



WHERE THE  
PINES  
KISS THE

*Sexy*

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

V.L. LOCEY

WHERE THE  
PINES  
KISS THE

*Sky*

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PERKY ROOSTER PRESS



**S**ometimes life leads you back to where it all began because home is where the heart can truly mend.

Elias Lake is facing a personal and professional crisis. The world-famous star of countless action movies has been outed on social media. By an ex-lover with a poisonous ax to grind. His life and reputation as “The World’s Only Remaining Manly Man”—the studio’s PR words, not his—is hiding in his mansion in the L.A. hills, trying to sort out where to go now. The media is camped outside his gates, the studio heads are up in arms, and his legion of fans are ready to fire up the torches and grab their pitchforks.

With his world burning down around him, he tucks his tail and heads home to a small island that hugs the rocky coast of Maine. There Elias Lake can return to being plain old Elias Kesside, the son of an innkeeper, who spent his youth pretending to be a famed local pirate or swimming in the choppy waters of Kesside Bay. Hiding isn’t as easy as the beleaguered movie star had hoped, though, and when the press

finds him, he ducks into a small pottery shop near the inn to shake off the paparazzi. There he meets Gibson Vale, the upbeat and attractive older ceramist who owns the shop. What starts out as a duck-and-cover moment turns into a friendship that quickly grows into something strong, vibrant, and healing for both men.

*Where the Pines Kiss the Sky is a slow burn, age gap, small town M/M romance starring two men who are looking for new beginnings, a tiny coastal town filled with well-meaning but incredibly nosy natives, rough seas, rocky coasts, sailboats under summery sunsets, and a happy-ever-after.*

A V.L. Locey M/M Romance

Where the Pines Kiss the Sky

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# Acknowledgments

**T**o my family who accepts me and all my foibles and quirks. Even the plastic banana in my holster.

To my alphas, betas, editors, and proofers who work incredibly hard to help me make my books the shiniest we can make them.



If you want to keep up with all the latest news about my upcoming M/M releases, sign up for my newsletter by visiting my website: <http://vlllocey.com/>

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# Chapter One

*T*onight on *Hollywood Beats*, we're delving into the breaking news about one of the world's most macho action stars, *Elias Lake*. We're switching from the studio to *Morgan Wong*, who is on location outside the actor's forty million dollar estate overlooking Los Angeles. Morgan, what can you tell us about this story that has set the movie industry on its ear?

"Elias, would you *please* turn that off?"

I raised a hand to my agent to shush her.

*Thanks, Susan. Things are heating up out here in the hills of L.A. let me tell you! Famous leading man, Elias Lake, was outed two days ago by an ex-boyfriend, Tic-Toc sensation My-Key Delano, after engaging in a hidden affair for over six months that went sour. My-Key has flooded his Tic-Toc account with previously private videos of himself and Elias in some rather spicy and compromising positions. This reporter has been following this closely as the movie world is reeling from the news. Elias has long been touted as the "Last Remaining Manly Man" by Four Winds Studios, so the shocking revelations that the action star is not only gay but likes to wear ladies panties while having gay sex has lit Hollywood up! I'll be keeping on top of this story as it progresses with hourly updates. Back to you, Susan!*

The television on the wall snapped off. I threw a glower at the two women staring at me. My agent, Elle Sterner, and my personal trainer and beard—oh right, that was ex-beard now—

Katy Heath. Elle waved the remote in the air, so I directed my sour frown at her.

“Turn that back on,” I growled, shoving a hand into my lank hair.

“No. I am not going to sit here and listen to them circling around like vultures cawing at each other,” Elle spat, then tossed the remote to Katy who caught it nimbly and shoved it down between her boobs. Damn women and their cleavage storage areas.

“Actually, vultures are pretty silent for the most part. Maybe you’re thinking of crows. They caw,” I tossed out before shoving another chocolate-covered cherry into my mouth. Katy coughed lightly. I crammed another sweet in with the first and chewed loudly.

“Elias, you’re being a petulant shithead,” Katy told me. I knew that. I was aware, thank you. Being a spoiled asshole was pretty much all I had left of my former life. Fucking Tic-Toc twinks. They were my weakness. I really needed a different type of man in my life. Honestly, I just needed a life. The one that I had had just been nuked by someone I thought I could trust. I mean, did the fucker have to show the world that picture I had sent him in confidence? No. He did not. The jerk. The miserable uptight jerk bastard shithead, fuck-toad skinny bitch.

Honestly, we’d broken up seven months ago, and all had been well—sort of—then I’d made the mistake of asking the spoiled little tart to move out of my beach home in Laguna

Beach. I'd been incredibly nice letting him stay there rent free after our split so he could "find a new place and recover from our break-up" but I wanted to go there to rest up before my intense training regime for an upcoming movie began. Guess my request that he vacate my premises had flipped his bitch switch for a mere twenty-four hours later he flooded his social media accounts with personal images in a smear campaign that had left me curled up in a ball smelling like dead fish wrapped up in sweaty socks.

"Sue me," I grumbled around a mouthful of candy. Each treat I ate made me feel better. For a minute, then it made me feel like shit. Shittier, I suppose, because I had worked my ass off to get into incredible shape for my fans and my role as Connor Days—former ex-marine good guy turned Robin Hood type of vigilante who went after bad guys with a bloody heterosexual machismo glee—in the *Daze of Retribution* movies. Ten. Ten fucking movies over fifteen years. And now those same fans were ready to roast me over a pit. Just for being gay. Christ, this fucking town sucked. I should have been a naturalist like I'd wanted to be as a kid but no, I got this wild acting hair up my ass and left Maine for L.A. Thanks, Los Angeles, you fickle thing you. I gave you my all and now I'm getting it in the ass and not in the fun way. This was sans lube with a giant dildo reaming.

"Elias, I swear if you don't stop glutting, I'm going to kick your ass," Katy barked, rising from her seat on one of five tan and dark brown sofas. She stalked over, lunged for the box of candy, and then snarled down at me when I held onto it. Since

she was a former Ms. Olympia bodybuilder/professional wrestler, I had no doubt she could smash me like boiled potatoes. “Give me those.”

I lost the fight. She stormed off into the kitchen. I winced when I heard the garbage disposal firing to life. Personal trainers were mean. I slunk down on the sofa—a tan one—and stared out the thick wall of glass at the city of angels far below.

“Okay, so this is manageable.” Elle sat down beside me, the picture of professional acting representation. Dark skin glowing, hair neat and bobbed, power suit, heels, and earrings that glistened in the bright California sun. Diamonds. Bought from her ten percent of my millions. I liked pretty earrings.

*Hey, maybe you can wear them now.*

*Yeah, maybe so. When I throw myself off the Vincent Thomas Bridge, I’ll make sure my earrings match my frilly undergarments.*

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked with zero emotion. I’d burned through all the feelings in the past forty-eight hours aside from anger at my friend/trainer/beard for tossing my candy down the sink. That was still glowing brightly in my empty breast. “How is this manageable? My career is in the toilet. My fans are calling for my head for lying to them for years. The studio is already shredding my last contract. What exactly do you think is salvageable in this fucking mess?!”



“Well, for one,” she crossed one lithe leg over the other, then hit me with a glower, “I’m going to be gracious and not rip your balls off for speaking to me as if I were a dimwit.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, curling into a ball and then falling to my side as Katy entered the room with a platter of vegetables and a bottle of spring water. Really? I mean...really? Did she think carrots could take the place of chocolate-covered cherries during a time like this? The woman was delusional.

“Here, eat this instead.” Katy placed the platter on the glass-and-chrome coffee table and then sat down beside me, her long blonde ponytail falling over a muscular shoulder as she righted me like a rag doll. A big rag doll. I was six foot three and weighed in at a toned one hundred eighty-five pounds. She hoisted me up as if I were nothing. Sure, take another punch at my masculinity why don’t you? “Fruits and vegetables make you feel good.”

“No, they do not. Sweets make me feel good. This is just healthy shit. Who wants healthy shit when they’re experiencing a life trauma? Elle, call the pizza place and have them deliver a meat fanciers delight. With a side of candy.”

Elle rolled her dark eyes.

“Do *not* call for pizza for this man,” Katy firmly said. Elle wasn’t scared of Katy at all. They were two lionesses who respected each other tremendously as they tried to keep their little cub—that would be me—from making stupid life choices. Like candy over veggies, investing in cryptocurrency, or having hidden affairs with skinny Tic-Toc stars. I should

have listened to the women about that last one. Probably I should listen to women more than I do. They're smarter than men. That is a fact. My dick had led me into more trouble than it was worth. "Elias, I know this sucks but you cannot lie around this house forever. Get up, get moving, and face this thing head on."

Katy punched her palm. I winced, picked up a baby carrot and began chewing on it, and sighed so hard that some of the carrot flew from my mouth.

"Honestly," Elle grumbled as she wiped the bits from my chest into her hand. "Elias, I really think you need to take the bull by the horns." She dumped the carrot bits into a swanky ashtray—never used—near a coffee table book about vases—never read—then turned her attention back to me. "So, while the studio works out what it feels is the best way to progress —"

I moaned around my over-chewed carrot. Katy handed me some celery. I crammed that in with the carrot mush and chewed harder.

"The best way to progress is to make a public statement," Elle concluded.

"Faying wash?" I asked. They both stared flatly at me. I chewed, swallowed, and tried once more. "Saying what? Sorry that I lied to the whole world about my sexual preferences? What do they care? The fans are after my blood for pretending to be straight when I was queer."

“Ugh, not all the fans are like that,” Katy said, sitting back with a huff. “And really, who the hell are these people to get into your face for not coming out? I mean just look at the backlash that you’re facing. As if people in this town don’t pretend to be other things every fucking day of every fucking week of every fucking year. Gah! I hate people. I’m going to go punch something.”

She stalked off toward the gym at the back of the house. My poor weight bag was going to get a workout it would never forget. Hell, maybe it would get knocked clean across the room ala Steve Rogers.

“Okay, now that she’s busy, let’s talk sensibly.” Elle plucked a cherry tomato from the platter and then dunked it into a monkey dish of ranch dressing. Light. I was sure it was light. Not even full calorie salad dressing for the man watching his life spin down the shitter.

“Punching something sounds sensible. I know a mouthy little twink that I’d like to throat punch.” My jaw worked faster just thinking about popping My-Key in the face.

“No, it doesn’t. That would just add fuel to his fire. The videos have been taken down after our lawyers jumped on him for defamation of character.”

Cool. But the damage was done. The videos had been up on his Tic-Toc for over twelve hours. That was an eternity. They’d been downloaded and viewed all over the world tens of millions of times.

“What we need to do as a team is take a breath, let the fires burn themselves out, and then have you address the world as a gay man who has been cruelly and horribly outed against his wishes by a vindictive little cow patty of a child.”

“He really is a cow patty,” I whispered and sighed dramatically. “I mean, it was one little fight. I really did like him, you know?”

“I know, baby.” She patted my bare thigh. “But you need to get up, shower, put on some clean boxers, and get moving like Katy said.”

“Move where?” I asked in utter desperation. “I can’t leave my house without the throngs of paparazzi swarming me like angry killer bees!”

Elle’s cell phone buzzed. She glanced down at it, then leapt on it. I’d turned off my phone when the first image of myself posed in a highly personal boudoir shot meant for someone I had thought cared had been shown on CNN.

“Hello, Marcus, yes, he’s right here.” I cocked an eyebrow. “It’s your father.”

Well fuck. This was a conversation that I had sidestepped for about twenty years. I shook my head. Elle shoved the phone at me as if she wanted to press the damn thing through my chest like some dark wizard.

“Elias, you have to start facing this situation and who better to open up dialog with than your father?” My eyes closed as I drew in a shaky breath. “He loves you beyond reason. He will

understand. Trust me. Marcus is a good man with a loving heart.”

Knowing she was right, my father *was* a gentle soul who deserved so much more than the shitstorm now raining down on him, I blew out a breath.

I lifted her phone from her hand and stood up, hoisted up my saggy boxers, and padded outside. The patio was a huge square of redwood with benches set up around a square firepit. Water pools flowed behind the benches as a roof over top provided shade from the hot California sun. I’d not had a fire in the pit for years as I was too scared that a spark would fly upward and set the whole hillside aflame. I did enjoy the burbling waters that flowed around the area and ran down to my inground pool, though. It circulated from the pool, was filtered, and then pumped back up to the deck. An extravagant setup for sure. It fits with the other mansions on the private road, trust me. Actually, it was nothing compared to the helipads, dog mansions, and moats. Yep. Moats. Only in Hollywood, baby.

“Hey, Dad,” I said as I flopped down on a bench, leaning over the back with one arm to dangle my fingers in the cool water. The trickle of cool water over my fingertips was doing little to soothe the upheaval in my stomach. I’d been hiding this secret for so long that I had no clue how to even open up a conversation about it. How did someone explain why they’d kept a part of themselves locked away for so long? And from someone who had given up so much and worked so hard to be both a mother and a father to a young, fragile child? My throat

felt like it was closing up, my heart was thundering. Was this what a panic attack felt like?

“Elias...Son,” he said, his words thick with emotion.

“Dad,” I croaked, unable to say more as tears flooded my eyes. Crying was so not a manly man thing to do. What would Connor Days think if he could see me curled up on a plush peach cushion sobbing like a child with a skinned knee? He’d be appalled. And would probably slap me silly and tell me to grow a pair. “I never...” I stalled out, gulped in some warm air, and tried again. “I never wanted...you to find out...I had planned to tell you a thousand times.”

“Son, I so wish you had shared this with me,” he replied, clearing his throat before he could continue. “It might have given me a bit of a shock, but I would have accepted it. All of it, Son, not just the gay thing but the cross-dressing thing. Is that the right term? I’m so behind on the letters and gender things.”

That made me cough/laugh. Yep, I was pretty sure that the whole of Kesside Isle was behind on gender things. The natives were salt-of-the-earth folks, good people for sure, but many were happy to live on that rocky wild island for their entire lives and never venture from the norm. Norm being a man, a woman, marriage, kids, the sea, grandkids, death.

I drew my fingers from the water, wiped at my wet cheeks, and then sat with my back to the plush cushion, staring out at Los Angeles.

“I think that’s an okay term, Dad, but I’m not sure if that’s me. Sometimes I feel...” My sight moved over the city as the sun began to set. Such a beautiful sight. Or it had been. Now when I looked over the sprawling metropolis, all I could see was a den of vipers. A town hiding people who took great glee in building you up and then tearing you down. Somehow, the glitter of living where I could see the Hollywood sign on my drive to the studio was forever tarnished now.

“What do you feel, Elias? Tell me. Son, I only want to help. You know I don’t care that you’re gay.”

“I know, Dad, I know.” And I did. Deep down I’d known he would be okay with my being queer, but something always held me back. Some vile voice in the back of my head whispered that he would only love me if I were the man the studio had crafted me into being. That man was who everyone wanted. Elias Lake, action star, man about town, women love him and men want to be him, the last bastion of pure machismo and proud of it. If they only knew. Well, I guess they know now. My safety net was gone, and I was free falling. “I just...I’m sorry. I should have talked to you about it years ago. I was scared, I guess. And now it’s just a fucking mess.”

“Sure, sure, I understand being scared, Son. I surely do.” That was true. He’d been terrified of being a single parent after my mother had died. I’d been a little tot, five years old, when she’d gone out boating with friends and drowned. Horrible accident, the cops had said, leaving us to cope with a

life now void of her warmth and humor. “There were years where I stumbled around this old inn in absolute horror.”

I had to smile at his accent. Thick as chowder it was. Pure Maine. Christ, I had worked *so* hard to lose that accent with my voice coach when I’d come to L.A. years ago. Now I longed to hear more of it. I yearned to run back to Kesside Isle and ask Portman Keyes, the harbor master—a title he had bequeathed to himself forty years ago—to swing open the tiny metal mechanical bridge that linked our island to the coast of Maine near Jonesport. The choppy seas called me as they had when I had been a boy running wild over the island. I could smell the brine, taste the saltwater on my tongue, and hear the wind whispering through the pines that dotted the rocky coast. God yes, I wanted to return home, to my old room, and hide from it all. I wanted my father so badly it hurt to breathe.

“Dad,” I asked with trepidation, making my voice waver. “Dad, can I come home?”

“Yes, Son, of course. You are always welcome here. Come home, my boy. We’ll sort this whole mess out together.”

“Thank you.” I did manage to push that out before I hung up and collapsed in on myself. Elle came out after a few minutes, sat down beside me, and hugged me to her side.

“I’m going home,” I finally coughed out after the worst of the crying jag had abated. She handed me tissues, smiling kindly, as I worked on gathering myself.

“Good, I think home is where you need to be right now. Let me call Paul and inform him you’re taking a short sabbatical.”



Elle lifted her phone from my hand and began doing what Elle did best. Moving and shaking. I let my head fall back to the cushion, my nose was stuffy now, and I felt drained. Drained in that kind of good way, though. In the way that only a good cry and a pint of ice cream could bring.

“I want some ice cream.” I sighed to the hot, dry air that blew around my home.

“Katy will not like that. You do have to stay in shape, Elias,” Elle warned as she tried to get through to the head of Four Winds Studio. “You still have two films under contract. *Armageddon Daze* is slated to start shooting in three months.”

“That’s if I still have a job with Four Winds,” I replied sluggishly, the forty-eight hours of no sleep seemingly catching up with me. My eyelids felt like cement bags. Giving up on the battle, I let myself drift off, legs splayed, in the same boxers that I had been wearing when the shit had gone upside down. Whatever Elle said next, I couldn’t say.

I came awake about an hour later when Katy was taking potshots at a drone buzzing my patio.

“Fuck off!” she bellowed as she lobbed a bath bomb at the dark gray whirligig. The hard ball of lilac and vanilla scent hit true, shattering one of the four little propellers. The little alien-looking craft cocked off sideways but stayed in the air. Katy lobbed another bath grenade, this one pink and white—the strawberry ones were my favorites—and that one smashed in the front of the drone, destroying the camera I hoped. I stood up and joined her at the end of the deck to watch the fucking

thing nosedive into the cliff below my house. A small crash followed.

“Nice shot,” I said as I leaned over the railing to enjoy the sight of the carnage below.

“Thanks. I used to pitch softball back in high school.” She beamed and then turned to look at me. “You stink.”

“Sorry.” I probably did have a slight manly odor. “I think I’ll go shower.”

“Yeah, do that. Elle has a way to get you off this hillside without hauling you to LAX to fight off the press.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Is she rolling me up in that imported rug in the dining room?”

“Not even close. Go shower, pack some clothes, and know that I will always be willing to be your fake date.”

“No need for that now. But I do appreciate you being willing to cover for me all this time. You were a great date. Cheap.” She slugged me, and I almost went over the railing. My bicep throbbed, but I was still clinging to my macho actor persona so I couldn’t whine or rub the offended muscle.

“That’ll teach you,” she said, pulling me in for a hug. “I’m taking the gardener out through the main gates in your clothes while Elle sneaks you down to Bomb Bay D’s place.”

I pulled back. “Wait, hold on. You’re hauling poor Rufus through the sharks in my clothes while Elle sneaks me to the mansion with the helipad and moat?”

“Yep.” She smiled at me, kissed my whiskery cheeks, and shoved me in the direction of the sliding glass doors. “Now go. Get out of this town for a while. Go home and eat fresh lobster or whatever it is you Maine people do.”

“Yep, that’s all we do. Eat lobster, pickle octopi, and complain about the weather.” She grinned. God she was a stunner. Some man was going to be really lucky. “Hey, you can date now. I mean, like openly dating without the press calling you a trashy trollop for cheating on me.”

“Meh, I’m not in a hurry. I’m more worried about you. Now go wash. You really do smell terrible. I’ll see you when you come back home.”

I gave her a weak thumbs-up and made my way through my mansion. The dark fog that had clung to me for the past two days lifted just a bit. Maine and my father awaited. Smelling that fresh ocean air instead of the smog of Los Angeles would please my lungs, I was sure. Maybe those salty winds would blow away more than the stink of city life. Maybe, just maybe, it would clear my head and set me on a new heading. One that would get me out of churning seas and into a calm, quiet cove of serenity.

Fuck knew I needed a little peace.

# Chapter Two

**Y**ou haven't lived until you've crossed a moat around a rap superstar's mansion and then you're whisked away in a helicopter that takes off from the helipad of said rap superstar.

And people thought *my* place was extravagant because I had rippling water streams on my frigging patio. Yeah, nope. My home was a dump compared to some of the places out here. Hell, I didn't even have a bowling alley or private theater for screening my movies. Talk about living in squalor.

Bomb Bay D had been gracious through and through. He even offered me some of his bodacious female company for the flight, but I graciously turned him down. Then the lightbulb went off over his head.

"Ah, right. You're into dick." He shrugged, took off the official Bomb Bay D hat he had been wearing, and placed it on my head. "Pull that down low, brother."

We rapped knuckles and Elle hauled me to the waiting chopper and then I was off into the wild blue yonder. I'd removed my sunglasses to stare down at my home as it grew smaller and smaller. We'd snuck across the border to Arizona to land at the Grand Canyon West Airport where a private jet had been all gassed up and waiting. This flight would take me to another small airport, Bangor International, where I'd be picked up by a chauffeur service and taken to Kesside Isle.

All the subterfuge sucked. My flight out of Arizona had gone off without a hitch. Poor Katy and Rufus had been followed all through my neighborhood by news vans until

they'd stopped at a Dairy Queen for milkshakes. Once the press saw that the passenger in her Vette wasn't a recently outed movie icon but a sixty-four-year-old gardener from Maravilla, they got pretty pissy and then stormed off. Katy and Rufus had enjoyed their frozen treats while laughing manically at the pouty press.

"Hey, Elle," I said into my phone as my private jet taxied for takeoff. "Thank you for being so fucking clever. I'll touch base when I reach my destination." I smiled at the lithe little flight attendant who was waiting for me to turn off my phone. Not that I didn't trust her, but...yeah, I didn't trust her to not tell the media—if they found me and they would find me—where I was headed. "Also, give my accountant the go-ahead to add hazard pay bonuses for Katy and Rufus. Oh, and make sure my place is locked up tight."

"Already done all the above," Elle replied, staring at me from a tiny square on my phone. "Let me know when you land. Try to get some rest. You look like hell."

"Yep, I'm doing that resting thing for sure. Talk to you in a few hours." I made a show of turning off my phone. The flight attendant smiled graciously. The plane then began to roll along, bumping over small humps in the runway as I stuffed a neck pillow behind my head. Staring out the small round window, lost in thoughts, I saw the runway speeding by faster and faster. The flight attendant was up in the galley, strapped in, I was sure, as we built up speed. I drew in a breath when the wheels left the earth, that push of pressure on my chest releasing some sort of pressure valve inside my mind.

I'd made it out of my luxury prison. For a few precious hours, it was just me, a pretty flight attendant, and a pilot. No press, no studio heads, no agents, no world. Just me, the clouds, and Cindy, the smiling blonde with the long legs and sympathetic eyes.

I think I was asleep before we even leveled off.

My eyes snapped open when Cindy gave me a gentle shake.

"Mr. Papadopoulos," she whispered as I blinked into consciousness. It took me a second to recall that I was traveling under an alias. Elle's idea to help throw off the bloodhounds, but everyone who saw me knew who I was. Cindy certainly did. I could tell just by the way she tiptoed around me when I'd entered the plane like a fugitive on the run from Tommy Lee Jones. "We're about to land in Bangor. If you'd please put your seat in the upright position that would be amazing."

"Right, yeah, sure." I slowly righted myself, rolling my head in circles and then stared down at the lush greenery of Maine as we banked into Bangor. We flew over the Penobscot River and touched down a few moments later, the landing smooth. I stretched my arms over my head, yawning widely, and waited until the Lear was parked. "Thanks, Cindy."

I stood and was handed my carry-on bag. "You're very welcome, Mr. Papadopoulos. I believe your ride is waiting for you at the end of the ramp. Your bags are being loaded into the trunk as we speak."

"Wonderful. Thank you, Cindy."

She smiled and bobbed her head, showing me the way out of the plane. I threw a few looks left and right, seeing no one but the ground crew stowing my lone suitcase into the trunk of a shiny black SUV. Standing beside the Cadillac was a tall guy, with dark skin, expressionless, wearing sunglasses and an earpiece.

“Oh hey,” I said into my phone as I handed the imposing man my carry-on. He nodded, placed it in the trunk, and closed the trunk with a slam. “Did you get the Secret Service to come out here to drive me to...where I’m going?”

I skirted some glances at the guys hustling past. A few were gawking. I ducked into the rear of the SUV like a shot.

“No, they’re a protection service that the studio set up for you,” Elle replied, then sighed wearily. “Not to ruin your return to the moose state—”

“Maine is not the moose state. It’s the pine tree state.” My driver sat behind the wheel, giving me a long look as if to ask if I wanted anything. I waved him off and then tugged off my bright yellow Bomb Bay D hat and ran my fingers through my hair.

“They do have moose though, right?” Elle asked. I could hear traffic in the background, so she must be on the road. She listened to talk radio steadily in the car.

“Inland. Up north usually. I lived my whole life on the island and never saw a moose,” I replied, toeing off my sneakers to let my feet breathe. “Any news from the studio?”



“Other than they got you a ride from the airport to your island? No. Sorry, sugar.” I exhaled through my nose as we left the airport behind. There were some really nice perks to being famous. “But that’s not unusual. They’ll come around. I’m sure of it. Did you get some sleep on the flight?”

“Yeah, yeah, a little. What do you mean by them coming around? Did you hear something?”

“Christ, I fucking hate L.A. traffic!” she snarled into my ear. “No, nothing. They’re keeping their thoughts to themselves. They can’t do anything rash, Elias. You do have a contract. And I plan to—why the hell don’t you put on your fake eyelashes *before* you get behind the wheel, you bougie bitch?!—ensure they honor that contract.”

Quiet was not good. Quiet from the rather conservative heads of Four Winds was not good at all. A low throb began to set in behind my left eye. Tension. So much tension. I rubbed at my temple as the SUV moved swiftly and surely away from the city of Bangor toward the coast.

“Look, you just get yourself settled in with your father and let me handle the studio. You sound fried. Go spend some time watching the sun rise or whatever it is people do on tiny little islands for fun.” I had to smile to myself. Elle was not a fan of leaving her beloved Los Angeles. She could manage in Manhattan, but once she saw a snowflake, she was out. “Rest. Get some sun but not too much. Use sunscreen. Watch out for whales and moose.”

“I’ll be mindful of the whales and moose,” I teased.

“Well, you know what I mean. Just try to chill. Take a few days to meditate on things and let me try to nail down the studio heads for a meeting. You can do it online. I want you there on that little island where no one can hassle you until we get our plan of action in place.”

“Got it. Rest and relax. Watch out for moose and whales and don’t get too much sun but just enough. Would you like to plan out my menu for the next few weeks too?”

“That’s Katy’s job. Just...you know, Elias, take care of yourself. Mentally and physically. Sit by the sea and try not to worry about shit out here. Trust me, next week it will be some other scandal. Ugh, why is this lane not moving?!”

“Right, a new scandal next week.” I sighed as she hung up so she could yell at the traffic gods. Settling back into the plush leather seat, I blew out a long breath. Elle was right, of course. There would be a new scandal soon. Someone would be caught with the babysitter, or some mogul and his wife would have a public fight, or an actress would flash a tit, or an actor will be seen in a clinch with an underage fan. Hollywood was a city built on scandal and debauchery. My little queer drama would be old news in a few weeks. People would move onto some other salacious tidbit and I’ll be able to go home and return to my work.

Maybe. It was that unknown element that scared the shit out of me. What would I do with myself if I was canned or blacklisted?

*Do they blacklist actors anymore, Elias? I mean, it's not the fifties.*

True, but while Hollywood—the actors, producers, directors—were generally very liberal thinking, the studio heads were a different story. They liked to cling to old ways of thinking. Back in the day when men were men and women were churning butter. Okay, perhaps that was a little dated even for them, but the fact remained that there were genres in the movies and woe to those actors who didn't portray their famous characters in a manner suiting that character.

If you were a young miss playing an innocent little cherub in a flick, you'd best be portraying that virginal persona off the set as well. If you were an action hero known for being a macho het vigilante, you *did* not suck dick. Also, there was social media to do the blacklisting now. One wrong step, one old Tweet, one misplaced word and your career was toast. And let's face it, the fans of the kinds of movies that I made were not known for being kind to the female gaze. Hyper-sexualization and objectification of women in my genre were rampant. Female-centric action films are always torn to shreds by male viewers who get frustrated when women are shown to be strong, have any depth, and God forbid have goals other than being arm candy for the leading man.

Want to talk about how gay men are viewed in these types of films? Yeah, badly. So incredibly badly...yet there I was reaping in millions while portraying a character that would scoff at a queer character if—and that was doubtful—he came across one in his straight little masculine world. Homosexuals,

lesbians, or trans people just did not exist in Connor's neighborhood.

What was I *doing* playing someone like Connor Days?

*It's all about the Benjamins, baby.*

Oh right, those millions. Man, I really loathed myself right now.

"Would you care for any music, sir?" Mr. Beefy in the front enquired.

"No, thank you. I'm going to try to sleep."

That was a lie. My mind was fully engaged now that I'd had a power nap. I spent the next hour and forty minutes watching the coastal charm of Maine begin to blossom while trying to find the correct size for a hair coat on Amazon.

When we reached the rustic shores of Jonesport, we pulled up to the Kesside Bay swing bridge. The bridge was open right now, swung out to allow a lone sailboat to cruise through the deep channel that the high tide provided. Once the tide went out as it did twice a day, the channel was nothing more than brackish puddles, rocks, and clamming opportunities. When the tide rose, the channel was flooded with seawater once again. We waited for fifteen minutes until the sailboat was out to sea and yet the bridge didn't swing back to let us pass.

"Is there a way to speak to that man in the tiny booth?" Mr. Beefy asked.

"Yeah," I groaned, pulled my yellow ball cap back onto my head, and left the idling SUV much to my driver's displeasure.

I knocked on the driver's side window. It rolled down to show me one greatly unhappy man. "I'll just go chat with Portman."

"I'm going with you." I started to argue but the behemoth got out of the SUV.

"That's not at all necessary," I assured him. "Things here aren't like they are in the big cities. We all know each other on Kesside Isle. Trust me." I gave him that smile that had won so many feminine hearts. It should have. The cost to get that smile could have fed a small nation for a month. Seemed my smile had little effect on Mr. Beefy. "Okay, just wait by the car and if I need your help, I'll shout."

He nodded, folded his arms, and glowered at my back as I made my way to the stuffy little shack that held the mechanics for the swing bridge. What I knew about how to operate the bridge was nil, but I did know Portman.

I rapped on the window. A wiry old man of about ninety woke up with a snorty snore and gazed at me with tangled, frizzy silver eyebrows. He had a wild mop of hair—think Albert Einstein—and wore an old Navy uniform. From the Napoleonic war era. Blue velvet jacket with gold epaulets, white knee breeches, black shoes with brass buckles, and a glorious bicorn hat with a gold drapery tie-back tassel. Why? We had no clue as the war with Napoleon had not been fought here in Maine to our knowledge. We'd had Portman Keyes here, daily, in his royal navy uniform for forty years. The people of Kesside Isle weren't big on change.

“Bridge is up!” he shouted through the screen on the open window.

“I know that,” I replied. “The sailboat has cleared the bridge, though.”

He grumbled something under his breath and then leaned into the screen, pushing his bulbous nose into the screening until it bowed dangerously away from its frame.

“Are you trying to tell the harbor master how to do his job?!”

Jesus Christ. “No, Portman, I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job, I’m just reminding you that—”

“You got an island resident pass?” he asked with no small amount of glee. Resident passes were a thing. Not sure how they ever got started, but it was before my time. Folks who lived here or were summer residents got little cardboard passes that they had to place on their dashboards—right-hand side so Portman could scope them out from his shack—to be admitted to Kesside Isle. It was insane, to be honest, but the passes had been around forever and, as I noted before, the people of this little chunk of rock weren’t big on change. The summer dwellers actually found it cute, and it gave them some false sense of security about their small but crazy expensive vacation homes. Gated community mentality and all that.

“Portman, I’m Elias Lake.” He stared at me as if I were a zombie trying to gain access to the last bastion of non-flesh-eating humanity. “Kesside. Elias Kesside.”

“Where’s your pass then?”

For fucking fuck’s sake. “Hold on.” I exhaled so loudly it was a wonder I didn’t pass out. Tugging my wallet free, I began rummaging around in the photo section. Stuck behind a shot of me and my father on my patio in L.A. were two old bits of Elias Kesside’s past. A dog-eared image of me and Billy Morton taken by his dad when we were ten or eleven. Way before we had sexuality questions about ourselves. We were just two boys sitting in a rowboat off the edge of the jetty, adventure awaiting us. Shoved behind that old picture was a resident’s pass from twenty-five years ago. Tattered and faded so badly that the original red coloration was now pink.

“Here it is,” I crowed and waved it in front of his mashed nose. His eyebrows tangled as he tried to read it. Where his glasses were, I had no clue. Maybe they were lost at Waterloo.

“Okay, that checks.” He studied the pass, then me a little more closely. “You look familiar.” He squinted at me with eyes as blue as the sea-kissed sky. “Didn’t I chase you around the town once when you and that Billy Morton stole my hat?”

Shit. Busted. “Yep, that’s me.”

“I knew it!” he crowed. “I never did like that Billy Morton. Bad apple, that one.”

“He’s the pastor of the church on the island,” I informed Portman.

“You think I don’t know that?!” He glowered at me through the screen. “Mind like a steel trap. What do you want again?”

“The bridge is open.”

“I know! I’m the harbor master! I opened it, didn’t I? Look at these levers and buttons. I know what each of them does. Do you?”

“Nope, I do not.” I folded my arms over my chest. This would take a while. I winked at the driver. He was not amused. Maybe he had a schedule to keep. That would be his first lesson about life on Kesside Isle. Schedules meant nothing to the natives here. There was always time to talk or tell tales or humor Portman.

“That’s right. You do not. I know them all because I was in the Navy. That’s why I’m the harbor master and bridge king.” Oh, bridge king. Must be Portman had given himself a new title. Snazzy. Quite fitting. “Did you know that this lever here is what makes the lights flash?”

And off he went. I stood there, feeling the glower of Mr. Beefy on my back, the sun baking down on my head, the cry of gulls floating by on the salty winds, listening to the same litany of how the bridge worked that I’d heard a thousand times as a kid. Ten minutes passed.

“...that’s why you can’t never open the bridge at midnight on Halloween.” Portman looked at me for a sign. I grunted. “What did you want?”

I pointed at the bridge. “Can you open that, *please?*”

“That’s my job. You could have just said that in the first place.” With that, he slammed the window shut. The squealing



of the metal bridge moving back into place filled the air. A few lazy gulls that were seated on the rafters of the bridge took to wing only to settle on top of the harbormaster's shack. The roof was covered with gull shit. Billy Morton and I had been made to chip and/or scour the dried poo off the roof as payback for swiping Portman's hat all those years ago. It looked like no one had done the job since.

As we crossed the bridge onto the isle a rush of sentimentality washed over me. It had been years since I'd come home. I'd flown my father out to California a few times when he could get free from the inn, which wasn't often because he was running it alone. Well, not solely alone, he had help, of course, but the daily mind-numbing tasks of innkeeping were on his back. He'd assumed that I would stay in Maine and take over, easing his burden as he got older. But I'd streaked away from the smell of seaweed and the winds whipping the pines as soon as I had graduated. I'd hated this stupid island when I was a teenager. There was nothing and no one who could have made me stay. I took the money I got as a graduation gift and flew west, never looking back. Christ, it had been twenty years since I'd been back.

Little had changed.

The main road—a scenic two-lane—followed the coastline of the island in a wiggly path from the top of the ten-mile-long isle to the bottom and then back around. One road. That was it. Two lanes. Quaint as all get out. Pines and woodland filled the center of the island where Phillippe “Low Tide” Kesside had supposedly buried his booty. Yes, we were related to a lesser-

known pirate. Argh. It had been cool when I was a kid, sure, but now it was just a silly thing that drew treasure hunters to the island. There was no treasure on this little hunk of rock and scraggly pines. All there was was a spattering of rich city folks who came out to their summer cabins to flout their wealth and old timers who hated the city folks almost as much as they detested new-fangled ideas like more than two genders. Yep. And people wonder why I bolted at eighteen.

Well, not everyone. My father knew that I had been terribly unhappy here. If not for the small little theater on the southern end of the island, I would have probably walked out into the sea and let the ocean swallow me up. Of course, my father didn't know just how depressed I had been. It had taken me years of costly therapy to delve into why I was so fucking sad despite all my successes. Losing my mother at an early age and hiding my sexuality were two of the biggest reasons. And while there was nothing I could do to bring Mom back, I didn't have to hide being gay anymore. Yippee. So why wasn't I feeling free as a gull? Good question.

“You have to follow the road down to the tip, then come back around to access the inn,” I explained to Mr. Beefy. He grunted. We crawled along at a roaring thirty miles per hour, the maximum speed limit on Kesside Isle, and quickly entered the tourist area. The southern tip was where the summer folk came for meals, trinkets, or to go out for whale watching tours. The tip was filled with trendy boutiques—many that had been here since I was a kid—as well as a few new ones. There was a new coffeehouse, a popcorn shop, and a pottery shop. Oh,

and a pet sitter business. Tucked among the tourist traps was a tiny art museum, as well as the Kesside Bay Theater. I sat up a little straighter as we moved past the theater. Damn. It was in need of some major renovations. Weather tore things apart here along the Maine coast. Salty winds, Nor'easters, damp air...they all ate at paint and old wooden siding.

“That’s where you first started acting?” Mr. Beefy asked.

“Yeah, it is. I was ten when I landed the role of Kurt von Trapp in *The Sound of Music*,” I relayed as we waited at the lone traffic light on the tip for several families to scurry across the roadway. “It’s not as big a deal as it may sound. There were only two kids on the island year round—me and Billy Morton—and Billy was not into acting or singing. So I was the only real kid and the other children were played by adults. Do they still do two shows per year, one summer run and one for the locals, I wonder?”

“Not a clue.”

I stared at the rundown old theater until I couldn’t see it anymore. That was some sad shit there. My back flopped into the seat. Smiling at the memory of that first time in greasepaint, I let the memories roll over me. It had been a winter production, so I’d had to balance my schoolwork with the play, but that was fine. There was little to do around here in the winter.

All the tourists packed it out by late October, taking any kids with them. I learned not to get too close to the summer people. They’d just leave.

No one in their right mind wants to sit along the ocean during the winter to face down massive winter storms. Okay, I amend that. Only brave Maine natives will hunker down and then spit in the eye of Mother Nature. It takes a special breed to face the sea. She can be a nasty bitch. Deadly. Dad and I knew that firsthand.

We passed Phillippe's Point, a jagged little natural jetty. Several cabins dotted the coastline, most occupied now that it was the end of June. The island was peppered with vacation homes, most on the smallish side as space was at a premium on the island. Once we left Philippe's Point behind, the driveway leading to Kesside Inn came into view.

"Turn here, to the right," I said, my heart speeding up as we passed the white sign with gold lettering and pulled up to the front of my parents' dream. The Kesside Inn. We pulled under a *porte cochère* and parked. "I'll get out here. You can go. Were you paid?"

"Yes, sir, and a gratuity was included."

"Excellent. Thank you." I shimmied out of the back, my sneakers touching down as a snapping wind off the Atlantic set the hotel and state flags flapping. I glanced at the flowerbed to the left and then up at the flagpole that sat in the middle of vibrant yellow, red, and white blooms. The grounds looked amazing. Dad always took great pride in the lawns. Mom had planted the roses in the front flowerbed years ago. Dad and the gardener on duty babied those tender buds and blooms. I drew in a deep breath to inhale the subtle scent of

rose on the salty breeze. Gulls cawed loudly overhead, riding the brisk air currents, as the soft sounds of bells and ship horns floated by. Yes, I was home. Little here had changed either. Taking my bags from my driver, I stood there breathing in emotions that were far too powerful to sort right now. The hired SUV left, taking the road back to the bridge. I hoped Portman was awake. Mr. Beefy seemed like a man who didn't have time to waste.

“I thought that fancy car would be you.”

My heart jumped at the sound of my father's weathered voice. I turned to face him. He was a tall man, like me, still broad and strong. Hard work kept him lean. His face was pure coastal native. Tanned heavily by the sun, wrinkled by the years of life and loss. There was a small scar on his nose where he'd had a noncancerous melanoma removed four years ago. That had been a worrisome time. I'd made sure he had the best surgeons money could buy, followed up by some top-notch Beverly Hills cosmetic surgeons that he refused to see. Stubborn man. Guess I was a lot like him in many ways. Ways that I wasn't sure I wanted to investigate too deeply just yet, if ever.

# Chapter Three

“Hey, Dad,” I said, my throat tight. He came to me, and hugged me. My eyes closed, tears threatened, and I threw my arms around him. We’d never really been huggers. Dad was from a generation of men that didn’t do displays of affection often. He showed his love in other ways. So this was something huge and I was soaking it up. “I’m so sorry,” I coughed out.

He patted my back, cleared his throat, and then stepped back to give me a wobbly smile. His hair was still thick and dark, but there was a lot more gray in it than there had been the last time I’d seen him.

“You look good,” Dad said, and I scoffed. “No, you do. Lean and in shape. Why don’t you come inside and get set up? The Seagull Suite is open for a few weeks, so I put you there. I know you like the view of the harbor.”

My old room had been converted into an office for Dad after I’d left. I nodded, happy with the room. I did like the rooms at the back of the inn. We only had fifteen rooms in total. Ten facing the bay and five facing the front. The rooms with the views were always in high demand. The small apartment that Dad and I had shared was just off the reception area inside.

Stepping into the lobby, I was nearly bowled over by the landslide of memories. Racing up and down the stairs leading to the second floor, helping in the kitchen, running a carpet sweeper along the corridors, and stealing toilet paper from

housekeeping just for the fun of it. The warmth of a fire in the hearth hit me in the face as did the smell of garlic.

“Do you still have Emelda cooking?” I asked as Dad led me up the stairs. I nodded at an older woman behind the front desk. She was attractive, blonde bob haircut, and a wide smile for the guests she was engaged in. “Who’s at the front desk?”

“That’s Kimmy, she’s been here for a year now. And yes, Emelda is still cooking,” Dad replied as we climbed the stairs to the second floor. The walls here were white, as they were throughout the inn, and oils from local artisans hung here and there. Seascapes mostly. There were several chunky pieces of furniture spattered along the hall, handcrafted tables with flowers in some of the most unique ceramic vases I had ever seen. I even paused to inspect one of them up close. The pottery was shiny and had dragonflies painted on it in shades of dark blue, green, and rusty gold. The cut flowers from the back flower garden were lovely, but they paled in comparison to the vase holding them.

“Pretty, eh?” Dad asked, stepping up beside me, the sweet smell of pipe smoke clinging to his clothing. “Fella down at the tip makes them. Calls himself a ceramist. I thought folks that played with clay were potters.”

“Times and terms do change,” I whispered as I ran my fingers over the textured ceramic.

“Ayup,” Dad murmured. I glanced his way and caught his eye. The same dark brown eyes that I had. People always said



that there was no denying I was Marcus Kesside's boy. "Elias, I know this is hard for you..."

He paused when a young couple—maybe early thirties—exited their room. They both gaped at me. Fuck. I'd not put my shades back on after leaving the car. Not that people didn't know me, even with sunglasses and a hat.

"Oh wow, you're Elias Lake," the fellow said as if he were speaking to the Pope. I smiled and shook his hand. Dad stood there with my bag, beaming with pride, as I did my best to be polite and not engage too deeply. "I have seen every one of your movies. That last one where Connor Days tracked down those terrorists who were trafficking young women was amazing. That scene where Connor used only a box cutter to —"

His wife shuddered. "He loves your films." And she didn't. I got that a lot from women. "Are you here trying to shuck the media after that...well, that news about you?"

"I would have never pegged you as being queer," the guy said. I bristled a bit inside.

"Did you folks need anything?" Dad interjected. They soon moved on, casting looks back at me as they whispered to each other. "Sorry about that, Son."

"It's fine. There was no way to keep it a secret for long." I sighed as we padded down the hall to the last room. Dad opened the door to the suite, and I stepped inside. French doors on the other side of the room had been opened and Kesside Bay sat right out there, looking as if I could reach out

and touch the foamy brine lapping at the slate gray rocks. Several boats sat moored out in the water. People were walking along our dock, which had canoes that guests could use. Pine trees rose up along the shore, tall and spindly, some looking as if last winter's gales had lashed them strongly. Yet, no matter the weather, they still stood strong. There was probably a lesson to be learned from the mighty pines.

"I can gather the guests at dinner and ask them to keep your presence here a secret," he offered as he placed my suitcase on the wide king bed. The blue covering was a light summer blanket. Several throw pillows with crabs adorned the bed, tucked among four fat sleeping pillows. A TV was hidden in a tall corner cupboard and an upholstered chair sat in the opposite corner facing a window. The carpet was thick, silencing our steps. To the right, next to the front door, was the bathroom. If memory served the towels were white with blue trim and the shower curtain had a seaside motif complete with a lighthouse. Tell me you're in Maine without telling me you're in Maine.

I walked out to the patio. Dad followed. Each room had a small patio with a squat table and two chairs. Thankfully, the patios were separated with clapboard walls for privacy.

"That's kind of you, but there's no point," I said as I leaned my elbows on the railing and breathed in the sea. "The best we can hope for is that Portman won't allow anyone he doesn't know onto the island."

“Which he does far too often,” Dad said with a chuckle. He walked up to stand beside me. My gaze fell on a small skiff with two people heading out to sea. The bay opened up to the ocean just a few hundred feet from our dock, so residents and summer visitors were constantly heading out to sea to fish, sail, swim, or just enjoy the water. Some ducked into the jetty to linger or picnic. I smiled softly. “Elias, I know now isn’t the time, as this is a conversation that needs more than a passing nod, but I just want you to know that you are always welcome here. No matter who you date or what kind of clothes you wear. You’re my only child.”

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. My vision grew blurry, the boats bobbing on the bay muzzy as tears once again welled up.

“I know. I’m sorry I haven’t been home in so long. It’s... thank you. I’m so tired. Can we talk later?”

“Of course. You take a nap. I’ll make sure no one disturbs you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said, swiping at my eyes with the back of my hand. “I’m sure this will die down soon. I just need some time away.”

“I know, Son.” He patted my arm and then left me to my own means. I stood there staring out at the sea for a long time, trying to recall exactly why I had despised this island so much. The air was so clean here, the sky so blue. Giving up for the moment, I went inside, closed and locked the French doors, took a piss, and fell into bed. The afternoon sun falling over

the foot of the bed didn't keep me awake. My heart and mind were so exhausted that I slept through dinner.

When I woke, it was five in the morning. My mouth tasted like I'd been sucking on the bottom of one of our rental canoes. Rolling to my back, I sat up slowly, shoving the small crab pillow I'd been sleeping on aside. My clothes were tangled around me. Rising from the bed, I peeled off my shirt and socks, took a piss, and grabbed some bottled water out of the tiny fridge. I made a cup of coffee in the room, then made my way to the patio, barefooted, and threw one of the doors open. The sun was peeking over the horizon. Pinks, purples, and a hint of blue were painted over the sky, the peaceful waters reflecting the colors onto the moored boats. The tide was slowly coming back into the bay, covering up the shiny rocks coated with seaweed.

I took a tentative sip of my coffee. The green lawn below the patio was thick with dew. None of the guests seemed to be awake yet as there was only the gentle whisper of wind and the ever-present roll of the tide. Not even the seagulls were awake. It felt as if I were the only man on the planet. The soles of my feet were damp. My sight moved from the empty pool to the games corner where guests could play lawn games. There were giant checkers, cornhole boards, ring toss, horseshoes, and croquet. The staff had cleaned up things last night while the guests had been sleeping. The faintest trace of red glowing embers in the outdoor fire pit could be seen, and the redwood chairs around the pit had been rearranged. All was ready for another day of fun in the sun for the tourists.

Knowing this would be the only time I could probably spend without people gaping at me, I tossed the dregs of my coffee into the trash, changed into running shorts and a tank top, and dressed my feet. Katy was right. I could not simply let myself go. I had to believe that the studio would back me on this life twist. And if they did, I couldn't be a blob when I showed up on the set. Also, I enjoyed running. It gave me a high and right now I could use those endorphins.

Tucking my key card into the back pocket of my shorts with my cell phone, I quietly snuck down the stairs and past the check-in desk. There was a sign that said someone would be available at the desk at eight a.m. but in case of emergency...

Several numbers were listed, including my father's private line. The man gave this place his all, there was no denying that. Slipping out the front door, I thought I smelled bacon in the air. Probably that was the kitchen staff getting ready for another buffet breakfast.

My stomach rumbled at the thought of food. I'd not eaten since my flight to Bangor, and that had been a light meal on the plane. Most of which I had left untouched because yuck airplane food. I'd get a few miles in, then sneak into the kitchen to see if I could pilfer some fresh baked goods and oatmeal from Emelda. She'd always been an easy mark when I was a kid. That she was still here slaving away in that tiny kitchen made me shake my head. Why was she not retired? Why was my father not taking it easy now?

Too many questions that I had no answer to. Bending down to touch my toes and stretch, I set off at a slow pace, jogging down to the head of the driveway and then taking the left that would lead to the island's tip if I went that far. I doubted I would. That was a big run, eight miles one way, and I wasn't feeling up to that long of a run. Nothing was moving on the island other than the flutter of tiny birds waking up with the sun. I ran along the side of the road, the slap-slap-slap of my running shoes along the blacktop seeping into my psyche. Sweat started to bead up as I jogged past thick stands of red and white spruce and some larch. Birdsong grew louder as did the ocean as I neared the jetty. Slowing down, I veered off the road and down a well-worn path through the trees, stepping out into the new sun as the tide crept back into Phillippe's Point.

Casting glances at the sleepy cabins, I kept myself on the public path until I was standing on the rocky slope overlooking the Atlantic. The sea swept in gently, lapping at the mossy rocks. I dropped down to sit, sweat making my shirt cling to my back, and just let the call of the sea work its way into my harried soul. It sounded so much better now than it had when I was a teenager. More like a soothing sonnet than a death knoll.

Funny how that happened sometimes...

# Chapter Four

**I**t took me four days to find time to talk to my father alone.

Part of that was on him as he was always working. Even when he wasn't supposed to be, something or someone needed him. The staff—small as it was—always had things that only the owner could fix, reply to, or handle. Which was part of the joy of being the owner.

Part of the reason we'd not had a sit-down was on me. I'd been doing my level best to spend my time in my room reading the classics that were lined up on a shelf downstairs by the dining room, running, swimming in the pool, or sneaking into the kitchen to plague Emelda. She still adored me even if she did threaten me with a spatula when I swiped too many of her tiny blueberry crumb muffins.

Also, I was hiding. So, my being reclusive was to be expected. I ate alone for the first few days, plotting out my meal times to avoid the crush of guests in the dining hall or at the bar where dinner was pub food. We were a small inn with free breakfast. The big money foods—lobster and such—could be bought at the tip of the island. The supper fare was good though, and one could buy lobster rolls and fries, which I gluttoned on for the first few nights' meals. Nowhere on this planet was lobster any better than in Maine. Fresh out of the sea and soaked with butter...

Good thing I was running every morning at the crack of dawn. Amazingly, the guests were being polite. Some nodded and smiled as they passed me in the hall or as they left the pool, but most just looked at me with pity or thinly veiled



disgust. Whatever. What did I care if some old bastard didn't like my choice of undergarments? Fuck him and the Prius he arrived in.

Dad finally caught up with me as I was sneaking out the back door of the kitchen on my fourth day home. He was walking up the slim path as I was backing out, hands filled with warm muffins, and Emelda's coastal-flavored words raining down on me.

"...flashing that smile at me, sonny. You might think you're from away but you grew up right here on this island. I flicked your ear back then and I can do so again!" Emelda's voice scolded as I chuckled to myself and then spun to find my father standing there smiling at me.

"Chuppta?" he asked as the screen door to the kitchen swung shut.

"What am I doing?" I asked, offering him a muffin. He shook his head. Dad wasn't big on sweets. Guess I got my love of sugar from Mom. "I'm grabbing a bite after a run."

He nodded, then glanced out at the docks. "You got a minute?"

I really did not want to have this conversation, but it was overdue. I at least owed him some explanations after he had let me return in disgrace. My being here had to have ruffled a few of the conservative-minded folks' feathers.

"Sure," I replied, tossing a mini muffin into my mouth and then falling in alongside him. We padded past the games that

were all tidy and waiting for players, around the pool that I was hoping to dive into before I cooled down too much, and down to the dock. A seagull floated past. I tossed a bite of muffin out to him. He gobbled it down and looked up at us. The dock bobbed gently as we stood there, the new day warming our faces, feeding nibbles to a gull. If Emelda found out I had given the guests' muffins to a bird, she would tan my backside with that spatula of hers.

“Things been okay here for you?” Dad asked, his face seeking something out at sea, his hands clasped behind his back. He was wearing the standard uniform of all the ten people who worked here full time: a green polo with the Kesside Inn logo on the front left pocket and tan trousers.

“Ayup,” I replied and grimaced. Holy shit. Only four days here and I had picked my coastal twang back up. Guess I'd have to rehire that speech coach when I got back to L.A. That is, if I still had a job. The studio had been releasing some vague but politically correct statements to the world about me. That they were fully in support of the LGBTQ+ community and all that. Which was nice to know, but what about me? What about my career? Were they going to torch my contract for some sort of ethical breach? Elle could not get a definitive response from them, which was making her testy and me anxious.

“Good, good. I sent all the guests an email that first night you come to tell them you were here for a restorative vacation with your family.” He glanced my way. I nodded along. “They been respectful of your privacy?”

“They have yeah.” I lobbed a small bit of muffin to the gull as a brisk wind blew. “Breezing up,” I commented as I had nothing else to say.

“Calling for a strong wind today. Good day for sailing,” Dad remarked. I bobbed my head. Maybe I would take one of the small boats out and paddle to the jetty. Burn off all these damn muffins I was inhaling. “Elias, I know this is a tough time and all.”

“Mm,” I hummed around a mouthful of blueberry goodness.

“When did you know you were gay?” There. It was out. Being a Mainer, I was shocked he had let it go as long as he had. Folks around here were generally pretty direct about things.

“When I was fourteen,” I replied. “Well, I knew I was different then. Something about me wasn’t like the other boys. I never wanted to touch boobs.”

“Right, right. You never said a word to me, Elias. Never once in over thirty-five years.” I chucked the rest of my pilfered muffin to the gull. He was appreciative. My hunger had suddenly disappeared. “I’m not scolding you, Son. Far from it. I just guess it hurts to know that you held this secret inside you. I wouldn’t of turned you out to sea, boy.”

“I know, Dad, I know. It was just...” I closed my eyes and let the rolling sea under the dock ease away the tension. “It was just that I felt that you’d be disappointed in me. *More* disappointed, I should say.”

He touched my sweaty bicep. My eyes flew open, and I met his confused gaze. “When was I ever disappointed in you?”

“When I said I wanted to be an actor and not run this place,” I confided, the sea breeze drying my skin. A tiny shudder ran down my spine. A swim now and then a shower would be perfect. Then I could hide until dinnertime in my room, reading and letting the world hopefully forget about the tiny frilly briefs I’d been seen wearing. Fucking twink. I was so done with them. Next lover I took was going to be a beefy lumberjack daddy type.

“Oh,” Dad said. He knew I had him on that one. “Okay, well, sure, I was a little downhearted about that. Your mother and me we worked so hard to get this place successful for you.”

“I know.” I wished I had something to do with my hands now, so I shoved them into the pockets of my running shorts. The gull paddled back and forth waiting for more muffins. “And I wish I had the love of innkeeping that you two had, but I don’t. I adore this place but my heart is on the stage, in front of the cameras. That’s why I didn’t tell you that I was gay. I’d already let you down once...”

“Elias,” he whispered, reaching out to drape an arm around my rounded shoulders. “You being gay don’t upset me at all.” He pressed a kiss to my sodden hair. I had to choke down the ball of emotion wedged in my throat. “And I don’t care one whit about what kind of things you wear under your pants. I know people who done far worse things than pulling on a pair

of ladies under bits.” I nodded my head. Speaking wasn’t happening right now. Dad gave my shoulder a pat before letting his arm rest around the back of my neck. “I feel like I did a poor job as a parent because you didn’t feel comfortable enough to talk to me.”

“Dad, no,” I said, turning to face him. The anguish in his eyes about undid me. “You were a great father. The best father a son could have asked for. It’s all me. And what I perceived to be what you felt. I should have opened up. I’m terrible at being honest about the really important things.”

“Water runs downhill, Son. A million times a day, I wish I’d told your mother that I loved her. Sure, I said it on occasion, but I should have said it every day, not just on anniversaries. Don’t you make that mistake, Elias. Don’t you store up things like me. Be more like your mother. Tell folks you love them every day. God knows we don’t know when our last words will be. Make sure they’re filled with love.”

“I love you, Dad,” I choked out and then pulled him into my arms. He stiffened for a second, but then he melted into the embrace, his chest working hard as he battled with emotions that had been packed away for far too many years. “I’m sorry for not telling you.”

“It’s okay, Son. It’s out now.” He pulled back. “It’s out now and we’re going to be starting over. Just like we do when a gale blows up a mighty breeze. We gather up the boards and shingles that were blown off and we start rebuilding, one nail

at a time, until we got something even better than we did before things were all stoved up.”

Stoved up. Yep, that was me right now. Battered and bruised.

“We’re going to need a shit ton of nails to fix this storm blow, Dad,” I coughed out and got a gruff snort of a laugh.

“Got plenty in the shed,” he stated as his phone buzzed. “Son of a bitch,” he grumbled, checked his phone, and rolled his eyes. “Someone at the main desk needs to talk to me about billing. Kimmy says they got their ass up.”

“Go straighten them out, Dad. I’m going to take a few laps and then maybe dig around in the supply shed for some oars. Take one of these canoes out around the jetty for the day.”

“That sounds fine, Son. Good to see you doing what you used to do as a kid.” He gave me a smile and a rare peck on the cheek. “Enjoy yourself, Elias. Maybe you can join me for dinner?”

“I’d like that.” He grinned widely before ambling back up to the inn. I took a few moments for myself on the dock, enjoying the motion of the tides under my feet as my eyes went skyward. Nothing to be seen but puffy white clouds and an endless expanse of azure sky. A perfect day lay ahead. I could feel it.

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After lunch I took a short sabbatical on the patio, just me and a well-read copy of *Mr. Midshipman Hornblower* by C.S. Forester. I might have drifted off a bit as the hardcover novel sliding to the white wooden floorboards startled me awake. Knowing that if I slept now, I'd have a terrible time falling asleep tonight, I tossed my book back onto one of the nightstands and grabbed my sneakers, wallet, a yellow ball cap, and some sunglasses. Off I went on a mission to find some oars in the nautical supply shed down by the docks.

First, I had to scare up a key. Dad passed that over as he and Kimmy were enjoying a late lunch in his room. Both seemed a little flustered when I'd walked in without knocking, but I fluffed it off and hustled down to the dock. Once the door was unlocked, I had to dig around to locate a paddle. One. Then a mouse ran across my foot so there was five minutes of chaos as I tried to use the paddle to dispose of the rodent, to no avail. When the mouse got away, I took a breather and then dove back into the messy shed to find the other paddle. I never did find it, but I did come across my old three-speed bike. It was covered with a painters cloth tarp that someone—Mr. Mouse, I was sure—had chewed holes in. Whipping the cover off stirred up a cloud of dust that floated out the open door. Guests from the inn could be heard nearby. They were probably wondering what the hell that queer movie star was doing in the sea shed.

I ran my fingers over the handlebars. The bike was still in decent shape. The tires were a little soft, but I could pump them up with ease using the old hand pump in the corner, and

the seat was intact. A big middle finger to the mouse. Overall, it was pretty much as I recalled it being with a few spots of rust here and there. Feeling a rush of nostalgia, I hurried to inflate the tires and then chucked the hand pump back in the corner where it landed on some busted lobster cages. The pile of multicolored lobster buoys tumbled to the ground. I rushed to slam the door and lock it lest the mess swallow me whole.

I pocketed the shed key, slung my leg over the seat, and started riding. I'd not ridden a bike since I was sixteen other than a stationary bike during my workouts with Katy. Once we get our driver's licenses, we tend to shove our bikes into a shed and forget about them. Which was a rather fitting description for this entire island. My childhood was stored away in a tiny corner of my mind, only to be revisited when I was melancholy and in need of comfort. Guess I was super down in the dumps as I'd not only pulled out some memories to succor me, I'd flown across the country right into my daddy's arms.

"Nothing so wrong with that," I mumbled to myself as I pedaled past the inn and out onto the main road. Sometimes a soul needed a hug from your parent.

I took the left, my legs working steadily, the salty air blowing my hair from my face. The woods on the right were cool and shady, inviting as I grew hotter. I pressed on, though, checking out the small cabins dotting the forest as well as the shore. Many—most I should say—had expensive cars in the drives. One small yellow one caught my eye. It was back in the trees, the bright sunflower color peeking through the pines.



I did not recall a yellow cabin, but then again, a lot of these summer homes had probably changed hands a dozen times since my youth. Still, the yellow color was friendly and welcoming, cheerful even. Whoever vacationed there now had chosen a good shady spot for their getaway. There was an older white Nissan coated with pine needles parked by the cabin.

The island was filling up for the Fourth of July next week. You wouldn't be able to swing a cat without hitting an off islander on that long holiday weekend. The inn would be filled to capacity, and the staff harried. Maybe I'd be back in L.A. by then and free up one of the best rooms we had. Dad had. Not me. I was not an innkeeper. My blood was thick with greasepaint.

The miles flew by, the ride slightly downhill, the sea breeze ruffling my hair. The dense pines began to thin out as I got closer to the tip, which is what we called the southernmost end of the island. Trees gave way to docks and cabins changed to stores. I slowed as I entered the tiny town of Kesside Bay and saw the sidewalks packed with people. The Kesside Bay Playhouse was the first building on the left. My heart clenched yet again when I stopped outside the poor old gal to study her. The elements had done a number on the soft blue paint on the clapboards. The door hinges were rusted, and the ticket booth was dated. This was only the outside. I shuddered to think what the interior was like. Why had this been let go? Did people not want the arts to thrive?

*No, stupid, they do not. Why do you think they're cutting arts programs in all the schools.*

Right. Well, shit. I stood there, shades on, cap down low, straddling my old bike, deep in thought. I'd make a mental note to send the playhouse committee a substantial donation. I had the cash. This way, the theater would survive and the plays could continue. Feeling rather proud of my generous nature, I slid off the bike and walked it down the skinny sidewalk. Most of the stores were new, but a few were old names. Rowdy Ralph's Pub had been here forever. Served the best crab cakes in all of Maine. That was no lie. I peeked through the front windows to find the eatery packed full. The toot of a boat horn pulled my attention from the pub. One of three tour boats was backing out of the dock on the far side of the tip. There were whale watching tours, deep sea fishing excursions, and a boat that sailed the coast looking for seals and seabirds. For the less adventurous souls. I took a moment to enjoy the sound of the boats and tourists. Gulls vied with smaller seabirds for scraps of food along the roadway.

Things were hopping. A bell rang out. I glanced at the small church that sat smack dab in the middle of town. The Kesside Bay Non-Denominational chapel was bright white with a tall steeple and a lovely brass bell that rang out every hour on the hour. Grinning to myself, I took a step forward with the intent of dropping by the church in the hopes of finding my old childhood buddy Billy Morton, Pastor Morton, I should say, when I spied a tall man across the street. He was nothing out of the ordinary. Just some dude wearing a blue ball cap, shorts,

and a white tee with a big sailfish. His ears were flying elephant enormous. Around his neck was a camera. Nothing abnormal about that since ninety percent of the tourists here had cameras of some sort. The little coastal hamlet was quaint, after all. I shrugged, then chided myself for being paranoid when the camera rose from his chest to land on me.

Fuck. Mother fucking fuckers. I lowered my head and elbowed my way through the throngs of people, hurrying past the popcorn shop and a gift store. Someone exiting the pottery shop left the door open, and I rushed in, bringing my bike with me.

“Uhm, sir, you can’t bring that bike inside. There are bike racks out front that you can—”

I spun around to see who was speaking to me. Oh. Oh, okay, so that was a pleasant surprise. He was a big bear of a man. At least six foot six and full of muscle. Great, now I sounded like that old Men at Work song. Only that was six foot four, I think. Whatever. It was no lie though...the guy was jacked. He was wearing a pink T-shirt and a leather apron that was coated with dried clay and specks of paint. His jeans were faded from blue to white and his work boots were soft leather which were also coated with clay and paint. His hair was long on the top, short on the sides, and pulled back into a tiny man bun. I would have scoffed, but I didn’t for two reasons: one, it looked good on the sky-eyed man, and two, he could probably beat me to a pulp.

I'd never known I was into the lumberjack bear sort, but this blond-and-silver bearded hunk sure had my attention. Then the bells on the door rang. I flung my sight from the man in the apron to a woman coming into the shop.

"Sorry, I just..." I glanced around the shop, looking for a back entrance. "There's a man out there threatening me."

Okay, so it was a lie. The big man's sight flew from me to the front door. "Does he have a weapon?"

"No, worse. A camera." The three people in the cramped storefront gaped at me. "I just need somewhere to hide until he's gone and if he sees my bike out front, he'll know I came in here."

"Back here," the man in the apron said, leading me carefully through a shop packed to the rafters with pottery. I chose each step with caution. There were tables and shelves filled with ceramic dishes, urns, vases, bowls, and just about anything you could create out of clay. "You can wait here until your ex moves on."

I started to explain that the man was not my ex but a paparazzi scum ball when the tiny gold bells over the door chimed once more. My savior moved me with speed into a back room with folding tables and chairs and yet more shelves. Each shelf held all kinds of works, some still gray looking, some half-painted, and some completed. Or what I would say were completed. I knew jack and shit about pottery other than a few scenes from a famous movie about a ghost.

Two kilns sat in the middle of the floor, both packed with ceramics ready to be baked. An older refrigerator was humming along in the corner.

“Stay here and I’ll have a look outside. What does he look like?” the potter asked as he led me to a chair and then eased my bike from my hands. It looked puny compared to him.

“Uh. Dark hair, scraggly mustache, blue ball cap, white shirt with a sailfish, cargo shorts. Pricey camera. Long distance lens.” I sat down with a huff. “Thank you for doing this...what is your name?”

“Gibson Vale. I own this shop.” He smiled down at me. I gave him a wobbly sort of smiley-grimace in return. “Just sit here. I’ll go take a look.”

He placed my bike by a small back door and then slipped back into the front of the store, his deep voice upbeat as he talked to the customers perusing his wares. I rubbed my face with sweaty palms, angry as hell that someone had found me. I mean, sure, it wouldn’t be hard to track me down. My bio was public knowledge. It was right there on my website/fan page. All someone had to do was spend thirty seconds on Google. Still, it pissed me off that I’d had exactly four fucking days of peace before some jackass with a Pentax showed up. Wasn’t I allowed some private time? Jesus Christ, just because I was an actor didn’t mean I wasn’t entitled to privacy!

The chit-chat out front died off as the bells over the door rang out. I tipped my head this way and that but heard nothing. Rising slowly from the folding chair, I made my way to the

door separating this back area of the store—where perhaps he gave lessons given the number of chairs—and peeked into the showroom. Nothing. No one was here. Some soft classic rock floated around the area from speakers hidden somewhere in the room. Sunshine flowed through the big panes of glass facing the street. Gibson was nowhere to be seen. I did take note that the OPEN sign on the door was now flipped to CLOSED.

The sound of someone coming in the door behind me had me whirling around. I may have squeaked a bit, but that peep of fear would never be spoken of. I did have a reputation as an ultra-masculine swaggering action hero to—oh wait, no, I didn't. Not anymore. Now I was known as that queer who likes to wear Victoria's Secret.

“Hey,” Gibson softly said as he swept through the back door and then stepped inside, filling the room with pink cotton and wide shoulders. Dirty blond hair fell into his pale blue eyes, several strands having escaped during his time outside in the wind. “So, I didn't see anyone close by that fit the description of your ex. But that being said, would you like me to call the Maine State Police barracks over on the mainland? Stalking is a serious situation, and you were obviously really scared.”

“No, no, it's not an ex, it's...” I removed my ball cap and sunglasses and waited for him to gasp in shock at having a movie star in his tiny little pottery shop. I waited. And waited. And waited. Nothing. No squeal or exclamations of joy. Nothing other than real concern on his ruggedly handsome face. It was a real face. Lived in. Showing signs of life lived,

wind and sun, joys and sorrows. Not like the faces that I saw in Hollywood on the daily. Some of those faces were so full of Botox, they resembled mannequins more than people. “You don’t know who I am?”

He shrugged a thick shoulder as he took a few wary steps closer. “Sorry, no. Do you play for one of the Boston sports teams?”

“I...no. I’m Elias Lake.” Crickets. “Star of the high action *Daze of Retribution* movies.” Nada. Huh. “*Daze of Justice? Daze of Mayhem? Daze of Avengement?* No? None of those ring a bell?”

“I’m sorry, no. I’m more of a book person,” he replied and shoved a big hand through his wind-blown hair, unconsciously freeing the longer mop on top that fell right into his eyes. Okay, that there was sexy as fuck. “So, if you’re not hiding from an ex-lover...”

“Oh, sorry, right. I think it was a reporter.” I padded back to one of the tables and dropped my weary ass into a folding chair, letting out a breath that puffed my cheeks. “He aimed the lens right at me.”

“Ah, well, could he have just been a fan of your films? They sound riveting.”

I tossed the ceramist a look. Was that some subtle sarcasm? “No, well, maybe.” I rubbed my hands over my face. “Maybe. Hell, maybe it was just some mainlander trying to take shots of the shops to send home.”

Suddenly, now that the rush of fear was past, I was feeling incredibly stupid. “Could have been.” He went to one of the shelves, pulled out some tubs of clay, and then used his foot to yank out a chair across the table from me, easing his large frame down and settling those pretty eyes on me. “Or it could have been some reporter trying to get some exclusive photos. Are you here on vacation?”

He slid a tub of green clay over to me. Not knowing why exactly, I took the lid off and scooped some out. I pretended I didn’t care that he had given me clay for kids. Whatever. I rolled it into a ball as I talked.

“No, it’s...well, yeah, in a way.” I liked his face. The way his beard was not just one color but a mix of dark gold, some silver, and some brown. That wild hair was also really attractive. It needed to be cut and trimmed, as did the beard, but that just added to his appeal. He was not coiffed and waxed to the gods like so many in Tinsel Town were. This was a manly man. A real manly man, not a fake manly man. I bet he didn’t have something lacy under his flannel or denim. But I did. I had been wearing all the pretties since that day. Why not? Having lace next to my skin made me feel good inside. “I had some bad press about a week ago and came home to the island to let things die down.”

“Oh, so you’re a native?” I nodded. “I just moved here about five years ago from Illinois.” He wasn’t schooled at hiding his feelings like I was. I picked up on a dark shadow of grief move across his face.



“I am, sorry, yes. My real name is Elias Kesside.” That made his eyes flare. “Yeah, we’re distant relatives of old lusty Phillippe, not that my lineage means much anymore.” I rolled the clay out into a long snake, curling it around on itself. “I left the island when I was eighteen with the acting bug in my blood. Took me a few years in L.A. waiting tables to finally get chosen for commercial work, then a sitcom, also some soap opera work as a young doctor with a large libido and an evil twin.” That made him chuckle. It was a pleasant sound. “Then my agent Elle got me a read for a new action series a small studio was making. They’d wanted someone new, someone handsome, someone bold and macho.”

“And that was you?” he asked, his gaze intent but kind, his fingers pinching his glob of blue clay into a perfect little teacup. How did he make such small things with such big fingers?

“And that was me.” I made another snake. It was really the only thing that I could make while the words flowed from my mouth as we sat there in that stuffy room like someone had turned on a tap. I told him about my career as I rolled out a herd of snakes. No, not a herd. What is a group of snakes called? A clowder? No, that was cats. A nest? Well, whatever, I had eight snakes in front of me by the time I realized I had been jabbering to this good-looking stranger for over forty minutes. “Shit, why didn’t you tell me to go?”

“I was enjoying your conversation,” he replied, placing his tiny teacup in front of me with a warm smile that pulled a soft

grin from me. “You can discover more about a person from an hour of play than from a year of conversation.”

“Ah. That’s a good quote. Did you just think of that?” I wiped my hands on my shorts as I rose.

“No, that was Plato. I’m just a humble ex-philosophy professor who likes to toss famous words from great thinkers about to make myself sound erudite.”

I gaped. What the *hell* was a professor of philosophy doing selling vases—and they were very pretty vases, make no mistake but still—to tourists on a dinky island off the coast of Maine? This burly bearded man had some secrets.

*Don’t we all?*

True. “Well, thank you for hiding me in your back room,” I said as he got to his feet and motioned to a sink in the corner. My hands were pretty dirty. “I’ll wash up and let you get back to business. Oh,” I tacked on when I reached the waist-high sink, turning to look at him ambling toward me. “Let me reimburse you for the sales lost while you had the door closed.”

“Nonsense, that was my lunch hour anyway,” he stated, sliding up beside me, his bare arm brushing mine as he reached for a bar of dark green soap sitting in a soap dish.

“You have lunch at three in the afternoon?” I asked and got a small quirky smile that set my tummy to tingling.

“Call it a second lunch,” he replied with a wink.

“You’re far too tall for a Hobbit,” I parried and got a nod. God that wild hair of his really needed someone to fix it for him. Gather it back into that tiny little man bun that so few could wear as well as he did.

“Fan of Tolkien?”

“I am yes.” Gibson handed me the soap. It felt like some sort of grand gesture but how could it be? I mean, it was only soap. Still, he had let me use it first. That was polite. “Not as big as say Stephen Colbert, and no, I’ve not been in any of the films although I auditioned for each one, but I’m a fan of fantasy. Knights and elves, dragons, grand adventures.”

“I can hear the zeal in your voice,” he said, his elbow touching mine as I lathered and then handed the slippery bar back to him. “So why are you making movies that don’t ignite your passion?”

I opened my mouth to reply with my standard studio reply of “I love the bold masculinity of Connor Days. He’s the last of a dying breed of male action heroes,” but I just couldn’t seem to cough that dredge up for the millionth time. Mostly because it wasn’t true.

“I don’t know,” I thoughtfully replied and shoved my hands under the water to rinse.

“Perhaps you should ponder on why you’re not making art that expresses your inner self while you’re on your sabbatical from the press. Art should never be driven by the capitalistic need for money but for the sheer joy of brush to canvas, quill to paper, or images to celluloid.”

“Or clay to pot,” I said, and he smiled down at me, his soft China-blue eyes glowing.

“Or clay to pot. Dig down to find the essence of your art and you’ll discover the real Elias.”

“Wow, that was deep,” I remarked, drying my hands on my shorts.

“Sorry, I tend to forget that the world is not remotely interested in my rambling thoughts and lengthy dissertations on religion versus ethics anymore. I left that behind years ago. Now, I’m just a humble potter with a pet seagull and a tiny yellow cabin on a tinier island.”

Ah. Aha. So that yellow cabin was his. I wasn’t the least bit surprised for some reason. He was the sort of man that tried to fit in but always stood out. I assumed. That was pretty presumptuous of me to say since I’ve only known him for an hour.

Still, he fascinated me. Not only his looks appealed, which was a new twist to my usual preferences, but his mind as well. I found myself wishing I could sit down to listen to him lead some philosophical discussion. I’d never gone to college. Acting lessons were about all that I could afford during those lean first years in California. Many a time I had had to choose between eating and acting lessons. The lessons always won. I could eat at work. You’d be amazed how much food people leave on their plates.

“Pet seagull?” I had to ask simply to keep him talking. Even as he was now maneuvering me to the back door as politely as

he could, I wanted to engage him more.

“Well, she’s not so much a pet as a squatter. Every year she makes a nest in a pot that I planned to use for oregano. So, her name is Oregano, and she commands the yard.”

“Do you have a new pot for your herbs?” I asked as the back door opened, allowing the cooling air off the sea to sweep in.

“I do, several.” He rolled my bike outside and waited for me to step out into the sun. “I like to cook and give boring lectures to Oregano in the evenings. Captive audience and all that.”

I had a mad moment when I considered asking him if he would like company. More company than a cranky seagull, but I bit back that impulse. In matters of the heart, I tended to leap before looking, which sometimes left me bloody and battered along a steep cliff with my ex looking down—laughing manically—at me while sharing intimate images to the world.

“I hope you have a lovely meal,” I made myself say. Gibson inclined his head regally. “Thank you for everything. Letting me hide out here when it was probably nothing.”

“It’s always best to err on the side of caution. I had several students come to me over the years asking for a walking buddy to their dorms for one reason or another. I’m rather an imposing sight, according to some.” He seemed amused at that description. “I hope your stay on the island is a restful one, and that your future in films prospers. I’ll make sure to find one of your movies and stream it.”

We shook hands. I liked his grip. Truthfully, there wasn't much I didn't like about Gibson Vale, ceramist and savior of skittish students and actors. I pedaled back to the inn as if the hounds of Hell were snapping at my rear tire. Along the way I saw only birds, a red squirrel, and a small band of joggers who did double takes as I raced past a la Lance Armstrong.

I sighed heavily when I locked the door to my room behind me. Even with a marvelous view and amazing food being delivered at my beck and call, this inn was beginning to feel more and more like a prison every day. I was growing to despise the world and all those upon it other than my dad, Emelda, who kept me well fed, and of course, the potter who had talked me through a potential anxiety attack. Those were the only three. Oh, and Elle. And Katy. Five. Five people I liked. The rest could go take a long walk off an incredibly short pier. I padded out to the patio to watch the boats bobbing on the waves and eyed that stumpy dock that the world could stride off and smiled at the image of my ex leading the pack.

# Chapter Five

I was still covered with sweat and feeling rather pungent when my phone buzzed in my side pocket. I slowed my gait, easing down into a light jog so I could see who was calling at the crack of dawn. Oh. My agent. Okay, this was not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

It was the middle of the night back in California. Fuck.

“Hey,” I panted into my cell, easing off the quiet roadway into the drive for the inn. Guests’ cars were parked along the left and right, and the grounds were quiet except for a large delivery truck idling to my left. The stink of diesel fumes was killing my whole “run with nature and cleanse your chakras” vibe. “Are you drunk dialing your clients?”

“I wish I were drunk,” Elle replied, her tone sullen. Well, double fuck.

“Hold on,” I said, walking around the truck. A burly type of man gave me a long look as he toted in baskets of fresh shrimp. I heard Emelda in the kitchen barking out orders to stop and let her examine the shrimp before putting them into the cooler. My stomach growled. I wasn’t sure if it was hunger or nerves. Time would tell. With the truck and fumes behind me, I stopped to rest beside a small butterfly garden that overlooked the games area. The bees were already up and at it, but the butterflies were sleeping in. Standing with my sweaty back to the inn, I stared out at the sea and drew in a steadying breath. “Okay, tell me what is going on.”

The sound of ice cubes clinking in a glass tickled my ear. Wow, that was not a good sign. Elle wasn’t much of a drinker



for the most part, so if she were knocking back a vodka on the rocks to get through this call...

I braced myself.

“Well, we’ve finally heard from legal. They’re reading over the fine details of your current contract closely.”

“Okay...”

More ice cube sounds. “Morality clauses are tricky things, Elias. Yours is narrow because the studio felt you were a reliable talent with no pings of any kind when they did a background check and your reputation was stellar.”

“Was.”

“Sorry?”

“Was. You used the past tense. My reputation *was* stellar.” I let my legs fold. Flop. There I sat beside the butterfly garden in disgusting running clothes, staring out at the sea as if it held all the answers.

She cleared her throat. “It’s taken a bit of a hit, Elias.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I shoved my hand into my lank hair as my calves started to cramp. That’s what not stretching after a run does. I unfolded my legs and reached out to touch my toes with one hand. “Go on.”

“Your reputation gave us room to negotiate a rather narrow clause the last time we sat down with legal. If you recall, before we went into those negotiations, I strongly recommended that we sit down and discuss your sexuality and

tastes with the studio at that time. That we perhaps have you come out in a controlled way that the studio could get behind with a major push of PR to quell what turned out to be the wildfire we now are trying to extinguish.”

“Are you scolding me?” My toes started to curl painfully. “Ouch, fuck!” I jumped back to my feet to walk off the cramping. “You do realize that it is utter bullshit that anyone has to come out, right?!”

I stormed down to the large chess set and kicked the queen to her side. Fucking world. I hated that this was even a thing. What did it matter who I took to my bed or what I wore under my clothes? What the fuck did that have to do with my acting skills?!

“Okay, Elias, I know this is upsetting, but don’t kill the messenger here.” Her voice was as cold as her vodka on the rocks.

“Sorry, right, yeah. I should have listened to you, but it was just so fucking scary.” I bent down to the right of the queen and then lifted up a smaller white pawn. I felt a kinship with the pawn for some reason, so I toted it down to the dock as Elle poured herself another drink.

“Look, I’m sorry for being a witch. I’m exhausted, and one of my other clients just had to be bailed out of the L.A. lockup after a public indecency incident. Why the hell can’t men keep their dicks in their pants?”

“That is a question for the ages,” I mumbled as I pulled off my sweaty shoes and socks.

“Yeah, I know.” She blew out a long, weary breath. “It sucks. This whole thing is utter bullshit, I agree. I don’t care what you do in the privacy of your home, Elias. And millions of fans don’t either.” I snorted. The last time I dared to check into social media, it had not looked like a love fest on my Facebook page. “But the studio does care. This kind of uproar is going to affect the success of any of your future projects. Your target audience is straight males.”

“And they are pissed,” I said, letting my toes dangle in the foamy water lapping up around the bouncy dock. She didn’t reply. There was no need. Her firm was keeping a close eye on my social media accounts. They could see the smoke billowing out of the dumpster just as clearly as I could. “So, what did legal say? Exactly?”

“They’re examining exactly when you triggered the clause. They are asking some rather pointed questions of me about your past relationships and when it was you decided to be a gay cross-dresser.”

“Jesus Christ,” I groaned and then listed to the left. The white pawn and I both fell to our sides. It hurt, but I let my head rest on the round base of the large chess piece. “Did you explain—”

“Yes, I did. I played Lady Gaga and everything. They’re quite disgruntled that you signed with them years ago knowing that you were of this persuasion—their words, not mine—and kept it a secret while they trusted in your reputation. They also mentioned that triggering the morality clause is reason enough

for them to terminate your contract.” I wanted to cry. Or shout. Or punch something. Maybe all three. “It’s a lot, I know. But there are options they might be willing to offer when they decide to cut loose. I’m praying that they do not come after you for collateral damage. I don’t think they will. What I think they *may* do is sever your current contract with partial pay. Termination of the agreement with a hefty severance package would be a good thing, Elias. They’re going to have to walk a fine line here because they cannot be seen as firing you because you’re gay. I’ve already had calls from several LGBTQ legal groups that are frothing at the mouth to leap on the studio.”

“Yay for my fellow queers,” I muttered.

“You jest, but that is a pressure that the studio must take into consideration.”

“Ugh, I’m an asshole. I’m sorry. Go on.”

“You’re fine. This whole shitstorm makes me want to get drunk and go kick your ex in the face.” I snorted in miserable commiseration. “So, what we’re going to do is keep on them to see your current contract through, then they can cut ties if they wish. We will not fight them. They’ve given you tons of money in exchange for a successful movie franchise. Once you’re free from Four Winds, we’ll start shopping you around to other studios. Less uptight ones. I know of at least one in Manhattan that would love to sign you.”

My cheek was starting to ache. I slowly sat up just as the sun peeked over the horizon.

“Fine, yeah, that’s fine.” I felt as if Mola Ram had pulled my heart out of my chest and there was no Dr. Jones to stop the sacrifice. “I’m tempted to sue that rat fuck bastard for all he has.”

“Rat fuck bastard being your rat fuck bastard ex?”

“Yeah.” I swung my feet left and right, toying with the soft tide ebbing and flowing.

“Well, that is certainly an option to explore, but I’d not do that right now. The studio is trying to play all of this down and if we filed suit, it would blow right back up again. Your name wasn’t mentioned at the top of the news hour today, so that’s progress.”

Wow, that was progress. Go me. “Is Paul in on all of this?”

“Of course, he’s sitting in on all the calls and advising as your lawyer. You can call him later today for his thoughts on things, but I’m pretty sure we’re both in alignment for the moment. Stay there and stay out of the limelight.”

“Be a good, quiet little gay,” I mumbled and then shoved the pawn into the sea. That had felt really good. Then I realized my father would wonder why I’d fed his beloved lawn chess piece to the sharks. That was a sadness that I couldn’t handle on top of the mountain of grief that I’d brought with me. “I have to save a pawn. Keep me informed. I’m sorry all of this blew up on us. I really thought I could trust him.”

“I know. Love makes us do stupid shit. Keep your head down. I’ll be in touch. This will all end well, Elias. Your team

will make sure of that.”

I smiled even though she couldn't see it. My team. Team Elias Lake. Rah-rah-rah.

I tossed my phone to the dock, slipped into the water, and saved the pawn from floating out to sea with the tide. Actually, I used it as a floatation device and bobbed around in the water for a good long time, letting the sea push and pull at me until some kid came down to the dock and asked me if I was playing chess with a mermaid. I handed the pawn up to him.

“Nope, no mermaids,” I said as I passed it up. He stared at me, his nose burnt and peeling, and then ran off with a plastic pawn as big as he was. Ah, to be young and carefree. To still believe in mermaids and superheroes. Pity time had to march on to strip us of the things that we once believed in so strongly. Right now, I'd be all kinds of tickled to play chess with a mermaid.

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Suffering from a funk the size of Captain Norville's whale watching boat, I biked the island that day. Starting at the inn, I rode up to the bridge, parking to enjoy the sailboats and small bass boats passing by as the bridge swung open and shut. After a slim sailboat with a bunch of rowdy passengers moved past, I biked over the bridge, thrilled at the sound of the metal bridgework under my bike tires. Guess some things never got old.

Portman eyed me warily as I parked my bike by his shack. I took off my shades but left my ball cap on just in case someone pulled up. I really *was* trying to lie low.

“*Bonjour, mon Capitan!*” I called with as much cheer as I could muster, which wasn’t much. “Do you happen to keep a log of any sort?” He slammed the window shut. I rolled my eyes and rapped on the streaky glass. “I can see you in there.”

His lips puckered. The window flew open. “I got no time for nonsense.”

“I understand. It’s been incredibly busy today.” If you called three boats in two hours busy.

“Ah-yup.”

“Do you keep a logbook of all the cars that go back and forth over the bridge?” I asked again with a bit more information for him to chew on.

“Don’t need a book. I got things all locked down tight in here.” He tapped his bicorn hat.

“You keep the logs in your hat?” I asked just to twist his knickers.

“In my head. I keep things in my head.” He glanced around me. I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see a car, but there was nothing but two gulls staring at us. “Kick them in the ass.”

“If I kick them in the ass, will you tell me if you’ve seen anyone suspicious in the past week?” He mulled over that for a moment and then nodded. I walked up to the gulls. “Beat it,

guys,” I said as I waved my hands. They took to wing and then landed on top of his shack. I walked back to the window. “Okay, they’re gone.”

“You didn’t kick them in the ass.”

“It’s a new law that you can’t kick seagulls in the ass. Seagull rights groups are up in arms. All you can do is ask them politely to leave the premises.” He stared at me as if I had a square dancing cat on my head. “Hand to God.”

“Stupid laws. Yeah, I seen two cars that weren’t islanders. One was that bread truck that carries all them buns to the inn. He didn’t have a pass. Said he was new. I figured the baker on the mainland would supply passes to them to cross my bridge. Told him I’d let him go this time if he gave me a bagel.”

Great. So the guardian of Kesside Isle could be persuaded to let creepy people in with an onion bagel.

“You said two.” I held up a pair of fingers.

“Yep, two. The other was a green car. One man with a funny accent.”

“Funny accent. Do you know what kind of accent it was?”

“Not Mainer.”

Well, that narrowed it down. I scrubbed my face so hard it hurt.

“What did this guy with the not Maine accent drive?”

“Green car. I said that already. This is why you kids don’t make good bridge supervisors because you don’t pay no mind



to nothing unless it's on one of your cellular phones.”

I pulled my sunglasses back on. “Sorry, I meant what make was his car?”

“Green.” That cleared things up. Not. “Didn’t have a pass. Tried to talk me into letting him go over without one. I told him to take his fancy-ass camera back to the mainland and not come back without a pass.”

Fancy-ass camera. That piqued my attention. “Did he say *why* he wanted to come over?”

“Who?”

“The guy with the green car and fancy camera?”

“There ain’t no cameras here. There was once, back in the late eighties, but the gulls snuck in one night and stole the batteries.” I stared at him blankly. He stared back. “You got a pass?”

I showed him the tattered one from my wallet and then got back on my bike and rode along the western side of the island, trying my best to work out why seagulls would steal batteries from a security camera. There was nothing like a morning chat with Portman to muddy your mind. Chest still packed full of gross feelings of “woe is me” and “my life is a cesspool” I rode along while playing at being Miss Marple. Pedaling along at a snail’s pace, I checked out every vehicle parked at every camp. Not one was green. Not that I really assumed that the mystery picture taker would still be here—if, in fact, he had been trying to snap images of me—so scoping out every abode

was dumb. And probably made me look like a stalker type. Once that realization hit me, I picked up speed, keeping to the right of the thin road, the busy town of Kesside Bay coming up on me.

Riding through the tip was nearly impossible earlier in the day, but now the tourists were just waking up so Main Street was clear. I glided past the dock for the whale watching boat, stopping for a moment to watch someone on the chunky vessel hosing off the decks in preparation for new passengers. I passed a small art gallery that sold mostly seascapes—shocking I know—as well as a candy store, a shoe shop, and the Clipper’s Call Hotel where guests were sitting on their balconies sipping coffee and planning out their day. I’d skipped breakfast due to being a sad sack, so my stomach rumbled when I rode past the closed pizza parlor.

I stopped for a moment outside the pottery store. Sea Song Ceramist, it was called. I’d not paid much mind to the name when I’d ducked in to hide from...well, from a tourist taking a shot of a fucking pelican probably. While the name of the shop had been a blank, the owner certainly had not been. Gibson Vale had stayed with me, appearing here and there in my dreams even as we played at being the leads from *Ghost*. Yes, I may have gone searching for that movie last night. And yes, I was Demi to his Patrick. I did love to have men hug and cuddle me. Most didn’t. Seemed they all felt that Elias Lake would be a top because I blew things up for a living. I didn’t blow up things. The pyrotechnicians made the boom. I just walked away from the explosion looking tough.

There was a wide variety of handmade gifts in the front windows. A place setting for two with a white base and purple flowers painted on the edges caught my eye. There was a dinner plate, a soup bowl, a bread plate, and a small cup for wine, perhaps. Maybe coffee, although there was no handle. Yep, probably wine. I liked the color. Purple was one of my favorite colors, but I didn't wear it much unless it was something soft and satiny under my clothes. Hidden away I could indulge myself in softer, more traditionally feminine colors like lilac, peach, bubblegum pink, or baby blue. I had a tiny set on today. A periwinkle bralette and panty combo. It helped to lift my spirits a bit after the call from Elle. God knows I had needed something because that episode of sliding into the sea with a big plastic pawn had rattled me after I'd slunk out of the ocean. Had I really wanted to just float out to sea? Maybe. No. I didn't know. And that had really shaken me, so I'd pulled on something pretty. Why was that such an issue? Why did clothing have to be so damn gender specific, anyway?

Heaving a sigh, I pushed my bike away from the dark pottery shop and across the street, the peal of the small chapel bell calling to me. Maybe I needed to talk to God. I'd not spoken to him in years despite my showing up at a non-denominational church in Beverly Hills on the big days—Easter and Christmas—with Katy on my arm. The studio liked that. They thought Connor Days would be a God-fearing man. Given how many bodies he left lying around in his wake, he should be scared of God. Thou shalt not kill was one of the big

man's ten rules. So if Connor Days was a Christian, then the man who played him should be too. It boggled my mind how some people could not/would not separate the actor from the role. The amount of hate mail I'd gotten when Connor had slept with a Black woman in the seventh film was appalling. I could only imagine the volume of vitriol my team was dealing with now.

Filled with dark, glum clouds despite the sunny day on tap, I parked my bike outside of the Kesside Bay Church and climbed up the stairs to enter the chapel. It was dark and cool inside, the smell of fresh flowers filling my nose.

"The prodigal son returns," a male voice from the front called as I stepped into the church proper, my hands coming to rest on the back of the last pew on the right. The sunrise was shining through the stained glass window behind the pulpit, the brilliant colors in the rendition of Jesus on the cross throwing all kinds of wild hues to the short ginger hair of Billy Morton. Pastor Morton. I couldn't help but smile. He looked just the same as he had when I'd said goodbye to him all those years ago. He'd gone off to a seminary college in Massachusetts and I'd headed west. Our friendship had taken a beating over the years as they do, but now that I was looking into his freckled face, the past melted away.

"As they are known to do," I replied and hustled down the aisle to embrace my boyhood best friend. He was still a string bean. We hugged it out for several minutes, both of us pulling back with damp eyes and slightly stuffy noses. "You haven't aged a bit."

“You’re not looking in the right light,” he teased, his arm still around my shoulders as he turned us into the rainbow of light flowing in. Ah, okay, yeah, I could see the lines of life around his bright green eyes and mouth. They looked good on him. “See, time catches up to all of us except you.”

“Beverly Hills has some incredible plastic surgeons who keep old age at bay,” I replied as we made our way to the front pew to sit.

“Well, they must be worth every penny because you don’t look a day over forty,” he teased again, and I laughed like a hyena, my mirth bouncing off the sloped ceiling. “I kid. I know we’re not quite forty yet.”

“It’s a close thing,” I mumbled as I gazed at my friend. “You look amazing, though, Bill. Honestly, being a man of God works for you. Personally, I would have never thought it when we were kids. You were the one who always led me into the worst trouble.”

That made him snicker. He was in plain clothes, no collar, just shorts and a tee with a lobster wearing a sombrero on the front.

“Mischievous is still one of the things I battle against the hardest. Jane, that’s my wife, likes to say that Satan isn’t in the details, he’s in fake cans of chips.”

“Dad told me you finally married a few years ago.” I sat back, finally at ease.

“I did. She’s expecting our first child in four months.” He beamed, and I clapped his shoulder and congratulated him. “Thank you. We’re thrilled, obviously.” We spent a few minutes talking about his wife, whom he adored, the church, the town, and the weather. When we ran out of the general small talk topics, he gave me a nudge in the side. “You know, it’s been ages since I paddled from the dock behind the inn and around into pirate cove.”

I smiled at him, feeling that old spark of childhood adventure firing up in my breast. “If you’re not busy here, we can always take out a canoe or two and go looking for booty.”

He glanced around the small but homey chapel. “I suppose the Lord wouldn’t mind if I took a day off to search for buried treasure.”

With that, we jumped to our feet and went on a grand adventure. Just like when we were the only two lads who lived here year round. Billy sent a text to his beloved bride, who was over on the mainland visiting her mother to let her know he was working diligently on his sermon for Sunday.

“She’ll know I’m lying. She always knows,” he tittered as he pocketed his cell phone and pulled on an old straw hat with KESSIDE BAY stamped on the brim. We took off like wild men, shouting to each other, both of us on old bikes—many islanders biked where we wanted to go here on the isle—and within an hour Billy and I were paddling madly around the tip of the bay. The sea was a little choppy, but we made it into the inlet only half-soaked. Once we landed our red canoes on the

rocky shore, we scampered over the rocks, laughing and collecting bits of shell and bottle caps, which we then carried up to the soft grassy overlook and dumped them.

“Phillippe’s booty has lost much of its glitter.” I sighed, toeing my wet sneakers off and then removing my sodden socks before plopping down to sit on the grass. Bill joined me, peeling off his old Chucks and socks as well and then sprawled out, long skinny legs pale as cream.

“The bottle caps are harder and harder to come by,” he lamented, lying back to stare at the puffy white clouds floating past. I joined him, crossing my arms behind my head and using my hands as a pillow. “Remember when we were kids, everyone was drinking that dark root beer from that specialty shop over the bridge.”

“I do yeah. That was good root beer. Came in glass bottles. We must have had ten thousand bottle caps. I wonder what happened to them.”

“Probably our parents threw them into the recycle when we moved out. How is your father doing?”

“Good. Works like a demon still, but good. He’s been incredibly kind and supportive to me through this whole mess.”

A moment or two passed with only the sound of the wind rustling the pines behind us. “I’m surprised you haven’t brought it up.”

“I was waiting for you to mention it.”

“Ah, well, consider it mentioned.” I rolled my head to look at him. His nose was still rather beaky, but it worked on his long, angular face. “Are you disgusted by my being gay?”

His face grew sad. Terribly sad. Then he sat up, wiggling around to face me, his gangly arms draped over his knees.

“Elias, I am not disgusted by you being gay.”

That lifted a small boulder off my chest. “I also like to wear girly undies.”

“So I read, and before you ask, that doesn’t bother me either. Not every clergyman is a bigoted ass,” he said with some real passion. Another rock lifted. “Please know that I embrace all people at my church. God does not pick and choose which of his children he loves based on things like skin color, gender, or sexuality.”

“Thanks,” I coughed out, letting my sight go back to the clouds because looking at Billy was going to make me cry. “It’s been...things have been trying.”

“I can imagine. Your father is accepting, yes?”

“Very much so. I kept it hidden from him for years because I felt he would be disappointed in me. I ran off and never came back, not like you.” He made a sound that was hard to discern. “What?”

I glanced his way. The wind was tugging at his hat so strongly he slapped a hand to his head to keep it in place.

“You make me sound like some kind of exalted being for coming back to Kesside. Perhaps I returned because I couldn’t



stand the world out there, off island. Jane likes to say that I'm too gentle of a soul to live in the big city. She's not far from wrong, Elias. I had a breakdown ten years ago and came home to recuperate. I'd seen too many tragedies in Boston. That was when I was serving as an assistant pastor in a large church in Roxbury. The crime rate was astronomical or seemed that way to me. Shootings, stabbings, rapes, assaults, and battering of women and children. It all got to me, and so I came home and took over the church here. The previous pastor had passed right after I'd moved back and the locals were thrilled to have me take over."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know. Dad never mentioned it. He told me you had gotten married, but nothing about your mental health issues." I sat up slowly and took one of his hands in mine. He didn't yank it away, instead he smiled and gave my fingers a squeeze.

"Most of them don't know why I came back. Jane does, of course, and my mother as well. Dad passed over fifteen years ago before I got sick." A gust of wind whistled through the pines, tearing at his hat and lifting my cap right off my head.

I yelped and shot up to my feet, but the ball cap was gone before I could stumble up to my bare feet. Down into the bay it went, landing softly on the ocean as I watched from above.

"Well crap, that was given to me by my neighbor." I sighed as the bright yellow cap floated along atop the rowdy waves.

"We'll need to start wearing bonnets that we can tie under our chins," he called from our resting spot. I padded back to

him, sat down, and stretched out my legs to let the sun warm them.

“I bet most people wouldn’t be surprised to see me in a bonnet,” I said, pulling my lips over my teeth. “Sorry. I’ve been really down since things went to hell.” I glanced at Billy. “Since you have God’s ear, can you ask him to make sure my ex burns?”

That made him chortle. “That’s not exactly how it’s supposed to work. You’re supposed to dig deep into your heart and find the grace to forgive your ex-boyfriend for his sins.”

“Christ,” I huffed and blanched. “Sorry.” Billy nodded and then flung some grass at me. “It’s not in me to forgive him for doing this to me. I know that sounds shitty, and I know that makes me a terrible person—”

“No, it just makes you human. All of us are struggling to live in grace. You’ll work your way through this dilemma and come out stronger. Perhaps this was God’s way of showing you a new path for your life. I believe he wanted me here on Kesside to tend to this salty flock of sheep.”

“And so he gave you a nervous breakdown to get you to come back?” He shrugged. A motorboat sped by out on the water. “To be honest, I’m not a real big fan of his style. He could send a simple text stating that he thought we should be moving in a different direction.”

That made him chuckle. “A text probably wouldn’t have the same impact.” His smiling eyes widened as he looked past me. I glanced over my shoulder to see a blonde woman with a

round tummy showing through her summery dress, walking toward us with a picnic basket and a knowing smile. “Well crab apples. She found us,” Billy whispered, then got to his big feet to rush over to take the food from his wife.

I stood, brushed the sand and grass from me, and grinned at Jane Morton. She was a cute little woman with incredibly pink cheeks and bright blue eyes.

“I told Mom that you were out here with Elias talking about treasures and how to best torment poor Portman,” she said, hugging me to her as soon as she got close. I squeezed her gently and then pulled back so Billy could spread out a small red checkered blanket. It took all three of us to secure it since the wind was blowing that hard. We both made up terrible excuses as she held out sandwiches to each of us and took one for herself. “It’s fine. I love coming out here and watching the sea. This island is magical.”

She was right. This tiny rock did seem to have some sort of mystical powers. Sitting here with them was making me feel so much better.

“We were reliving our carefree days as young pirates sailing the waters of the bay,” Billy said around a bite of ham, sharp cheese, and spicy mustard. “We’d not made it to the bridge to torment...I mean visit with Portman.”

“I did that earlier today.” I relayed the visit with the bridgeman. Jane and Billy were roaring when I was done. I chewed on a sour pickle and felt lighter than I had in ages.

Then, for some reason, Jane decided we should all talk like pirates for the rest of the picnic.

We were still growling out “argh” and “poop deck,” which always made Billy laugh so hard he snorted, when we rolled into town on our bikes. Yes, Jane had pedaled out to the cove on a retro ’50s pink bike with a huge basket on the handlebars. We passed by the theater, and I slowed to look on in pity at the old grand dame.

“Shame isn’t it?” Jane asked as she stopped beside me, Billy on my left. “We keep asking the town council for money, but there just isn’t any to spare.”

“Small tourist towns don’t have a lot of ready cash.” Billy sighed with sadness. “It’s a pity to see her crumbling to dust. If only someone who loved her had some cash just lying around to spend on fixing her up and—”

“William Ashton Morton, that is not at all the proper way to ask your dear friend to help the playhouse out,” Jane scolded her husband, then turned those big baby blues on me. “What he meant to say was, wouldn’t it be heavenly if a benefactor appeared and bestowed a grant upon the playhouse to restore her to her former glory?”

She batted her lashes. I glanced at Billy. “Oh, she’s good.”

“Why do you think I let her pass the plate after Sunday services?” he teased. Jane waved us both off with a knowing smile.

“I think I might know someone who has a few extra dollars lying around that they’re looking to spend on a charitable contribution,” I replied, letting my sight roam over the front of the worn and weary theater before my eyes were drawn to a man with a big camera. My heart rate tripled as I made eye contact with Dumbo Ears. His camera came up quickly, then he took off his blue ball cap sitting atop his huge ears. Okay, that was no innocent tourist taking pictures of the local waterfowl. That camera had been right on me. The rat fucking bastard.

Anger flared up to replace the mellow vibes I’d been enjoying. I did my best to keep an eye on him as I maneuvered my bike through the crowds. I lost him immediately, his big ears disappearing from my line of sight when a family of about ten crossed in front of me, making me hit the handbrakes hard. When I looked up from the near collision, Big Ears was gone. I cursed under my breath the whole way back to the church. Jane and Billy were just as upset as I was when I relayed what was taking place and promised to keep an eye out for the man. They also extracted a promise from me to come to Sunday services with my father before they sent me off so Billy could actually work on his sermon.

I rode back to the inn, surly as a bear with a thorn in its paw, and slammed back to my room to glower out at the sunset. Honestly, was it asking *that* much to be left alone to heal?

# Chapter Six

**M**onday afternoon I was back in town, enjoying an ice cream in the shade as I stared at the pottery shop. There was a sign in the front window which read CLOSED FOR LESSONS that had my attention. Licking at the rapidly melting mint chocolate chip cone, I found myself hurrying to finish my treat—I would not tell Katy about this—and making my way to the rear of the ceramic shop with my bike at my side.

Laughter and chatter flowed out of the back door as I neared. Several bikes were parked back here, many with fancy names and a billion speeds. I patted my old three speed then kicked the stand down to rest her beside a new shiny speedster of a bike. The moment I picked up Gibson's hearty tones, my belly did this funny whoopy-doop that had nothing to do with ice cream. I'd been drawn to this man since we'd first met but was unsure of how to spend more time with him without looking desperate. I'd nonchalantly mentioned Gibson to Billy and Jane on Sunday after church and had gotten glowing reports about him. Working on my casual air, I took a deep breath, then rapped on the wooden screen door. The chit-chat inside quieted.

Gibson appeared on the other side of the screen. Good gods, the man was just as good-looking as he had been a week ago. Was it a week? It was hard to say. The days here on Kesside Isle kind of started to blend together after a while. His smile upon seeing me made all my blood rush from under my new Kesside Inn cap to my dick. The impact this man had on me was exhilarating. Yes, it had been a long time since I'd been

with a lover, but wow, my reaction to this sexy mountain of beard was something else. I liked it, but it scared me. My past choices in men had been rather crummy, to put it mildly. Although Gibson was about as far away from a bratty twink as possible so that spoke well for my upgrade.

The sound of childish laughter floated past him as he opened the screen door wearing a huge smile.

“Good afternoon,” he said as I drank him in. Same outfit as the last time I’d been here. Pale tee, jeans, boots, and a dirty apron, but this time it was a cloth one with his store logo on it.

“Hi,” I replied, my command of the English language really coming to the fore.

“Is there someone pestering you again?” He took a step out to check the cramped rear area of the store.

“No, no, I’m not here to hide.” His attention came back to me, light blue eyes curious now. “I was...I’ve kind of gotten bored reading about life on the high seas with young Mr. Hornblower and thought I should get out more.” That much was true. The books at the inn had quickly bored me silly and one could only run so much in a day. Hiding in my room had also started to work on my nerves. While I was trying to lie low as the studio had asked, I also wanted to live my life just a little bit. So here I was, back at the tip of Kesside, ball cap and shades on, trying to be incognito, but not trying as hard as I probably should be. “So I came to town for an ice cream cone and pottery lessons. If you have room for one more student?”



“I just happen to have one seat left.” He held open the door for me, his gaze making my toes curl around the edge of my sandals. I took two steps in and saw that the tables were full of kids. About a dozen or so, maybe even a baker’s dozen, and all staring at me with those wide, inquisitive children’s eyes. “You can sit by me.” He walked around me, his bare arm sliding over mine. “Everyone, this is one of my new friends Elias. He’s here on vacation and is going to join us in making a ceramic coil pot. He’s very good at making coils.”

I felt a warm blush on my cheeks. He remembered my snakes.

“Hi, everyone,” I said as I followed Gibson around the table and then sat in what I assumed had been his chair. I removed my sunglasses and ball cap, relatively sure that this group of under tens had no clue who I was. If their parents let them watch the Connor Days films, they were incredibly bad parents. If I ever had a kid, I’d not let them watch the movies I made until they were college graduates. Maybe not even then. The longer I spent in seclusion here on Kesside, the more shame I felt over my body of work. Guess being outed made one more introspective or something. To be honest, I’d always been a little uncomfortable with some of the tropes that were played out on the set. I’d even asked a few producers and/or directors to possibly tone down the rampant sexism and gay taunts that were in the scripts. Of course, I was shot down and told to go be a good actor and read the lines as they were written.

Obnoxious assholes.

Gibson gathered up some clay and an apron for me. Mine was mint green with the Sea Song Ceramist logo of a pot and some waves. I tied it on and settled down to make some coils. As Gibson had said, I was a damn fine clay coil roller. Using the tiny toy rolling pin was huge fun, as was pressing out the globs of clay. The kids were loud, giggling, but totally into the lesson, just as I was. I had a moment of unease when I thought about what would happen if someone who knew me saw me sitting here with a bunch of kids rolling out clay-like pie dough with a toy rolling pin.

*Like the world could think you were any odder? Who cares what the rest of the world thinks?*

Yeah, who cared what the world thought of me? I was being me. Finally. I was doing what Elias wanted to do. Who gave two shits about the studio and the irate fans?! Okay, I did. I cared quite a bit.

“Good, okay. Now we’re going to move on to creating our pots. What we’ll do next is make a round base that looks like a cookie. Do not eat the base,” Gibson was quick to tack on. I chuckled, then set into rolling out a nice round base. We used a cookie cutter to cut out our bases.

“You should paint your pot pink,” a little girl of around five told me. She was a cute little thing with dark pigtails and big brown eyes. “Pink is a good color for boys too.”

“You’re right. It is. Mr. Vale, can I have pink paint?”

“Of course, Elias.” He was barely holding back his mirth. I looked at the young miss beside me. She nodded, then

returned to her work. After my base was made, we moved on to laying the snake around and around, piling the snakes atop each other. “You’re all doing really well. Now we get to play in some water!”

The kids all cheered. I sat back, enjoying the hell out of watching this bruiser of a man interacting so well with these tiny humans. I’d never really spent a lot of time around kids so while I was polite to them because being rude to children was uncool even if you weren’t Connor Days, I tended to interact with teenagers and adults more as they were my fan base. It was obvious to me that Gibson loved being with children. That was probably why he’d gone into teaching.

Tiny bowls of water were passed around. We then were told to smooth out the seams of our coil pot. After that, we made braided ropes for the top of our pots. Gibson had to help the other students with their braided toppers, but I had no trouble making mine.

“Why, Elias, you did really well with your braiding. Why don’t you see if you can assist Penny with hers?” Gibson nodded at the girl beside me. Since he was busy with the other dozen kids, I felt I could certainly help one, so Penny and I made her a lovely, braided top for her pot. Since her pot was a little lopsided, there were some adjustments to be made to her base.

“I think you and I will have the best pink pots,” I whispered to Penny, who nodded sagely and then spritzed clay water at the girl across the table from her. A few tears were shed.

Gibson was so kind and gentle to the kids it made me like him even more.

“So when you come back next week, your pots will be dry and we can paint them,” Gibson told the class just as some adults started to file in. I got a few looks from the grown-ups but for the most part they were polite. I wondered if the whole island knew I was here. Probably. Those kinds of secrets didn’t stay hidden for long. A few of the dads gave me funny looks as if they were trying to not remember that the man they had admired for over ten years was currently wearing a soft rose thong and bralette. Still, overall, the vibe was accepting. As the kids left, Penny waved goodbye to me, and then it was just Gibson, me, and one hell of a mess on the worktables.

“Would you like a hand cleaning up?” I asked, surveying the wet mess of clay bits, plastic place mats that had been taped to the tables, and murky white water puddles.

“I would love that,” he replied, gifting me one of his warm smiles. We started by taking each pot to the shelves, taking great care as some were a little on the wobbly side. “You did quite well with your pot, although I think Penny may have the edge with her pinch petal flowers.”

“Yeah, she will certainly take the blue ribbon in pink coil pots,” I replied as I began peeling tape from the corners of the placemats. Gibson chortled while doing the same on the other table. The squalls of gulls and the distant hum of tourists filtered through the screen door. The room was warm, probably from the kiln. “Are you going to bake the pots?”

“No, no, the clay we use for the little ones just needs to dry, then we’ll paint them. With the teen and adult classes, we fire some of the works.” He waved a dirty hand at the plates, cups, and vases on the shelves. “This is more of an hour of babysitting with clay play, to be honest. The adults get to have lunch or shop while I show the little ones some fun crafts.”

“You seem to enjoy it a great deal,” I said offhandedly, then toted the placemats to the sink to be washed off. “I’m not sure I could handle that many kids.”

“Nonsense, you did just fine. And yes, I do enjoy teaching children, even if it’s just hand-building a pot. Only the educated are free.” I looked over my shoulder at him in awe. “That last line wasn’t mine, that belongs to Epictetus, who was much wiser than me, rest assured.”

“I don’t know. I think you’re pretty damn smart,” I replied and returned to hosing off the placemats and then laying them on a dish drying rack.

“Not really. I just fob off quotes from the true thinkers to impress men I find attractive.” That got my attention. My sight flew from the brightly colored placemats to the man washing off tables with an old soapy sponge. He arched a brow. I felt my dick fatten, pressing against the pouch of my thong. “Did I offend?”

“No, God no, not at all. It’s been some time since...well since a man made a pass at me. That was a pass, right?”

He chuckled. “Yes, Elias, that was a pass. A bumbly one for sure, but a pass just the same.”

“Nothing about you is bumbly. I like hearing you talk.”

“Good! I tend to spend my evenings talking to myself and while I’m incredibly entertaining, I ruin all my jokes because I know the punchline.”

I laughed. “If you’re looking for someone to orate to, I’m available most nights.” The words popped into my brain and flew out of my mouth before I could stop them. He stared at me as if I were something he’d never seen before. “Or not. That was really pushy of me.”

I was sure he was going to turn me down. He should. After all, I was just some manic stranger who flew into his shop on the verge of a panic attack railing about some person—on an island full of tourists—with a camera. The more I thought about the whole incident, the stupider I felt. Then I showed up at his shop *again* with ice cream on my shirt and dove into a kid’s pottery class.

“That sounds fine. Why don’t you stop by this evening? I have some chicken in the crock pot with some seasonings from my pots. We can eat, sip wine, and delve into the reasons why you create films you dislike.”

*Ugh, no. That sounds like therapy.*

Yeah, it kind of did, but it also sounded fantastic.

“Or we can talk about the price of eggs,” he quickly amended while I battled with myself. “Don’t let me bore you. I tend to do that people are quick to say.”

“Dinner and deep discussions sound great. Much better than sitting in my room sulking while my career withers on the vine like a desiccated grape.”

He reached out to touch my arm. A whisper of electricity skipped down to my fingers.

“I’m sure your acting career is not in any danger of becoming a raisin,” he said, giving my bicep a squeeze.

“You have no idea what was said about me a few weeks ago but thank you for the kindness. And the dinner invitation.”

“You’re welcome. See you around seven?”

I nodded and left after that, leaving him to hang out his placemats on a line to dry in the warm breeze. I pushed my bike down a narrow gap between his shop and a local wine store. Feeling his gaze on my backside, I paused to look back. Catching him staring at my ass lit me up like a Roman candle. He flushed, smirked knowingly, and then ran a hand through his hair. A tiny smile played on my lips as I eased back into the crowded sidewalk, stopping to give the street a once over.

“Okay, so we have a dinner date,” I mumbled, pulled down my cap, and slid on my shades.

I headed back home, my legs screaming by the time I rolled into the drive for the inn. Uphill was much harder. My calves were not happy. Still, I had gotten a lockdown on where Gibson lived on the way back. I’d stopped to catch my breath at his skinny, overgrown drive, then pushed on toward home.

I took my old bike back to the shed, locked up things, and meandered through the inn. This time, I took in all the ceramics that were placed throughout the inn. Seafaring tones could be found on the pieces my father had purchased, for that motif fit perfectly given our locale.

Kimmy was behind the desk when I ambled past. She gave me a warm smile. I smiled back.

“Your father is napping,” she called to me. “Do you want me to wake him up?”

I shook my head as my mind raced. Did this employee just waltz into my father’s room when he was sleeping? That seemed odd to me.

“No, let him rest. He works too hard,” I said to her, moving toward the kitchen to tell Emelda that I would be skipping room service this evening. I had a dinner date with a cranky seagull and an utterly fascinating—and sexy as sin—ceramist.

My mind began warning me against letting my heart get ahead of my common sense but as I was already picking out what to wear to best compliment my eyes, I had to assume my heart had already thumped common sense over the head with a candlestick and dragged its unconscious form to the dock and rolled it into the ocean.

Yep, that was Elias Lake all right. Jump right into the sea of love and then wonder why he kept getting caught in riptides.



# Chapter Seven

I opted to bike to Gibson's funky yellow shack.

Okay, it wasn't truly a shack, but humming that to the beat of "Love Shack" by the B-52's was supposed to be easing my growing trepidation. This was probably a bad idea. Not that I wasn't a man who embraced bad ideas—cough My-Key cough—but this reeked of rotten conception. Maybe that could be the next Connor Days flick. *Daze of Rotten Conceptions*. The studio would love it. Not. Then again, I'd not heard anything from them for a week now, so maybe they were working on the title for my next release as we speak. Not, again. Sure, they were dancing a fine and socially acceptable waltz with my agent and the press. Releasing the right words to make them sound inclusive but not committing to any requests from Elle for a sit down to discuss my contract and if it were in peril. I prayed not, but there was a tiny little subsection dealing with a moral clause that had Elle and me concerned. I was a worrisome talent according to several entertainment sites.

Pedaling along as the sun was sinking low into the sky, I tried to shift my mindset from potential bad things—being canned as part of the studio's right to can said talent if said talent has engaged in questionable acts that could harm any current or future projects or being murdered by a potter—I tried to fixate on good things. Dinner with a new friend. A clever new friend.

"No," I corrected my brain. "Clever, not clever. This is not going to end up like some B-grade horror flick."

There, told me. I rolled along at a slow clip as I didn't want to make myself sweat. I'd showered, trimmed my scruff, added product to my hair, and dressed in what I liked to call island chic, which was dark blue drawstring shorts, a short sleeve cotton shirt with a sailboat pattern, low-cut socks, sneakers, and dark blue femboy panties. The pouch held my junk just right. I'd never really been able to sort out why dressing in ladies lingerie made me feel so self-possessed. I'd read up on it, of course, and while it's a fairly common fetish or kink, I've never sorted out the whys other than it makes me feel pretty and empowered. Hell, maybe that was reason enough.

The winds coming off the water were cooler now, the tang of salt lingering on my lips as I slowed my old bike and then cruised into Gibson's drive. Wildflowers had kind of taken over the small lot, grasses and weeds growing up to the rickety mailbox. I slid off the bike, the crash of the waves subtler here as we were a little further inland. You could still hear the music of the sea, but it wasn't as in your face as it was at the inn. The trees gathered up the sound as did the nearly deafening sound of a seagull cawing at the top of its lungs. I walked my bike up to the front door of the cabin, making a wide berth of the winged alarm bell setting in a big blue pot on a small square of terracotta tiles that made up a fifteen feet or so wide patio. There were tiny pots everywhere, all different shapes and colors, filled with herbs and other plants. Some were on the ground, some were on benches, and some were on

a shelf that had dragonflies on the wrought iron sides. The plants were growing chaotically kind of like the lawn.

“Evening, Oregano,” I said to the angry gull. She snapped her beak at me in warning just as the dark green door opened. Gibson stepped out wearing a striped kaftan and sloppy sandals. His hair was down, the wind grabbing it instantly, then giving it a good toss. He was so handsome. “And good evening to you. I bet no one sneaks up on you, do they?”

“They do not,” he replied with a grin that told me he was happy to see me. The slow rake of his gaze down over my body told me other things. Things that I was thrilled to pick up yet terrified of seeing. I’d just been famously dumped and outed. Should I even be *thinking* of how sexy another man was? Shouldn’t I be taking a hiatus from this kind of thing? See, this is where all that therapy should have helped. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, fine, just exerted myself on the way over,” I lied and parked my bike beside the patio, keeping a good berth between myself and the gull in the feather-lined pot. “You look comfortable.”

He glanced down and did a small spin. “Thank you. I like to be free when I’m home. Hair down, balls in the wind, that sort of thing. Come in, please. Dinner is ready to come out of the oven.”

Stepping over the threshold, I walked into an area that was just as chaotic as the yard was. Gibson, it seemed, liked disorganization. The cabin wasn’t dirty, it was just filled with

things. Lots of pottery, obviously, but books too. Several shelves were stuffed full along with a whole wall of sagging shelves. The furniture was lived on, the wooden floors were clean but worn, and the windows were wide open. It was a simple home. An open area living room/kitchen area, a bathroom, and a bedroom. All the doors stood ajar as if he had nothing to hide. The space was lived in, yes, but in that mish-mosh way that real homes were. Not like my home back in California, where cleaning crews came in weekly to hermitically sanitize everything.

Nothing was ever out of place. And sadly, there were no family pictures to be found. Gibson's cabin was chock full of pictures, many in ceramic frames, all of him with another man who gazed at Gibson as if he hung the moon and the stars. A partner of some sort that was obvious. A young boy of around six was in several, both men were always with the child.

Yeah, the other man had to be a love interest. No one could fake that kind of deep emotion. I should know, I was a trained thespian. I could cry on command—not that Connor Days *ever* cried—and emote at the drop of a hat—not that Connor Days *ever* emoted any kind of emotion other than rage—and I'd never been able to drum up that kind of expression on screen. Of course, Connor Days rarely fell in love with a woman. He'd had his one great love, and she had been murdered by a car bomb set by a Venezuelan drug lord, thus prompting him to go on a ten movie killing spree. Sure, he slept with women all the time but never grew close to them. New leading lady in

every flick. Each one no older than twenty-three please even though Connor—and me—were now pushing forty.

Why the *hell* was I making those damn movies?! The more I thought about Connor Days the more I wanted to knee him in the balls.

“Come on in and sit down. I have some foods of the philosophers for us to dine on. To fire up the mind as we delve into the depths of why we do what it is we do.”

The seagull in the pot called out a few times. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. She’s just asking for treats.” He padded to the open front door to speak to his squatter. “Oregano, we’d discussed this before. I can’t bring you appetizers before the guest has been served. Now just sit there on your eggs and remember your etiquette lessons.”

I chuckled to myself, taking a mismatched seat at an oval wooden table that had been set up to reflect the owner. A whirlwind of different colored plates, bowls, glasses, and linens. The tablecloth was pink, the napkins green, and the vase in the middle was a short white ceramic piece with round red circles and splashes of green and purple. I was beginning to wonder if the man was color blind. Still, even with the colors assaulting my eyes, it was a charming and welcoming table. The chair creaked a bit as I settled into it.

“It’s been a long time since I had a dinner guest that wasn’t plumed,” he tossed out as he flip-flopped back and forth with dishes that I had never heard of before. “Now this is a mix of seafood with minestrone and olives.” He set a crock of soup in

front of me, then a platter with some figs, cheese, breads, and some sort of squishy yellow stuff in a glazed red bowl. Then he poured some wine into two squat blue ceramic wine glasses. “Now this is the milk of Aphrodite according to Homer in the *Iliad*, but it’s simply Lemnos wine with rose petals and edible flowers. It’s quite tasty and goes well with the soup and quinces.”

Ah, that saved me from asking what the mushy yellow things were. “This is an interesting menu,” I said, plucking a fig from the platter.

“Yes, these were some of our favorites to serve when we were hosting symposiums for our students. Generally, the wine always went first,” he said with a bittersweet edge to his voice before sitting down with a bit of flare as he swept his kaftan up and to the side, giving me a peek at toned calves. “We served these various foods and drinks in the manner of Giorgios Palisidis, a famed Greek culinary professor, to help explain the philosophy of Aristotle to eating. The Japanese also have a name for this type of food preparation that...” I glanced up, spoon in hand, from chasing a clam around in my soup crock when he faltered. “I’m sorry. I’m boring you.”

“No, no, not at all.” I fibbed. He sort of had been boring me, but I’d been enjoying his enthusiasm. “I’ve not had this kind of food since I was in Greece five years ago to shoot the sixth film of the series. *Daze of Malice*.”

“Thank you for being kind. I’ll try not to talk your ear off about tiresome topics. So, you filmed in Greece. What did you

think of the country?”

“Mm, I loved it. The people are amazing, the lands beautiful, and the wine is quite tasty.” I took a sip of wine from my glass. It was sweet with a hint of berry and bay leaves. “Where did you find edible flowers on Kesside Isle?”

“There’s a small shop next to the pet sitter that carries such delicacies. Quite a few of the summer residents enjoy sprinkling them in their wines as we have,” he said, leaning up to pass me some of the dark bread to dip into my soup. “If you could pick one thing about Greece that you could bring back to the States and incorporate into your life, what would it be?”

“Oh.” I chewed my bite of soupy bread, then swallowed. “I never really thought about that.”

He smiled, tapped his temple, and waved his bread at me to speak. “Well, I did like the custom of being kissed on the cheek instead of shaking hands. It seems more genuine than showing someone that your sword hand is empty.”

“So you prefer more intimate greetings?” He took a drink of wine.

“I suppose so, yes.” I’d not really pondered on such things before. “They’re not really accepted over here, though, kissing people on the cheek. Imagine going up to some American man and pecking him on the face. You’d get punched or shot.”

“True. There is a vibrant aversion on the part of many men to intimacy in any form.” He sighed deeply, then lowered his cup to the table. “Which is an interesting segue for us to take



into the matter of why you're starring in films that you find distasteful."

"Hmm," I murmured around a huge bite of clam and veggies. He gave me a smile that pulled up just one corner of his appealing mouth. I gulped softly and then pointed my soup spoon at him. "Don't these philosophical symposiums work better when various ideals are being tossed back and forth?" He nodded, his smile growing wider as he sat forward a bit. "So that being the case, shouldn't I be asking *you* something for you to cogitate about?"

"Yes, we can certainly do that. Ask away but do take care. I have been known to Pythagorize on occasion," he warned as he placed both elbows on the table, the flowing sleeves of his kaftan pushed up to show off toned forearms sprinkled with dark blond hair.

"I'll make sure we have some tissues on hand." He chuckled softly. "Earlier you mentioned that we hosted symposiums. Would the 'we' be other professors or your partner?" His playful expression shifted subtly. "Did I cross a boundary?"

"No, of course not. You told me about your unpleasant situation this afternoon, so it's only fair that I share equally." It felt wrong of me to let him talk about something distressing when I'd really only shared a glossy version of my situation. "Yes, it was my partner, Bradley. He was a mathematics professor at the same university where I taught. Younger by about ten or so years, brilliant man, handsome, swarthy, much like you. We had a mad, passionate relationship. One of those

love affairs that you fall into totally unawares. He had a startling quick mind, a love of all things chocolate, and a weakness for depressing foreign films. We were together for many years, then finally legally wed when the law changed and allowed us to do so. I took him to the Cannes Film Festival for our honeymoon.”

“You loved him a lot,” I chanced to say. He nodded his eyes filled with melancholy.

“I did. Losing him and our son shattered me. They’d been on the way to pick up a pizza for dinner. Such a simple, run-of-the-mill thing, going to get a pizza. They never made it to the pizza shop. A drunk driver plowed into them, killing both of them instantly.” He paused to take a sip of wine, his gaze dewy with unshed tears. “They had wanted me to go too, so we could all play the old Pac-Man machine while we waited but I begged off. Too many papers to grade.” Another shaky sip. “I should not have been left behind. I should have died with them.”

“No, Gibson, no, please don’t say that,” I whispered, my throat tight with emotion.

“I don’t feel that way now, don’t worry. But for years I did. I even tried to join them once but a friend found me before I could swallow the sleeping pills. Survivor guilt is crushing. I could never look at another term paper again after that so staying on the faculty was pointless. The town held too many memories, as did our home, so I sold it all and found a little hamlet by the sea to hide away in. And that is how I came to

be here on Kesside Isle, and eventually, meet a brilliant man like you.”

I sensed it was time to let him be on that subject. “I’m far from brilliant,” I hurried to say to change the subject. “I never went to college.”

He shrugged as a wash of relief moved over his face. “Some of the brightest people that I have ever met never went to college. Some barely graduated high school. There’s a veritable wealth of knowledge that can only be gained by living life. So many famous people have gained great success without secondary education. The main goal of college, in my humble opinion, is to help open minds to thinking outside the confines of what mommy and daddy have spoon-fed them for eighteen years and to build character. Both of those things can be done merely by letting the hardships and joys that life deals us soak into our souls. Bill Gates is a college dropout, and he’s done rather well for himself.”

I nodded. “Thank you. Not having a degree has always made me feel inferior to incredibly smart people like you.”

“Pfft. I’m not any smarter than you. I just like to talk a lot about dead Greeks and drink wine.” My eyes rounded. “No, it’s true. Perseverance is a large part. Luck comes into play as well as I had a family that could afford to send me to college for years and years. My father was a wealthy man who cared little if I spent years in school striving for a degree in philosophy. Which, he was keen to remind me, was a useless major as it would never bring me the kind of monetary

paybacks his degree in business had blessed him with.” He sighed. “That was a bone of contention until he died from a massive stress-induced coronary.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, it was many years ago, but I still miss him.” He drifted a bit but came back to the discussion. I didn’t mind him taking a moment to reflect. It gave me time to admire him openly. When his light gaze moved from the ether to me, I quickly looked down at my empty crock of soup. “Would you like more?”

“No, thank you. I’m going to pick at this tray of cheese and figs.”

He grinned, then pushed the platter to me. “Enjoy! Where were we?”

“I asked you about your partner,” I said, plucking another fig from the platter. “And I feel as if that was incredibly nosy.”

A light breeze danced across the table, the smell of the pines heavy here among the trees. The pine scent mingled nicely with the aroma of the ocean.

“It’s fine. People are curious creatures. I asked you here to try to delve into your past, the reasons that you make movies you find offensive, and possibly pick your brain about other things. Also, you’re an incredibly handsome man and sitting here looking at your face over my soup is a very pleasant way to spend an evening. I enjoy Oregano, but she’s not much of a conversationalist. She simply cannot grasp any of Nietzsche’s

prose.” I felt my cheeks warm. “If you’d like more details about Bradley and Zach, I *will* need more wine.”

“No, please, I shouldn’t have brought it up. I mean...shit, I’m sitting here lamenting over the world knowing I like lacy things cradling my balls and you’ve been through some real loss.”

Gibson reached around our empty soup crocks to tap the back of my hand. My sight lifted from my lap to where his fingers rested on my knuckles and then flicked up to his face.

“Elias, there is no echelon one must move through when it comes to grief, loss, and trauma. I’d say that you being exposed to the world by a man you cared about in such a heinous way is fucking awful. No, please, let me finish my thought or another will pop up and I’ll be off on some windy speech about determining what age we should hold children accountable for their actions. While there are stages of grief, yes, loss is loss. And your loss of the sense of privacy is profound. You’ve been violated by someone you cared about. That’s a deep and toxic wound that requires time to heal. I’ve not had the world watching me grieve, it was just a few colleagues and friends riding it out with me. I’m sorry for what that bitch put you through.”

That made me snicker. “Thanks. It just seems so pissy of me to be whining about what some asshole on Instagram thinks about my being gay when you’ve lost so much more. Who gives a damn string of movies? They’re all shit, anyway. Every last one. I hate them.”

He placed his hand over mine, his palm resting on the back. “Then perhaps you should find a way to let this experience, rancid and painful as it is, steer you to a new path. Something that you can do with that beautiful face and clever mind that will make you feel good inside.”

“And what about you?”

He gave me a weary smile. “Oh, I’m in a place now that’s comfortable enough. I exist.”

“But is merely existing enough?” I asked, rotating my hand under his until his rough palm and my smooth one were touching. Our eyes met, gazes holding, the scent of sweet wine and falling pine needles washing over us.

“Ahh, turning the tables on the philosopher. That’s quite skillful of you.” He gave my hand a tentative squeeze but felt it all the way to my toes. “If you’d like to stay for dessert, I have a cheeky little cake from the baker in town. Red velvet with cream cheese frosting?”

I bobbed my head. Katy would blow a gasket if she knew I was wolfing down something so decadent, but I did not care. All I wanted was to spend a few more hours with a fascinating man in this yellow shack with the blue shutters.

# Chapter Eight

The following morning my run felt a little less strenuous as if I were running on air instead of blacktop. Which was silly of course, but that was how my body felt after that meal last night.

Gibson and I had eaten far too much cake, drank too much wine, and spent too much time talking about the film industry. We also discussed if it was truly possible to be happy and sad at the same time. I'd never given such deep thoughts much merit but sitting there for hours talking and laughing, sometimes things even got a little heated, had been amazing. Just talking.

Okay, so there might have been some heavy flirting and that handhold, but that was it. When I left around midnight, full of rich foods and giddy on Greek wine, he bussed my cheeks as they do in Europe. Then I kissed his. Oregano snapped at me as I walked around her pot, but I was deft enough to avoid an ass pinch. Overall, it had been the single best date I'd ever been on and I prayed we'd do it again soon.

Feeling good despite a late night and far too many fattening foods, I returned to the inn to find my father waiting for me in the kitchen. Emelda was there, stirring oatmeal in a giant pot on the huge cookstove. A few servers were moving about sluggishly, the early hour rough on the young migrants that flocked to the Maine resort towns to work. They'd all probably been serving in another restaurant over the dinner shift. Seasonal workers fueled much of the local economy working as servers, farm workers, cleaning staff, and such. You know,



the jobs that Americans refused to do for the meager wages the seasonal workers were paid. My father paid well, obviously, as Emelda was still here. She'd started here when I was an infant and while I'd not say that the chunky woman from Honduras had taken the place of my mother entirely, she certainly had been a kind aunt. Always there with cookies and a hug if I scraped a knee or missed dinner. She'd married an auto mechanic on the mainland and made the short trip over to Kesside daily for years and years.

"Seems the only one who sees you on a regular basis is Emelda," Dad teased, but there was some bite to his words. Emelda tossed me a look over the pot of bubbling oats. Her dark brown eyes crinkled.

"I meant to stop by your rooms last night but I had a dinner date with someone that ran late," I explained, slipping around Emelda to pluck a warm muffin from a baking pan that one of the young kitchen assistants had just taken out of the oven.

"Stop stealing and ask," Emelda warned playfully. I kissed her cheek, then patted the net holding her long salt-and-pepper hair. The assistant giggled but got a dark look from Emelda and rushed to carry the muffins to the dining room.

"If I can have your ear for a moment," Dad said with a wave to the dining area. The doors to the dining hall didn't open to guests until 7 a.m. so we had about fifteen minutes. I smelled like sweat and man. Not exactly the best aroma for an early breakfast with my father, but since he seemed determined to bend my ear...

The dining room was a wide and open space with a rounded wall of glass that looked out over the sea. We stole some scrambled eggs and bacon from a large silver buffet server. The tables were nearly filled with breakfast foods. Off to the side was a light blue antique sideboard that held coffee and teapots with creamer and sugar packets.

Once we had our food and coffee, we made our way to the middle table by the windows. A smaller one for two. Dad nodded at the workers as they scurried around. Guests were milling around outside. Three women were doing yoga on the lawn, their white mats standing out against the lush green grass.

“The grounds look great,” I said to open up things.

“I have a new gardener. Max retired last year. This fellow, his name is Anton, has the greenest thumb I have ever seen. Your mother’s flowers are exploding like never before.” His gaze darted to a perennial bed that was thick with tall purple flowers, short yellow buds, and of course, Mom’s beloved roses. His dark eyes came back to me. “I stopped by your room last night, but you weren’t there.”

Kimmy meandered in, saw Dad and me talking, and then scooted back out of the dining room.

“I had a date,” I repeated as I watched the day clerk hustle out as if the hounds of hell were snapping at her backside. “Does she have a thing with me?” I asked, pointing my fork in her direction. Dad never turned to look at his employee, he just

kept peppering his eggs. “Every time she sees me, she looks like she swallowed a puffer fish.”

“No, no, it’s not like that at all. Kimmy would like to get to know you better—I talk about you all the time—but she doesn’t want to step on the memories of your mother,” he said, his sight darting from his now black scrambled eggs to me.

I chewed my bacon in confusion. “How on earth could she step on the memories of Mom? Why would she even care? She’s just the day clerk and I—”

Dad swallowed some coffee, then gently shook his head. “She’s my girlfriend.”

Someone could have knocked me out of my chair with the feather duster poking out of the cleaning cart one of the staff was pushing past the dining room doors. Girlfriend. Wow. Granted I had been wrapped up in my own shit since arriving, but how did I not see...

“Oh okay,” I said after the cogs in my head started cogging again. “So that’s why she has permission to enter your room and wake you up.”

“Yes, that’s why. Are you upset?” He seemed quite worried.

“Upset? Why would I be upset? I’m thrilled that you have someone in your life, Dad. She seems...well, skittish is the word that comes to mind, but I’m sure she’s nice.”

“She is, Elias, very nice. And sunny. So different from Gretchen,” he confessed, but then snapped his mouth shut. “I

didn't mean to say that, Son. Your mother couldn't help the darkness that took her away from us in the end."

I nodded, unable to say much at the moment. Memories assailed me. Blurry now because it had been so long since she had died, but if I strained, I could still hear Mom humming as she worked on the flowers. That seemed to be the only place she was truly happy during those last few years.

Not wishing to let melancholy settle over me, I shook off those remembrances. "I'm happy for you and Kimmy. Maybe we can have dinner together soon so I can get to know her better. I take it she knows about things in my life?"

"Oh yeah, she knows it all. I hope that's okay. I needed someone to talk to when the news broke," he whispered as if the servers setting silverware on the tables didn't know. Everyone knew about me and my predilections.

"Sure, that's fine. Is she okay with queers?"

Dad smiled. "She has a lesbian niece, so yes, she is very open to the queers."

"You can drop 'the,' Dad, and just say queers."

"Oh." His face fell. "I'm sorry, Elias. Did I offend?"

"Nope, not at all." I knew he was trying.

"Good, I am working on it. There's a lot to get aligned in my brain, but I will be a good ally to you, Son." He reached over the table to grab my hand. "Which brings me to another thing that I wanted to talk to you about." I nodded and picked my bacon back up with my left hand. "One of the guests came

to me about you.” I cocked an eyebrow. “No, it’s nothing about you being queer or anything with that mess, it was...one of the guests...they said that they saw you floating in the ocean with one of the chess pieces. Their son dashed off to get it as he wanted to play a game. The boy said that you looked sad and well, given what has been taking place in your life, they thought that perhaps you had...”

“Dad, no, please, oh God, no.” I chucked my slice of bacon to my plate to gather his hand between mine. He was shaking. “It was nothing like that,” I said but felt the lie sticking in my throat. “Okay, I may have had a moment.”

“Oh God,” Dad whispered. “Elias...”

“No, Dad, it was just a low point. An incredibly low point. I’d just gotten off the phone with my agent. Things out west are not going well, to say the least. The studio wants me to keep doing what I’m doing, which is basically hiding from the world. Most of my team is slowly distancing themselves from me, and it was just...yeah, it was a low point.”

“But your mother...”

“I know, and I am not Mom. I’m not that sad. I mean, sure, I’m sad, but Mom was clinically depressed and refused help or meds,” I explained, or tried, as my father looked at me as if I might poof out of existence. I held his hands even tighter to show him I was here and here I would stay. “I’m sorry I scared you like that.”

“Do you want someone to talk to? There are good counselors on the mainland, Elias. I can pay for your sessions

if you want to go.”

“Dad.” I smiled softly at him. “I can pay for my own therapy, and yes, perhaps I will set something up back in L.A. when I return, but please know that I am fine. I promise.”

“They say mental illness is hereditary. That worries me, Elias.” The first couple arrived to have breakfast, smiling and chatting, until they saw Dad and me hunkered over our table. Their cheerfulness dissipated. “We’ll talk later.” He worked up a grin and greeted the Thompsons. I nodded at the couple and then dove into my now cold food with less gusto than I’d had before.

Dad and I made small talk after that. The feeling of eyes on me as the dining room filled with guests spurred me to want to haul my stinky ass back to my room to shower.

“So, tell me about this dinner date,” Dad said as he walked me to the rear door of the inn. We stepped out onto the veranda, the skies crisp and blue as Gibson’s eyes. “Was it a friend date or a something more date?”

I took a moment to ponder his query. On one level, I should not be looking for romance. I’d only be here for a little while. Perhaps the studio would call me back today and all my misdeeds would be forgiven and a new fat contract would be awaiting my return.

*But do we really want a contract for more Connor Days movies?*

That was the million dollar question. More like ten million. Per movie. With some ownership perks for each film and a cut of the grosses. Would they gross that much now, though? Would my fans be willing to shell out hard-earned cash to see me—the poof in the pink panties—pretend to be straight? The answer to that is being investigated right now.

“I think it might be a something more date,” I replied honestly. Lying to my father felt wrong now. I’d done so for so damn long. I was tired of the dishonesty and hiding who I truly was and what I was truly feeling. “It’s just...early is all.”

“Sure, of course, I get that. Is it Gibson Vale?” he asked with a twinkle in his deep brown eyes. I couldn’t help but chuckle. There really are no secrets on this tiny island. “One of our guests has a child who takes pottery classes...”

“Ah,” I said and turned to look out at the sea. The sun glittered on the rolling surface, birds swooped and dove, and the wind rustled the flags out front, snapping them soundly. “There is a spark between us. I can’t deny that, but my time here is short.”

“Sure, of course. Still, if you could stay for an extended period of time, then Gibson would be a good one to pal around with.” That made me laugh aloud. Dad gave me a look of bewilderment.

“Sorry,” I said when I caught my breath. “I haven’t heard that term for ages. Yes, Gibson would be a fantastic sort to spend time with. We’ll see what happens. My life is so up in the air right now I can’t honestly make plans past lunch.”

“How about you join me and Kimmy for dinner? Our treat. We can go to the steakhouse on the mainland.”

I bumped his shoulder with mine. “You’re bound and determined to pay for something today, aren’t you?” He snorted in amusement. “Dinner sounds amazing. Tell Kimmy that I’m looking forward to it tremendously.”

Dad beamed and gave me a sound hugging before he darted back inside to tell Kimmy.

Our meal that night was delicious. Kimmy was a delight. She adored my father, that was obvious, and Dad thought the world revolved around his Kimmy. That made me incredibly happy. I’d hated leaving him here alone when I’d gone to pursue my dreams. That guilt had been steady, but now he had someone at his side, who loved the inn as much as he did, and that lifted the weight off my shoulders. Much to my father’s chagrin, I paid for the meal. I could afford it. Speaking of cash, I had a donation to make.

“Who’s in charge of the playhouse now?” I asked as Kimmy, Dad, and I were waiting to cross the bridge to Kesside Isle. There was a traffic jam. Two cars were waiting to cross. That was peak traffic density around here, although next weekend would see a ton of tourists flowing in to fill each cabin to bursting.

“Millie Conklin,” Kimmy informed me as we waited for Portman to check passes. It could take a while since he was loath to leave his shack and was trying to read the pass of the lead car from his little hut with a flashlight. “She owns the art



museum now. She's been the mayor for two years. Nice woman, has a son who's a carpenter who's been doing some odd jobs for free around the theater to keep it from falling in on itself, but the place needs a major overhaul." She looked over her shoulder at me in the back seat. "Are you thinking of donating?"

"I am, yes, so thank you for that info."

"Did you hear that, Marcus? We'll have a playhouse back soon! I love plays. Oh, imagine if you could come back to star in one of the shows, Elias!"

That would be something to see. It had been years since I'd been asked to belt out a tune or hoof the boards. I could do both rather well actually after taking lessons to perfect my talents. Shame all I was known for now was being a bloodthirsty jerk.

"Maybe, Kimmy," I replied, then sat back to try to call up exactly what kind of stage performance a thespian with my skills could star in. Something dark and brooding where they blew up things and used lots of guns.

*First Blood the Musical.* That would fill the seats for sure.

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Two days later, I was meeting up with the incomparable Minnie Conklin, owner of Kesside Fine Art Gallery and a whirlwind of a woman. No bigger than a Hobbit, Minnie could run circles around me and had been for the past twenty minutes. Her hair was a short red bob, her face round, and her

figure chunky. She wore a bit too much rouge and big dangly earrings that matched her yellow shirt and black skirt. The woman reminded me of the bumblebee that I'd ridden into on my way to town this afternoon. That encounter had nearly caused me to crash my bike into a stone driveway pillar that marked the short road to an elite cabin on the western side of the island. I was still looking for green cars and not chunky bumblebees. That'll teach me to keep my eyes on the road and not on the neighbors' vehicles.

"...to me you've shown up when you have," Minnie was saying as she hustled me out of her art gallery—which I was pleased to see had pottery from a certain ceramist I was infatuated with—and out into the hot summer sun. July had arrived just this day, bringing summer weather with it. The forecast for the Fourth was hot, dry, and fireworks galore. "I've been trying to fend off several developers who are lusting after the playhouse," she said over her shoulder as she locked the gallery for a late lunch hour.

Town was bustling with tourists and summer residents were already arriving. The docks were filling up as the rich folk berthed their sailboats and cabin cruisers. By this weekend, every berth would be filled and the waters around the isle would be packed with boats of all shapes and sizes.

"Oh? Kimmy never mentioned that," I said, casting a look around an SUV to see if I could see the pottery shop from here. I could, but there was no sign of Gibson. I'd stop by after I was done here to see if he had any plans for the evening. Hopefully not. I was hoping to invite him to the inn to take

part in a one-on-one cornhole challenge. Loser buys drinks at the bar inside the inn.

“It’s nothing I’d like the residents to know of right off. I’m hoping we can secure some major funding to keep the theater open and afloat for a few years. Perhaps by that time I can convince the residents that a small tax increase to save the playhouse would be a good investment.”

“Well, if anyone can do it, Madame Mayor, it would be you.” She giggled like a schoolgirl as we picked our way carefully through the tourists. The roar of the whale watching tour boats’ motors floated by with the sound of gulls and children laughing. “What are the developers hoping to do with the theater?”

“They’re keen to tear it down and open up a hotel,” she said, casting a concerned look my way as we came up in front of the old playhouse. My brow furrowed. “Yes, that was my reaction as well. We have two fine inns here on the island, the small one here on the tip and yours.”

“Well, it’s my father’s,” I confessed as she shook out a ring of keys and then found the one she sought quickly. “But yes, I’d rather not have a major chain come in here to push out the two small family-owned businesses.”

“Nor would I. We take pride in the fact that all of our businesses are independently owned. While I would hate to turn the property over to an uncaring real estate developer who has never been to the island nor ever will, as the caretaker of the playhouse for the town, something will have to be done

here soon. Greg, my son, has been making small repairs when he can, but...well, you'll see."

She unlocked the front doors. I held the door open for her, removing my ball cap and shades when we stepped into the dark theater. Minnie pulled out a small keychain flashlight. I shoved my cap into the back pocket of my shorts—wondering why I was even bothering with the whole movie star incognito bit when everyone and their poodle knew who I was and why I was here now—and followed Minnie into the lobby. The place smelled of musk and rodents, not a pleasant aroma at all.

"We keep the power on here to run the heater in the winter and try to discourage vandals." The carpeting under our feet was threadbare. "Not that we have much vandalism offseason, but the summer folks are known to bring some wild teenagers with them when they come."

I nodded. Yep, Dad and I knew all about the rich kids who strolled around town filled with attitude. Billy and I had gotten into more than our fair share of fights as young men. And now he was preaching to turn the other cheek. My smile over my old friend with the smart mouth now being the pastor faded quickly when Minnie shined her light upward.

"Oh fuck, that's not good," I mumbled when I saw the water stains on the high ceiling. "Sorry for the profanity."

"Pfft, I've seen all the Connor Days movies, some twice. I'm not offended by an F-bomb."

"My father would kick my backside if he knew I spoke that way in front of the mayor," I said, trudging along after her

through the sorrowful lobby into the theater itself. She padded over to the left, leaving me standing in the doorway. The click of lights blinded me for a moment, then I let out a slow, sad breath. “Holy hell.”

The theater area was a disgrace. The stink of mouse piss was much stronger in here. Walking down the center aisle, Minnie showed me seat after seat that was rodent chewed. The carpeting was down to the wood in spots, and the curtains that hung from the ceiling to the stage itself were moth-eaten. I climbed onto the stage, Minnie following me, listing off all the things that the playhouse needed funds for. New wiring, new plumbing, new roof. And that was just the big things. She also ticked off new flooring in the bathrooms, new bathrooms, new carpeting...the list went on and on.

After we had made a pass through the cramped backstage area, we made our way to the lobby, the fresh air coming in the open doors a relief after an hour of inhaling mouse pee and dampness.

I eyed the small concession stand covered with rodent droppings and dust.

“Is the town looking to sell this property or just find someone to invest in it?” I asked as we lingered in the shade, Minnie seemingly unwilling to venture out into the afternoon heat.

“Well, to be honest, we’re looking to find someone who will love this old gal as much as we do. As a native islander and a thespian who got his start on that stage,” she waved a well-

manicured hand at the cavernous dark room behind us, “I’m sure you understand that the need for arts far outweighs the need for another chain hotel. Also, as a hotelier, you can surely see what a cheap motel/hotel will do to your family’s inn. Small business cannot compete with a huge chain. That being said, the playhouse is a huge drain on the town coffers. Greg has been doing what he can, but he can’t afford to keep shelling out free labor and supplies to keep her limping along. No, what we need is someone with a love of the theater and a large wallet to step in and buy her lock, stock, and leaky barrel.”

She turned clever brown eyes on me. I laughed out loud. “That was about as subtle as a brick to the back of the head, Mayor.”

“I didn’t get elected to tippy-toe around the issues. I’m a direct woman. Personally, speaking off the record, I would love to see you buy her outright. Your name on the marquis would be a draw.”

“I’m not so sure about that, and to be honest, I have no wish to have my name in lights here.” She rolled those brown eyes. “If I do buy her from the town, the name will stay the same. My name is shit right now, pardon my French.”

“People get too damn caught up in what other people do in their bedrooms if you ask me,” she stated as if she were out stumping for votes. That Maine accent was thick and strong. “We got bigger fish to fry on Kesside than fretting over who

shacks up with whom or what they're wearing when they get out of the tub."

"You got my vote," I quipped. She chuckled. "What's the asking price for her?"

She folded her arms over her substantial bosom and then tipped her head to study me. "One point two million with a twelve point two four cap rate."

I turned around in a small circle, sight moving over the lobby to the theater and then to the concession stand. The place would basically need to be gutted and redone to keep the interior and exterior the same as it had been when the place had been built back in the late '40s. That would be expensive. Restoration was a costly and time-consuming thing, but what the hell else did I have to do? Also, this tiny playhouse had been where I'd caught the acting bug. God knows she should be paid back.

"Sold." I held out my hand. Minnie squeaked and grasped my hand, pumping it like only a politician could.

"That is excellent news! Most excellent! I had a good feeling when I heard you were back on the isle." She nearly shook my arm free from its socket. Who knew a little lady who ran a tiny town and an art gallery could shake like Arnold Schwarzenegger? "Give me two days to get the paperwork lined up and we'll meet in the courthouse and sign over the property to you."

"That's perfect. I can call my accountant and get the money moved from one place to the other. I assume you'll want a

cashier's check for the full amount?"

"Yes! That will be wonderful. Oh, we can finally do some road work now. And improve the docks here on the tip. Elias, you have no idea how much this will improve the town! And we'll be having new shows here as well! With a big-name actor producing and perhaps performing!"

I wanted to tell her not to get that horse in front of that particular buggy, but she was on a roll. And if I knew one thing, it was to never try to outtalk a politician. I'd schmoozed with governors, senators, and even a president or two in my illustrious career. Best to let them filibuster, then try to squeeze in a word or two.

Fifteen minutes later I was back out in the sun, Minnie having hurried back to her gallery to get the wheels rolling on the playhouse purchase, my phone to my ear. My ball cap was still in my back pocket. The fresh salt air and hot rays felt good after spending so much time in all that dankness. My accountant was sputtering in my ear about possibly holding off on major investments until my career was on more stable ground.

"Just get the money ready and put it into a cashier's check written out to the Town of Kesside Bay and have it ready by tomorrow." That was a little short, I knew, but since he had just informed me not five minutes ago that he couldn't in good conscience continue handling my financial affairs due to my being part of a community he didn't believe in—like he



thought LGBTQ people were in the same realm as Santa Claus—I was not feeling all that polite.

We ended the call—and a seven-year working relationship—with that last sniping comment from me. Ralph would do as I asked about this, I was sure, then he would wash his hands of my scandalous gay ass. Fine. I was done working with people who were bigots. It wouldn't be hard for Elle to find me a new accountant. And a new PR firm since mine kicked me to the curb yesterday. Yay Team Elias Lake. Woohoo.

“You look like you could stand a friend to give you a cupcake.” I heard the sexy low purr of Gibson beside me. I glanced to the right and there he was, pottery schmutz on the tip of his nose, his gorgeous hair pulled haphazardly back from his dynamic face. In his hands was a small blue box from the local baked goods shop. The furrows on my brow disappeared. “Bad day?”

“Fifty-fifty. What's in here? Why are you here? Do you not have a shop to run? And why are you smiling at me as if you have a secret?”

“Such a curious man,” he teased, shifting out of the sun to stand in the shade of the canopy that held the marquee. “Open it and see.”

I stepped out of the sun, smiling softly, and I lifted the lid to find a cupcake with white frosting with delicate little candy hearts.

“It's not Valentine's Day,” I said, lifting the glorious creation from the box. “Oh my God, is this red velvet?”

He nodded and took the empty box from me. “It is. You seemed to enjoy the cake we had for dessert the other night.”

“Enjoyed it? I made a damn pig of myself over it. I’m still trying to pedal off the pounds it packed onto my ass.”

He took a theatrical lean back to check out my rump. “Looks as delightful as it did the last time I saw it.”

“You dirty old man,” I joked as I peeled the cupcake paper away from the rich, red cake and took a big bite. Big like half the cupcake. Gibson’s light blue eyes flared. “Rug bag.” I held up a finger, chewing and swallowing as fast as I could without choking. “Rough day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He reached out to wipe some frosting from my lower lip. I watched, mesmerized, as he licked the icing from the tip of his finger. My cock twitched.

“Truthfully, it’s been fifty-fifty.” I held out the other half to him. Two kids on bikes raced by, nearly running over my toes. Someone tooted a boat horn. The sound of passengers disembarking from a tour boat drifted by. None of it really seemed to register as I watched, dick growing fatter by the second, as Gibson took my hand, held it still, and took a teensy bite. Then he led the treat back to my mouth. I opened. He gently pressed it in and smiled at me, eyes blazing with desire. Dear Lord. I was questioning if we should move away from the old building before we set things on fire.

“Well then, there must have been some good things taking place if it was fifty-fifty. Tell me about the good things while we walk to the wine shop.”

“Mm, you’re very pushy,” I said around the final bite of cupcake.

“I know. Do you mind?”

“God no,” I replied, wiping at my mouth with the back of my wrist. We couldn’t walk side-by-side due to the amount of people, so we went single file, not really talking until we stepped into the cool interior of the wine shop. Gibson turned to look at me beside a rack of white wine.

“Okay, so the good news?”

“Oh, I just bought the playhouse.”

He literally gasped and grinned. “That is amazing news! Elias, I’m so happy for you and the town. The arts shall not die on Kesside this day!” He announced it like the finest of Shakespearean actors. Several customers turned to look our way. I chuckled softly. “This calls for a celebratory feast. Would you like to come to my cabin for something decadent?”

“What exactly is the decadence you’re talking about? Food, wine, or something else?”

His gaze met and held mine. “All the above?”

My body thrummed with want. “What time is dinner? I’ll bring an appetizer.”

“Seven and I’ll supply the decadence.”

If not for an old lady and her husband staring at us as if we were entertainers—oops, okay, I was—I would have kissed Gibson right there in the wine shop. Probably it was for the

best that the elderly couple was there. When Gibson and I kissed for the first time, I didn't want to be in a store with people gawking. It would be somewhere private, tucked back into some stately weather-beaten pines. And that was not an if we kissed, it was a when. This man and I were destined to be lovers.

# Chapter Nine

Not wanting to be caught short if decadence broke out this evening, I took way more time to get ready for dinner than I generally would have. I prepped for intimacy, shaved up the overgrown patch of curls by my dick, moussed my hair, tidied my beard, and then applied a light spritz of cologne that matched my soap and shampoo. Some ridiculously expensive stuff that I'd bought on Rodeo Drive the last time I'd been shopping. Something Dior with a Greek god's name on it. I even rubbed some of the beard cream into my facial hair. Was that too much? Did I reek of the stuff now?

"Shit." I sniffed what I could sniff of myself. Hopefully, I wouldn't bowl the man over with scent first thing in the door. After I was done with the personal things, I padded to the wardrobe, naked as a babe, opened it, and pulled out the middle drawer. There, laid out neatly, were my panties and bralettes. I ran a finger over the silken ones, then the lace, letting the material speak to me. The sound of the sea floated in the patio doors as I let my eyes drift shut. When my fingers settled on one thing, I glanced down to see what the lingerie gods had chosen. Oh my, they had picked well. The set was black see-through lace, a sissy bra with matching panties, and garters that went along with them. I mulled over if it was too much to wear stockings on the first night of possible decadence. While slipping on stockings was one of my favorite things ever, perhaps Gibson would be turned off in some way.

I opted out of the garters and stockings this time. Stepping into the panties sent shivers up my legs, pleasurable tingles

that settled not in my groin but in my heart. Any time I wore lingerie, it made me feel whole and pretty and alive in a way that boxers and tighty-whities never could. What a pity the world was so damn hung up on such things. Who cared what a person wore to cover their ass? Fans of action movies, it seemed.

Unwilling to let myself get bummed out before the night even started, I shoved all thoughts of the world that lay across the bridge that Portman guarded away and focused on tonight. On Gibson and our meal. Once I was dressed in a tank top, shorts, and low-cut sneakers, I made my way to the back door of the kitchen.

Usually, there was a light amount of food being served at the bar, but since the island was filling with people, the kitchen was humming. Pub food always went well, and for those who wanted finer dining, they could hit the tip or cross the bridge. They just had to be back by ten or risk rousing Portman from his bed. Amazing what city folk would put up with in the name of quaint Maine charm.

Emelda glanced my way when I snuck in. “We are too busy for you to be taking up all the room,” she said while plating up some deep fried shrimp.

“I’m just here to grab that shrimp platter you said you’d fix for me.” She huffed, muttered, and waved her hand at the large silver walk-in. “You’re the most beautiful woman on the island.”

“Go away now before I paddle you for lying,” she replied with a smile playing on her lips. I kissed her on the cheek, then danced out of the way of her playful slap. The plate sat just inside the fridge, a hearty helping of giant prawns with a monkey dish full of Emelda’s fiery hot cocktail sauce. “Thank you!” I called as I scurried out of the kitchen as servers hustled in and out, all calling out greetings.

Trying to figure out how to balance a dish of shrimp on a bike was a problem. After a quick dash back to the kitchen for a takeout container with a lid, I was off, with the appetizer secured to the rack over the rear tire. I wanted to race to the yellow shack, but I also didn’t want to be sweaty when I arrived. The humidity had spiked the past few days. I was damp under my arms when I wheeled into the overgrown drive. Nothing to do about that. I’d pedaled with ease.

Oregano sounded off as soon as I leaned my bike against the side of the cabin.

“Who is it?” I heard Gibson calling from within his home, his voice pitched high like a woman’s.

“It’s the handsome bike delivery man,” I called back as I loosened the bungee cord holding the shrimp and then walked to the door, making a wide berth of the irate gull trying her best to reach out and peck me.

“Come in, handsome bike delivery man,” he replied in that singsong voice that had me laughing out loud as I opened the front door. The inside was cooler, the pines shading the cabin nicely, and the open windows allowed the ocean breeze to



blow in. The tiny home smelled of garlic, onions, and fried bacon. Gibson stood by his kitchen table in another beautiful kaftan, this one bright green with small gold antelopes. His big feet were bare and his hair flowed freely. My cock plumped up inside my panties, which was a little uncomfortable but also kind of a turn on. Like a lace cock ring of sorts.

“We sound like a cheap porn,” I said as I walked over to hand the takeout container to Gibson. “This needs to be refrigerated. Whatever you’re making smells amazing.”

He cracked the container, oohing at the shrimp, and rushed to get them on a glass dish.

“Sit, sit, we’ll start with some shrimp and wine while the cheese melts on the pasta.” I glanced at the stove and saw a casserole dish in the oven. “It’s brie pasta. The recipe calls for spaghetti, but I wanted to use rigatoni. There’s brie, pancetta, a dash of lemon juice, red peppers, caramelized onions, fresh spinach, some garlic, and salt. I like a casserole so I tossed some sliced brie on top. I have always felt that one can never have too much cheese.”

“I tend to agree,” I said, taking a seat as he placed the shrimp on the table followed by a charcuterie board with pumpernickel bread, apples, more brie, a dish of honey, and nuts. I smiled up at him as he filled our glasses with white wine and then took his seat. “This looks amazing. Do you have some sort of cooking degree?”

“Gods no, although I did always want to be Julia Child in another life,” he replied, sitting back and crossing one leg over

the other.

“Ah, so you believe in reincarnation?” I asked, sipping the very dry wine and reaching for a shrimp to eat.

“Well, there are schools of thought on that. Some of the greatest Greek minds believed in life after death. Plato, for example, felt that the soul was eternal and would linger when the body was gone. He felt that death should not be feared but viewed as an achievement.”

“What do *you* think?” I prodded after dipping the shrimp into the sauce and holding it out for him to take. He leaned over the table, pulled the shrimp from my fingers with his teeth, and sat back slightly to chew. His nose flared when the extra hot horseradish hit his tongue. I snickered at the sweat breaking out on his brow. To his credit, he chewed and swallowed. But then downed a glass of wine while I tittered.

“I think that cocktail sauce should come with a Scoville warning,” he gasped, eyes watering, and nose running. I roared, then ate a shrimp with only a mild shudder. “How on earth do you eat that and not pass out?”

“I grew up eating Emelda’s cooking,” I replied and offered him a shrimp dripping with red sauce.

He politely refused. I popped it into my mouth as he nursed his wine for several minutes as we talked about life after death. Once the pasta was ready, we dove into that and some other deep discussions. Soft classic crooners played from a hidden stereo somewhere in the cabin, adding the perfect tone to the meal. I’d never had someone stimulate my mind like

Gibson did. He prodded and poked, pushed and pulled, engaging me on topics that rarely came up in my life. *Was* happiness just chemicals floating in my brain, or was it something deeper? Is having a large ego good or bad? Are we truly inside the Matrix?

We carried the conversation of Neo and Trinity out back after we'd stuffed ourselves on pasta with dark chocolate cupcakes with brandy icing for dessert. I really wanted to stop at the bakery in town but knew I shouldn't. Someday soon I'd be heading back to L.A. where every inch of fat on an actor's body was up for discussion. Gain weight and you were gossiped about. Lose weight and you were gossiped about. Maintain your weight and you were gossiped about. It was a no-win situation.

"...personally, I feel that if we were living in a simulation, I would prefer a better one," he said as he led me to an old glider facing the woods. Oregano was out front, keeping her vigil, so out here it was quiet. Small pots were stacked here and there, herbs flowing out of the different shaped and sized pottery holders. A small garden sat off to the left, holding what looked to be a couple of tomato plants, some carrots, and two tiny heads of cabbage that seemed a bit wilted. A few fireflies under the pines began to blink as the night enveloped the isle.

I sat down next to him, wineglass in hand, holding it out to be refilled again. My stomach was packed tight with so much rich food I was far from tipsy. My belly was so full I would have to jog to Vermont tomorrow morning to work this meal

off. Katy would be flogging me with beet greens if she had seen the carbs I'd just ingested. Good thing she wasn't here.

“What do you think would be a better simulation?” I asked as he poured from the second bottle of Sauvignon Blanc we'd opened so far.

“One with no wars, no hunger, no guns, no police brutality, and no mosquitoes.” He slapped at his neck, spilling some wine onto my shorts. “Oh damn, sorry. Miserable bugs.”

“No worries,” I replied as I took a sip of wine while patting the wet mark on my thigh. Gibson got up to light some citronella candles sitting on the ground in tiny metal buckets.

“There, the bastards.” He sat beside me again, wiggling around to tuck a leg under his ass so he could look at me. “Now, what would you like to see for a better simulation?”

I drew in a long breath through my nose to think. “You listed the main ones. I'd like my simulation to be free of bigotry, hate, and divisiveness. In my perfect simulation, no one would care if someone else went to bed with someone of a different race. They'd give no shits if a man bedded a man or if those men were wearing frilly tights or makeup. I'd like to live in a world where people just accepted each other.”

Gibson held up his wineglass. “Here's to that.” I tapped my glass to his, the light clink of glass kissing glass ringing out. “Oh! Speaking of something to drink to. Cheers to the new owner of the Kesside Bay Theater.” We tapped glasses once more and took small sips. The wine was so dry I puckered

slightly. “I’m so relieved to hear that a native bought it and one with some classic theater training.”

I nearly choked on my wine. “No, no, I’m not at all classically trained.”

“You did an off-Broadway rendition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, did you not?”

I gave him an amused look. “Did you Google me?”

He fluffed it off. “If I did, it was only after meeting you. You intrigued me. Still do.”

“Ah, okay then. Well,” I sat back, my leg cocked up so that I could look into his face as the night slowly began to claim the island, “I did do one summer of Shakespeare when I was nineteen. It was a small theater off-off-off-off-off-Broadway.”

“Yes, Pasadena is quite off Broadway,” he teased, reaching out to pat my knee. His hand settled there, and I willingly allowed it.

“Quite. But I did enjoy it. The pay was dismal, but I was young and hungry to act.”

“Mm, I can see you as a young man filled with the fervor of youth. Lean and whippet strong, driven to tread the boards as the Bard’s words flowed from your honeyed lips. Favor me with a passage?”

I blinked and then sipped my wine. The man could sure wax poetic. I’d never had anyone say my lips were honeyed. I thought to say no but then asked myself why. Why not recite

lines by a master of words? Why not speak of things grander than revenge or bloodlust?

I rose, faced the darkening sky, and pulled up a passage from so long ago when I'd played Lysander.

*“Or if there were a sympathy in choice,  
War, death or sickness did lay siege to it,  
Making it momentary as a sound,  
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream:  
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,  
That in a spleen unfolds both heaven and earth,  
And ere a man hath power to say ‘Behold!’  
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:  
So quick bright things come to confusion.”*

He breathed in the prose as if it were sweet, scented tea. With his eyes still closed, he rose and fed me the next passage from Hermia.

*“If then true lovers have been ever crossed,  
It stands as an edict in destiny.  
Then let us teach our trial patience,  
Because it is a customary cross,  
As due to love as thoughts and dreams and sighs,*

*Wishes and tears, poor fancy's followers."*

I watched him as he spoke. The words fell from him with ease and passion. When he opened his eyes, our gazes locked. Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald were singing "Dancing Cheek to Cheek" inside the little yellow cabin, the song floating out the open windows.

"Amazing," I said, my smile sincere. He took a theatrical bow, righted himself, and offered me his hand.

"Would you like to dance?" The moon was still hidden behind the trees, so the only light in this private copse was from dancing candles and one small square of illumination from the rectangular kitchen window.

"I've never been asked by another man to dance," I confessed, slipping my hand into his. He moved closer, his raspy cheek brushing mine, causing my breath to hitch. He slid the palm of his left hand around my back as he began softly singing along to Louis.

"That is a crime against humanity," he whispered into my ear, then resumed his song. I let him lead. No reason really other than I had never experienced it before. His chest moved against mine with each swaying step. My free hand came up to rest on his shoulder. We never moved much, just a few steps one way and then the other, the rub of his erection jolting me from head to toe. His cock stood out proudly. "Yes, I am not wearing anything under my kaftan. I rarely do at home."

“God,” I croaked as my dick grew longer and thicker. I clung to his shoulder with my free hand, letting my lips brazenly move through his beard until my lips located his. “Can I kiss you?” I enquired breathlessly.

“Please,” he answered softly as he moved me in a tiny circle, the hand on my hip now pulling me into him more fully. I ran my lips over his, a brush of touch, then applied some pressure. Gibson lapped at the seam of my mouth, asking for entry, which I granted him. The flick of his tongue over mine made me lightheaded. He tasted of wine and chocolate. A mixture that made me delirious with want. The song ended, and our dancing faded to two lonely men grinding against each other as we explored with teeth, tongue, and lips.

“I would very much like to take you to my bed,” he gruffly said when the kiss broke. This was all so new to me. All of my previous encounters had been hidden in the dark, the fear of discovery always at the back of my mind, dimming the joy of the moment. This night was different. Hell, this man was different. He wasn’t a starstruck twink looking to score the big bad movie star. Gibson was an open and out gay man. And... so was I.

“I would like that as well,” I replied with a little more volume than was needed.

He chuckled as he held me to him, his pelvis tight to mine. “Why don’t you shout that to the stars? Tell the world and all the creatures upon it what you’re feeling right now.” He



dropped a kiss to my jawline, then moved back, his hand still clasping mine.

“That feels silly,” I stated as I tipped my head back to stare at the few twinkling stars I could see through the jack pines standing sentry in knowing silence.

“It will free you,” he said and waited.

I inhaled and then shouted skyward. “I’m gay and going to take this man to bed!” My bellow rolled upward and was swept off with a gentle wind rich with the sea scent. I glanced from the stars to Gibson. “You were right. That *did* unlock something in my breast.” So I did it again and again once more.

“One more step to being the proud gay man the world didn’t want you to be.” He lifted my hand to his lips, kissed my knuckles, and took a step toward the back door. I followed with eagerness, my heart thundering, my cock aching. “Now let’s see how being free to love another man feels on your skin.”

As we tumbled into his bed—a wide, firm thing with vibrant quilts and eclectic pillows in various shapes and sizes—I already knew how loving him would feel. It would be glorious. He turned on a tiny hobnail lamp on an old oaken nightstand and then rolled me to my back, easing my shirt up and inhaling as if he had found old Phillippe’s treasure. My hands were shaking as I moved them up and down his thick forearms. He nestled between my legs, sitting on his heels, and placed both hands over my pectorals.

“You are one of the most sinfully beautiful things I have ever seen,” he said, his voice heavy with lust as he began rubbing the material of my bralette over my nipples. The scratch of fine lace making the nubs stand up and beg. “Such a stunning man. I adore seeing you wearing such gorgeous things. The combination of male and female...” He paused to slow his breathing, his blue eyes now dark with desire. “I’m so turned on right now.”

Feeling desired and pretty and free, I slid my hand under his kaftan to find his cock. It was easy to locate. Hard, fat, and leaking, it sat in my palm as if it were made to be there. I gave him a stroke.

“I can tell you like it,” I panted like a work mule just done plowing the back forty.

“So very much.” He moved over me with a grunt. “Can only sit like that for so long,” he playfully explained before slanting his mouth over mine. I held onto his dick, working him slowly, rubbing my thumb into the wet slit so that I could hear his huffs of pleasure as they puffed into my mouth. Then he moved downward, latching his lips onto a nipple covered with lace. I yelped, arching up for some friction, my balls tingling and tight to my body.

“God fucking yes!” I dug at his shoulders, kicked my legs, and writhed under him. I was mad with want. If I came from him just sucking a tit, I might just die of embarrassment, but the possibility was real. “Tug harder...”

He did as asked, using his teeth to pull on my sensitive nub. My bralette was wet with his spittle, which was just another ratchet upward. I pulled on his now hard cock, working him with an urgency that he picked up on. He lifted his head to look down at me.

“You’re close?” he asked with bright pink, wet lips.

“Yes, so close,” I huffed, my fingers biting into his thick biceps. “It’s been a long time for me and—”

“No need to make excuses,” he whispered over my lips before stealing a long, wet kiss. My balls throbbed now, my cock so hard it ached. “I’m right there with you.”

He sat up, pulled the kaftan over his head, and whipped it somewhere over his shoulder. My eyes moved over his big, brawny, hairy body. Saliva pooled in my mouth when I peeked at his cock locked in the vise of my fist. He reached down, uncurled my fingers, and gave me a wink.

“We do this in unison,” he said, tugging my zipper down. When he saw my cock trapped in see-through black lace, he made a sound like a lion spotting a gazelle. “Look at you. My gods, just look at you.”

“Hurry, please,” I begged, digging my heels into the bed to hoist my ass from the mattress. He yanked down my shorts, then flung them to the wind too. His gaze was glued to my dick wetting the fine lace panties. “Do you really like me?”

“Yes, oh yes, I adore you.” He ran a finger over my cock. I gasped and shuddered. Then, with infinite care, he placed his

cock next to mine, leaving my prick in the confines of my underwear. With eyes ablaze, he hovered over me, hands on either side of my head now, and began humping my cock. My eyes rolled back into my skull. Strange sounds tumbled out of me as he ground down on me, his grunts mixing with my cries, until I blew apart, soaking my panties. Brow resting on mine, he rolled his hips, groaned roughly, and pumped rope after rope of spunk over my belly and dick. His cum mingled with mine, soaking through the fragile lace.

Words were just nonsense for a few minutes. He kissed me gently several times, murmuring things that my brain could not comprehend. Then he moved down to rub his face on my still hard cock. I pushed up to my elbows to watch him begin licking the spend from my belly, then moving down to lap at my sodden panties. His eyes were like sapphires lit from within as he tongued at my dick through the lace. I'd never seen a man so enraptured with frilly bits. I honestly wondered if I had died and gone to my version of heaven.

“My dear God,” I finally managed to croak out as he eased himself from my flaccid dick, his lips and beard sodden as he covered my mouth with his. I sighed into the kiss, licking deep into his mouth to gather up our essences like a man starved. It was he who eased back from the kiss, smiling, and then fell beside me on the bed, using the back of his hand to swipe at his mouth.

“That was incredible,” he said in a tone heavy with passion still. He lay next to me, on his side, his left hand roaming over my chest, fingertips plucking at my panties or the strap of my

bralette. “You are incredible. My exposure to men in women’s clothing was limited to drag shows, and while I found those to be entertaining and somewhat erotic, having you here in my bed wearing these is just...” He snickered as he floundered. “Imagine me at a loss for words.”

“Would your former students be surprised?” I moved to my side to trace the shell of his ear.

“Shocked. Utterly shocked,” he admitted with no shame. “I love the sound of my own voice. I’m very intelligent, you know.”

A short laugh erupted out of me. “So you keep telling me.”

That made him snort with amusement. “You are a joy, Elias. Please, stay the night. We have wine and sweets left. We have songs to fill the silent night. Linger here in my arms.”

“Hmm.” I toyed with him for a second or two, pretending to ponder. “I’ll stay, but it was the promise of more sweets that swayed my decision.”

He buried his face in my neck, nibbling along my thumping jugular. “If cakes and tarts will keep you here, then I shall buy out the bakery on the morrow.”

A shiver ran through me. This man could charm Satan out of his pitchfork.

I didn’t leave that cabin until the sun rose. We feasted on cake and each other for breakfast. And when I left, I didn’t skulk or hide. We kissed at the front door and I pedaled off

with my head held high, keeping a good distance between myself and Oregano.

True, only the waking gulls, a paperboy, and an old man in a windbreaker walking a Pug dog saw me leaving Gibson's cabin, but that was fine. They saw a proud and out gay man with cake icing in his hair passing by, and that was the important thing.

# Chapter Ten

The next few days were spent working on trying to find local skill to renovate the playhouse, talking to my agent as we tried to douse fires back in Tinsel Town, and helping my father at the inn as the holiday guests were arriving by the carload and Kimmy had come down with a migraine. Poor woman. Gibson and I texted or snuck in quick kisses when I could sneak to town on the premise of renovations. In truth, the only local craftsman who could come right away was Minnie's son, Greg Conklin. He was licensed as a plumber and had some handyman references, so I hired him on the spot to start on the plumbing. The roof was worrisome but finding a roofer who wasn't booked out a year in advance was proving impossible. Then there was the need for electricians and carpenters.

"...personally, they're going to come out with a statement soon," Elle was saying in my ear as I smiled at a new guest while trying to get the credit card reader to scan their AmEx. "There are whispers coming my way and they're not promising, Elias."

"Try scanning it again," I said to the elderly gent. "No, flip it over. There you go." I smiled widely as the machine beeped happily. "Elle, let me call you back." I glanced at the couple waiting to get to their room and one sour-looking blonde woman who had been here for an hour but had the look of a complainer about her. "Things here are a little crazy."

"Okay, sure. You got any spare rooms? I could use a break from this stinking town."



I brightened a bit when an idea sparked to life. “You could have my room. I could stay with a friend over the long weekend.”

“I adore you. Let me put one last call into the studio, then I am packing a bag. Can I bring Katy? She misses you.”

“No, she doesn’t. She’s working that football player into shape. I saw her IG posts,” I replied as I passed over the room key to the old twosome from Manhattan. They tottered off chatting about crab cakes, then the uptight blonde woman from the Puffin Suite strode up to the desk with a slip of paper in her hand. “Feel free to bring a guest.”

“Honey, I spend all my time on my clients. When the hell do I have time to find a man to share a bed with?”

“Bring your vibrator then,” I joked and got a glower from my waiting guest. “Okay, duty calls. Let me know when you’re on the plane.”

“Will do. See you this evening.” Elle hung up, and I ended the call on my cell and slid the phone into my back pocket. “Hello.” I grinned at the woman in the white sundress. “How can I help you...” Shit. Her name had fled my mind. My eyes darted to the computer screen to see the list of guests and rooms. “Mrs. Michelson.”

“I was checking my credit card purchases after I unpacked and I found a discrepancy in the price that I was told I would be charged and what I was actually charged.”

“Oh, well, let me see what could have happened.” I brought up her credit card information. “Hmm, all looks good here. What were you told you would be charged when you made the reservation over the phone?”

“I was told that my room would be four hundred a night. Which would work out to two thousand dollars for the Puffin Suite for five days, but here on the receipt it says that my card would be charged two thousand dollars and eighty-nine cents.”

I looked from the screen to the printout and then to the woman. Really? She was kicking up a bitch over eighty-nine cents.

“Oh, well, that’s a small fee that the credit card company added. If you read the fine print that particular card—”

She huffed in disgust. “Please, don’t try to pin this on the credit card. I’m well aware of how small businesses try to nickel and dime customers to death. I insist on getting my eighty-nine cents refunded.”

Having had just about enough of this harpy, I tugged out my wallet, extracted a one-dollar bill, and placed it on the sturdy wooden countertop.

“There, with interest. Can I help you with anything else?”

She swiped the buck, gave me a scathing look, and made her way to the bar to torment the poor barkeep on duty. I gave her the finger behind her back.

“Elias,” my father chided when he hustled up to the desk, his arms filled with wet towels.

“Sorry.” I lowered my hand. “Dryer issues?”

“Yes, of course. Things always break down when you need them the most.”

“I can run them to the laundromat on the tip.”

“Thank you. I’ll work the desk. It appears I have a better temperament for it.”

I thought he did as well. So, ten minutes later, I was loading wet towels into the back of my father’s old Subaru hatchback, the official car of the Kesside Inn. Judging by the bags of soggy towels, I would be in town for a while. Which was fine with me.

Traffic slowed to a crawl the closer I got to the southern end of the island. About half a mile out, I just pulled off the road the best that I could, hoisted the wet cloth bags over my shoulders, and walked to the tip. Tourists were packed into the small town, the shops were overflowing with patrons, and the sound of boat motors and horns filled the air.

Toting my booty like a pirate, I slipped into the nearly empty laundromat. The smell of bleach and soap reached me as I emptied the bags into four massive dryers. The front door was open as people passed by steadily. Women chatting, men laughing, and children shouting.

Smiling to myself at the noise, for it meant money in the tills of all the stores that lined the harbor, I changed a twenty into a ton of quarters and got the loads tumbling. Cussing at my memory, I rushed to buy some dryer sheets from a coin-

operated machine on the wall by a bulletin board. After tossing the sunshine-fresh strips into the dryers, I started the machines again and headed out into the street. My sight was set on the pottery shop.

Gibson was ringing someone out when I entered. Ten or so customers were milling around. He glanced up to see me, a smile splitting his face when our eyes met. I grinned and ducked my head, easing around the tourists who were whispering praise over the items for sale.

“Hey, you,” I said in a low tone when I neared the register. He looked a little tired but still magnificent. I loved seeing he had on a soft lime green tee and bright yellow shorts. No leather apron today. Instead, he had donned a soft blue one made of cloth with SEA SONG CERAMIST on the front.

“Hello, handsome,” he replied, tucking a squat round bowl of burnt sienna clay that had been deeply glazed into a small box filled with tissue paper. “What brings you to town?”

“The dryer at the inn went on the fritz,” I said, moving out of the way when a couple of millennials came up to pay for their vase. Under the counter were scores of boxes already made and sheafs of tissue paper at the ready.

“Oh no, what a weekend for that to happen,” he replied as he handed over change to one customer and began ringing up another. A woman with red hair by a shelf filled with plates and bowls called out with a question. Gibson glanced around and looked at me. “Would you be willing to ring them out?”

“Of course.” I nudged him aside with my hip. He gave me a grateful look, then a peck on the cheek before heading off to speak with his potential customer. “This is so pretty,” I said as I packaged up the deep red bud vase.

“Are you two dating?” the man asked as his wife tapped in her PIN number.

“We’re...” I paused to look at Gibson. His head turned the moment my eyes touched on his wide shoulders. Oh yes, there was something special between us, but I didn’t want to say what it was before we ourselves had discussed it. “We’re special friends.”

“Ah, gotcha.” The man smiled knowingly. The next twenty minutes raced past as people came and went, spending as if there were no rumors of an impending recession. Of course, these were mostly wealthy people. They owned summer homes and speed boats. So what was a few hundred spent at a pottery shop to the elite? Hell, I’d spent what Gibson had just made on socks. That felt all kinds of elitest now that I thought about it.

“Shall we take a lunch break?” he asked as he flipped the lock on the front door.

“Sounds good. I could go for a lobster roll at Rowdy Ralph’s.”

“Me too.” He untied his apron as he walked toward me. He didn’t stop walking, not until I was pressed flat against the counter with the cash register in my lower back. “I’m also

rather hungry for a taste of your bewitching lips. I've missed you, Elias."

I loved how he said my name. So filled with emotion and passion. "I missed you too."

My arms went around his middle. His mouth slanted over mine. Our tongues tangled as I reacquainted myself with the width of his shoulders.

"Mm, that was lovely." He sighed when the kiss ended. I buried my face into his neck, enjoying the hell out of the crackle of beard on beard. "Maybe we should skip the food and just stay here and get randy?"

I was about to say yes when my stomach rumbled. "Ah well, perhaps we should feed you and then come back and get randy."

"That sounds like a plan." We snuck out the back, locking the screen door, and made our way around the front, hand-in-hand. As we hit the sidewalk, I had a moment of panic. I yanked my hand from his. Gibson waited for me, his fingers dangling by his side, patiently giving me time to come to grips with this new reality. "Damn it." I shoved my hands into my hair with an exhalation. "Sorry. That's...I'm stupid."

"No, you're not. You're just conditioned. We'll work on that." He offered me his hand once more. I took it, wiggling my fingers between his.

He smiled at me lovingly, then we made our way to the pub holding hands so the world could see us. Imagine that. I hated

to let go when we were shown to our table on the second floor. A long outdoor patio looked out over the harbor and we were happy to get a tiny little table for two. While the exhausted server rushed to clear the dirty dishes from the previous patrons, we sat there watching the boats moving slowly out to sea, flags dancing in the brisk wind. When the table was wiped and reset, we both ordered some lemonade and the Rowdy Ralph's lobster roll platter and an appetizer dish of shrimp dip with crudites.

“So, here we are. Eating in public while playing toesies under the table,” Gibson said after our drinks arrived. The sole of his bare foot moved up and down my shin. Man, I did love shorts and sandal season. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” I meant it. I was doing really well with the new out and proud Elias Lake. Sure, a few patrons were staring at me. Perhaps they knew I had been outed or perhaps they didn't. I really didn't give a shit anymore. It felt amazing to be able to gaze longingly at a man I liked without wondering if I was being too obvious. “This is so freeing.”

He took my hand in his and gave it a squeeze. “There is a terrible tragedy in living a lie. I'm thrilled that you're unchained from that, even though you're still struggling with the fallout of your freedom.”

“Thanks. It's been...yeah, it's been something else. My agent called earlier.” His light blue eyes were on me as I spoke, his foot still tickling the hairs on my calf. “She's hearing rumors that my time there is about over.”

“Ah, that’s unfortunate, Elias. Fools the lot of them. They’re letting a skilled and popular actor go due to outdated thinking about what a real man is.”

I shrugged. “Well, to be honest, I probably only had a few more years in me before they decided I was too old to be an action hero.”

“Bullshit. Stallone is still making action movies, and he’s older than Socrates or damn close.” I chuckled. “They would have kept you for eons had your sexuality not been discovered. Hollywood allows their male stars to work far too long at times while letting their female stars rot on the vine after they reach forty. Ageism and sexism are vile things.”

I couldn’t argue. “Well, whatever they might have done once my whiskers turned white is inconsequential now. They’re going to decide not to re-sign me. The liberal media will flail them for a week or two, and then some new drama will pop up and that will be that.”

“I am sorry.” He lifted my hand to kiss my knuckles.

“It’s okay. Well, not really, but I’m not going to fight them about it. I don’t want to work for people who don’t wish me to be there. Elle says there’s a small studio in New York that’s forward thinking and making movies with strong LGBTQ representation. When I’m freed from Four Winds, perhaps we’ll contact them.”

“Manhattan is a long way from Los Angeles. What about your home out there?”



“I’ll sell it and buy a swanky little rooftop place in New York. I was never really attached to the place. Other than the patio. I did like that patio,” I said, my gaze wandering out to the harbor. A whale watching trip was underway, the big boat moving slowly through the water of the harbor on its way out to the deep sea. “I’m trying not to put my cart in front of my horse, to be honest. I’m kind of enjoying my stay here. I’d forgotten how soothing the waterfront and familiar faces can be. New faces too.”

That made the slightly sad cast of his eyes brighten. “I like your new face as well.”

“Good. I hope you really like it a lot because I may have invited myself to be your houseguest for a few days.” I bit down on my lower lip. “My agent is fried, so I told her she could have my room at the inn and I could stay with a friend. Just for a few days. If that’s not acceptable to you, I totally get it. It’s incredibly presumptuous of me to do that.”

“It’s not rude at all. Oregano and I will be thrilled to have you stay. I’ve missed your face.”

“And I have missed yours.” The server arrived with our shrimp dip and crudites. We dug in, chatting about this and that, just an easy laid-back conversation. A few tourists stared at us, but none came over. I wasn’t sure if I was happy about that or sad.

As we ate, we made plans for the upcoming holiday weekend. A brash seagull landed on the patio, looking for a

handout. An old lady tossed him a crouton before the staff chased the bird off, his bounty in his beak.

“When will Oregano’s eggs hatch?” I asked as butter from my lobster roll dripped onto my plate. I leaned over even further.

“She’s been on the nest for about two weeks, so another week or so. Twenty-days is what I read online. She’s a bit later than most. I wonder if she started a nest somewhere else then lost it and decided to come back to my place.” He shrugged. We’d never know. “Usually the male will help incubate and care for the chicks, but I’ve never seen another bird coming in to relieve her. Of course I’m gone most of the day, so maybe I *do* have two birds.”

“Oregano and Basil,” I tossed out. He snorted.

“Perfect!” We toasted each other with our lemonades. “I’ll have to keep a closer eye on them over the weekend. Maybe she is alone and lost her mate. That was what I assumed but perhaps I was projecting.” I rubbed his leg under the table with the top of my foot. “I’m sorry. That was not really for your ears. I’m so damn comfortable with you I tend to forget that you have no need to listen to my melancholic random thoughts.”

“Please, share. I’m coming from a world where no one tells you anything that’s not in their Instagram profile. And half of that is bullshit. I like knowing you feel so at ease with me.”

“This is lovely, isn’t it?” His gaze moved over my face.

“The lobster roll?”

“Well, yes, but this thing between us. It’s easy and open. You’re on my mind all the time, Elias. I’m tickled to have you staying over again. Waking up with you was so pleasurable.”

Warmth spread through me. I felt the exact same way. Maybe I should have been spending my time with older men with lives well lived instead of flaky twinkles whose only concerns were how many followers they had.

“Ditto,” I replied. Gibson smiled and then offered me his last bite of lobster roll. It was dripping with butter. Thank Christ Katy wasn’t privy to my menus since I’d come home. She’d birth a fucking seal if she could see this. I opened my mouth, uncaring of what the other people up here on the patio thought, and Gibson delicately fed me. Melted butter covered my lips. He kissed it away. His lips beat using an old, crumpled napkin any day.

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After returning to the inn with dry towels, I spent the rest of the day helping where I was needed. Something that came right back to me like riding my old bike. Dad and I had worked as a team for years once I’d gotten old enough to legally work. I could make a bed, scrub a bathtub, and fluff a pillow with the best of them. My front desk skills were rusty, but I managed. My talents in the kitchen were limited to chopping veggies, making salads, and washing dishes, but sometimes those skills were sorely needed. We all pitched in.

“How’s Kimmy feeling?” I asked my father as I was toting clean towels to yet another room. What the hell did people do with all the towels? How did two guests dirty every towel overnight? I used one towel when I got out of the shower, and that one I hung up to dry to use again.

My agent used to tease me about that when the cash had begun flowing in. Yes, I had a housekeeper. Yes, I could use as many towels as I wanted. That didn’t mean I had to make extra work for the staff. I liked to think that being raised here and seeing the crap that service workers had to deal with had left a lingering impression.

“Oh, better. She’s got some miracle pills. I took her some tea, and she’s sitting up in our rooms.” I raised an eyebrow. Dad blushed.

“Oh, so they’re *our* rooms now. When did she move in?”

Laughter from behind the door of one of the suites floated past. I was battling back a smile.

“It’s not like that,” Dad sputtered, his ears bright red now to match his cheeks.

“Dad, I’m teasing. It’s fine. I like Kimmy. And she makes you happy.”

“Thank you, Elias. I think you look mighty happy of late as well.” I nodded. “Why don’t you let me finish delivering these towels and you can go pack for your romantic weekend with Gibson?”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. I’ll get the staff to clean your suite as soon as you leave so your friend has a nice clean room to enjoy.” I hesitated. “Go. We’re caught up now. Kimmy will be back at the desk tomorrow if I know her. The dryer repair man is on the way. Go spend some time with your new beau.”

“I’ll take this armful to my room.” I patted the towels in my arms. Dad smiled widely. I jogged down the hall, heart thumping like a teen about to go to prom. Knowing that the cleaning crew would be here shortly, I tidied up a bit. Then I showered, taking extra care to prepare for a romantic night, and dried off with haste.

I chose what to wear under my shorts and tank top with care. White lace this time, with stockings and garter belts packed away for later. I’d forgo a bralette this time. Anticipation of the next few nights getting to know Gibson’s body and his wants better had my dick plumping up before I was even out the door.

My phone buzzed with a text from Elle. She was leaving LAX as we spoke, her flight about to taxi into position for takeoff.

**I have a surprise for you. ~ Elle**

**What’s that? ~ Elias**

**You’ll see. Phones off now. Talk to you this evening. ~ Elle**

**Tease. Safe flight. Text me when you land. I’ll come get you. ~ Elias**

**No, you won't. I'll get a cab. Support the local gig economy. ~ Elle**

Knowing that arguing with her was futile, I gathered up my backpack with my clothes, cell phone, wallet, and keys. I passed a young woman named Teresa in the hall. She smiled widely as she pushed her cleaning cart right to my suite and opened the door.

I snuck past the front desk, easing out of the back door to find my bike where I'd parked it last. The afternoon was balmy. The skies filled with birds and kites. The staff had set up a kite flying event for the younger guests. Boats sailed out to sea and people splashed and played in the pool as well as down by the docks. Canoes were being paddled out to the bay and two small white dogs darted back and forth to fetch balls by the outdoor play area. I filled my lungs with fresh salty air, threw a leg over the old stiff seat of my bike, and took off for Gibson's.

Oregano—or was it perhaps Basil?—carried on as soon as I arrived, alerting Gibson of my arrival.

“World's most annoying security alarm,” he teased as he stepped out of his lemon yellow cabin in another vibrant caftan. Knowing that he was probably bare assed under it only added to the tingle of want that was skimming down my spine. I'd somehow managed to not pop a boner on the way here, but now that I was off the bike, my dick was one eager beaver.

“I hope I'm not too early,” I said, kicking out the stand of my bike.

“Not at all,” he replied, pattering over in bare feet to embrace me. I melted into the hug, eyes closing, nose buried into his throat. He smelled like soap and some sort of herb or spice. He kissed my cheek and then stepped back to look at me as if I were a prized painting in an art museum. “You take my breath away. Your beauty lies not only in your outward appearance but in the depth of your soul, the dark richness of your eyes, and the tenderness that shines through despite the vulgarity the world has heaped upon you.” I kissed him. I simply had to. He held me close, his lips soft yet firm, and I let him lead me as he wished. Any way he wished was fine with me.

We stood outside for a long time, kissing and caressing, until the harping from the bird in the pot got to us. Leaving her—or him—to their eggs, we went inside. The interior of the cabin was much cooler. Gibson had set up fans to move the air around. While it wasn't AC cold, it was cool, my overheated skin prickling as an older oscillating fan hummed over on a repainted sideboard.

“We can have a light snack now if you wish,” he said, taking my backpack from my shoulder and dropping it onto the sofa. “What time is your friend due to arrive?”

“She said she'd get a cab from Augusta airport,” I said as I toed off my sandals. Something was cooking. Something beefy with onions. My stomach rumbled. “What do you have going for dinner?”

“That’s an old beef bourguignon recipe. It’s in the crock pot as it’s too hot to fire up the stove. Given the sound of your stomach...” he patted my tummy, letting his hand linger on my abdomen, “we should dig out the snacks to tide you over.”

I placed my hand over his and led his palm downward to my stiff, aching prick. His eyes grew hot with desire, the pupils blotting out the sky blue irises.

“I’d much rather take care of this first,” I admitted, my voice rough with need. He gave my cock a squeeze, and much to my shock, went to his knees. I widened my stance, allowing my ass to rest on the back of the couch as he worked to lower my zipper.

“Oh, look at this treasure trove.” He sighed as he wiggled my shorts down to my ankles. I stepped free of them, my dick held in place by haute couture beaded ivory lace. “Tell me you have stockings and garters in that backpack of yours and I shall die a happy man.”

“There are, but they’re for later.” I carded my fingers into his hair, leading his face to my groin. He slid his hands between me and the couch, cupping my ass, then buried his face into my crotch. His lips moved up and down my shaft. My hips rolled, my balls already tightening up.

He used his nose to push aside the lace just enough to get his lips around the purple head of my cock. I gasped and moaned and rocked forward to feed him more. His fingers massaged my buttocks as he slowly swallowed my cock to the root. His eyes were heavy and smoky as he gazed up at me. I



shuddered at the sight. His fingers slid down the crack of my ass, parting my cheeks, and opened my hole to the air being moved by the fan.

“Oh fuck,” I panted when a fingertip found my hole. He sucked harder now, toying with the rim of my entrance as spittle dripped from his chin to his beard. My hips moved on their own accord now, thrusting forward and back, leaving the sofa to pump with more speed. I rocked back, eager for his fingers to breach me, but they never did. He rubbed at my hole, teasing me, applying pressure, then taking it away when I wanted it the most.

I cradled his face as I fucked it. He made sinful, wet slurping sounds that pushed me to the brink. Then he gave me a fingertip. A yelp ripped out of me as I pumped my load down his throat. My knees buckled, dropping my ass to the back of the couch again. Raw, gorgeous sounds of pure pleasure rose from the man on his knees. Glancing down as I pulsed, I saw spunk leaking onto his beard. A frothy mix of seed and spit soaked his facial hair. He was working his cock, I saw now, his fist flying. With a grunt around my prick, he shot his load, cum dotting my right foot as well as the throw rug of deep rose.

“Holy hell,” I huffed, releasing his face to grab the back of the couch before my rubbery knees let me down. He licked his lips. I moaned at the sight. Letting my back slide downward, I slithered to the floor to clean the strings of cum and spittle from his beard. Then I tongued my way into his mouth while he gave his cock a few final tugs. “More, give me that,” I

growled, reaching for the hand his dick lay in. I pulled his messy fingers up and shared them with him, our tongues gliding over his fingers. His spend was salty, slightly bitter, and utterly delicious. I lapped up every bit of it, even taking time to get between his fingers. “Delicious.”

“As are you.” He used his wet fingers to hold my chin while he placed small kisses along my eyes, nose, and swollen lips. “Absolutely divine. Oh shit, my knee is protesting loudly. This is why I don’t go to church. All that kneeling.”

I pressed my lips to his mouth, then got to my feet to help tug him from the floor. “I’m sure you have more reasons than that for not going to church.”

He muttered something under his breath. “Several dozen actually. Let’s get cleaned up and have a snack and something cold to replenish our reserves.”

I hoped our reserves would be depleted fully by the time Tuesday came.

# Chapter Eleven

**A**fter a long, hot, leisurely shower together, Gibson and I spent the rest of the afternoon and into early evening puttering. He weeded his garden while I lazed on the glider, dozing in the hazy heat of early July. Even with the protests from Oregano—or perhaps Basil—the hours spent doing nothing but being domestic oozed tranquility.

“I could use something to eat,” he said around seven or so, rising from his foam knee pad with a wince. “Ouch. Damn knee. It’s never been the same since I tore some ligaments trying to be Andre Agassi in college.”

I smiled up from my iPad. “Do you need a hand getting inside?”

His face puckered comically. “I’m not quite that infirm yet.” He was so sassy at times. I chuckled softly then blew him a kiss as he limped into the cabin, mumbling under his breath about whippersnappers and AARP.

The wind was sticky as it whirled around the pines, shuffling some brown pine needles over the patio as it kicked and swirled. My eyes popped open when someone sat down beside me on the glider.

“Shit,” I gasped, staring at my surroundings. “I must have drifted off.”

“That happens out here. Even with the surrounding cabins filled with people, this little patch always seems so secluded.” He passed me a charcuterie board, then pulled an off-beat round metal table from the side of the glider to the front.

Someone had repainted the vintage piece. The dark wood of the meat and cheese board stood out against the bright pink mesh metal. He then fetched a couple of icy cold beers from the ground to his left, passing a Sam Adams Summer Ale my way.

I placed my iPad on the table, leaving the idea board I'd been working on when I'd fallen asleep open.

"May I?" he asked with a nod at the tablet.

"Sure." I leaned up to peruse the offerings. My empty belly roared as I eyed some fresh crab meat, batter dipped shrimp poppers, carrots, tomatoes, pickled green beans, olives, artichoke hearts, a bowl of tartar sauce, capers, a ball of soft cheese, several varieties of crackers, and clouds of fresh parsley. "This looks amazing. What kind of cheese is this?"

I picked up a rye cracker.

"Boursin cheese. Garlic and herbs. I like it with seafood. Try some with the crab. That's today's catch."

There was nothing that compared to Maine seafood. I would fight whoever disagreed. Living right by the sea was a delight for a lover of fish and shellfish like me. Of course, I'd been born and raised feasting on the sea's bounty.

"Mm, it's so smooth," I said around a mouthful of cheese and cracker. I picked up a small fork to gather some crab meat to feed to Gibson. He smiled tenderly after I placed it on his tongue. I pecked his hairy cheek and then took a forkful for myself.

“I’m rather impressed with your inspiration board,” he said after he swallowed. His kaftan was riding up over his knees, allowing the breeze to blow around his manly parts. I found the knowledge that his dick and balls were swinging free was quite a distraction.

“Yeah, it’s a thing I like to do. I have to use Elle’s account because if the world found out that Connor Days made inspiration boards on Pinterest...well, I guess the world couldn’t think any less of me.”

“Fuck Connor Days,” he muttered with real ire. Something sweet and sassy from Jon Batiste flowed out the windows, the bouncy soft jazz ideal for the moment.

“You have been,” I teased, bringing a shrimp popper doused with tartar sauce to his lips.

“Mm, no, I’ve been making love to Elias Kesside.” A flush of something incredibly moving rose to my cheeks. This man was doing his best to win my heart.

“Have I mentioned how keen I think you are?”

His eyebrow rose. “Keen? Are you trying to surpass my stuffy old donnish standing?”

“Maybe.” We both snorted. “So, you like my ideas for the playhouse?”

“I do.” The wind peppered the patio with dying pine needles. Gibson had to pick a few out of the food tray, but we were not inclined to move it or our ourselves. It was just too

perfect here in this moment. “It’s not at all what I was expecting, but I’m very happy to see how you’re leaning.”

“Oh, what did you think I’d be doing?” I wiggled around on the glider to see him better. He fed me a cracker with some cheese followed by a fat olive. I took both from his fingers with a sigh of contentment.

“Well, I assumed you’d be modernizing it, but these images are all of older theaters. The classic movie houses of the ’40s and ’50s. Personally, I think that feel is absolutely spot on for the Kesside Playhouse.”

“I’m glad. Yeah, I have no interest in a modern theater at all. The world has enough of them. I want to restore the old gal to her former beauty. It’s going to cost a lot more, but I think the investment will be worth it. I can see a huge stage with flowing red velvet curtains and flocked wallpaper, glowing tile floors, plush seats filled with theatergoers as the smell of greasepaint fills the air.”

“I do love the way you speak of the theater. Will you be starring in the opening night production?” he asked as he plucked a carrot from the board.

“That’s...well, that’s doubtful. Even if I don’t re-sign with Four Winds, which is highly likely, I’ll be making movies with another studio. I hope.”

“Yes, of course. Well, perhaps one day you can return and grace us with a performance of something from the Bard.”

I tried to read his expression, but he looked it down quickly after a brief touch of disappointment. I was about to ask him if he would be in the front row if I came back to act in a show when my phone rang in my pocket. With an internal sigh, I dug out my phone. Hopefully, it wasn't my father having issues or—

Ah, it was Elle. She must be on her way. "It's my friend Elle."

Gibson gave me a smile that didn't quite reach his sky blue eyes. I made a note to come back to this conversation at a later time.

"Hi, Elle, are you in Maine?" I asked.

"Elias, I am stuck at the fucking bridge leading to the fucking island. Why am I stuck here you may ask?"

Oh my. She sounded really mad. "Because some old man in a Napoleonic naval outfit won't let you come over without a pass?"

"Yes, that is correct. Some old asshole in a moth-eaten hat is barking at me about a pass. What the hell kind of pass do I need?! Elias, cars are waiting behind us. People are getting pissed off at us. Also, I think Katy is going to haul that old fool out by his fucking codpiece."

Did Portman wear a codpiece? I hoped not.

"Oh cool. Katy is here." How happy was I that she was at the inn and not here supervising every damn bite that I took? Extremely happy. "Okay, sit tight. We'll be right there with a



pass for you. Tell Katy to keep her hands off Portman's codpiece."

The call ended with my agent shouting to someone to sit the hell tight.

"I'm not sure that men in the Napoleonic era wore codpieces," Gibson tossed out as he rose from the glider. "Your friends are here and being detained at the bridge, I take it."

"Yeah, I totally forgot about needing a damn pass. We'll just flash yours at Portman. He won't read it closely enough to see the name on it."

"I'm not sure he could read it unless his ample nose was pressed right to it."

We hustled around to finish our beers and tucked the food back into the fridge. Then we were off. Old pine needles blew off the windshield of Gibson's Nissan as we made our way to the bridge. A whole five-minute ride. He had an interestingly diverse range of musical tastes. I'd heard classic crooners and soft jazz at his home. Here in the car he'd been jamming out to Black Sabbath. The first album. The man was nothing if not eclectic.

We pulled up behind about five cars on the island side. With a huff, I plucked the cardboard pass from the windshield and then jogged to the edge of the bridge. There had to be at least twenty cars on the other side. I waved madly to no avail.

Gibson appeared at my side. "You may have to call them."

“Christ,” I grumbled as I dialed Elle. “Elle, put the phone up to the window of the guard shack so I can tell Portman that I have your pass.”

“This man is a numbskull,” Elle growled. Several folks had exited their cars to come up behind us to watch the show. I could see Elle stamping over to the shack where Portman sat. They had words. Elle’s hands were flying. I didn’t see Katy. Perhaps Elle had locked her in the car so no bodily harm came to the bridge keeper or whatever he was calling himself today.

“Who is this?” I heard Portman shouting into my ear.

“Portman, it’s Elias Lake.”

“Who?!”

I sighed. “Elias Kesside. The mayor sent my friend’s pass to me by mistake. Can you swing the bridge so I can come over and show you?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m on the island. Waving at you with a pass in my hand.” I motioned with wider arcs of my hand over my head. “Let us come over to show you the pass.”

“Fine. But don’t try no funny business. You know the rules. You and that Billy Morton always thought you could get away with hijinks, but I’m onto you boys!”

Elle said something to me after getting her phone back to her ear. What it was I didn’t hear due to the metallic bridge gears thumping and creaking. It took a few minutes, but the bridge was finally open. I ran over with Gibson on my heels as

tourists and natives on both sides just moseyed around on either side of the channel. They were used to it. All part of the charm.

Oy.

I gave Elle a quick hug and waved at Katy seated in the front passenger seat looking like she was ready to blow a gasket. The woman had no patience whatsoever and did not suffer fools—or a nonagenarian in a bicorn hat—well.

“Portman, hey.” I walked up to the shack. Several gulls blinked down at us, roused from their sleep by all the hubbub. “Here’s the pass.”

He pressed his nose to the glass and glanced at me. The man truly needed to trim his nose hairs. They were wild. I wasn’t sure how he could breathe.

He coughed and spit on the floor of his shack. “Fine, but the next time you have fancy Hollywood people coming over make sure they got their passes!”

With that, he slammed the window shut. I turned to find Gibson smirking, his arms folded over his broad chest, as Elle stared at me flatly.

“Okay, we’re all good here.” The people in the cars hooted. “Elle Sterner, this is my good friend Gibson Vale. Gibson, my agent Elle. That foreboding woman in the front seat is my personal trainer Katy Heath.”

Elle and Gibson shook hands. Katy flipped me off. Ah, I had missed her.

“Follow us. We’ll lead you back to the inn,” Gibson said. I nodded, gave her cheek a peck, and then ran back over the bridge. Traffic began to flow again, people heading out to eat or shop knew to be back by midnight. Portman did sleep. Not much at night as I assumed he spent most of his working hours napping in his stuffy shack.

“That old man has no idea how close he came to being shot putted into the sea,” Katy said when we’d reached the Kesside Inn.

“He’s been here forever,” I said by way of explanation. “We all fear that one day the bridge won’t open and someone will find him dead in his shack but so far that hasn’t happened.”

I hugged her close and then rushed around to take their bags. “Why don’t you visit the bar while I get the girls—” They both cleared their throats. “Sorry, while I get these beautiful professional women checked in,” I said to Gibson.

“That sounds great. Ladies, what would you like to drink?”

They told him their orders. Gibson leaned in to kiss me, then ambled into the hotel, calling out a hello to my father at the main desk.

Elle and Katy stared at me. Openly. Without blinking. “We might be dating casually,” I mumbled and herded them inside before they could start peppering me with a million questions.

Dad and Kimmy both gushed over my friends from Tinsel Town. Kimmy sat at the desk while my father and I got them settled into my old suite. The room was open to the sea, the

linens fresh, the floors vacuumed, and a small gift basket filled with chocolates from the candy store in town sat on the nightstand. That was something new. I liked it though.

“Do you want to freshen up?” I asked while placing their bags on a luggage rack in the corner. Dad fussed around with towels and then showed them where to find the remotes for the air conditioning unit over the bed and the TV in the cupboard.

“Maybe? It was a bumpy flight,” Elle said, giving Katy a worried look.

“I’m fine. I just get queasy with turbulence,” Katy replied as she worked her fingers through her long hair. “I’m ready to get some food into me, though.”

“Come along then,” I said, smiling at my father as he opened the door with the same kind of flourish the doorman at the Ritz-Carlton had shown me a few years ago.

“I’m going to check on the linens. You kids have fun.” Dad gave me a pat on the back and excused himself.

“Your father is really handsome. I can see where you get your good looks,” Elle said as she took one arm and Katy took the other. “Also, we will need *all* the tea on that sexy bear Gibson.”

“We’ll talk later, I promise.” We made our way down the corridor, thankfully not running into any other guests along the way.

“You look good,” Katy said as we neared the stairs. “Not too paunchy.”

“It’s been less than a month since I left L.A. Did you think I’d go to pot that quickly?”

She patted my belly. “I’ve seen how you eat when you’re sad is all.”

“I’m going to hazard a guess that he’s not all that sad with Gibson to cuddle up with at night,” Elle chimed in.

I could feel the heat in my cheeks as I led them down the stairs. They both giggled at my embarrassment, but that was okay. Kimmy waved as we passed the check-in desk to move into the bar. Several guests were here, sipping cocktails and nibbling on onion rings or shrimp in small baskets. Gibson had gotten us a table by the windows, the salty wind rushing through the screens to rustle the cocktail napkins our drinks rested on. He pulled out a chair for Katy as I did for Elle, then we sat, his arm coming around the back of my chair. I felt his fingertips stroking the back of my arm as the sun dropped behind the horizon, leaving a brilliant purple and red swatch of color on the sea that slowly melted away as darkness took hold.

Seated here in my family home with my two best friends and the man that I was rapidly growing frighteningly attached to felt *so* right. If I could do this every night for the rest of my life, I would be a contented man. But life rarely gave us exactly what we wanted now, did it?

No, it did not, but it did, at times, give us exactly what we needed. And this night with these people in this auberge was precisely what I needed.

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There are some stretches in life a soul lives out and wishes that they could stay in those golden moments. The next four days were those kinds of days.

I'd never experienced having a boyfriend—not sure if we were using that term officially yet, but it was the only word that felt right—that I could do things with in public. Hell, I'm not sure that the past relationships that I had had could even be coined as boyfriends. Most were convenient arrangements that led nowhere because how could they? I was so far back in the closet I was in peril of becoming the king of the moths. Watch out, Godzilla!

So, experiencing a holiday with a man at my side—a man that I could touch in public—was a wonderfully heady sensation. Gibson, bless his heart, was more than open to the PDAs I couldn't quite stop making. He understood the giddiness of simply being yourself.

Elle and Katy were cozy friends, always touching and kissing cheeks, something that I'd not noticed before but was enjoying. The four of us felt more like two couples than a friendship and a budding relationship. I refused to dwell on whether this glorious thing with Gibson was doomed to end soon. Why invite heartache? I may never make another movie again. Despite the back-and-forth with Elle, my lawyers, and Budgie in the Dell Studios, the whole potential prospective partnering could fizzle at any moment. To be honest, I wasn't sure I could handle another rejection right now. I was just

starting to feel as if I was walking upright again. Ever since my outing, I'd been slumped over, a morose little monkey of a man. Now I felt more human.

I credited a lot of that to Gibson, but my father, Kimmy, and my two dear friends also got credit. As did a small but vocal section of my fandom. Surprisingly, during my social media hiatus, the Connor Days fans who were not bigoted poop flingers—I was really on an ape theme of late—had begun reaching out to not only me but Four Winds Studio. Elle had already warned me to expect the worst. The morning after we'd rented a cabin cruiser to take us out deep sea fishing and then parked in the bay to watch the fireworks, I awoke to a cell phone chirruping.

Gibson rolled over me as I moaned and whined to grab my phone. His weight was a pleasant heaviness that I wanted to enjoy for longer. Linking my arms around his middle, I began kissing his collarbone as his hard dick poked me in the belly. He smelled like sleep and wine. I let my lashes drift closed as a weak shaft of sun slanted through the window of his cabin.

“It's—”

I hurried to capture his lips in a long, wet kiss that went on for ages.

“Nope, don't want to know,” I whispered into his ear as I hooked my legs around his back, my heels resting on his lovely backside. “No outside world. Still on holiday. Fuck me?”



“Elias, it’s important. No one calls this early unless it’s something of import.” He placed the vibrating phone on my forehead. I scowled, and it slid to cover my eyes. I really wanted to get laid this morning. I had yet to get my stockings and garters on for him. They were balled up in my bag atop the dresser. We’d both been too exhausted to devote ourselves to the inaugural anal event after full days at sea or biking or canoeing or getting tipsy by the firepit.

Yesterday was all about the water and the Fourth. Sailing out to sea to fish for bluefin tuna off the coast had been the goal. We’d come up empty for the fishing but had spotted a pod of whales so that more than made up for the lack of fish in the live wells. Today was the last day Elle and Katy would be here, so there was no way I was going to start the day off with some bullshit.

“Is it my father?” I asked while swatting the phone from my cheek.

“No. It’s Elle, and we both know that woman does not rise and shine before ten.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I huffed as the call kept ringing. He smiled sadly, easing up to sit and rubbing his face. “Ugh, work stuff.” I sat up, dropped a kiss to his sun-freckled shoulder, and then tapped the green button to accept the call from Elle.

“Hey, sorry to wake you up so early. but it seems that Caiden Dell is an early riser,” Elle said in a rush. I could just pick out Katy in the background saying something about running shoes. Good Lord, was she expecting me to run with

her again this morning? I'd been doing so, but right now I was still erect and hoping for a roll in the hay. Gibson gave me a brief touch, a stroke of his hand over my ratty hair, and pattered out of the bedroom to the bath.

I scrubbed at my face.

“And Caiden Dell is...” I asked as my sex scrambled brain tried to reboot.

“The head of Budgie in the Dell Studios in Manhattan. His call came in at four a.m., I shit you not. His rep said he was on site in Queens wrapping up a rom-com but had a day free today and could we hop a plane to do lunch. Elias, this is something huge that you should not let pass by. Especially after the rather crappy email I got from Four Winds legal department overnight.”

I glanced at the doorway that Gibson had just passed through. A sigh escaped me. I so did *not* want to end this long weekend by jetting off and leaving him. He'd taken time off to spend with me and my friends, closing the shop during one of the busiest weekends of the year. Fuck. Fucking fuck.

“Okay, let me focus here.” I got to my feet and walked to the window. A bumblebee flitted past. Another early riser, it seemed. “So Four Winds has said what exactly? I just want to make sure that they're really not re-signing me.”

“They are not picking your contract back up. Citing breach of morals clauses etcetera. Things that we knew they would fall back on. I've not gotten the paperwork yet but Royce from legal said it's pretty cut and dry. You did trigger the clause, so

they feel it's in their best interest not to re-sign you. They are being gracious enough to not ask you to pay for any collateral damage to their reputation. Also, they're asking that you make a public announcement saying that your contract is up and you're looking to spread your wings in more liberal films. They've got a press release ready to go as soon as we can get ours ready that will back up your version of things."

"Well shit." Even though I knew it was coming, it still sucked to hear it. "Okay, yeah, we can work on that release on the way to New York."

"Excellent. I'll touch back with Caiden Dell's PA and tell them we're looking forward to doing lunch. Please make sure your face is sexy scruff and not just scruffy. Also, wear something bright. This is a happy occasion, Elias. It might be a second chance and those don't come often or easily from the film industry."

Of course. I knew that. Generally, once an actor's reputation was ruined, they didn't get a chance to redo things. And while I hated that *Four Winds* was cutting me loose, I got it. I'd lied to them for years. That was on me. No more lies now. I was out and proud and I was not going back into that damn closet ever again.

"Elias?" Elle's voice pulled me from my mental wandering. "Are you okay?"

"Fine, yeah, fine." I rose, scanned the room for my robe—a sheer lacy thing that went with one of my lingerie sets, a rose pink one that I'd worn yesterday—and padded over to the

armchair in the corner where I'd tossed it last. "Can you get us a flight to New York?"

"Already booked. Can we scare up a ride to the mainland?" Katy was murmuring something in the background. There was a shuffle then I could just make out the creak of the patio door opening. Elle must have slipped outside to allow Katy to sleep.

"Of course. I'm sure we can get someone to run us to the airport. What time is our flight?" I slid one arm of my robe on and then the other, forgoing tying it around my waist for now. No one would see me aside from Gibson, and he had seen all of me in several wicked positions.

"Ten forty-five. So we have a few hours to eat, shower, and get our heads into the right space. Are you sure you're okay?"

The soft clatter of a ship's bell ringing floated through the phone. "I'm fine. This was totally expected. Still, it's hard."

"Of course it is. But maybe this is the final hurdle for us to leap as you start a new life."

"Yeah, maybe." I liked that thinking. "We'll swing by the inn around nine. That should give us time to get there and get boarded. I'm assuming this is too last minute to use my jet?"

"Sadly, yes, we're going to go commercial. Your jet is back in L.A. in the hangar. It should be fine if we keep your face covered."

"Right. Okay, let me go speak to Gibson about a ride. Elle, thank you for sticking with me through all of this. I know it's been a shitstorm for you as well." I made my way to the

bathroom to find it empty. The smell of coffee perking wafted by on a subtle little breeze.

“As if I would leave you for being gay. Silly man.”

That made me chuckle. I hung up with a smile that faded when I found my man in the kitchen staring out the window, naked, an empty cup in his hand.

“Sorry about the rude awakening,” I said as I made my way to him. He glanced from the view of a seagull sleeping in a large ceramic pot to me. His expression was placid, thankfully. I’d been worried he might be upset. “I have to fly to Manhattan.”

“I know. This is a small house.” He removed the full cup from the machine and handed it to me before sliding his in. I sipped as he took out the spent pod and replaced it with a new one. The pod would cool, then he would empty the grinds into a container to spread around his little garden. “I’m happy to take you to the airport and pick you up.”

The machine spit and gurgled as it brewed a new cup of dark roast. “Thank you. I’m sorry I had to cut this long weekend short. I feel terrible. You closed the shop just to spend it with me and—”

He leaned over to kiss me, taking care of the hot coffee in my hands. No one wanted scalded balls first thing in the morning. Or ever. His lips were tender, the kiss fleeting.

“And you’re leaving for a few hours to hopefully jumpstart the first leg of the new Elias Lake story. I love that this is

opening up for you.”

It was right there. That big L word. It appeared on the tip of my tongue out of the blue. Foolish man that I was. Yet again I was leaping before looking. Letting my heart lead me once more. Did I never learn?

“Thank you,” I whispered, swallowing down the urge to say something that was too big, too soon, too irresponsible. “I’m more than a little terrified.”

“Don’t be.” He lifted a hand to cup my face, his thumb moving over my cheekbone as he stared into my eyes, his gaze rife with emotion. “Now, I will make you breakfast while you shower. Then I’ll drive you and Elle to Augusta to catch that plane. Katy and I will spend the day touring the flower gardens like we’d planned while you two wheel and deal. When you’re ready to come home, text me, and we’ll come pick you up, and we’ll break out some bubbly to toast the good news.”

“There might not be good news.” I had to keep my wits about me. Allowing myself to get giddy would only make the crash harder if/when the deal fell through.

“There will be.” He kissed me again, then stepped back. “Now, go shower before I forget myself and peel you out of this sexy as sin robe.”

“The next time we fuck, I will wear those stockings for you,” I promised, pecked his lips, and spun on my heel. His gaze was searing on my backside, so I put a bit more sway into my sashay, taking care of the hot coffee in my hand.

“He radiates beauty with each smile, each step, each glance.  
And I, a simple potter, am spellbound.”

I floated to the bathroom.

# Chapter Twelve



**M**anhattan was as it always is, bustling, mercurial, gritty, and unforgettable.

Elle and I had worked up a rough, short speech for me to deliver via my social media soon. Tomorrow probably. It would have to be polished and reviewed by Four Winds, but we were sure it would fly. They were desperate to unload me, I was sure.

Exiting the cab in front of a swanky little Persian eatery on Steinway Street, I stretched the kinks out as Elle paid the cabbie.

The smell of New York hit me in the nose. People, cars, and the rich scents of the varied ethnic restaurants. I tapped out a quick text to Gibson.

**About to head in and meet Caiden Dell. Nervous as hell.**  
~ E

**You're going to be great. You always are. ~ G**

“You need to wipe that goofy look off your face,” Elle joked as she took my arm and led me into Khandidin, the name of the place, with her professional face in place. The melodic sounds of Farsi filled the bright and airy eatery. We stood just inside the door, inhaling rich spices, until we spotted a tall, leggy blonde woman rising to her feet. A stunning woman with a body to rival Jessica Rabbit waved at us. I tugged my ball cap down to my eyebrows and followed Elle to the table. Caiden Dell looked up at me, his sharp green eyes touching on my casual actor trying to hide but fooling no one get-up.

“Hello, thank you for working us in. I’m Polly Mayhew, Mr. Dell’s executive assistant. And this is Caiden Dell.” She waved a manicured hand at the famous producer/director/studio head. Seemed the man with the short brown hair, gauges, and flair for bright fashion did it all at Budgie in the Dell Studios.

Caiden stood, shook Elle’s hand, then mine, and then waved at the empty chairs. “Please sit,” he said, his New York accent brash in my Mainer ears. “We’d like to get right into it if you don’t mind? I have a dinner date with my husband Devon at six and if I’m late again, he will throttle me.”

“No, sure, of course.” I sat down, took the menu a server gave me, and read it over quickly. I’d forgotten how hectic people in New York were. Go, go, go. It was quite the jolt from Kesside Isle or even L.A. where deals were done over hour long meals or poolside. Diners nearby never glanced up from their food as I peeked around the brightly lit and sparkling clean interior of the eatery. Green plants were everywhere and neon signs in Farsi glowed on the bright white walls. Every table was full and the food passing by looked amazing.

“I’d suggest trying the Fassenjan. They make it with duck breast instead of chicken and top it with sour pomegranate sauce,” Caiden offered. I nodded as did Elle. We also got a few appetizers such as fried eggplant and a fava bean borani. We also ordered saffron and bitter orange martinis for our drinks.

“So, let’s get right into things,” Caiden said after the server hustled off with our orders. “I’ve been keeping a close eye on the bullshit going on with Four Winds. First off, please let me say that I am incredibly sorry you were outed in such a sickening way.”

I took off my cap and sunglasses, placing them on the table beside my plate before replying. “Thank you. It was quite a shot in the plums.”

Polly—who bore a striking resemblance to Christina Hendricks only in a platinum blonde version—dug into a sleek leather tote to remove what I assumed was a movie script.

“This is one of the best scripts to cross my desk in three years. I’ve been looking for the right actor to star in it but failing. No one had the right look or the proper swagger to pull off the leading man. Then, out of the blue, your story went viral.” I glanced at Elle, who was listening intently as the script was handed to Caiden. “Not to sound morbid, but it was like a blessing to hear that you were on the outs with Four Winds. Personally, I find them to be incredibly stuffy and unwilling to portray LGBTQ films in any fashion.”

“They’re slightly conservative,” I said, trying to read the title of the film on the script Caiden was waving around.

“They’re regressive pigs locked in the ’70s when it comes to telling the story of people of color or the queer community. As you know, Budgie in the Dell is the leading American studio producing queer content for the theater,” Caiden said with pride.

I did know that and told him so. I'd streamed several of his films over the years, secretly of course using Katy's passwords because God forbid Elias Lake would watch a movie with two gay men making out. It's all so stupid.

"This project is very dear to Caiden's heart," Polly stated. Our drinks arrived. After the server was gone, she picked up the thread of the conversation as I sampled my martini. "He's been saying for years that he wanted to make a trilogy of post-apocalyptic movies with a gay leading man." My eyes flared. Caiden offered the script to me. I swallowed the slightly sweet drink, enjoying the fragrance and depth from the saffron, as I tried to settle my nerves. "This is the story of Luke Barlow."

I cleared my throat as I put down my glass to take the script from Caiden. "Zombies?" I asked, unsure if this was the way I wanted my career to go.

"Not in the sense that you're thinking," Caiden explained. "There is a plague, yes, and it does turn people but not into shambling mindless husks that eat flesh. This virus is alien in nature, brought back from a Russian probe into deep space. It shuts down the human brain for a short period of time. During that time, the person falls into a coma, a brittle chrysalis forms around the body, and when the transformation is complete, a new hybrid human emerges. Smart predators with speed, humanoid yes but also with alien characteristics."

"Damn aliens," I teased, flipping the script around to stare at the title. *Gray Rains*. Huh. "What's the story with this title?"

“Nukes launched by accident during the initial rush of infected caused black rain that then, over time, has now become gray rains.”

“Oh fuck, so nukes. Great.” I began paging through the script as Caiden prattled on and on, his voice crackling with excitement. Skimming over the dialog, it seemed like a damn potent script with lots of angst and emotion as Luke fights off the turned in a world gone gray. Ah, okay, now I was getting the title.

“This is the first in a trilogy that we’re planning on developing,” he said, pulling my attention from the first meeting of Luke and a man called Darren, the other hero I was assuming, as Luke didn’t kill him right out fearing he was infected. “I’d like you to come read for the role of Luke Barlow.”

My gaze flew from the well-written but tense encounter on the page to Caiden. “Audition for the role? Sure, I can do that. I would love to do that! But I’m still contractually bound to Four Winds for another month or so.” I glanced at Elle.

“There will be some time needed to ensure that Elias will be free and clear legally. We’re hoping that won’t take longer than a month. Legal can be sluggish at times, but Four Winds seems to be in a rush to distance themselves from Elias,” Elle informed the table.

“That’s fine. This isn’t even in pre-production yet. I’m just acting now to ensure we have the actor that we want locked down for the part.” Caiden smiled at me.

“And that’s me?”

“And that is you. You’re perfect for the role. You’re the right age, the right look, the right attitude. You’re gay and you’re out. This is the kind of movie that Budgie in the Dell makes. I want you on board. Will you come read for us sometime over the next month or two? We’ll work things out with legal for Four Winds if they drag their feet for some reason. Our legal team will work up a contract for the three films and send a rough copy to your agent to peruse.”

“What are we talking about in general terms for Mr. Lake’s salary per film?” Elle enquired as a man at the table across from us glanced my way and froze. I nodded at him. He tapped his temple, then returned to his meal.

“That’s something for legal to work out, but hopefully in the ballpark of a couple of million with some bonuses when the film goes into the black. I know that’s not the hefty salary you pulled in out in L.A.,” Caiden glanced from Elle to me, “but I can guarantee you that my movies do not demean women or gays in any way. That is not what my studio does. If this takes off and I suspect it will because the world is ready for queer leads, you’ll be right back in the spotlight, but for the right reasons this time. And for the right sort of films.”

“I’d love to come read for you,” I said, surprising Elle and myself. The few lines that I’d read were incredible and rich in queer representation. This was the kind of filmmaking I wanted to be associated with. “And if I’m cast, I’ll be happy to work for nothing.”

Elle sputtered, coughed, and quickly dismissed that possibility with gusto.

“He tends to get his foot planted in his mouth, which is why I sit beside him,” Elle said, firing a look of chastisement my way. I chortled because yeah, she was right, I did tend to dive into things that appealed to me headfirst. Films and romances at the top of that leaping off the edge of a rocky cliff into rough seas list. “We’ll be happy to study the script in depth to see if it’s something that reflects the new direction Elias wants to take his career.”

“Can’t ask for more than that,” Caiden replied just as our main dishes arrived. “Let’s dig in.”

And dig in, we did. Eating and talking filled two solid hours. Caiden was jacked about this project, and so was I, now that I’d sat with the man. His enthusiasm was infectious. This could be a huge step forward for the action genre. A gay leading man. Imagine that. Imagine me playing this hero while living my life openly. Imagine Gibson coming to the premiere as my date. I bet he cleaned up well. I’d hold his hand on the red carpet as the flashbulbs popped and the press asked who we were wearing.

“...we should just leap into this project.” I blinked at Elle as we stood on the curb, in the rain, trying to hail a cab to get us to the airport. “I know...hey! Taxi!” A yellow cab pulled up, and we clambered in, slamming the door on the deluge. “JFK please,” Elle said and then sat back in the stiff seat to dig a handkerchief out of her purse to dab at her face.

“Why do you not want me to take it?” I asked, swiping at the dampness on my face.

“I didn’t say that. I said we shouldn’t just leap into it. I need you to pull back on the reins.”

“But you said it was an amazing second chance and they don’t come around often. Now you’re telling me to not get involved.”

“Elias.” Elle sighed as the driver shifted his eyes from the rainy street to me as the lightbulb of recognition lit above his head. His previous smiling demeanor turned into a look of barely concealed disdain. Well, fuck him too. “I’m not saying to not sign on, I’m saying to take a breath and not commit before we have the contracts worked out.”

“I think I pretty much committed when I shook hands with Caiden before we left and told him I was onboard,” I replied, shifting in my seat to face Elle.

“That’s what I mean,” she said, crossing one leg over the other as we cruised to a red light. “You must learn to be less eager.”

The driver’s lip raised slightly as if he smelled something rotten.

“Sorry, that’s just not me. I’m done pretending that I don’t like cock.” Elle gaped. The driver’s eyes rounded, but he kept his mouth pressed shut. “I’m gay. I like dick. I also like the idea of making a series of movies about a common man in uncommon times being the hero. If I get the chance to sign on



to this deal, I am going to do it. Is that okay with the motherfucking world?”

Elle’s mouth hung open for about ten seconds. The driver’s shoulders came up and his gaze left mine in the rearview to focus on driving.

“Wow, that was impassioned.” Elle studied me. “I don’t recall hearing you being this excited over a film in years. I thought you were done with action movies.”

“I’m done with sexist, homophobic action movies. It’s time to show the world that queer people are just as able to kick ass as the straights.” I continued staring at the bald spot on the back of our driver’s egg-shaped head. He refused to meet my sight. Our ride to the airport was free from dirty looks. Amazing what calling out bad behavior could do.

I sent off two quick texts before the plane took off. One to my father to let him know the meeting went well, and I’d fill him in fully tomorrow. The other to Gibson to tell him I was feeling my oats and to be ready for a randy thespian tonight.

Dad’s reply was a smiley face. Gibson’s was a string of eggplants.

I couldn’t wait to cross that bridge to Kesside Isle. How funny is that? At eighteen, I couldn’t wait to leave that hunk of wet rocks, craggy pines, and piles of cormorant shit behind. Now I couldn’t wait to return. Amazing what twenty years of life could do to a person’s perspective.

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Four days later, standing on the docks of the Kesside Inn, the ocean at my back, the sun at an advantageous angle—one that didn't make me look too old—I took a deep breath and gave Kimmy a nod. She nervously gave me a thumbs up and then hit record on my cell phone. My dad and Gibson were flanking her not five feet away, smiling encouragingly.

“Hey, everyone, I'm here at home, along the coast of Maine, taking a small hiatus. During my time away, quite a few things have come to light. None of which I am ashamed of. If people are tuning in to hopefully see me deny what has been spread around the world, then those people are in for a disappointment. I am not apologizing for being me. I am not making excuses, rationalizing, justifying, or repenting. What I am here to do is tell you, my fans, that I am gay. I was born gay and I have been gay my whole life. When I came to Hollywood, being queer was not at all acceptable, especially for a macho role such as Connor Days. So, I hid my homosexuality. That ends now. I am not hiding who I am, who I date, or what I wear under my clothes. No more secrets.”

I paused for dramatic effect, allowing the sun to shine on me as I smiled at the camera. Elle nodded, a pleased look on her face. We'd gone over this announcement a few times. Memorizing it was easy. That was my job, after all.

“To that end, I am announcing that Four Winds Studio and I have parted ways. I thank them for all their support over the years. I have no idea what they plan to do with the Connor Days franchise, but whatever their decision, I wish them well.

It's been one hell of a ride and I enjoyed every moment of every film.”

That was a lie, but Elle thought it sounded good, so she added it to the speech. She and Katy were off to the side, whispering and giggling. It seemed odd to hear Katy giggle. There was a lot of ponytail flipping going on too with my personal trainer. Well, probably soon-to-be ex-trainer. All of her clients—and her life—were on the West Coast. I dreaded the thought of finding a new trainer. And a new PA, and a new PR team. Thankfully, Elle was sorting through all of that for me. She'd have a few prime candidates chosen for the assistant position before I got back to work. *If* I got back to work. I was being pretty cocky. Just because a producer says he wants you for a part does not mean you have a lock on that part. Maybe the whole deal with Budgie in the Dell would fall through and I'd spend the rest of my life acting in the old Kesside Playhouse. Which also might not be too bad because that meant I'd be able to spend my time with Gibson, Billy, Dad, and Kimmy.

“Now, as you can see, a new Elias is standing here in the sun. An older and wiser Elias. A man who has several projects on his schedule already and is not in any rush to leave Maine anytime soon.” I motioned to my father to step up. He came to stand beside me, and I hugged him. “My dad is here with me, a more accepting parent I could not have asked for. His lovely girlfriend is acting as our camera person today. Kimmy is quickly becoming the mother I lost as a child.” Kimmy sniffled softly. I kissed my father's cheek and then let him take

over the camera so Kimmy could blow her nose and wipe her dewy eyes. “There is also a man here that I would like the world to meet. He and I have grown quite close since I came home. Gibson?”

Gibson pulled down his tee, ran his hands over his windblown hair and beard, and came to stand beside me, his arm resting around my waist. He’d been a little reluctant to be in the coming out video, but he’d relented when I had said he could wear a Sea Song Ceramist T-shirt. His tiny website would probably melt down after this went live.

“Hey, honey,” he said and kissed me. That was unscripted, but perfect for the moment. I felt my cheeks warm and not from the mid-summer sun. It was a chaste kiss, but it made a bold statement of possession that melted my heart. Not that it had needed much more thawing.

“Talk about sealed with a kiss,” I kidded, hugging Gibson to me, my eyes on the phone that Dad was holding a tad higher than it needed to be. “For all my true fans, thank you for your patience, love, and support as I worked through a tumultuous time. As you can see, I have come out of the eye of the storm whole, happy, and comfortable. I am truly blessed.”

I gave Gibson a loving look and then kissed him right on the tip of his nose.

“Cut,” Kimmy shouted to be heard over a small boat chugging past. “That was the cut place, right?”

“It was the perfect cut place,” I said, chuckling. Dad lowered the camera and then passed it to me. We stood on the

dock, the waves rocking us slightly, and watched the replay of the video. When it ended, I glanced around at the people who meant the most to me. “What do we think?”

“I think you did a wonderful job, Son.” Dad gave me a hug as did Kimmy.

“What about you?” I asked Gibson. “Are you ready to be Elias Lake’s squeeze?”

He captured my face between his hands and led my lips to his.

“One word frees us of all the weight and pain in life. That word is love.” He searched my face for a long moment as I tried to not get hung up on the L word being used. But I couldn’t quite move past it. Did he mean he loved the idea of being my boyfriend, or did he love me? “Socrates said that, and it still holds true today. My heart has not been this light for years, Elias. You’ve brought love and laughter into my life. Yes, I am ready to be your boyfriend.”

I grinned so widely my cheeks ached. Then I kissed him so hard he had to take a step back to counter my weight slamming into his chest. We both nearly went ass over teacups into the water. Dad and Kimmy roared as we flailed and helicoptered our arms.

He gathered me into his arms, hugging me tightly while peppering my face with little smooches.

“Get a room,” Dad called, breaking up the love fest. Gibson’s cheeks grew red above his beard.

“Got any suggestions?” I parried as Dad waved at the inn behind us. We all laughed.

“Okay, so this is it. When I hit post this goes live on all my social media sites. Are you one hundred percent sure?” I asked my loved ones.

Gibson nodded and so, with a firm pointer finger, I hit post. My video was now flying out to the world, unfettered, kind of like how my spirit felt now.

“Okay, now that you have that on the winds we’re going to go pack our shit and head back to L.A. I have about ten thousand calls and meetings waiting for me. You’re not my only client, you know,” Elle teased as we walked back up the slight hill to the inn. The pool was doing a brisk business today. Kids shouted and splashed as their parents lounged poolside, sipping cocktails.

“Do you need me out there?” I asked, taking Gibson’s hand in mine, my sandaled feet following the tidy path to the rear of the inn.

“No, not right now. What I would like you to do is give some hard thought to your house in the hills. If you’re going to be out here on the East Coast, we can bring in a cleaning crew to close it down like we did when you were away on long shoots. Or we can rent it out,” Elle tossed out, then stopped at the rear entrance to the inn. Her sunglasses were big, round, dark things that sat well on her pert nose. Katy was at her side, squinting out to the sea as if she would never witness the ocean again.

“Or I could sell it,” I offered. That got me some shocked looks from the small group making chit-chat. “What? If everything that I’m now hoping to do is here on the East Coast, what reason would I have to maintain a house in California?” Gibson looked as if he wanted to say something, but he flattened his lips and merely nodded. “It’s just a thought.”

“Well, think it over. I have a plane to catch,” Elle stated.

I glanced at Katy questioningly. “Are you not going with?”

“No, I wanted to visit my grandmother in New Hampshire while I was out here. She’s getting pretty wobbly, and it’s been ages since I saw her.”

“That’s sweet. I’m sure she’ll love it. Will you be checking out today then?” Dad asked, always the innkeeper.

“I will yes. Once I get Elle off, I’m going to call for a cab to take me to the mainland then I’m renting a car to drive to Grammy’s,” Katy explained.

We said our goodbyes, the ladies heading up to pack, Dad and Kimmy going inside to tend to the inn. Which left Gibson and me standing on the back porch, shaded from the blistering sun, fingers meshed, and staring at each other. My phone hummed. Then buzzed. Then vibrated. The video was getting some attention.

“One second,” I said to my new boyfriend—didn’t that sound grand?!—and turned off my phone, shoving it into my

back pocket. “No news from the world today. Did you want to bike around the island and do some lunch?”

“I’d love to, but I need to get to the shop. I have a class in an hour.”

“Of course. Oh, how about I walk you to your bike? I’ll hang out until the girls are ready to go, and I’ll take Elle to the airport to save her from calling a cab. Then I’ll come to the tip. I wanted to see if I could sneak into the theater to see how the work is coming along. We could eat dinner in town if you want?”

“Perfect. Meet me at the shop at five.” He lifted our clasped hands to his lips, then kissed each of my fingertips softly. “Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say goodnight until it be morrow.” His face puckered. “That’s not a great fit, but the parting bit is true enough.”

“I love the way your mind works.” I rolled our hands to pepper his knuckles with kisses. “Now be off temptation lest I pull you into one of the empty rooms and have my wicked way with you.”

“Again?” He winked, leading me not to an empty room—damn it—but to the newly installed bike rack out front. My idea. A subtle way to encourage people to use bikes and not cars. The rack was full.

Gibson eased his ride out of the rack, pecked me on the lips, and set off with the wind in his face. Once he was gone from sight, I heaved a happy sigh and moseyed back inside to give Kimmy a hand at the front desk. We whiled away an hour or



so doing paperwork, sipping tea, and not discussing the furor that was probably erupting online. Elle and Katy came down the stairs, bags in hand, looking rather glum.

“Let me run and get the truck. I’ll take you over the bridge to Augusta,” I told Elle. She thanked me while Katy was paying her bill. Off I jogged after lifting the keys from a rack behind the check-in desk. With no cares whatsoever, I felt light as the osprey gliding over the shoreline. I stopped to watch the bird of prey dive once into the sea only to come up emptyhanded. Then I hustled around the storage shed and unlocked the door.

The old gal cranked right over. I eased her out of the tight building, turned on the radio, and slowly crept around the inn to find Elle. Coming around the soft bend, I found my agent all right. In a lip-lock with my trainer. My foot slid off the gas. The truck backfired, then stalled. Both women leapt a foot into the air, spinning when they landed to glare at me staring at them.

No one said one word as I loaded Elle into the truck, taking care of her luggage, then slid behind the wheel. Katy pointed at me, a warning of some sort, before she waved her fingers at Elle and stalked back inside.

“Nice weather,” I opened with as we slowly left the inn behind.

“Okay, before you bust, I’ll fill you in.”

I rolled my lips over my teeth, turned down an old Kenny Loggins song, and crept along the slim two-lane road leading

to the bridge. We passed an older man jogging with a small dog and two kids on bikes.

I glanced her way when the silence began to drag. “You don’t have to tell me,” I offered to ease her mind.

“No, no, it’s fine. I just...this is a first for me.” She began to nervously fiddle with the hem of her comfy summer sundress.

“Telling clients about personal relationships? Because if that’s it, do not feel funny. I’ve dumped all of my shit on you and Katy for years,” I quickly said, easing over to the berm of the road to allow the produce delivery truck headed to the inn to chug along. The roads on this isle were so damn tight in spots.

“Well, yeah, that. And being with a woman.” I threw a round-eyed look at her, then jerked my gaze back to the road.

“Okay, well, that’s good.” I had no idea what to say.

“Is it? I mean, yeah, she’s amazing. I’ve known that since you hired her three years ago. And she’s funny, brash, and sexy as hell. And does that woman know how to use her tongue. No man has ever done things like that for me.”

“Men, pfft.” That made her smile just a bit. “Listen, Katy is amazing. And if you two are hitting it off, then don’t read more into it than that. Enjoy it. She really is incredible. You could do a lot worse.”

“I know it’s just...whatever it is it’s pretty fucking great,” she confessed. I patted her knee as we neared the bridge.

“Then soak up all that great while you can. Something sweet and wonderful that makes you glow like a lantern is a rare thing. Enjoy it.”

“You too.” She placed a warm hand over mine as we sailed over the bridge. Portman was outside his shed with a rake trying to swat seagulls. He wasn’t having much luck, but he had lost his bicorn hat somewhere in the melee, and it kind of amused the rotten kid inside me.

I planned to enjoy *every* damn second of my life now. Finally, I was free to be me. There was no feeling in the world that compared to being yourself. Well, maybe falling in love was super close, but as Mama Ru says, you can’t love somebody else until you love yourself. Right now I was pretty high on self-love and Gibson love.

I just had to figure out how to tell him and when. And pray that he felt the same way...

# Chapter Thirteen

The month of July raced by. It was a stormy month with several days of nasty weather and thunderstorms.

Many a night Gibson and I had laid in bed, sweaty from sex, and listened to the wind wuthering through the pines as rain battered the tiny yellow cabin. I'd never felt more content in my entire life. Four Winds and I had come to terms with each other. They'd made some perfunctory donations to a few LGBTQ groups in L.A. which I was thrilled to see, but they also then announced my replacement. A younger actor, surprise, surprise. New face, same manly hero. The taglines made me cringe, but I was now happily away from the whole stinking mess.

Now I was biding my time helping Dad, overseeing the slow work that was being done on the Kesside Playhouse, and falling deeper in love with my burly ceramist. The island was still bustling with tourists, so Gibson and Dad were hopping steadily to keep up with the demand. Seems my coming out video had not only brought me a new following of fans but added a nice boost to the isle's income. Lots of people who had never heard of our rocky little paradise were flocking here to try to get a peek at me, Gibson, the inn, or the town in general. No one was complaining. The mayor was about ready to hand me a damn medal for boosting the local economy. All I wanted was to live my life in peace. And get a call back from Caiden Dell. I'd hopped to Manhattan a week ago to read for the part of Luke Barlow. Polly had assured me that I had the role, but they wanted to run some reads for supporting cast members as well as my love interest.

I'd mentioned my old neighbor Bomb Bay D for the role. Not only was he well known, but he was also incredibly hot, an ally to the community, and had been quite vocal about wanting to break into acting. Bomb Bay had read for them the day after I'd flown back to Kesside Isle and had, in his words "Blown their motherfucking doors off!" in our text thread, so I had high hopes that he would be cast. Oh, how the haters would flail over a gay multiracial action movie.

The last bastion of manliness was about to be woke. I fucking *lived* for the sputtering comments online. I also lived for my man. Who was now working at his shop just a few hundred feet away while I was standing in the old lobby of the theater, hands joined with the good Pastor Billy's, and the crew of architects and craftsmen who specialized in refurbishing old movie palaces and playhouses. I'd lured them in on short notice all the way from Boston. They did not come cheap, but they had some incredible recommendations from quality theaters around the country. I wanted the best for my old flame, even if no one but natives and tourists ever came to a show.

"Lord, we ask that you bless and watch over these workers and offer them the glowing shadow of your protective guard as they begin their labors," Billy said, his voice strong and rich with conviction. It was hard to believe this was the same kid who had egged houses with me every mischief night. "Give to them the assurance of an income and grace them with all the support, resources, and strength that they require. Gracious God, you bless us all in so many wondrous ways. Shower your

children as they toil in this playhouse and smile upon our work. All this in your holy name, we pray, amen.”

A soft murmur rose from the gathered. “All right, tell me what to do and where to go,” I said as I tightened a leather handyman’s apron around my waist. The pros all gave each other looks, then one, the head of the firm, smiled at me as one would a toddler asking to help his father run a power saw.

“Mr. Lake, we don’t have insurance to cover non-licensed workers on the site,” he said so politely that I didn’t even mind the brush off.

I took the hint, signed a blank check for more supplies, and then moseyed outside with Billy, the humidity slapping us in the face like a soggy woolen blanket.

“That was the kindest fuck off I have ever gotten,” I told Billy. “Oh, sorry. I keep forgetting you’re not saying bad words anymore.”

“You should hear me when I stub my toe.” He slapped me on the back. “Would you and Gibson be available for a light dinner tomorrow night? Jane’s nesting. She’s got the house cleaned from top to bottom and is now cooking and baking. She still has three months to go. I’m not sure our place will hold all the food if she doesn’t slow down.”

“I’ll ask him. I’m heading over there now, I guess, since I was so politely booted out of my own theater.” Billy laughed. “I’ll let you know, but I’m sure he’ll want to come. He adores Jane.”

“Philosophy majors do tend to put a twinkle into the eye of philosophy professors.” We hugged and parted, him jogging to the church to get his work done, and me heading to my boyfriend’s shop to spend the rest of the day staring at his sexy backside. He’d worn the pink shorts that hugged his ass so perfectly today.

My back pocket buzzed. I reached back for my phone, then realized I was still dressed like Tim Allen on *Home Improvement* sans the flannel. It was too damn hot for flannel, and that was Gibson’s look. Mine was...well, I wasn’t sure. Vacation chic, I supposed, since I was unemployed but still rich. My heartbeat tripled when I saw that the call was from Caiden Dell. Not Polly. The man himself. I drew in a breath and then let it out. This was nothing new. Just another reading. Not like your whole future in films isn’t riding on this project.

“Hey, Caiden,” I said with so much nonchalance I even convinced myself.

“Elias, thanks for picking up. I know people hate phone calls, but some news has to be delivered with a call and not a text, don’t you think?”

“Yes, for sure,” I replied as I eyed the ice cream shop. If this was good news, I was going to buy several quarts of frozen deliciousness to celebrate. Katy would never know. “I totally agree.”

“Cool. I know this is generally done via our staff, but I could tell you had invested a great deal of time and work into memorizing the lines when you came in for your read,” he said



as a horn blared in the background. Ah yes, nothing like traffic in Manhattan. I looked around the wharf, pleased to see the majority of tourists were on bikes or scooters. It was such a nice look for the island while making Mother Nature happy. Also, there was only so much room on a chunk of rock for so many cars.

“I read the script over the night I got it and felt a kinship with the protagonist right off the bat,” I confessed while slowly making my way toward the ice cream shop. I stopped outside, glancing through the plate glass window to see people enjoying their scoops at round, brightly colored tables. The line inside was long. I didn’t dare go in yet though as that might jinx things.

“I could tell. You brought him to life. I’ve got Polly typing up a contract for the trilogy as we speak. If you still want to be involved in the project?”

I pumped the air strongly, but I did manage to not shout in joy. Two teens at a table by the window gave me odd looks.

“Yes, yes, I would love to be part of the project. Thank you so much, Caiden,” I stated as calmly as I possibly could given my heart was thundering with excitement.

“Excellent. Polly will forward your agent a copy of the contract to peruse, then we’ll get things all zipped up legally after your lawyer and agent haggle with my lawyers.” Yes, that was all part of it. Elle would insist on adding things to the contract for my comfort. I tried not to be too spoiled of an actor on set, but I liked a few luxuries. “Filming is set to start

next fall in Iceland, then we'll move to Nevada for the summer scenes.”

“Amazingly, my schedule is wide open,” I kidded, and that, for some weird reason, made me chuckle as it did Caiden. Perhaps that was progress? Joking about the sludge I had waded through had to be a good sign. “I’m yours. Oh, did you settle on my romantic interest?”

“We did. Your friend Bomb Bay was fucking amazing. I hope you don’t mind sex scenes with a buddy because you two are the chosen ones.”

I couldn’t contain my grin. Bomb Bay had always been a fun if somewhat wild neighbor. I was sure we’d hit it off well on screen. The man was stunning. Hopefully, his acting was on par with his charm and rapping. Obviously, Caiden thought it was, or he wouldn’t have signed him for the part.

“That’s great news. I am *so* damn excited to make these films. I really thought I despised the genre, but I don’t, not at all. What I loathe is how toxic so many of them are.”

“I hear you. That’s why we’re going to make some inclusive ones. I can hear the howls of the outraged already and it is music to my ears.” We both laughed. “Okay, I have to call Bomb to let him know he got the role. You go celebrate with that handsome man of yours.”

“I plan on it. And, Caiden? Thank you so much. You took a huge risk by offering me this role. I will not let you down.”

“I know, and it was no risk at all. We all know you’re a fine actor. And your ass looks amazing on the screen.” That one made me howl in glee. My ass *was* pretty nice. I had to agree. “Now go enjoy yourself. We’ll be in touch.”

We ended the call. My sandaled feet barely touched the ground as I pushed into the ice cream shop with a grin on my face. While I waited in line to be served, I signed a ball cap from an older fan of mine. Huh, guess not all of my fans hated me. That was nice to know. I texted my father, then Katy, then Elle. Everyone was thrilled. Of course, it was all hush-hush for now. The studio would put together a promo and announce the movie to the world when they were ready. I did not text Gibson. I wanted to see his face when I told him.

Fifteen minutes later I exited with four tubs of ice cream. Tubs. Not cups. Tubs. This kind of news needed tubs of ice cream. Moving along at a rapid clip because ice cream did not enjoy ninety degree heat any more than we humans did, I hurried to the pottery shop and rushed into the back area. I could hear Gibson out front talking to customers, so I shoved the bag of cartons into the tiny freezer section of his fridge and then slipped out front silently. His gaze met mine, the smile appearing on his face making my insides wiggle with joy. God I loved this man. I’d yet to tell him. And he had not said it to me. Fear was keeping us both silent when it came to the heavy emotions. Trust was also a factor for me. I knew Gibson was not like my ex, but I was leery. I hated myself for that reticence. Maybe it was time to speak up and exorcise the last ghost that remained of that terrible time.

“You look like the proverbial cat that swallowed the canary,” Gibson teased when he met me behind the register with a quick kiss. “Did you and Billy ride up and stick that stuffed seagull in Portman’s shed again?”

“No, we’re not children anymore.” I fake huffed. “Besides, he threw that in the water yesterday when we did that.”

Several of the customers snickered at our banter. “Ah, well, I’m sure you two will come up with something to torment the old duff tomorrow. What brings you here? I thought you were planning to work on the playhouse all day.”

He reached out to stroke the hammer in my apron, the motion hidden behind the counter.

“Naughty potter,” I whispered by his ear, then took a step back to keep my dick from swelling up as he fondled my tool. “I was told that while my offer of help was appreciated, they lacked adequate insurance to cover a novice using a saw, drill, or nail gun for the first time.”

“Wise people,” he replied and turned from tormenting me to ring up a woman buying a complete set of dishes. I smiled at her and helped Gibson pack things up. When she was gone, he turned back to me. “So, what’s put that sparkle in those sexy eyes of yours?”

I peeked around him, saw no one currently in the shop, and decided to let it out. If I didn’t, I might burst.

“I got the role of Luke Barlow in all three films,” I said softly. His sky blue eyes widened, and he swept me into his

arms for hugs and kisses. He'd been my cheerleader through the whole process. From reading lines with me to traveling to New York for the actual casting call, which it turned out was only me, to gently reassuring my bruised ego I was a fantastic actor during long nights of self-doubt. He'd been with me throughout it all. The short trip to Manhattan had been a wonderful three-day visit with a reading last thing, so I didn't obsess over it during our fun days beforehand.

Talk about being gobsmacked when I walked into Budgie in the Dell's office and found only Caiden, Polly, and a young man who Caiden introduced as his husband who shook my hand and gushed so long Caiden had to intercede so we could do the read.

"Of course you did!" I kissed him hard on the mouth, the kiss turning from a celebratory smooch to something lurid in the blink of an eye. He rubbed his thumb over my lower lip when the kiss ended, his gaze lovingly moving over my face. "We'll have to celebrate tonight."

"I have ice cream in the freezer," I said, leaning in for another kiss when the bells over the door rang out and we jumped apart. Good thing we both were wearing aprons and/or belts to hide our erections from the two old ladies tottering in to admire the ceramics.

"Excellent. I tossed a roast in before we left this morning. I'll whip up some potatoes and cut some of the asparagus in the garden. Oh, and I'll grab some wine on the way home."

“That sounds lovely. I’ll bring the sweet and the lacy bits.” I winked like a vixen as I slipped around him. “See you at six,” I purred then ducked into the back room, leaving him staring at my backside, which I may have wiggled just a bit. I had something special in mind for him for this evening. A set that he had never seen before, but I was sure he would love. I’d never seen a man so fond of lingerie on another man, but I adored each and every second of his adoration of my pretty things as he liked to call them. A pretty man in pretty things he had taken to saying.

Pedaling home—the yellow cabin and not the inn which was something that I’d also have to deal with soon because didn’t my thinking of his home as my home say something pretty damn big—I was flying at top speed so my tubs of ice cream stayed as frozen as possible. While I was biking along the coast, my mind was already mapping out the night. It was going to be a big one. I hoped I didn’t fuck up anything or wake up tomorrow morning with regret in my heart.

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“To be honest, I really have no clue how to cut asparagus,” I told Oregano.

She gave me a dirty look as her three yellowish-white speckled chicks peeked out from under her wings. “I mean, sure, it seems simple, but am I cutting them too short?”

A second gull, Basil, arrived, landing on the patio table, then cussing at me kneeling in the garden.

“Oh stop, you know me. Just feed the wife and kids,” I called to the gull. He flapped over to the pot. Oregano got to her webbed feet to ask for food. Things got pretty loud for a few moments as Basil coughed up chunks of fish for his wife and the little ones to eat. I sat on my heels watching the feeding. The chicks were so adorable. Gibson had named them Parsley, Sage, and Thyme. And now that song was in my head. Again. I started singing the old Simon and Garfunkel song, the lyrics about heading to a fair barely out of my mouth when Gibson arrived on his old blue bike, the basket on the front holding two bottles of wine in brown paper bags.

“You’re home early,” I said as I rose to my feet. I’d wanted to be all gussied up and ready for romance when he arrived. Instead, I was in dirty shorts, my fingernails packed with soil from digging up some potatoes for the meal, and my bare feet grimy from gardening sans shoes. A habit that I’d picked up from Gibson. As soon as he was home, he stripped off every vestige of civility. He let his hair down, took off all his clothes and shoes, and slid into a kaftan with his balls free to dangle as they wished. “I’m not ready.”

“Sorry, things were slow, so I closed up early. Hello, everyone.” He spoke to the gulls as they warned him away from the little ones. He tossed a stale hot dog bun at the adults. Basil and Oregano dove into it, the tiny chicks peeking over the edge of the big ceramic pot to watch their parents make hogs of themselves. “Oh look, you’ve harvested the veggies. What a good wife you are.”

I curtsied and stole a kiss. He gathered the wine. I picked up the little basket filled with taters and asparagus, and we entered the cabin. It was cooler in here, the shade of the pines keeping the small home temperate. With the aid of a fan, it was pleasant enough even if the air was thick with humidity. Rain was in the forecast for this evening, so things would ease overnight.

“Let me shower and change and then you can make yourself pretty,” he said as he toed off his sneakers right inside the door. I closed it behind me, nodded, and carried the wine and veggies into the kitchen. Gibson was a power showerer, so he was back at my side in ten minutes in an airy blue kaftan, his beard and hair still wet. “You scrub a mean potato,” he whispered as he stepped up behind me at the sink. His lips moved over my sweaty neck.

“I probably taste like dirt,” I commented, turning from the sink to place a tater and a scrub brush into his wandering hands. “Here, you make food. I’m going to go make myself pretty for you.”

He wet his lips. I danced away. “Take your time,” he called as I rushed into the bedroom to gather my things. I had a small silken bag with my intimates and a leather travel bag with my personal cleanliness items. Throughout my shower and shave, I was half hard. Wiggling into soft pink lace panties with a boner was tough. I finally had to just tuck my dick off to the side instead of placing my junk in the pouch. A soft wind whistled through the jalousie window, cooling my skin as I rolled up one stocking and fastened it to the belt that sat just



above the top of my panties. I ran my hands over the stockings, reveling in the smooth glide. The bralette came next and then the robe, a stunning thing that was pink like bubble gum, the edges scalloped and the hem resting mid-thigh.

He was going to love it. I applied some moisturizer to my arms, face, and belly, all scented with rose oil, and then put on some lip gloss. Strawberry flavored. Gibson adored strawberry anything.

Then, for a final touch, I painted my toenails with a shiny watermelon nail lacquer. As much as I would have loved to wear heels to complete the look, I hated the pinch of pumps so painted tootsies it was.

I spritzed some cologne into the air, walked through it, and made my way to the kitchen. Gibson was just dumping the taters for mashing when I cleared my throat after posing like Jayne Mansfield in a doorway. Right arm on the doorjamb with my hand on the back of my head, my left hand on my hip, and my right leg cocked up and out, with my toes resting on the floor.

“Got anything in that big pot for little old me?” I asked in my best breathy, starlet voice. Gibson seemed to be enraptured. So much so that he forgot about the pot of spuds in his hands. The lid slid to the side, freeing several rebel potatoes yearning for freedom.

“Shit,” he grumbled when one bounced off his bare toe. “That outfit is...it’s mind altering,” he said while I pursed my lips and batted my lashes. The man chased down his pretty red

potatoes, rinsed them off, and then returned to his meal, his gaze flicking to me steadily.

“I love a man who cooks for me,” I purred and that, it seemed, was the straw that broke the ceramist’s back. He placed the pot of drained taters back on the stove, then turned to look at me. There was no blue left to be seen in his eyes, the pupils were so blown out. I wet my lips when my sight dropped downward. His stiff shaft tented the front of his kaftan. “Want to see if we can make something rise in the bedroom?”

My cooking/baking foreplay kinky talk needed work.

“Too late, something is already risen.” He shucked his kaftan in one smooth move, baring that lush hairy body. His prick was hard, slick, and ready. “I think dinner is postponed for a few minutes.”

I pouted. “Only a few minutes?”

“Minx.” He chuckled, then strode to me, capturing me in an embrace that snugged me to him thigh to thigh, chest to chest, and cock to cock. Mine was held in place with dainty lace, the feeling of being caged erotically uncomfortable. He kissed me with such fire I was sure the cabin would burst into flames. Thankfully, it didn’t, but I did. Desire pounded through me with each thump of my heart. Somehow, we managed to get to the bedroom without falling over something.

I stood by the bed, panting, cock wetting the front of my panties, and shrugged out of the robe. I reached for the bralette.

“No, baby, leave everything on.”

Knowing that rough voice well by now, I did as he asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed and then falling back onto it with a vixenish sigh.

Gibson was on me like a lion on a wounded gazelle. A grunt of pleasure bubbled out of me when his weight settled on my belly. My hands moved over his arms, then shoulders, my fingers carding into his hair to pull his mouth to mine. He licked in deep, his hips grinding down, pressing his cock into mine. I groaned into his mouth, firing him up even more. I loved it when he got so hot for me when I was in my pretty things.

“God I love the taste of you,” he panted and licked his way from my puffy lips down to my nipples. He slathered and suckled each one through the lacy bralette, which was incredibly sinful, pinching them just hard enough. My pelvis rocked up off the bed, my body crackling with the need to have him inside me. We’d not ventured into anal land yet. We’d come close a few times, but we eased back as if him entering me would change things somehow. Maybe it was fear on our part. Perhaps we both were scared of this most personal intimacy as it would herald something deeper in our relationship. If so, I was ready for that depth, no pun intended.

“I want you so badly,” I breathlessly said, rubbing my hands over his sun-freckled shoulders. He sat back, wedged between my spread legs, a ruddy glow from his weeping dick and all the way to his hairline. I whimpered a little, just enough. He

smiled and then reached for the lube I had placed so carefully on the nightstand. I needed to feel him inside me tonight. No more lollygagging as my father liked to say. "I'm all yours. Do with me what you will."

I tucked my thighs to my belly, then grasped my knees to offer him every single inch of my body. His nostrils flared as he worked the lube over the fingers of his right hand.

"I love looking at you like this." He ran a finger along my dick and down over my balls to my pucker. "You're the most beautiful man." With his left hand, he eased my panties to the side to bare my hole. My cock was throbbing.

"Mm, sweet talker," I purred and gasped when two fingers plunged into my ass. "Ah shit, that's so good. Can you use your dick now?"

He chuckled hotly, taking his sweet old time as he opened me up. I was ready to scream by the time he eased those slick digits out of me, then knee-walked up just a bit more. His hair and beard were wild and knotted from my fingers, his blue eyes burning.

"You're incredibly pushy. Must be the Hollywood tabloids are right about mega superstars," he kidded as he tapped my slippery opening with the head of his cock. Pat. Pat. Pat.

My fingers were digging into my shins. "Have you ever... read a tabloid in...life? God above, will you *please* get that prick inside me!"

“I’ve paged through them when I was in line at the grocery store.” His smile was predatory. The bastard. Then, without warning, he eased in. Just a bit, enough to push past the slight resistance. I gasped and groaned, the stretch familiar and yet not. It had been some time, but oh how grand that stretching was!

“Are you sure you want to continue?” he asked, his voice shaky as he stilled, his restraint commendable but not needed.

“I am sure I want you now, just as you are, all pinked by the sun with your hair a mess. This is life, Gibson. This is real and true. I’ve been with men who were nothing but glitz and no substance. You’re not that kind of man. And I love it so much, so please, please, make love to me here in this rumpled bed as the sun tries to weave through the pines.”

“Such a honeyed tongue,” he murmured as he slowly entered me, pausing every point one millisecond to check to see if I was okay. It was endearing but maddening. Gradually he sank into me, and the heavens sang. My cock had flagged a bit as he had stretched me with that plump dick of his, but now that he was to the root and my body had adjusted, my dick began to fatten back up. Watching him tower above me, his hands coming to rest on my knees as he eased out and then glided back in, was so erotic. My channel was tight around his cock, and he made the most delicious sounds as he began pumping in earnest.

I let my head flop side to side, gripping my shins, as he rose up on one knee to find another angle. A deeper one that wrung

a yelp out of me.

“Fine...fine,” I huffed as my prostate vibrated. “More... there...right there,” I shouted as my soul began to leave my body. He listened quite well for an older professor used to being the top dog. His pelvis slapped against my ass, my cock bouncing off my abdomen, as he pegged that knot of nerves every damn time. With my spirit floating somewhere above the slate roof of this lemon-toned cabin, I let go. Of everything.

Letting go lifted me higher still, and my body thrummed as I chased my orgasm. I just needed a little more...

Gibson sensed my needs and fisted my cock as he pounded away. The touch of his hand sent me spiraling higher. My balls drew up just as a bolt of white hot light lit up at the base of my spine. I cried out as spunk flew from me, coating my chest and stomach. Gibson growled low in his chest as I exploded all over his fingers and myself. With a grunt, his hips punched into me one last time. The depth stole my breath. I dropped my legs to grasp at his ass as he shuddered. He needed to stay right there. Buried in me as deeply as he could go. I watched him detonate. His head fell back, the cords in his throat taut as his jaw fell open. His guttural sounds made me pulse and spurt as they filled the room. My soul settled back down into my chest while Gibson buckled, that trick knee of his tipping him down into me. I embraced him, kissed him, and hugged him despite not being able to draw a full breath. Who needed air? Totally overrated stuff that oxygen.

“Heavenly.” I sighed dreamily. He purred with pride and then licked some spunk off my nipple. A zing ran through me at the touch of his tongue to my tight little bud. “God above, I think...I may have had an out-of-body experience.”

“You’re stroking my ego now,” he said as he licked his way to my mouth. His weight shifted when his lips met mine. I snickered a bit as his mouth ended up on my ear. He gave it a wet lick that made me shiver, then flopped to his back. “Please, continue telling me how my mighty peen sent your spirit to the cosmos.”

“You said mighty peen.” I sniggered in my best Beavis and Butthead. I could hear his eyes roll as he moved to the edge of the bed to remove and then tie off his condom. “You have a sexy back,” I told him just as a ruckus took place outside.

The gulls were in full on protect the little ones mode, their screeching mingling with the shouts of a man in dire peril. We both blinked at the noise. It had been so lovely and serene just a minute ago. Gibson was first off the bed, sprinting as quickly as a man with a tricky knee could sprint. I rolled back and forth, trying to get my lingerie back in place before hitting the floor, still covered with spunk, and racing out into the living room. Gibson had pulled on his kaftan and was heading out the door. The man outside was shrieking as if a puma were on his back. I raced outside, realizing I was in see-through lacy things and darting back into the cabin to grab a small quilt from the back of the sofa.

Running back out, I skidded around the corner to find a dark-haired man lying prostrate on the patio tiles, his hands over the back of his head, trying to protect himself from two very irate seagull parents. A large camera lay to the side of the man, the strap just out of reach. Gibson was swatting at the birds as they swooped and dove, their beaks coming dangerously close to the terrified man's bare calves.

A burble of unease rose up into my throat. I recognized that camera. Suspecting foul play, I snatched the Pentax from the ground. The man threw an arm out to try to grab the camera, but I was too fast. It was then I saw his scraggly mustache and took note of his enormous ears. The pieces all snapped into place then.

The sneaky paparazzi that I'd seen several times since coming home was now spread-eagle on my patio. Well, not my patio. It was Gibson's, but whatever.

"Let the birds pluck his eyes out," I shouted to Gibson, hoisting the camera up into the air for him to see. The quilt around my shoulders slid off on one side. My lover lowered his arms, upset shifting to outrage in a second. "This is the man who's been following me all over the island."

"You bastard," Gibson snarled like an angry panther. "Were you trying to get pictures of us in bed?!"

I flipped the camera over and began sorting through the images he had snapped in the LCD viewfinder. The nosy pig. There were hundreds of shots of the two of us taken over the past hour. Ones of us talking in the yard, moving around inside



the house, then me coming out to entice Gibson into the bedroom. After that there were shots of us making love. I felt incredibly violated. The urge to vomit and/or beat this man in the face with his own camera was overwhelming. I could see why so many celebrities lost their shit with this kind of sick human being on occasion.

“Not try, Gibson. Took. Hundreds,” I snarled down at the man cowering on the patio, his nose still pressed to the cool tiles. Basil and Oregano waddled back to the pot where their chicks were waiting, looking quite proud of themselves for alerting us to this vile shit heap sneaking around our cabin. Well, not my cabin, but...who cared? There were bigger fish to fry right now.

“Call the cops. I want this scum arrested. I will press so many charges that he’ll not be able to afford a roll of film when I’m done suing his ass!” Crap, there was no roll of film. This camera was digital. Oh well, the point stood. “Don’t think of moving, you motherfucker. I will sic the birds on you if you so much as wiggle a pinkie finger.”

The photographer seemed to fold in on himself. Someone had a great fear of birds. Good. I hoped he had nightmares that would make Alfred Hitchcock envious.

“Just...one second here, Elias,” Gibson cautiously said. I threw a glare at him. “You may want to reconsider.”

“What?!”

“Please...reconsider,” the man whimpered into the dirty tiles.

“You shut up!” I barked at the paparazzi, then flung my sight back to Gibson. “Explain why I should reconsider.”

“Because if you press charges those images will be entered into evidence,” Gibson explained with far more calm than I could muster—oh. Oh. Fuck no. “At least I think they would be. I’m no legal expert, but they’d need to use them in court. I’m not sure we want the world to see these. Or even the state police. Maybe we should just delete them?”

I wanted to rage. I even lifted the camera into the air to smash it, but then, when the reality of what might be exposed to the world set in, I lowered my arm.

“This is utter bullshit,” I whispered, flipping the camera over to delete every image. Then I removed the memory card. “What’s your name?”

“Lawrence Montclair. I’m freelance, so there’s no magazine or website to go after.” He spoke into the tiles, wincing every time the gulls squawked. I so wanted to punch him in the throat for violating our privacy this way. “Can you move the birds? I was attacked by my stepfather’s parrot as a kid and lost a chunk of my upper lip. Please, move them?”

That explained that miserable, patchy mustache.

“No, the birds stay.” The man was trembling like a dog on the Fourth of July. “Did you follow me here?”

“Yeah, it was pretty easy. Just had to look you up online, see where you were born, then rented a room and got an island pass. Look,” he turned his head to the side to look up at

Gibson and me with one wide eye, “keep the fucking camera. Just let me...can I get away from the birds? Please. I’m fucking begging you!”

He did look a little green around the gills. I glanced at Gibson. He shrugged as if to say this was my call to make.

“Fine, go. Crawl around to the front of the cabin and then go. I know this island like the back of my hand and all the people on it. If you’re not gone by midnight, I will call the cops and I will press charges. Trust me when I say I have enough money to sue you so hard your fucking grandkids will be making payments to settle your debt. Do you understand?”

I was channeling Connor Days. The final performance. Actually, it wasn’t all an act. If I did see this man on Kesside Isle again, I would turn this over to the state police and pray that a new scandal would not scare off Caiden Dell.

“Thank you, thank you,” Lawrence whimpered, rising to his hands and knees and scurrying away as fast as he could scuttle. We followed at a distance, his camera still in my possession. When we got to the end of the drive, we saw him jumping into a late model green Mercury Marquis. The tires kicked up dust as he sped away.

“There is no justice as satisfying as watching a worm of a man slither on his belly.”

I looked to the left. “Is that some famous quote from a dead Greek philosopher?”

“No, that’s all mine.” He draped an arm around my shoulders and then steered me inside. “Shower and change. I’ll try to salvage dinner.”

“Give Oregano and Basil whatever they want. They are premier guard gulls.”

“That they are.” He kissed my hair and took the camera from me. I made my way to the bath feeling as dirty as I had ever felt in my life, and that includes when the images my ex shared had first appeared. Those racy images were partly my fault for allowing him to possess them. This was a whole new level of violation. I scrubbed for a long, long time and then pulled on some summer shorts and a tank top. The romance of the evening had been ruined. Fuck you, Larry.

When I was washed off and dressed, I let Gibson have the bath. While he speed showered, I looked for the camera but came up empty-handed.

I took some sardines in a can out to the wonder gulls. They were happy for the treat. When I was at the kitchen sink washing sardine goop off my fingers, Gibson appeared. He’d changed into a burgundy and yellow kaftan.

“The food’s almost ready,” I said while drying my hands on a kitchen towel. “I’m not sure I can eat much of it, though.”

“No, me either. We’ll store it for tomorrow.”

“I could use some ice cream, though.”

That made him smile feebly. Side-by-side, we tidied up the meal, stashing the food in the fridge for tomorrow’s supper,

then hit the freezer. We found two tubs of ice cream, rocky road and mint chocolate chip, and fell into the sofa with spoons.

“What did you do with that scumball’s camera?” I asked as we settled in.

“I deleted all the images, took a hammer to the memory card, and then in a fit of anger that was not at all like me, I beat the living hell out of the camera. The bits are in the trash if you’d like to piss on them?”

“Maybe later,” I replied, tugging the lid off my tub, then shoving a spoon into the rich, green ice cream. “Right now, I just need to decompress.”

“I’m sorry that happened on such a happy day for you,” Gibson wearily said as he spooned rocky road into my mouth. I sighed around the ice cream, my eyes drifting shut for a moment.

“Mm, heaven.” I sighed after I swallowed. “It’s not your fault. You don’t need to apologize. That man is scum. What kind of decent person does such a vile thing? We should have let Oregano pluck his pornstache off his face.”

“She would have been happy to do so,” he replied as his shoulders sagged. “I’m mentally and physically exhausted. Also, I am mad at that asshole for ruining a beautiful moment after our lovemaking. There is nothing I enjoy more than cuddling with you after sex. And he stole that from us on a night that was incredibly special to me. A night where I had

plans to feed you, pleasure you, and tell you how much I love you.”

I lowered my spoon back into my mint chocolate chip tub. “You were going to tell me you loved me?”

He glanced up from his ice cream, his eyes tired and sad. “I was yes.”

“I was going to tell you the same thing,” I replied. The first hint of a smile I’d seen in hours lifted the corners of his mouth. “Honestly, and I hope that I can back this up, but my life isn’t always this insane.” I paused to ponder. “Okay, it might be. I love you and want to be with you forever, but I need to be real here. This kind of thing isn’t a daily occurrence, but the press can be vile. And if the new trilogy with Budgie in the Dell takes off, then the scrutiny will be intense again. I’d not fault you for not wanting to commit to being my one and only when there will be—”

He placed a finger to my lips. “I would love to be your one and only. And I am not a foolish man who enters into this lightly. Being with someone famous is trying at times, I’m sure, but I love you far too much to let that keep me from you. Also, if another photographer should show up, we’ll sic the gulls on them.”

That made me chuckle. “You’re so you. I love that about you,” I murmured into the finger resting on my mouth. Then I kissed the calloused pad tenderly. His gaze went soft as he traced my mouth lovingly. “As long as you know what you’re in for.”

“I’m well aware of what I’m getting into.” He lifted his arm for me. I moved under it, snuggling in tight to his side, then diving back into my tub, eager to get lost in the comfort of his embrace as I glugged on ice cream. I’d have to hide my weight-in numbers from Katy this week. Maybe she would be too busy with her new love affair with Elle to hound me about my weight. A man could dream.

And sometimes, when he least expected it, those dreams come true.

One year later



“Signior Hortensio, ’twixt such friends as we few words suffice: and therefore, if thou know one rich enough to be Petruchio’s wife as wealth is burden of my wooing dance, be she as foul as was Florentius’ love, as old as Sibyl and as curst and shrewd as Socrates’ Xanthippe, or a worse, she moves me not, or not removes, at least affections edge in me, were she as rough as are the swelling Adriatic seas. I come to wive it wealthily in Padua. If wealthily, then happily in Padua.”

I waited in the wings for the young man playing Grumio to speak as the director of the play, our very own Mayor Minnie, stood at my side, the young woman dressed as a man nervously fiddling with the rapier hanging off her hip on stage.

The Kesside Isle Playhouse was packed to capacity, the opening night showing of *The Taming of the Shrew* bringing in people that were here for Labor Day who, I wagered, would have never entertained the notion of seeing a Shakespearean play if not for the fact that I was taking part. Not that I was on stage. I was the executive producer and a stand-in just in case the opening night nerves got to the young actors. Which was why I was in costume.

Since the announcement of *Gray Rains* had been made in May, my stock value had soared again. No one seemed to care much that I wore frothy things anymore. And the ones who did care could go snorkel without a snorkel.

When I’d posed for a national queer magazine in a bright pink set that Gibson had bought me for my birthday last

Valentine's Day, the world had gone bananas. For a week. Then someone else had something scandalous and the press had charged off after them. Seeing me in frilly bits was no longer shocking. Which cut down on the creepers trying to sneak peeks in our cabin windows. Not that that happened much. We had installed security cameras a week after the Larry incident. And we had the guard gulls for several months over the summer. We felt as secure as was possible on an island off the coast of Maine.

“Grumio, it's your line next,” I whispered to the young actor. He blinked at me, his face blank. I smiled and tossed him his opening line on the sly. The patrons were forgiving of the small mistakes as this was the first performance of the Kesside Young Thespians Club. I was the only one here with real acting credentials and a few of the patrons had insisted that I be Petruchio, but I had declined. I wanted young lovers of the stage to taste the glory of our art. Who knows, one of these budding performers just might be the next Tom Hanks or Meryl Streep. Producing was one task that I could do and then hand it over to someone else. Tomorrow Gibson and I were flying to Iceland to start shooting *Gray Rains*.

“Oh,” Grumio stammered. “Nay, look you, sir, he tells you flatly what his mind says...”

Once he got over his little bump, Grumio flew through his lines. The rest of the play went off without any major hitches. A few fumbled lines, a lost sword, and a mishap with Katherine's wig falling down to hide her eyes during a key scene, but that was it.

I took my bows with the kids, smiling and clapping for each young actor as they basked in the spotlights. The stage was littered with flowers. The attendees were on their feet, everyone clapping loudly, and I felt on top of the world. There was no notoriety for this play, not really. A small write-up in a few local newspapers was about it, which was fine. I didn't want the accolades. This project was for local talent. I was just adding a tiny push to opening night attendance. Also, it had been fucking years since I'd done any Shakespeare. I truly did love it. Maybe someday, if Caiden Dell was willing, we could redo one of the Bard's plays with a queer cast.

After the curtain fell for the last time, I herded the bubbly thespians to the changing rooms where family and friends were gathered. The kids were all beaming as they were hugged and kissed, handed bouquets, and generally majorly fussed over. My father, Kimmy, and Gibson were waiting for me outside the small dressing room.

Gibson stepped up to place a dozen long stem roses in my arms. "You did a marvelous job tonight, Elias." He stole a quick kiss. "And now you know the joy of passing along the arts to young minds. I'm so thrilled to have been able to see those children blossom under your tutelage. Kiss me once more."

So I did, and then once more after that. "Okay, you randy bucks," Dad teased as our faces flamed. Sometimes we did tend to forget we weren't alone, but that was how love was. It swept you up and carried you out to sea. Sometimes those waters were placid, and sometimes it was like sailing into a

gale in a paper canoe. “Mind your manners. You’ll have a whole month or two in Iceland all alone to get frisky.”

I hated to bust Dad’s bubble, but the only time we would be alone was when we were in our hotel rooms. Location shooting was long, arduous, and trying. But we were both thrilled to be going despite how tiring making a film was. Bomb Bay and I were ready to bring this queer, interracial action/romance/post-apocalyptic movie to life. The four of us—Gibson, me, Bomb Bay, and his current girl Veronica—were hoping to see the sights while working. The Northern Lights were on the top of all of our bucket lists.

“Did you pack warm clothes?” Kimmy asked as we slowly made our way outside, stopping to shake hands, make nice with the mayor, and take a few selfies with the Morton family. Even little Roscoe Morton had come to the play, but he slept through the whole thing. Not unlike Billy used to do when we were studying classic literature in high school. Like father, like son.

“We did, although it won’t be really cold there for a while yet,” I said, taking Gibson’s hand in mine as we walked to the pier. “Where are you two going?”

“Back to the inn for a foot rub,” Dad said, hugging Kimmy to his side.

“When did I say I would rub your feet?” Kimmy asked as the stars twinkled over our heads. The air was rich with the scent of the sea, the waves lapping at the moorings under our feet.

“It’s part of being a couple. You rub my feet and I rub your back.” Dad smooched her on the cheek. “You’ll stop by the inn before you leave tomorrow morning, right?”

“Of course.” I hugged Dad and Kimmy, and then they embraced Gibson. Soon it was just us leaning on the old wooden railing overlooking the ocean. The moon was full, high in the sky, and bathing the gentle waves with milky light.

“You look so peaceful,” Gibson remarked, draping an arm around my shoulders. “I hope to see you look this serene every day.”

“Well, that won’t happen, obviously. Life just isn’t that way. But every time I’m with you I feel a sense of calm that I’ve never known before.” I let my head meet his. “There is something amazingly restorative about the sea.”

“Mm, yes, which is part of why I moved here. The ocean heals us if we just allow it to do so. As did finding you. You’ve healed me in ways that I never thought were possible, Elias. I spent a long time alone and then you showed up one day and lifted that shroud of loss from my eyes.”

My gods the man had a way with words. Guess all that college education paid off.

“If only I had words like the Bard to reply back with, but I don’t. I’m just a Mainer who got lucky and found a man who loves him despite all the baggage he’s pulled along with him. I do adore you. I trust you and love you. I’ve never been happier anywhere. That fancy mansion in the Hills has nothing on our little yellow cabin.”

He kissed me with passion that made my toes curl in my boots. I'd yet to change or wash the makeup off my face. How silly we must have looked standing on the dock, him in flannel and jeans and me in a period costume with a feathered beret making out like randy teens. Not that we cared. We were in love and the whole world lay before us ready for us to explore it.

And while I was sure Iceland would be breathtaking, I was also sure that nothing could compare to that little yellow cabin where the pines kissed the sky.

***THE END***

I hope you enjoyed Elias and Gibson's romance. If you'd like a little insight about the inspiration for Kesside Isle, the Kesside Inn, and building a tiny fictional community along the Maine coast, just flip the page!

How Kesside Isle was born....



In September 2022, my daughter—otherwise known as “The Lone Penguin Chick” as she is our only child and my husband and I doted over her just as penguins do that solo egg—got married. She and her husband had always wanted to visit Maine, and so they found a gorgeous inn on a small island for their ceremony.

It was a marvelous trip filled with joy, happy tears, lobster, botanical gardens, stunning sunrises, long walks looking out over rocky shores, lobster (so much lobster) and afternoons spent in the sun whale watching or enjoying the sights of porpoises and seals from a tour boat. We don’t see such things as whales, seals, and porpoises on our farm in the hills of Pennsylvania!

The trip was one that I will never forget. Not only did we get to see our daughter marry a young man we love dearly, but we got to spend several days with new friends and old alike. My coauthor RJ Scott and her husband Steve flew over from the UK for the ceremony! So much giggling, chatting, and plotting of books took place on those peaceful afternoons overlooking the sea.

During one of those chat/plot sessions, I mentioned that I just *had* to write a romance novel set along this gorgeous coastline. Which is pretty common for an author. We rarely go anywhere and not come home with at least a dozen plot bunnies. When we got home, I dove into the story as soon as possible, sketching out a rough map of a coastal island, then

populating it with characters that were entertaining and endearing.

*Where the Pines Kiss the Sky* is that story. I hope you loved reading it as much as I did penning it. If you ever get the chance to visit coastal Maine, I highly recommend it. I'm sure it will inspire you in a million ways, just as it has me.

All the hugs ~ Vicki

A note from the author...

If you enjoyed *Where the Pines Kiss the Sky*, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review on a major retailer site, BookBub, Goodreads, or on your personal social media platforms.

Reviews are the reason someone else might decide to give this book a try!

Deepest thanks,

\*squishy hugs\*

V.L.

# About the Author

**U** SA Today Bestselling Author V.L. Locey—Penning  
LGBT hockey romance that skates into sinful pleasures.

V.L. Locey loves worn jeans, yoga, belly laughs, Dr. Who/Torchwood, walking, reading and writing lusty tales, Greek mythology, the New York Rangers, comic books, and coffee. (Not necessarily in that order.) She shares her life with her husband, her adult daughter and son-in-law, one dog, three cats, and a flock of assorted goofy domestic fowl.

When not writing spicy romances, she enjoys spending her day with her menagerie in the rolling hills of Pennsylvania with a cup of fresh java in hand.

If you want to keep up with all the latest news about her upcoming releases, sign up for her newsletter by visiting her website:

<http://vlocey.com/>

## Other Books by V.L. Locey

# **LGBTQ Releases**

## ***Standalones***

*Holly & Hockey Boots*

*Life is a Stevie Wonder Song*

*Improper Fraction*

*Playmaker—A Venom Novella*

*New York Nightwings Collection*

*An Erie Collection*

*Nightside—An Erie Vampire Tale*

*Love is a Walk in the Park—Coauthored with Stephanie  
Locey*

*Shake the Stars*

*Loving Layne*

*Love of the Hunter*

*The Ballad of Crow & Sparrow*

*Forget-Me-Not*

*Spiritual Whispers*

*Checking it Twice*

*Where the Pines Kiss the Sky*

***Watkins Glen Gladiators***



*Between the Pipes—Watkins Glen Gladiators #1*

*Defending the House—Watkins Glen Gladiators #2*

*Dump and Chase—Watkins Glen Gladiators #3 (Coming  
10/2/23)*

*Taking the Body—Watkins Glen Gladiators #4 (Coming  
2024)*

*Reading the Play—Watkins Glen Gladiators #5 (Coming  
2024)*

*Playing the Man—Watkins Glen Gladiators #6 (Coming  
2024)*

### ***Blue Ice Ranch Trilogy***

*Dawn's Desire*

*Twilight's Touch*

*Dusk's Devotion*

### ***Colors of Love Series***

*Lost in Indigo—Colors of Love #1*

*Touch of a Yellow Sun—Colors of Love #2*

*The Good Green Earth—Colors of Love #3*

*Slow Dances Under an Orange Moon—Colors of Love #4*

*A Brush of Blue—Colors of Love #5*

*Songs of Red Currant Wine—Colors of Love #6*

*Pines & Violets—Colors of Love #7*

*Kaleidoscope Sunsets—A Colors of Love Novella*

***Campo Royale Series***

*The Viking and the Drag Queen—Campo Royale #1*

*The Bachelor and the Cherry—Campo Royale #2*

*The Barkeep and the Bookseller—Campo Royale #3*

*The Financier and the Sweetheart—Campo Royale #4*

*The Chanteuse and the Bodyguard—Campo Royale #5*

***According to Liam Series***

*Life According to Liam—According to Liam #1*

*Christmas According to Liam—According to Liam #2*

*Love According to Liam—According to Liam #3*

*The World According to Liam—According to Liam #4*

*Family According to Liam—According to Liam #5*

*The Liam Collections 1 & 2*

***Overtime—The Trilogy***

*Rebound—Overtime #1*

*Final Shot—Overtime #2*

*Draw—Overtime #3*

*Black Tie—An Overtime Novella*

***The Laurel Holidays Series***

*The Christmas Oaks—Laurel Holidays #1*

*The Christmas Pundit—Laurel Holidays #2*

*The Christmas Tenor—Laurel Holidays #3*

*The Christmas Rescue—Laurel Holidays #4*

*The Christmas Extra—Laurel Holidays #5 (Coming  
11/15/23)*

***Tales of Bryant Series***

*Tales of Bryant*

*Nine Small Sips—A Tales of Bryant Wedding*

*Fade In—A Tales of Bryant Novella*

*Reserved—A Tales of Bryant Novella #2*

*Safflower—A Tales of Bryant Novella #3*

***Cayuga Cougars Series***

*Point Shot Trilogy Boxed Set*

*Snap Shot—Cayuga Cougars #1*

*Open Net—Cayuga Cougars #2*

*Coach's Challenge—Cayuga Cougars #3*

*Overtime—Cayuga Cougars #4*

*One-on-One—Cayuga Cougars #5*

*A Star-Crossed Christmas—A Cayuga Cougars Holiday Short*

***Arizona Raptors***

*Coast to Coast—Arizona Raptors #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Across the Pond—Arizona Raptors #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Shadow and Light—Arizona Raptors #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Sugar and Ice—Arizona Raptors #4—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*School and Rock—Arizona Raptors #5—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

***Harrisburg Railers Series***

*Changing Lines—Harrisburg Railers #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*First Season—Harrisburg Railers #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Deep Edge—Harrisburg Railers #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Poke Check—Harrisburg Railers #4—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Last Defense—Harrisburg Railers #5—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Goal Line—Harrisburg Railers #6—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Neutral Zone—A Harrisburg Railers Holiday Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Hat Trick—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Save the Date—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Baby Makes Three—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Rivalry—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Perfect Gifts—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

***Owatonna U. Hockey Series***

*Ryker—Owatonna U. Hockey #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Scott—Owatonna U Hockey #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Benoit—Owatonna U. Hockey #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Christmas Lights—An Owatonna U Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Valentine's Hearts—An Owatonna U Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Desert Dreams—An Owatonna U Novella—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

***Boston Rebels Series***

*Top Shelf—Boston Rebels #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Back Check—Boston Rebels #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Snowed—Boston Rebels #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Royal Lines—Boston Rebels #4—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Blade—Boston Rebels #5—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Rental—Boston Rebels #6—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

***Chesterford Academy***

*Off the Ice—Chesterford Academy #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*On Thin Ice—Chesterford Academy #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott (Coming 9/5/23)*

*Dance on Ice—Chesterford Academy #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott (Coming 11/28/23)*

***LA Storm***

*Script—LA Storm #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Second—LA Storm #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott (Coming Soon)*

***M/F Rereleases***

***To Love a Wildcat Series***

*Pink Pucks & Power Plays (To Love a Wildcat #1)*

*A Most Unlikely Countess (To Love a Wildcat #2)*

*O Captain! My Captain! (To Love a Wildcat #3)*

*Reality Check (To Love a Wildcat #4)*

*Language of Love (To Love a Wildcat #5)*

*Final Shifts (To Love a Wildcat #6)*