that I quite knew what he'd done or who he'd worked for before he retired. But Kane's background and experience would fit well enough for the story.

In the back of my mind I continued to worry about Steve and whether I'd destroyed our relationship. But it was such a relief to feel my creativity sparking to life, I managed not to obsess about him not responding to my text for over two hours.

After leaving my parents' house, I headed to the pet store and bought a pet bed, shredded paper bedding for the babies, food, another litter box, a couple of chew toys, and more hay. I also made a quick stop at the grocery store for leafy greens.

The twins were awake when I returned, and they helped me arrange Rocket's new belongings as unobtrusively as we could. Rocket was excited to see the hay and the spinach I

offered her, and she didn't seem concerned with Drake placing the litter box a couple of feet away.

Once we had everything set up, Rocket took a nap in her new bed while the babies remained huddled in their pile in the throw blanket on the floor. It turned out mother rabbits didn't cuddle their babies unless they were actively nursing. Rocket didn't seem to mind us being near the babies, so Drake and I made a ring of the paper bedding material around them to help keep them warm.

I took a photo of the little family and—before I could talk myself out of it—texted it to Steve. I didn't add any comments.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

I stood next to Sarah Connor's back hatch and peeled off my blood-soaked clothes. I washed as best I could with a couple of bottles of water and a rag, then I bundled everything, even my boots, into a garbage bag to be washed. Washing bloody clothes was safer than throwing them into a random dumpster. Plus I really liked that pair of Altama boots.

I put on sweats, going commando, and stuck my feet into a beat-up pair of Birkenstocks before getting into the driver seat.

Ostap was dead, and his men were dead. His girlfriend had been sleeping in his bed, but I hadn't woken her. Hopefully she didn't work in his organization, but I hadn't had it in me to kill her without knowing for sure.

I was tired. Tired of the killing, tired of the blood.

No one was looking for that fucking ring anymore. I hadn't found it, and I didn't care to.

It wasn't even dawn yet. I could go back to the apartment. Back to my Karl Thomas persona.

Back to Bastien.

CHAPTER 23

STEVE

I'd visited Cole, Will, and Jason's rescue ranch before, and I'd been in their hot tub on more than one occasion. But I'd never stayed in the guest house, or cottage, as Cole called it.

It was a lovely two-bedroom bungalow with tiled floors throughout. Every amenity you could ask for was either built-in or stocked in the cabinets and drawers. Pretty much what I'd always imagined a 5-star resort would be like.

When I'd visited before, sometimes I'd gone with Cole or Felix to see the animals, but that had always been a secondary item on the agenda. Usually we'd either be working on the software app or we'd be there to socialize.

Today, though, I decided would be all about the animals. I'd woken to the muffled sounds of the ranch hands talking and laughing, but also to whinnies, brays, baas, and barks.

I was sick of being sad about Baz, sad about not being the right person for him. I knew I had to go back to Bent Oak and give my official statement to the police, but until then I could do something for myself.

The door to Phillip's bedroom stayed shut, so after making a couple of eggs and some toast, I left my phone behind, turned off my brain, and went outside to walk around the ranch and look at the animals.

The temperature was chillier than it'd been for the last few days, but the coat closet by the front door yielded a variety of jackets in various sizes. I picked out a dark green anorak and pulled it over my head on the way out the door.

I took a left as I got to the parking area in front of the guest cottage. The barn and most of the smaller paddocks were in that direction.

The sun warmed my skin despite the icy wind. I turned my face up and tried to remember the last time I'd just walked around without a purpose.

I couldn't. Other than reading, gaming, and watching TV, I had typically spent most of my free time—at least back before I started overworking myself—with other people, usually getting together for parties or activities involving drinking.

The big white barn loomed ahead. A few horses were in the paddock in front of it, and I recognized one of them as Madeline, the horse Felix had been working with the day I'd told him and Cal I was bisexual.

I walked over to the fence and called her name. She ambled over, and I wished I'd thought to bring some carrots or something from the guest cottage's kitchen.

Two of the other horses followed Madeline over, so I made sure to rub each one's nose and pat their necks in apology for not having any treats. The fourth horse, a light-brown one with white socks on its legs, stayed on the far side of the paddock and watched me carefully. Its ribs were visible, and it had marks on its haunches I guessed were from some asshole human hitting it.

Most of the rescues the ranch took in were farm animals. Occasionally they'd end up with a dog or cat, but there were already shelters and rescue groups for those species. The guys had wanted to focus on animals that were more difficult to rehome. They even had vets come out to the ranch along with trainers and specialty people like Felix.

"You're in a good place now, buddy," I told the horse. It didn't believe me yet, but it would eventually.

After I'd gotten my fill of petting the three horses, I walked through the barn. It was empty; all the animals had been taken outside to exercise.

At the other end of the barn was a path that wound between several paddocks. I leaned against the first fence and watched a flock of sheep mill around. They ignored me for the most part.

In the next paddock was a pair of alpacas. I only knew they were alpacas and not llamas because Felix complained about their hair all the time. The alpacas came over to greet me but wandered away when they realized I didn't have any food.

About a hundred yards beyond the barn was a paddock containing a giant horse. Like, huge. It was the kind on those beer ads. A Clydesdale.

Like the horse I'd seen earlier, it eyed me carefully from as far away as it could get. It was a little skinny but I didn't see any scars, though of course that didn't mean someone hadn't abused it.

"I feel you, bud. The invisible scars are just as deep as the ones you can see."

I folded my forearms on the top of the fence railing and rested my chin there. The sun and the wind competed to see if they could make me stay or leave.

Over the far fence I could see other paddocks, white fence after white fence, right up to the enormous wall the guys had had to build around the entire ranch to keep out the paparazzi.

Wesley and Keson had extended the wall around their property, which was adjacent to the rescue ranch on the north side.

My eyes refocused on the horse, which had walked a couple of steps in my direction. Its head was down so it could chomp on the grass, but its eye never left me.

"You're a big guy, huh? I'm going to call you Bruce." Now that I checked, Bruce definitely had a male's undercarriage. He flicked an ear at me, which I assumed was agreement to his new name.

I sighed. "Sometimes I wish I had a new name. Well, a new identity at least. My friend Phillip, I don't think that's his real

name. But he chose it, and he's choosing the life he wants to live, at least for the next couple of months."

Bruce took one step forward to get at a different clump of grass.

"But me, I'm stuck with the identity I have. And, really, I shouldn't complain. I've got some good friends. And a rabbit." I paused. "Or nine rabbits."

Bruce made a snorting noise.

"Yeah, I don't think I'll be able to keep them all." I sighed again. "That's kind of the way people have been about me my whole life, you know? Nobody wants to keep me. Don't get me wrong, I know my mom didn't want to leave me, and my grandfather didn't either. They would've kept me if they could've."

Bruce moved a couple of steps closer.

"But most everybody else acts like I'm kind of disposable." The yawning well of hurt in my soul never left, but I was tired of it. So fucking tired.

"You know what, Bruce?" He was about fifteen feet away. He lifted his head, still chewing grass but waiting for me to complete my thought. "I'm done with that shit. I'm done trying to prove my worth to people who just push me away or leave me behind. If they don't want me, then fuck 'em. I have friends and other people who *do* want to be around me."

Bruce bobbed his head before going for more grass.

"Take my brothers for instance. Dirk and Drake seem to want to be real brothers to me, and I hope they're sincere about that. But if they're just using me so I'll help them with their lawsuit, well, at least I'll know instead of wondering for the rest of my life. And if Hunter and Heath and Mona think they can just drop in for the Christmas concert and treat me like shit, well, they can kiss my ass."

"And what about work? I practically killed myself these last few months trying to do everything and be everything. And for what? Cal and Cole had to stage a fucking intervention so I wouldn't tank the company. I mean, they were nicer about it than that, but we all know sooner or later I wasn't going to be able to keep track of all the stuff I was juggling, and it could've derailed the entire app, everything I was working for."

"A better CEO, a *smarter* CEO, would've listened to Cal and Cole and fucking hired some people to do all that for me." I tapped my finger emphatically on the fence railing. "But not me. I wanted to do it all myself, so I'd be valuable. So Cal and Cole wouldn't be able to kick me out and leave me behind."

"Well, you know what, Bruce? I'm damn good at my job, and I bet I can be damn good at delegating too. My life, my free time is just as important as the work I do for the company. Cal tried to tell me, but I wasn't listening." I nodded at Bruce, who'd moved a few feet closer. "It took a rude awakening to make me understand, but I hear what he's been saying now."

Bruce eyed me and flicked his ears, but he kept his nose to the grass.

"But, Bruce, none of those things hurt as much as Baz hurt me last night. Which is ridiculous, because we've only been dating for, like, four days. If that."

I pressed my lips together and looked off toward the barn.

"And I admit going into the apartment when that woman had a gun was a foolish risk. Phillip has lots of skills I don't, and he can handle himself. But Baz shouldn't have yelled at me like that. He might deserve someone better than me, but you know what, Bruce? I deserve someone who won't yell at me when they're frustrated."

Bruce angled himself so his body was parallel to the fence. He'd moved almost within arm's reach.

I laid my head sideways on my hands. "I know what you're thinking. Screw Baz. You were with him for a hot minute and it's over, so move on." I sighed. "It's just, Baz made me hope for things. For forever-type things. And I was foolish enough to buy into that hope."

I stared into Bruce's eye, only a few inches from mine. "I thought he was someone who'd keep me."

Bruce nuzzled my hair and ear, covering me with grassy saliva slime.

"Gross, Bruce," I told him, making a face. "But you're right. I can keep myself. And anyone, even Baz, would be lucky if I wanted to keep *them*."

I slowly slid one hand from under my head and laid it against Bruce's neck. He shied a little but then steadied. He let me run my hand down his neck, then he lowered his head so I could rub his face. He seemed to like it when I scratched under his forelock and behind his ears.

I'd got him into a good groove where he let me scratch and pet him with both hands at once. But in an instant he went from mellow and relaxed to throwing his head up and hightailing it to the far side of the paddock.

I looked around to find Cole standing about twenty feet behind me with Arturo, the ranch manager. They both had grins on their faces.

"Steve, that was impressive," Arturo told me. I'd met him several times before on previous visits to the ranch.

I felt my hair, making a face at the grassy saliva goo in it. "What was?"

Cole hopped up and down in excitement. "That horse only likes Arturo and Myron the billy goat. If Arturo's not around, we have to use portable fencing to get him in and out of the paddock. None of the rest of us have been able to touch him."

I shrugged. "I just talked to him." Then I frowned. "If he only has one friend, where's his friend?"

Cole gestured at the land behind the barn. "We're using the goats to clear the brush toward the back of the property."

Incensed, I snarled at him. "Don't you have a landscaper? Bruce needs his friend more than you need shorter grass."

Arturo smiled. "You're right. And I like Bruce for a name. Maybe you can come back and hang out with Bruce some more later this week?"

I shrugged again. "Sure." I looked at Cole. "How long can Phillip and I stay in the guest cottage? I don't know when the police are going to let me back in my apartment." I gagged a little. "And I'll need to get it cleaned." Or the carpet replaced. Hopefully my Captain America sheets had soaked up most of the blood.

Cole said seriously, "As long as you need. Jason's mom has been making noises about visiting. Feel free to stay through the New Year."

I laughed for the first time all day.

Cole walked with me back to the guest cottage before he continued on to the ranch house. He'd tried to probe about me and Baz, but he hadn't pushed when I'd told him we were taking a little break.

Phillip was sitting at the kitchen island when I walked in. He took one look at me and laughed. "What happened to your head?"

I rolled my eyes. "A horse likes me." I glared and pointed at him. "No innuendos! It's a nice horse."

Phillip held up his hands. I was almost to the bedroom when he called out, "Your phone's been going off."

"Thanks," I called back. Hope and dread that Baz might be trying to reach out were battling inside me.

But yes, Baz was one of the people who'd texted, I saw when I picked my phone up off the bed. I'd also gotten messages from Dirk, Drake, and Felix.

I breathed deep to try to relax, but I ended up just holding the air in my lungs while I opened Baz's message.

He was sorry he'd yelled. He wanted to apologize.

I collapsed on the edge of the bed.

What did *I* want?

By the time I'd showered, I still hadn't decided. I was hungry, so I wandered out of the bedroom. Phillip was on the couch looking at his phone.

"I called the new principal," he told me. "She wants me to come in tomorrow." His voice was carefully neutral.

I went into the kitchen. The cottage had an open floor plan, so the living room was just on the other side of the island.

I said, "You don't sound too sure about going back." I opened the pantry and perused the snack selection. There were a *lot* of options.

He said, "I'm kind of looking forward to it. Which is... strange."

I grabbed a package of Oreos and went to sit on the couch next to Phillip. "What's strange about it? The kids love you; that was obvious from the letters to Santa. So you must be a good teacher." I waved the cookies toward him. "Nothing wrong with enjoying something you're good at."

Phillip huffed but took an Oreo when I held the opened package out to him. "I'm good at killing people. I'm good at breaking into places. I'm good at lying." He opened the Oreo and stared at the filling like it held the answer to his destiny. "How can I be in charge of innocent little kids?"

I considered my own Oreo. "Well, the kids may be innocent, but the world they live in sure isn't. Maybe they need someone like you in their corner."

He contemplated his Oreo some more. "Maybe." He put the half with the least filling on it in his mouth.

I ate mine whole.

After a moment, Phillip said, "Have you spoken to Baz?"

I heaved a sigh and put my head on the back of the couch. "No. He texted. He wants to apologize."

Phillip raised an eyebrow. "And you said...?"

"I haven't texted him back."

Phillip waited.

"Fine. I recognize that what I did last night was dangerous and ill-thought-out. I shouldn't have done it. But—" I held up one finger. "He can't yell at me or threaten our relationship."

Phillip made a humming sound. "True. But with what happened to his husband, surely he deserves a little room to fuck up this one time. Especially if he's apologizing."

I lifted my head off the back of the couch and slowly turned to look at Phillip. "He told you what happened to his husband?"

Phillip didn't blush, but he made an odd face that made me think he was embarrassed. "No. I did background checks on everyone in the building when I moved in."

"Okaaaay." I wasn't going to worry about what he'd found out about me. I had bigger things to focus on. "Well, Baz hasn't told me how his husband died. I gathered it happened on Christmas Eve, but that's all I know."

Phillip, who hadn't batted an eye when he'd shot the intruder last night, winced.

"Don't tell me," I said.

"Baz should tell you," he agreed.

My phone chimed with an incoming text. I pulled it out of my pocket. Baz had sent a photo of Rocket and the babies. He'd obviously gone to the pet store for her.

I'd carefully fortressed my heart earlier today with Bruce's help, but even Bruce would've been hard-pressed to resist that level of adorable.

I showed the picture to Phillip.

He said, "Good thing I don't have any clothes to pack before we leave."

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

"Stephanie, I'd like to apologize to you."

I'd caught up to her outside the mailboxes. She didn't seem pleased to see me.

At my statement, surprise flickered over her face.

I widened my soulful blue eyes and said earnestly, "And I need to thank you."

Her eyebrows flew up. "Oh? For what?"

I said, "I thought really hard about what you said to me that day in the elevator. About accepting people for who they were. And you asked where I got off thinking people like me were the models for a perfect human being."

I put my hand on my chest. "You were right. And I've been talking to a therapist. I'm working on my insecurities, and also...." I took a deep breath as if this next part was particularly difficult for me. "I realized I'm bisexual."

Stephanie smiled and took my giant hand in her two tiny ones. "Thank you for telling me that, Karl. It means a lot. I'm so proud of you for working on your issues, and I'm glad I was able to help you on your journey."

CHAPTER 24

BAZ

STEVE

Phillip & I have to go to the police station. Have you already been?

Thank fuck. I pressed my phone to my chest before hurrying to reply.

I went this morning, but can I meet you there? Phillip can have my car and we can go somewhere to talk?

STEVE

Ok. We'll be there in about 30

I'll text you when I get there and wait in the parking lot

Steve came out of the police station alone. He was wearing a blue jacket he hadn't had when he'd left last night.

"Where's Phillip?" I asked.

He stopped in front of me, no expression on his face. "His interview is taking longer, and he said he had an errand to run. I gave him my car keys, so we can just go."

I wanted to hug him, but instead I just made an awkward gesture toward the car. "Okay, hop in."

I'd debated at length about where to have our conversation. In the end I'd told Dirk and Drake to make themselves scarce for a couple of hours. Steve and I needed privacy.

After Steve had checked on Rocket, who was living her best life on her new bed after feeding the babies earlier, he and I sat in the armchairs I'd moved away from the budding rabbit colony in front of the couch.

I pulled my chair in front of Steve's. I leaned my elbows on my knees and took his hands in mine. I was reminded of my pose from Saturday, when everyone had thought I was proposing.

"I'm sorry," I told him, my heart in my throat. "I was scared for you, but I shouldn't have raised my voice, and I shouldn't have criticized you for trying to help Phillip. If you give me another chance, I promise it won't happen again."

Steve was silent, searching my eyes for something. I tried to project as much sincerity as I could into my expression.

He said, "Tell me how Warren died."

I couldn't stop my fingers from clenching down on his hands. But he was right. It was past time.

Steve wrapped his hands around mine. I stared blindly where we gripped each other.

"It was December 20th. Warren had gone out to buy a Christmas tree. He loved to decorate for the holiday." I braced myself for the next part. "There was a pile-up on the freeway. Warren wasn't in the accident, but he saw it and stopped to help."

Steve's hands were grounding.

"Warren saw somebody stuck in their car, and he went to go help them get out. The car, uh, the car was leaking gasoline, and it caught fire." I squeezed my eyes shut. Without letting go of my hands, Steve came over and sat on the arm of my chair. I traded holding hands in favor of hugging him around his waist. He put his arm over my shoulders and kissed my head.

I cleared my throat. "Warren was standing in some of the gasoline. He had burns over 60% of his body. But he was healthy, and he should've been able to survive it. Except his wounds were infected. He died on Christmas Eve."

Steve bent his body around mine to hug me as best he could from the arm of the chair. He said, "Baz, I am so, so sorry for your loss. I can't even imagine how difficult that was for you."

I pulled back and took my glasses off. I tossed them onto the empty chair and wiped my eyes so I could look Steve in the face. "I went to therapy for almost a year. But I guess last night, seeing you go into the apartment...." I choked up and started to cry.

Steve held me until I calmed down, then he said. "Do you have any tissues?"

I nodded. "Bedside table, or there's a new box in the bathroom cabinet."

He got up and hurried into the bedroom. Then he hurried back out even faster and ran into the kitchen. He brought me a roll of paper towels.

"Um, sorry, but all of the tissues are gone, and having two 18-year-olds staying here means we probably should buy more."

I laughed as I blew my nose into the paper towel. "Thanks," I said. Steve held his hand out for the used paper towel, but I wrapped it in a clean one before handing it over. He gave me a smile and jogged back to the kitchen to throw it away.

When he returned, I said, "I haven't really been able to celebrate Christmas since then. No decorations. For sure no tree. I've made a point to be with my family on Christmas Eve, but except for last year I've kind of holed myself up here on Christmas Day."

Steve sat on the arm of the chair again and told me, "That's understandable."

I managed a smile. "My parents know, of course, which is why I was so surprised when they bought those holiday decorations, whatever they are."

Steve wrinkled his nose. "If the police give them back, I'm going to have to see them before we decide whether to keep them. They might cause a weird memory association."

I nodded and looked up at him. "Does this mean you forgive me?"

Steve hesitated. "I do, but you have to know, something you said was pretty triggering for me."

I caught his hand. "What was it?"

"You said something about you didn't know how you could be with someone like me." Steve said, "I've been kicked to the curb a few too many times in my life, so to me it sounded like you were holding our relationship over my head as a threat."

I opened my mouth to speak but he held up a hand. He said, "If you want out, you just tell me. But don't ever threaten me with it like that. It came across as controlling and manipulative."

Holy hell, he was right. I remembered shouting something along those lines. I'd sounded just like those jackasses who got quoted on the "Warning Signs You're in an Abusive Relationship" Tumblr posts.

"I... I didn't mean it that way, Steve. Please believe me. I was lashing out, but not with any sort of agenda." Steve still looked concerned, so I said, "I promise I will never do that again. If you want, maybe we could go see my therapist and have her help us with our communication?"

Steve leaned back a little, his eyebrows flying up. "You'd do that? We've only been together a few days."

I barked a laugh. "And in that time we've gone through more relationship stress than most couples have in years."

He nodded, smiling a little. "Living together, estranged siblings reappearing, adopting a pet, staring into children's homes with binoculars."

I added, "The pet had babies, our neighbor's apartment got trashed, then someone broke into your apartment."

"Then the neighbor shot an intruder."

I said, "Don't forget you met my parents and my sister and best friend. And I met your friends."

Steve leaned down and gave me a slow, sweet kiss. He broke it off, and his eyes blinked open. "Sounds like we need some time to ourselves."

I smiled. "I think you're right."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "When are the twins coming back?"

I glanced at my watch and groaned. "Probably in about five minutes."

Steve sighed. "Well, you'll just have to stay with me at the ranch tonight."

That was when the pounding on the door started. And then stopped. We heard one of the twins—probably Drake—say, "Shh! Don't stress Rocket out!"

Then a softer knock, and one of them—my guess was Dirk—said in a normal voice, "Are you decent? Can we come in?"

Steve got up to open the door.

Dirk and Drake walked sedately inside. They'd been to the store, and after checking on Rocket, they unloaded bags of groceries. I smirked to myself when I saw they'd bought tissues.

"What are you two up to tonight?" I asked.

Drake said, "We're getting on Zoom with the siblings to update them on what the lawyer told us." He made a face. "He doesn't want us to tell Dad he's fired as our manager until Yiannis files the lawsuit against him. The sibs told Dad we were visiting Steve for Christmas so he wouldn't try to come along."

Dirk folded a shopping bag. "Yeah, but at some point Dad will find out about the Christmas Eve concert, and he's gonna want his cut."

Steve spread out his hands. "It's a Christmas concert. Why don't you donate your fees?"

Dirk and Drake stared into each other's eyes and grinned. That telepathy thing they did creeped me out a little.

They nodded at each other. Dirk told Steve, "We'll do it. Maybe Phillip's school needs some computers or something."

Speak of the devil, or the devil's hitman—operative?—Phillip knocked softly on the door and eased it open.

"Hey," he said.

Steve asked, "Did you get your errand done?"

Phillip's face broke into a satisfied grin. "I paid a visit to—" he glanced at the twins. "A certain stepparent we were concerned about."

Ah. Seth and Robin's asshole stepfather.

The twins gasped, and Dirk whispered, "You killed somebody else?"

That earned Dirk a scornful look. "I didn't have to. I just explained the consequences if he failed to behave in a... lawful manner." His smile was devilish. "I'll check in on him periodically to reinforce my message."

Damn, I needed to work that scene into my Kane book.

After we all had a snack, courtesy of Dirk and Drake's shopping trip, I helped Phillip dig in my closet to find an outfit he could wear to work tomorrow.

When I handed him the button-down shirt, he stared down at it and said, "My friends George and Katrina, the ones I'm executor for?"

"Yeah?" I said.

He rubbed the sleeve between his fingers. "They left me everything. Their house, bank accounts, everything."

"Wow, they must have loved you a lot."

He nodded, still not looking at me. "They did. But the house, it's huge for just one person. And, I'm obviously not squeamish, but it's where they died."

"Oh, that's rough." I put my hand on his shoulder. "Steve and I meant it. You can stay with us until you're ready to move back into your apartment."

He looked up then and gave me a small smile. "Thanks, Baz." His dark eyes were shiny.

"And, hey, if you need help going through their things, donating the furniture or whatever, Steve and I would be happy to help."

"Yeah?"

"Anytime."

"Thanks. I might take you up on that. I had a crime scene cleaning company go through the house." His eyes darted toward the living room, and he lowered his voice. "Steve might need them for his place too."

I shivered. "Probably so."

I picked out some clothes for Steve to wear tomorrow, then we went back into the living room.

Phillip said, "Dirk and Drake, would you mind if I crash here tonight? These guys need some alone time."

Steve looked up from where he was sitting on the floor petting Rocket. "Thanks, Phillip." He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

Dirk and Drake made gagging noises but agreed.

Steve texted with Cole to let him know we were on our way to the ranch.

"I hope you don't mind," Steve said. "Cole invited us to stop by the house and hang out, but I told him we were exhausted after last night and wanted some time to ourselves." I reached out and put my hand on Steve's knee. "Good choice. It's also true."

He flashed me a smile and put his hand over mine.

When we got to the ranch, Steve directed me to pull up to the little speaker box in front of the gate. The gate and the wall on either side of it were easily twice as tall as I was.

I pushed the button on the speaker box and waved at the camera above it.

"Hey, guys. Have a good evening," Cole said.

The gate swung open, and I said, "Thanks," into the speaker box before pulling through.

I couldn't see much beyond the lighted driveway, but I was looking forward to meeting all the animals in the morning.

I parked in front of the little guest cottage. It probably wouldn't have seemed small on an average street in Bent Oak, but we'd just passed the ranch house, which was huge in comparison.

Steve's guided tour of the cottage consisted of hustling me through the front door, pointing and saying "Living room, kitchen, bedrooms. Baths are attached. We're in this one."

Then he put a firm hand on my back and urged me into the far bedroom. I tossed my backpack in the direction of the closet, and when I turned toward Steve, he was already in front of me.

Hungrily we came together. Our open mouths met, and all of our pent-up arousal and emotions combusted in a hot, wet kiss that went on and on.

I clutched Steve against me with one arm around his shoulder and one hand on his ass. His hands swept up and down my back as if he was too restless, too urgent to settle on a spot to hang onto.

Panting, I broke off the kiss. "Want you," I gasped.

"Yes. Baz, you're so... I—" Steve shook his head and we stepped apart.

I tossed my glasses onto my backpack and yanked my hoodie over my head. Steve helped me get my t-shirt off, and I did the same for him. We pulled off our shoes, socks, underwear, and jeans before coming together again.

God, I loved the feel of his body pressed into mine from knees to chest. Our hard cocks met between us, and I grunted, pulling Steve close to increase the friction.

Steve was still too skinny, though his ribs didn't look quite as prominent as they had on Thursday night when I'd run into him in the apartment hallway. I tried not to imagine what my life would've been like if I hadn't decided to walk outside and see the storm that night.

"I want you to top me," Steve said, reminding me to pay attention to the present, not to what might have been.

I leaned my upper body back to look him in the face. "Are you sure? We can build up to that, you know. Or you can top me."

Steve put his hands on either side of my face. "Baz," he said while staring deeply into my eyes. "Listen, I've known I was bi for over a year. My favorite reading material is essentially tentacle porn. I might not have had a real dick in my ass before, but I've got a decent dildo collection."

"Holy fuck," I whispered. My dick got exponentially harder at the mental image of Steve fucking himself with a toy. I ran my hands down to his perky butt and massaged his cheeks. "How do you like to do it? Do you lean over and put one hand on the bed while the other hand pumps the dildo in and out of your hole?"

Steve moaned and sucked my earlobe into his mouth. I spread his cheeks slightly, kneading my fingers along his crack.

"Or do you get on all fours so you can spread your knees as far apart as you can, opening yourself up for the big, thick toy?"

"*Nnhgh*." Steve pulled my hips into his and mouthed the side of my neck. I tilted my head back to give him more access.

"Do you have one that suctions to the wall in the bathroom, so you can impale yourself in the shower while you jack yourself with both hands?" I dragged two fingers across his hole.

Steve pushed away from me, bending forward at the waist with his hands on my biceps. "Holy Jack Harkness, Baz, I'm going to come if you keep that up."

I grinned. "So you're ready to move this to the bed?"

He carefully stood upright. "There are condoms and lube in the nightstand."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really? You said this place had everything, but damn."

I gave him a quick kiss before going to check out what our options were. And there were a *lot* of options. I held up a tube. "Have you ever used warming lube?"

Steve put out a hand in a *stop* gesture. "Yeah, and, uh, it's not for me. It was... pretty uncomfortable."

"Okay, regular it is." I sorted through the tubes in a basket on the right side of the drawer. I didn't recognize most of the brands, but they looked expensive. I palmed one that promised it was unscented and water-based.

Next I hovered over the little compartments lining the left side of the drawer. Our hosts had supplied condoms of all types: ultra-thin, lubed, ribbed, nubbed, flavored, etc. And again they seemed to be expensive brands the average drugstore didn't carry.

Steve was already on the bed, waiting, so I snagged a little flat box with three inside. They were latex-free and fragrance-free. Nothing fancy. That was all we needed.

I tossed the lube and condoms on the bed next to the nearest pillow.

"Sorry that took so long."

He chuckled. "I opened that drawer earlier. I wouldn't have known what to pick either."

I kissed his smiling mouth. Damn, the way he felt under my hands and lips was intoxicating.

Steve guided me down so we were laying on our sides on the mattress. I didn't know where the top sheet and comforter had

gone, but my body was heated enough not to miss them.

When Steve threw his leg over my hips, I let him go long enough to reach for the lube.

"Do you want to prep yourself, or shall I do it?"

He blinked at me in the dim light coming from the living room. His forehead was sweaty with his hair sticking to it, his cheeks and chin were red with beard burn, and his lips were swollen and glistening with saliva.

I forgot everything about my question. I dropped the lube down between us, wrapped my hand around the back of Steve's neck and leaned in for a kiss. This one wasn't about sex—or at least it wasn't only about sex. The kiss was also about a promise, a future, and a whole shit-ton of emotions I couldn't formulate into words.

When I ended the kiss, I had to wipe away the tear that escaped my eye.

"Baz," Steve breathed. His eyes were liquid, the darkest blue of the ocean. "I think—" He lifted his hand from where it had clasped my shoulder, and I slotted my fingers through his.

"Yeah," I said hoarsely. "Me too."

He kissed my knuckles. Then he brought our joined hands to the tube of lube and wrapped my fingers around it.

I chuckled. "I guess I'm doing the honors."

Steve shrugged the shoulder he wasn't lying on. "I already know what it feels like when I do it."

I propped myself up on my elbow and popped the cap. I poured a little out on my hand. "Damn, this is nice stuff."

Because I'd neglected it thus far, I wrapped my lube-covered hand around Steve's erection. He hadn't been expecting it and I enjoyed his "Oh!" of surprise, followed swiftly by a seemingly involuntary thrust of his hips.

"Dammit, Baz," he scolded. "Stop trying to make me come before you get your dick in my ass."

I laughed. I'd missed this, having fun during sex. Quick club hookups were results-driven, never fun.

I swiped some lube over my own dick, then I added more to my fingers and finally gave Steve what he'd been asking for. I didn't linger, didn't tease. I just dove in with one finger.

"Yes!" Steve shouted, and I got another gratifying thrust of his hips. His cock brushed mine, the lube and our combined precum easing the slide.

I added a second finger. Steve was right; he knew how to take me in. I felt around until I found his prostate. Another yell and thrust.

I grinned into his panting face. "You need another finger," I told him.

"Aquaman's assless chaps, get on with it!" he bellowed.

I burst into laughter and scooted closer. "Anything for you," I said.

When three fingers were gliding easily, I asked, "Do you want one more?"

Steve practically bared his teeth as he gritted out, "Don't flatter yourself."

I barked a laugh, and he said, "Get in there. Now."

"Okay, okay." I felt around for the condoms. Had I been thinking clearly earlier, I would've taken one of them out of the box. I had to roll away from Steve a little and wipe the lube off my hand on the bottom sheet so I could peel open the cardboard flap.

"Uh...." I pulled out one of the condoms. They weren't the flat circles I was used to seeing. They were more like little eggs.

Steve leaned over and took the box from me, checking out the other condoms. "Those are different." I could feel the sexual tension draining out of the room.

With raised eyebrows I opened the tiny envelope-like cover and slid the condom out. We both peered a little apprehensively at the cylindrical shape with the big tab on one side.

Steve squinted at the box. "There are instructions on here." He leaned to the side to examine the box in the light from the doorway.

"Uh, why don't I get a different one from the drawer?"

Steve glanced up and grinned. "Oh, no. It's a challenge now. I need to see what's so special about these."

Fuck. "Fine. Then tell me what to do." I held up the mystery condom.

"Okay. You pull that tab thing out, and it's actually two tabs?"

I did as he said, and the familiar circle was revealed. I blew out a relieved breath. Even the odd little tabs on either side weren't going to stop me now.

"Yeah, so take one tab in each hand and hold it over your dick. The side of the tabs that say *Pull* should be facing away from your body." Steve was sitting up now, his fascinated eyes locked onto my hands.

"Okay, got it." This was finally made sense. "I use the tabs to pull it down my dick?"

"Right."

My cock had softened a bit, but the application was fast and easy. The tabs tore away when the rubber was fully extended. I stroked it down my shaft to make sure it was seated correctly.

"Huh."

"Well? How does it feel?" Steve reached out and jerked me a couple of times.

"Oh." My cock came back to life. "It's... I can really feel how hot your hand is." And just like that, I was desperate to get inside Steve again.

I grabbed the lube. "How do you want it?" I asked.

He didn't hesitate. "I want to see you." He rolled to his back and scooted over so I could get between his legs. Then he pulled his knees to his chest.

"Oh, fuck." His hole was shiny with lube. I added more to my fingers then threw the tube aside. I coated my cock then eased a couple of fingers inside Steve to make sure he was still nice and relaxed.

"Do it," he ordered. "Stop messing around and get in there."

One side of my mouth quirked up, but I did as he asked. I lined myself up and slowly sank inside.

"Thor's thirst-trap!" Steve threw his head back, his eyes shut and mouth open.

I paused. "You okay?" He didn't seem tense, but I needed to make sure I wasn't hurting him.

Steve peeled his eyes open, glared at me, and snarled, "Goddammit, fucking move, you asshole!" He writhed his hips to try to wriggle further down my dick.

Giving up, I laughed as I drove into him.

But my laugh turned into a moan when my balls met his ass cheeks. "Fuck, oh, fuck."

I'd only gone bare with Warren, and I'd never used a condom that let me feel the heat of my partner's body like this.

I managed two thrusts before my balls tightened and I had to warn Steve, "Fuck, I'm about to come." I stroked his weeping dick with my lube-covered hand as I thrust into him one more time. He shuddered and curled in on himself.

The orgasm washed through me from the top of my head to the pulsing throbs of my cock. Steve squeezed around me, milking another spurt out of me.

I braced myself over him, waiting until he relaxed before I pulled out. He grunted, and I kissed his shoulder in apology. I tied up the condom and slid out of bed.

"Be right back."

Steve grunted again. He didn't stir much when I cleaned him off with a damp washcloth.

I tossed the washcloth into the bathroom, then I picked up the top sheet from where Steve had thrown it to the floor and carefully spread it over him.

I briefly debated over the comforter, but I was pretty warm, so I folded it over the end of the bed in case we wanted it later.

I got under the sheet and tucked myself up next to Steve. He smelled of sex and sweat and body wash. I wanted to drape myself over him to keep him close and safe.

Tomorrow was the three-year anniversary of the explosion that had burned Warren, ultimately causing his death. Saturday was the anniversary of the day he died.

This was the first year I hadn't spiraled into a moody funk. I had Steve to thank for a lot of that, but I'd also been coming out of the grieving process on my own this past year.

Warren and Steve would've adored each other, I thought. They were both intrinsically positive, happy people.

Warren had been a true romantic. I knew with utter certainty he would've been thrilled to know Steve and I were together.

I put my head on Steve's shoulder. How did I get so lucky to have him? How could his family have thrown him away?

I tried not to dwell on how I'd yelled at him last night. He'd forgiven me, but I felt horrible about telling him I couldn't be with someone like him. I resolved to make it my mission to ensure Steve knew he was wanted and loved.

I could say that word to myself, even if I wasn't ready to say it to Steve. Not out loud at least.

No, I wouldn't say the words yet—five days was a crazy-short amount of time to have feelings this strong. But I could communicate my emotions in other ways, show him he'd always have a place by my side.

I rested my hand on Steve's and closed my eyes with a smile.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

"So, uh, Bastien. Uh, would you maybe like to go to dinner sometime?"

A radiant smile bloomed over his sweaty but still beautiful face. We'd just finished a workout, and I'd been fiddling with my water bottle for the past three minutes trying to find the guts to ask him out.

"Sure, Karl, I'd like that. How about tomorrow night?" Hell, yeah!

I beamed at him, going full dimple. "Sounds great. Winter break starts Thursday, so I won't have school the next day."

Bastien's pupils dilated, and his breathing became more rapid. "I'm off work starting Thursday too."

I pushed a thick lock of hair off my forehead, making sure to trail my hand down my corded neck to my firm chest. "What a wonderful coincidence."

CHAPTER 25

STEVE

Instead of waking up to another epic lovemaking session with Baz, I woke up to my phone ringing. Detective Walkoviac told me my apartment was no longer a crime scene, so I could go back in.

"You got the name of a crime scene cleaning service?" I asked him, yawning. Baz had checked his phone for the time, then laid back down and covered his eyes with his forearm.

The detective said he'd text it to me. Then he said, "I hear you're friends with Felix Olwin."

I chuckled. "How long after he talked to me Sunday night did it take him to track you down?"

He had a rich, warm laugh. "I'm pretty sure Malcolm texted me as soon as Felix hung up with you. Amy and I were just leaving your apartment building."

I said, "Well, I promise not to ask any special favors of you."

He laughed again. "Just promise not to rush into any more dangerous situations."

I groaned. "Yeah, yeah."

He said, "I've already called your friend Mr. Downs. The District Attorney won't be filing any charges in Ms. Kottner's death."

Yesterday we'd learned the intruder had been named Erica Kottner. I'd had more than a few flashbacks to the violent way she died, but I wasn't troubled at all that she was dead.

"That's great to hear," I told Detective Walkoviac.

"Oh," he said. "One more thing. I asked the crime scene team to put a rush on processing those holiday decorations you said Mr. Allen's parents bought you. I thought you might want them back for Christmas."

"Oh, thanks. I'm not sure we're going to want the reminder, but I guess we'll just have to see what they are."

Detective Walkoviac's voice was amused. "Based on what I saw of your apartment, I think you'll be happy to have them around. Anyway, you can come pick them up at the station anytime."

"Thanks, Detective."

"Call me Foster. If you're friends with Felix, we're bound to run into each other socially."

"Thanks, Foster," I said.

We hung up, and I told Baz what I'd learned from the detective.

He *hmmmed* when I got to the part about the holiday decorations. "Not sure how I feel about them, since all I can see when I think about them is you holding one up like a baseball bat when you went into the apartment."

I made a face at him and ran my hand through his hair. "It's up to you, but I'd like to at least see what they are. Why don't we pick them up on the way home? I want to check out the state of the apartment anyway. And we can see the bunny babies and find out if Dirk and Drake want to go to lunch."

He smiled. "Sounds good."

Outside, we heard a horse whinny. Baz said, "Do you mind showing me some of the animals before we leave?"

I texted Cole that my apartment had been released but I wasn't sure what state it was in. He told me again we could stay in the guest cottage as long as we needed to. That was a relief,

because getting the apartment complex to replace the carpet in my unit the week before Christmas was going to be difficult.

After a tour of the ranch, Baz and I got on the road and headed for the police station. Detective Walkoviac—Foster—handed us the mystery gifts, which had been rewrapped in their original brown kraft paper and still strongly reminded me of enormous dildos.

Foster said, "They took the paper off to check for evidence, but they rewrapped them at my request." He grinned. "I didn't want to ruin the surprise."

Baz was eyeing the dildo-clubs like they might bite, so I just thanked Foster and told him we wanted to unwrap them at home. Or at least at Baz's place.

"I told Mr. Downs," Foster said. "We traced Erica Kottner to a known crime syndicate. The thing is, over the weekend every member of that syndicate, from the top guy down, was killed. The FBI is operating under the assumption Ms. Kottner was the one who took them all out." He shrugged. "We still don't know why she was in your apartment or why Mr. Downs' friends were murdered."

I nodded and didn't hesitate to pretend ignorance. "As long as no one else comes after us or Phillip, I'm okay with not knowing."

"Agreed," he said.

We thanked Foster and took the dildo-clubs to the car to head home.

"You know, we could kick the twins out," I told Baz. "Then you'd have your apartment back."

Baz, who was in the passenger seat for once, made a *hmmm* sound. "It's an option, but let's see how much work your place needs first."

I threw him a doubtful glance. "Okay, but let me know if you change your mind."

He patted my thigh. "I will. But I'd prefer to stay at the ranch with all the animals for a little longer. And Arturo wants your

help with Bruce."

I shook my head but bit back a smile. I'd taken Baz to see Bruce, and we'd run into Arturo in the barn, so he'd tagged along as well. I'd fully expected the horse to be afraid to come closer when I had a stranger with me. But instead he'd performed a faster version of the pseudo-accidental approach from yesterday. Baz hadn't tried to touch him, which I thought had helped. Arturo wanted me to keep visiting Bruce, and he seemed thrilled that the horse was letting more people near him.

When we got to our floor, we set the dildo-clubs down beside my apartment door. Baz knocked on his own door to let the twins know we'd arrived. Phillip was still at work.

I braced myself as I unlocked my door, and the apartment... wasn't as bad as Phillip's place had been.

A giant section of the carpet was gone, but they'd left the weird multi-colored foam padding. If there was blood on it, I couldn't tell. Other than that, almost everything was slightly out of place and there was black powder on a lot of the furniture, the bookcases, and kitchen counters.

The bedroom and bathroom were much the same.

"I'd say they were trying to see what the woman had been doing in here before Phillip interrupted her."

I checked the balcony, and the alarm system I'd built out of pots and pans was still in place. Erica Kottner must've come in through the front door like Phillip had. Phillip said she'd locked the door behind her so she'd have an early warning if we came home.

"How does it feel to be back in here?" Baz asked. He stroked a hand down my back.

I thought about it. "I don't think it bothers me. I wasn't really even worried about that on the way over here. Maybe because I wasn't here when she broke in? Does it bother you?"

Baz looked around. "No, not really. It all kinda seems like a dream."

"I know what you mean. Maybe we should rearrange the furniture. That'll help just in case any memories upset us later. I do want to make sure Phillip is okay being in here though."

Baz tilted his head toward me. "Really?"

I grinned. "Yeah, he probably won't care. But I'm going to ask anyway."

Dirk and Drake appeared in the doorway, exclaiming over the disarray.

Drake said, "We should just get you a big area rug to cover this up. Then you can move back in as soon as we clean away all the black powder."

I raised my eyebrows at him. "You're going to help clean?"

"Sure." Drake shrugged. He ran a finger through the black powder on the kitchen table. "It's what brothers do."

"Oh," I said, gobsmacked. "Thanks."

Drake wandered into the kitchen while I tried to surreptitiously wipe my eyes.

Dirk came out of the bedroom. "Dude, that's quite the collection in your nightstand drawer."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why were you looking in my nightstand?"

He held up both hands. "The drawer was open. But don't worry, they didn't dust any of your dildos or plugs for prints."

Drake called from the kitchen. "Bro, that's messed up. Stop talking about Steve's private stuff."

"He needed to know!" Dirk whined.

I rubbed my forehead, and Baz chuckled.

"Speaking of phallic-shaped objects," he said. "Why don't we see what my parents bought us?"

Dirk was happy to grab the two dildo-clubs from the hallway. Drake wiped down the kitchen table with some damp paper towels so Dirk could set the packages there.

"You should open them at the same time," he told us.

"Sure," Baz said. "Tell us when."

Dirk made us wait for dramatic effect, but then he shouted, "Go!" like it was going to be some sort of race.

Baz and I were on the same wavelength, because we both smirked as we carefully unpeeled the tape and slowly unrolled the objects from the paper.

Dirk crossed his arms and pouted.

Finally we unrolled the last of the paper and beheld our gifts.

"Holy superheroes, Batman! I love them." I said.

Grinning, Baz hugged me. "These are perfect."

And they were. We were the proud owners of two extremely tall nutcrackers. One was painted to look like The Flash, and one was painted to look like Captain America. Both had movable arms, and Captain America was holding a shield. We stood them on the kitchen table so they wouldn't get dirty.

"Okay," Dirk said. "Let's go eat. I'm starving."

As we were finishing up lunch—Bent Oak had some great barbecue places, and Dirk and Drake wanted to try them all—Dirk's phone rang.

"It's Yiannis," he said before answering. The lawyer was preparing to file the lawsuit against my father for stealing my siblings' earnings. They couldn't do anything about the money each had earned when they were minors. The Coogan Law only applied to child actors, so unfortunately Dad was allowed to do whatever he wanted with my siblings' income before they turned eighteen. The lawsuit covered royalties or other revenue that should have been due to each sibling after they became an adult.

Another lawyer who specialized in estate law would have to handle the case about my grandfather's will, but Yiannis told me he'd find me someone we could trust. He'd also pointed out that no judge would rule in my father's favor when it was clear he had a history of taking money from his children.

It was nice to finally be able to relax a little regarding my father contesting my grandfather's will. I hoped the threat of public embarrassment would make him drop the case altogether, but Yiannis assured me we'd prevail either way.

Dirk hung up the phone. "Yiannis is filing the suit tomorrow. Dad will get served with the papers probably on Thursday."

Drake raised his fists in the air. "Yes! We need to have a Zoom call with the sibs and talk about how we're going to tell Dad we're firing him as our manager."

Dirk nodded. "Yiannis is sending us a letter we can overnight him. We should also ask the sibs about contacting that journalist. Yiannis wants us to do a press release and he thought a more in-depth article might be helpful."

Drake scrunched up his face. "I don't want to use the label's PR person for a press release. I think he's tight with Dad."

They stared at each other. I wasn't sure if they were doing the twin telepathy thing, but I suggested, "I know Cole has a publicist. She helped us with the announcement about Rogues Gallery. If she can't help you, Wesley probably has one too."

They looked relieved and nodded, so I texted Cole and asked if he thought Bridgette would be willing and able to help my brothers and sister. He texted back almost immediately.

"Cole says he'll ask her and let us know."

"Thanks, bro." Dirk picked up his phone and started texting, probably arranging the call with Heath, Hunter, and Mona.

Who'd all be arriving in Bent Oak sometime before Saturday night.

I was not looking forward to seeing them. I cared about them in a distant way, but those feelings were completely overshadowed by the hurt and anger at how they'd gone along with Dad and declared me *persona non grata*.

Would I be able to be in the same room and not spew my fury and resentment?

Baz's recommendation that I talk to a therapist was sounding more appealing all the time.

I reached over and put my hand on Baz's thigh. He covered my hand with his and said, "You okay? This family stuff has got to be difficult."

I stared into his eyes, the concern and affection for me impossible to miss. My heart felt huge in my chest, and those words—the ones it was far, far too early to say—attempted to fly out of my mouth. I beat them back and settled for kissing his cheek and saying, "Just knowing you're here with me helps a lot."

His face softened, and he put his arm around me.

After making sure Dirk and Drake were occupied with their phones, I said, "But what about you? I know today's a tough day for you. Do you need time by yourself? Do you want to go visit Warren's grave or anything? I'd be happy to go with you. Or not. Whatever you'd prefer."

Baz closed his eyes and put his other arm around me too. "I'm good," he said into my ear. "Each year it gets easier, but I appreciate you offering. I haven't quite decided if I want to do anything this year to, you know, mark the date."

I pulled back. "I think you should do something. We should do something. Warren was a part of your life. I don't want you to feel like you have to hide your feelings for him."

My voice had gotten louder, and I could tell I'd attracted Dirk and Drake's attention. Well, Warren wasn't a secret.

I said, "Baz, you've been remembering Warren's death on Christmas Eve each year, right?"

"Yeah?" he said.

"Look, I'm not trying to tell you how to grieve or anything, but if I go by how many times you and your family mentioned it to me, you seem to dread that day. Do you get depressed then?"

He made a face. "Not depressed, no, but I haven't enjoyed Christmas Eve because it's become synonymous with Warren's death. I'm looking forward to it this year, though, because the concert gives me something to do that's completely unrelated to Warren." Then he twisted his mouth. "Which makes me feel guilty because I'm not trying to forget him. I just don't want to be reminded of the horrible way he died every time I think about Christmas Eve."

I stroked my fingers over Baz's hair. "I don't want you to forget him either. Would it help if we start celebrating his life and his bravery instead? What if we did something like have a dinner in his honor on this date every year instead of on the day he died? You can share your memories of him, and we can make sure he isn't forgotten."

Baz looked at me in wonder before his face crumpled. "You're amazing," he said, putting his head on my shoulder. "That's a beautiful idea. Thank you."

I squeezed him tight. "I wish I'd been able to meet him."

He sat back and put his hand on my neck. "He would've adored you."

We kissed, and then the real world came back online. Dirk and Drake were staring at us.

"Uh," Dirk said. "Your husband died on Christmas Eve? That sucks, man."

Drake elbowed his twin in the ribs before looking at Baz. "Do you want us to dedicate a song to him or something at the concert?"

Baz considered this but shook his head. "Thank you, but no. I think Steve has the right idea. Today is the anniversary of the day Warren tried to save someone's life. I'd rather make today about Warren instead of Christmas Eve."

Drake straightened his fedora and said, "We'd love to help. Would you let us find some restaurant options and host the dinner?"

Wow. I was so proud of my brothers. They were making a real effort with me and Baz. I knew I still needed to work through my lingering resentment against Dirk and Drake. I resolved to talk to Selina and get her colleague's contact info.

Baz said, "Guys, it really means a lot to me that you offered, but you didn't know Warren. Wouldn't it be uncomfortable—"

I put my hand on his arm. "They're my family, and so are you. It's not uncomfortable. Let them do this for you."

Dirk nodded emphatically. "Yeah, what Steve said. We want to."

I could tell Baz was still worried about it, but he finally bowed to the inevitable. "Okay, thank you."

For the next several minutes Dirk and Drake researched restaurants on their phones, and Baz sent texts to his family as well as Flo and Phillip to see if they were available.

He went outside to call Warren's brother Mitchell, who lived in Austin. Baz told me they hadn't really kept in touch because it was so painful, but he hoped Mitchell would join us.

Baz was smiling when he came back in. "He's coming."

"That's great, Baz. I can't wait to meet him."

He sat back down next to me. "I told him about you, and he said he's happy for me." I leaned into Baz's shoulder and kissed his cheek.

Eventually a restaurant was chosen, and the invitees were updated with the venue.

"Thank you," Baz said in a choked-up voice to Dirk, Drake, and me. "I'm very grateful to have you in my life."

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. McCarthy. I'm calling about your nephew Sean."

A pause. "I'm sorry you have the wrong number. I don't have a nephew."

"He's your sister Regina's eight-year-old son."

A longer pause.

"Who are you?"

"I'm someone who's going to call Child Protective Services if you don't come take Sean away from his shitty stepfather. Were you aware your sister passed away last year?"

A gasp confirmed he hadn't been. Which wasn't a surprise. Hell, fifteen years ago the guy had changed his name and moved half a continent away from his homophobic family. Wrigley hadn't had trouble tracking him down, but McCarthy's sister wouldn't have been able to. Not that she'd probably tried.

I was sure McCarthy, multi-millionaire founder of a tech company, would get Sean enrolled in the advanced schooling he needed. I'd be checking periodically to make sure.

"And Sean is living with his stepfather, you say?"

I couldn't stop the growl in my throat. "I don't have proof, but I think he's violent toward Sean. I do have photographs of the inside of their apartment. It's unfit for anyone to live in. CPS will have no trouble taking Sean away from that asshole, but he needs a place to land that isn't the foster system."

Another pause.

"Tell me where he is. I'll be there tomorrow."

CHAPTER 26

BAZ

SINCE WARREN'S DEATH, MY CHRISTMAS EVE HAD BEEN spent sitting around at my parents' house feeling sad and making my parents and Selina feel sad. I'd hated ruining their holiday, but that was the one day I couldn't stand being alone.

But this year I was spending Christmas Eve at the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown with Steve. My parents, Selina and Flo, Phillip, and even Warren's brother Mitchell would be joining us later.

Steve and I were here early to meet the band.

We'd had an eventful week. I still marveled at how everyone had come together on Tuesday night to help me remember Warren and celebrate his life. I'd teared up several times, but Steve had been right there with me, holding my hand and offering support.

I'd been glad to see Mitchell too. I felt bad I'd let our connection fall apart. Maybe I was wrong, but I thought Mitchell seemed lonely. He'd told me how his cats were doing, but he hadn't mentioned any friends or relationships. I was happy he'd agreed to join us for the concert tonight.

Steve and I had spent one more night at the ranch, but we'd cleaned his place up enough on Wednesday we'd been able to move back in. And "moving in" seemed the appropriate term, since Dirk and Drake showed no signs of wanting to leave my apartment. I was sure they'd eventually get tired of sharing a bed, but so far they seemed content, even with nine rabbits and Phillip sleeping in the living room.

We'd made some headway on Phillip's apartment—he'd had a junk removal company take everything that couldn't be salvaged, and we'd cleaned up the rest. He was trying to decide whether to use some of the furniture from his friends' house. Steve and I had promised to go with him to look at it if he needed company.

And today was Christmas Eve. When I'd woken up this morning, I hadn't been sure how I'd feel. I could talk all day about not wanting to associate the holiday with Warren's death, but I wasn't sure my brain wouldn't dwell on it anyway.

To my relief, I'd been fine. I'd thought about Warren, sure. But it was more of a reflective melancholy than the all-consuming grief I'd felt in years prior.

Steve had checked in with me once about how I was doing and then let it go. He'd made me pancakes for breakfast and proudly showed me how he'd put up our "holiday decorations", which consisted of clearing off the top of a bookcase and setting the Captain America and The Flash nutcrackers on it.

Phillip had shown up later with two wrapped gifts. One turned out to be a new set of sheets, these covered with small round icons for each of the Avengers, with Captain America's shield on one of the pillowcases. The other was a plush throw blanket with The Flash's logo on it.

We'd given Phillip a Black Widow-themed shower curtain that said *Kiss or Kill*. He'd pretended not to be amused.

But now we were back at the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown, winding our way through the crowds shopping at the vendor booths. Steve's hand was clenched tightly around mine. His siblings Hunter, Heath, and Mona had arrived in town earlier today, and this would be the first time Steve had seen them in person in years.

In my other hand was a large envelope Steve had asked me to hang on to. He'd told me it was something from his grandfather for his siblings, but he hadn't decided if he was going to give it to them or not yet. But the fact that he'd brought it with him made me sure he wasn't planning on seeing Hunter, Heath, or Mona again tomorrow before they went home.

The audience area for the band had been rearranged. Around the dance floor were several rows of folding chairs, and then the tables surrounded those. I waved at my parents, who'd staked out one of the tables with Flo and Selina. Most of Steve's friends had other plans this evening, but Cal was supposed to join us.

Phillip had elected to wait out front to greet his students and their families as they arrived. Wednesday had been the last school day before winter break. Phillip had told the kids he hadn't been able to mail their letters to Santa due to his grandmother's funeral, so as an apology he'd asked Santa for passes—secretly courtesy of Cole Washburn—to bring each of them plus up to three family members to the Melodious Moon concert at the Jalapeño Holiday Hoedown. He said the kids had been beyond excited.

Steve and I were looking forward to seeing Phillip in teacher mode.

When we walked up to the stage, Drake was messing with the drum kit. Heath was normally Melodious Moon's drummer, so Drake was probably killing time until we arrived. It was thoughtful of him to wait here and escort us in to greet the siblings.

Thursday's press release regarding the charges against Oscar Derry, Steve's father, and his firing as Melodious Moon's manager had caused a media frenzy. The band had avoided interviews up until this afternoon, when they'd met with Alberto Herrera, the freelance journalist who'd introduced himself to Steve on Sunday night. Steve had elected not to join them, although Dirk and Drake had warned him the journalist would be mentioning Steve in the story.

After the lawsuit had been filed, the FBI opened an investigation, as Oscar Derry had several offshore bank accounts for the money he'd siphoned from his kids. But Oscar Derry had gone into hiding, and apparently the authorities were concerned he'd fled the country. Good

riddance, in my opinion, though I was sure Steve's siblings would've appreciated being paid what they were owed.

Drake saw us coming toward him across the dance floor, so he jumped down from the stage. "Hey, guys." He paused in front of Steve, then said, "Um, heads up. We found out today that Hunter and Heath expected Dad to just sort of say, 'Oops, sorry,' and hand over the money he owed everyone. Then they wanted him to just keep being our dad." He took off his fedora and ran his hand over his hair. "They're more than a little upset he did a runner, and they're blaming you, me, and Dirk."

Steve scowled. "I thought Dad wouldn't give them their money when they asked for it. Didn't they support the lawsuit?"

Drake shrugged. "I guess they didn't believe Dad valued the money more than his relationship with them."

Steve pressed his lips together then said, "They didn't learn anything from how Dad treated me then." He let out a breath. "And Mona?"

Drake made a face. "She's not blaming us, but she's pretty down about the whole situation. I think we all need time to recover. This afternoon Herrera, who's writing the article on us, asked us about the future of Melodious Moon. None of us had an answer. Dirk and I think this will be the last Melodious Moon concert for a long time, maybe forever."

Steve dropped my hand and hugged Drake, whose mouth dropped open before he smiled and hugged Steve back.

"I'm sorry, Drake."

Without letting go of Steve, Drake said, "It's okay. Dirk and I started writing some songs that are a little less commercial, and I'm pretty stoked about the direction we're taking them."

When the brothers released each other, I told Drake. "You're welcome to stay in the apartment as long as you want."

He smiled, looking so much like Steve probably had at that age. "Thanks, Baz." He gave me a quick hug as well.

"You ready for this?" Drake asked Steve.

Steve nodded grimly. "Let's get it over with."

Steve reached for my hand again as we followed Drake down the little hallway behind the stage. He opened a door, and we were in what must have been a waiting room, with chairs and a kitchenette.

Dirk was standing next to the sink with his arms crossed and a mulish expression on his face. Sitting in the chairs were the other siblings, Heath, Hunter, and Mona. Heath and Hunter—I didn't know which was which—had brown eyes, but the same nose and chin as Steve. They both had white-blond hair, though that might have been dyed. They wore their hair long, but more in the way of a romance novel cover model than Dirk's rocker vibe.

Mona had definitely dyed her hair. It was kind of silvery gray with red streaks in it. She also had the Derryberry nose and chin, and she'd gotten the bright blue eyes.

Heath and Hunter glared at Steve when we came in. Mona put her hands over her mouth and looked like she was trying not to cry.

None of them stood up. None of them said anything.

Dirk walked over and said, "Thanks for coming, Steve."

I let go of Steve's hand and he gave Dirk a hug. Dirk's eyes were wide when they met mine over Steve's shoulder. I smiled at him.

Steve let go of Dirk and stepped around Drake to address the other three. "You're all looking well. This is my boyfriend Baz." Only Mona glanced at me. Steve didn't pause. "I'm just here for a minute and then I'll let you get back to preparing for the show."

He held out his hand in my direction and I gave him the envelope. "Grandfather left something for each of you."

They all sat up in their chairs.

Steve said, "He instructed me to only give these to you," he made air quotes. "When they get their heads out of their asses."

"What does that mean?" the Heath or Hunter on the left grumped defensively.

Steve answered him calmly, "He meant when you reached out to me to apologize and reconcile."

The Heath or Hunter on the right said, "Apologize for what? You were the one who made Grandfather hate us."

I couldn't see Steve's expression, but his tone was exasperated. "Since reconciling seems out of the question, but at least half of the blame for that is on Dad and not you—"

Right-hand Heath or Hunter raised his voice and pointed at Steve. "Now wait just a minute!"

"I've decided to give these to you anyway." Steve opened the large envelope and pulled out five letter-sized envelopes.

Heath and Hunter went quiet. Steve handed them their envelopes first. He obviously knew which of them was which.

When he handed Mona her envelope, she said, "Thanks, Steve. You... you look good. I hope you're happy."

I could see the side of his face when he smiled at her. "I am happy, Mona. Thank you. Dirk and Drake have my number if you ever want to talk."

She nodded and looked down at her envelope. She stroked a finger over the front where her name had been handwritten.

"This is bullshit!" Heath or Hunter on the right said. He was waving what looked like a letter, also handwritten. "It's not even money or anything!"

Mona stood up. "I'm going to open mine later. If I open it now, I won't be able to sing."

She stopped next to Steve, who'd been about to hand letters to Dirk and Drake. "Thanks for coming, Steve. I'm glad to see you. I'll... I need to process for a bit, but I'll be in touch."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and ran out the door.

Steve smiled as he turned to Dirk and Drake. "Here are yours." He handed them their envelopes.

"Thanks," Drake, like Mona, stared at his name on the front.

Dirk folded his envelope over and stuck it in his back pocket. "Mona's right. I don't think I can open this now." He looked at Steve. "Can you.... Would you be there with me when I open it? I have questions about Grandfather."

Steve smiled and hugged Dirk again. "Of course."

I kept a wary eye on Heath and Hunter when they stood up, but, after throwing their letters into the trash can, they walked out of the room without speaking.

"Are they going to be able to perform?" I asked Dirk and Drake.

Dirk rolled his eyes. "They'll be fine. They throw worse hissy fits all the time."

I went over to the trash can and pulled the letters and envelopes out of the trash.

"They won't want them back," Drake told me.

"Maybe, but it just feels wrong to throw these away, since your grandfather wrote them."

Steve held up a hand. "I don't want to read them. I have an idea of what's in there, and it'll just make me upset."

Drake said, "I'm sure they're similar to ours, and I'd rather just read mine and no one else's."

Dirk nodded. "Same."

"Do you mind if I read them?" I asked.

They all told me to go ahead, so I let them start walking back out to the stage area and I read the letters while I followed behind.

Dear Heath.

I miss you. Not sure you'll believe me, but I never wanted to stop talking to you. Your father, my son, is responsible for that. I wish I believed we'll have reconciled by the time you receive this after my death, but I'm pretty sure things won't work out that way.

I remember how happy you were every time you came to visit me when you were a kid. You loved helping me in my workshop, though you spent most of your time knocking different pieces of wood together to see what sounds they made. I hold those memories close now, because they're all I have left of you.

I hope one day you'll learn the man your father has become and how he's torn apart our family. But even if that doesn't happen, I hope you find joy in life.

I love you.

Grandfather

I blinked back tears, carefully not looking at Steve, Dirk, or Drake. Hunter's letter was almost identical, though their grandfather had called out memory specific to Hunter.

Wherever their father was, I hoped he ended up dying penniless and alone.

Dirk had been right. From where we sat in the audience, I couldn't tell the Melodious Moon band members were going through any difficult family drama. They played about ten of their most popular hits before taking a break.

I told Steve to socialize, and I got up to get us refills on our beers. When I got back to our table, Steve and his friend Cal were laughing together. Tonight Cal's t-shirt said "Check Out My Balls" under a drawing of some round Christmas ornaments.

"Hey, Cal," I said, setting down the beer glasses. "You want me to go grab you one too?" We hadn't ordered a pitcher tonight.

He shook his head. "I'm good, but thanks. I appreciate the offer." He turned to Steve. "I wanted to make sure to ask you tonight. How are you feeling about work after a week off?"

Steve threw an arm around Cal's back and leaned his head on one of Cal's big shoulders. "I'm sorry I was an ass to you and Cole. This time away has given me a lot of perspective, and I'm ready to let you help me delegate the stuff I don't need to be spending my time on."

Cal smiled. "Good. We already have a great candidate for the admin position. Cole and I are just waiting for you to give the final blessing when you get back."

Steve took a sip of beer, then said, "Go ahead and hire them. I trust you, and we don't want to lose them to another company that might make an offer sooner."

Cal grinned. "Well, alright! I'll contact them on Monday!"

Then Steve surprised the hell out of me. He said, "I'm going to take more time off when I get back, too. I'm going to find a therapist, so I'll need time for those appointments. And I'm going to prioritize time with Baz. And my friends." Steve looked between me and Cal. "You'll both help me keep on track with that, right?"

Cal and I agreed and created a group hug with Steve between us.

A few minutes later, Dirk and Drake bounded onto the stage. Dirk took the microphone. "Hello, Bent Oak! We understand we have Mr. Downs' class from Bent Oak Elementary School here tonight!"

Cheers rang out.

"Can we get only Mr. Downs' class and their families on the dance floor for this next number?"

While everyone in the audience sorted themselves out, Heath, Hunter, and Mona came back onto the stage and took their places.

Once the class, plus Phillip and the accompanying adults and siblings, were assembled on the dance floor, Drake said, "Santa asked us to sing this song just for y'all." And the band swung into "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town".

The kids and their adults cheered and danced, or just jumped up and down, depending on their level of coordination.

Phillip didn't seem to be much of a dancer. He had his arms in the air, but he was staring at a little girl a couple of feet in front of him.

I watched him move closer to her, then lean down. He looked at something in his hands for a minute then nudged the little girl and handed whatever it was to her. She must've dropped something.

I leaned into to Steve. "Will you dance with me when this song is over?"

He pressed back into me. "Of course. Nothing is more romantic than dancing with your boyfriend while your estranged siblings glare at you from the stage."

I laughed.

Steve said, "What's Phillip doing?"

I located him quickly. He'd moved to the edge of the dance floor, directly behind a boy, probably one of his students, who was holding onto a teenager's hand. The boy and the teenager had the same color hair, so brothers, maybe? Perhaps that was Seth and Robin. They weren't dancing with the rest of the class.

Phillip's stance was relaxed but now that I knew him better, I could tell he was faking it.

The song drew to a close, and Dirk thanked "Mr. Downs and his class" for coming tonight. He said, "The dance floor is open for everyone again!" and I lost sight of Phillip in the milling crowd.

Melodious Moon began playing "Put a Little Love in Your Heart."

"Come on," Steve said. "Let's dance."

On the dance floor, we kept our eyes on each other and smiled goofy smiles. I swung him around and when he laughed, I felt like my happiness would explode out of my chest. The song came to a close, but I wasn't ready to sit down yet. "One more?" I asked over the opening bars of one of Melodious Moon's slower songs.

"Absolutely."

I put my hands on Steve's hips and brought him closer, making sure to keep a family-friendly couple of inches between us.

I looked into the depths of his blazing blue eyes. Warren, the consummate romantic, would haunt me forever if I didn't tell Steve what I was thinking.

I put my lips to Steve's ear, and he shivered. I brushed my lips against his ear one more time just to make sure the two actions were connected.

They were. Nice.

I reminded myself I had to keep my hands on his hips and not slide them lower.

I said, "Remember when everyone thought I was proposing to you, and you said you might be open to getting married someday but just not quite yet?"

Steve turned his head so he could look at me. His eyebrows were down over his nose. "Yes?"

I kissed him. "I just want to state, for the record, I would definitely be open to that someday. Just not quite yet."

Steve's eyes lit up, and he lunged at me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and pressing a firm, but still family-friendly, kiss to my lips.

The band segued into "Santa's Secret Stocking" and the cheers from the audience were deafening.

EXCERPT

From Christmas for Kane: The Last Op, the seventh and final novel in the Kane Thorsson series by Owen Mercer

I woke in the dark. Someone was in the apartment. Someone other than Bastien, that is. He was asleep next to me, well-satisfied and smelling of cum.

I was about to have some explaining to do.

But first I had to neutralize the threat. Either one of Quintano's men, or Ostap's girlfriend.

My money was on the girlfriend. Dammit.

Ignoring my nudity, I slid silently out of bed and pulled the KA-BAR from its sheath under the box springs. I left the Glock in its holster behind the headboard. I wouldn't need it, and I didn't want anyone to call the police after hearing a gunshot.

I crouched low next to the door. She led with her gun, so I dropped the KA-BAR and just grabbed her hand and broke her fingers. She didn't make too much noise, but Bastien would be awake now.

The gun fell to the floor, and I easily overpowered her and snapped her neck. My favorite. No mess.

A sound from the bed had me meeting Bastien's frightened eyes across the dark room. He'd backed up against the headboard and was holding his phone.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Can I turn on the light?"

"Sure, but it's not going to be pretty."

He gulped but flicked on the lamp on the nightstand. He looked down at the obviously dead woman in the doorway and the gun next to her.

Bastien gulped again. "You told me you were in the Army. But there's more, isn't there?"

I sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. "You know my friends Gio and Kathy who died?" He nodded. "Gio and I were in the CIA together. This was over ten years ago." Bastien's eyes were huge but otherwise he didn't seem horrified. "I came here to look for their killer. This woman was the girlfriend of the guy who ordered the hit." Okay, I was glossing over a lot, but the basics were accurate.

"And what happened to that guy?"

I rubbed the back of my neck and made a rueful grimace. "Um, remember when my grandmother died?"

Bastien's spectacular eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

I shrugged. "She never existed. That was when I took out that guy and everyone who worked for him. I let this woman live in the hopes that she didn't have anything to do with his organization."

"Looks like you were wrong."

"Yeah." I sighed again. "Sorry. I'm just so tired of the killing, and I didn't want to kill an innocent person. Not so innocent though, it turns out. I feel awful you had to witness that."

Bastien tossed his phone aside and scooted over to me. "Thanks for saving our lives." He kissed my scruffy cheek and I stared at him in astonishment. He said, "I'll probably have more questions, but in the meantime, do you need help disposing of the body?"

EPILOGUE

ALL MY STUDENTS HAD CHEERED WHEN DIRK INVITED US TO the dance floor with their adult companions and siblings. They were having a tremendous time, leaping about to the music. I pretended to dance along with them, but extemporaneous dancing was something I was only used to doing to attract a target.

I was still astonished at how much I enjoyed the role of third grade teacher. I had even caught myself wondering wistfully if there was a—non-violent—way to turn this into a permanent position.

I did not do wistful. Wistful was a waste of time. Wistful could get you killed.

Except I was retired now, was I not? And it had been a hard-won retirement. I had had to cross the globe to eliminate every possible threat who might know how to find me.

But I had not been there for George and Katrina.

Granted, George should have known better—why had he not fucking known better?—than to start gambling. And then to steal that ring of all things.

It was probably just as well I had not been able to find it. Just like its former owner's goons hadn't been able to find it.

Anna Friedmann and her mother walked by me and waved. They were closely followed by Bette Flowers and her father. I examined the quartet; they moved as a unit. That was an interesting development.

I refocused my attention on the other children, searching for Seth. As a teacher, one should not have favorites. I knew that. But perhaps, as only a substitute, I could be forgiven.

Seth had intrigued me from the first day, with his shy nature and quiet little jokes. He had had an advanced understanding of mathematics for his age, but when I discussed placement testing with him, he had told me his parents were not in favor of it.

He had not told me his mother was dead. And he had not told me about the stepfather.

I wrinkled my nose. Alan Shackleford. Such an unpleasant man. I had had a satisfyingly successful visit with him on Tuesday though. Seth had been at school, and Seth's older brother Robin at one of his jobs.

I had enjoyed scaring Shackleford into promising not to use his fists on the children in his house, but I needed a more permanent solution for Seth and Robin's living situation.

Ripley had done the research, and it appeared that the actor, Lucas McCord, was indeed their blood relation. But he had had a week to get to Texas from Los Angeles, and he still was not here. He had a reputation as someone who loved parties, alcohol, and drugs. I was not sure he was the best guardian for the boys, but he would be better than Shackleford.

I could always provide Lucas McCord with an incentive to moderate his lifestyle.

I located Seth and Robin standing at the back of the dance floor. Seth was more of a cerebral child than an athletic one, so it did not surprise me that he had not joined the dancing. But he seemed focused on Robin instead of the music. And I did not like the tension in Robin's body. He should not be panicking at a concert.

Perhaps he was uneasy in crowds?

Perhaps his repugnant stepfather had done what I had warned him not to.

I began to ease my way toward Seth and Robin.

A little girl wearing a red dress and a bright yellow windproof jacket bounced into my path. Rudy Zdenko's younger sister. I waited for her to move in a predictable direction before I proceeded.

When she bounced back toward her brother and mother, a doll fell out of her pocket.

A Barbie doll.

A Barbie doll with braids.

A Barbie doll with a thick diamond band around her throat.

Rudy Zdenko had been the one to take the Barbie.

I bent over and picked the doll up. The sparkly blue dress crinkled under my fingers as I swiftly worked the doll's head off her neck.

The ring rolled into my palm, and I tilted my arm up so it fell down the sleeve of my suit jacket.

"Excuse me," I said to the girl. I had to speak loudly to be heard over the music. Rudy and his mother turned around as well. The entire family was dressed in festive but slightly worn clothing. Possibly thrift store purchases. Based on what I had seen of their house—inside and out—Ms. Zdenko was barely making ends meet.

The girl's room had not boasted many toys. I felt oddly proud of Rudy for stealing the doll for his sister. George and Katrina would have approved.

I would make sure the Zdenkos' financial circumstances changed for the better, though.

I leaned over and offered the Barbie and her head to the little girl.

"I saw this fall out of your pocket." I told her. "I'm afraid someone stepped on it and the head came off."

The little girl gasped, "Barbie!" She reached for the pieces of the doll, and I handed them over.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Downs," Ms. Zdenko said. "Rudy saved up his allowance to buy that for Jasmine's birthday last month,

and she'd have been so upset to have lost it."

"Would you like me to reassemble her?" I asked Jasmine.

The little girl hesitated, but then nodded and handed the Barbie pieces back to me. I quickly popped the doll's head on and returned her to Jasmine.

Jasmine touched Barbie's throat. "Her necklace!" she said. I was about to pretend to look for it when she smiled up at me. "I couldn't get it off. Now she can wear more outfits!"

"What do you say to Mr. Downs, Jasmine?" Ms. Zdenko scolded.

Jasmine held the doll to her chest. "Thank you," she said sweetly.

I put my hand to my sternum. "You are very welcome."

I turned and resumed my journey through the crowd to Seth and Robin. I tucked my hand in my pocket.

The ring fell safely inside.

EXCERPT

From *Christmas for Kane: The Last Op*, the seventh and final novel in the *Kane Thorsson* series by Owen Mercer

I didn't believe in signs from above.

But I believed in opportunities.

I clenched my fist around the ring in my pocket and willed the last school bus to pull away. The children were on board, so what the fuck was the driver waiting for?

Two of the children on that bus were Russell and Juliet Zarko.

I'd hardly believed my eyes when the Barbie had fallen from Juliet's pocket as she'd run past me on her way to join her brother in line. In the throng of kids it'd been easy to pretend the doll's head had come off when it had been stepped on.

Juliet had not seemed to even notice the doll's "necklace" was missing.

At last the bus' brakes squealed and it lumbered down the drive in front of the school. I casually turned toward the teachers' parking lot, waving at Marnie and my other coworkers. Sometimes my life felt like a dream, being a full-time teacher and knowing Bastien was waiting for me at home.

After much discussion, and a great deal of remodeling, we'd moved in to Gio and Kathy's house. It was a beautiful place, and I thought Gio and Kathy would be pleased for me to live there with my love.

Upon arriving home, I found Bastien in his office. He was on the phone, so I got to work in the kitchen. I made his favorite meal and set the table with cloth napkins and candlesticks. Bastien walked in to greet me and froze, gazing around at my preparations.

"Did I forget an anniversary or something?" he asked.

Smiling, I walked over to him. "You didn't."

I knelt down on one knee in front of Bastien and held out the ring on my palm. He gasped.

"Bastien, will you marry me?"

EPILOGUE

"What the Helen Mirren's misadventures, Baz!"

I tossed my tablet down on the couch next to me, startling Rocket and Quill, who'd been snoozing at the other end.

"What's the matter?"

Baz came out of the kitchen where he'd been making dinner—spinach enchiladas, my favorite. How had I not noticed him setting the table? It must be almost time to eat.

I'd been so engrossed in finishing his book, I hadn't been aware of anything else.

I crossed my arms and scowled at him. "You didn't put Bastien's response in the book."

Never mind that six months ago when Baz had told me this book would be based mostly on real-life events, I'd doubted anyone would find the plot believable. And, when he'd finally let me read it, I'd made fun of him for casting himself as the love interest.

Once I'd gotten hooked on the story, though, the Bastien character became a completely separate person in my mind.

And I needed closure.

Grinning, Baz walked over to me until he was standing between my legs. "What response?"

I threw my hands in the air. "Whether he'll agree to marry Kane or not!"

Baz put his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels a little. His brown eyes sparkled behind his glasses.

"Well," he said, "I don't actually know the answer."

I opened my mouth to yell at him, but I gaped instead when Baz went down on one knee.

He held out his palm, and there was a ring—a huge, *honking* ring—on it.

"You know the answer, though, Steve. Will you marry me?"

I tore my gaze from the ring—seriously, it was too big for any human to wear comfortably—and stared at Baz's smiling face.

"Is that...?"

Baz closed his eyes for a second and gave a small sigh. "Yes. Phillip said he didn't want it. He'll help us hock the stones if we decide not to keep it. But for now, I just need you to. Answer. The. Question."

"Um, I was a little distracted. Can you repeat it, please?" My heart started pounding. Was this really happening?

Patiently, he said, "Steven Roger Derryberry, will you marry me?"

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ABOUT BIX BARROW

When Bix Barrow got an idea for her first book, it ended up turning into her second — and thus the first two stories in the *Bent Oak, Texas* series emerged. An aspiring author for most of her life, it took a foray into the MM romance genre to spark the steamy scenes and blazing banter Bix now weaves into her novels. Accompanying her on her writing exploits are her two dogs and multitude of cats (six at last count). An avid traveler, Bix has started to view her expeditions as interviews for her future home. Born and raised in Texas, she is eager to move somewhere with fewer politicians, hurricanes, and flooding.

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