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CHAPTER ONE

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“Y_{OU}’_{RE} going to tear those stitches,” Ray Delgado said from

somewhere over Christopher’s head.

Christopher wanted to curse at him. At the moment, though, the extra weight was making it difficult for him to breathe through performing a single bench press. Talking wasn’t possible. The muscle just below his left shoulder felt like it was on fire. The surgical strips holding the stitches closed strained as the skin and muscle tightened for the first time in weeks. He wasn’t even sure he would be able to keep the bar up off his neck much longer. A few weeks of bed rest and he felt weak as a kitten.

“This is stupid,” Ray said as he hoisted the bar off him with ease. “You really shouldn’t push it. Staying in shape isn’t going to get you back on duty any sooner.”

“Getting back into shape,” Christopher corrected him, ashamed that he was breathing heavily. “I’ve hardly gotten out of bed in the past few weeks.”

“You’ve gone running three times since you were discharged.” “Running doesn’t count,” said Christopher. “That’s not exercise, that’s running.”

“Only for psychos, Hayes. The rest of the world doesn’t run for hours on end for fun.” Christopher’s partner stared at him like he was an idiot. “Aren’t you supposed to do physical therapy or something? Work out with a resistance band and a cute little nurse spotting for you, instead of me?”

“I need to be medically cleared before I can even schedule the physical therapy appointment. And I’ll pass on the cute little nurse.” Using his legs for leverage, he sat up on the weight bench. The sight of his own reflection in the mirrored wall caught him off guard. His hair was a mess. He nearly had a full beard because the tiny row of stitches across his left cheek prevented him from shaving, and he could see a checkerboard of white bandages and bruises peeking out from beneath his T-shirt. “You haven’t even been back for your first checkup yet, have you?” Christopher refused to look at him.

“If you hurt yourself worse, it’s going to be more than three more

weeks before you're cleared to go back to work."

"That's why I've got you. I kept you from getting shot, so you're obligated to keep me from spraining a muscle."

"And that's precisely what I'm doing. Go hit the treadmill if you're going stir-crazy. Or go out and get laid. Watching you try and lift right now is funny as hell, and even though it's helping my ego, it's also pathetic."

"I'm done. I don't think I could dead lift the barbell right now. Just doing this was exhausting. But you said you'd fill me in on what's happening at work."

Ray shrugged and watched a petite blonde woman move across the gym floor doing lunges.

"Delgado..." Christopher waved his hand in front of the other man's eyes.

"I did," Ray said quietly, not taking his eyes off the woman. "I've been stuck in training seminars. Eight fucking years on the gang task force, and the captain's got me going through the gang enforcement class again. I'm qualified to teach the class, and I have to sit there and take notes." "Has anything in it changed much?"

Ray shrugged. "New tattoos. There are always new tattoos, though. Personally, I still say we should just lock them all in the same yard in San Quentin and let them sort it out for themselves, but that's not the popular approach. None of the rookies even laughed when I suggested it in the class. One of them had the gall to tell me it wasn't *socially appropriate*. At least an old guy from the prison thought it was funny. You want a copy of the handouts?"

Christopher shook his head with a half smirk. "I think I've still got my copy from going through it at the academy. I wouldn't mind seeing the new tattoos, if you've got pictures of them."

"You got it. I've got a weeklong session on interpersonal communications skills coming up on Monday, if you want that too." "Fuck no. Remember, I was stuck with two weeks' worth of hospital food," Christopher reminded him. "One form of torture is enough."

"I'd rather eat the hospital food. Well, if you're done trying to kill yourself, I'm going to take off. I need to get home and get some sleep." "You want to go run tomorrow?"

Ray shook his head and sniggered. "If I say yes, are you going to kick my ass?"

"No, no, I feel worse than I look. Five miles, max."

"Five miles? It's your shoulder, man. Still, I suppose I'd better be there to pick your ass up off the pavement."

"I could drag you out to the mountains for a long run, if you don't have anything better to do. Seven too early?" Christopher asked, knowing it was. When there was no response, he glanced up at Ray. He watched his partner as his partner watched the blonde.

They had worked together for nearly four years, and during that time, Christopher had done his best to ignore his partner's handsome features and well-defined body. Ray had known that Christopher was gay from the start, and the only thing the other man had ever said about it was that he was straight, and that he didn't want Christopher to hit on him. After that, it had never come up again. They had merged into a seamless partnership and tight friendship that had left many of the other detectives wondering if Ray swung both ways. Christopher, however, had gone out of his way to think of Delgado as nothing but a friend. While the other man had made it clear that he didn't want to know about Christopher's sex life, he was always there with a pair of boxing gloves or a six-pack of beer when he knew Christopher was upset about something. That type of open and honest friendship was something Christopher had known very little in his life, and he was determined to protect it.

His partner was incredibly hot and exactly his type physically, but Christopher never spent more than a moment even thinking about the other man's tan body, in case it somehow eroded away the trust they'd built over the years. Still, the idea of staring at his partner's ass over five miles of trails held an undeniable appeal.

The blonde adjusted her iPod headphones and eyed both of them.

She pushed out of her lunge and walked, very slowly, over to the cardio equipment.

"Delgado? Mountains? It would do you good to get out of the city." "No chance in hell, Hayes. An entire day trying to run up a sheer wall just to be too sore to move for the next week is not my idea of a good time. Five miles is fine. We can run to Coronado. But you know, make it nine o'clock." Delgado smiled brightly. "I think I'll stay awhile, maybe hit the elliptical."

The clock hanging above the mirrored wall beside the weights said it was ten minutes after eleven. Christopher shook his head and wiped at his beard with his sweat towel. "Good luck with that," he muttered. He nodded when Ray tapped his left elbow with a soft fist as he walked past. "Try to rest, man, you look like shit."
"Yeah. See you in the morning."

Christopher wasn't really surprised when there was no answer as he rapped on his partner's door at ten minutes before nine the next morning. He had a spare key and let himself in. From the silence of the apartment, it was obvious his partner was still asleep. "It's nine, Delgado!" he shouted in a voice that carried through the entire apartment. "Get your ass out of bed!"

He headed for the kitchen and pulled out a couple of coffee mugs. Even if his partner wasn't always up on time, the man's programmable coffeemaker was always set for six each morning. Christopher closed his eyes and cocked his head, listening to the sound of water running in the shower and shuffling from the living room.

He bit his lip and pulled down a third coffee mug. He had nothing to do today except go for a long, slow run, so he wasn't going to let anything throw him into another bad mood.

"Oh, wow!"

Christopher plastered a smile on his face. The girl who'd just come into the kitchen wearing one of his partner's T-shirts sounded like she was fifteen years old. Christopher glanced at her briefly, deciding she probably wasn't more than twenty at the oldest. "Are you Raymond's gay partner?"

He felt his smile twitch, wondering if Ray even cared about how bad that sounded. He made a mental note to tease him about it as soon as they were alone. "Christopher Hayes," he said, introducing himself. "Not that you look gay or anything, but I think it's totally hot. And it's so cool that he's totally open about things like that. I'm Michelle, by the way. Oh, hey, there's coffee!"

"Yeah," Christopher managed, not trusting himself to say anything else without laughing. He poured two cups of coffee and set one on the end of the kitchen counter for her.

She bounced past him, pulled open the fridge, and hauled out a small carton of milk. "So he mentioned you two work together," she said

casually. "How long have you been a trainer there?"

"I'm sorry?"

"At Around-the-Clock Fitness. I just go there because of the student discount, so my membership's only good semester to semester, you know. It is just so sad that the only two guys there with nice bodies work there. I mean, it just figures. So is that how you two met? At work? Or were you together before that?"

"We met at work," Christopher muttered, then bit his tongue again.

"Did, um, Ray mention how long he's worked there?"

"Well, sort of. He said you two have worked together for years now. That's got to be a dull job, though, just watching the same blubbery people in baggy clothes huff and puff on a treadmill all day. I go insane if I'm stuck there for more than half an hour without music and a magazine, you know?"

Christopher shrugged and said nothing. He didn't like going to the gym either, but mostly because it was full of people all trying to convince themselves that they weren't in the gym. They tried to close themselves off from everything, usually with headphones and magazines, so you couldn't even smile and nod at them without them glaring at you for somehow violating their personal space. At least people who opted for basketball or soccer at the city park would say hi.

He sipped his coffee and tried to decipher the noises coming from the rest of the apartment. He'd go running alone if Ray didn't hurry up. After a moment, he realized the girl hadn't stopped talking yet. She was rambling about majoring in sociology now. Christopher listened for a few more moments, then realized what must have happened the night before. As Michelle talked bluntly about being open-minded and about sexual experimentation, poor Ray probably started talking about his gay partner, and how he was just fine with different lifestyles, to try and relate to the hot young co-ed better. Had the man even realized that the word "partner" wouldn't mean quite the same thing to a bisexual sociology major that it did to a straight homicide detective?

As Ray stumbled into the kitchen, dressed to run and pulling on his socks as he went, he met Christopher's eyes with an apologetic look. Christopher schooled his face and forced himself not to laugh. Ray took the cup of coffee out of Christopher's hands and drained it in two long gulps.

“That was mine, you know,” Christopher pointed out.

“Would take too long to pour my own,” Ray hissed, giving him back the coffee cup. He leaned against the counter and began to pull his shoes on while standing up. His fingers blurred as he fumbled with the laces. He glanced up at Christopher and stopped. “You finally decided to shave again! About time.”

Christopher refilled the coffee cup and was about to take another sip when Ray pulled it from his hands too.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ray gasped, and then he finished draining the second cup. “If you expect me to keep up with you for more than a mile, I need the caffeine.”

“OMG, you guys really are serious! You’re going running after working out last night! That’s the real secret to getting those abs, isn’t it? That is so hard core!”

Ray cringed and kept his gaze on the tile. Christopher knew if he could just get his attention, he could rub it in without ever saying a word. Then the part of his brain that was always spinning in the background told him he’d missed something. “Did you actually just say OMG out loud?” Christopher asked.

“Yeah.” The girl looked a bit deflated. “Would you mind if I come along? I’ve still got all my workout stuff from last night!”

Christopher saw the horrified expression that flittered across his partner’s face. “Yeah, come with us! It’s a great workout. Grab your shoes—we’ll wait.”

Michelle squealed and hopped out of the kitchen.

Ray stared at the tile beneath his worn-out running shoes while Christopher stared at him. Finally, out of pity, he poured him another cup of coffee. “Pedophile,” Christopher whispered, trying not to laugh. Christopher almost lost control of himself when he saw his partner shake from the effort of not laughing.

“Asshole,” Ray finally whispered back, taking a slow sip of coffee. “You realize that your new girlfriend thinks we’re lovers, right? The whole gay-partner thing....”

The way Ray shut his eyes tight and cringed told Christopher his friend knew he had a bit of a misunderstanding on his hands, but had no clue how to fix it. “I promise I’ll explain later,” he whispered, as the girl bounded back into the kitchen, still wearing Ray’s T-shirt, but also

wearing a pair of shorts and tennis shoes without socks.

“Totally ready!” she announced.

“Great! Let’s go, baby.” Christopher slapped Ray on the ass and then jogged out of the kitchen, ready to sprint just in case he actually had to outrun the other man. He had to stop and wait for them at the elevator, but by then he could see that his partner was torn between being mortified and laughing hysterically.

Christopher started out at a slow jog and then worked his way up to a comfortable pace he knew Ray could keep up with. They were barely out of sight of Ray’s apartment building when he began to listen to the rhythmic footfalls of his partner and the random shuffling footsteps and heavy breathing of his partner’s newest girlfriend. He was surprised she kept up with them for a good two miles before she panted out something about heading back so she could get to class on time.

Ray glanced back and forth between them, trying not to look too sheepish as he fell back.

“Go on. Be a gentleman, walk her home.”

“You sure?”

“Go.”

“Fine. Call me if you get into trouble, right?”

“My legs work just fine,” Christopher reminded him. “Do us both a favor and tell her what we actually do for a living.” He waved with his good hand and sped up until he felt his heart racing in time with his stride, falling into the pace with practiced ease.

It wasn’t long before his mind emptied and all the stress of the past three weeks began to seep away. The only time the world seemed to come into perfect focus, when everything was clear and understandable, was when he was running. Otherwise, his brain would keep spinning endlessly. And the last thing he wanted at the moment was to keep thinking about the very real possibility that his life was over.

Three weeks ago, things had been perfect. He had one of the best track records of any of the detectives in the department. His captain had been coaching him for next month’s promotion board, a grueling three-hour oral exam on every detail of the department’s policies, procedures, and all of the duties he would tackle when he was promoted to lieutenant. He was sure he’d ace it. He’d been in the best shape of his life too, on track to take a good ten minutes off of his best marathon time. Then he and Ray had

listened on the radio as a traffic stop just a few blocks from them exploded in gunfire. The radio traffic got muddled, but they knew one of the officers involved had been shot and that the suspect had fled on foot. And Christopher had never met a single criminal in San Diego who could outrun him. For a moment, when the suspect stumbled and turned toward them, firing while he tried to get around a corner, Christopher actually cursed being fast. The bullet had pierced his right shoulder, missing bone but tearing through muscle, arteries, and tendons. Now, after two surgeries and weeks of sitting in bed recovering, Christopher didn't want to admit just how bad his shoulder was. The dull constant ache was something he could learn to live with, but it got so stiff it felt like it was on fire if he stopped moving for long. When he started moving again after sitting still, the entire muscle became hot and swollen, until his shoulder locked and he couldn't move at all. The worst part was a tingling dead feeling from his shoulder all the way down the outside of his arm. The last three fingers on his right hand were completely numb. He remembered the doctor going over the list of possible complications from the gunshot wound and the surgeries, how she had brushed over the slim chance of nerve damage and hardly mentioned the symptoms at all. From the thick packet of discharge paperwork, though, Christopher had learned that the dead tingling that signaled a damaged nerve wasn't something doctors could fix. Muscles healed, nerves didn't. Once the damage was done, it was done.

He was supposed to have gone back to the doctor to get the stitches taken out two days ago, but he had skipped the appointment. If he told the doctor the truth, he would never be medically cleared to go back on duty—not unless he could learn how to shoot left-handed. If he could work up the nerve to lie about it, he didn't deserve to go back to work anyway. Only a real bastard would put his teammates and partner at risk by going back on duty when he would likely end up dropping his gun if he ever had to use it.

He shook his head as he tried to imagine life without his job. He had more or less fallen into police work, but it had become his life. While he was finishing his undergraduate degree, intending to teach English and coach track and field, he had gone out with a guy who wanted to be a cop but couldn't work up the nerve to go to the preemployment test session alone. Their relationship had ended the moment Christopher

passed the tests and his boyfriend didn't. The job turned out to be the best thing that had ever happened to him. He loved being a police officer. And the thought of starting a new career, when he was already well past thirty, was terrifying. The thought of taking early retirement on disability was even more frightening.

Christopher wiggled his fingers again, watching to make sure they were actually moving. There was no way to know for sure if he would be able to handle a gun again until he tried it, and he didn't dare try until he'd had a few more weeks to heal. Just trying to hold his gun had been a disaster. He had dropped it on his bed four times before he decided to tuck it into his nightstand until he went back on duty.

He curled his fingers into loose fists, let his gaze settle on the ground in front of him, and just ran. He ran until he couldn't feel the pain as the tendons in his shoulder caught with each swing of his arm, until he didn't care about the tingling and numbness in his fingers, until he forgot what extensive nerve damage to his gun arm would mean for his career, until he let go of the petty jealousy he felt toward the girl his partner had picked up at the gym. He ran until he couldn't feel anything at all.

Life was a lot like the grueling long-distance races he ran. He knew he had to keep moving forward, even if there didn't seem to be any hope of his shoulder recovering. There were desk jobs with the department, and training and consulting positions. He would find a way to move forward if his arm didn't heal, and until then, he would run until he didn't have the energy to worry about it anymore.

It was nearly one thirty by the time he finally staggered the last half block back to his condo. He fumbled with his door key and felt his stomach seize as the knob turned in his hand. His right hand twitched toward his left side, to the spot where his gun would have been if he'd been wearing his harness. The door was yanked in as Christopher let go of the knob and stepped to the side. He didn't make it very far. "Where the hell have you been!" Ray, still dressed in his running clothes, grabbed Christopher by the shirt and hauled him inside, then slammed the door behind him. "How does five miles take you five fucking hours? Why didn't you call?"

Christopher tried to swallow but found his mouth was too dry. He had worn himself down so far that he was dehydrated and his blood sugar was low. He had felt a headache creeping up on him during the last two

miles back to his place. If he didn't rehydrate, cool off, and get some electrolytes soon, he was going to end up stuck on the couch with chills and nausea for the rest of the day. He had refilled his small water bottle at least three times, but he should have had more.

Unfortunately, it was hard to come up with an explanation for all that while the world was still spinning. "Water..." he rasped, trying to move past Ray and get to his kitchen. "Salt. Aspirin."

"Sit your ass down!"

Christopher would have laughed about how easily Ray shoved him down onto his couch, but he was too tired. Ray didn't even try to be gentle as he ripped Christopher's shirt off over his head. Christopher stared at the yellow jersey, wondering how he hadn't noticed the bloodstains on the front and back. After thinking about it for a moment, he chalked it up to endorphins. He'd been really embarrassed during his first marathon when he hadn't noticed bloody outlines of his nipples on his white shirt until after the race was over. There was a lot of blood on his shirt now. That was strange.

"Fuck." Ray's hands ghosted over his shoulder and back, picking at sweat-soaked bandages. "Is there anything I can say that would get you to go back into the doctor?"

Christopher shook his head slowly. "I need some water. And a Snickers bar. And a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Then I'll take a shower. It doesn't hurt, so I'm sure it looks worse than it is." "Don't move," Ray ordered in his most authoritative voice. A few minutes later, Christopher found a cold bottle of Powerade

and two aspirin in his hand while his partner mopped at the blood on his back with a dark washcloth. Then, while Ray put a clean, dry bandage on his back, Christopher fiddled with the shirt in his hands to distract himself from the heat of the other man's fingers. When Ray pushed him back against the couch and walked around to stand in front of him, Christopher felt the euphoria give way to panic.

"I've got it." He grabbed the washcloth and tried to hop up from the couch. He ended up bumping into Ray and stumbling backward to avoid the physical contact. He scooted to the side and escaped to the bathroom with the washcloth in hand. He cleaned up the blood on the front of his shoulder, shocked that he had actually managed to tear the small wound open again after it had nearly healed. He rinsed out the washcloth, dried himself off

with a towel, and then turned to find his partner leaning against the door frame with a box of large bandages in hand.

“What the hell, man? Weight lifting wasn’t stupid enough? You had to try harder to really fuck yourself up?”

“Didn’t even notice,” said Christopher. He grabbed the box and fished out a bandage before Ray could volunteer to help him. “It’s not bad,” he said, poking at the tiny pinpricks of red along the top and bottom of a raw, red stretch of new scar tissue. “I pulled the stitches, but the skin is fused. Was my back all right?”

“What do I have to do to get you to stop this? You think I enjoy going to work every night and watching other guys work our cases? I would like to get back to work sometime this year, so do you think you could find a bit of fucking self-control so your body can actually heal?” “Self-control?” Christopher laughed. He wiped at his face with the rinsed-out washcloth. “The man who takes home a new twenty-year-old twice a week is lecturing me about self-control?”

“Me having a sex life makes this less stupid?” asked Ray with a calmness that never failed to infuriate Christopher.

“I tore the stitches, that’s all. They were supposed to come out two days ago. I really don’t get why you’re making such a big deal out of this.”

“You got shot! The bullet hit an artery! Do you have any idea how it feels to sit there and watch someone you care about bleed to death on the sidewalk? How it feels to watch you do this to yourself?”

“No,” Christopher admitted. “Thankfully. I’m sorry, all right? I should have... I should have done a lot of things differently this week.” Like told the doctor about the numbness in his hand before he left the hospital. Told his captain the truth, so he could assign someone else to work with Ray instead of forcing him into classes and desk work while he waited for a full recovery that wasn’t going to happen. He should still tell Ray the truth—tell him that the next time he needed Christopher to be there to back him up, Christopher would fail him. The next time he needed to come through for his partner, Christopher was likely to get him killed instead.

“Come on, Hayes, I didn’t mean to turn into some kind of drama queen on you.” Ray rubbed a soothing hand up and down the middle of his back for a moment, and then his partner awkwardly stepped back to

the bathroom door. "Come on, get over it and I'll spring for lunch and a beer."

"Can't. I have to go talk to Captain Jenkins." Christopher shut his eyes and tried to force his brain back into the calm quiet from his run. His skin still felt warm where Ray had rubbed his back, and no matter how much he tried to keep his thoughts under control, he couldn't seem to stop focusing on that warmth. "And I need a shower before that. Pull that off my back so it doesn't get all gooey?"

"But I just put it on there!"

Christopher opened his eyes and met his partner's gaze in the bathroom mirror. "Gooey," Christopher enunciated carefully. "You've got to eat, idiot. The captain can wait." Ray smirked at him and ripped the bandage off fast. "Hurry up, I'm hungry. Although, after listening to what's-her-name talk about us, I got the impression you should be buying me lunch."

Christopher felt a blush rising fiercely. In the mirror, he could see that his partner was blushing too, but he was smiling. No way was he going to let Ray get the last word. He pulled up the same smile he used to break the ice with guys in bars and let his gaze travel noticeably up and down his partner's body. "It's just because I'm taller than you," he explained, dropping his voice a little. "Trust me, though, you'd be the one opening doors and pulling out my chair in the relationship."

Ray's blush turned crimson. "You mean..."

"If I spell it out for you, do you think you'd turn purple?" "What?"

Christopher pointed to the mirror. "You're blushing like a kid who just got caught with a dirty magazine. Who knew that infamous sex life of yours was so dull?"

"It's not dull! I just... I never thought about the logistics of..." "Ha! Purple!" Christopher didn't even bother trying to hide his laughter as his partner ran for the safety of the living room.

He showered fast and got dressed, pulling on some khaki shorts and then wincing his way into a polo shirt. He found Ray, dressed in clothing he'd stolen from Christopher's closet, reclining on his couch flipping through his newspaper. He stopped himself from wondering if he looked as good in his clothes as his partner did. Joking aside, he would not allow himself to follow where those thoughts led. "Ready?"

"Yeah. Hope you don't mind." Ray gestured to the button-down shirt and

black slacks. “I figured we should go somewhere nice. I owe you for not sneaking a beer into the hospital last week.”

“Belated beer is still beer,” said Christopher with a happy smile. “I can’t say I’m all that eager to celebrate getting older, though. Another few years and I’ll be as slow as you.”

Christopher smirked at the way Ray rolled his eyes. Talking to his captain and admitting his career was all but over would keep.

CHAPTER TWO

DOUG reached up to the radio clipped to his shoulder and pressed the button. “Onrappel,” Doug said.

“You’re all good” came the crackling reply from the radio.

He set his feet wide and leaned backward, over the edge of the cliff, then settled into his harness and let himself down slowly. The moss-covered spots where his feet touched the cliff were slippery and littered with loose gravel. The tiny stones fell away as he pushed off and lowered himself down. Three search-and-rescue members had hiked down into the canyon that morning, following the creek. They were waiting for him down below. Half a dozen others had been willing to make the descent down to the body, but as the only member of the volunteer search-and-rescue team who also worked in law enforcement, it fell to Doug to try to preserve whatever evidence might have survived in the windswept canyon.

Even though he had been climbing for years, Doug took his time inching down the limestone wall, trying not to disturb the other rope or too much of the loose stone. After about ten feet, he dropped past the six-foot overhang that had, so far, obscured the body from view. If it hadn’t been for the clear view of the body from the trailhead parking lot, the poor soul dangling below him would probably have been hanging there until some random hiker found the rope tied off near the trail high above. There weren’t likely to be too many more hikers until spring officially arrived

in another month or two.

He braced his feet against the wall and glanced down to his left. Long blond hair streamed out from the body in the wind. He could tell from the bulk of the shoulders that it was a male, despite the long hair. The rope cut through the hair and seemed to run down the body's back. *That's not right*, Doug thought grimly. He suspected the person below him had been climbing alone and hit his head, but if that were true, then the body would be hanging sideways, with the rope still attached to the climber's harness. Doug clipped the rope tight and pulled on a pair of latex gloves before dropping the last few feet.

He tied himself off, took off his sunglasses, and tried to make out the features of the body beside him. The blond hair framed a pale gray and purple face with bloated eyes and a gaping mouth. The man wasn't dressed like a climber, but in black jeans and a leather biker vest. There was nothing beneath the vest but tattoos and sliced skin. And the rope, Doug noticed. An efficient noose had tightened so much it cut into the bloated skin around the man's neck.

"Fuck."

Suicides always sucked. He tried to change the man's image in his head, to mentally erase the bloating and decay, but he couldn't place the man's face even then.

"Send down the backboard," Doug called into the radio. Above him, the rest of the search-and-rescue team lowered a hard fiberglass stretcher. Doug swung himself to the side and caught it before it could smack the body in the head. He guided it down another few feet, and then he hit his radio again. "Stop." He swung the stretcher around the body and held his breath as he leaned around the body to wrap the black nylon strap around the man's chest and secure it against the Velcro on the other side. As soon as he finished the first strap, he launched himself off the wall and swung as far away from the body as he dared, then took several deep breaths. Holding his breath again, he swung back to the body to secure another strap around the legs.

As he bent sideways to secure the second strap, he ended up flinching as the back of the dead man's fingers rubbed against his temple. When he pulled his head away slightly, he saw a long series of black marks along the inside of the man's forearms. At first, he thought the man must have been absolutely determined to kill himself, and slit his wrists several times just in

case his neck snapping, the rope strangling him, and smacking into the limestone wall on the way down all failed to kill him. As he moved his head a bit closer to wrap the second strap around, he made out the shape of a letter among the bloody cuts. He swung to the side a little and, reluctantly, reached out to turn the man's arms so he could read the letters.

"Fuck," he whispered again.

He grabbed the webbing attached to the foot of the backboard and hoisted it up, then clipped it into a carabiner on his harness. Then he found a few good footholds and climbed up several feet. He pulled the slack rope tight and carefully unclipped the carabiner. He hoisted the bottom of the backboard the last few inches and secured it, so the stretcher was hanging horizontally. He avoided looking at the man's face again. At what was left of his face, anyway. He pulled out a small knife. Before he opened it, he reached for his radio again. "Backboard secure—I'm cutting him down."

"Make sure you cut the right rope now," a half-amused voice said over the radio.

Doug opened the pocketknife, reached for the stretched rope attached to the man's neck, and began to saw through the rope a few inches above the knot. He stopped after he cut through most of the rope and reached for his radio again. "Oh, damn," Doug drawled. "I always get this one wrong.... Remind me, is it the rope tied with a clove hitch I'm supposed to cut, or the one tied with a noose?"

"That's a puzzler," the same voice echoed. "But, hey, you've got a one in three chance of guessing right."

"Tension," Doug warned before he let go of the wall and let his weight settle in the harness. He sliced through the last of the braided rope. The rope holding the stretcher shifted as the man's full weight settled onto it. The webbing stretched tight and held the body secure. He folded up his knife and slipped it into his front pocket. He settled back into his harness and pushed himself off the wall, then reached for his radio again. "Alright, let's bring him down, slow."

"You got it, chief."

Doug kept one hand on the stretcher and let the men lowering the body set the pace. He guided the stretcher over two more overhangs, and even though he knew the man on the stretcher was so far beyond feeling a bump or two that he was beginning to decompose, he tried to keep the stretcher from swinging back into the cliff wall. A hundred and twenty feet

below the overhang where he'd cut the man down, three more members of the search-and-rescue team caught the stretcher and set it down on the rocky shore of the creek. Even though two of them were professional paramedics and one was a forest ranger, they all froze when they saw the state of the body. The paramedics recovered so fast that Doug wondered, not for the first time, if they were human at all. They moved in, unhooked the stretcher from the rope, and began to run through a standard emergency-response checklist.

Doug pulled the forest ranger aside. "Is that guy from the Missoula newspaper still down at the trailhead?"

"I doubt it. I've got an intern down there making sure no one else comes up this way. I can call and ask her."

"Please do."

The ranger nodded and pulled out his cellphone. After a moment, he covered the mouthpiece. "Yeah, he's still there."

Doug turned back to the paramedics, who were already hoisting the stretcher for the hike back down to the trailhead parking lot. "No. There's a reporter camped out down there. I want him bagged before we take him anywhere."

The paramedics glanced at each other, then set the stretcher back down.

"Why?" the ranger asked.

"Until I get a coroner's report on this, I'm going to treat the cuts on his arms as suspicious."

"Cuts? Are there signs of a struggle or something?"

"Don't know," Doug admitted. He pulled the rope free from his harness, gave three sharp tugs, then let the rope drop as the men on the upper trail began to pull the rope back up. "I think they're just a sign that someone had a birthday. Beyond that, well, I'd like to find out."

"Huh?"

The older of the two paramedics smirked and raised both of the corpse's arms so the letters were clear. Doug tossed his harness aside and knelt to go through the man's pockets, hoping to find an ID.

"The left arm says HAPPY, the right says BIRTHDAY," Doug recited with a grimace. He pulled out an empty packet of cheap cigarettes.

"That's fucked up." Despite the situation, the younger paramedic's tone suggested that he was amused.

Doug pulled the strap over the man's legs loose and rolled him over, then

checked his back pockets. He found a thin wallet in one and pulled it out. Inside, he found a few one-dollar bills, a coupon for more cigarettes, and a state ID. It wasn't a license, but a state inmate ID, given to convicts leaving prison for probation or parole. "Hayes," he said, reading the name aloud. "Peter Eugene Hayes."

"You're kidding." The forest ranger leaned over his shoulder. "We wasted a whole day for some ex-con?"

Doug shrugged and slid the ID back into the wallet. When one of the paramedics held out a large ziplock bag, he dropped the wallet and the empty pack of cigarettes into it. "There was nothing else," he said levelly. "How long would you say he's been up there?"

"Six, maybe seven days," said one of the paramedics. "There's still blood pooling in his feet."

"Couldn't have been much longer," the forest ranger agreed. "The trail was snow packed until mid-April."

Doug glanced up at the mountains towering above them. The snow line, the point where the snow seldom ever melted, was only a thousand feet above them, but there were still traces of snow and ice even down here along the creek and it was nearly June.

"Fucker's lucky he didn't freeze to death, coming up here dressed like that," said the ranger, somehow keeping a straight face.

Doug laughed despite himself. It was either that or pick a fight with another member of the search-and-rescue team, and he wasn't likely to maintain his ample supply of volunteers if he did. He bent down and began undoing the straps that held the body to the stretcher. One of the paramedics had laid out a black body bag, and the two of them hoisted the body into the bag with a professional, cold efficiency. Doug refused to look away from the milky purple eyes, frozen open and sunken into the bloated flesh at the same time. He kept his eyes on the body until the black plastic was zipped over the man's head.

"Call down to the trailhead, let her know we're on our way," Doug instructed.

The forest ranger flipped open his cell phone and nodded. After a moment, he touched Doug's elbow. "Signal cut out. I'll try again as we get closer."

Navigating the stretcher down the thin trail was an arduous task, and it took them two hours, taking turns carrying it from the front and back, when the hike up usually took about thirty minutes. Doug had handed off the front of

the stretcher and moved ahead of the others as soon as the trailhead came into view. There was a harassed-looking woman in a US Forest Service uniform, trying very hard not to talk to a man in a suit. Another man hovered near the pair, occasionally fiddling with a tangle of camera equipment that had been set out on the hood of a white Subaru. The logo of one of the local TV stations was painted on the door of the Subaru.

The five other members of the search-and-rescue team, who had been up on the trail above the canyon and lowered the stretcher and the body, had already made it down. They were standing in a close huddle around the bumper and open back doors of the ambulance. From their bodylanguage, it was obvious theywere alltired and nervous.

As soon as Doug stepped off the trail, the man in the suit snapped his fingers at the cameraman and hurried over. The man looked Doug up and down and pulled out a notebook. “Any idea who the climber was, then? Was he found over the reservationline?”

Doug shut his mouth and mulled over both of those questions. He pressed his lips tight together and glared at the young intern. How the hell did orders not to say anything turn into telling a reporter they were retrieving a dead male climber? It was standard procedure not to disclose the details surrounding a local death until the victim’s family could be notified. No one deserved to find out that their loved ones were dead by readingabout it inthe paper. The interndropped her gaze to the ground.

“I’m afraid we can’t release any information at this time,” Doug said automatically.

“Is this a matter that the tribal police are going to be investigating?”

“Tribal police?” Doug tried his best to look honestly perplexed. He made a show of pulling his badge off his belt, examining it carefully, and holding it out to the man. “Baker County Sheriff’s Department,” he read aloud, tracing the gold letters with his finger, as if reading to a child. “We have no jurisdictiononthe Flathead reservation.”

“Oh,” the reporter said, laughing, “I just kind offigured...”

Doug stared directly into the man’s eyes without smiling. He fought every cultural rule that urged him to keep his face down, every childhood memory that told him it was rude to look someone in the eyes. He was well aware that he was the only member of the Baker County Sheriff’s Department who wasn’t white. The reservation, the home of the combined Salish and Kootenai tribes, was to the south, bordered by the city of Missoula to the

south and mountain ranges on the east and west. The Missoula Police didn't tend to employ many tribal members, either. Even Doug had to admit the man's assumption was a safe bet.

Doug, unfortunately, had paid enough attention during his sociology classes to know it wasn't worth getting angry over. The relationship between the tribe and the outside world was a tangled mess of racial stereotypes, a culture suspicious of education and ambition, and a cycle of learned helplessness that kept most of the men his age on the reservation stuck between seasonal construction jobs and binge drinking. This idiot reporter was stupid enough to remind him of all of it, but that didn't make him responsible for any of it. He felt angry anyway.

The laughter wilted under Doug's glare. "Look, I am sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

Doug folded his arms across his chest and smiled. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Was I supposed to take your assumption that I am employed by the tribal police to be an insult? Because your apology tells me you considered it an insult, or you assumed I would."

"Well, no, I just...." The reporter stuttered out another half apology and then shrank from Doug's stare. "I'm not making this better, am I?" The reporter offered him a good-natured smile.

"No. Feel free to follow up with the sheriff's department this coming week. By then we'll have had a chance to notify the victim's next of kin." He heard the others coming up behind him. Doug folded his arms across his chest and stood as tall as he could to try to block the reporter's view of the stretcher.

"Right." The reporter nodded, closed his notebook, and hurried toward the Subaru. Despite Doug's best attempt at glaring the cameraman into submission, the man continued to film for a few seconds before following his coworker.

After the body was loaded into the ambulance, Doug watched the flashing lights until they were out of sight, and then he headed toward his truck. He pulled a cooler out of the backseat, pulled a bottle of water out for himself, and tossed the rest to the remaining members of the search-and-rescue team. When he handed a bottle to the forest ranger, he held tight to the bottle for a moment and leaned in close. "Do us alla favor?"

"Hm?"

"Don't give that interna reference for anything except a job as a tour guide."

“Everybody makes mistakes, Doug...”

Doug took a deep breath and nodded once. “Whatever. I’m going to head back into town, see if I can get an address or emergency-contact info on this guy from his DOC record and then get to work on the report. Thanks for not dropping me!” Doug hopped into his truck, waved at the rest of the crew as he pulled away, and drove north toward the town of Elkin. He shook his head and forced the image of those dead eyes out of his head. This was not the way he’d planned to spend his weekend.

Three hours later Doug found himself wishing he could be back on the wall of the canyon, dangling in his harness and dealing with a half-frosted corpse. He changed into the spare suit he kept in the department locker room, checked in with the duty officer, and then began trying to track down any next of kin. Looking through the ex-con’s records with the Department of Corrections was unsettling. The man’s most recent booking photo was striking. Doug was stunned by how much a week of decay had bloated and warped the man’s features. He had an angular, almost feminine face and sad eyes that were so blue Doug figured they were probably colored contacts. He stared at those eyes for a long time, trying to replace the dead purple eyes of the man’s corpse with those crystal baby blues.

It didn’t work.

Peter Eugene Hayes had a history of physical and sexual violence in California dating back nearly two decades. At seventeen, the man had been charged with molesting a twelve-year-old boy. Somehow, he had avoided prison, most likely because he was a minor. At twenty-three, he was convicted of raping a ten-year-old boy. A plea bargain had gotten him ten years in prison, and he’d been released after six years. The moment he was off probation in California, he’d moved to Elkin. Doug wasn’t sure how he’d never run into the man over the last few years. A series of drug- and alcohol-related charges had landed him in and out of jail or prison at regular intervals ever since, but Doug couldn’t recall ever seeing him in the jail. Most recently, a Missoula court had sentenced him to eight months in prison for a DUI. He had only been out for about six weeks.

What was most disturbing to Doug was that there hadn’t been any additional child abuse charges levied against the man. Child molesters, in Doug’s experience, did not stop molesting children just because they went to prison. When they got out, they inevitably did it again. Unless they didn’t get out alive. Doug had talked to enough correction officers to know that

life in prison was absolute hell for anyone accused of raping a child, and many of them did end up getting killed. That was one reason why Doug had never considered working inside a prison or jail. He didn't want to have to be the man standing between a mob of rioting criminals and a monster he would be glad to throw to their mercy.

The man's sex-offender registration hadn't been updated when he returned to Elkin. It listed him as living in a halfwayhouse in Missoula. The inmate records didn't have any contact information for his next of kin, so Doug had to call the man's probation officer. The probation officer was hung over when he answered the phone, and hadn't bothered to check in with Hayes at all during the week and a half since he died, which just made Doug's mood worse.

He got an address, though. It was a small, run-down Victorian house on the edge of town. The house looked to be nearly a hundred years old, with real wood siding that had seen much better days. It might have been green, it might have been black, but it was so cracked and faded no one could say what the original color really had been. It had once had white trim; now it had cracked gray trim.

The front door was locked, but a large manila envelope was taped to the door with packing tape. He found the key to the house taped to the outside of the envelope. Out of habit, Doug put on a pair of rubber gloves and pulled the entire envelope off the door. He opened the envelope and found a piece of lined notebook paper that had been folded in thirds and taped shut. The name Christopher Malcolm Hayes was written on the paper, but there was no address or phone number. Doug used his car keys to cut through the tape and open the sheet of paper.

A few words were scribbled in fading pencil on the notepaper. Doug read the short note aloud. *"Well, little brother, I'd say I'm sorry, but you'd just accuse me of lying. It's amazing how things come back around again. I tried to do the right thing this time, I really did, but it all fell apart. This is the only gift I can give you to try and make things right, and I knew you wouldn't come otherwise. There's a new Man of God, and I think you're old enough to stop running. It isn't fair to ask you to deal with the mess I'm leaving behind, but I can't think of anyone else who would understand. Go to the bluffs west of town, you'll see. Stop running and you'll see."* Doug turned the note over. There was only the name—no address, no phone number, no nothing. Unless you counted cryptic narcissistic suicidal

bullshit, but that was par for the course. “Well, fuck.”

The only other thing inside the manila envelope was a single sheet of printed parchment paper that turned out to be a fill-in-the-blanks style will, signed and notarized. Doug scanned the will quickly, looking for names and addresses in the disposition of property. Everything, including the house, was bequeathed to the same Christopher Malcolm Hayes. The will didn't list a phone number or address for the man, either. Doug replaced the will, scribbled the name on a notebook, and then slipped the will and the note back into the envelope. He pried the key out from the pocket of tape that held it secure.

As soon as he opened the door, the smell drove him back down the steps. There were all kinds of horrible smells associated with police work, but Doug had been stuck dealing with stolen bicycles for so long now that he had repressed his memories of most of them.

He covered his mouth and nose with his suit jacket and hurried up the steps again, determined to slam the door shut. Before the door swung closed, though, two skinny calico cats bolted out the door, across the yard, and into the bushes. At least that explained part of the smell, he thought miserably. He watched them go, then locked the door again and took the key and the envelope back to his car. He had a name, at least, so he could return to the station and try and find a phone number to go with it. If he couldn't find anything, he'd have to come back, but he wasn't going back inside this house until he had a chance to steal one of the tins of menthol gel the jail used to help officers cope with all of the interesting smells they encountered when pat searching suspects.

It was already close to seven, and the sun was beginning to set behind the glacial mountains surrounding the small town. This suicide had taken up his entire day. It was Saturday, and it was supposed to be the last day of his weekend. He'd only been planning to hike today, anyway, but he had just put in a full ten hours of overtime. The man's next of kin had the right to know as soon as possible, but Doug didn't intend to let some child molester's suicide ruin his evening too. He would find him tomorrow. If he couldn't find this Christopher Malcolm Hayes, he would deal with the coroner's paperwork for the county to dispose of the remains on Monday.

Doug rubbed his hands over his face, exhausted. Every time he shut his eyes, he saw that bloated skin and that long blond hair again. He had a

feeling he was going to be seeing that image for quite some time after he shut his eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

LATE the next Friday, Christopher finally found himself sitting at his own desk, one of nearly thirty desks crowded into the district homicide office, staring at the closed glass door with Captain Jenkins's nameplate on it. It had taken five days for him to convince himself to talk to his supervisor about the dead feeling in his hand. During those five days, he had been tactlessly ignoring call after call from work. He had arrived well before the normal shift change, hoping to catch the man before he left for the day, but the shift briefing had already lasted twenty minutes longer than scheduled.

The extra time gave him a chance to catch up with the rest of his division, and to grab the stack of notes and messages covering every single inch of his desk. He had a feeling he had Ray to thank for the fact they were plastered over the entire desktop, rather than stacked in his inbox. Only Ray would devote time to turning his desk into a Post-it note jigsaw puzzle. Some of the notes were from the guys who had taken over his cases, some messages from informants that he would have to respond to personally, and eight notes just said to call right away. The same out-of-state number was on each of those eight notes, but he didn't recognize it.

"Hayes is back!" One of his fellow homicide detectives called from the hallway. "Are you back?"

"Not yet. Just checking in. I've got to teach Delgado a bit of creativity." He fanned out the notes and messages. "He could have at least tried for a mosaic or something. Or a few little origami animals. He managed paper cranes once, when Sanchez was out on maternity leave."

"I remember that one! It's good to see you up and moving around. We figured it'd be another six weeks before we saw your face again."

"Ha!" One of the detectives at a desk across from Christopher snickered.

“He figured it would be six weeks. I figured you’d jump out of the ambulance and run that bastard into the ground.”

The newcomer nodded. “Some people did put money on that,” he admitted. Christopher shrugged. “Delgado told you that the bullet was kryptonite, didn’t he? That crap leaves me weak as a kitten.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just hurry up and get back to work. Without you holding his leash, Delgado is bouncing off the fucking walls. Somehow he rigged the copier so it only prints pictures of his ass, no matter what you put in it.”

That made him smile. He would have to ask Ray how he’d managed that one. “You think I’m eager to get back to babysitting him?”

Christopher jumped off his desk as three lieutenants filed out of Captain Jenkins’s office. He took a deep breath and waited for them to pass, then headed in before he could lose his resolve. His stomach twisted as his supervisor stared at him. For the millionth time since he made detective, he wished he had been assigned to one of those movie-style captains who shouted and smacked the table to try to be intimidating. Captain Jenkins was one of those rare people who had mastered how to communicate and intimidate people with silence. From the little that showed on the man’s face, Christopher could tell something had him worried.

He came right out with it. He told him about how he was recovering from the surgery, about the dead feeling in half of his right hand. He admitted that he didn’t know if he would ever be able to hold a gun or restrain a suspect again.

As he spoke, Captain Jenkins pulled a handwritten list toward him and added an item to the bottom. “So,” he said slowly, “you feel like you’re going to be a liability when you come back?”

“I can’t hold my Beretta,” Christopher admitted. “I’ve dropped it each time I’ve tried.”

“You been to physical therapy? Gotten some tips for different grips? Tried working with your left hand at the range? You know, switching to a revolver might do the trick. More control with your left hand, if you don’t have to keep your thumb out of the way of the slide.”

“Ah, no, sir, I haven’t even been cleared to start physical therapy yet. I went back to the doctor and got the stitches out three days ago, but he said that he wants me to wait another week at least. I’m more than willing to try a revolver, though. I’ve had my Beretta for so long, I didn’t even think about switching. I might go pick one up today and take it out to the range.”

Jenkins nodded. "If you're up for it. Something to try before you decide to start applying for disability, anyway."

"I've got to try! As of Monday, I've used up four weeks of disability. I've only got two more before I've got to submit a medical clearance form to apply for permanent disability."

"You've got three more weeks, now."

"I do?"

"We can always have you come back on limited duty too, and there's no time limit for that. Plenty of time to give that shoulder a chance to rest. Keep me posted on how it comes along, and we'll just play it by ear when you get back. We'll reschedule your promotion interview when you get back to town too."

"Back to town? I'm going somewhere?"

"Sit down, Chris."

Chris. Not Hayes. Christopher bit the inside of his cheek and sat down in one of the chairs in front of the man's desk. Even after he sat down, Jenkins just stared at him. Christopher felt like he should be confessing to something, but he couldn't think of any pranks or jokes that the other man didn't already know about. Whatever was on Jenkins's mind, it was bad.

"I can't wait until we switch back to nights," Jenkins began. "Nights are simpler. Not stuck here plowing through administrative reports."

Christopher knew Jenkins wasn't the type to stall unless he was working up to something he really didn't want to say. "You wouldn't want me to try physical therapy if I was being fired," Christopher said aloud.

"Fired? No."

"Sued?"

"No, you're not being sued. When I came in this morning, I had a long voice mail from a sheriff in some hick town in Montana, believe it or not."

"That new housing development out in Mira Mesa?"

"No. The state, smartass. This guy's been calling for the past week trying to get a hold of you, and people have been taking messages, but near as I can tell, they all wound up in that black hole on your desk. Anyway, I called him back to tell him you were out of commission for a few weeks." The silence bloomed again as Jenkins paused and seemed to consider something. "You need to call him." He picked up the phone on his desk, glanced at the list in his other hand, and dialed a ten-digit phone number before passing the receiver to Christopher. "I'll give you a minute."

Christopher held the receiver to his ear and noticed the click of the door as it shut behind Jenkins. The phone was answered after the fourth ring. “Sheriff Brubaker,” a gruff voice wheezed.

“This is Detective Christopher Hayes, San Diego Homicide. I’m just returning a call—” He stopped when a muffled curse and a series of thumps sounded through the phone. “Hello?”

“Ah, sorry. I dropped the phone. Mr. Hayes?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Christopher Malcolm Hayes, younger brother of Peter Eugene Hayes?”

“What has he done this time?”

“The Christopher Malcolm Hayes who grew up down in LA?”

“San Diego.”

“Eh, close enough. Mr. Hayes, I’m afraid it’s my duty to inform you that we found the body of Peter Eugene Hayes late Tuesday morning in Lone Pine State Park. Our coroner hasn’t completed her report yet, but it appears that he took his own life. The only contact information, for anybody, that we found among his possessions was your name. Are you his closest family?”

“I’m his only family,” Christopher whispered.

“Well, I’m sorry someone couldn’t tell you in person. His body is being held in the coroner’s office. Do you have a funeral home down there that can help you with this?”

Christopher fell back into the chair, jarring his shoulder but not really noticing. “I’m sorry, you said he killed himself?”

“It appears so, yes.”

“Killed himself?” As his brain began to function again, Christopher quickly buried his emotions as deep as he could. The same rage that always consumed him when he thought about his big brother threatened to escape from the cage he had trapped it in years before, and that anger was somehow magnified now, and tinged with a pain he felt stupid for feeling at all. Peter wasn’t worth getting upset over. Hell, Peter wasn’t even worth mourning.

“Yes, sir. Do you have a mortuary service affiliated with your family’s church or anything like that?”

“Our family’s church?” Christopher barked out a laugh, desperately trying to bite back the anger. He shut his eyes against the flashes of memories assaulting him. He had outrun those memories a long time ago, and he wasn’t ready to let them catch up with him. He bit the inside of his cheek

and forced himself into work mode. “No,” he managed calmly. “I’ll have to contact someone to make arrangements for his disposition.” The phrase came out automatically. It was what he usually said himself when contacting a victim’s next of kin. Saying it now almost felt like cheating. “Elkin County, Montana?”

“No, sir. Town of Elkin, Baker County.”

“I should be there in a day or two.”

“You driving or flying?”

“Flying, probably.”

“Nearest big airports are in Missoula and Kalispell. Missoula’s got daily flights. It’s your best bet. We’re about four hours north. Stop in to the sheriff’s office when you get into town, and we’ll help get you sorted out.”

“I’ll be there by Monday morning. Thank you for letting me know.”

Christopher hung up the phone and wandered out of the office in a daze.

The people around him seemed to be moving in slow motion. He made it about four feet before his legs collapsed under him. Instead of hitting the floor, he found himself being carefully set in a chair. Jenkins’s grim expression faltered as he held Christopher upright in the chair. Everyone else was staring at them. Jenkins quietly met Christopher’s gaze, forcing his attention to focus on him.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Jenkins muttered quietly, “I should have told you myself. I’m a coward. Are you all right, Chris?”

When Christopher didn’t answer, his captain patted him on the back. “Do you want me to call Ray? I would have called the chaplain, but —”

Despite the way the world was spinning, Christopher still managed to glare at him.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured.” Jenkins nodded, not at all upset by his expression. “Hey, McClure, get him a glass of water.”

A foam cup from the water cooler showed up in his hands.

“I’ll put in the paperwork to get you three weeks of paid family leave, on top of the two weeks’ temporary disability you’ve got left before human resources needs that medical evaluation done—five weeks total. Do you think that’ll be enough time? It’ll give you more time to heal, at least.”

Christopher tried to focus on the question, but somehow he couldn’t come up with an answer. He was not all right. He wanted to punch something, or to run until he dropped, or both. He felt like a terrified twelve-year-old boy hiding beneath a dumpster and watching his seventeen-year-old brother, a

monster one moment and overcome by guilt the next, stalking along the alley searching for him.

“Find Delgado,” Jenkins said to someone behind him.

“He called in sick.”

“If he’s not hospitalized, get him in here,” Jenkins growled. “Send a couple traffic officers to his house if you have to.”

“No!” Christopher shook his head, forcing the memory of his brother’s long blond hair back into oblivion. “No, I’m okay. Just had a bit of a shock. I’ve got to go get a plane ticket.”

“You sure? I can send a car to get his lazy ass out of bed. He just called into get out of training, anyway.”

“That’s alright. I can drive, I just need a minute.”

Christopher just had to force himself not to think. He made it home, booked a plane ticket online, then found himself leaning into his fridge, debating between finishing the six-pack of beer on the bottom shelf or lacing up his running shoes again. The beer won, but only because he knew he needed to sleep while he could. But finishing off those three beers didn’t knock him out for long. He was wide-awake and fidgeting on the couch by three in the morning. By four, he was packed and ready to go, and then he unpacked his running clothes and shoes and raced out the door, determined to kill the last few hours before he had to leave for the airport.

After his run, he swung by Ray’s apartment to ask Ray to pick up his mail for him. As always, he was careful to avoid going anywhere near Ray’s bedroom, and he wasn’t too surprised when he heard someone shuffling around the bathroom and someone else shuffling around the bedroom at the same time. He couldn’t bring himself to shout out his usual warning when he barged through the front door, but he also didn’t go out of his way to avoid making noise in the kitchen. He got himself a glass of water and then began digging through drawers in Ray’s desk for a pen and notepaper.

He was damn lucky his brain was still effectively shut down from his run.

As he began to scribble a quick note, soft footfalls came to his attention and a body, a very male body, padded out of the bedroom in a pair of dark briefs and nothing else. “Oh, hell,” the young man said. Christopher’s face must have betrayed more shock than he intended. The nearly nude young man looked terrified and hurt. “He said he wasn’t seeing anybody!”

There was an almost naked man in Ray’s kitchen. *No*, Christopher corrected himself, *an almost naked boy*. He looked like a surfer, with gel-spiked

blond hair and exhausted haze eyes.

Christopher's totally straight partner had brought a boy home last night.

Christopher forced himself into his work smile. "Yeah, he lied. He's seeing every willing man and woman in San Diego. Not me, though. I'm Christopher. I work with him. I'm just leaving Ray a note, don't mind me."

The panic faded from the young man's expression. "I'm Ian. I guess I should put some clothes on."

Christopher shrugged and plopped the key to his apartment on top of the note. "Don't worry about it. I've got to run anyway. Tell him I'll see him in a few weeks when I get back to work?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Nice meeting you." Christopher even managed to wave before he headed out the door. He forced himself to walk, and specifically not to think, as he headed to the elevator.

Part of his brain registered the sound of a door opening and then closing behind him. He pushed the button again, then twice more.

"Hayes!" Ray called. "Hayes, wait! I can explain!"

Christopher pushed the button harder.

"Wait a second!" Ray grabbed him by the elbow and spun him around to face him. "Just wait, willyou!"

"What is it?" Christopher asked, forcing his voice to stay low.

"I know what you've got to be thinking, but this isn't anything serious, I swear!"

"I have never known you to be capable of serious, so I wasn't assuming. I've got to go. I'll see you, Delgado." Christopher pulled his elbow out of the other man's grip and started to step into the elevator.

"No! Damn it, Hayes, would you— Hey, stop!"

Christopher felt Ray's hands on his shoulders, spinning him around again and pinning him against the wall beside the elevator. Then his partner, the man he had spent four years stealing glances at, four years not allowing himself to fantasize about, was kissing him. Ray's lips were grinding against his, his tongue delving into his mouth with a demanding insistence. Ray's very frank arousal was grinding against him so hard that the force nearly lifted him off the ground. Christopher found his body responding, but the adrenaline transformed what would have been lust under different circumstances into rage. He found his fingers trailing over Delgado's bare chest, tracing muscles he had always wanted to feel, until he could get a

grip on the other man's shoulders. He shoved him away as hard as he could. It was all too much. Christopher's career was teetering on a knife edge. If his arm didn't recover, he would either have to look for a new job or risk getting other officers killed. The only family he had in the world was dead, and he didn't know if he should be celebrating that fact or be angry about it, but no matter what he was actually feeling, he had to go pretend to mourn the bastard who had made his childhood a living hell. And now, after watching his best friend bring home at least one new girl each week for the last four years, as a constant reminder of just how straight he was, the asshole had the nerve to think he could run out on his last one-night stand and start fucking around with him.

Christopher threw every ounce of his strength, and every shred of anger, into a punch to the gut, then a roundhouse punch to the jaw that sent Ray flying into the wall. He felt the tendon in his shoulder catch halfway through the roundhouse, and he nearly screamed as a lightning bolt of pain stabbed down the tendon into his right arm. He gritted his teeth and stepped into the elevator, ridiculously thankful it was empty, and hit the button for the lobby.

He had a plane to catch and now he would have to unpack his luggage to dig out a painkiller before he went to the airport.

AFTER two short flights and a layover longer than both flights combined, Christopher picked up a rental car and directions.

"Elkin?" The woman behind the counter at the rental agency said the name like it left a nasty taste in her mouth. "It's out past Hot Springs, up Highway 93. You don't want to make that drive tonight." She shook her head. "The road gets icy around the lake when it gets cold, and it's already below freezing up north."

"This late in the season?" asked Christopher, oblivious. "When you get high enough into the mountains, spring likes to take its time. Your best bet is to go up tomorrow afternoon. That would give traffic and the weather a chance to clear the roads."

After Christopher carefully tested out just how slick the roads were when he got out into the parking lot, he suspected that the woman's warning had more to do with his California driver's license than the weather. Still, it was nearly ten o'clock and the prospect of arriving in a small mountain town, which might not even have a hotel, at two in the morning wasn't appealing after the day he'd had. He programmed the rental car's GPS to take him to a

hotelfor the night.

He drove through the city of Missoula, surprised by just how lively the town's nightlife was. The downtown area was packed with pedestrians. The few cars on the road were an even mix of luxury-brand SUVs and police cars, allinching their way through town as partiers wove their way through the line of traffic. While stopped at a light, he arched an eyebrow at the sight of two young men making out outside of a dark bar. He watched as a few other couples, all male, walked into the bar holding hands.

Five blocks ahead, he found a hotel closer than whatever the GPS was leading him to, so he turned the machine off and pulled in to get a room. After he got checked in, he spent a whole two minutes sittingonthe end ofthe bed and staringat the black televisionset across fromhim.

He sat back against the headboard and tried to relax, but as soon as his body stopped moving, his mind starting running in circles. He'd avoided thinking about his partner all day, but now the memory of those lips and that tongue came back and threatened to suffocate him. He kicked his shoes onto the floor and shut his eyes, only to see Ray again. Not Ray sitting at a bar and laughing with him, or shooting rubber bands across his desk. He saw Ray naked, hard, dripping and breathless from wanting to fuck him. He tried to imagine old lovers, old one-night stands, but his brain kept inserting Ray's face, Ray's body, into his memories. Just as it had when Ray kissed him that morning, his cock got hard instantly.

He adjusted his cock through his pants, thought about jacking off, and then stood up and slipped his shoes back on. He was not going to jack off while thinking about his partner. Even if his partner was willing to cross that line, Christopher wasn't.

He crushed his eyes shut and took a few deep breaths, getting his body under control. He let the anger that had been boiling inside of him escape just a little. Just enough to make him remember that Ray was an asshole. The man was hot, Christopher wouldn't deny that, but he also slept with every girl, and apparently*everyone*, who caught his attention. There was no way Christopher was going to blow his job and their friendship just because Ray's attention had somehow shifted in his direction. He couldn't deal with all of the emotional bullshit that would come up when Ray brought home someone new within a week. And someone else a week after that.

It had been too long since Christopher had gotten laid. That was the only reason he could come up with for feeling so angry over Ray kissing him. If

it hadn't been so long, he wouldn't have gone from exhausted to ready to fuck Ray in the hallway because of one stupid kiss. He would have just laughed it off and walked away.

Somewhere in the back of his head, Christopher knew he really should be more upset about his brother's death than about his partner deciding to hit on him. Once the initial shock had been muted by beer and beaten into submission with a nice long run, Christopher had decided the best thing to do was to deal with the funeral as quickly as possible and then forget Peter had ever existed at all. But his partner wasn't some stranger he hadn't seen in two decades.

He grabbed his wallet and headed out the door. The bar was only a few blocks away. Unfortunately, it was also filled with kids so young even Ray would have thought twice about trying to pick them up.

Christopher ordered a beer and drained it in a few gulps. He ordered a second beer, scanned the college guys lingering around the bar and dance floor, then frowned. They ranged from skateboarders to lanky young men who looked like they hadn't quite hit puberty yet. He was beginning to think he'd have been better off with pay-per-view porn in his hotel room.

Near the back of the bar, he caught sight of a white shirt collar and a muted gray suit jacket. Christopher wove his way through the crowd until he was just a few feet from the man, and then he stopped, stunned. The man's black hair was so dark it should have been drab, but even in the darkness his hair gleamed. No, it sparkled. Christopher wanted to touch it, just to see if the effect was from hair gel. Even though the stranger was relaxing against the bar, Christopher could make out the contours of his muscles beneath his suit jacket. To have that much muscle definition, even through heavy layers of fabric, the man had to have an incredible body.

Christopher was about to tap the man on the shoulder when he noticed a few creases in the man's jacket that were too straight and too rigid to be muscle. The man was wearing a shoulder harness. Either that or he had worn one all day and hadn't bothered to put on fresh clothes before going out.

There had to be other gay cops, Christopher knew. He had never run into any, but he still believed there were others out there somewhere. It was more likely that the bar had hired an off-duty police officer for extra security. Still, there was no harm in asking. If the man was working security,

Christopher would never see him again, so the idea of embarrassing himself wasn't quite as terrifying as usual.

CHAPTER FOUR

Doug sipped at his beer and watched the college boys crowding around the bar, wondering why the hell he had even bothered to show up. He sat near the end of the bar, in the only quiet corner to be found, and swirled the two inches of dark beer that remained in the bottom of the bottle. All around him, young university students were trying to drown their inhibitions in liquor. They were most likely trying to burn away the shame and embarrassment that would have kept them from ever going near this particular bar when they were sober. Not to mention creating an ego-saving alibi in case any of their straight friends should spot them trying to hook up with another guy. Everyone did stupid shit when they were drunk, they could argue. And if pressed, most of them would insist that they weren't gay, not even bi, just curious. Curious enough to try and hammer out their sexuality through a haze of chemical-induced trial-and-error experiments with every guy who was willing to slip into the bathroom with them, but still just curious.

When Doug was nineteen, he had snuck into Giovanni's with a fake ID, dressed in the tightest clothes he owned, with the same curiosity and lust-fueled excitement. Throughout his college years, no matter how many girls he managed to hook up with, he kept coming back. When he moved away after college, he discovered life in Miami allowed him to be a bit more open about his sexual preferences. He'd have been perfectly happy to stay there, but life never quite worked out the way Doug wanted.

No matter how far he got from home, or how easily he could pass for Cuban in Miami, the Salish values forced into him by the reservation schools had surfaced the moment he got word his mom was sick. He had to come back. He had to be there to take care of her. The duty was so

ingrained that he hadn't thought twice about putting in his resignation, just four years after joining the Miami-Dade County Sheriff's Office. After everything he'd done to try and build a life away from the reservation, a life where he could actually be himself, he had ended up stuck at home anyway. Once every couple of months, he gave in and made the four-hour drive to sit in Giovanni's, desperate to feel like himself again, even if it was just for a single night. Every time, he sat at the bar, feeling old and out of place, wondering if he should bother flirting with the kids around him or arrest them for underage drinking instead.

Doug tossed a crumpled wad of bills on the bar and stood to leave. He was a bit surprised when he felt fingers between his shoulder blades. Doug bit down the panic that made him want to drop for cover or throw whoever was touching him headfirst into the bar. A tap on the shoulder wasn't that unusual, and he had gotten used to the required cheesy pickup line that came with it, but the hand at his back was gently, but very insistently, shoving him back toward the bar. Doug mentally cursed the forethought that had led him to lock his pistol in his truck. Then he cursed the panicked impulse to reach for his sidearm whenever anyone touched him. The way that tic stuck with him was the reason the pistol had to stay in the truck.

The fingers shifted over his shoulder and down his right arm. Doug's breath caught when he felt a warm and surprisingly solid body press up against his back. "Hey, slow down... it's okay.... I was just going to make a joke about how I'd be the only old guy here, if you left."

Doug lowered his right arm as the fingers that had been on his back worked their way down to his fingers. He stepped to the side, back toward the barstool, and turned to look over his shoulder. His first thought, as he took in the man's military-short blond hair, rugged features, and the amazing way the man's clothes clung to his body, was that there was no way a walking menswear advertisement should have realized he was trying to reach for a weapon. He pushed that thought aside, for consideration later, since the man behind him seemed to be the only one in the bar over the age of twenty-one.

The man cocked his head to the side and smiled down at Doug. "Unless you'd prefer younger company?" He forced himself to smile. "The twelve-year-old-boy look isn't your thing?" Doug asked, before he could stop himself. When the stranger cracked a smile that made Doug shiver, he sat back down.

“Definitely not my thing,” the man agreed. “Look, before I make a complete ass of myself....” He ran his left hand over his head, as if expecting there to be hair to run his fingers through. “Are you here working?”

Doug slipped off the stool and stepped back until he hit the bar. People aren’t supposed to just come out and ask something like that. Even professional prostitutes had enough discretion to master innuendo. He glared up at the larger man furiously. “What the fuck kind of question is that?”

“You’re not a bouncer?” The man shut his eyes and let out an anxious sigh. His entire body seemed to deflate slightly as he relaxed. “That’s a relief. I can’t think of anything more pathetic than trying to pick up the only straight guy in the bar. Can I—”

“Bouncer?”

“Yeah. Your suit.” The man touched Doug’s back again. “It’s creased from your harness.”

Doug had left his harness with his gun. No one could spot something like that from across a dark, crowded bar. He turned to look over his shoulder, trying to see if it was that obvious. “I guess it is. Sorry, I thought you meant something else.”

The man met Doug’s gaze again, and then understanding seemed to bloom across his face. “Oh, you thought I meant... oh, hell no. Not that I wouldn’t... if you were... I mean, you’re really....” The stranger’s blue eyes widened. He shut his mouth, then pressed his lips together, as though he was trying not to laugh. “I’ll just go.”

Doug found himself laughing aloud and feeling sorry for the stranger at the same time. Part of him suspected that stranger’s adorably befuddled act was a fake. It was still kind of funny, even if it was just a con. It meant the man was interested enough to pretend to be tongue-tied. *I’d pay to sleep with you if you were a prostitute* wasn’t a typical pickup line in this bar, at least.

“Are you for real?” he asked, chuckling more than he meant to.

“Yeah, ’fraid so. I’ll just go.”

Doug looped his right hand through the stranger’s elbow and stopped him from turning away. “I can’t buy you breakfast if you *just go*.”

The stranger lowered his gaze and relaxed his smile, and just for a moment, Doug felt the same shock of excitement he’d had when he had frequented this bar in college.

“Isn’t it traditional to start with a drink?”

Doug shrugged and motioned to the empty bar stool next to him. “Both?”

“I’m Christopher,” the man said, carefully extending his hand.

“Doug.” He shook the stranger’s hand, trying his best to look nonchalant about it, trying to hide the fact he was grateful the man had moved slowly and kept his hands in the open.

Doug wasn’t paranoid; he really wasn’t. He had argued with three shrinks about it. Paranoia was a mental illness where you had delusions that everyone was out to get you. One thing he had learned early on in his career was that for police officers, it wasn’t a delusion. Everyone really was out to get you. A horrible, abusive relationship, along with a year of undercover assignments in Miami posing as a strung-out surfer desperate for another fix, had left him jumpier than he liked to admit.

Christopher ordered a Bud Light and glanced meaningfully at the empty bottle in front of Doug.

“Moose Drool, please,” he said to the bartender. The bartender popped open a bottle of dark beer and set it in front of him. He took a sip and tried to ignore the other man’s raised eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing.” Christopher took a sip of his beer, smiling into his glass. “Is that a local thing?”

“Moose Drool? You are definitely not from around here. It is a local thing. Do you want to taste it?”

“Sure.”

Doug almost laughed at the other man’s innocent reply. When he reached for the bottle, Doug pulled it back and leaned forward to press his lips against Christopher’s. He was a bit disappointed when Christopher kissed him back ever so gently and then pulled away. “I guess that was kind of cheesy,” Doug admitted.

“Incredibly cheesy.” Christopher raised the bottle of dark beer to his lips and took a small sip.

Doug turned and stared at his hand. His fingers were wrapped around Christopher’s glass. “How did you—”

“That’s pretty good,” Christopher declared, handing the bottle back. “Too rich for me, though. Creamier than I figured. A lot more body than light beer, anyway.”

Doug took the bottle back and held it tighter. He studied the other man’s features, less worried now about openly gawking at him. His own

confidence swelled as he saw the blushing Christopher's cheeks.

When Christopher took a drink of his own beer, Doug smirked. "Well, you know what Monty Python said about the average American beer, right?" Doug asked.

"Hm?"

"It's a bit like making love in a canoe. It's fucking close to water."

The smile contorted as Christopher struggled not to spit out the small sip of beer he'd taken. When he finally swallowed, the grin erupted into full-blown laughter. They talked and cracked jokes while they finished their beers, then Doug hesitantly ran his fingers along Christopher's jaw. The way the blond shut his eyes at such a simple touch made Doug's stomach flip. "Do you want to get out of here?" he whispered.

Christopher nodded. "I've got a hotel room a few blocks away, if you'd like to go there?"

"Sounds perfect." Doug paid for their beers and stayed close to him as they headed for the door. "But, ah, there's something you should know."

"What's that?"

"This might not be a very conservative neighborhood, but it's still a conservative town," Doug said grimly.

"How conservative?"

"Conservative."

"'Keep my hands to myself' kind of conservative? Or 'be prepared to kick someone's ass to get back to the hotel alive' kind of conservative?"

Doug's first instinct was to laugh at the other man's posturing, but something in his tone and stance made his comment seem less like arrogance and more like an easy confidence. "Definitely a 'hands to yourself' kind of conservative."

"No groping in public. Got it." Christopher winked at him and led the way out of the bar. Doug followed him down the busy street to one of the larger, nicer hotels in the city, discreetly watching the way the man walked. His breath caught in his throat as he caught the way Christopher's slacks clung to his ass. Just the thought of squeezing that ass, of fucking that ass, had Doug so hard he had to shove his hands in his pockets and shift his cock up under his waistband to avoid pitching a tent in his pants. He followed Christopher into the elevator and stood beside him quietly as an elderly couple rode the elevator up to the third floor. On the fifth floor, Christopher set his hand at the base of Doug's back and guided him out of the elevator and to a

room halfway down the hall.

Doug managed to wait until the door shut behind them before he grabbed Christopher by the shirt and pulled him into a fast, hungry kiss. He felt his cock surge to full attention as Christopher returned his kiss, opening his mouth to allow Doug to explore him.

Panting, Doug broke the kiss and tried to pull Christopher's shirt off over his head. Christopher set his hands on Doug's, stopping him quickly. Doug stepped back and watched him pull the hem up and over his head, then slipped the shirt off of his right arm carefully.

"Bad shoulder," Christopher whispered, tossing the shirt aside.

When Christopher smiled and motioned for Doug to follow him toward the bed, all Doug could do was stand there and stare like an idiot. The sight of this man topless was one Doug wished he could burn into his memory forever. The sharp angles of the man's shoulders, the steep hills and valleys of muscle on his arms, continued down his chest in an erotic pattern that drew Doug's gaze to every inch of skin and made his hands twitch to touch him. Doug cocked his head to the side as he saw the red stretch of skin over Christopher's shoulder. Fresh scar tissue from a puncture wound, Doug realized, and one that had been large enough that it should have been fatal.

"How didn't that kill you?" he asked.

Christopher didn't even look up at the question. "It nearly did. A dozen cops and EMTs were about thirty seconds behind me. Still hurts, but I can live with it."

Doug moved across the hotel room and watched the other man toe his shoes off, his stomach tightened in slight panic. He had switched roles readily enough when he was younger, but after his last relationship, he didn't handle being pinned down well. He wasn't good at feeling helpless, much less helpless, pinned down, and ripped open by someone a good three inches taller and probably twenty to thirty pounds heavier than him.

Christopher sat down on the bed and pulled his socks off. He caught the expression that must have been on Doug's face, though, and he stood up slowly. "Second thoughts?" Christopher asked, holding up his open hands in an appeasing gesture. "It really is all right. I can move and everything."

"Am I that easy to read?" Doug whispered, striding forward with a confidence he didn't entirely feel.

The other man's smile faded. "Oh."

Then Christopher's blue eyes lit up and his face was set aglow by one of the

most charming smiles Doug had ever seen. A smile that was just as much of a mask as his own, Doug realized. In the brief moment before Christopher pulled out that fake smile, Doug realized just how beautiful Christopher was, and how much pain he was hiding. The way his face softened without that mask made him look handsome and adorable at the same time, but it also showed Doug a glimpse of a deep misery and emptiness inside of him. For that one honest moment, Doug thought he might be seeing something beyond simple disappointment in the man's eyes, something beyond pain.

Suddenly Doug wanted nothing more than to break through that mask. If letting this man fuck him could pull a real smile out of him, or even just break through the pain inside him for a moment, Doug was willing to risk the panic attack.

"No," said Doug. "I am not having second thoughts. I'm just not sure how we're going to do this. Neither of us is boy-toy skinny, so...." Doug slipped his suit jacket off and tossed it on to the other bed. He unbuttoned his shirt and set it on the jacket, then pulled his T-shirt off, trying to keep his gaze locked on Christopher's the whole time.

"Is that all?" Christopher relaxed and actually blushed. He stood and pressed himself against Doug in two short strides. Doug hissed at the feel of the other man's muscled chest, his warm skin, against his own. Christopher kissed Doug softly, almost timidly, then wrapped his fingers around the back of Doug's neck and pulled him into a deeper kiss. "For you," Christopher whispered, glancing down between them, "I'm up for just about anything." He kissed Doug again. "I should warn you that it's been a long time for me," he whispered when he pulled away. "And you are so fucking hot...." Another kiss. "I don't think I'd last very long if I were to fuck you...."

Christopher dropped his head to Doug's neck, and Doug felt teeth and a hot, wet tongue work their way along his collarbone. Doug groaned and ground his hips against Christopher while he licked and sucked and explored every inch of Christopher's skin that he could reach. His hands found their way to the other man's waist, but he kept moving, touching, massaging—trying to memorize every inch of all that muscle. He ran his hands over Christopher's chest, carefully avoiding his shoulder, and down to the button of his slacks. He unbuttoned the other man's pants and shoved them to the floor. He took Christopher's head in both hands and drew him close so he could kiss him again. He moved his hands back down to Christopher's hips, pivoted

them slightly, and then pushed him back onto the bed.

Christopher, Doug noticed, had managed to unbutton Doug's own pants already. How the hell had Doug not noticed him doing that? Not that he cared.

Doug moaned into the kiss as he felt long, calloused fingers reach inside his briefs to stroke his cock. He broke the kiss and pushed Christopher back onto the bed, then slipped out of the rest of his clothes and crawled over him. When the other man spread his legs wide and let Doug settle between them, all of Doug's hesitation evaporated.

Christopher took Doug's cock in hand again, shifted so their bodies were aligned, then began to stroke them both together. Those adept fingers and the heat of Christopher's body pressing tight against his drove Doug into a frenzy where nothing mattered except touching more of that hot tanned skin. Beneath him, Christopher writhed and arched into every inch of contact between them. Christopher rubbed every part of himself against Doug, grinding their erections together while he stroked them roughly. Doug savored the friction of the other man's skin scraping his nipples, hissed at the contrast of velvety skin and coarse hair where his cock slid against Christopher's own.

Doug kissed his jaw, then down his neck and chest. He shifted lower and saw Christopher open his eyes and stare at him, blue eyes glazed with lust. Doug held his gaze and wrapped his tongue around the head of Christopher's cock in a motion that made Christopher's entire body seem to twitch. Doug took Christopher's entire length into his mouth and watched his delicious reactions. Just as he felt the head of Christopher's cock graze the back of his throat, Doug reached a single finger back toward the man's entrance. He pushed his way inside and then licked the full length of Christopher's cock again.

Christopher was so tight that Doug could hardly even move his finger inside him. He sucked the tip of Christopher's cock and then let it go with a loud pop. "You're too tight," he said, breathless.

"It's been a while," Christopher muttered. "Lube. Condom. Pants pocket."

Doug rolled off the bed and found Christopher's pants. He rifled through the pockets quickly, finding a small tube of lube but no condom. He pulled everything out of the man's back pocket and then saw a blue foil square sticking out of the wallet. He was just going to grab the condom, but the brief glimpse he got of the man's ID made him hesitate.

“Where’s the condom?” he asked, knowing he was taking too long. He scanned the ID fast, taking in the police department logo, the California state seal, the outline of the badge that was the backdrop of the ID itself.

Another cop. An out-of-state cop, but another cop. It didn’t matter, though. Sunday morning, he’d be back in Elkin and back at work. Even if this guy was relocating and not just passing through, the odds of ever seeing him again were slim at best. It was fine to let this happen, fine to want it so desperately. And he did want it. His entire body felt like it was on fire at the idea of burying himself inside this man.

“Back right pocket. It’s in there somewhere.”

When he heard the bed springs shift, Doug snapped the wallet closed and held up the condom. “Got it.” He shoved the wallet back into the man’s pants and crawled back onto the bed.

He climbed over Christopher again, running his hands up the man’s thighs as he moved. He nuzzled the tuft of blond hair where his thigh met his groin and nearly laughed as Christopher jumped and giggled. Doug ran his tongue over Christopher’s sac and up his shaft again before taking it back into his mouth.

Doug squeezed a bit of the cold lube onto his hands, coating his fingers, and then he slipped a finger inside of Christopher quickly, then added another. When he eased in a third finger, Christopher whined and bucked up into Doug’s mouth. He felt Christopher’s hands on his shoulders, trying to push him away. Doug smiled around Christopher’s cock and sucked it down as far as he could without gagging. Doug felt Christopher tense and then swallowed around the head of his cock as Christopher came down his throat. He swallowed again, milking every drop he could out of him. After another twirl of his tongue, Doug eased himself off Christopher.

“Better?” Doug asked, twisting his fingers inside Christopher.

Even as Christopher’s cock softened slightly, he rocked his hips to try to get Doug’s fingers deeper. “Stop teasing me and it will be!”

“Teasing? Not yet,” said Doug, licking Christopher’s cock again before moving back up to his chest and neck. He wiggled all three fingers inside Christopher, stretching his body and pressing up hard.

Christopher froze in an instant; his eyes went wide and his cock swelled again. “Fuck! Right there!” A wave of tremors rippled through the taller man’s body as Doug stroked inside him. “Fuck yes!”

“Perfect,” Doug gasped. He watched in awe as Christopher threw his head

back and arched his entire body into the contact. Doug stroked him again. Watching the tremors vibrate through Christopher's body was nearly enough to make Doug come by itself. He felt his groin tighten and had to close his eyes, take a few ragged breaths to calm down. He reached for the small tube again, applied the slick liquid to his own cock, and shifted between Christopher's legs. He ripped the condom open with his teeth, slicked the lube over the condom, too, and finally slipped his fingers out of Christopher.

Christopher rocked his hips up and lifted his legs invitingly. Doug dove into the other man in a single hard thrust that nearly knocked the wind out of Christopher. He couldn't wait for Christopher to relax and accept his size; he was too far past the point of control. With a feral heat that drowned out every logical thought, he rolled Christopher's hips up higher and placed both of his hands on the backs of Christopher's knees for leverage, then gave a quick, sharp thrust. Christopher moaned and tried to pull Doug's cock deeper into him. Doug pushed Christopher's knees so far back they were touching the bed beside his hips, then began to thrust into him fast and hard, driving into the spot that made Christopher tremble over and over again.

Doug marveled at the tense, overwhelming lust he saw on Christopher's face. Beneath him, Christopher fisted both of his hands in the sheets as his body was wracked with tremors of pain and pleasure. Doug growled low, thrilled when he managed to coax Christopher back to a full erection with a few thrusts. He kept up the same frantic pace, but he focused everything he had on trying not to finish. He wanted to make Christopher come all over his chest—he wanted to see it. He wanted to feel those tremors around his cock as Christopher came with him inside him. He released Christopher's legs and licked his clean palm, then began to stroke Christopher in time with his thrusts, making Christopher groan and try to thrust into his hand. Doug tightened his fingers and stroked faster, until every thrust and stroke made the man beneath him scream. It was less than a minute before Christopher's body tensed again, but this time Doug shifted his hand to the base of Christopher's cock and squeezed, stopping Christopher's orgasm. He thrust harder and faster, pushing himself to completion, and then slid his fingers gently up to the tip of Christopher's cock. He squeezed the sensitive tip and buried himself deep inside Christopher before the building tension finally broke and the pleasure washed over him.

“Fuck!” Christopher pulled at the sheets, closing his fists so tight his knuckles were white.

Doug shut his eyes and let out a silent cry as Christopher’s passage tightened around him, dragging his orgasm out until he couldn’t think straight. When the world came back into focus, Doug slipped out of the other man’s body and collapsed beside him. He slipped the condom off and flung it into the trash, then stared down at the panting man on the bed beneath him. When he saw that the fake smile on the other man’s face was gone, replaced instead with a satisfied grin, Doug pulled him close. Christopher tried to shift a bit away from Doug, though he didn’t try that hard. When Doug tightened his grip, Christopher grunted and settled his head against Doug’s chest.

“Damn.” Doug rubbed Christopher’s shoulder. He traced a small circle of slippery red flesh, lined with tiny, almost indistinguishable bumps. He didn’t miss the way the other man flinched as he traced the fresh scar with his fingers. “I’m sorry,” Doug whispered against Christopher’s blond hair. “I normally don’t get that carried away. Are you all right?”

“Are you kidding? That was fun.” Christopher laughed. Doug watched Christopher’s eyes droop and the lazy, but thankfully real, smile that spread across his face made Doug want to hold him tighter. “You can get carried away with me anytime.”

“Any time, huh? I need a minute to rest, but then I’m going to take you up on that,” Doug whispered.

CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER cleaning up, Doug drifted off to sleep spooned against Christopher. He figured he’d sleep fine, he usually did after sex, but soon his dreams turned on him. When Doug dreamed of sex, he dreamed of a faceless, nameless body—a perfect ass he could pound into as hard as he wanted, and arms strong enough to hold him down and fuck him in return, even if he

panicked. The dreams always shifted into a nightmare of his ex holding him down with a gun against the back of his head while he fucked him hard.

This time the dream changed, but it didn't turn into his usual nightmares. Doug dreamed of turning Christopher over and fucking him from behind, seeing those blue eyes turned back over Christopher's shoulder, smiling at him. Then those blue eyes morphed and turned into lifeless, pale purple eyes. Christopher's smiling face became bloated, purplish, and dead. It was the corpse from the cliff he was fucking, long blond hair streaming out as if caught by the wind, and those dead eyes piercing his soul like daggers.

When he felt hands on his shoulders, holding him down, he woke up frantic and lashed out in the darkness. He couldn't move. He flailed against the hold, trying to free his legs, to shift his hips so he could buck off whoever had him pinned, but he was trapped. He blinked until his eyes adjusted to the dim light coming from the hotel bathroom, then he looked up to see a very serious-looking blond pinning him down with ease. "You okay?" Christopher asked, not moving from the perfectly balanced hold.

"Fuck, I'm sorry." Doug tried to shift his arms out of the other man's grip, but failed again.

"We've all got issues, man," said Christopher. "I'm just glad you didn't slip your gun under the pillow or something." Christopher shifted so his hips and Doug's were aligned, then tilted his head and smiled at Doug, considering his expression. "You normally do that, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"And you normally don't do this?"

"I try not to," he admitted. "I usually come down here two, maybe three times a year. Otherwise I see women occasionally, but that's mostly to keep the guys at work from trying to set me up with their sisters or in-laws."

On top of him, Christopher shifted and offered him a sympathetic smile. Doug felt Christopher's cock grow hard against his, and in spite of himself, his body arched up for more contact. Christopher ground his hips down. "I wouldn't have thought working in Montana would be that bad."

"I wish." Doug bucked instinctively, even though he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to throw Christopher off him. "Four years with the Miami Dade Sheriff's Office were that bad. Up here, I'm just bored stupid."

Christopher whistled slowly. "Miami, huh? Ouch. I read that it has one of the highest fatality rates of any law-enforcement agency in the country.

Second to Detroit.” Doug felt the grip on his wrists loosen and shift, until both of his wrists were held in a vise-like grip above his head. He felt Christopher run slender, calloused fingers down his body, over his hip, and finally up again along the inside of his thigh, until there was no more room. Christopher lifted his hips just enough to reach between them, then those damn fingers continued their trek up and over Doug’s balls and to the tip of his cock. “Bored stiff is the saying, isn’t it? Because you are.” Christopher caressed his dick gently, tickling every centimeter of tender flesh, until Christopher cupped Doug’s sac again.

Then he moved a single fingertip lower and circled Doug’s entrance.

Doug’s entire body tightened as he shut his eyes and threw his head back. He crushed his eyes shut, trying to force down the panic building in him. Part of him wanted to move. He wanted to escape from the control of this man, and he twisted his body, trying to get away.

“Shh,” Christopher whispered. “Whatever it is, it’s in the past. You’re safe.” Doug shook his head frantically. “I’m sorry, I don’t.... That’s what I was trying to say before. I panic, sometimes....”

“That’s fine, you don’t have to,” said Christopher in a soothing voice. Something in the way his tone grew deep and calming went straight to Doug’s groin. Christopher withdrew his fingers and Doug tried to look away, too embarrassed to face the man hovering above him. This man, who looked so incredible when Doug was fucking him, who looked so perfect when he really smiled, wasn’t who he was afraid of. Christopher wasn’t the lover who had so brutally betrayed Doug’s trust that it took him a year before the thought of touching someone didn’t make him feel like throwing up. He wasn’t one of the strung-out meth dealers Doug had ended up bottoming for as part of his undercover work in Miami, when he had needed to medicate himself with drugs and alcohol just to get through it. He opened his eyes and stared at the man holding him down. Doug wanted this. He wanted it so bad it hurt.

“I wasn’t saying no, just warning you. I want you to fuck me,” Doug whispered, locking his gaze on Christopher.

“Are you sure?” Christopher asked, his voice level.

“Unless you’d like to ride me instead, ’cause I’d be up for that.”

Christopher ground their erections together hard and groaned. He shifted his weight off Doug’s hips and chest, squirming to settle between Doug’s legs, then kissed him again, crushing their lips together and reaching his tongue

deep into Doug's mouth, distracting him while he slipped a single finger inside him.

Doug's eyes opened wide as both lust and panic threatened to consume him. Christopher kissed his jaw, his chin, and his neck, tasting every bit of skin he could reach without releasing Doug's arms. Doug felt his panic ebb as he drank in the delicious sensations. Christopher pulled away and smiled down at him, everything about him reassuring and intoxicating at the same time. He was calm, completely controlled, and absolutely stunning. When Doug finally managed to get himself under control, Christopher shifted his head down and kissed Doug fiercely. Doug burned as he felt himself being stretched by talented fingers.

Doug tried not to cringe, but it was hard not to. Christopher was so eager, stretching him so quickly, that it hurt more than he remembered. Doug tried to ride out the pain, but he couldn't force himself to relax enough to stop fighting Christopher's hold, much less allow the other man to penetrate him easily. "Lube," he gasped.

Christopher pulled his fingers out of Doug and groped for the lube in the darkness. He had to use his teeth to untwist the cap, and then he set the small tube between his teeth and squeezed some onto his fingers. A moment later, the burning returned as Christopher shoved three fingers inside him. When he scraped Doug's prostate this time, the explosion of pleasure smothered the burning. Doug cried out as the first wave of pleasure ripped through him. He pushed back against those fingers, finally shifting his hips enough to free his right leg from Christopher's pin.

Christopher moved in a flash. The fingers inside him vanished. Before Doug could move his leg out to try and flip Christopher, Christopher looped his arm beneath Doug's knee and lifted his leg up, flipping him onto his stomach. Doug felt a steady hand settle on his shoulder and another lift his hips slightly, bracing him. Doug felt the other man's tip against his skin, then felt it slip inside.

"Fuck!" Doug cried out, twisting his entire body as the other man rocked into him.

"Anything you want," said Christopher. But he didn't move. Doug wanted to scream and tried to thrust back, to feel more of Christopher filling him, but Christopher held him tight. Christopher leaned forward and nipped at the back of Doug's neck, then lapped at the skin gently.

"Now, damnit!" Doug yelled. "Fuck me!"

Christopher inched Doug's hip up higher and rocked into him carefully, almost teasing him. Then he moved Doug's hip again and repeated the shallow, careful rock.

"Please!" Doug whined, trying to push back with all of his strength. The moment he did, he felt Christopher's cock brush against his prostate and he lurched forward, whimpering. Christopher kissed his shoulder gently, then sat back on his knees, took hold of Doug's hips with both hands and hammered into him so hard Doug screamed. Another hard thrust followed, slamming into his prostate and pushing him forward before Doug had a chance to catch his breath. The pace Christopher set was so frantic, all Doug could do was hold on. The panic and fear that had so often stopped him from doing this were gone. There was no time to panic. There was only sensation, pleasure and pain both, melded together until every nerve in his body was on fire. With Christopher pulling his hips back with each thrust, he had no choice but to let that fire consume him.

Christopher held out longer than Doug had. He fucked Doug until they were both out of breath, each movement making his hips and balls slap against Doug's ass. In the darkness, Christopher's panting and the slapping of skin against skin formed a rhythmic background music punctuated by each cry and scream he pulled from Doug's body. With one half-muted scream, Christopher curled around Doug's back and exploded inside him. Doug took a ragged breath as he felt the last tremors of Christopher's cock. Despite his trepidation, Doug tried to clamp down on Christopher, to hold him inside his body, just as they were. Christopher kissed his shoulder with a tenderness that seemed alien after the way he's just fucked him. If Doug hadn't been so damn close, he might have enjoyed the soft caress of his lips more. But he needed to come. He reached down to take himself in hand and felt Christopher close his fingers over his.

Christopher rolled him over and reached for his cock with a sweatsoaked hand. Doug watched Christopher's face, tried to memorize that well-fucked look that made his toes curl, and let Christopher stroke him off. It took three whole strokes before Doug came with an exhausted cry. Christopher closed his fingers around the tip of his cock and massaged the sensitive glans with Doug's own come. It wasn't until Doug's cries turned to plaintive whimpers that Christopher finally stopped the slow, tender torture.

Christopher dropped his head onto Doug's shoulder and closed his eyes with a whimsical laugh. "You okay?" he asked without opening his eyes.

“I’m good,” Doug sighed. “Fucking hell, I’m good. I’m not sure I’m going to be able to take advantage of you again tonight, though.”

Christopher chuckled beside him and kissed his neck, then sat up and grabbed the blanket from the foot of the bed. He draped it over both of them, squirmed until he was nestled in Doug’s arm, and closed his eyes again. “I said anytime, didn’t I? After breakfast counts as anytime,” he muttered.

“Does next weekend count as anytime?” Doug asked. He ran his fingers through Christopher’s hair, hoping the question wouldn’t frighten the other man away.

“Probably not,” Christopher muttered.

Doug felt his stomach twist at those words. It was the only way these things could work, and it was what Doug had been expecting, but he was still disappointed.

“I’m actually just in the state to take care of some personal business. I have a feeling it’s going to take a while even to hire someone else to deal with it for me. I doubt I can get back next weekend. But it’ll be impossible to get anything done on that front until Monday morning, if you want to hang out for the rest of this weekend? Or maybe the weekend after?”

Doug stared at the man in his arms. Nothing much happened on Sundays in Elkin, he knew, but if he called in sick, he’d get no end of shit from the rest of the sheriff’s department, especially after the pathetic week he’d had. It would be weeks before he managed to live down not being able to get in contact with Peter Hayes’s next of kin when it took the sheriff a whole two minutes to find his phone number. “I would like to,” Doug whispered, “but I’ve got to work Sunday morning, and it’s half a day’s drive. I can stay for most of tomorrow, though. If you want me to.”

“Yeah.” Christopher smirked. “I want you.”

“To stay, I mean?”

“That too. Ah, I need to take a pill.”

Christopher squirmed out of bed, retrieved a prescription pill bottle from his bag, and pulled out two small white pills. He swallowed them dry, buried the bottle back in his luggage, and rolled his right shoulder, wincing at the motion.

“You okay?” Doug asked.

“I’m fine.” Christopher grimaced. “Maybe not fine,” he amended. “But that was worth it.” He crawled back into bed, obviously favoring his right arm, and nestled against Doug’s chest.

“What happened to your shoulder?” Doug asked.

The other man didn't answer, and soon Doug heard his breathing slow down to the steady, soothing breaths that indicated he was asleep. In bed, the three- to four-inch height advantage Christopher had over Doug wasn't as noticeable. He looked younger than Doug had originally thought, and too damn adorable for his own good. He couldn't make sense of the man. He had the strength to hold Doug down as he panicked, even with what looked like a fresh surgery scar on his shoulder, and he had the strength to fuck him into the blind oblivion where memories and paranoia couldn't touch him, but he'd also managed to stay understanding and willing to back off at the same time. In his sleep, he looked calm and adorable, like a little boy.

Doug decided he liked looking at Christopher in his sleep. There was no sign of that emptiness, no trace of the agonized expression Doug had caught a glimpse of for just a moment that left him certain Christopher was screaming inside. But maybe Doug had just imagined that.

They ordered room service for breakfast, took their time eating, and then took a long, slow shower together. Doug jacked them both off in the shower, stroking their erections together and kissing Christopher when he came. Since breakfast was charged to Christopher's room, Doug took him out for lunch, happy that Christopher seemed fine going to one of his college favorites—a back-alley Indian place that, despite not having an English menu or any tables, served incredible food. They ate curry by the river, and Doug told Christopher about the town, the university where he'd studied, and some of the hiking trails visible from the valley floor.

The conversation shifted, as most conversations between police officers did, to work. They traded stories of some of the more ridiculous calls they had gone on. They talked about life, and when Doug tried to nonchalantly ask if there was anyone special waiting for Christopher in California, Christopher had actually blushed. Then he looked crestfallen.

“Definitely not,” he whispered.

“Was there?” Doug asked, not sure what to make of the sad look on Christopher's face.

“No. There was almost a complete bastard of a best friend who wanted to be fuck buddies, but no one special.”

“What happened?”

“He kissed me,” Christopher growled. “He was my partner, and my best

friend, for four years. We transferred from Gang Enforcement to Homicide together. For four years, I watched him sleep with every girl who crossed his path, and then, just before I had to leave, he decided to become curious. I went to his place to drop off my keys and ask him to keep an eye on my place. The boy he had brought home came out and introduced himself, wearing nothing but his briefs, and then, when I was leaving to give them some privacy, my partner came out into the hallway and kissed me.”

“Your partner? With the guy still in his apartment?” Doug asked. “What an asshole. It’s bad enough when that kind of thing happens between men and women who are paired up! Doesn’t he know that? I think I’d have smacked him for that.”

“I know! I have a hard enough time knowing that when we walk into something, if it goes wrong, my best friend is going to die. If I had to work with a lover....” Christopher shook his head. “I couldn’t do that. Every shift would be a nightmare.” Christopher fumbled with his phone. Doug noticed that the screen stayed blank. “I should probably turn my phone back on and see if he’s decided to press charges.”

“Wouldn’t it be the other way around? Sexual harassment is sexual harassment, doesn’t matter if you’re a man or woman.”

“Nope.” Christopher smirked and offered Doug a half shrug. “Assault and battery charges, against me.” As the phone in his hand booted, Christopher turned the screen to show Doug the display. He had twenty-eight new voice mails. “Ah, fuck it, I still don’t want to know.” He held down the power button and turned the phone off.

Doug leaned back in his chair and laughed. “He had to know the score. If he had tried that shit with a female partner, he’d be blacklisted for the rest of his life. I wouldn’t be too worried.” Unfortunately, seeing the phone had reminded Doug of the time. It was already late afternoon.

“What about you? Trolling bars out of town because you’ve got someone at home?”

“No,” Doug admitted. “There was almost a girl. When I was in high school, I loved her more than anything, but her daddy didn’t approve. I went away to school and then to work. When I came back, we tried again. This time around, when she found out that I had turned myself into everything her daddy wanted in a son-in-law, she lost interest.”

“Damn. What a bitch.”

“That’s just what I said,” Doug agreed. “It wouldn’t have been fair anyway,

not to either of us. So now I come down here a couple times a year, just to unwind, you know?”

“So, no guys back home?”

Doug shook his head slowly. “Not a chance. It’s a small town, small department. If I came out there....” He shook his head again. “It’s not like things are easy, anyway, but I don’t even want to think about what people would say if I did come out. Half the people up there already lock their car doors when they see me walk by.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m not white,” said Doug, as if it should be obvious. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“The town I work in is just north of the Flathead Indian Reservation,” Doug explained. “And I’m Salish. In the towns around the reservation, they talk about it, and the people who live there, the way people in expensive suburbs talk about city ghettos. If you’re white, they assume you’re lost and come out with coffee and a map, but if you’re Native American, you’re a suspicious prowler and they call the police.”

“You’re Native American?” Christopher looked dubious. “I just assumed you were Hispanic.”

Doug shrugged it off. “I passed for Cuban in Miami,” he admitted. “So that isn’t that much of a stretch.”

Christopher was silent for a moment, staring out at the river and finishing his lunch. Then he looked Doug up and down suggestively, then looked away, blushing furiously.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“Just imagining you in those leather deerskin pants, with one of those beady things over your chest.”

“Enjoy the thought?”

Christopher blushed again, then crossed his legs and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “So, wait,” he said as he tossed his plastic fork and takeout container into the trash beside their bench, “have you ever ended up checking out different calls about prowlers and found yourself running around in a big circle?”

Doug sighed. “Actually, yes. I try not to take it too personally. Some of the guys on the reservation really are deadbeat assholes, so it’s not like I

cansaythe stereotype is completelyunfair.”

“You get ass—” Christopher paused as a family rode by on bicycles, the youngest trailing behind on a pink bike with training wheels. “Youget jerks everywhere,”he said, censoringhimself.

Doug chuckled, tossed his food in the trash, and checked the time again. “I’ve got to go. Walk youback?”

“Sure. I think I’mgoingto go back to the hotelto get changed. I feel like goingfor a run.”

“Yeah? Where to?”

“Up that,” Christopher pointed to one of the many mountains encircling the city. It was behind the university campus and had a gigantic white M painted halfway up. “You can see the trail from here,” Christopher went on. “It looks fun.”

“There’s a hellofa view fromthe top,”Dougagreed, silentlywishing he could go too. “It’s steep, though. I don’t know ifI’d runit.”

“I run everything. I do endurance races, fifty miles, sometimes a hundred, if I’ve got time to train for them. Most of my training runs are on the Pacific Crest Trail, and some sections are about that steep. Ofcourse, ifI’mrunning that far, I tend to walk up most ofthe climbs and run for the flat and downhillsections.”

“A hundred miles? A hundred-mile race?”Douggaped.

Christopher grinned. “Yes.”

“Onfoot?”

“Yes, on foot.” The smile on Christopher’s face told Doug that Christopher was used to people looking at him like he was crazy. “You’ve got to admit, there are worse addictions out there.”

“That’s insane. Even crack isn’t going to fuck up your body like runningthat kind ofdistance. How do youhave anymuscle left?”

Christopher shrugged. “I eat a lot. With Snickers bars and Gatorade, the humanbodycanaccomplishanything.”

“Snickers bars.”

Christopher nodded enthusiastically.

“You run a hundred miles at a time so you can eat Snickers bars? Youexpect me to buythat after youordered a light beer last night?”

“No! I don’t run ultras so I can eat Snickers bars.” Christopher shoved his hands in his pockets as they walked. “I eat Snickers bars so I canrunultras.”

“Ultras?”

“Ultra marathons—anything longer than a regular marathon. If I could find an inexpensive energy gel that didn’t have the taste, texture, and smell of dog sh—” Christopher caught himself as a woman with a jogging stroller walked past, pushing two young toddlers. “I would use energy bars or gels if I cared for the flavor,” Christopher continued.

Doug pressed his lips tight to keep from smiling. Christopher befuddled and censoring himself in mid-sentence for the sake of two passing toddlers made Doug want to do something stupid, like wrap his arm around Christopher’s waist or take his hand.

“You didn’t seem too turned off by how fucked up my body is last night,” Christopher whispered, after they had put some distance between themselves and the children. “Or this morning.”

“You’ve got me there,” Doug admitted. He glanced around fast and decided a quick leer was worth the risk.

“It’s not like I live off Snickers bars,” Christopher insisted, pouting. “Most of the time.”

“You did say Gatorade too.”

“Damn straight.” Christopher smirked.

Christopher led the way into the hotel. He pushed the button for the elevator and then stared at Doug. After a moment, a terrified expression bloomed on his face. “No! You’re anti-Snickers, aren’t you!” He wagged an accusing finger at Doug. Doug tried to avoid making eye contact with the people staring at them.

“I knew it!” Christopher declared when the elevator door closed behind them. “I knew you were too good to be true! Smart, sexy, another police officer, incredible in bed... I knew there had to be a catch. You’re all...” Christopher wagged all five of his fingers at him. “... healthy.”

Doug tried to bury his face in his hand. He tried to school his features, to force himself not to smile. Inside, he felt his stomach doing somersaults. He was smart, sexy, and incredible in bed? “The man who runs ultra marathons is turned off by healthy?” he asked, trying to shift the conversation back to Christopher.

“No, not really.”

“So it’s just the Snickers-bar thing? Is that really a deal breaker? Not liking your favorite candy bar?”

“That depends,” Christopher said immediately, his face incredibly serious.

“What is your stance on Twizzlers?”

“Twizzlers? My stomach doesn’t like candy. Or much of anything else,” Doug explained. He reached out and grabbed Christopher by the collar, tugged him close, and kissed him hungrily. Christopher returned the kiss, squeezing Doug’s hips, until they both ended up laughing against one another’s lips. “I ate a whole package of Twizzlers when I was a kid, at the state fair, right before going on the rides. I’ve never been so sick in my life. I was traumatized by Twizzlers. I didn’t say I hated Snickers bars, though.”

“Fair enough,” Christopher mumbled. He dipped his head down and nibbled on Doug’s neck. “What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?” Doug moaned as Christopher sucked a small patch of skin over his collarbone into his mouth. He ran his hands up Christopher’s back and dropped his head to the side to give Christopher more access. “Shift briefing is at six thirty, the shift starts at seven.”

“Damn. I thought walking me back to the hotel was just an excuse to go at it one more time.”

Doug whimpered as Christopher pulled back. He really wanted to call in sick. He wanted to drag Christopher back to the room, tumble into bed, and fuck him all over again. How could Christopher, with the body of a porn star and a smile that could land him any man or woman he wanted, want someone like him? He didn’t understand it, but he wanted to enjoy it as much as possible while he had the chance.

He followed Christopher back to his room and made sure he had his keys and jacket while Christopher changed into running clothes. He turned around to say good-bye right as Christopher pulled on a pair of black spandex shorts. Doug groaned as he watched Christopher struggle to pull his polo shirt off over his head. Christopher reached for a thin polyester tank top, but Doug grabbed his forearm and stopped him. Doug stared at him, feeling the heat from Christopher’s naked chest and incredible body pull him close like a magnet.

Christopher raised his eyebrows. Doug made a choked noise, almost a whimper, then looked down at Christopher’s virtually naked body. Christopher grinned and stepped close to him. Doug felt like his skin was electrified everywhere Christopher’s body pressed against him, and tiny shocks seemed to jump from Christopher’s bare chest straight through Doug’s clothes, down his body, to his groin.

Doug released Christopher’s forearm and worked his hands beneath the spandex to cup Christopher’s ass, then pulled him closer so he could grind

against him. With a deep growl, Doug kissed Christopher and pushed him back against the wall. He massaged Christopher's ass and spread his cheeks wide, plunging a dry finger inside. His finger slid in with the slightest friction, and Doug groaned as he imagined the ring of muscle inside Christopher tightening around his cock. He wanted to sink inside Christopher and stay there forever.

"These shorts are distracting," said Doug. "Are you too sore for another round?"

Christopher let his head fall back against the wall and squirmed as Doug's finger slipped in and out of him. "Oh shit, right here!" Christopher gasped, and then he shifted his hips, trying to maneuver his body against Doug's finger. Doug grazed his finger over that tiny bundle of nerves again and smiled as he saw Christopher's eyes glaze.

Doug gave up. He shoved Christopher back toward the bed, pushed him down on to his hands and knees, and peeled the tight black shorts down. He ripped at his own belt buckle frantically. Christopher lunged forward, grabbed the last of the blue foil packets, ripped it open with his teeth, and handed the open condom to Doug. Christopher braced himself on the bed, most of his weight on his left arm.

Doug was going to be stuck driving half the night, probably not getting home until well after midnight. He wouldn't get to sleep until one, and then he had to be awake and moving by five. Doug smiled down at the gorgeous man on the bed, his legs spread and his ass held up in an open and wanton invitation. Doug couldn't resist. He grabbed the other man's hips and lined himself up. This was more than worth losing a night's sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

THE morgue always smelled like ammonia. The scent filtered out of the closed door to the exam room and through the cluttered office, where the Elkin County coroner and the deputy medical examiner worked, and out

into the utilitarian hallway beyond. Doug tried to convince himself the smell was from window cleaner, but he had visited the morgue enough times to know better.

He fidgeted in one of the blue plastic chairs lining the hallway outside the office, refusing to check his watch again. After two days, his ass still hurt, and the hard plastic chairs seemed to be angled to remind him of just how much. The pain was a subtle reminder of the things he had spent the weekend doing, and every time he let his mind wander, his body responded to the memories and he had to think about sports to keep himself from squirming. The reminder was delicious, but he had to focus on acting like a professional.

What made waiting worse today was that he was sitting less than ten feet from Brittney McAllister, the new deputy medical examiner. She stood leaning against the door to the office with her arms folded rigidly across her chest. Her once long brown hair had been cropped short, probably to avoid having the long strands get stuck in anything messy, and she wore an expression on her face that made Doug suspect she was thinking about ways to dissect him.

He probably deserved it, but he would never admit it aloud. They had dated for two years in high school, and had been engaged before she left to go to an Ivy League school and he began classes at the local community college. For a few years of hormone-induced bad judgment, he'd allowed himself to be paraded in front of her very wealthy, very conservative, and very white family as the ultimate sign of rebellion.

At sixteen, Doug had been too damn naive to know how to handle the *I'm going to date a boy from the reservation just to spite you!* vibe between Brittney and her parents. College and four years in Miami had given Doug an easy confidence that had charmed Mr. McAllister the next time around. Brittney's rage about her father's approval told Doug just how sincere she'd been about their relationship. As soon as her father approved, she'd decided they had grown too far apart. When he called her on it, she had blown up, screaming denials, then screaming obscenities at him, and ultimately throwing things at him—all in front of her family. Afterward, her father had actually invited Doug out for a drink to apologize and that had just made her hate him more. Doug had rubbed it in by being as cool, professional, and civil as he possibly could.

It was just as well. Without the hormones of a sixteen-year-old, Doug

couldn't revive the adolescent desire that had originally convinced him he was attracted to both men and women. The few times he'd seen her after he came back had more than proven that.

Now that Brittney was the official county deputy medical examiner, it had become the department joke that no one in the coroner's office would work with him. Between her attitude and the small-town crime rate, the only way he'd ever see another homicide investigation was by returning to Florida, or by watching a documentary about one on television.

So he was stuck dealing with things like this.

No one liked to deal with an obvious suicide. The people who killed themselves while making it look like an accident were easier. A single car hitting a tree at a hundred miles an hour was easy to chalk up to a senseless tragedy, so it wasn't so hard to break the news to the next of kin. An obvious suicide, especially a messy one, was always met with denial and rage instead of grief.

Doug had been the one to cut him down, though, so he was automatically the one who got to deal with the rest of the mess.

"So is this guy actually supposed to show up, or was this just an excuse to waste my time?" Brittney asked.

"The sheriff said he's driving in from out of town." Doug tried to sound diplomatic.

"It's already ten past five."

Doug held up his arm and made a show of pulling up the sleeve of his suit jacket, then staring down at the bare skin. "Is it?"

"Yes, and some of us prefer not to work all night."

"What, you got a hot date or something?" The words tumbled out before he could stop them. He fought the urge to smack himself in the forehead.

"Like you'd care."

"I don't care. The guy is coming all this way just to bury his brother. You could cut him a bit of slack." Doug leaned back, making as much of a show of relaxing as he dared. If he shifted too much, his ass would twinge again.

"If he shows up, he can get a hotel room and come in *alone* tomorrow, during normal business hours. It's not as if he's going to find the funeral home tonight, anyway. Unless he doesn't exist, and you're just using this as an excuse to ruin my evening...."

Doug couldn't believe she had actually said that. "Are you actually suggesting that I hiked eight miles into the woods, rappelled down a

crumbling limestone wall, and orchestrated some random freak's suicide on the off chance that the guy's only family would live out of state, also I could waste four hours of my day fucking with you when his next of kin doesn't show up?"

"I think you'd gladly exploit some random freak's suicide for a chance to be an asshole."

"You know, Brit, the county health benefits include decent mental health coverage. If you wanted to sort out these delusions about the world revolving around you, you could talk to a professional without spending a dime out-of-pocket."

She smiled at him brightly, unfolded her arms, and jangled her keys. She strode through the office behind her, and then into the exam room. Less than a minute later, she reappeared outside the exam room door, slammed it shut, and locked it behind her.

Doug hopped out of his chair to try to stop her, holding his hands up pleadingly. "Come on, Brittney, you don't have to be such a bitch about it! If it was a member of your family in that cabinet, wouldn't you want to know? I'm sure he'll be here!"

She flung a loose file at him, spilling notes, photographs, and typed pages everywhere, then closed and locked the office door. "Tell this mysterious brother that if the photos look familiar, he's welcome to come in alone and begin seeing to funeral arrangements when we open in the morning."

"Say hi to your dad for me!" Doug called out as he watched her rush out the door. He waited for the door to close before he began putting the file back together again. He shoved everything back into the manila folder, but paused on a full-color close-up of the cuts on the corpse's arms. The blue-gray skin made a gruesome canvas for the words, and the sharp contrast of the photograph reminded Doug of a cheap zombie horror flick. Paper-clipped to the photo was a handwritten note from the county coroner, detailing how long the cuts had been left to form clots before the man died, along with a note that they were most likely self-inflicted. They estimated that the cuts and the man's time of death were about twenty minutes apart. There were no signs of a struggle and no evidence that the man had been intoxicated at the time. There was no reason at all to classify the death as suspicious. Gruesome, yes, but not suspicious. There were dozens of sets of footprints left by the hikers who discovered the body, and by Doug and the rest of the backcountry search-and-rescue team that retrieved it, so there was no way to

know if he had been alone or not. They'd found no blood splattered on the trail, no crushed underbrush, no torn scraps of clothing.

Doug had been able to hang onto the case because it was an obvious suicide. The department's real detectives didn't want to bother investigating why the local drunk had decided to carve up his own body and then hang himself. Doug had spent the better part of the previous week trying to nail down the man's probation officer and get a phone number for his mysterious next of kin. The probation officer was apparently catching hell for not knowing one of his clients was dead and had refused to hand over the information so he could contact the man himself. When Doug dropped the victim's personal property off at his home, he had had spent hours digging through the victim's desk, filing cabinets, and random paperwork trying to find the contact information for his brother, but he'd come up empty-handed. By the end of the week, Doug had reported the problem to the sheriff and given up. Over the weekend, the sheriff had managed to get in touch with the guy somehow. Now all that was left was identification and disposition of the remains.

At least he didn't have to go back inside that filthy house again.

Doug tucked the folder under his arm and strolled toward the double glass doors. He scanned the nearly empty parking lot for the sixth time. His truck and Brittney's Malibu had been the only vehicles in the parking lot for most of the day. Now his truck was the only thing in the parking lot. He thought about going back to the row of chairs, but decided against it. He'd already been sitting for too long. He was beyond twitchy. He reached into his pocket and ran his thumb over the ridges of his keys again.

He stretched his shoulders and rolled his neck from one side to the other, remembering the pair of smiling blue eyes he'd left behind in Missoula. He should have given Christopher his number, should have tried harder to talk him into showing up next weekend. But that would have been a very bad idea. He was already having trouble forgetting about him. Walking away was the only thing to do, but now that it was done, he couldn't go three seconds without thinking about whether or not he could track the other man down. If he went back to Missoula anyway, maybe Christopher would swing by the same bar again. And then what? Make a joke about how desperate he looked? Hope the other man wouldn't think Doug was stalking him and bolt?

He was already cursing himself for not calling in sick and spending Sunday

with the other man. It had been a slow, dull day. Because it had been the weekend, he'd been stuck supervising the traffic officers, dispatch center, and the jail. It had given him plenty of time to catch up on paperwork, finish reports, complete more crossword puzzles than any sane person would ever want to do, and argue about sports with the shift sergeant at the jail. And force himself not to think about the man he'd left behind in Missoula. He hadn't thought about Christopher until his shift ended, and then he hadn't thought about him on the drive home, or through a grueling workout. When he dragged himself into the shower, though, he had remembered the feel of the other man's skin, remembered his scent and his taste, and he had given in and jacked himself off.

Today had been worse. He couldn't sit in the dispatch office and argue about baseball, and he had finished every single crossword puzzle in the small paper book he had bought last week. He definitely couldn't think about the weekend, but it was hard not to. On impulse, he bought a Snickers bar for lunch from the vending machine and chuckled as he ate it. Brittney had glared at him for that. He was about to stand up and start pacing again when he saw a dark blue Lexus turn slowly into the parking lot. "Well, it's about fucking time...."

He reached for the door handle but stopped himself from pulling it open when his eyes caught the local license plate. Doug watched as the car came to a stop across three parking spaces and the handicap access aisle and a giant of a man stepped out from the driver's seat. He had a bit of white hair brushed in thin strands over a rather pronounced bald spot, and a thick white beard. He was the type of man who was built to play Santa Claus at the mall each Christmas. He was dressed in a thick wool suit with leather patches sewn on the elbows and a western-style bolo necktie with a jade and silver slide pendant on it.

The sight of the bolo tie made Doug wince. Every tourist-trap gift shop on the reservation sold them, and every would-be cowboy who retired to Montana thought he had to wear one. Doug's family had owned and lived on the same ranch for three generations now, and despite being enrolled members of the Salish-Kootenai tribe and cowboys, none of them had ever worn bolo ties.

The towns around the reservation were all conservative, and that conservative nature made them naturally distrustful of anyone from the reservation. They were naturally distrustful of anyone with different colored

skin, a different religion, different sexual preferences, a different hometown, or even a tendency to eat more vegetables than meat. Doug fit every single one of those categories, and it was almost a relief that folks only expected him to be a petty criminal and an alcoholic. Oddly, the worst assholes around town tended to be the ones who proudly wore trinkets from gift shops on the reservation, so Doug knew he'd have to deal with the same bullshit as always.

A tailored suit and a professional attitude helped. Doug straightened his own gray clip-on tie and stood up straight. He even held the door as the huge man lumbered up the four concrete steps.

"Good evening, sir," Doug said politely.

"You work here, young man?" the fat man huffed, apparently too winded from climbing the steps to return Doug's greeting. Doug could see him sweating, even in the cool June breeze.

"No, sir," said Doug as he reached for his badge automatically. "I'm a deputy sheriff. Detective Douglas Heavy Runner. The coroner's office is closed for the evening. Is there something I could help you with?"

"That man...." The man caught his breath. "The one they've been talking about in the paper?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I understand that you haven't released his name or picture yet," the man explained, "but a gentleman who does some odd jobs for me sounds a lot like the description in the paper. As I was reading the paper, I began wondering whether he had any family left, any who would come for him, and I realized he was probably all alone. So I thought I'd come down and see if anyone has arranged to bury the poor soul. As he was my employee, I feel a certain duty in that regard."

"Yes, sir, I understand. However, it's department policy not to release the name of the deceased until we've had a chance to notify any family. His closest family is coming into town to take possession of the body. You said he may have worked for you?"

"I... maybe... I see so many people, you understand, but...." The man shook his head. "Would it be possible to view the body?"

"At the moment, no," said Doug. "The deputy medical examiner and a member of the sheriff's department must be present to view the body. I'd be happy to schedule a time for you to view the body tomorrow morning, if you'd like. Mr....?" Doug let the question hang in the air.

“Liedes,” the man said, puffing out his already enormous chest. “Reverend John Liedes.”

“Liedes?” Doug repeated.

“*Lead us not into temptation*, Liedes, as I always say.” The white haired man smoothed down his lapel.

Doug knew the name. The man was the minister of one of the larger Christian churches in town. He had a reputation for being a passionate, fire-and-brimstone kind of preacher who drew in so many parishioners that his small church had expanded into a modular warehouse that took up three city blocks. He and his wife took in an average of five to six foster children at a time, and he’d dedicated a section of the back of the warehouse to the youth of his congregation, where he’d built a skateboard ramp, an arcade, and an indoor rock-climbing wall. It was a popular place.

No matter how popular the man was as a minister, though, Doug couldn’t quite shake the feeling that he was dealing with an old con—the type who would chat up a police officer with a big smile on his face just to get him close enough to cut his throat.

“Well, Mr. Liedes, how about tent tomorrow?”

“Why such a fuss, young man? The paper said the poor soul committed suicide.”

Doug kept his face rigid and stared at the man, not saying a word.

“I mean,” the man stammered, “why does a sheriff’s deputy have to be there? Seems like quite a bit of trouble, if I do say so myself.”

Doug stared at him in silence for a few more seconds. In Miami, he had learned to let people fill in the silences in conversation, since they almost always did. Sometimes, though, even he couldn’t stand the awkward pauses that doing so left in conversations.

“You do think someone killed him, don’t you!” Liedes hissed, narrowing his eyes.

Doug took a deep breath, making sure it looked like he was choosing his words carefully. “I don’t believe I said that. It’s just against department policy until his family signs for his remains.”

“But you do... I was worried he would come to no good end, I don’t mind telling you. If it’s the man I think it is.” Liedes leaned in close, as though he was going to whisper a secret in Doug’s ear, then he clamped his mouth shut.

“The man you think it is?” Doug echoed. He had to hold his breath as he

caught the smell of sweat and cigar smoke emanating from the large man. Reverend Liedes nodded frantically. He draped a hand the size of a dinner plate over Doug's shoulder and pulled him close. "He came to us out of a halfway house in California, years ago now. He cleaned up after services, performed some maintenance around the church." He shut his eyes and shook his head. "He had spent time in prison, I'm sure, but I'm a stalwart believer in second chances. Seemed to me, though, he was more friendly than he should have been with some of the young men in my flock. Peter was his name. So many people passing through the church, you understand, but I try to look after them—even those who have strayed."

"Youngmen?"

"Well." Reverend Liedes looked horrified. "That's not the type of thing I like to say out loud. Especially if I'm not certain it's the same man. Was it Peter Hayes?"

"I'm sorry, I can't release his name," said Doug automatically. In the back of his head, he started mapping out possibilities. That wasn't the type of comment he could ignore. If there was even a hint that a crime might have been committed, or that someone might need help, Doug had a duty to perform due diligence. Even if the perpetrator was already dead, he had to investigate. Since it meant another few days of not having to deal with bicycles in the stolen property locker, he was more than willing to explore every possibility.

"The coroner's office opens at eight, and a deputy can come by at any time. If you feel like you need to talk to me about anything..." Doug passed the man a business card.

"Thank you," the large man said as he held up the card and winked. Then he waddled down the stairs and climbed, with some effort, back behind the wheel of his car.

Doug followed him to the double glass doors and was surprised to see that the parking lot wasn't empty. A small Subaru with a rental agency sticker sat parked at the far end of the parking lot.

Doug's stomach clenched, both from shock and from the flood of arousing memories that assaulted him as he saw familiar blond hair. *His* blond from Missoula stepped out of the car, arched his back, and rolled his head from side to side. Instead of the casual polo shirt and running clothes Doug had seen him in over the weekend, Christopher stepped out of the car in a dark-blue pin-striped suit that made his hair and eyes seem to glow. He looked

amazing. Doug quickly got himself under control. He couldn't act too friendly now, while he was still working, just because he had spent the weekend fucking this man until they were both exhausted.

Christopher stood there, his posture and bearing radiating a poised confidence that took Doug's breath away, and watched the Lexus pull out of the parking lot. Then Christopher looked at the brass sign beside the door, glanced at his phone, and began to walk toward him. Even though his brain was screaming at him that he had to play this off professionally, his body was compelling him out the door.

At the top of the stairs, he froze. Christopher, four steps below him, stood staring at him with a stunned, mischievous smile.

"Well, hello, gorgeous," Christopher drawled.

Doug was about to say something, some tacky joke about it being a small world after all, but his brain smacked his libido down and reminded him there was only one reason Christopher would be here now. Doug gazed down at him, saw him from nearly the same angle at which Doug had first seen the body of Peter Eugene Hayes as he rappelled down to cut him free, and finally noticed. There were so many similarities that Doug's brain tried to convince him he was staring into the face of another bloated corpse.

Something in Doug's mind screamed that this was another police officer. He could not lose his composure in front of another police officer. Not to mention a man he had been fantasizing about sleeping with again up until a minute ago. For as long as he could remember, every bit of stress and anxiety he felt went straight to his stomach. From getting sick after roller-coaster rides as a kid to throwing up before major tests in college, Doug's stomach rebelled at the slightest upset in his life. At the moment, he just didn't have the willpower to keep his stomach under control. "Excuse me," he whispered, ducking back into the building.

He made it two feet before he had to run. The men's room was a whole twelve feet away, but that was too damn far. He rushed into the bathroom and managed to make it into a stall before the knot in his stomach turned into a full-blown spasm. He bent double, riding out the pain as his stomach expelled whatever was left of his lunch. When he was finished, he wiped his face and mouth with toilet paper, then went to the sink and tried to clean himself up as well as he could. As he caught sight of his own pallid reflection and flinched away from his bloodshot eyes, he wanted to punch something. How much more embarrassing could this day possibly get?

At least Brittney hadn't stuck around, Doug thought ruefully. He straightened his suit, prayed he hadn't been too loud, and went out to face his weekend lover.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTOPHER stood on the stairs of the Baker County Coroner's Office, utterly confused.

He picked up the manila folder that Doug had dropped as he sprinted into the building, and then followed him. He heard the sound of retching coming from behind the men's room door. Christopher turned around again and jogged back to his rental car. He had stocked the backseat of the car with sports drinks and snacks, along with his luggage. He grabbed an orange Gatorade and went back in, taking the steps two at a time. At the bathroom door, the sound of retching continued.

Christopher sighed. He would have to take that as his answer to whether or not Doug was busy tonight. For a police officer, coming out was hard. He was open about his sexuality, but he didn't advertise it around the office. The one thing that had kept him from being the butt of every joke in the homicide office was that his apparently straight partner was more flamboyant than he was. It helped that San Diego was a big city, with its own gay district, and more than its share of diversity. It wasn't San Francisco, but it wasn't uncommon to see two men walking down the street holding hands. Up here, where there were hours of highway between signs of civilization and Christopher had seen as many cows from the highway as people, things were probably different. Top that off with how Doug had described the city in terms of quiet, seething racism, and suddenly the idea of coming out wasn't so much a question of freedom, but of giving the town one more reason to hate and distrust him.

Still, for a man who claimed to have worked in Miami, Doug seemed to have far less composure than Christopher would have expected. He sat down and waited. And waited. Then he noticed the name of his big

brother on the label of the file. He shifted into work mode and opened the file. He scanned the coroner's report, noting the cause of death. He scanned the search-and-rescue report, and noted the name at the bottom: Douglas Heavy Runner. Christopher went back and reread the report carefully, then turned to the rest of the file. Inside were the coroner's photos of Peter's body, including photos of the words "Happy" and "Birthday" carved with a razor blade into his arms. Christopher turned back to the coroner's report. Despite the unfamiliar format of the report, he found what he was looking for quickly—the estimated time and date of death. His birthday.

"That fucker," Christopher whispered, glaring at the photo of Peter's face again. He was lucky he had succeeded in killing himself, because after seeing that, Christopher wanted to kill him. That day he had been bouncing off the walls of his hospital room, too doped up on painkillers to be discharged and too anxious to sit still. He'd had to move to avoid thinking. He remembered feeling sorry for himself, and if he sat still too long he'd have to think about the fact that it was his birthday. He would have to acknowledge that he didn't have anyone who cared enough to show up other than the man assigned to work with him. Somewhere, a world away, his brother had wished him a happy birthday and hanged himself as a gift. While Christopher had been alone in a hospital room, realizing for the first time that the bullet that had landed him in the hospital would take an even greater toll than he'd imagined, his brother had reached out across a thousand miles to take one last jab at him, to remind him just how empty his life was.

He buried that anger, forced himself to stay in work mode, and acknowledged that he was being irrational. Whether Peter had stayed fixated on memories of Christopher or not, Christopher was not responsible for his suicide. But he was furious that his brother would go to such lengths to try to fuck with him, even after all these years. He bottled that anger up, promising himself that he would run tonight. He would find a hotel with a treadmill and run until he or the machine broke.

He kept flipping through the photographs and coroner's notes with a blank, professional expression on his face. When he heard the bathroom door open, he glanced up at Doug and tried to smile, but didn't quite manage it.

"Here." He held up a bottle of orange Gatorade.

Doug said nothing but took the drink and gulped it down.

"Guess we're starting from scratch," Christopher said levelly.

“Hmm?” Doug hummed around the bottle.

“I’m Christopher Hayes, San Diego PD,” said Christopher. “I’m here to deal with this shit. Sit down, relax.”

Doug plopped into the chair beside Christopher. He peeked at the open file folder, *his* file folder, in Christopher’s hand. Christopher had found the photo of the carvings in his brother’s skin. He surprised Doug. He didn’t gasp, didn’t swear, didn’t even flinch. He took in the image with a professional detachment that Doug would give anything to be able to replicate himself.

“What do you mean, starting from scratch?” Doug asked.

Christopher sat back and turned his head sideways. Doug was stunned to see that even the man’s eyes were blank. “Seeing me obviously upset you. We can pretend nothing happened. So introduce yourself already, and get on with it.”

“Oh, hell no,” said Doug. “You surprised me, that’s all. You look like him. I don’t know why I didn’t see it before, but you really do.”

Christopher flipped back two pages to a photograph of his brother’s face. He held up the picture and smirked at Doug. The man’s hair color was the only similarity, in the picture.

“It’s your bone structure—your jaw, the way your eyes are set. I was the one who cut him down,” he explained, “And the angle outside was just....”

Doug tried to keep himself from shivering, but he just couldn’t control himself. “It was the same.”

“The angle?” one of Christopher’s eyebrows rose.

“I’m in charge of the backcountry search-and-rescue team in Baker County. I had to rappel down about forty feet to get to him.”

“I see. Well, that’s a relief,” said Christopher.

“It is?”

“Yeah.” Christopher turned the photo to the side and held it up beside his own face for comparison. “If *that’s* the kind of thing that gets you hot and bothered, then we might have some issues. That whole zombie kink has always freaked me out.”

Christopher cocked a cheesy smile in his direction, and Doug broke out laughing. It wasn’t appropriate. It was so far from appropriate Doug knew he should have been disgusted with himself. He laughed anyway. It was the kind of joke that would come out during the tense moments of an accident investigation, or while working a gruesome crime scene. It broke the

tension, made it possible to keep going. It was also the type of joke that led to occasional media scandals and painted police officers everywhere as callous bastards.

“I’m sorry,” Doug managed, when he stopped laughing. “It wasn’t about seeing you. Hell, I *wanted* to see you.”

Christopher dropped the photo back into the file, closed it with a snap, and handed it back to Doug. “You should be sorry. Have a bit of fun with a guy and the next time he sees you, he’s so sickened he throws up. Talk about a blow to the ego.” Christopher shook his head dramatically. He was still smiling, though. “I might have to go crawl into a corner until whatever is left of my manhood asserts itself.”

“It was just the angle. It was a mess. Is that definitely him?” Doug held up the file. “Do you want to view the body?”

“It’s him. And no, I don’t want to view the body. I’d be tempted to beat the shit out of the body, and there’s no point anymore.” Christopher felt his carefully perfected smile melt just from looking at the way Doug’s chocolate-colored eyes widened. “I guess I should apologize for being late.”

“You’re really late. I thought you were planning on dealing with your *business issues* Monday morning. What happened?”

“Would you believe I got lost?”

“No. We’re on the main highway.”

“Yeah, well, when the roads on the GPS are all the same color, it’s hard to tell when it’s trying to lead you to certain death and when it’s leading you to an actual town.”

“You got lost?”

“Yup.” Christopher pulled out the small GPS the rental agency had supplied, pulled up the map with the route still marked, and held it up.

Doug took the device, zoomed the map out, and laughed. “This thing thinks you’re up in the mountains over the lake. You’d have to go up through Kalispell and then south again, taking this route.”

“I figured that out, eventually. It was a pretty drive,” said Christopher, flushed and embarrassed.

“This had you going over dirt roads for ten miles,” Doug pointed out. “I’d have expected most of them to be blocked by snow.”

“It’s Montana!” Christopher cried. “I was surprised to find out that the runway at the airport was paved! I followed the GPS, and by then I didn’t have any cell phone reception, so I just kept following it. I also got

distracted by the mountains. I'm used to the High Sierras. Mesas, canyons, and all that shit. Some of the mountains along the highway seem to go up forever. It's beautiful. A little scary, but beautiful."

"Ever heard of an atlas?"

"Yes. He was the guy who held the world on his shoulders," said Christopher.

Doug rolled his eyes. "We've got these newfangled things up here called maps. They come in a big book called an atlas. It's a paper version of this"—he held up the GPS—"except that it has the roads labeled and color-coded, and it never needs to be recharged. It's terribly helpful, even if it can't give you turn-by-turn directions. Do you have any idea how dangerous it can be to get lost up here?"

Christopher shrugged. "I did notice there weren't all that many towns along the way. Not that many cars, either. I met a lot of cool people, though, including a lady who organizes a race around some big reservoir. She bragged that it was the only race in the world where the entry packet includes instructions on what to do if you encounter a grizzly bear."

"Is that one a hundred miles long?"

"Only fifty." Christopher dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a flyer. He held it up with a huge grin. Doug stared at Christopher, and then he shook his head.

"What?" Christopher asked.

"You're insane. I've got to take you hiking," said Doug. "If I'm right, that would be Hungry Horse Reservoir, in the Flatheads. The Flathead Mountains are pretty, but over here, we're in the Missions. These mountains make the Flathead range look tame."

"I believe it," said Christopher, purposely not addressing the offer to go hiking. He didn't know much of anything about this guy except that he was good in bed, and he wasn't about to make stupid assumptions. "Driving down into town was amazing. Still, it took all day. There's no funeral home assignment listed in there, so I assume the body is still locked up in the office?"

"Our county medical examiner couldn't stay. They open at eight in the morning. As for the rest, well, I found his will and a note shoved into an envelope and taped to his front door. I have the key to his house—he seems to have left his truck at his job, but I didn't find that key. The paperwork tends to take a while, regardless. There are six law offices in town, but we

don't have a dedicated probate court. Judge Watson does probate stuff as it comes up on the docket like everything else, so it shouldn't take more than a few weeks to get things sorted out. You're welcome to take possession of the house now, but you're better off getting a hotel."

"House?"

"It's about three miles from here. After his personal effects were boxed up, I delivered them to his house, since it's all supposed to go to you. It's just his clothing, boots, wallet, and a lighter."

"There's a house? He didn't rent?"

"No, from what the county attorney said, he owned it outright."

"Is that where—" Christopher couldn't force himself to finish the sentence. He was used to talking about death, used to being casual about it. He was not supposed to be this fucking weak. But the idea of walking into the house where his brother died made him cringe. His thoughts still whirling, he remembered the details of the search and rescue report. "No, of course not. Never mind."

"What?"

"I was going to ask if that was where he hanged himself, but I read the report."

"Oh. He died up in Lone Pine State Park. It's a day-use park, on the bluffs to the west. The bluffs overlook the city. A hiking trail leads to the picnic area at the top, then a switchback leads down to the lower trail. There are a couple of picnic areas up there too."

"How could he afford a house?" Christopher asked him. "The last time I tracked him down, he was in prison in California, and he didn't have a dime to his name. How did he end up owning a house up here?" What Christopher actually wanted to ask was what could have brought his brother to this out-of-the-way little town? Since the last time he had actually spoken to his brother had been when he was twelve, Christopher didn't know enough about the man Peter had become to know what might have brought him up here. He didn't know anything about his brother. He didn't know if Peter had ever held a job, if he'd gone to school, if he ever had any solid relationships, or any children. He had spent so much of his life hating the memory of his brother, and then arrogantly assuming the worst, that he had never cared to find out the truth.

Doug shrugged. "I was hoping you could tell me. His probation officer said you're the only family he's got, so I figured you would know."

“I haven’t seen him for twenty years,” Christopher admitted. “The only time I ever tracked him down was so I could list his address and inmate number on my first job application. Aside from needing to admit he exists for background checks, I’ve made a point of not associating with him. I’m just... I’m stuck in work mode.”

“Work mode?”

“You know, focus on what doesn’t make sense, gather facts, forget that the body was a person and just do the job that’s in front of you... work mode.”

“Ah. If you’re worried about it, the real-estate transaction should be a matter of public record. The documents are in the courthouse, if you want to see who sold the house to him, who financed it, that kind of thing. Your lawyer will pull them all anyway, to make sure there isn’t a lien on the house.”

Christopher rubbed his eyes. After driving all day, this was the last thing he wanted to deal with. He did not want to sort through the personal property of someone who, aside from a few terrible memories, was a complete stranger. He really didn’t want to have to hire an attorney. Christopher enjoyed dealing with attorneys about as much as he enjoyed going to the dentist. He recognized the need for them, and he would begrudgingly go, but he would never be happy about it.

“And I think he worked part time at a local church.”

“Oh, he would,” Christopher sneered.

Doug eyed Christopher carefully. “His PO said he got disability too.”

“I didn’t know alcoholism was something you could get disability for,” Christopher grumbled.

Doug leaned back slightly. “Thought it had been twenty years?”

“Page seven,” Christopher nodded to the file folder. “In the coroner’s report, under ‘other notes’. Late-stage alcohol-induced cirrhosis.”

“Well, who knows? Maybe he got on disability for something else and then pissed away his monthly check on beer,” Doug suggested. “I can give you a ride over to the house if you’d like,” he offered.

“That’d be great,” Christopher said automatically. Christopher followed Doug to his truck. Christopher couldn’t help stretching out a little in the large cab. He had sprung for the cheapest rental car they had, but that had meant a compact car instead of an SUV. Christopher was too tall to fit comfortably into most sedans, so not having to climb back into the tiny rental car was a relief by itself.

Doug started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot, then glanced sideways at Christopher.

“Something on your mind?” Christopher asked, before he could stop himself.

“Ah....” Doug tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “No.”

For a long time, neither man said anything. Christopher almost laughed at how long they both let the silence drag. Most people gave in to the urge to fill the pauses left in conversations. The silence was awkward, but knowing that Doug seemed to be more than able to control himself made it amusing at the same time. It was also a nice change of pace after putting up with his partner for so long.

Christopher stopped that thought cold. He wasn't going to start comparing Doug to Ray. That would mean putting Ray into the same category as Doug in his head, and that wasn't fair.

“So.” Christopher grinned brightly. “You from here originally?”

“Yeah. Well, technically, I grew up a bit to the south. I went to high school here, though.”

“Didn't like the school in your hometown?”

“I think it would have been fine, but my mom was the only English teacher at the reservation high school.”

“The only English teacher? Like one teacher for the whole subject, for every single student?”

“Yes, one English teacher for the entire school. There was only one science teacher, one history teacher, one math teacher, and the shop teacher doubled up and taught PE. All of the teachers' kids were bussed up here. It's a nice town, though. I imagine it's a bit of a change from San Diego, huh?”

“Have you ever been to So Cal?” Christopher asked.

“No. Just the East Coast.”

“Well, it's not as bad as everyone thinks. Downtown is straight city, but northern San Diego is built on mesas. The highways run through the canyons in between, so driving around, it's easy to forget that you're driving through a city of six million people. The High Sierras are an hour away from the coast, so you have everything from surfing to the Pacific Crest Trail all right there. It's a great town, an awesome town.”

Doug glanced at him curiously. “You don't like it.”

“What makes you say that?”

Doug gave him a wry smile. “The lady doth protest too much, me thinks.”

“Shakespeare?” Christopher laughed. “Really? Man, you are an

Englishteacher's kid."

"Am I wrong?"

Christopher glanced out the window, watching the tiny mountain town pass by. "No." He shifted in his seat and clenched his right hand into a fist, relaxed it, and clenched it tight again. His fingers were still numb, and even clenching his fingers made the tendon in his shoulder twinge. "Yes. I've just had a hard couple of weeks. I like San Diego. I've never lived anywhere else, but it's big enough that if you really need to get away, you can just move to another neighborhood."

"I've got to admit, I'm envious."

"Working here is that dull?"

"I'm envious over the way you gripe about things. This has to be weird. Getting lost, dealing with all this, and running into me—it's a lot to deal with. And you talk about how beautiful the drive was."

"What's wrong with having a positive outlook?" asked Christopher, his bright smile firmly fixed in place.

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it. It makes you hard to read, but there's nothing wrong with it." Doug pulled up in front of a two-story Victorian that looked like it had seen better days.

"It makes me hard to read?" Christopher got it. "You're worried I was just stoking your ego this weekend?"

"I didn't say that," said Doug.

"I wasn't." Christopher kept himself from smiling, kept his face serious. "Despite everything, and there was a fuck of a lot of everything, my weekend was incredible." Christopher wanted to touch him, especially when he saw the blush that darkened Doug's cheeks.

Doug gestured toward the house. "This is it."

"Really?" Christopher narrowed his eyes. "It's old, but it'd still be expensive. If he was on disability, he couldn't afford this."

"It's not so nice on the inside. Reach into the glove box."

Christopher cocked his head to the side but opened the glove box. Inside, on top of a stack of manuals and maintenance records, was a large jar of Vick's VapoRub. "That bad?"

"Yes."

The menthol in VapoRub was one of the few things that could block out some of the nastier smells police officers and paramedics tended to encounter. Christopher opened the jar and smeared a bit of the gel under his

nose. He held out the jar to Doug. When the other man reached for the jar he closed his fingers over Christopher's hand, and Christopher felt his stomach flutter.

He looked away quickly. This was not the time for this. Doug was as far in the closet as a man could get, and he had literally gotten sick at the sight of Christopher. Doug wanted casual weekend sex. That didn't mean he wanted *Christopher*.

"You know," Christopher said as he pulled the jar back and twisted the lid back on, "I'm sure you've got other stuff to do. Why don't I sign what needs signing and let you get out of here? I'll get in touch with an attorney and a funeral home tomorrow to deal with everything else."

Doug stared at him for a long moment. "If that's what you'd like to do. I only have the case file and the coroner's report here, though. You can sign to ID the body, but his will and the paperwork for temporary custody of personal property is back at the station." He plucked the VapoRub out of Christopher's hands. "I'll take you inside, then you can ride with me back to the station, we'll get the paperwork out of the way, then I can drop you off back at your car. If you want." The less than subtle invitation hung in the air between them for a moment. Doug applied the VapoRub to his upper lip and hopped out of the truck. "Come on."

Doug unlocked the front door and held it open. Christopher strolled inside, barely hesitating as the smell of cat, sweat, rotting food, and filth assaulted him. He looked around the old living room and groaned. His brother had furniture—a house full of furniture, and knickknacks, and stacks of papers, and too much other crap to take in just by looking at it. Flies were everywhere. They buzzed around all of the furniture in twos and threes, the quiet hum of their wings making the still silence of the house that much more apparent. "Thank you for the VapoRub," Chris whispered.

"A couple of cats ran out the first time I opened the door. I brought his property box the next morning and tried to find your phone number, but I didn't see any sign of them at the time. They might have had another way back in."

"Cats?" Christopher waded through the closely packed furniture, stepped around stacks of boxes, and opened a window. He opened the rest of the windows in the room, then moved into the kitchen, opening all the windows he could find. In the kitchen, he found an overflowing litter box in one corner, a garbage can filled with empty beer and liquor bottles, and a fridge

completely devoid of food. He opened a few more windows, leaning as close as he dared to the spider-infested screen to get some fresh air, and then he gave up.

“You okay?” Doug asked.

Christopher shook his head. “I need to get out of here. Give it time to air out.”

Doug nodded and helped Christopher back through the mess. Christopher tumbled out onto the porch and took several deep, gasping breaths. Doug hesitated at the door, looking back into the living room.

“What is it?” Christopher asked, pushing himself to his feet again.

“Someone’s been here,” Doug said quietly.

“Who would want to go in there?”

“I left the property box on the couch last Monday. It’s gone.”

“But you locked the door,” said Christopher, appearing by his side.

“I did. You might want to change the locks. It looks like he gave somebody else a key.”

“Did you go through the house after you found him? See if there was anybody else living with him?”

Doug shook his head. “No. I just searched his desk. The smell was worse then. His PO said he lived alone, and I took his word for it. Now that you mention it, though, somebody had to have been feeding those cats. Do you want to go back in?”

Christopher shook his head frantically. Doug pulled the door shut and turned the key, locking the deadbolt.

“Come on, then.” Doug took hold of his elbow and led him away from the house. “We can finish up paperwork, and then I’ll come back without to make sure the house is empty.”

Christopher shook his head more. “Run. I need to run.”

Christopher was practically shaking with nerves.

Doug slipped his arm around Christopher’s back and guided him back to the truck. “I can help with that. Paperwork first, then you can get changed in the station locker room, and the high school track is a quarter mile down the road.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Doug was glad he was wearing a heavy suit. He didn't think he would ever be able to see Christopher in those running shorts without getting tuned on. Even after stepping into that festering house, with its cat-piss stench, he still got hard seeing Christopher step out of the sheriff's department locker room in a tight black Under Armor tank top and the same damn shorts. Even with his expression hard and guarded, Christopher was still breathtaking. A heavy suit jacket, that made his erection a bit less obvious, was a very good thing.

Doug had the forms ready when Christopher came out, and the man was so eager to run that he scribbled his name on each line without even glancing at them. Four blocks down from the department, a new running track encircled the high school football field. A baseball diamond and the Lions Park playground were right next door. He and Christopher were the only ones in the park. At nearly six thirty, most of the streets of Elkin were empty.

Christopher didn't say anything. He took off at a slow jog around the track twice, and then he sped up. He increased his pace until he seemed to be flying around the track. Somewhere between four and five laps, Doug sat down on the bleachers, half aroused and half in awe as he just watched Christopher move. Somewhere between five and six miles, Doug stopped counting laps and just enjoyed himself.

"Is he going to be much longer?" The voice came from behind him. Doug looked up at the high school football and wrestling coach. The man had taught PE when Doug was a student, but Doug couldn't seem to remember his name. He had also been Doug's own wrestling coach, so he felt shitty for forgetting him. "Sorry," he said with a shrug. "I think he's going to be a long time. He just lost his brother, said he needed to run, but he's from out of town... I didn't know where else to take him. Is it all right?"

The coach watched Christopher circle around the track in the fading twilight. The old man adjusted his ball cap, strolled around the side of the bleachers, and fiddled with a metal power box. The lights around the track snapped to life.

“Turn the lights out before you leave, you hear?”

“Thanks, Coach,” said Doug. He leaned forward, watching Christopher increase his stride and his speed yet again.

“Sure, Doug.”

Doug looked up again. “You still remember me?” he asked, genuinely surprised.

“I try to keep track of my kids. With an average of fifty students per year, it ain’t that hard. You wrestled two years and played basketball one year. Mostly, though, I remember I could never get you to try out for football.”

“Yeah.” Doug laughed. It had been wrestling his freshman year that had alerted him to the very real problem that he got way too turned on when he managed to get another boy pinned down. The entire season had been mortifying, even when he was wearing a cup. Football had been unthinkable after that. Sure, the other guys said it happened to everyone, but not everyone had wet dreams about wrestling afterward. He could only imagine what football would have been like. “My dad got hurt playing in college,” he lied. “My mom didn’t want the same thing to happen to me.”

The coach nodded slowly. “It happens. Who is he? He can run.” “He’s some big-city hotshot homicide detective. Says he runs ultra marathons, whatever that means....” Doug scoffed.

“Ah. You’ve got to watch out for those guys,” said the coach.

“Those ultra runners are a whole different kind of nuts.”

“So people really do it?” Doug stared out at Christopher again. “Run fifty-mile races?”

“Fifty is the gateway drug,” the coach warned him seriously.

“You’ve never heard of them? There’s this one in Death Valley, in the middle of summer, that’s a hundred and thirty miles.”

“A hundred and thirty miles, through the hottest desert in the world, in the middle of summer?”

“Yes. And if it ain’t deserts, it’s mountains, with snow and ice. Like I said, they’re a completely different kind of nuts. Which is good, because

you don't want to be stuck out here tonight babysitting some kind of wimp. It's supposed to get down below freezing again."

"Hypothermia can happen, even when you're sweating," Doug chided.

"It most certainly can. But listening to somebody whine about it is never any fun. Take care of yourself, Doug."

Doug waved and watched the coach head back toward the dark high school before turning his gaze back to Christopher. In the yellow glow of the overhead lights, Christopher's arms and hair sparkled. The sweat dripping off him caught the light and made every inch of him glimmer. It also made Doug realize that, in nearly an hour, Christopher hadn't stopped for a drink. Doug hopped down off the bleachers and walked the four blocks back to the office. There was a vending machine next to the locker rooms, where Doug bought two bottles of orange Gatorade. On his way out, he went through the dispatch and booking office.

The sheriff was sitting on the corner of the jail sergeant's desk. Both men were leaning over a small monitor watching the youngest Elkin County sheriff's deputy run an early drunk through a series of sobriety tests.

"Heavy Runner!" The sheriff, Greg Brubaker, called out. He was a large man who had probably once been intimidating. Like so many older men, gravity and beer had turned what was once a solid wall of muscle into a gut as round as his chest. Doug doubted Greg Brubaker had ever had to fight a man in his life—he was just too likable. His office was always open, though he was seldom actually in it. He wandered around the department, and the rest of the city offices, with an open smile on his face. He made a point to remember things that were going on in his officers' lives, and he made a point to ask about them on a regular basis. Doug knew for a fact that, hidden beneath a Playboy magazine in his desk drawer, was a calendar with the birthdays of every city and county employee jotted down, so he always remembered them. Everybody liked him, and Doug couldn't help but like him too.

Harold Daniels, his counterpart in the jail, was a hard man to like.

He was heavy-set, short, and so gruff he bordered on rude. He was also sincere, honest to a fault, and he took his job seriously. Doug also took his job seriously, and the two respected each other and got along fine. "Come

watch this with us! We're taking bets on how long it's going to take Jackson to notice how badly he fucked up the pat-search with this guy."

"I think that boy of yours is slow, Greg. He's not going to notice." Brubaker shook his head, a huge smile on his face. "My money is on two to four minutes. It's been two, so he's got two more."

Doug stepped into the small glass office. On the desk was a security monitor with a split-screen display. The display in the upper right-hand corner showed the DUI room. Inside the DUI room was Eric Jackson, a twenty-year-old traffic officer with the build, face, and buzzed-cut blond hair of a ten-year-old boy. He was reading the instructions for the sobriety test from a small note card while a hulking man in blue jeans and a plaid shirt swayed back and forth as if the room was spinning. Doug had seen the same man in the DUI room a dozen times. He was obviously close to falling over, but he was filling in the blanks every time Jackson stuttered. "I'm with Daniels," Doug said. "Or I would be if I weren't broke. Jackson is going to get him into a holding cell without bothering to look up from the prompt card."

"There!" Brubaker called out. The man in the plaid shirt flipped a coin, fumbled with it, and watched as it clattered to the ground. "Less than four minutes!"

"Ahah, watch."

On the monitor, the very young deputy stopped reading, watched the coin roll across the floor, then bent down and picked it up. He handed the coin back to the suspect, and then went back to reading the instructions for the sobriety test. Brubaker groaned while the old sergeant laughed and collected a handful of dollar bills on the desk.

"Hey, Daniels, mind if I check something really quick?" Doug asked, pointing to the second work station crammed into the office. The sergeant nodded. Doug squeezed into the tiny space and logged into the FBI's National Criminal Information Center database. He ran a quick records check on Christopher Hayes. The only thing that the check brought up was his police record, listing promotions, commendations, and an extensive list of training certifications. It also listed his date of birth, which was what Doug had been curious about—May 21.

"What's wrong, Dougie?" Brubaker asked.

"My suicide's next of kin showed up. The guy didn't even bat an

eyelash when he saw the photos of the carvings in his brother's arms, so I got to wondering...."

"The *Happy Birthday* thing?" Brubaker asked.

Doug nodded. "It was his own birthday." How could anyone maintain that damn neutral smile when faced with the knowledge that his own brother committed suicide on his birthday?

"The corpse or the next of kin?" Daniels asked.

"The next of kin."

"And he wasn't even surprised?"

"Ah." Brubaker stood up and looked sheepish. "I wouldn't read too much into him not being upset, Dougie. Pete Hayes wasn't a good guy. If this brother of his had to come to terms with that, then he might think it's for the best."

"Greg, your boy's hugging the suspect," Daniels told him. Brubaker turned back to the monitor. The young deputy was trying to hold his suspect upright. He'd wedged his shoulder under the man's arm, his chest and gun belt right against the man's side—and the man's other hand.

"That's what you get for letting the experienced officers train him," Doug chided.

"Harris and Glenn?" Brubaker asked. "They've got nearly forty years of experience between them...."

"Forty years of sitting in their cars pretending to be police officers doesn't count," Daniels cut in. "They taught him everything they know about the best places to get lunch during day shifts, the only place to get lunch during night shifts, and how to be slow enough in responding to a call that he doesn't have to get out of his car."

"They take a readiness approach," Brubaker translated. "After all their years of service, they've learned not to sweat the small stuff. They like to be ready in case something big happens."

"If something big is going to happen, it'll happen on a regular call. If they wait to hear about something big on the radio, it'll be over before they ever show up," Doug pointed out.

"That's why we've got all you young hotheads," Brubaker said gleefully. "They're old men, Dougie. They can't play the game for real, so let them play armchair quarterback for a couple more years. Of course, don't tell them that."

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Doug looked back at the screen, where the drunk was wobbling his way off the yellow line painted across the concrete floor. He stopped halfway across the line to talk to Jackson again. “He could have a weapon.”

“He’s already had two chances to grab Jackson’s,” Daniels muttered. “And I took a four-inch hunting knife off him when the kid wasn’t looking.”

“I know the guy. He’s a good old boy who likes to drink. He won’t hurt the kid,” Brubaker insisted.

On the monitor, the man in the plaid shirt fell to the side, recovered, and began to walk along the line again. The young deputy didn’t have the slightest clue how to deal with a suspect safely. “Can I deal with this?” Doug asked, nodding to the monitor. “Please?”

“No. Your shift was over forty minutes ago. Just because you were stuck hanging out in the morgue all day doesn’t mean you get to stay and play now. He get settled in okay?”

“So far. I showed him the photos, got a confirmed ID, got everything signed, and then he broke down. He said he needed to run, so he’s been doing that since. I thought I’d be nice.” Doug held up the bottles of Gatorade.

“The man I talked to didn’t sound like the type to break down. Not flinching at the cuts on his arms is more the kind of thing I’d expect. That’s surprising.”

“I’m not sure it’s fair to call it breaking down.” Doug shrugged. “He’s down the street, running himself into a heart attack around the high school track.”

“Why?”

“He likes to run.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Daniels insisted. “Some people drink,” he said as he patted his beer gut with every sign of affection. “Running’s probably a better choice.”

Doug smirked and shook his head slowly. “Honestly, I don’t think he runs the way other people drink. I think he runs the way other people breathe.”

“Hmm.” Brubaker slid off the desk, made a show of dusting off his jeans, and glanced at Daniels. “You got this?”

“Yes. I’ll make sure Junior doesn’t get hurt. I’ll also smack some

sense into him once we've got his suspect booked."

"Thank you, sir," Brubaker drawled. He clapped Doug on the shoulder and led him out through the detention-center entrance. "There's nothing wrong with being nice, either. It'd be a real mess if the next of kin died of dehydration. From the sound of it, neither of them had anybody else in the world. He got a funeral home lined up yet?"

"No, but whoever is associated with that church on the north side will probably work. The minister there came by, volunteered to take possession of the remains if Hayes's family didn't show up."
"Mission Mountains?"

"Huh?"

"The Mission Mountains Evangelical Church." Brubaker chuckled.

"Reverend Liedes, was it?"

"Yeah. I guess Peter Hayes worked for him. Probably under the table, but it doesn't really matter now. I'll pass on his contact info, I'm sure he'll help sort it out."

"You don't look happy about that," Brubaker observed. Doug shrugged. "The guy just came across a bit too.... No, there's no nice way to say it. He seemed like a manipulative bastard." "Did he now? Well, mind if I tag along? I spoke to this Detective Hayes on the phone, but I'd like a chance to introduce myself to him in person."

"Sure. He's something else. Hard to believe he's actually related to Hayes at all." They hurried down the quiet street and into the football stadium. Doug didn't return to his spot on the bleachers, but instead went to the track as Christopher sped around toward them. Doug tucked one of the bottles under his arm, twisted the cap off the other, and held it out as Christopher slowed down. His momentum carried him a few extra steps beyond Doug and Brubaker, but he was already gulping down half the bottle when he turned around.

"Thanks," he panted.

"Eh, I owed you one anyway. This is the sheriff, Greg Brubaker," said Doug.

"Hi." Christopher smiled that same infectious smile that had stunned Doug when they'd first met. He took the older man's hand and shook it firmly. "Nice to meet you. I appreciate you taking the time to track me down for this."

“Glad to meet you, Chris,” said Brubaker. “Doug here said he could hardly believe you and your brother were related, but I’ve got to say, you look like him.”

“It’s Christopher. Or Hayes is fine.”

“Huh. Your brother always called you Chris.”

Christopher stared at the sheriff, not commenting.

“You knew Peter Hayes, Sheriff?” Doug asked, surprised. “I kept track of him,” said Brubaker.

When he didn’t seem willing to elaborate, Doug glanced at Christopher.

“I imagine you kept track of all of the sex offenders in your jurisdiction, given the size of the town,” Christopher offered. Brubaker nodded, and his smile looked more sheepish than open.

“Not the kind of thing I had planned on bringing up, given the circumstances. As one police officer to another, though, I guess there’s no point in pussy-footing around it. I want you to know, regardless of my own feelings about him, I’m still sorry for your loss. I’m sorry as hell that I had to tell you over the phone. You need any help getting squared away with a funeral home, or anything else, you let me know.”

“That’s all right.” Christopher waved the offer off. “Detective Heavy Runner said that Peter worked for a local church, so I think I’ll start there. If he has any friends in town, I suspect they’ll be there. Any funeral will be more for them than for me. As for the rest....” Christopher shrugged. “I didn’t even know that there was a will or any property until I arrived tonight. I haven’t even read his will yet, much less thought about a lawyer.”

Brubaker nodded thoughtfully.

“I would rather fight off a mob of debt collectors than deal with a lawyer, or that house. The mess and clutter alone are going to take a week or more to sort through, if I can get the house aired out.”

Christopher finished the rest of the bottle of Gatorade.

“You’ve already been in the house?” Brubaker asked, glancing sideways at Doug.

Christopher shrugged. “I’m hoping to get it ready to sell by the time the probate stuff is done,” he explained. “Or at least get it aired out enough that I can walk through the front door without getting sick.” Doug took the empty bottle, put the cap back on, and chucked it

into a recycling bin about twenty feet behind them.

Christopher's gaze followed the bottle as it hit the bin and tumbled inside. "Nice."

Doug didn't worry about hiding his blush in the yellow glow. He should have been worried about why a little compliment from Christopher was enough to make him blush. But there would be enough time to worry about that, and to forget about it, once Christopher was gone. For now, Doug let himself just enjoy the soft glow that one stupid word caused him to feel.

"You're not staying in the house, are you?" Brubaker asked. "No. I'm going to go get a hotel. I just needed to blow off some steam."

Brubaker looked at the empty track. "I suppose that's one way to do it. If you want, most of the boys in the department stop off at the Hay Loft for a beer after the shift change. You should come by." "Sounds fun," Christopher agreed. "I want to get in a few more miles, though."

"More?" Brubaker squeaked. "Son, you're already soaked with sweat. You're gonna end up frozen, now that the sun is down." Christopher shrugged. "I admit it's cold. I guess I should hurry."

Then he was gone again. He took off at a speed that would have been close to a sprint for Doug.

"Shit," Brubaker whispered, his gaze never leaving Christopher. "I'll keep an eye on him," Doug said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"Right. Did you give him the key to the house?"

"Not yet. He needed this. I got him to sign paperwork for possession of the remains and personal articles, but I left everything on my desk. He's better now than he was an hour ago. Eh..." Doug looked at his watch. "Two hours ago."

"I'm off, then. Keep an eye on him. Make sure he gets to a hotel in one piece."

"Yes, sir."

"You're a good boy, Dougie."

"Good night," said Doug.

Doug resisted the urge to glare as the older man walked away. No matter how much the patronizing attitude annoyed him, Doug wasn't

about to fuck himself over by snapping about it. Brubaker meant well, and that alone was enough to defuse whatever anger Doug might have felt. Doug knew that the main reason Brubaker did it was to try to get Doug himself to let some of the formality go. He was the only detective who showed up for work in a suit, and he was the only one who bothered to add the occasional “sir” or “ma’am” to the end of a sentence. Doug wasn’t going to stop, though, no matter how over the top Brubaker got with the nicknames. It was better to act like a formal asshole than a shifty Indian. There was no middle ground.

It was easily another hour before Christopher staggered to a stop in front of Doug, breathing so hard that he could only manage a few half words. Doug moved toward him with the other bottle already open. “You alright?” he asked.

Christopher was standing with his hands on his knees. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but he’d decided talking was too much effort. He fell forward onto his knees. As his breathing slowed down, he finally seemed to notice that his breath was crystallizing in the air. He wasn’t shivering yet, but there were goose bumps on his bare, sweat-slicked arms.

Doug pressed the Gatorade toward him. Christopher took it with a grateful look and drained the whole bottle while Doug turned off the lights and closed the control box.

“Thank you,” said Christopher. “You didn’t have to stay.” Doug wanted to joke about hanging around hoping to get laid, but he thought better of it. “Did it help?”

Christopher slumped back to sit on the track and grinned. “I feel good. I’m cold, though. Fuck, if it gets this bad in the spring, I don’t think I’d survive a winter up here.”

“It’s not like there aren’t heaters. Come on.” Doug slipped an arm under Christopher’s and hauled the larger man to his feet. “I’ll give you a ride back to your car.”

The look of exhausted euphoria on Christopher’s face reminded Doug of just how adorable the man looked after sex. When Christopher pulled up his fake smile, Doug stopped cold. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything,” said Christopher, not meeting his eyes. Doug held him back. He let his hand slide over Christopher’s stomach and chest, even though they were in public. “You’ve got that

smile on your face.”

“I can’t smile?”

“It’s not a real smile,” said Doug. “I’m not quite sure what it is, but it is not a real smile.”

“Of course it’s a real smile. You’re weird.” Christopher slipped out of Doug’s arms and strolled toward the sidewalk, swaying his hips with each languid step.

Doug watched him walk away. Christopher’s ass really was incredible. Watching him run was incredible. Doug didn’t know any other way to describe it. The man’s powerful body moved with a speed and grace born of years of physical training. He was absolutely beautiful when he was in motion. Even though Doug had just spent roughly two and half hours watching Christopher run, he would have been perfectly happy to just keep on watching. Doug shook his head sadly, and then he jogged to catch up. They walked back toward the station quietly, both of them stealing glances at each other when they thought the other wasn’t looking. Dark storefronts lined the street across from the park, each one looking much the same as it had fifty years ago. Even though the stores themselves had evolved, with bookstores giving way to coffee shops offering free Wi-Fi, the stores still maintained the same small-town facades that attracted tourists, and they still kept the same hours they always had. So, at nearly nine o’clock, Doug and Christopher had the street to themselves.

“I think I’m going to go get cleaned up and then go get a beer. And food. Lots of food,” Christopher said, trying to sound cool and casual, despite the shivering. “I don’t suppose you might want to join me?” “For a beer? Or getting cleaned up?”

“Ah, you got me.” Christopher laughed. “How fucked up would you think I am if I said both?”

Doug thought about that seriously. “Do you think,” he said as he slowed down and looked up into Christopher’s eyes, “that I am any less fucked up, following you around hoping to get into your pants again? Given the circumstances, I mean.”

Christopher sighed and shivered. He folded his arms across his chest and bounced on the balls of his feet. “So long as I’m not the only one, it’s fine.”

Doug took Christopher back to his rental car and then followed him

to a hotel just south of town. After he checked in, Christopher dropped a duffel and a garment bag on the floor, then began stripping off his clothes as he hurried to the bathroom. Doug shut the room door and followed the trail of running clothes. He picked them up as he went and hung them over the hand towel rack by the sink, so they could dry completely. They weren't nearly as wet or as cold as Doug would have assumed, since his own experience with running clothes was limited to whatever cotton T-shirt happened to be near the top of his drawer at the time. He always ended up soaked after a jog.

Doug noticed that Christopher had left the bathroom door open, so he ducked his head inside. The shower was so hot the bathroom was already filling with thick steam. Christopher was standing under the spray, rubbing his left hand over his right arm to help the heat sink in faster. He held his right arm bent close to his chest, shielding it. Doug stripped off his suit and stepped into the shower behind him, pressing his chest, hips, and legs against Christopher's body. He felt like ice. Doug wrapped his arms around Christopher, holding him close. His entire body was shaking with lingering shivers. Doug rubbed his hands up and down Christopher's arms.

Heat slowly returned to the other man's body, and Doug felt the muscles in Christopher's back relax. Christopher let his head fall back, until he was leaning against Doug's shoulder. He held onto Doug's arms, wrapping them tighter around him. Even when the heat from the water and Doug drove the last of the chill from him, Christopher still shivered a little. Doug held him tighter, no longer focused on how hard and lean Christopher was, but on his shaking breaths. Doug held him as a single, half-choked sob escaped with those breaths. He just held him, until Christopher's breath became calm and the water became tepid. "I'm sorry," Christopher whispered. "I know this is going above and beyond.... But thank you."

Doug wasn't sure if Christopher was talking about his job with the sheriff's department or the role of weekend lover he was reluctant to abandon. Either way, he wasn't going to start that conversation. If Christopher needed him to be here, he wanted to be. He didn't know anything about the man other than that he was good in bed and was absolutely insane when it came to keeping in shape, but Doug knew that he wanted to be there for him tonight. If that meant helping him deal with

the emotional roller coaster of losing family, Doug would do it. Doug tensed and squeezed his eyes shut as he remembered the night he lost his mother. In a matter of months, colon cancer and the chemotherapy that was supposed to treat it wore her down until she was emaciated and frail. When it became clear that the radiation was doing more harm than good, she had refused all treatments except a feeding tube and painkiller, but by then she had needed more care than Doug could provide at home. He had gone to visit her every day in the nursing home as she became weaker and weaker. The night she died, he had been running late. She was dead when he walked through the door, but still warm and pink. The nurses said that they had just given her the evening dose of her medication not five minutes before. All Doug had been able to think about, at the time, was that he had been too late. Five minutes too late. Ten hours and a half a bottle of whiskey later, stuck in a house that seemed too empty to be real, Doug had stopped cursing being too late to say good-bye and instead cursed the fact he was completely

alone. He knew what it was like to face that reality all too well. “Not going above and beyond at all,” Doug insisted, kissing Christopher’s shoulder. “I thought I made it clear that this isn’t the type of thing I do to earn a living.”

Christopher groaned, but Doug felt a chuckle ripple through his chest. “You’re not going to let me live that down, are you?” “Absolutely not.” Doug grinned against Christopher’s back. “I just can’t believe that someone who looks like you could ever possibly be that hard up.”

“To pay for it? I’ve never paid for it, but there have been a few times when I’ve been desperate enough to think about it. For a chance to feel you inside of me, I... well, I might have.”

“Naughty, naughty.” He let one of his hands drift down over Christopher’s stomach and hips. “And you’re a cop too.”

“Honestly, if you had been willing, I would have gone to jail with a smile on my face. Some things are worth it.”

Doug was glad he was behind Christopher. He couldn’t help grinning like an idiot at that. “Just so long as it’s not *that* smile.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“Your fake smile. Your ‘the world is falling apart so I’m just going to sit back and wait for an entertaining explosion’ smile.”

He felt Christopher chuckle again. “It’s just habit. It always made things easier, before I met you.”

“I think I hate that smile.”

“You’re warm.” Christopher looped one arm up and around Doug’s neck.

Doug nuzzled Christopher’s shoulder, licking and nipping at the other man’s skin. “You’re amazing,” he whispered. “And salty.”

CHAPTER NINE

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“Do you want to move to the bed?” Doug asked. Christopher’s

response was a low, sultry growl that had Doug instantly hard. He shifted his hips back and then rocked forward against Christopher’s ass, grinding against the other man softly. “Oh God,” Doug gasped. “I can’t tell you how much I’ve thought about this since Saturday.”

“No God,” Christopher hissed, wiggling his ass against Doug while he caressed the back of Doug’s neck and hair with his left hand. “I don’t have a lot of rules, but that’s one of them. I don’t care what you believe, no talking about God during sex.”

“No God? That’s one I haven’t heard before, but I think I can manage.” Doug pressed harder against him, focusing on the slide of his cock against Christopher’s dripping skin. He rocked his hips back and let the tip of his cock drag over Christopher’s crack.

“It’s not a kink,” Christopher gasped, trying to shove his ass back hard. Doug held him steady, though. “You don’t like to bottom, I don’t like religion. I don’t talk about it, and I doubt you do, either....”

“All right.” Doug ran his fingers down the tight triangle of skin above Christopher’s groin and then teased the soft skin between Christopher’s thigh and his sac.

“Oh fuck!” Christopher rolled his head to the side.

“Is that what you want?” Doug smiled with his lips against Christopher’s pulse. Christopher’s response was another low groan. That sound went straight to Doug’s groin and nearly sent him over the edge. He cupped Christopher’s sac and worked his hand up the other man’s shaft. As he scraped his thumb over Christopher’s slit, Christopher shoved his hips back against him. Doug wasn’t sure how he ended up lined up so perfectly, since Christopher was taller than he was, but he only had to rock his hips up slightly to slip his cock past that tight ring of muscle. He kept rocking his hips, sinking in inch by inch, until he was buried balls deep inside Christopher.

It felt so incredible, so overwhelming, that Doug had to stand still and take a deep breath just to last for a few moments. He squeezed Christopher’s cock hard and sucked the tender spot on Christopher’s neck into his mouth.

A deep moan tore through Christopher's chest, and Doug bit down to keep himself calm. "Damn it, you feel too good...."

Another moan was Christopher's answer. Doug dropped his arm from around Christopher's chest and grabbed his hip. He bent Christopher forward, trying to get the perfect angle. Doug continued the slow rocking, reveling in the tight, hot friction. He didn't want it to end, but he also knew a couple of real thrusts would finish him. So he continued the maddeningly slow rocking and stroked Christopher hard.

"Please!" Christopher cried, trying to pull away slightly. Doug nearly slipped out of him. Hearing Christopher's desperation made Doug's head spin. He knew he couldn't draw it out this time. He snapped his hips forward and drove back into Christopher, pounding into him so hard that Christopher had to slap his hands onto the shower wall to steady himself. "Yes! Fuck yes!" Christopher cried out.

Hearing that was all it took. Doug pulled out until only the head of his cock was still inside Christopher, then he rammed back in. It took three full thrusts before the spring tightening inside Doug snapped. He exploded.

"Oh fuck!" Christopher bent forward, his entire body convulsing. Doug closed his fist around Christopher's tip and caught as much of the other man's come as he could. Doug rubbed his thumb over Christopher's slit, sliding the creamy liquid all over him to drag out the other man's orgasm.

When the trembling stopped, Christopher slumped forward and collapsed against the shower wall. "Shit," he said, laughing. "I was going to say 'let's go to bed', but you just had to let your hands wander...."

Doug kept his hands on Christopher, not wanting to let him go. He rubbed Christopher's back, stroking his fingers down the man's taut muscles gently. He slowed his fingers down and grazed over the fresh red scar. An egg-sized mass of swollen muscle trembled beneath the scar. Just grazing his fingers over it, Doug could feel it throbbing. He was coming back to reality fast, and he was distracted from Christopher's back by the feel of his own come seeping out of Christopher's ass, dripping over them both. He reached for the tiny hotel bottle of shower gel, worked up lather, and then washed Christopher's spent cock. When that was done, he washed Christopher's back, his ass, and his thighs, where Doug's come was sticking to him. Doug stared at the white liquid dripping out of Christopher's ass. He had never tried rimming, but the sight of that puckered hole leaking his come was quite possibly the most erotic and inviting thing that he had ever seen. That,

he realized a bit late, was why it had felt so incredible this time.

“Oops,” he whispered. “Uh, it’s a bit late to ask, but are you clean?”

Christopher glanced over his shoulder and looked down at Doug’s cock. He watched Doug wash himself clean and then let his eyes travel up Doug’s body.

“Oops is right.”

“You’re not?” Doug felt panic and bile rise in his throat simultaneously.

“I’m totally clean. It’s been a couple years, I always use protection, and I’ve had quite a few standard physicals since the last time.”

“Years?” Doug was shocked.

“Yes. I did tell you it had been a long time. What about you?”

“Yeah,” Doug said, smiling at him. “It hasn’t been years, but I’m usually a lot more careful than this, and I get tested every time.”

Christopher nodded, as though that resolved the issue. He took the soap from Doug, squeezed a bit into his hand, and washed the salt, sweat, grime, and come from the rest of his body. Doug set his hands on Christopher’s back again, enjoying the contrast of soft skin and tight muscle under his fingers. Christopher’s muscles tightened, but he didn’t tell Doug to stop, so Doug let his hands wander back to the swollen line of muscle in Christopher’s shoulder.

Doug returned his attention to the small circle of scar tissue that was still new enough to be red and angry. It was a match to the one on Christopher’s chest that Doug had found during their first night together. Seeing the matching scar, Doug was sure it was a bullet wound. Two inches away was a pink line of scar tissue that looked almost like an incision, except it was nearly a quarter of an inch wide in the center. Tiny white dots of scar tissue surrounded the line. Doug rubbed his thumb over the dots. The entire shelf of muscle beneath the two scars was shaking. It had to hurt like hell. “How old is this?”

“About four weeks, almost five.”

“You got shot.” It wasn’t a question, but Doug hoped for an answer anyway. Christopher sighed. “Yes.” He rolled his shoulders and rocked his head from side to side, stretching his neck. “Surgery too. They had to restitch the cut back there, because I kept tearing the stitches every time I moved. It sucked.”

“You weren’t kidding when you said you’ve had a shitty few weeks.” Doug ran his fingertips over Christopher’s shoulder and down the outside of his right arm. Christopher turned toward him with a rueful smile.

“Getting shot wasn’t so bad. Being stuck in the hospital nearly killed me. I get twitchy if I can’t run.”

“Twitchy,” Doug repeated. “Like that night in the bar. I don’t think you managed to hold your hands still for more than five seconds.”

“Exactly. Twitchy.” Christopher opened and closed his right fist again.

“Come on.” Doug reached around him and turned the water off. “Beer. Food. That kind of thing.”

“Food,” Christopher agreed.

“Do you need to take something for your shoulder?” Doug asked.

“No. It’s painkiller or beer, and I’d rather have a beer.” “Is that healthy?”

“Yes. Unhealthy would be taking a painkiller and then going out for a beer anyway.”

“Good point. Maybe later tonight I can help get some of the kinks out.”

Christopher shifted his back and hips experimentally. “Too sore for that,” he said with a pout. “But I wouldn’t mind the company.”

Soon they were both dressed. Christopher returned to the dark pinstriped suit that made Doug drool. He followed Doug out the door and hesitated at his tiny rental car.

“Should we take two cars?” Doug asked. He tried to keep his face neutral, to give Christopher an easy escape route if he needed it.

“Would you mind if I rode with you? I don’t want to read too much into this, so if you’d rather take separate cars... I mean, you don’t even have to come with me if you don’t want to...”

Doug shook his head and turned away from him, hoping Christopher wouldn’t take his smile the wrong way. Doug wanted to read too much into this. Reckless as it was, insane as it was, he wanted this. He hit the button on his keyfob until his truck honked. “Hop in.”

Instead of heading toward the driver’s side door, Doug followed Christopher. “Are you asking because... Well, are you sure you even want me to come along?” Doug asked. “We both know that this is just sex... that it can’t really be anything else. Would it make you feel weird, having dinner with me?”

Christopher cocked his head to the side. “I would like to have dinner with you. Sex doesn’t mean we can’t be friends, right?”

“I’d like to be friends.”

“Cool.”

Doug hurried around to his door, trying to ignore the feeling of relief that

washed over him. He drove them back into town, where they ended up at the Hay Loft. Every town, no matter how big or how small, has a bar that police tend to frequent, and the Hay Loft was Elkin's. All of the bar's regulars were deputies, highway patrol officers, firefighters, or other civil servants. No normal person stayed for long. A consequence of its limited clientele was that the Hay Loft never had a problem with underage drinking, all-out brawls, or people selling drugs out back.

Within twenty minutes of sitting down, nearly every off-duty officer in Elkin had introduced themselves, and Christopher and Doug found themselves crammed side by side at a table crammed with ten other people. Despite the fact they weren't obvious about their interest in each other, Doug's fellow officers fell back on the time-honored tradition of telling embarrassing stories about Doug.

"... so, not knowing the codes for an armed robbery were different, Dougie broke out his bulletproof vest, the paintball gun, and all of our pepper-spray rounds. He ran around the entire county, to the location of every traffic stop that day, ready to come to the rescue."

"Wait," Christopher said, between sips of beer, "if a two eleven in Montana isn't an armed robbery, what is it?"

"It's a blank code section," the old detective cackled. "We use it when a warrant check comes up clean during a traffic stop."

"Our version of a code four." Christopher laughed. "Damn, that had to be a hell of a first day."

Doug blushed and glared across the table at his coworkers. "It was a highway-patrol guy who finally told me the difference. These bastards would have let me run around like that for weeks."

Christopher laughed with the rest of them, and eventually Doug laughed too.

"You're lucky you didn't have my partner to deal with," Christopher said. "He'd have shown you where to check out riot gear, and then gotten it all on video. Now that he's got a smartphone, he can send a humiliating video to every single person on our team in thirty seconds."

Christopher listened to some more amusing stories about Doug's rookie days, shared a few stories of dealing with Mexican street gangs, and drank a lot more than he should have. Doug tried not to laugh when Christopher humiliated himself in a half-dozen games of darts, argued when highlights from recent baseball games aired on the bar's big-screen TV, and then spent

the rest of the night shooting pool.

Around midnight, half of the beepers in the room went off. Eight men groaned and shuffled out, following a slightly more sober older man.

“Volunteer fire department,” Doug explained to Christopher.

“But they’re drunk....”

Doug chuckled. “You’re drunk. They’re fine. Mostly.”

“I’m not drunk,” Christopher insisted. He bent down to take his next shot, missed the cue ball completely, and then dropped his head to the side of the table. “Alright. I’m drunk. But I also can’t feel a damn thing in my right hand, so this is tricky even when I’m sober.”

“How long has that been going on?” asked Doug, trying to recall if the risk of a heart attack was associated with numbness on the right or left side of the body. Then he felt stupid, because he knew it was the left and he was supposed to be able to calmly remember that kind of thing.

“It’s been numb since I got shot. Nerve damage, I think.” Christopher bent down and lined up another shot.

“You got shot?” one of the older detectives at the table beside them asked.

“Yeah. It’s a hell of a way to spend an afternoon. I don’t recommend it.”

“What happened?”

Christopher managed to hit the cue ball, but sent it careening into an empty section of the table. “We were eating lunch two blocks from a traffic stop that blew up. The suspect shot the traffic officer and fled on foot. I’m fast. I caught up with the guy and he shot me before I even got a warning out, and then my lazy-ass partner caught up and shot him. That’s all there is to it.”

“You can’t feel anything?” Doug asked.

“Just in these three fingers,” said Christopher, holding them up.

“That sucks,” the older detective muttered. “So, can you shoot with your left hand?”

He was having more trouble than usual keeping names straight, and he couldn’t recall this man’s name, so he just smiled. “To be honest, I haven’t tried. It’s only been about a month. I haven’t even been cleared for physical therapy, much less picked up a sidearm again.” When Doug missed his shot, Christopher swung his cue around and lined up his own shot. “If they stay numb, I’ve got to figure out how to shoot left-handed or take a desk job. I might get stuck as a training officer or something.” “That’s got to be hard,” another officer said from the crowd.

Christopher nudged the cue ball and watched it roll a whole six inches

before coming to rest in the middle of the table. "I have had too much to drink," he admitted.

"Well," said Doug, "whether you're drunk or not, I'm your ride home and I've got to work tomorrow."

"Nice meeting you, Chris," called one of the deputies. Three of the other officers he'd met also waved and called out good-byes.

When Doug got Christopher into the truck, he watched the way Christopher's head lolled to the side. When Christopher was exhausted, he really was too adorable for his own good. He drove them back to the hotel, helped Christopher into his room, and set him on the bed. Christopher just fell backward on to the bed, so Doug unlaced his shoes and then started helping him out of his suit.

"You should stay," Christopher whispered. "I want to fall asleep with you inside of me. I want to wake up to you fucking me. Can you?"

Doug knew Christopher was way too drunk to realize what he was asking. No matter how hot it sounded, Doug was pretty sure it would be impossible to fall asleep like that.

"Stay?" Christopher asked.

Doug didn't have a suit in his truck, just a pair of slacks and a T-shirt. He would have to get up in less than four hours to make it home in time to change and get back to work. But he wanted to indulge this insanity for one more night. For a few hours, he could hold onto Christopher and enjoy the rare comfort of just being close to someone. It had to be about sex, had to stay about sex, but for tonight, he could pretend that Christopher was a part of his life and not just passing through it.

Once he finally got Christopher down to an undershirt and briefs, Doug let him fall backward onto the bed. Christopher lay there for a moment, and then he burrowed under the blankets. Doug stripped down to his boxers and crawled under the covers with Christopher. As soon as he wrapped his arms around Christopher and pulled him close, he let sleep claim him. Doug felt warm lips and rough whiskers against his cheek before he fell into a deep sleep.

For once, it wasn't a nightmare that woke him up, but the sound of his phone ringing. He fumbled for his cell, trying not to disturb the man beside him. "Heavy Runner."

Beside him, Christopher blinked and sat up.

"Heavy Runner, it's Daniels. You were the one closing out the case file

on that Hayes suicide, right?”

Doug sat up quickly. “Yeah. What’s up?”

“Where’s the next of kin’s contact information? The only thing in the case file is his work phone.”

Christopher glanced up at him, his silent question tinted by amusement.

“No,” Doug said quickly, “I don’t have his contact information in the case file. I can find him on my way into town, though. I know where he’s staying. Why?”

“Someone burned down Peter Hayes’s house last night. The fire department called down to the FBI field office in Missoula for an arson investigator. They would like to chat with Mr. Hayes. And you. Where’s he staying? I’ll send a deputy out to pick him up.”

“No, I can get there faster. I’ll make sure he comes in. But”—he glanced at his watch—“I’ll probably miss the shift briefing.”

Doug hung up the phone.

“You look serious. You’ve got to go arrest someone?”

Doug looked away. “Not quite. I have to bring someone in for questioning. You remember that fire last night, the one they paged the entire fire department to deal with?”

“That was the *entire* fire department? For the whole town?”

“Yes.”

“I remember.”

“Your brother’s house burned down last night. They called in an arson investigator from Missoula. An FBI agent, apparently. He wants to talk to both of us this morning.”

“How the hell did an FBI agent get up here so fast? It took me all fucking day!”

“They’ve got an office in Missoula. If you just stay on the highway, it’s only a four-hour drive.”

Christopher glared at him. “He wants to talk to both of us?”

“That’s right. They want to talk to you because it’s technically your house. And me because I was the last one to have the keys.”

“An arson investigation,” Christopher muttered. “I knew my week just wasn’t complete yet.” He jumped out of bed and began to dig through his luggage. He pulled a nice brown suit out of his garment bag, and then pulled out another gray one. “Here.” He held up the brown one. “I should go home and get something of my own,” said Doug.

“So they can ask what took you so long? You can just bag it up and drop it at the front desk if it makes you feel really weird.”

Doug bit back the urge to say something. There wasn't time to panic about what was supposed to happen this morning. There wasn't time to dread an awkward good-bye, or to suffer a panic attack because the good-bye part didn't seem to be happening. There would be time for all that crap later. Right now, he needed to be as collected and professional as possible. Christopher seemed to realize that, too, because his *work mode* mask was already firmly in place.

Doug rocked forward as he realized what this would mean for him. He would have to explain that he had been with Christopher from the moment he stepped out of his car until his phone rang. The possibility of outing himself at work had just become inevitable. He couldn't lie to a federal arson investigator, and he couldn't let Christopher face the shitstorm that would come from not having someone to verify he hadn't set the house on fire when he was there. “What am I supposed to tell them?” Doug asked.

“The truth,” Christopher said automatically. “Don't act like a moron and try to hide the fact that you were here. I got drunk, you tucked me in, and you fell asleep. That is actually what happened.”

“Yeah, but...”

“We came here after my run, I got a hotel room, and I got cleaned up. You were in the room. Whether you think they need to know you were in the shower or not is up to you, but I don't intend to mention it.”

Doug rubbed his eyes and climbed out of bed, the rising panic ebbing. “God, you're right. I just... I'm not out, and I don't think anybody I work with would handle it well. Not to mention the town.”

“I'm not going to out you to the FBI,” Christopher promised. “Or myself, if it comes to that. Those fuckers never have a sense of humor.”

“I'll just shake out the jacket I wore yesterday. No one's going to notice. Do you have a clean shirt I could borrow?”

“There's a cream-colored shirt in the suit jacket. And no more *God* talk.”

CHAPTER TEN

AT LEAST the FBI had a dress code. Between Doug and the two federal agents, there were enough suits in the station that Christopher didn't look out of place. Unfortunately, for two hours he had been sitting at Doug's desk in the charge room, while Doug answered questions inside a small conference room. Christopher, like everyone else in the room, was trying very hard not to pay attention to the window in the conference-room door.

Christopher knew, from the way they had separated them for questioning, that the FBI was convinced the fire had been deliberately set. The firefighters wouldn't have called in an arson investigator if they didn't have evidence. Proper procedure would mean bringing Christopher in without giving him and Doug a moment to talk to one another, so they could compare both Doug and Christopher's accounts of what happened objectively. Both Christopher and Doug were being treated as potential suspects. Christopher wondered if being one another's alibi would clear them or get them both arrested.

They were following standard procedure, so Christopher couldn't hold it against them. He wasn't crazy about the way the skinnier of the two FBI agents kept staring at him through the window in the conference room door. The man's expression was utterly blank, and Christopher wasn't sure what to make of him. He had short black hair and two days of stubble on his jaw. He was taller than Christopher, which was rare by itself, and his suit hung off him. It would have looked bad if the man hadn't radiated such complete confidence that wearing a ruffled, oversized suit just made him look slim and fit.

Christopher tapped his foot until his calf muscle ached, and then he bounced his knee. Two hours with nothing to do but hang out with a room full of strangers had Christopher ready to start drumming his fingers on the desk.

When the door finally opened, Doug came straight toward him, with the skinny FBI agent following on his heels. Doug rounded the desk, nudged Christopher's thigh to the side, and pulled open the bottom drawer. He pulled out a file and handed it to the FBI agent without opening it. "You're welcome to use our copy machine. The key went back into the evidence locker last night," said Doug, walking away without even glancing at Christopher.

The FBI agent, however, stood there staring at him. His expression was still unreadable, but his gaze was open and curious.

"Mr. Hayes!" The second FBI agent appeared beside his partner and elbowed him in the ribs. "I'm Special Agent Allen Shaffer. This is Special Agent Elliot Belkamp, who is going to go make photocopies. Come with me."

There was no mistaking his words for a request. Christopher was just grateful for a chance to get up and move without looking as restless as he felt. He jumped to his feet and hurried ahead of the FBI agent, toward the conference room. He sat down in the chair that Doug had spent the last two hours stuck in, drummed his hands quickly over the table, the bottom of the chair, and then the table again, then tried to settle down.

"You all right?" Agent Shaffer asked, taking the seat opposite him.

"I don't sit still. It's physically impossible for me to do so without some kind of restraint system. It would probably be classified as a high functioning form of ADD, except I can't sit still long enough for a diagnosis." When the FBI agent didn't even smile, Christopher forced himself to settle down. "Can I ask you a question?"

"I might not be able to answer, but you can ask."

"Are you required to have your sense of humor surgically removed to join the FBI, or is it optional?"

"That was a joke?" Agent Shaffer asked.

Christopher pressed his lips together tight. "I guess it wasn't," he muttered.

"Sorry," Agent Shaffer said as he pulled out a legal pad and a pen. "It's been a long night."

"It's ten in the morning."

"Yes, that's how long a night it's been."

"Sorry to hear that," said Christopher, well aware that leaving the windows in Peter's house open had probably contributed to the man's long night. Christopher sat back and studied the man carefully. He was tall and broad,

but not quite as tall as Christopher or his dark-haired partner. He had military-short auburn hair, hazel eyes, and a bright red goatee showing a hint of gray.

“I heard you like to run,” Agent Shaffer said in a friendly voice. The man tried to smile, but Christopher could see nothing but stress and strain in his eyes.

That wasn’t what Christopher was expecting. That was the type of bullshit investigators pulled when they were trying to set their suspect up: a half hour of friendly conversation hoping their suspect will slip up and say something stupid, then they could press him on the slip up and try to convince him they were on his side because they’d spent a whole thirty minutes chatting. No wonder they had spent two hours asking Doug to tell them about a single night. “I do,” said Christopher, trying to keep a passive look on his face.

“I googled you,” Agent Shaffer explained. “You’ve run some major races.”
“Yes.”

“That’s awesome. I wish I could run like that. I did a few marathons when I was younger, but now my knees just won’t hold out for much more than a 5K. I nearly shit myself when I saw that you’d finished Western States and Leadville—those are insane.”

“Is this an interview, or do you want recaps of the last Rock ’n’ Roll Marathon?” Christopher asked, not smiling.

“Yeah, okay. I just thought it was cool.” Special Agent Shaffer shrugged. Maybe Christopher was overreacting. He probably was. The guy might not actually talk to suspects that often. He might actually want recaps of the last big San Diego marathon. “Look,” he offered, “I’m not trying to be an asshole. If you want to talk running, I’d love to, but not here and not now.” The door to the conference room opened, and the skinny FBI agent let himself in and shut the door behind him. *Elliot Belkamp*. Christopher repeated the name in his head.

“So what brought you up to our neck of the woods?” Special Agent Shaffer asked.

“My brother killed himself. I’d have left him up here to rot, but I was on medical leave anyway. I thought it might be a good excuse for a change of scenery, if nothing else.”

“Medical leave?” Shaffer flipped through the sheets on his notepad. “You’re a certified peace officer in the State of California?”

“That’s correct.”

“Why are you on medical leave?”

“Is that relevant?”

“I don’t know,” the agent admitted. “That’s why I asked.”

“I was injured in an officer-involved shooting last month.”

“You were shot?”

Christopher kept his features neutral, but he was trying to imagine other ways to get hurt in an officer-involved shooting. “Yes,” he said finally.

Special Agent Belkamp snorted.

“When are you planning on going back to work?”

Christopher shrugged. “When the doctors tell me I can.”

“So you *will* be able to go back to work? Your captain said you had some doubts about that.”

Christopher was careful not to look surprised. “I do. And if my doctor tells me I’ll never go back into law enforcement, I’ve also got my secondary-school teaching credentials for California. I’ve got subject credentials in English and physical education.”

“Really?” Shaffer couldn’t hide the look of disgust that flashed over his face. “From Homicide to a high school gym?”

“And here I thought you were thorough.” Christopher leaned forward and set his elbows on the table. “No California school district has funding for gym anymore. I’d like to teach English. I would have to take a few refresher courses first.”

Special Agent Shaffer scribbled a few illegible notes. “So were you and your brother close?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“About two decades ago.”

“Two decades ago?”

Christopher nodded.

“So you didn’t grow up together?”

“Until I left, we did.”

“You left?”

“Yes.”

“You’re thirty-two. You left home at twelve?”

Christopher knew the man was just parroting him, trying to get him to elaborate. He didn’t want to elaborate, but he had a feeling this guy just wasn’t going to let it go. “I just turned thirty-three. There is a basic

assumption in that question that is incorrect,” said Christopher calmly. “We didn’t have a home. I left *him*.”

“You were homeless? Was he your only family?”

“Technically, we were in a reputable foster home, run by a local minister.”

“But you ran away from the foster home?”

“I did.”

“Why did you run away?”

Christopher opened his eyes and glared at the man. “Is that relevant?”

“Again, I don’t know.”

Christopher kept his gaze locked on Special Agent Shaffer’s. “I ran away after my brother raped me. In all fairness, he had refused to let our foster father do it. He was beaten and brutally raped instead, and I ran away to hide and to wait for my big brother to come find me. If I had had any clue about the nature of cyclic violence, I probably would have seen it coming. Afterward, he felt so guilty he sat there crying. He told me to run away and never look back. I ran.”

Christopher didn’t look away from the other man’s gaze. He glared at him, daring him to say something with the same mocking sympathy Christopher had heard every time he admitted to being an adult survivor of child abuse. He absolutely refused to look at Agent Belknap.

“Did you go to the police, or to CPS?” Shaffer asked.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t think you did.”

Christopher laughed. “Special Agent Shaffer, your assumptions in this conversation are all seriously flawed. I did. I told them everything. Unfortunately, the only actual evidence I could provide incriminated Peter. My CPS caseworker agreed that I was traumatized. They said I was transferring responsibility for what happened from Peter to our foster father in my head. Peter went to juvie, not prison, though, because he was a minor. I went to a foster family in another part of the county, an older couple who were both retired teachers. They believed me. They helped me through it. They helped me go to school and insisted I keep coming to Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner after I turned eighteen. They even stopped saying grace at the table because it freaked me out so much I couldn’t eat.”

“They sound like nice people.”

“They were. They both passed away over the past few years.”

“I’m sorry,” Agent Shaffer whispered.

Christopher dropped his glare. "It's fine. Can we get on with this now?"

"Did you know that your brother lived here in Elkin?"

"No."

"How did you find out?"

"The sheriff called to tell me he'd died. Frankly, I was surprised he was out of prison."

"When did you arrive here in Elkin?" Agent Shaffer asked.

"Yesterday. Around five. I got lost."

"Got lost?"

"Yes. I flew into Missoula on Saturday. Missoula has curry, good beer, and some great running trails. I figured the morgue would be closed until Monday anyway, so I stayed there and enjoyed the trails. Then my GPS somehow turned a four-hour drive into a twelve-hour drive through someplace called Big Fork."

"Big Fork?" Agent Belkamp asked.

"It's a bit out of the way." Agent Shaffer chuckled.

"Yeah, yeah. Purchasing a map is on the agenda. I got that lecture yesterday."

"So you arrived in town at five?"

"Yes. The GPS managed to get me straight to the morgue once I was in town. I was running so late that I caught Douglas as he was leaving."

"That's right.... How long have you and Detective Heavy Runner been friends?"

Christopher thought about the question. He shrugged. "I couldn't say."

"How did you two meet?"

"We were the only big-city cops in a Montana bar," said Christopher. It was a gamble, but he was confident that they would assume he meant they met at the Hay Loft.

"Big-city cops?"

"He worked Miami," Christopher said idly. "Opposite coasts, different gangs, different issues—but it's still the same animal, you know?"

"Miami? I assumed he was Native American." Agent Shaffer laughed. "I figured he was trying to pretend he wasn't from the reservation by moving a whole twenty miles north."

Christopher didn't smile. He froze. The twitching, that he so often disguised with flamboyant conversational skills, stopped.

"Reservation?" Agent Belkamp asked.

“The Salish and Kootenai tribes,” Agent Shaffer tried to explain. “Nothing but drunks and assholes. Ah, never mind. He just transferred out here from California a few months ago,” he said, pointing a thumb at his partner.

Christopher let his glare intensify on its own again. He didn’t make any attempt to hide it with a smile. He sat back and folded his arms across his chest.

“So you’re old friends?” Agent Shaffer said carefully. He was quiet for a moment, and Christopher had a feeling he was either waiting for Christopher to confirm that he knew Doug previously or to clarify that they’d just met. Christopher stayed quiet. He had no way to know exactly what Doug had told them, and the worst thing he could do right now was to say the opposite.

“And he was waiting for you at the morgue?”

“He was waiting for Peter’s next of kin, yes. Afterwards, I looked at some of the coroner’s photos and then he took me to my brother’s house. I didn’t do so well with the smell. I’m not sure if it was the cats or just rotting food, but it smelled like something crawled in there and died. I opened up the windows on the first floor, and then I had to get out before I got sick. I touched the blinds, the window frames in the living room, the wall between the kitchen and the living room, the window frames in the kitchen, the refrigerator, and the kitchen counter—but nothing else.”

“Aren’t you a homicide detective? You can’t handle the smell of a litter box?” This was from Agent Belkamp.

“I even tried some of that menthol rub,” Christopher snapped. “It was that bad.” Christopher went on, telling both FBI agents about returning to the police station to sign paperwork, his run, checking into his hotel room, and then going out for a beer and dinner with Doug. He avoided any mention of sex, or any mention of any kind of contact at all, but he confirmed that Doug was with him the entire time.

“He spent the night in your hotel room?” Agent Belkamp asked. For the first time, Christopher thought he could detect a hint of a smile on the stoic man’s face.

“Yes” was all Christopher said.

“Have you been by your brother’s house this morning?”

“No. I figured this was more important. Plus, I’m not sure if even a fire would be able to cover up that smell.”

“Have you looked at your brother’s will?”

“No, not yet. It’s been a whole fourteen hours, though, so I’ve got no excuse. I’m just lazy.”

“Do you have a copy of it with you?” Before Christopher could answer, Agent Belkamp slipped his partner two photocopies. “Ah, here we go.” Instead of looking at the photocopies, though, he shuffled them under his legal pad.

“So.” Christopher leaned back. “Any idea how the fire started?”

“Oh yes,” Agent Shaffer said casually. “Accelerant-based burn patterns are the easy part. Mr. Hayes, we’d obviously like you to stay within Baker County until we’ve concluded our investigation. Since you’re still arranging your brother’s funeral, I presume that won’t be a problem?”

“I’ll stick around,” Christopher agreed. He recognized his cue to leave.

“Here.” Agent Shaffer handed him a business card. “Just in case, could you write down your phone number too?”

“My boss didn’t give you my number?” Christopher didn’t wait for an answer. He wrote his cell number down on the legal pad. “I turn my phone off a lot, so you might have to leave a message.”

Christopher didn’t want to look Doug in the eye as he left the conference room. He could almost feel the eyes of Agent Belkamp on them, along with the eyes of every other officer in the charge room. Doug wasn’t fazed by it at all, though Christopher could tell he knew everyone was watching them. He was, as Christopher expected, utterly professional.

“That probably wasn’t how you were planning on starting the day,” said Doug. He pulled out the case file on Christopher’s brother, the same one he had handed to Agent Belkamp just fifteen minutes before. Inside was a worn-looking manila envelope. Doug didn’t open the envelope. Instead, he carefully secured the clasp and passed it to Christopher. “This is his will and the note he left. The key was originally taped to the outside, but the feds took it. I’ll get them to sign a receipt for it, if you want.”

“I don’t even know if there’s still a door,” Christopher reminded him.

“That would make the key a bit moot. It’s still sealed, anyway,” said Doug.

“But at least you can start the probate process.”

Christopher rubbed his eyes and sighed. “A morning interrogation and an afternoon of dealing with lawyers. If I could schedule a root canal before dinner, this might just make my list of my best days ever.”

Doug pointed at him calmly. “That’s the smile.”

“Yeah, I get it now.” Christopher tucked the envelope under his arm and put his hands into his pockets. “Well, thanks for your help, Detective HeavyRunner. Give me a call if you need to follow up on anything.”

Christopher didn’t wait for Doug to say yes or no. He pulled out a pen and wrote his phone number on a blank legal pad on Doug’s desk, then turned and walked away. He was being stupid, and as soon as Doug looked at the legal pad, he was going to think Christopher was pathetically desperate. Beneath his phone number, he scribbled the word *anytime* and underlined it. Then he got the hell out of there. He didn’t even look back.

“Oh!” Doug shot up from his chair and raced to catch up to Christopher. “I forgot about Liedes!”

Christopher stared at him, both eyebrows raised. “Liedes?”

“I don’t have his number,” said Doug, taking the manila envelope back and writing out the minister’s name. “But he was your brother’s boss and probably his minister too. John Liedes. He runs the Mission Mountains Evangelical Church. You should get in touch with him about a service.” On the envelope, separate from where he wrote the minister’s name, Doug wrote *Tomorrow night*, and then he jotted down his own number.

“John Liedes,” Christopher read off the envelope. He grinned. “I’ll look him up.”

Christopher found a nice-looking diner, ordered a lot of coffee and the biggest lunch they served, and then looked up phone numbers for funeral homes and lawyers. He looked up the minister, got as far as typing the man’s number into his phone, and then set his phone down again. He called the first funeral home on the list instead. It took about an hour, but soon he had a funeral director who agreed to take care of everything, an appointment to go over the funeral details the next morning, and an appointment to meet with an attorney that afternoon. He had also agreed to pay out a huge chunk of his savings for the funeral and a legal retainer, but that couldn’t be helped.

By the time the diner began to fill for lunch, Christopher had run out of things to accomplish. Calling Peter’s minister was the last thing on the list. He stared at the name of the minister again, dialed the number, and hit the send button. He shut his eyes and let the phone ring, absolutely refusing to let himself feel anything. He was drumming his fingers on the table so fast his silverware clattered on his plate. The waitress, who had very patiently kept refilling his coffee, slipped the plate off the table. She had obviously

overheard some of his conversations, because her smile had gradually evolved from flirtatious to sympathetic.

As the ringing continued, Christopher felt the muscles in his back and shoulder tighten and cramp again. He should have taken a muscle relaxer and painkiller that morning. It would have left him too groggy to deal with the interrogation, and far too messed up to drive, but he would pay for not taking one by the end of the day.

“Thank you for calling Mission Mountains....” Christopher collapsed back against the booth as a woman’s voice told him that the office was empty and invited him to leave a message. He managed a choppy message and hung up without leaving his number.

The waitress set a slice of chocolate pie in front of him. “Always makes me feel better,” she said quietly.

Christopher stared down at the gigantic slice of chocolate cream pie, drooling. Missing breakfast after a long run was never a good idea. Christopher usually needed all the calories he could get, and even after the lunch he’d eaten, he was still hungry. “I think this is just what I needed.” A strong narcotic and a deep-tissue massage would help too, but Christopher would have to figure that out on his own.

“He’s great, you know. Reverend Liedes. If you need someone to talk to, he’s sure to help.”

“Is he a good guy?”

“He’s a great minister.”

Christopher knew better than to argue that he didn’t think it was possible to be a great minister and a good man. He never argued about religion with anyone. They inevitably wanted an explanation for why he hated something so basic and comforting. The few times he had told people, they’d insisted it wasn’t fair to judge every religious person in the world based on the crimes of a single man. Christopher knew they were right.

Christopher could fight back memories, he could block out the feelings and images and even smells of his past, but he could never block out the man’s voice. He remembered the man quoting long passages from the Bible while he was punishing them. At first, Christopher had only had to listen—listen to the man force himself on Peter, listen to him coach Peter in how he wanted him to move, how he wanted him to moan, and the things he wanted Peter to say. When Peter failed him, the Bible passages were about obedience. When Peter succeeded, they were about the sin of sodomy. He

never touched Peter without punishing him for it afterward.

Christopher nodded his thanks, took a bite of the pie, and chewed it slowly. He let the chocolate roll around on his tongue, knowing if he couldn't stop the flood of memories now, he wasn't going to be able to eat the pie at all.

It was too late. He felt like the world around him was frozen and growing dark. He found himself lost in one of the many memories he had of that alley near the church. In his mind, he saw Peter sitting beside him, his chin-length blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. That was the first night their foster father had turned to Christopher instead of Peter. It was before Peter had ever tried to touch him, when Christopher still thought Peter was protecting him. Looking back, he now knew Peter hadn't done anything to stop the man from grabbing Christopher by the back of his head and shoving his cock down Christopher's throat. He also hadn't done anything to stop the beating that followed. Christopher had never blamed his brother then. He thought Peter was just as scared as he was. Peter had carried him out into the alley, set him down against the wall, and sat down beside him.

He told Christopher the beating was his own fault for throwing up. When Christopher said it was gross, and that it hurt, Peter laughed at him. He laughed so long Christopher felt like hitting him. Being ten, he tried. Peter just shoved his fist aside and rubbed his hair until it was a complete mess. Peter told him not to fight the next time, and not to throw up.

Christopher remembered he hadn't wanted there to be a next time. He asked why they didn't just run away, why they didn't at least try.

"They'd bring us back," Peter told him. "They would never believe us over him. He's a Man of God, Chris. We're just kids."

"They can't send us back if they can't find us!"

"He'd find us. Besides, where would we go?"

Christopher had known better than to suggest they look for their mom. For as long as Christopher could remember, she had always been too drunk, too high, or too busy with the dozens of men who passed through her life to take care of them. In all of Christopher's early memories, it wasn't their mom who helped him when he was hurt, or who fed him when he was hungry—it was always Peter. After school, when other kids ran to their mothers or grandmothers, Peter had been waiting for him.

Peter had pulled him close and kissed the top of his head. "When I'm old enough to get a job, we will. We'll run away and we won't look back."

Christopher stared down at the glob of chocolate mousse on his fork. How could he ever run far enough to forget what Peter had been? What Peter had become? Christopher had never stopped running and he still hadn't managed to get away from it all. He shut his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

"You okay, sweetie?" The waitress stopped by again.

"No." Christopher smiled. "Bad week, I'm afraid. This is delicious, but I don't think I have room to finish it. Could you box it up for me?"

"Sure."

Christopher took his pie and went back to his hotel. The hotel had a small gym, so he tried to lift weights. That turned the pain in his shoulder into a full-blown spasm, so he took a shower, swallowed two pills, crawled into bed, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE next day, checkbook in hand, Christopher met with the director of the funeral home, ate lunch at the same diner, and then met with an attorney. He didn't even read the will before handing it to the lawyer. Apparently, there was not only the house, but an old truck and a bank account too. The will said Christopher was listed as the beneficiary on the bank account, so he could access that immediately. The rest would require going to court, opening an estate account, and a million other mysterious things the lawyer seemed to brush off as trivial matters.

"Do we really need to go through all this? The house is in ruins, so it's not like there's anything left to inherit."

"If you choose not to probate the will, then eventually the property will revert to the state through eminent domain, and then be auctioned off. There is also the matter of the vehicle and accounts. If you are the account beneficiary, they don't have to go through the probate process. The title to the vehicle will. Also, I'm sure the house was insured," his lawyer pointed

out. “The insurance adjuster will no doubt want the police to finish their investigation before settling any claim, but money will go to the estate if the investigation is concluded in your favor.”

“In my favor?”

“Obviously, no insurance contract allows a party to benefit from their own acts.” The lawyer smiled as though the implication that Christopher was an arsonist was somehow funny.

“Well, then, we shouldn’t have a problem. I admit I didn’t want to clean that place up, and lighter fluid and a match might have been the most efficient way to deal with it, but I didn’t have that much forethought. And there’s no truck there.”

The lawyer spun the will on his desk and pointed to a small clause after the description of the house. “A 1998 Toyota Tacoma?”

Christopher shook his head. “There’s no truck there.”

“Perhaps he left it up at Lone Pine?” the lawyer suggested.

“No. The police would have impounded the vehicle if they had found it near the body. Maybe he sold it after he signed the will. Also, he might have had a roommate. One of the local detectives said something like that.”

“I’ll run a title search and check to see if the title has been transferred to a new owner,” the lawyer agreed. “If it hasn’t, you’ll have to report the vehicle as stolen.”

Christopher bet there would be another insurance investigation to go along with it. “How much more would I have to pay you to just deal with the entire process and call me when everything is disposed of?”

“We can work something out,” the lawyer said smoothly. Christopher had a sinking feeling he had just bargained away more of his savings than he had expected. Still, it would be worth it to be able to get back to California and forget about Peter altogether.

“I won’t be needing this, of course,” the lawyer said, passing the manila envelope back to him. “Just the will.”

Christopher opened the envelope wide and peered inside. The only other thing in there was a single sheet of notebook paper. A bit late, he remembered Doug saying that Peter had left the classic suicide note. He had seen a few over the years, and they all tended to repeat the same self-pitying apologetic ranting. They always echoed feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and shame. As a teenager, his foster parents had taken him to a therapist who insisted he fill up page after page of what amounted to the same thing. He

had filled up notebook after notebook with every negative thought he had for years. He'd hated it, and he had thought of it as nothing but a chore by the end. But it was a chore that had kept him sane and functional, and it had probably kept him from hurting himself or the people around him.

Every time he read something similar, though, it just made him angry. He was often the one who had to deal with the grieving families who were in shock and denial. They were usually angry when they found a suicide note, and Christopher couldn't help but wonder how, if these people cared enough to get angry and upset when their loved one died, they never noticed any of the warning signs, never noticed their suffering. The worst for Christopher were the teenagers. Kids who were just as messed up as he had once been, and who had called out for help just as he had, or who had been desperate for someone to notice their misbehavior as a sign that something was wrong. Too often their families wrote off their teen's depression as drama, they even wrote off failed suicide attempts as a cry for attention, and rather than getting their kid the help and attention they needed, withdrew from them completely. Then, when the next suicide attempt was successful, they were stunned and angry.

He shut the envelope and tucked it under his arm. He would deal with it all later, when he didn't need to keep himself together.

Once the meeting with the lawyer was over, Christopher drove around Elkin, trying to get a feel for the town to avoid getting lost on a run. He tried to match up the streets with the grid on his GPS. He didn't mean to drive by the house, but he did anyway. There were several official-looking vans and sedans with federal plates parked outside the charred frame that had been Peter's house. Yellow crime-scene tape surrounded the entire property, and Christopher could see two different teams with dogs working through the debris.

He parked across the street and got out. As he approached the tape, he recognized several members of the local sheriff's department, including Sheriff Brubaker. They were standing outside the tape watching the dog teams work. Christopher said hi and joined them, hoping to find out what the feds had found that warranted bringing in an entire forensics team. Before he even got a chance to fish for gossip, Brubaker tapped him on the shoulder and cocked his chin down the sidewalk. Christopher followed him until they were about twenty feet away, where Brubaker shoved his hands into his pockets and looked back at the closed-off property.

“Son,” he said sadly, “do you have any idea how big of a can of worms you’ve split open? You know they ain’t going to bring in this kind of operation for an insurance fire.” Brubaker shook his head and kicked the sidewalk with a muffled growl. “And they’re not saying a word about it. In my own fucking town...” He looked at Christopher intently. “Are you absolutely sure you didn’t do anything but open the windows?”

Christopher felt his mouth drop open. It took a minute for the world to stop reeling. Then he shut his mouth. “What are the dogs looking for?” he asked. “Hell if I know. They ain’t even said hello, much less bothered to respect our fucking jurisdiction. Are you absolutely sure you didn’t go anywhere but the livingroom?”

“I went into the kitchen too. I opened every window I could find. Two in the living room, two in the kitchen,” Christopher insisted. “I checked for rotting food too. My prints would be on the door of the fridge, the windows, and the counter. I told them everything I touched. Plus, Doug Heavy Runner was with me the whole time.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” When Christopher gaped at him, he smirked. “Think about it, son.... The house was empty for two weeks, and then it burns down right when you show up to move in. If you were called into investigate that fire, who would you want to talk to first?”

“Whoever had access to the scene,” said Christopher quickly. Then his brain caught up with his mouth. “Doug. It was his case and he had the key.” Brubaker nodded slowly.

“But due process will clear him,” Christopher insisted.

“Will it?” Brubaker looked surprised. “Because so far, the only thing those feds back at the station are convinced of is that there’s a huge chunk of his weekend that he’s not willing to talk about. Did he say anything to you on Monday?”

Christopher wanted to track Doug down and smack him. The man was so far in the closet that he had gotten too used to lying about who he was. If it came down to being arrested and held until the investigation was over, or telling a few federal agents he preferred men, it shouldn’t have been a difficult choice. What did it matter if he told them they had spent the weekend fucking each other senseless?

Brubaker looked back at the house. “If he said something to you, son, I’ve got to know.”

Christopher shrugged. “Nothing. Is he at the station? I need to talk to

him about my brother's truck anyway."

"Truck?"

"There was one listed in the will. I don't know if he sold it, never owned it, or if someone took it."

Brubaker nodded slowly. "Pete drove a white single cab. Older truck, but I don't remember seeing it sitting around like a junker. I didn't even think about that. Maybe Dougie had it hauled down to the impound yard and just forgot."

The use of his brother's first name hit Christopher hard. It left a hollow feeling in his stomach. He wasn't going to get upset over Peter, not again. The man was so far beyond an asshole that he wasn't worth mourning. Whatever Peter had been to him when they were children didn't matter—nothing about the man Peter had become was worth crying over.

"Son, are you all right?" Brubaker asked, nudging him in the shoulder.

When Christopher opened his eyes, he saw the sheriff staring between him and the burned-out house. Twenty feet behind the sheriff, in the shadow of two tall pine trees, was a skinny young man with dark blond hair. He was in ragged jeans, a dirty T-shirt, and a black leather biker vest that looked like it had been through hell. Christopher would have guessed his age to be around eighteen, but he could have been younger. He was staring at them both, his face pale and frightened.

When Christopher met the boy's gaze, the boy bolted. Brubaker turned around to see what Christopher was looking at, but by then the boy was gone.

"I said, are you all right?"

Christopher nodded. "Yes. Like I said, I've got to go ask Doug about the truck. And I've still got to try and organize a funeral."

Christopher started walking back toward the house, and Brubaker fell into step beside him. Christopher wondered just how much access he had to the federal investigation. He probably had access to more than he would admit to. The more people who knew about the investigation, the more likely it was that there would be interference and chain-of-custody problems for any evidence the FBI did find.

"I'll call and let him know you'll be by later. Take care of yourself," said Brubaker, returning to his men while Christopher crossed the street back to his rental car.

There was only one thing left on his to-do list, and it was the one task he

dreaded most.

A large white and orange warehouse took up half of a city block—it was hard to miss. Reader boards on each corner announced the name of the church, and the times of services, Bible study, Sunday school, and skate-park hours. Beside the church was a parking lot nearly as large as the building itself, and behind it was a large grass field. Well-used playground equipment sat in one corner of the field. Another section was dominated by a wood and concrete skate park, complete with a giant half pipe. The entire area was empty at the moment.

Christopher parked in the lot near a familiar-looking blue luxury car. He got out of the car and stared at the building, trying to force himself to step toward the two large metal double doors. He wasn't sure how much time he wasted standing there. When he'd just about decided to give up and get back into his car, the doors opened from the inside. A very large man in a meticulous cream-colored suit stepped out backward, then pulled the door shut and locked it behind him. He turned around, keys in hand, and froze when he saw Christopher standing in the parking lot. The man cocked his head to the side, his white hair swishing with the movement. He strolled up to Christopher as if they were old friends.

"I should have guessed that was you on Monday," he said, without any kind of introduction.

"Excuse me?"

"I imagine you know you're nearly the spitting image of your brother. Or you would have been, if either of you had lived different lives. You are Chris, aren't you?"

"I am Christopher Hayes, yeah. I haven't gone by Chris since I was a kid."

The fat man nodded. "He always called you Chris, when he spoke about you."

"You're John Lieder?"

"That I am, that I am. I assume you're here to talk about arrangements for Peter's funeral?"

"I... I was," said Christopher. "But I don't know that a funeral is such a good idea. Mostly, I came because I heard he worked for you, and I didn't know who else might know if there is anyone in town who would want a service. I already contacted a funeral home, and I told them this was his church. I hope that's all right?"

"Of course it is," Lieder said with a smile. "And to be honest, I don't know if

a public service is the best idea either. It's been plaguing me, though. I keep looking back to the last few times I saw him and wondering why I didn't notice anything different, why I didn't catch the signs that he was thinking about hurting himself."

"If he was ever honest about his past, you might not think it was all that much of a tragedy," Christopher muttered.

The minister shrugged gently. "I believe he was honest. I can't imagine any man would want to claim the things he talked about. You don't need to convince me that he made mistakes, or he did terrible things. I'll tell you this, though—I hear a lot of people pray for forgiveness every day, but I don't hear all that many sinners actually repent. I don't hear true guilt in many voices. He was always sorry. He always loved you."

Christopher ground his teeth together and tried to control his rising anger before answering. "Do you really think that saying sorry to some myth, just to make himself feel guilty, somehow makes amends for the things he did?"

"You don't believe in the Lord?"

"No," Christopher said quickly. "My life is a hell of a lot better without any god."

"May I ask, how so?"

"Because if I believed, I would never be able to stop being angry. If my childhood, if Peter's life, was all part of some divine plan, then, Reverend, I think I would have to devote my entire existence to finding a way to kill whatever fucked-up holy father orchestrated it all. Life as an atheist means I've got no one to blame but the actual people responsible, and I don't have to go through each day feeling like the entire universe is in the hands of a sadistic monster who likes to torture innocent children as a punishment for the sins of their supposed ancestors!"

Liedes shook his head, but he was smiling. "Every parent plans for their children to grow up strong, good, and successful. They put money into college savings accounts, then make heirloom quilts for grandchildren they may never have. If they have a plan that doesn't come to fruition, it doesn't mean they themselves are held accountable for the crimes their adult children commit."

"Your god decided that children should be held accountable for original sin, so shouldn't accountability go in both directions?"

"I suspect we're going to have to agree to disagree on this one," Liedes said

with a diplomatic and patronizing smile.

“I suspect you’re right. It’s not something I talk about, usually. You asked why; I told you.”

“So I did. I can perform a secular service, if you’d like. There are a few people who might like to attend. The staff here at Mission Mountains, I know, would like a chance to say good-bye. Speaking of”—Liedes nodded to a small, beat-up pickup truck slowly turning into the parking lot. The driver slowed the truck down and stopped about fifty yards away from them. Behind the wheel of the truck, a young man in a black leather biker vest gaped at them with his mouth open. Then he shifted the truck into reverse and pulled out of the parking lot fast enough to make the tires squeal.

“Who is that?” Christopher asked. “I saw him outside my brother’s house, not even an hour ago, and that truck looks like an old white Toyota, like—” “It Peter’s.” Liedes confirmed what Christopher had already guessed. “The young man’s name is Micah.” The old man shut his eyes and grimaced. “He worked here part time while he was in high school. Peter taught him to drive a stick. He said Micah was planning on buying his truck from him. He’s been upset, since Peter died. I’m surprised he didn’t stop—I know he wanted to meet you.”

“Did he have a key to Peter’s house?”

The grimace deepened. “I’m sure I don’t know.”

“How old is he?”

“Nineteen. And before you start making assumptions, I don’t know if they were involved... like that. Micah was teased in school for being queer, ever since he was fourteen. Peter was the only other openly gay man in Elkin. Micah needed a role model who wasn’t some kind of flaming drag queen like they show on television.”

“You can’t be saying what I think you’re saying.... You sent a young gay man to a pedophile because he needed a role model?”

“Peter’s crimes were horrible,” Liedes said as he backed up slightly, “but they were decades ago. He worked for me for years, off and on, and I never allowed him to be alone with any child, including Micah. I never encouraged Micah to so much as speak to Peter, but I did point out how Peter was gay but still a man. He was still strong, worked with his hands, and he watched football like everybody else. Children do grow up, though. And with Peter gone, does it matter now?”

Rage was not the appropriate way to respond to this situation, Christopher’s

brain told him. Under no circumstances would it be appropriate to pick this asshole up and throw him into a wall. Not that Christopher could; the man was probably twice his weight. A lecture about the methods of pedophiles might be enlightening, along with a few nasty comments about how people like Peter framed their abuse so even their victims thought what happened between them was either consensual or their own fault. Christopher even thought about explaining just how often victims grow up to be abusers themselves, particularly when no one steps into tell them that it shouldn't have happened in the first place.

"How about we plan on next weekend? Saturday, maybe around ten? That way I can announce it at my Sunday and Wednesday services, and give the funeral home a chance to run an announcement in the paper. Which funeral home did you decide on? You going with a burial or cremation?"

"Mortens," said Christopher, before he could think better of it. "Cremation."

Liedes nodded. "I'll give them a call. Are you planning on interring the ashes, or scattering them?"

Throwing Peter's ashes in the trash probably counted as scattering. "Definitely scattering."

"I assume you're going to want something outside of the church? We can use Morten's. They've got a lovely little room for wakes and viewings. It should be available—I know I would have heard if they had any other business this week."

"That'll be fine," said Christopher, remembering Micah's frightened expression. "I'm sorry, Reverend, there's something else I need to take care of before five. Can I stop by Monday to go over the details?"

"How about Wednesday? Anytime in the afternoon would be fine."

"Wednesday." Christopher nodded. He waved absently and got back into his car.

When he got to the sheriff's department, he learned that Doug was once again stuck in the conference room with the two FBI agents. Christopher said hello to some of the deputies who were stuck in the charge room and sat down on Doug's desk. He waited a whole ten minutes before he couldn't keep himself from bouncing and walked out. He wandered back to the park where he had gone for a run on Monday. In the late-afternoon sun, the park was packed. The playground was full, a little league team was on the baseball diamond, and half a dozen guys were shooting hoops.

Christopher was a bit surprised when one of the guys playing basketball called to him by name and waved him over. Soon, Christopher was meeting the entire Elkin Volunteer Fire Department again, and was making a complete fool of himself playing alongside them. It was definitely not his sport, but at least he had the stamina to keep up with them. By the time he began to sweat, he was already feeling better. He managed to outpace an older fireman and took a shot from the three-point line. Every one of them groaned and laughed as it sailed over the backboard and bounced into the grass beyond. "I never said I could actually play!" Christopher said, laughing with them.

He ran off the court to get the ball. When he turned around, he saw Doug, along with both FBI agents, watching from the sidewalk. Special Agent Belkamp had his arms folded across his chest in obvious impatience. Christopher passed the ball back to the firefighter and jogged over to them. "Hey. What's up?"

"Mr. Hayes." Special Agent Shaffer smiled. "My partner needs a few more minutes of your time, off the record this time around."

"Off the record?" Christopher met Doug's gaze. Doug shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged. Christopher wasn't quite sure how to interpret that. "Sure."

"Can we talk over here?" Agent Belkamp asked.

Christopher followed him to an empty section of the park. He glanced back and saw Doug fold up his suit jacket, then step onto the basketball court. A few of the firemen slapped him on the back before they began to play. Doug motioned for Agent Shaffer to join them, but the FBI agent shook his head and watched from the sidelines.

"What's this about?" Christopher asked, reluctantly pulling his gaze away from Doug.

"Detective Heavy Runner. Do you know where he was Friday and Saturday?"

"Yeah, I do."

Agent Belkamp waited nearly a full minute before he continued, "It'd be a bit of a help if you'd elaborate."

Christopher flexed his right hand. He dug his fingernails into the palm of his hand, focusing on the spots where he knew he should be feeling pain. He could sense pressure against his skin, but it didn't hurt. "We spent the weekend together, in Missoula."

Agent Belkamp stared at him. Normally, Christopher would have stared right back. Something about this skinny federal agent shook his confidence, though. “You want me to elaborate?”

“If you would, yes.”

“We had a few drinks at a local bar. We went back to my hotel. He had to work Sunday morning, so he left Saturday night.”

“He stayed with you, in your room?”

“Yes.”

“In your bed?”

Christopher shut his eyes. “Why does it matter?”

“I’m trying to correlate your account with his. I assumed you’d be familiar with the idea.”

“So I need to spell it out for you, for you to correlate our stories?”

Christopher growled. “Lots of sex was involved. How much do you want me to elaborate? Do you want details on how deep he can take a cock in his throat? How many times we fucked each other? Maybe who was on top each time?”

“That you are lovers is enough,” Agent Belkamp said, trying to hush Christopher. He had gotten a bit loud, but there was no one around to hear it.

“Were. We were a casual weekend thing. The weekend is over.”

That surprised the FBI agent. He glanced meaningfully at Doug and then looked at Christopher again. “Are you sure?”

“I live in California. Plus, in police work, there’s no such thing as a solid relationship unless you’re straight, and the odds are against it even then. If that doesn’t mesh with whatever he told you, then he misunderstood.”

“No,” Agent Belkamp said quickly. “He didn’t actually say whether or not you two were together. I just didn’t get the impression it was a casual hookup. You guys seem pretty solid.”

“Yeah, well....” Christopher shrugged. There really wasn’t anything he could say. Christopher glanced back at Doug as he wove between two firemen and tossed the ball over the head of another. The ball slipped into the net with a smooth whoosh. Christopher wished Doug had changed clothes. Watching him play and get sweaty in a pair of basketball shorts would have been incredibly sexy. Doug being willing to get his clothes covered in sweat meant he was probably done for the day, though, and that meant that Christopher could try and talk Doug into letting him take that

suit off fairly soon.

As Christopher watched the other men around Doug and noticed they didn't hesitate to get physical when trying to steal the ball, he smiled to himself. He wasn't allowed to feel jealous, but he was thrilled that the only thing they got to touch was Doug's clothes. Tonight, at least, Christopher would make a point of touching every single inch of Doug's skin.

A soft sound, like a cross between a moan and a puppy-dog whimper, drew Christopher's attention back to the FBI agent. Agent Belkamp was staring at him without right lust in his eyes.

"What?"

"A casual weekend thing?" Agent Belkamp asked dubiously.

"Yeah."

"Whatever."

"Technically," Christopher said as he looked down to try to hide his blush, "today is the start of his weekend."

"I'm scheduled to transfer back to the FBI field office in LA in about four months," said Agent Belkamp. Christopher felt a tiny bit of pressure over his right butt cheek and forced himself not to squirm as Agent Belkamp tucked a piece of paper into his back pocket. "If you go back to California, you should give me a call."

"What do you mean if?"

"I mean, if you do walk away from him, I'd like a chance to get to know you."

Christopher couldn't look at him. Between thinking about Doug's muscled chest and shoulders, and the dark FBI agent before him, he knew he was probably turning pink. He had to find something to say, something that didn't broach any kind of personal territory. He remembered the boy in Peter's truck. "Oh, shit, I forgot. Doug Heavy Runner might not be the only one who had a key to Peter's house." He told Agent Belkamp about his two encounters with the young man.

"You think he had a key to the house too?" Belkamp asked, scribbling down as many details as he could.

"Well, yeah. How many people do you know who keep their house keys and their car keys separate? He was wearing a black leather biker vest that matched the one on Peter's body in the coroner's photos. Doug said he boxed up all of Peter's personal property, but the box wasn't where he'd left it in the house."

“The kid was wearing the vest your brother died in?”

Christopher nodded. “Creepy, right?”

“Very. Fuck, maybe it was his birthday....”

Christopher froze. “No. If you’re talking about the carvings on Peter’s arms, those weren’t about the kid. His estimated time of death was on my birthday.”

Agent Belkamp stopped scribbling on his notepaper and looked up at Christopher. He shook his head sadly, but didn’t say anything.

“We done?” asked Christopher.

“What, you got hot plans for the night?” Agent Belkamp teased him.

“Very hot,” Christopher confirmed, shooting a sideways glance back to the basketball court.

The FBI agent chuckled and folded up his notebook. “We’re done. Go on, have fun. Leave your phone on, though, in case we need to get in touch with you about this kid.”

“Will do.” Christopher turned back to the basketball court and hurried toward Doug.

Doug saw him coming and passed the ball off to Agent Shaffer. They headed back toward the station, neither one saying anything until they had left the park well behind.

“I’m sorry,” Doug finally whispered.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like I’m in the closet back home, and I don’t have to work here when this is over.”

“Are we... are we still on for tonight?” Doug asked.

“Yes!” Christopher caught the sound of his own overenthusiastic voice and nearly groaned. How desperate could one word possibly sound? “Do you want to come by my hotel later?”

“No,” said Doug. “I want to have dinner with you.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“Like a date?”

“No,” said Doug smoothly. “Not *like* anything. A date. I guess we don’t... that is, if you want to just keep things simple, we don’t have to.... I just figured if I’m going to take you up on that offer to fall asleep inside of you, I might as well feed you first.”

Christopher nearly tripped. “I offered that?”

“Begged for it.” Doug smirked.

Christopher squeezed his eyes shut. He had already slept with Doug more

times than he had slept with any single person since college, and technically, they had gone out for dinner too. Why was the idea of a date so nerve-racking? His stomach started tying itself in knots just at the mention of the word. He wasn't sure if he was feeling hopeful or terrified. Maybe both. He swallowed hard. "Dinner sounds great."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Doug followed Christopher back to his hotel, where Christopher changed into fresh clothes and then got back into his car and followed Doug's truck out of town. Doug drove south down the highway. For a few minutes, Christopher wondered if Doug was taking them back to Missoula. He followed Doug's truck as the highway curved around the mountain range and descended into a long, narrow valley. Doug turned right and drove on down a worn two-lane road that seemed to go on and on through nothing but light green fields. Christopher tried to see where they were going, but there was nothing out here. Every few minutes they passed a fence dividing the sections of field, and large metal cattle guards set across the road between the fence posts.

For twenty more minutes, Doug kept driving, taking two more right turns and eventually leading Christopher on to a bumpy dirt road. Finally, they drove through a large loggate with a black lacquered mailbox posted to one side. Christopher slowed down as his car rumbled across another cattle guard, and took the chance to look around. Down the single-lane dirt road, there was a gigantic and empty-looking farmhouse set in the middle of one of the green fields. Doug parked right in front of the house. This was Doug's house, Christopher realized.

Christopher climbed out and stared around at the vast landscape. A large barn sat north of the house and several small sheds and buildings dotted the fields around the barn. All around the buildings, grass grew tall, unkempt, and wild. It rolled and swayed in waves as a cool breeze swept down off the

pine-covered mountains. The house itself looked like it was in good repair, but all of the windows were dark and most of the shutters were closed.

“Wow,” said Christopher, when Doug came toward him. “How can you afford a place like this?”

Doug laughed and took him by the shoulders. Instead of the kiss he was expecting, Doug spun him around. “See that grove of oak trees over there?” Doug pointed to a spot by the mountains far to the west.

“No,” Christopher said honestly.

“It’s about seven miles. It’s easier to see in the fall when the leaves change. That creek is right about in the middle of my land. Everything from the mountains just there, down to Little Crane Road to the south is mine. The highway is the eastern boundary.”

“Was that the road we drove in on?”

“No,” Doug laughed. “That was Isabelle Lane. My great grandfather named the road after a daughter they lost to measles. This ranch has been in my family for five generations altogether.”

“This is a ranch? A real ranch? With cows?” Christopher asked, looking around again.

“It used to be a ranch. As for the creek....” Doug pointed to the spot again.

“Oak isn’t a native tree. When my family bought the land, they planted oak trees along the creek, so they could tell which direction the creek was in from anywhere in the pastures. By late August, it’s the only water source that’s not dry.”

“The lighter green against the pine trees?” Christopher asked.

“That’s it.”

“So, everything here”—Christopher gestured out into the grass land—“everything we just drove through, that’s all yours?”

“Yes. I inherited it when my mom died, two years ago. It hasn’t been a working ranch in years. We sold off the last of our cattle after my dad died. My mom leased it as grazing land, until the end. I keep thinking I’m going to sell it and move on, so I haven’t bothered with letting anyone else lease it.”

Christopher took in the sheer size of the ranch around them. Doug’s ranch extended farther than Christopher’s vision, and it was all empty and pristine. He remembered how proud he’d been when he had closed on his first condo. Owning a thousand square feet of building seemed pathetic compared to all of this. “Damn.”

“It’s not that impressive when you realize that every acre is overgrown and

useless. There isn't enough water to use it for farming, and it's hard to raise cattle up here. I should have just put it in on the market from the start."

"Really?" Christopher noticed that Doug hadn't taken his hands off his shoulders yet, so he risked leaning back against Doug's chest. The warmth and familiar muscles made him think about how he had ended up in this same position in the shower on Monday night. "I think," he whispered, "that if I had something with this much history attached to it, it would take a lot to convince me to sell."

"Your folks still alive?" asked Doug.

"I wish I knew. Peter was all the family I had. We never dreamed we'd have any kind of home. I never imagined something like this could actually exist as a kid." From the way Doug tensed behind him, he wondered what he had said that pissed him off. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "Guess that was a bit personal."

"Your only family just died. I think I can forgive a little baggage."

Christopher turned in Doug's grasp and looped his arms around Doug's neck. "Doug, I don't have a *little* baggage. I have an entire set of matched and monogrammed luggage. Just because I don't whine about it doesn't mean it isn't there." Christopher wanted to add that any man who had panic attacks that left him reaching for a gun in the middle of the night probably had just as many issues as he did, but decided it wasn't worth mentioning. Christopher dipped his head down and touched Doug's lips in a soft kiss.

Doug returned the kiss for a second, and then he rubbed his nose against Christopher's. "You want to take a shower while I start on dinner?" Doug asked.

"You're going to cook? Something other than french fries?" The only thing Doug had eaten at the Hay Loft had been fries, even though Christopher had ordered enough wings to share. The only thing he'd seen Doug eat other than fries was the curry they had for lunch the day after they met, and a bagel.

"I can make fries if you want. They wouldn't go with dinner, but I've got some potatoes, I think."

"Whatever you're making will be fine. Think maybe you could take a shower with me, and then I can help you cook?"

Doug shook his head and grinned. He squeezed Christopher's hips, caressing the dip of skin where Christopher's abs began. "There will be time. If you want to wake up with me inside of you, you'll have to spend

the night.”

Christopher dropped his forehead against Doug’s shoulder. It was nice, being with someone nearly as tall as he was. He took a deep breath, trying to pull as much of Doug’s scent into his lungs as he could hold. “I can’t believe I said that...”

“You sounded pretty turned on by the idea at the time. I’m not even sure it’s possible, but if thinking about it gets you that worked up, I am totally willing to give it a try.”

Christopher tried to bury his face deeper in Doug’s neck. He couldn’t count the number of times he had thought about waking up to sex in the mornings. The few guys he had hooked up with had always been up for a quick round of sex in a hotel room, and even though some of them had asked him to stay, he never had. The last relationship he’d been in was back in college, and even then, his boyfriend had typically gone back to his own place after sex.

“It might even take a few tries, before we get it right.”

“A few tries?”

“Yeah. I’m off until Sunday morning. Are you busy this weekend?”

Christopher shook his head. “I am totally free.”

“Good. Come on, I’ll show you where the bathroom is.”

After a quick shower, Christopher found his way into the large farmhouse kitchen. Doug was setting the table with plates full of food. Separate plates of salad and crusty bread were already on the table. “Damn. You went all out. I thought I smelled chili, but that is not chili.”

“Nah,” said Doug modestly. “It’s ten minutes of playing with a can opener and Minute Rice. Sit down. You want a beer?”

When Christopher took a bite of the spicy rice dish, he shut his eyes as a surprisingly smooth blend of Middle Eastern flavors filled his mouth. “Ten minutes? Fuck, I’d like to see what you could manage with a whole afternoon. This is incredible! Where did you learn to cook?”

Across the dining nook, Doug blushed beautifully. “I missed the food in Miami. I’ve tried to copy some of the food from my favorite restaurants down there.”

“It’s really good,” said Christopher, before shoveling more into his mouth. When he finished the bite, he dug into the pile of rice and chickpeas curiously. “So, what kind of cowboy doesn’t eat meat?”

When Doug remained silent, Christopher was worried he had the wrong

idea. For an entire minute, Doug didn't say anything. "Does it bother you?" Doug asked finally.

Christopher shook his head. "No. Lots of Delgado's girls have been vegans or vegetarians. I just doubt any of them have awards from the Future Farmers of America framed on their walls."

Doug tried not to laugh as he finished chewing. "I'd guess you're right..."

"So you're a vegetarian cowboy?"

"Vegan cowboy," Doug corrected him. "I still wear a leather holster and stuff, because there's just no good substitute, but I don't eat animal products."

"Why not?"

"You're going to think I'm some kind of fucking pansy if I tell you."

"I will not," Christopher promised. When Doug glared at him, he cocked his head to the side. "Okay, I might. But I won't say so out loud."

"Fine. We'll see. When I was twelve, I got the job of bottle-feeding a new calf whose mother had died. He needed to eat every four hours for months. He followed me around thinking I was his mom until he was over a year old. At two years, he went to the slaughterhouse as part of a herd sale. We got our beef for the year back in the bargain." Doug shook his head sadly. "Every time my mom cooked something with that beef, I ended up wondering if I was eating my calf. My dad said I was too old to be going through that shit, so we spent the whole fall hunting. He wanted to drive home the whole natural-order thing.... I ended up quartering so many deer and elk that we had more meat than we could give away. By Christmastime, I couldn't even take a bite of turkey without feeling as if I was going to be sick. So now I tell the guys at work that I'm addicted to fries, or that I'm a peanut butter junkie, just so I don't have to put up with all of the PETA jokes they'd make."

"They would, too," Christopher agreed. The men he had met on Monday night had definitely been a steak-and-potatoes kind of crowd. "How do you stay in the shape you're in, though? You must lift. You look like you would put half of the guys in the weight room at my gym to shame." Christopher felt his stomach flutter at the slight blush that coated Doug's cheeks. "I mean, without protein shakes and stuff."

"I work out. I lift heavy and get plenty of protein from vegetables." Doug stabbed a chickpea and held it up triumphantly. "You run ultra marathons without energy bars and fancy gels. You found an alternative that works for

you. But I bet there are a lot of runners out there who never go more than a couple miles and who are absolutely convinced they can only do it with an expensive energy bar before their run.”

“There are,” Christopher had to agree.

As they ate, they traded half-veiled compliments back and forth, then talked about Elkin, the fire, and the FBI investigation. It wasn’t until the conversation wove its way back around to the house that Christopher remembered to tell Doug about Peter’s truck and his strange encounters with the boy named Micah.

“Did you catch his last name?” Doug asked.

“No. Honestly, listening to that asshole talk about Peter as if he was some kind of gay role model was sickening, so I just got the hell out of there. Although, sixteen is a bit too old to fall into the age range Peter preferred.”

“I can track the kid down,” Doug offered. “I’ve got to anyway, if I’m going to find out about your brother’s truck.”

Christopher scooped up the last bite from his plate. “I pushed Special Agent Belknap in that direction this afternoon. After totally outing us both, of course.”

“What did you say to him, anyway?” Doug asked with a laugh. “Even his partner noticed that he was blushing.”

“He asked what we did over the weekend,” said Christopher innocently.

“And when I was too vague for him, he asked me to elaborate. So I did.”

“You elaborated?”

“Yes.”

“In detail?”

“He stopped me before I got into you bending me over the counter in the hotel bathroom, but yeah. I half expected him to start jacking off right there in the park.”

“You’re mean.” Doug pointed his fork at him.

“I can be. The guy bugs me. It’s his job to track the kid down, so I figure why not let him do it? Then you don’t have to give up any of your weekend.”

Doug took a sip of his beer and smiled. “Well, I would hate to cancel my plans. I suppose you’re right.”

“Of course I am.” Christopher scraped the last of the spice sauce up with his fork. “That was really good. Is there more?”

Doug took his plate and went to the stove. “Actually, I made extra. After

watching you put away five orders of wings, half of my fries, and six beers, I figured you might have a healthy appetite.”

Christopher practically bounced when another plate full of spicy rice and chickpeas was set in front of him.

“Do you like hiking?” Doug asked suddenly. “I was going to go hiking or maybe climbing this weekend. Want to come?”

“I’ve never been climbing. There are incredible climbing spots, I’ve heard, right outside San Diego, but I’ve never been. I don’t have the gear, though.”

“I’ve got a spare harness,” said Doug, beaming. “I think you’d love it.”

Christopher agreed, his mind racing and trying to tell him that a dinner date wasn’t necessarily supposed to last all weekend. “If you’re sure it won’t be an imposition.”

Doug grabbed them each another beer and gave Christopher a tour of the house. The pictures on the walls, all nicely framed, showed four generations of brown-skinned men and women who all had the same square jaw and deep eyes as Doug. One of the only pictures of Doug’s entire family together was a large portrait taken when Doug looked like he was about eighteen. The woman standing behind him in the photo was a short woman with pale, weathered skin and graying blonde hair. The deep laugh lines around her eyes and lips told Christopher that she had probably spent most of her life smiling.

“Your mom liked to take pictures?” Christopher asked.

“How’d you know?” Doug asked.

“This is the only portrait of her. She looks happy. I bet she was the one who took most of the other photos.”

Doug smiled softly. “She was. I’ve always wished I had more pictures of her. I don’t even have a wedding picture, since my folks eloped.”

“That’s a pity. She was beautiful.”

Doug laughed. “I think she was. My folks met in boarding school, on the East Coast. She was upper middle class, and she and my dad got married right after they graduated. Her family learned he wasn’t white and cut her off. Bit of a surprise for her folks when my dad had more money than they did.”

“You keep in touch with them?”

“I’ve never met them. I guess they tried to visit when I was born. Family was always important to my dad, so he wrote to them about it.”

“They tried to visit? Why would he invite them if he was going to be a jerk about letting them visit?”

“Not him,” Doug laughed. “Her. The story goes that, when my grandfather saw this place, he made some comment about how I might have a chance at a decent future after all, despite being an Indian. By that point, she had become a bit obsessed with the tribe and our culture, even though she still had the same mannerisms you’d find in the Hamptons. She screamed them out of the nursery, out of the house, and then chased them off the property with a baseball bat.”

“Mannerisms?”

“Entitlement, romanticized views of confrontation, old ideas about marriage. She had an East Coast communication style that none of the neighbors ever understood.”

“Hm?”

“People on the reservation communicate differently than people outside of it. Every town has bar fights and stuff, but arguments and debates don’t really exist here. Anywhere else, not looking someone in the eye when you’re talking to them would be considered rude. Here, looking someone in the eye when you’re talking to them is considered rude. When my dad had to face her parents’ racism, he had plenty of responses to their prejudices, but he had been brought up to believe that when you’re speaking to someone, especially someone who’s older than you, you wait until they finish speaking before you make any kind of counter argument. When my dad never interrupted my grandfather to argue with him, everybody got the wrong impression, including my mom. She saw him as being intimidated and mortified, because he didn’t jump into the fight, you know? Here, jumping into an argument while someone else is still talking is a sign that the argument is about to get violent, or that someone had a very bad upbringing. Twenty years down the road, after she’d been teaching on the reservation for years, she realized that my dad really thought her father was some kind of violent psycho and was trying not to rile him up. When she chased her own family away that day, she really embarrassed my dad, as far as the tribe is concerned.”

“That had to be hard. At least in California, everyone tends to embrace the melting-pot culture. There are plenty of mixed-race families, but they all tend to come from the same background. It doesn’t matter what color you are, everybody wants a Lexus, a house with a view, and the best schools for their kids. She looks like she smiled a lot, though, no matter how hard it must have been.”

“She was always happy,” Doug agreed.

Christopher stared at a large bay window in the family room, overwhelmed by the vast emptiness around them. “Doesn’t it get quiet out here?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure I could handle it, living this far from other people,” said Christopher, shaking his head.

“I don’t actually spend a lot of time here,” Doug admitted. “When my mom died, I couldn’t stand it. If I’m not at work, I’m usually out in the woods, hiking or backpacking. The forest is quiet too, but it’s not empty.”

They went through a quarter of the house before Doug pinned Christopher against an old wooden doorframe. “Would you like a tour of the bedroom?”

Christopher relished the feel of Doug’s weight against him, even if he did have to deal with the doorframe poking him in the spine. He loved the freedom he managed to find when he didn’t have to take the lead. He liked not having to guess at his partner’s desires, not having to plant two or three steps ahead, liked it when all he had to do was hold on. It was terrifying and liberating all at the same time, because he knew it was going to hurt until it felt good, and then the pain would become muted and burning, like a spice accenting a delicious meal. All he had to do was enjoy the flavors. Just the anticipation of what was to come made every nerve in his body tingle like he was touching a live wire. It shut his brain down, made the wheels that were constantly spinning grind to a halt, and gave him a taste of peace and pleasure that was beyond delicious. He liked being on top just fine, but he craved this.

As Christopher tried to press tight against him, Doug pulled him through the door. The movement threw them both off balance. Christopher braced himself to hit the floor, but Doug caught him. Christopher flailed against Doug’s arms as his feet left the ground. A moment later, he was falling, then he landed on his back against a soft, worn quilt that smelled of the familiar mixture of Old Spice and pine that Christopher was coming to recognize as Doug. He fell back onto the bed, rolled over, and took a deep breath. He really liked that smell.

He felt the bed shift as Doug crawled over him. He rolled back over and found that the skin he had been so desperate to touch was just a few inches away. Doug was smiling down at him and digging through a pile of things on the nightstand. He pulled out a pack of condoms and lube. Christopher looked at the foil wrappers for a minute, thought about pointing out that

there wasn't much point now, and then thought better of it. Christopher would be leaving as soon as he finished dealing with Peter's funeral, and he didn't have any right to expect anything from Doug. This might not be a nearly anonymous hookup anymore, but it was still just a casual weekend thing.

"You all right?" Doug asked.

Christopher smiled. "Absolutely."

Doug groaned and smirked down at him. "You had to go and do that, didn't you?" Doug pushed himself up. He pulled Christopher's shirt out of his waistband and then set to work on Christopher's pants.

"Do what?"

"Use that smile again. If I can't scream out blasphemies during sex, you can't use that smile. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Christopher insisted, pulling his shirt off over his head and then easing it off of his right arm before letting it drop.

He swallowed when Doug managed to get his pants and briefs down over his hips. Doug hovered over his cock, so close Christopher could feel the heat and moisture of his breath, but he didn't move. Doug glared up at him.

"If nothing's wrong, what's with the fake smile?"

"It isn't a fake smile!"

Doug dropped his head down until Christopher could feel his breath against his balls. "Oh fuck...." He tried to shift his hips up, tried to get just a bit of contact, but Doug held him still.

"It's fake. What were you thinking about?"

"The condoms," Christopher admitted, still wondering why it mattered. "I was thinking that we already kind of fucked that up on Monday. But, well, we both know I'm probably going to be gone next week, and you've got your own life here...."

"You think I've been with someone else in the last three days? Because I haven't."

"I think it doesn't matter," Christopher explained. "You're with me now and I want to enjoy it. I figured suggesting we skip the condoms would just bring up all kinds of issues.... Of course, just smiling seems to bring up all kinds of issues with you."

"You can smile," Doug said, then dipped his tongue down and ran it up the length of Christopher's cock. Christopher whimpered and tried to move again. "Just not *that* smile. Have you?"

“Have I what?” Christopher panted.

“Been with anybody else since Monday?”

“No.”

“So, really, it’s just a question of which you’d prefer. Obviously, it feels better without one, but it’s also messier. So, you can choose.”

Christopher’s imagination reminded him of the dripping, slick feeling of Doug’s come leaking out of him in the shower. It probably wouldn’t be quite such a turn-on when everything was dry and sticky, but his libido didn’t seem to care.

“I take it you like the idea of going bareback?” Doug asked, watching as Christopher’s cock jerked up beneath him. “Tell me what you want—anything you want.”

“You’re going to think it’s gross...”

“Doubt it.” Doug grinned. Christopher screamed when Doug took his entire length into his mouth. He sucked him deep, and then slipped off him again. “Tell me.”

“You bastard,” Christopher said, laughing. When Doug hovered over him again, Christopher gave in. “I want to feel you. I want to feel it, when you come inside of me. I even want the mess. I want to feel it running down my thighs, over my ass as you fuck me. I know it’s gross, but— Hey... what are you doing?”

Christopher squirmed as Doug dipped his head low. He felt Doug’s tongue circling around his entrance, then pushing its way inside him. Christopher wasn’t sure if he was squirming to get away or to get more contact as Doug worked the tip of his tongue inside his body. Doug slipped his tongue out and replaced it with a single long finger. He licked his way up to Christopher’s cock and sucked him deep, swallowing around him until Christopher came with a scream in his mouth. Doug kept swallowing, and Christopher couldn’t take his eyes off him. When he finally slipped his finger out of Christopher’s ass and let go of him, all Christopher could do was stare.

Doug smacked his lips together and climbed up over Christopher’s body. “I don’t think there’s a single inch of you, inside or out, that is gross.”

Doug forced a deep kiss on him, despite his own protests, and Christopher was surprised when that same tongue attacked his own and all he could taste on Doug’s tongue was his own come. That alone was mind-blowing.

“There are some kinks out there where I draw the line, but I don’t mind

getting a bit messy. But if we're going to hang out," Doug said as he touched the tip of his nose to Christopher's, "you've got to tell me what you want. Even if you think it's gross or if you think it'll freak me out."

Doug rolled off him and relaxed on the bed. Christopher stared at him for a minute, wondering why he was acting as if they were finished.

"Oh, don't look at me like that." Doug yawned. "I'm still going to fuck you until neither of us can move, but I need a minute."

"You need a minute?"

"I do. Watching your cock jump as you talked about feeling my come leaking out of your ass was nearly enough to finish me by itself. Hearing you scream did the trick."

Christopher buried his face against Doug's shoulder, absolutely determined not to let Doug see him smiling. The last thing he wanted was for Doug to think he was making fun of him.

Christopher woke up sticky and ridiculously happy hours before dawn. Doug's body was still entwined with his own. The sticky mess he was expecting had fused skin to skin, rather than sticking either of them to the sheets. It was still gross, but it was also more intimate than he ever imagined waking up next to someone could be. For once, Christopher's brain was content to be still in the morning. He wanted to stay in bed and be lazy. However, he wasn't sure Doug would be quite as enchanted by, or as turned on by, the mess they'd made as Christopher was. He tried to shift his hips so he could escape, but as soon as he moved, Doug jerked awake. The arm trapped under Christopher's shoulders jerked upward in a reflexive movement.

Christopher caught Doug's hand before it slipped under his pillow. Doug moved his knee up into Christopher's gut. Christopher had to roll Doug over, bringing the arm he was still holding with him, and lock Doug's arm behind his back.

Christopher held Doug down as he fought. He caught a few random Spanish swear words. Christopher had gone through flashbacks until he was nearly twenty. He knew what they were like. He knew that until the flashback passed, Doug wouldn't realize where he was or who he might be trying to pull a gun on. The only way to deal with him was to keep him from hurting himself or Christopher until it passed. It wasn't long before Christopher felt Doug relax. Last time this had happened, he had been too turned on by feeling Doug beneath him to really think about what Doug's flashbacks must

mean. Now, after Doug had held him all night on Monday, and after he didn't say anything when Christopher broke down and started to cry in the shower, Christopher couldn't imagine being turned on when Doug was obviously terrified. He wanted to soothe that terror, not reinforce any link between the nightmares in Doug's past and sex. He would have to apologize about that when they were both awake.

When Doug relaxed enough that Christopher felt safe releasing his arm, Christopher rubbed Doug's shoulders and then down his back. He kept rubbing him and listening to Doug breathe until Doug's deep breaths turned into quiet snores.

"I guess we've both got our share of baggage," Christopher whispered.

He slipped out of bed, braved the cold night air long enough to get his things out of the car, then went to take a shower. When he dug through the bag to pull out the last of his clean clothes, he found the tape-covered envelope his lawyer had handed back to him. He would have to read the damn note eventually, so he might as well get it over with while he was alone.

He popped the envelope open and pulled out the ragged sheet of notebook paper. He scanned the handwritten words quickly, and then read it again, and then again. He had to force himself to keep breathing as he read the words over and over, trying desperately to convince himself that the words meant *anything* other than what he knew they meant. "A new Man of God," he read aloud. As his heart began to race, he shut his mouth and tried to slow his breathing down before he ended up hyperventilating. "The bluffs west of town...." The bluffs where Peter had hanged himself.

A Man of God—that was what Peter had always called *him*. It meant a pedophile who was so trusted by the community, so influential, so powerful, that nothing short of being caught in the act would ever convict him. A new Man of God meant that, somewhere in Elkin, there was a predator who had scared even Peter.

Christopher sank to his knees, wishing that he could crawl back into the peaceful oblivion he'd found in Doug's bed. However, he was already awake, his mind was already racing, and there was nothing he could do but brace himself. His mind threw up the obvious connections, and the observations he should have made from the start. The fire burned down Peter's home the day Christopher arrived, before he had a chance to search the house fully. Whoever Peter's new Man of God was, he must have

known that Christopher would be taking possession of the house. The only reason to burn the house down would be to destroy any evidence there, and it didn't take a lot of imagination to figure out the crimes that fire had been set to conceal.

Suddenly, Christopher felt like an idiot. He shut his eyes and tried to stop his brain from spinning, tried to stop it from pointing out things that should have been obvious to him on Monday. Four years in Homicide had apparently not twisted his thoughts severely enough that he could focus with Doug around. He kept thinking back to the smell in the house, trying to deconstruct the scent, to filter out the stench of however many cats Peter had owned. What he ended up with, though he hadn't recognized it at the time, was the smell of old death. It was the smell of very old death, in the last stages of decomposition, just before the body begins to dry. Christopher had seen one or two bodies that had been found between two and eight weeks after death, when the best way to guess at the time of death was by analyzing the life cycles of the flies and maggots that nested in a fresh corpse. It had been that smell. Christopher remembered that the house had been filled with flies.

The FBI dog teams were looking for human remains.

Peter had hanged himself three weeks ago, apparently right after he got out of a halfway house, on his way home from a six-month prison sentence. Had he killed himself to avoid going to prison for murder? Another part of Christopher's mind, one so contaminated by his job that it never trusted anyone, wondered if perhaps Doug had more to do with the smell than Christopher wanted to believe. If Doug hadn't told him that the smell was from the cats, if he hadn't offered him that VapoRub, he might have recognized the stench immediately. Christopher's subconscious came to his rescue then. Doug had only had access to the house since Peter's body was found two weeks ago. It was possible for a body to decay faster than normal in warm weather, but it hadn't been hot enough for a body to reach the stage of decomposition Christopher had smelled in two weeks. If nothing else, the freezing temperatures in Elkin during the spring would have slowed down the decomposition process. The victims could have been killed before Peter even returned to his home.

The only way to know for sure would be to go up to the bluffs like Peter had instructed. To see whatever it was Peter had wanted him to see. He would have to warn the FBI that the man they were looking for wouldn't be

some outcast kid in a biker vest, but a man the entire community trusted—a man like the Reverend John Liedes.

Not at four in the morning, though. Christopher put the note back into the envelope and got into the shower. He got dressed and went down stairs, hoping that being vegan didn't mean swearing off coffee. He needed coffee. The first pot didn't last until Doug wandered down to the kitchen. Christopher didn't move when Doug wrapped his arms around his neck and kissed his ear. He held onto the mug of coffee and stared down at the sheet of notebook paper, reading the words for the thousandth time. Doug leaned over his shoulder and glanced at the suicide note. "Oh," he said simply.

Christopher took another long sip of coffee.

Doug slipped his arms down to Christopher's shoulders and leaned against him. "I think I liked the twitching better. Seeing you actually sit still is kind of spooky."

"Sit down," said Christopher.

"What's up?" Doug asked, doing as Christopher asked.

Christopher took a deep breath and got right to the point. "You have a sexual predator operating in Elkin."

Doug sat back, his eyes wide. He didn't say anything, though.

"When Peter and I were kids, we were both abused by a man who was extremely influential in our neighborhood. A minister. Peter called him a Man of God when he was trying to explain that his reputation was so far beyond reproach that no one would ever believe a couple of kids accusing him of being a monster."

"You think that's what his note meant? That he was aware of a sexual predator operating in Elkin?"

Christopher took another sip of coffee. It gave him a moment to think. "He had an accomplice operating in Elkin. He was saying that he had an accomplice, one who was influential enough that no one would believe he was associated with the things Peter did."

"An accomplice?"

"Yes."

"Targeting children in Elkin?"

"Boys between eight and sixteen, typically. But who knows what the other man's taste ran toward? Also, I'm pretty sure it was more than just pursuing them sexually. The FBI brought in dog teams to search through the ashes of Peter's house. I should have recognized the smell, but you and the cat smell

threw me off. They're recovering human remains. Or traces of them, anyway."

Doug stared at him for a long time. Christopher couldn't read his expression, and he didn't really want to. He didn't want to see the disgust and denial he was sure would be there, or worse yet, the pity sure to follow.

"What does the last part of the note mean?" Doug asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me. You said you cut him down. Was there anything strange at the scene? Or even anything strange about the view?"

Doug shook his head. "Nothing. We looked for signs of a struggle, but didn't find anything. Hikers had been up there before us, though. I suppose this means we've got to call that FBI bastard who pinched your ass, doesn't it?"

"You saw that?"

Doug nodded slowly.

"He slipped me his number," Christopher said with a lopsided smirk. "He said he wanted to hook up when he transferred back to California."

"There any coffee left?" Doug asked. He turned away from Christopher and hurried to the counter. "I have a feeling this is going to be a long day."

"I'm sorry," Christopher whispered.

"It's okay." Doug squeezed his left shoulder as he walked by. "I can make another pot."

"I meant that I'm sorry about all this shit with Peter."

"I know."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

YELLOW and blue wildflowers were blooming under the forest canopy, and Doug could smell the wild strawberries just beginning to blossom. This was normally his favorite time of year to be up in the mountains. He felt guilty for enjoying the sights and sounds of the forest while they walked. The three men trudging up the trail behind him were serious and quiet. Doug

had contacted two members of the county search-and-rescue team and had them come down to close off the trailhead. Then he'd called the two FBI agents, who had agreed to show up without requiring any real explanation. He was grateful for that, but also suspicious. They showed up with cameras, evidence bags, gloves, and expressions so grim they looked like they were about to try to sort out a mass grave. If the looks on their faces hadn't matched Christopher's expression so well, Doug would have thought it funny. When Christopher had explained his brother's suicide note, their expressions had only hardened.

"Do you have any idea what we're looking for?" Agent Shaffer asked, breaking the silence for the first time since they began hiking. "No," Christopher admitted. "Anything that's out of place." "You don't have any idea what he wanted you to see?" asked Agent Belkamp.

Doug glanced back at both of the FBI agents curiously. They had taken a copy of the suicide note when they made copies of the will, but they hadn't asked about it.

"I have no idea. The local authorities didn't find anything, so anything he left isn't going to be obvious."

"But you think that you can find it?"

"I don't know. I think Peter believed I would be able to. I know what you're getting at, though. If I see anything weird, I'm stepping back. I've never been up here before, and the last thing in the world I want to do is fuck up your investigation."

"The fact that you're the one who called us already makes anything we find suspect," Agent Belkamp said calmly.

"I'm aware of that. Would you prefer to go back down and forget about it? It might be nothing. It might be Peter being a psychotic bastard. It might be me being paranoid and reading too much into the note. And too much into the smell. And too much into that kid's expression. And too much into basic human behavioral patterns."

"Thank you, I get it." Agent Belkamp rolled his eyes.

Christopher followed behind Doug, but Doug kept glancing back to check on him. He was unbearably still, compared to the way he normally acted. The first part of the hike was a steep climb, so Doug kept checking on the men behind him. When he saw that Agent Shaffer had fallen behind about fifteen feet and was having trouble catching his breath, he slowed their pace

down. When they reached the top of the first bluff, Doug stopped to give Agent Shaffer time to catchup.

“Wow,” said Agent Belkamp. “Quite the view up here.”

“It really is,” Christopher agreed.

“It’s one of the more popular spots in Elkin. Most of the time, local kids sneak up here at night to drink or smoke pot,” Doug explained. “But every weekend there are picnics up here too. Weddings, sometimes.”

“So anything up here could have been contaminated by the entire county,” Shaffer huffed.

“You’re assuming there will be anything,” said Agent Belkamp. “It looks like every wannabe gangster in the area has been up here. With hikers and search-and-rescue guys, too, I’m beginning to have my doubts.”

“We don’t have gangs up here,” Doug insisted. “That’s kind of the point of a small town.”

“Oh, ha!” Agent Belkamp glared at him. “They might carve their tags into trees instead of spray painting them, but they’re still gang tags, Detective!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Old Town 14.” Agent Belkamp pointed to a tree stump beside the trail. It was covered with carvings, including a very prominent “Old Town 14” carved over some of the older sets of initials. “It’s a Hispanic street gang, originally out of the Old Town neighborhood in San Diego.”

“No, it’s not Old Town 14. The gang is called Old Town National City,” Christopher said grimly. “They started out as union enforcers in the National City neighborhood, a long time ago, before the city cleaned it up and it became known as Old Town. They’re one of the oldest gangs in San Diego. Maybe the oldest. They keep OTNC as their tag, no numbers.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” asked Agent Shaffer. He sat down on one of the large rocks outlining the trail boundary to try to catch his breath.

“Why does the number matter?”

Christopher stared at the symbol. He glanced between Doug and Agent Shaffer. “Newer gangs usually take their name from a combination of their neighborhood or street and a symbol or a number to show which prison gangs they’re allied with, so other gangs will take them seriously. The Old Town National City guys don’t point out that they’re allied with the Mexican Mafia because they’re older than the Mexican Mafia. They’re sure as hell not a Norteño gang. They’re enemies of the Norteño gangs. If they were to tack a number onto their tag, it’d be a thirteen. Whoever was

responsible for that fourteen would be skinned alive in California.”

“What?” Agent Shaffer looked at his partner and then at Doug. Doug shrugged and shook his head fast.

Agent Belkamp rubbed his eyebrows and looked at Doug and Christopher with every sign of embarrassment. “You’ve been in the sticks too long, Shaffer. The Hispanic gangs in California are divided up into two enemy factions, depending on which prison gang they hang out with once they get busted. Southern California is all Mexican Mafia territory, and Northern California is all under control of the Nuestra Familia. Southerners and Northerners—Surenos and Norteños. The Southern California gangs fight and kill each other all the time, but they are *all* Surenos. They go by the number thirteen because M is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet. M for Mexican Mafia. Nuestra Familia gangs go by fourteen, because N comes next. This is a combination of two tags from enemy gangs.”

“But you said they’re both Hispanic.” Agent Shaffer looked just as confused as Doug felt.

“That doesn’t mean they like each other,” Belkamp explained. “In prison, where each local gang only has a few members, they band together under the control of regional prison gangs. The southern Hispanic gangs are all Mexican Mafia. The northern Hispanic gangs are all Nuestra Familia. They don’t mix. The fact that every one of them had family who immigrated from Mexico generations ago doesn’t mean shit. The Mexican Mafia is an American prison gang. They don’t exist in Mexico and never did—they’re strictly Southern California.”

“The factions fight outside of prison too,” Christopher added. “All the local gangs fight each other in San Diego, but they drop their differences and team up if anyone with a Norteño tattoo dares to walk down the street. All of them, including the members of the Old Town National City gang, are absolute enemies of every Norteño gang. This,” he said, pointing to the carving, “would be suicide. It would be the ultimate sign of disrespect. If a Norteño came anywhere near Old Town National City territory and had the balls to do this, they would make themselves a target for every single member or every gang within two hundred miles. And they wouldn’t dare, because the rest of the Norteño gangs would be just as insulted to see a fourteen next to an Old Town National City tag as the Old Town National City guys.”

“So you’ve got wannabe gangsters. Stupid wannabe gangsters, I admit, but

still....”

Christopher wandered up the trail about ten feet and leaned close to inspect some black scribbles on the limestone wall. “Linda Vista Locos with a Huelga bird is the same deal,” he said as he pointed to the black marker. Doug followed him and stared at the black lines that almost formed the shape of a bird. “Linda Vista Locos are another San Diego Sureno gang. The Huelga bird is a Nuestra Familia symbol—they’re enemies.” Up the trail another fifteen feet, he stopped again. “Ever heard of the 18th Street Logans? Logans are the Logan Red Stripes, but I’ve never heard of any other gangs using the name 18th Street,” he called back.

Agent Belkamp looked confused for a moment, then said, “Hell no! The Logan Red Stripes are only in San Diego. The 18th Street Gang is in LA and hates them. The Logans don’t let the 18th Street Gang move south of Escondido, and the 18th Street Gang stops the Logans from setting up business anywhere else.”

“So they’re enemies,” said Christopher quietly.

“I thought you were a homicide detective!” Agent Shaffer shouted.

“I was assigned to a gang task force my last four years as a patrol officer. Then I spent a year with the same task force as a detective. Plus I grew up on the same streets these gangs fight over.” Christopher pointed to another mismatched gang symbol. “Belkamp, you ever heard of Varrio Mesa Locos in LA?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think they ever expanded,” said Christopher. “And again, there’s another fourteen. These aren’t generic Sureno tags that got fucked up. They’re gangs that started and stayed in specific neighborhoods in San Diego. Old Town National City only controls the Old Town neighborhood. The Logan Red Stripes have never branched out. They operate in a part of southern San Diego County called Chula Vista. Linda Vista Locos do business in Linda Vista and Mira Mesa, in the northern half of San Diego county. Varrio Mesa Locos are—”

“In some place called Varrio Mesa?” Doug asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Nah. They’re in Lemon Grove. It’s a bit south of Mira Mesa Boulevard, but they wanted something to tell people they were different from the Linda Vista Locos. Vista, by itself, is a common name for streets, so some kids up here could have picked up the name without knowing.”

“There is no neighborhood around here with vista in the name,”

Doug supplied. "No street either."

"The only part of each of these tags that isn't from a San Diego neighborhood is the prison gang affiliation, and they're all matched up with enemy prison gangs. They're all wrong."

"But only someone familiar with San Diego would realize it," said Doug. "Someone familiar with San Diego's local gangs."

Christopher wandered up the trail, inspecting the rocks and trees on either side. Every now and then he would point out another tag, mutter the word "enemies," and move on. Doug and the FBI agents followed him, and Agent Shaffer began to take photographs of the gang symbols. Agent Belkamp caught up with Christopher and started helping him spot more symbols.

Doug found himself trailing behind, watching as both men stopped to comment on new symbols every fifteen to twenty feet. He watched from a distance as Agent Belkamp circled around Christopher, not hesitating to touch his shoulder or back to point out another symbol. He wanted to find something he could contribute, something that could take away that fucker's excuse to grope Christopher, but he didn't know anything about California gangs. Cuban gangs, with their own traditions and issues, had run all of Miami, but that wouldn't help. He even thought about pointing out the gnarled tree where Christopher's brother had secured the rope that hanged him, but that wasn't why they were up here. Doug noticed that a dirty length of rope still hung knotted around the bent tree trunk.

Christopher and the FBI agents stopped about fifty feet away from the tree, stood back, and stared up at the limestone wall on the right side of the trail.

"What's up there?" Agent Shaffer asked. Doug followed him to the spot where the other two men waited.

"The only gang tags that aren't fucked up," said Christopher. "And they're both East Side Piru tags. That figures."

"How so?"

Christopher pressed his lips tight together for a moment. "All the kids in our neighborhood were East Side Piru. Peter was East Side Piru, before... before everything."

"Were you?" Agent Belkamp asked.

Christopher shrugged. "Everybody was."

"But you're white...."

"Yeah, that helped. I got away with a lot more shit than the rest of the kids

inmyneighborhood.”

“Whyis that one wayup there?”Agent Shaffer asked.

Doug had to stand back to see what they were looking at. There was a black symbol about two feet above his head along the wall, and thenanother one about fifteenfeet above that.

“How the helldid it get up there?”

Christopher reached for a handhold on the rock and tried to pull himselfup. The gravelunder his fingers slid, and Christopher slipped back downto the path. “I have no idea.”

“Ah.” Doug set his hand on Christopher’s shoulder. “Obscure street gangs might be your thing, but climbing’s mine.”Dougslipped his daypack offand pulled out his harness and gear.

“But it just crumbles,”Christopher complained.

“Yougrabbed graveland dirt, Christopher.”

“Youbrought a climbingharness?”Agent Belkamp looked dubious.

Doug smirked. “My harness was still in my daypack from when I came up here to cut Peter Hayes down,” he said. “My daypack’s always in my truck. I climb a lot. I brought it up with us because I figured if Peter had left something, it would have been over the edge where he hanged himself.” He nodded toward the gnarled tree. He pulled the harness on over his shorts and changed his shoes. Then he pulled out a short coil of rope and three nuts. The nuts were small, light safety devices most climbers used whentheyweren’t secured to a belay. Theywere reallyjust large bolts attached to carabiners by a short length of webbing. They could be wedged into any crack or crevice in the rock face, and a rope could either be tied to themor slipped through a carabiner to be held by a climbing partner. He clipped them onto his belt and tied the rope to his harness.

“Think youcanhold me up?”he asked Christopher.

“How is me beingdownhere goingto do youanygood?”

Doug handed himthe slack end of the rope. “Just take up the slack, keep your feet apart, and don’t drop me ifI fall.”

Christopher turned pale instantly and a deep frown settled over his features. He shook his head almost frantically and carefully set the rope in Agent Belkamp’s hands.

“But the stiff didn’t have climbing gear. How the hell did he get up there to draw that without falling?”asked Agent Shaffer.

“I don’t think he was all that worried about his own safety,” said Doug

carefully. “And, theoretically, you only need equipment for climbing if you fall.”

Christopher stared at the rope in Belkamp’s hands, raised his own hands, his fingers spread wide, and stepped back. The serious expression on the man’s face was getting on Doug’s nerves. He was fully ready to admit he missed Christopher’s fake smile. At least with that damn smile Doug could catch a glimpse of the real Christopher in his eyes. This shutdown, still version of the man who hadn’t quit bouncing since they met was starting to freak him out. Christopher wasn’t looking at him, but was staring at the rope.

“Here.” Agent Shaffer pulled the camera off and draped the strap over Doug’s neck. “Just in case there’s something up there. Have you got gloves?”

“Right here.” Doug pulled out a pair of latex gloves from the stash he kept in the EMT kit in his day pack. “Bags?” he asked, glancing at the FBI agent.

The man passed him two folded Ziploc bags. Doug shoved them into the zippered pouch on his harness and started up a crack in the rock a few feet away. He climbed to about fifteen feet, wedged a nut into the crack he was also using for hand and footholds, and clipped his rope through the carabiner. He had to go up another ten feet before he found an easy path to climb over to the scrawled symbol. Above the symbol was another vertical crack. Doug set his feet wide against the wall, put his left hand inside the crack to hold him steady, and leaned back far enough to take a picture of the symbol.

He was about to climb higher to look for more, but when he set his right hand into the crack to get more leverage, his hand slipped over something smooth. He pushed himself up with his feet. There, wedged inside the crack in the rock wall, was a plastic bag filled with a stack of rewritable CDs.

Doug cursed. He wasn’t terribly loud, but the slack in the rope vanished anyway. “I’m fine,” he called down. “I just can’t get a glove on!”

Thirty feet below, the FBI agents were talking frantically.

He took a photograph of the crack itself, then zoomed in and took a photograph of what he could see of the Ziploc bag.

“Can’t you just set one of those things?”

“No,” he called down. “The crack’s too wide to hold. If I had a friend I could do it, but I didn’t bring any.”

“I could climb up,” Christopher offered. “The way you took didn’t look that hard.”

“I didn’t mean you. A friend is a tool. It’s a self-expanding piece of protection that can fit in wider gaps. Hang on, I’m going to go up higher and find someplace where I can set something up.” Doug had to climb another five feet or so before he found a gap thin enough to secure another nut. He clipped his rope through it and then worked his way back down. “Tension!” he shouted, then remembered that none of the men below him were likely to have any clue what he was talking about. “I’m going to let go for a minute! Brace yourself and hold onto the rope tight!”

He pushed his feet back and settled his weight in the harness before letting go of his handholds slowly. The rope tightened, then swung a little, but he didn’t slip down. He sighed and put on a pair of latex gloves. He pulled the Ziploc bag out of its hiding spot, then fumbled with the camera and took another picture of it. He was glad the camera was hanging around his neck, because he dropped it twice as he tried to adjust the focus. When he finished taking pictures, he got the entire thing into a plastic evidence bag and sealed it. Then, for lack of a better spot, he shoved it into his shirt.

He took hold of the rock again and climbed back up to get the nut out. Then he worked his way back down, pulling out the nuts as he went. When he got back to the last piece of equipment, he worked it loose, clipped it onto his harness, climbed down a few more feet, and then let himself drop.

“I took pictures,” he announced. “And bagged it.” He fished the evidence bag out of his shirt and handed it and the camera over to Agent Shaffer.

Both FBI agents donned gloves and opened the evidence bag. Inside the Ziploc bag were six CDs, all labeled with date ranges written in black marker. On top of the stack was a small square of notebook paper. It looked like the same paper that Peter Hayes had used to write his suicide note.

Agent Shaffer turned the plastic bag around while Agent Belkamp took pictures. “Another note,” he said quietly.

“I hope this isn’t turning into some kind of scavenger hunt,” Belkamp muttered. “What does it say?”

“It’s to you,” Agent Shaffer said, looking at Christopher. “It says, ‘Chris, you’ll know what to do with this. Just to warn you, the local pigs will try to kill you if you take this to them. Don’t trust those assholes.’ I take it he didn’t know you had a... friend... in the local police department?”

“We’re recent acquaintances,” said Christopher, his fake smile firmly fixed in place again.

“You have a friend in the police department too?” Doug asked. “Well, now I

feel jealous.”

“Police department, sheriff’s department, whatever!” Shaffer rolled his eyes. “Besides”—Shaffer glared between Doug and Christopher—“I thought you couldn’t say how long you’d know each other?”

“The weekend was a blur.” Christopher grinned. “What’s your point?”

Agent Shaffer sighed, his glare fading. “I don’t care, man, we have a problem. We have to seal this entire area. Get one of the vans with AV units out here.”

Agent Belkamp pulled out his cellphone and began making calls.

“I’m going to need paperwork from the two of you,” Agent Shaffer told them miserably. “Before you leave the site.”

“Sorry, I left my laptop in my other daypack,” said Doug, trying to keep his voice serious.

“I could tap something out on my phone,” Christopher offered.

“There are computers in the van,” Agent Shaffer informed them. “It should be down at the trailhead in a few minutes. We should head down there to meet them.”

“You guys go all out,” Doug said admiringly.

The FBI agents were eager to get off the trail, but Doug watched Christopher stop beside the gnarled tree. He squatted down and reached out his hand. The rope was dirty and the color had faded, so it blended in with the bark of the tree. Christopher touched the rope and left his fingers on the fibers for a long time. Doug watched him, wanting to give him time, but also well aware that the FBI agents were waiting for them.

“Christopher.” Doug knelt down beside him and wrapped his arm over the other man’s shoulders. “We’ve got to go. I can bring you back up here once it’s open again, if you’d like.”

Christopher snorted and shook his head. “I just want to cut this damn thing off and throw it away. I want to pretend it doesn’t matter— which is stupid, because if it really didn’t matter, I wouldn’t care.”

“Did you find something else?” Agent Belkamp asked, walking back toward them.

“No,” said Doug. He hoped his glare would be enough to stop the other man from intruding. Belkamp didn’t come closer, but he stood there staring at them. “Come on, Christopher,” Doug whispered. He pulled Christopher back slightly, quietly appreciating the fluid way he rose to his feet.

Down by the trailhead, the search-and-rescue team had been relegated to

the far corner of the parking lot. Three matching sedans and two large vans had taken over, and men and women in FBI windbreakers were milling around aimlessly. They had taped off both the upper and lower trailheads, again, and put white-and-orange barricades up to block off the parking lot entrance. Doug wondered where the hell they had gotten the barricades, but then he saw Deputy Jackson's patrol car parked along the road, lights flashing.

Their FBI agents took over one of the vans. They plopped Christopher down in front of a laptop so he could type an official report for them, then took over the van's audio and video equipment themselves. They turned on a video camera, pulled out gloves and masks, and opened up the evidence bag right there in the van. While Christopher was tapping away on the laptop keyboard and Agent Shaffer was narrating every movement he made with the CDs, Doug sat down on the bumper of the van with a bottle of water. He knew he shouldn't have been listening to Agent Shaffer. The less he knew about what was in that plastic bag, the more credence any evidence they found would have. But he did listen.

"Contents of the first disc include seventeen video files, eighty-seven image files, and two file-type markers. Accessing the first video file...."

When the static from the video's audio track began to fill the van, Doug held his breath. He cringed when what sounded like the cries of a little girl echoed through the van. They were soft, resigned cries. Not screams, but whimpers. Christopher's quick typing stopped instantly. Under the girl's cries was a quieter but unmistakable rhythmic sound of skin hitting skin, punctuated by heavy masculine panting. Doug felt his stomach rebel, twisting painfully, as his imagination filled in the blanks.

The van rocked down as Christopher launched himself out of the van and took off at a sprint. It rocked again as Agent Belkamp jumped out after him. Several of the agents in windbreakers were watching Christopher run. They looked back at Belkamp for instructions. He met their eyes and shook his head. "Let him go," he called out. He looked down at Doug, his expression pale and sickened. Doug imagined that he didn't look much better. "Shaffer's taking those discs down to the federal crime lab in Helena," he said quietly. "Right now. Whoever the man in that video was, he wasn't Peter Hayes."

Doug managed to nod. He trusted that Belkamp had a reason to be so sure, and he didn't want to know enough details to find out what that

reason might be.

“Are you going to go after him?” Belkamp asked.

“I... I think he probably needs to run....”

Belkamp glared down at him. “Your weekend hookup suddenly has too many issues to make it worthwhile?”

That question didn't help Doug's attempt to keep from throwing up. He didn't know why the man's question made it worse, but it did. Something in the way he said “weekend hookup” broke through the nausea and made him angry. “Don't call him that,” Doug hissed.

“That's what he is, isn't he?”

“He's a friend,” Doug insisted.

“If he's a friend, why are you still here?”

“I'm trying not to get sick,” Doug admitted with a half shrug.

“Oh. So what? Are you going after him? Or can I?”

Doug stood up and glared at the skinny FBI agent. The man wasn't asking about chasing Christopher down the road. Doug pulled his keys out of his pocket and headed for his truck. He had to wait for Jackson to move the damn barricades, and by then Christopher was already nearly a mile up the road. Doug slowed down and rolled down his window. “You want a ride?”

Christopher ignored him.

“Yeah, I didn't think so. There's a turnout a few miles up the road. I'll wait there.” Doug drove on ahead, pulled into the turnout, and decided that he would wait fifteen minutes before he went looking for Christopher again. Ten minutes later, Christopher sprinted into the turnout and skidded to a halt a foot from his truck, panting but not quite sweating yet. Doug held his water bottle out the window. Christopher took it without a word.

Doug got out of the truck and fished through the cooler for another bottle of water.

“I'm sorry,” Christopher whispered.

“I nearly threw up,” Doug admitted. “Even that skinny fucker looked like he wasn't feeling too hot.”

Christopher cocked an eyebrow at him. “You really don't like him, do you?”

“He's pinched your ass, used his investigation as an excuse to grope you... no, I don't like him!”

“Grope me?” Christopher laughed.

Doug knew he was blushing, but he didn't care. “I don't like him. I know

this sucks. I'm sorry it has to suck so much. Come home with me. No one drives on the roads around the ranch. You can run, I can shoot shit—we'll both feel better."

"Shoot shit?" Christopher perked up slightly. He flexed his right hand impulsively. "You've got a double-action revolver, right? I saw it Monday night."

"I've got a couple of them. I like guns."

"Could I give one a try?" he asked. "My captain suggested it. He thought the grip might work better for me than my Beretta."

"Perfect! We'll both go shoot shit. We can even type up the reports Shaffer was whining about at my place."

Christopher dropped his head. "Do you still... fuck, I shouldn't even ask... knowing what Peter was.... Knowing..." He shook his head miserably.

Doug took Christopher's face in his hands and kissed him without hesitating. "You're not him," said Doug confidently.

"The only reason I'm not just like him is because of him," Christopher whispered. "Everything I am... everything I have ever done... I ran away because of him. I went to school to prove I was better than he was. I put everything I had into being a police officer so I could stop him! And then, I didn't do it. I just pretended he didn't exist, and while I was pretending he didn't exist, he was up here.... How many kids did he hurt because I didn't stop him?" Christopher asked.

Doug stared into Christopher's open and unguarded expression, finally recognizing the pain he kept glimpsing in the other man's eyes. Christopher had said their minister had abused both of them, but Doug was beginning to doubt that. His own brother was the monster he was running away from. His own brother was the one Christopher had been thinking of stopping when he decided on the course his life would take. He had come all this way to mourn and bury the brother who had betrayed and abused him, and he had done it all with more self-control and strength than Doug would have ever imagined possible.

Doug's own nightmares were nothing compared to what Christopher had been through, and he wasn't sure how the man had stayed as sane as he did.

"It wasn't him," Doug whispered against Christopher's lips. "I didn't see the video, but the skinny little bastard who can't keep his hands to himself did. He said it wasn't your brother. Even if you had killed him the day he got out of prison, if you had shot him in the head before he ever came to

Montana, it wouldn't have helped that little girl.”

Christopher shivered against him.

“You are nothing like him,” Doug continued. “I doubt that video would have made him sick or made him feel like running up a mountain.” Doug cocked his head to the side and managed a smile. Christopher shut his eyes and he nodded ever so slightly. “Right then, let's go shoot stuff.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“T_{HAT} was just pathetic,” Christopher declared, gesturing in frustration

at the line of six beer cans that sat, untouched, on the wooden fence. Christopher reloaded the revolver, adjusted the fingers of his left hand on the grip, and raised his arm to fire.

“Use your right arm for support,” said Doug. “You’re allowed to qualify with a two-handed grip, aren’t you?”

“It’s allowed. I’ve never had to do it, though.” Despite his complaints, Christopher brought his right hand up to support the butt of the handgun. He raised the gun and tried to sight along the barrel. Even from his perch on the fence five feet behind Christopher, Doug could see the barrel trembling. Two hours of trying to shoot left-handed had worked the weaker muscles of Christopher’s left arm to exhaustion. Trying to shoot any more would be futile in terms of training, but Christopher seemed intent on continuing. During those two hours, Christopher had gone from effectively shut down to smiling and twitching again, so Doug was willing to let him keep going so long as he had enough ammunition to keep his service weapon loaded. Shooting definitely seemed to make Christopher feel better, and just watching Christopher smile and laugh was all it took to make Doug feel better, too, even if he knew that Christopher’s smile was just masking more misery.

“Maybe it’s an omen,” Christopher said at last.

“An atheist talking about omens?” Doug laughed. “That can’t be good.”

“No, no, think about it.... My physical ability to do my job”—he wagged his nearly useless fingers—“my reason for doing my job....”

“Your brother,” Doug filled in on cue.

“Yes. And my trust in my partner.... All gone in less than a month. I think the universe might be telling me it’s time to become a teacher.”

“A teacher? Why?”

“I don’t know.” Christopher shrugged. “It’s another job. Does it really matter what it is?”

“You wouldn’t be in law enforcement if it didn’t matter,” Doug pointed out.

“Well, obviously, but I’m sure teaching’s not that bad....”

“What did you study in school?”

“Secondary education.”

Doug was surprised. “Not criminology?”

“No. My foster parents—the good ones, that is—were teachers. They were great teachers. Until I met Caleb, I thought I was going to teach too.”

Doug had to smile at that. At least Doug understood how Christopher had picked up on his Shakespeare reference. “Who was Caleb? Hot criminology professor?”

“He was a hot guy on the track team. Maybe not so hot,” Christopher admitted, leering at him. “He was a criminology major. He wanted to get on with the San Diego police, but he was nervous about the tests. I went along....”

Doug was very familiar with the employment tests most police departments required of applicants. He had taken several, both when he was first out of school and when he came back to Montana. He had applied with practically every department within two hours of his home, and they’d all required applicants to take the same tests. He must have taken the same written test ten times before Sheriff Brubaker called to ask when he could start. Most people assumed the tests were fairly easy, but most people assumed that they were being tested on traffic laws and safe decision-making, not grammar. Eighty percent of applicants failed the written test, even among college graduates, because they didn’t have strong enough writing skills to tackle the grammar section of the test.

“He didn’t pass?”

“He washed out on the first section. There must have been two hundred people there, and by the time we got to the obstacle course, there were twelve of us. Five guys and one girl passed the obstacle course.”

“Sounds pretty normal.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know that at the time, though. He was furious. Four years in school just to become a police officer and his education major twink boyfriend passed when he didn’t. That was the end of us. It turned out the police recruiter was incredibly persistent, I was angry, and I still had a lot of issues from growing up with Peter. So I thought, what the hell, why not rub it in Caleb’s face?”

Doug pushed himself off the fence rail and laughed. “You got into police work to spite your ex? That’s perfect!”

“What was your excuse?”

“I didn’t have an excuse,” said Doug. “I’ve always wanted to be a police

officer. Ever since I was five, cops and robbers always felt like the only game in town.”

“So you wanted to be a cop your whole life?”

“My whole life.”

“So why Miami?” Christopher asked, flipping open the revolver’s cylinder and checking the chamber.

“It was the farthest spot in the country from here. I hated this place when I was a kid. After school, and after Brittney, I just wanted to get as far away as possible.”

“Brittney was the girl who wanted to piss off her dad?”

Doug nodded. “She’s the coroner now, and she’s still a bitch. You’ve got no idea how glad I am that you showed up after she took off.”

“That bad?”

“Yes.”

“So, when did you first discover men?” Christopher asked out of the blue.

Doug froze. “College,” he said carefully. “I used to be one of those kids hanging out in that bar in Missoula. All of the gay clubs in Miami were definitely an eye opener.” Doug knew he had to change the subject. He didn’t want to talk about his history with men. He had been young enough and naive enough in Miami to get in over his head when it came to men. His first crack at a real relationship had turned out to be with a drug dealer. The man had known Doug was a police officer from the start, and looking back, Doug realized he had been manipulated from the very beginning. As Doug became attached, his boyfriend had pushed and pushed for favors, for Doug to ignore the things he was doing. For too long, Doug had done just that.

When Doug woke up one morning to find his lover putting his department-issue Beretta back into his holster, he realized just how much trouble he had gotten himself into. When he tried to end things, his boyfriend had casually announced that he wasn’t allowed to leave. If he did, his lover promised Doug’s supervisor would get a detailed list of everything Doug had helped him accomplish, and Doug would go to prison as an accessory to drug-trafficking and extortion. With his lover blackmailing him, he had become a combination punching bag and fuck toy for a man who turned out to be far more sadistic than Doug had ever imagined possible. Sick as it was, Doug still got off on it, and that was more humiliating still. For three weeks, he hid his bruises, lived off ibuprofen, and put up with it. When his ex stumbled into his apartment with a roll of duct tape and announced he had

brought a couple of friends along to play, Doug lost it. He hadn't hurt the man enough to kill him, or even to stop him from running away, but he hadn't pulled his punches, either.

Then Doug transferred to another precinct, and for an entire year he had lived with the fear that he would walk into work one day only to have his supervisor sit him down with a detailed list of every way he had fucked up with that one relationship—including by ending it with his fists instead of by pressing charges himself. He never saw his ex again, though. It was two years before Doug even considered going out again, and when he did, he found himself holding back in conversations, refusing to stay with anyone long enough to risk getting to know them. He also found himself unable to bottom without trying to kill whoever was fucking him.

Doug twisted a chip of wood off the fence post and tossed it into the grass. He'd been standing there brooding too long, and Christopher was staring at him with a mixture of concern and amusement.

"I would have thought a big gay community would make it easier," Christopher said.

"Miami was different," said Doug simply. "I can honestly say I miss the food, and the pace, and even being able to pass for Cuban—but I don't miss the active gay scene. Not a lot of good experiences to look back on."

Christopher let out a sigh that almost sounded like a chuckle. "I got it on the first try?"

"What?"

"I was steering the conversation toward why you reach for a gun when you wake up at night and realize you're not alone," explained Christopher, as though there was absolutely nothing strange about manipulating the conversation in such an abstract direction.

Doug stared at him for a long moment, trying to sort out the feelings of anger and betrayal he felt. He was angry, and he felt betrayed, but then he always felt that way when he thought about what happened in Miami. "Do you ever just come right out and ask about what's on your mind?"

"Yes. I asked if you were a bouncer, didn't I? And I asked if you would fuck me. Several times."

Doug smiled despite his anger.

"I was trying to bring it up subtly, but when you got all spacey, I figured I'd give you an easy out. If you don't want to talk about it, you can just say so."

"I don't want to talk about it. And I did not get spacey."

“All right. I’m going to talk about it, though,” said Christopher. He set Doug’s revolver back into its case and closed it. “I feel like I owe you an apology, for Saturday night. You said you didn’t like to bottom and I disregarded that when I shouldn’t have. It was obvious you were uncomfortable. I shouldn’t have taken you like that. I’m sorry.”

“For Saturday?” Doug grinned. “Don’t be. I wanted you to fuck me, Chris. I told you I wanted it. I enjoyed it too. I just... I just can’t...”

Christopher closed the distance between them, took Doug’s face in his hands, and kissed him. “I have no issues at all with bottoming. I like being on top, but for me, it’s better the other way. If I had stopped for a second to think, I would have realized what was going on. I would have backed off.”

“I enjoyed it. I really did,” Doug whispered.

Christopher’s relief was so obvious Doug could feel it. “Are you sure?”

Doug pulled him close. “Absolutely.”

“Enough to want to try it again?” When the tension automatically shot through Doug’s body, Christopher laughed. “It’s just as well. Right now I really want you to fuck me.”

Doug could feel Christopher’s breath against his temple and it made him shiver. He could kiss Christopher so easily. Christopher’s shoulder and neck were at the perfect height, and to reach his lips Doug would just need to tilt his head up a little. So he did. He kissed Christopher’s lips, then the salty corded muscles of his neck and down to the spot on his collarbone that always made Christopher squirm. Christopher melted against him perfectly.

“I am definitely okay with that,” he whispered between kisses.

“Talk first,” Christopher gasped.

Doug could feel Christopher’s cock, already hard, grinding against him. “You can’t think straight? I’m not putting enough effort into this.” Doug latched onto the skin above Christopher’s collarbone and kissed, licked, and bit the already sensitive skin.

“I told you—it takes hard liquor or full-blown sex to make my brain stop. You know what’s in my past, Doug. You should also know that I’m content to leave it there. Everyone’s preferences are shaped by their experiences, and I can respect your preferences without needing to know where they came from. If you don’t want me to fuck you, that’s fine. Right now, my preferences include whatever I can entice you to do to me. Like that.”

Christopher gasped as Doug ran his tongue up his neck. “But if you ever want to experiment... I think I can take anything you’ve got, panic attack or

not.”

Doug felt Christopher’s pulse racing against his lips and smiled. “Is that an invitation to get carried away?”

“Fuck, yes. So long as I’ve still got pain meds left, anyway.”

Doug licked Christopher’s earlobe once more and then pulled away with a smirk. “Too bad.... If I take you up on that, dinner will burn.”

He tried not to laugh as Christopher’s entire body slumped in disappointment. He was quickly learning that Christopher tended to follow his stomach, even over the advice of his brain and dick combined. He imagined Christopher like a lost puppy—feed him once and he’d follow you everywhere in hopes of a second meal.

“After dinner?” Christopher asked hopefully.

EVEN with Doug’s weekend cut short, Doug and Christopher made the most of it. They divided their time between the bedroom, the shower, and the kitchen, but they also walked around the ranch. Doug took Christopher to the oak grove near the creek. They went for a run together, and Christopher didn’t even snicker when Doug couldn’t keep up for more than three miles.

Saturday they went into the reservation town of Ronan because Doug needed to get groceries. Christopher gawked at the tribal decorations that adorned most of the stores, failed to pronounce some of the street names so badly that Doug actually teased him about it, and was bouncing again by the time they finished in the store.

“It’s bigger than Elkin,” Christopher said in amazement. “It’s about twice as big.”

“Why didn’t you just get a job here?” Christopher asked, gesturing to the main street. “You wouldn’t have to deal with the suspicions and doubts down here.”

Doug pressed his lips tight. He shook his head slowly and took a sharp right turn. Less than a block from the main street, run-down trailers were packed close together, entire extended families taking up one or two city lots. Preschoolers, naked except for diapers that no longer fit them, sat and played in the dirt between the trailers. Half-starved dogs ran everywhere.

“This town is bigger than Elkin, but 90 percent of it is a slum,” said Doug. “It’s the kind of place where most people double-check that their car doors are locked when they’re at a stop light. My family has always been successful, but they did it by working themselves into early graves to build

that ranch. Even though they put in ten to twelve hour days every single day, folks in town hated them because they managed to be successful.”

Doug drummed on the steering wheel and circled around to the south end of town. It was one big series of trailer parks, worn-out buildings, bulletin boards advertising casinos, and old gas stations. “When I was a kid, my grandpa took me around the whole town, and when I asked why people didn’t just fix the broken sections of fences, or replace broken windows with glass instead of plywood, he said it was because the only thing they knew how to do was to be helpless. The men are all trapped in the same cycles—working seasonal construction jobs and making ends meet for half of the year, and pissing away what savings they do have on beer for the other half. Most of them are too proud to ask for help, even from each other. Even though their house might have a cracked window, they’ll cover it with a piece of plywood before they ask someone to help them replace it.”

Christopher stared out at the crowded trailers, no longer smiling or bouncy. “Was your mom unhappy living so close to the reservation?”

“Technically, the ranch is part of the reservation. Everything from the Baker County line down to Missoula is part of the reservation. Ronan is the biggest town on tribal land, but there are two more farther south,” Doug explained. “And she loved it here. My dad loved it too. My great grandpa was part of a government program aimed to help Native American kids adopt white culture. At the age of seven, a case worker from the Bureau of Indian Affairs put him on a train and sent him to a Catholic boarding school on the East Coast.”

“Just sent him away to school for free? That’s not so bad.”

“They didn’t have a choice. Looking back, it amounted to kidnapping. Parents weren’t even told where their kids were going or why, and it was years before they came home for a visit. He didn’t come back until he was fifteen.”

“He was seven? Like, first grade?”

“That’s right. My grandpa said his father was grateful, by the end. He came home well-educated, Catholic, and convinced it was his duty to try to rise up and prove that Native Americans could make something of themselves. Most of the other kids who were taken didn’t come back. They settled wherever they finished school. But he came home, and he came with enough education to write a business plan. He got a loan for the first chunk of land and started our ranch. He worked hard, paid off the mortgage, and

bought more land. Everybody hated him for it. By the time he had a family, the forced-education program had stopped, but he sent my grandpa away to boarding school anyway. My grandpa didn't come back until he was thirty, and he came home with a successful career in property law to fall back on. He tripled the family's land in five years, which made us even less popular." Doug slowed down and waited for a stray dog, followed by a half dozen stray children, to get out of the street. Along the side of the road, several men stood up and glared at Doug's truck.

"So I see," said Christopher. "At least the lady at the grocery store was nice."

"She's probably one of my mom's students. My mom fell in love with the romantic image of the Native American, and then she fell in love with the idea of convincing the tribe's children to embrace her ideal— taking pride in their culture and traditions, but still embracing the future."

"Sounds like what most people hope to do," said Christopher.

"The romanticized image of the proud Native American doesn't work very well in the real world," Doug insisted. "Hell, she was closer to being a real member of the tribe than I've ever been. She taught here, so I went to school in Elkin. Every day I went up there, it was like moving between two worlds. By eighteen, I decided I hated it here. I came back when she got sick, but... eh, who am I kidding? I still hate it here."

"Why don't you leave? You don't have to sell your family's land. You could lease it or something. Live off the rent in a small place somewhere else."

Doug shrugged. "I should," he admitted.

"I have trouble throwing out clothes," Christopher said randomly. "My foster mom, the last one I had, she always bought clothes. Every time she went out, she would pick up a suit, a T-shirt, or a pack of socks for me. She kept doing it while I was in college, and afterwards too. I would stop by their place for dinner, and she would make some comment about how she bought the shirt I was wearing years ago, then she would come out with a stack of new ones that she thought were more my color. I had no trouble throwing them out before she died, but since then, I have kept every single one I've still got. I have so many shirts it's ridiculous. Even this ragged T-shirt she bought me when I was fourteen. It's really pathetic. It's threadbare, stained with blood, grease, beer, coffee, pizza, gasoline, and mud. It has a few holes in it from where a dog tried to take a bite out of me. Delgado once told me it's going to spontaneously combust if I don't throw it out. I should

throw it out.” Christopher smiled whimsically. “But I’m not going to.”

Doug smiled too.

Normally, by the time Sunday morning finally rolled around, Doug would be so desperate to get out of his family’s vacant, quiet house that he would go into work early. Now he found himself lingering in bed, running his fingers up and down over Christopher’s bare hip just because he could. He loved to touch Christopher. He loved to watch his eyes crack open as Christopher woke up. He should have been in the shower twenty minutes ago, but he didn’t want to move until he had to. It was already to going to suck when Christopher left, so Doug wanted to enjoy this while he had the chance.

“What time do you have to leave?” Christopher whispered.

Doug was spooned against Christopher’s back. He snuggled closer. “About an hour. I don’t want to get out of bed, though.”

“No choice,” Christopher said sadly. “We’ve got to talk.”

Even though Doug couldn’t see his face, he had heard that tone, and those words, before. That was the same phrase Christopher had used before sitting him down to explain what his brother’s suicide note meant.

“Can you find the kid during your shift today? Micah, I mean.”

“Probably. I’m going to look for the truck anyway. Why?”

“There were local guys and feds there, in the parking lot.”

“Just because they’re feds doesn’t mean they’re stupid enough to tell everyone what was on those discs.”

“It wouldn’t matter if they kept their mouths shut or not. Park rangers, police officers, fire fighters, EMTs... there were more than a hundred people up there. They’re all going to assume we brought down something connected to the fire, just because I was there.”

“But no one should know what’s on the discs. I was the only one close enough to hear the audio track. And the FBI isn’t going to say anything until they know for sure that your brother didn’t just download those videos off the Internet—they’d cause a panic otherwise and they know it.”

Christopher sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Those feds wouldn’t have gone up there without some kind of explanation unless they already knew this was more than just an arson investigation. You don’t imagine that whoever set the fire can’t guess what they found? If they were willing to burn down Peter’s house to hide whatever evidence was still there, who’s to say they wouldn’t try to get rid of any other evidence that might be driving around

out there?”

It took longer than it should have for the full implications of that question to sink in. Then Doug was up and moving, frantically trying to find clothes.

“Why didn’t you say something before?”

“I was asleep before.” Christopher yawned and stretched. “Just thought about it. Hop in the shower, I’ll start some coffee.”

Doug nodded. He stopped at the door to the bathroom. “You just thought about that, at four thirty in the morning?”

“I’m a morning person,” said Christopher with an innocent smile. He practically leaped out of bed and then squirmed as their activities from the previous night caught up to him. “Eh. Never mind, I need a shower too. I know I can’t be a part of your investigation, but I was going to head to Lieder’s church anyway. If I see Micah or Peter’s truck, should I give you a call?”

“Yes. I have to do the morning shift briefing, but I’ll swing by the church after that. That Lieder guy gave me the creeps when I met him at the coroner’s office. He hinted that he knew a lot more about what Peter was doing than anybody else did, so I want to talk to him again.”

“Do you want me to hold off on talking to him? I can wait until you’re done and go after.”

“I don’t know. I want to check in and see what’s happened the past few days. Come on, we can save time if we shower together.”

Christopher cocked his head to the side and smiled at him. “The only way that will be faster is if you can keep your hands to yourself. Think you can manage it this time?”

“It’s important this time.” Doug shrugged. “So, probably....”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE Sheriff’s office was packed, for a Sunday. Doug was worried about bringing Christopher in with him, but there were so many FBI windbreakers

and suits in the charge room that no one seemed to notice Christopher was even there, much less care. The crowds seemed to be throwing things off, anyway. The shift briefing, which was normally Doug's job on Sundays, was already set up. Sheriff Brubaker, in his full uniform with polished brass, stood near the duty desk with his arms folded across his chest.

As soon as he saw Doug and Christopher, he left his spot and yanked them both into his office. With the din from the charge room muffled by the office door, Doug could hear Brubaker's jaw popping. Even though the sheriff looked furious, he didn't explode the way Doug expected him to.

"I tell you, boys, I am tempted to tell all of these big bad federal agents that they can go work out of the Super 8. When I told them to make themselves at home, I didn't expect them to take me literally." Brubaker sat down behind his desk and stared at them both, narrowing his eyes. "Alright, Dougie, let's hear it. When I saw you Wednesday night, you looked like you were about to send those FBI twits through a wall headfirst. What the hell happened?"

"I accompanied Detective Hayes and the FBI guys up to Lone Pine to follow up on a potential lead in Peter Hayes's suicide note. After reading it, Detective Hayes said he had reason to believe that his brother might have been operating as a sexual predator, and that he might have had a local accomplice. Agent Belkamp and Detective Hayes found a trail of Southern California gang signs, and I helped them recover a cache of computer CDs that had been hidden in a crack in the cliff."

"What was on the CDs?" Brubaker asked.

"Kiddie porn. Agent Shaffer stopped the playback as soon as he realized what was on them. He took them straight down to the federal crime lab in Helena," said Doug. "Have they come back with anything?"

Brubaker shook his head slowly. "They've come back with more people. Too damn many people—they're tripping over themselves. At least, the little one is. I haven't seen that big guy yet." He leaned back until his chair creaked. "What was it about your brother's suicide note that made you suspect there was anything up there?" he asked Christopher.

"The words 'Man of God'," said Christopher. "That's how Peter referred to the minister who molested him as a kid. Sheriff, I've worked with K9 forensics units. Arson investigations don't need them because the burn patterns can tell an investigator enough to figure out how a fire started. I suspect they found traces of human remains in what's left of Peter's house.

They haven't confirmed it, but I'd bet money on it. I think Peter got involved with someone who did things he was uncomfortable with, someone who killed their victims instead of grooming them to be complacent. Given his background, and probably his participation, he felt like going to the police wasn't an option. He orchestrated his suicide to get me up here, and he left those discs hidden at the end of a trail that only someone familiar with San Diego gangs could follow."

"So what do you think is on those discs that he wanted you to see?"

"Evidence," said Christopher simply. "I'd guess child pornography, possibly videos of violence against children here in Elkin."

"You're remarkably calm, Detective Hayes, for someone who's talking about his own brother raping little boys."

Christopher didn't even flinch. Doug was impressed. Christopher took a deep breath and smiled. "I have never denied that my brother was a pedophile, Sheriff Brubaker. As far as I knew, he was still in prison in California. He was my brother by blood, but I would never let that fact stop me from doing my job."

"Really?" Brubaker looked flabbergasted. "You saying you'd shoot your own brother?"

"To stop him during the commission of a felony, or in self-defense, yes."

Doug smirked. He knew he shouldn't be enjoying watching Christopher rise to the challenge in Brubaker's words, but he was. That damn smile really was the perfect professional mask. Fake or not, it gave Christopher the composure to face down anything. His answer was the textbook law-enforcement response.

"So, let me get this straight." Brubaker laced his fingers together and glared at both of them. "You suspect that we have a sexual predator, possibly a murderer, at large in Baker County. You found evidence that might have told you the identity of this man, but you handed that evidence over to the FBI without even looking at it, and then you went home?"

"Yes, sir, I did," said Doug. "My suspicions are just that—suspicions. Even if those discs are filled with child pornography, the only person I am confident has been in possession of them is deceased. The FBI analysts can find out if Peter Hayes downloaded them, which is likely, or produced them himself with an accomplice. I wouldn't even know where to begin finding that out, and doing so would inevitably require more people to be involved. Word that we might have a sexual predator operating in Elkin

would get out and cause a panic. Plus, if Peter Hayes and his boss were targeting our kids, then letting him know he's under investigation could very well put more children in danger. If this guy has already killed one or more of his victims, and was willing to commit arson to hide it, what would stop him from hurting any victims who are still alive? Like the boy who was running away from Reverend Liedes on Wednesday? I'm sorry if I should have reported to you faster, but I still don't know what's on those discs or where the files might have come from. Without that information...." Doug shrugged.

Brubaker stared at Doug. Then the sheriff leaned his chair back even further and put his feet up on his desk. He glared at them both, but there was a smile behind his eyes now. "Why the hell haven't I promoted you yet?"

"Because there are four other detectives who all have seniority over me, and they would take it personally."

"That's what's I'm talking about," Brubaker said, winking at him. "What I wouldn't give to have an entire department with common sense instead of just you and Daniels! And you're right. It's easy to get caught up, when you hear something like that.... But you're right." Brubaker dropped his feet off the desk again and slapped the desktop hard. "So you're on it. You are now our liaison to those damn feds, and I'm expecting you to do something to show them up. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find the kid, this Micah who's been driving around in Peter Hayes's truck. Then I'm going to find Liedes and have another chat, because those two are the only ones in the entire town who seem to have known Hayes at all."

"Donovan," said Brubaker quietly. "Pete's lover is named Micah Donovan."

"Micah Donovan?" Doug repeated. "You knew they were lovers?"

"Yes. Micah spent more time in the jail here as a kid than he spent at home with his granny."

"Thank you. That'll make it easier to find him. I need to try to get in touch with Agent Belkamp, too, and see if he's heard back about the discs yet. I know it's Sunday, but everyone else is here, so he's probably around somewhere."

"Wouldn't count on it," Christopher muttered.

Brubaker smiled brightly and stood up. "All right then. This is your rodeo. What can I do to help?"

"Talk to Liedes for me," Doug said immediately. "I already told you he

gives me the creeps.... When I talked to him last, he all but came right out and said Peter Hayes was involved in inappropriate conduct with the young men in his church. Now I think he only brought it up to try to direct attention toward Peter and away from himself, but... I have absolutely no reason to think that other than he gives me the creeps.”

“And the Man of God link, in the suicide note,” said Brubaker. “I’ll try and catch him after his service is over this morning, then we should compare notes. If we can catch him in a lie between the two of us, he’ll likely fall apart.”

“I’ll work on finding Micah Donovan, then,” Doug said, nodding. “Do you want to do the patrol briefing this morning?”

“Am I going to make you do the patrol briefing this morning, you mean? No, I’ll take care of it. Sit in on it, though, so we can give everybody the heads-up to keep their eyes peeled for Pete’s truck.”

Sheriff Brubaker glanced between Doug and Christopher, apparently noticing Christopher for the first time. “Son, you ain’t on my payroll, or my insurance. I appreciate the help you’ve given so far, but I can’t let you tag along on this.”

“I understand. I’m willing to help any way I can—including by getting out of your hair.”

“Good man,” said Brubaker. “Shift briefing in ten minutes, Dougie.” He began the casual shuffling of paperwork that meant they were dismissed.

Christopher followed Doug back to his desk and lingered for as long as he prudently could. “Could you give me a call, if you hear back from the FBI?” he whispered.

“Can I give you a call anyway?”

“I said anytime,” said Christopher, rolling his eyes. “I think I’m going to go get breakfast before the church crowd shows up.”

Doug wanted to point out that he had fed Christopher just an hour before, but he held his tongue. Christopher probably needed the calories, and Doug figured three days of pretending meat and dairy didn’t exist were probably getting on the other man’s nerves.

“I’ll be sure to let you know if I hear anything from your FBI stalker too,” Doug offered.

Christopher gave him a gorgeous smile and then wove his way out through the crowd.

CHRISTOPHER wandered out of the sheriff's office, through the stream of FBI agents, and out to his rental car. He cursed the tiny Subaru, thought about walking, and then got in anyway. He headed toward the Mission Mountains Evangelical Church. He knew he shouldn't be doing this, but he also knew the timing was just too good a chance to pass up if he wanted to find Micah quickly. What kind of good Christian boy worked at his church but didn't attend Sunday services?

He hadn't gotten a good enough look at Micah to pick him out of a crowd, but there wasn't any harm in checking to see if the truck was in the parking lot. Unfortunately, it wasn't. Christopher parked along the street, where he could watch the entrance to the church in case Micah had gotten a ride with someone else. It was nearly an hour wait before a sea of well-dressed men and women began to pour through the doors, and he lost track of all of the teenage boys among them. Any of them with light-colored hair could have been Micah Donovan. All Christopher had really seen of him had been that black leather biker vest, and that wasn't the type of thing anyone wore to church. Christopher drove by Peter's house next, but just to search the neighborhood for the old white Toyota truck.

Finally, three hours after he had left Doug to go get breakfast, he went to the café downtown. The church crowd he was expecting never showed up, so he had a chance to finish a second breakfast, pie, and coffee. Everyone else in the café was quiet and kept glancing in his direction with nervous eyes. Word had obviously gotten around that something bad was happening in Elkin, so Doug's goal of not causing a panic was moot at this point.

His phone rang and he answered it without even looking at the caller ID. "Hayes," he said, out of habit.

"Hey, Hayes." The sound of his partner's voice froze him stiff. When Christopher didn't say anything, Delgado fumbled and shouted, "Don't hang up! Don't hang up!"

"Your timing sucks, Delgado, as usual. What do you want?"

"Just to talk! To apologize! Jenkins won't tell me anything about where you've gone, you don't answer my calls, and I can't even fucking sleep because of how bad I messed things up!"

Christopher saw a few of the nervous eyes in the café turn angry. He turned down the volume on his cell phone. "Delgado, I'm sorry you're having trouble. I'd love to try and help, but I've got a lot on my plate at the

moment.”

“Where are you? What’s happened? I know you didn’t take off because of me, so what’s going on?”

“You want the whole list?” Christopher asked casually. He took a bite of his pie.

“Yes!”

“The bullet damaged a major nerve in my arm. I have no feeling in half of my right hand, so I’ll have to look for a new job. My brother hanged himself on May 21, as a gift, apparently. I wouldn’t really care, but there’s no one left to pawn the body off on except me, so I have to plan a funeral, probate a will, and deal with a mess he left behind. The mess exploded in all kinds of interesting directions—Hadley, Kawalski, and us kind of exploded,” said Christopher, using the names of two of their colleagues. Hadley specialized in arson and insurance fraud, and Kawalski was a woman who worked in the sexual and domestic violence task force, specifically with child abuse cases. Arson, child abuse, and homicide—all rolled into one.

“All three?”

“Yes.”

“May 21? So, like, as a birthday present?”

“He carved ‘Happy Birthday’ on his arms,” Christopher whispered, smiling miserably. “So, Delgado, I’m sorry that you feel bad about what happened, but I’ve got things to deal with.”

“Fuck, Hayes, don’t be like this. Where are you?”

“The Center Street Café,” said Christopher, trying to sound nonchalant.

“What town, asshole?”

Christopher took a deep breath and held it. Any other time, he’d have given anything to have Ray’s company, much less his help. But now, he couldn’t think about anything except what Doug would say. He knew he shouldn’t be worried about Doug. Doug was a great guy, and he was turning into a great friend, but they were just fucking each other, just a casual weekend thing. Even if the weekend seemed to be stretching into weeks. Even if Doug was quiet and sincere and perfect. Doug was everything Ray Delgado wasn’t, but Ray was still his best friend.

“I’m not going to jump you, Hayes! You just lost your brother, man. In more ways than one, from the sound of it. I’m still your fucking partner! Where are you?”

“Elkin,” he whispered. “Elkin, Montana.”

“I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

“Ray.” Christopher swallowed. “There’s... there’s somebody... up here....”

“Somebody special?”

“I... yeah.”

“I promise I’ll behave myself.”

After he said good-bye, Christopher finished his pie and coffee, then caught the waitress’s eye for a refill. When she came to refill his cup, she slipped into the booth across the table. “Is it true? Are you working with all those FBI agents?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I’m a regular police officer.”

“But you were up there with them.” She leaned close. “Can you tell me what’s going on? My little sister said nearly half of her friends were told they couldn’t leave the house all weekend. Everybody’s saying they found another body up there, and that the FBI is hunting for the killer now!”

Christopher schooled his features. A flat-out denial wasn’t going to go over well, but Doug was right about trying to keep people calm. Their primary duty was to keep the peace. “It’s nothing to be frightened about. I’m afraid we’re trying to solve some very old crimes that have just come to light. They’re the type of crimes where the victims were probably young children who have grown up. Usually the last thing adult victims of child abuse want to do is to admit that it happened.”

She giggled. “But things like that can’t happen here.”

Christopher softened his smile. She was twisting her black apron in her hands. “Things like that can and do happen everywhere. It’s natural not to want to believe it. What’s worse is that a criminal who targets children usually goes after children in their own family, kids who trust them and who have a strong emotional attachment to them. Those children are usually easier to manipulate.”

The poor waitress grew even paler. “I can’t imagine no one would notice. Not something like that, anyway.”

“I wish that were true,” said Christopher. “But let’s try an experiment, totally hypothetical. You have a little sister, right? I want you to close your eyes and imagine that she came to you and accused your father of molesting her.”

“What?” The woman sat back and glared at him. “I will not! He would never do something like that!”

Christopher nodded. “But imagine that she said he did. You’d feel hurt, angry, insulted by the very idea that she could say such a thing, because it threatens someone close to your heart. You really believe it couldn’t happen, so your anger would come out at her—you would accuse her of being mistaken, or of being malicious and lying. The really frightening part is that you’re not alone. Most family members tend to accuse the victim of lying about abuse in the family, to try to protect their family as a whole. So when a child is being victimized by someone they love and trust, not only do people turn a blind eye, but they also sabotage a victim’s efforts to get help.”

Christopher thought about the way that Reverend Liedes had tried to pass off the relationship between Peter and Micah as consensual. Even the sheriff himself had called Micah Peter’s “lover,” which implied that he was an equal partner in a relationship with a man more than twenty years older than he was. “Sometimes, even the victim themselves may defend their abuser. Sometimes abuse is all the victim has ever known, and they don’t think there’s anything strange about it.”

She chewed on her bottom lip and shook her head.

“In this case,” Christopher went on carefully, “we believe the man responsible no longer had any children in his immediate family, so he targeted kids who were outcasts, all to prey on their need for emotional attachment and to cast more doubt on their claims if they did say something.”

“So, you think he did attack a child in his own family?” she choked.

“His criminal history indicates that he did.”

“Is he still out there?” she whispered, shifting so she could see the front door.

“No. He is no longer on the streets. Nevertheless, the Baker County Sheriff’s Department and the FBI are going to continue trying to find anyone who might have been among his victims. It’s a challenge, though.”

“The old maintenance man at Mission Mountains...,” she whispered. “People used to talk about him being a bit off.”

She caught sight of one of the few other customers in the café, picked up her coffee pot, and hurried away. She came back again a few minutes later.

“I went to school with a girl you should talk to,” she whispered. “Except, I don’t know how you’d find her. I remember her name was Melody, and some of the things she talked about.... You should try and find her.”

“You don’t know her last name, by any chance?”

The woman shook her head. “I don’t remember. We were fourteen when she was taken to a foster home in Kalispell.”

“Kalispell? That’s hours away.”

She shrugged. “Melody was raised by her aunt and uncle, but she got mean and violent with her cousins. At least, that’s what everybody said.”

Christopher dug out a pen and wrote the name on his napkin. “I’ll see what we can do,” he promised. “I’m Christopher, by the way. Christopher Hayes.”

“Vanessa.” She shook his hand, then took her coffee pot back around to check on the full tables.

When he left, he walked back to the park where he had run on Monday. The playground was empty. So were the baseball field and the basketball court. No one was on the sidewalks, either. The park, and the entire town, felt empty. Despite Doug’s efforts and the FBI’s refusal to get chatty, the people of Elkin had learned something was wrong. They were worried enough to keep their children safe at home on a Sunday afternoon.

He wandered around the park until nearly two, when he got a text message from Doug saying no one had managed to find the kid yet, or the truck. Even the sheriff’s attempt to talk to Reverend Liedes failed—the man had disappeared the moment he finished his morning service, leaving a note on the reader board that the afternoon service was cancelled.

He drove back to his hotel room, paid for another week, then got changed and went for a run. He needed a long run to clear his head. He didn’t want to start speculating about the fact that the entire sheriff’s department and a team of federal agents had all failed to find Micah Donovan, and that their only suspect was also missing. If he let his mind mull over the coincidence, he would have to own up to the fact that he hadn’t thought about looking for the boy in time. While he had been distracted with Doug on Friday and Saturday, Micah Donovan could have been murdered.

CHRISTOPHER was already pulling his shoes on when Doug knocked on his hotel-room door at six the next morning.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to call last night,” Doug said. “I figured coffee and breakfast would be on your agenda, so....” He held up a paper bag and a drink tray with two steaming white cups of coffee.

“There’s a Starbucks here!” Christopher shouted, ripping the proffered cup out of the drink tray.

“There’s one on the reservation. I brought bagels and jam too.”

Christopher savored the first sip of smoky coffee, then grabbed Doug by the arm and pulled him inside. “What happened last night? Did you find him? Any sign of Liedes?” As soon as the door shut behind Doug, Christopher grabbed the bag out of his hands and began to dig out bagels. “Did you get any cream cheese?” he asked, knowing it was probably hopeless. Then he saw the single foil packet beneath the half-dozen condiment-sized packets of jam. “Thank you!”

“We didn’t find Micah or Liedes. His secretary said he had to go to a doctor’s appointment in Helena and that he won’t be back until Wednesday.”

“A doctor’s appointment on the other side of the state?” Christopher snorted. “That’s likely.”

“Actually, it is likely.” Doug grabbed a bagel too. “His appointment is at Ft. Harrison. It’s the nearest veteran’s hospital. It’s the only one in the state.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know. That’s just what the secretary said.”

“No, I mean you have one VA hospital for the entire state?”

Doug mumbled an affirmative while he tried to open a jam packet with his teeth. “This is Montana,” he reminded Christopher. “We have a grand total of four people per square mile.”

Christopher needed a minute to process that. He worked in a city that managed to cram six million people into sixty square miles. That anyone could survive in this state meant there had to be one or two pockets of civilization surrounded by nothing but empty space. “That makes getting lost around here seem kind of scary.”

Doug rolled his eyes. “There’s nothing scary about having to rely on yourself.”

“Unless you’ve never had to before,” Christopher argued. “I think I might have to stick to the treadmill from now on. It took me about an hour to find my way back to the highway last night.”

“You got lost running?”

Christopher shrugged. “The area looks different at night. I found my way back eventually.”

Doug chuckled at him and finished his bagel. Christopher ate fast, drained his coffee with a grateful sigh, and stared at Doug. His hair was still wet from a shower, and he looked like he hadn’t shaved in a couple of days.

Christopher couldn't stop himself from cupping Doug's cheek and grazing his thumb over Doug's dark whiskers. "Do you want help looking for him?" "I've got help," Doug complained. Christopher felt Doug wrap his arm around his waist and pull him close. "Sheriff Brubaker has decided he is riding with me for this shift. Apparently Micah's grandma said he told her he was going to spend the weekend camping, so we're calling up reserve officers and searching all of the big campgrounds between here and Libby." "Sorry."

Doug shrugged. "This is a really, really bad idea...."

"I know. I keep distracting you. Hell, if we hadn't spent the weekend fucking around, I might have realized we put that kid in danger on Thursday night. It's been bugging me."

Doug shifted away from him, his mouth open. "No."

"No?" Christopher laughed. "You just said this was a bad idea."

"I meant kissing you right now is a bad idea," Doug explained. "I missed you last night. I didn't get home until midnight, but you were all I could think about."

"Exactly. This is a distraction. That's why it's a bad idea," Christopher pointed out.

When Doug pulled Christopher against him, his resolve disintegrated. He felt Doug's hands roam up over his hips and back.

"You're right about distracting me," Doug whispered against Christopher's lips. "Calling this off now would just make it worse. I was miserable and couldn't think of anything except you last night, and it had only been a day. If you really want to help me focus, you should just stay out at my place while you're here."

Christopher swallowed and tried to think. "Stay? With you?"

"Yeah. If I can see you, if I can touch you...." Doug ran his fingers down his back, making him moan. "I'll be able to focus again."

Doug ran his fingers up to Christopher's shoulder and hovered over the knot of spasming muscle beneath the scar tissue. Christopher hissed and leaned against Doug, shying away from the slight pressure. "What if I bribe you? I can try a massage to get that muscle to relax."

Christopher knew he should have argued, he should have pushed away, and for a moment, he tried. But Doug closed the gap between them and Christopher let himself be carried away by Doug's deep, demanding kiss. Doug didn't break the kiss until Christopher gave in and melted against

him.

“Did you just ask me to stay with you?”

“Open your eyes,” Doug whispered. Christopher did. “I really like you.” Doug kissed him again. “I think better when you’re around.”

“If you’re really less distracted when I’m around....”

“I really want you around.”

Christopher bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from getting giddy.

“I guess it’s not that nice of a hotel anyway.”

“It’s really not. You drink coffee to calm down, don’t you?” Doug asked, regarding him with open accusation in his eyes.

“Hmm?”

“You were twitching when I got here. A cup of french roast and suddenly you’re capable of standing still.”

“It’s just that it’s warm,” Christopher told him. He tried to shift away from Doug’s arms, but the other man held him tight.

“Liar. You have ADD. You use coffee like Ritalin. Finish mine too, if you want.”

“You sure? I really do love their coffee. And, for the record, I have never been diagnosed with ADD. I could never sit still long enough to get through the list of questions.”

“It’s fine. If you want to stay at my place, I’ll even buy some Starbucks ground coffee for you.”

“Starbucks and a massage? Damn. Bribery will get you everywhere,” Christopher assured him. “Did you get in touch with Belkamp?”

“No. I guess he wasn’t even in town yesterday. Some of the FBI guys I did talk to said it can take weeks for DNA samples to be analyzed.”

“There were DNA samples on the discs?” Christopher’s eyes went wide.

“I don’t know. That’s just what they said. I’m kind of hoping Belkamp or Shaffer will show up today. If not, well, there’s always trying to find one random camper in one of a hundred and fifty potential campgrounds within a few hours of Elkin.”

“At least it’s something to do,” Christopher said, smiling. “If you need a break from driving through the woods, I might have an ID on another victim,” he said. “A girl named Melody. She’d be about twenty now. No last name, and she was sent to a foster home in another town at fourteen, but it might be worth trying to find her.”

“Do you know what town?”

“Vanessa said Kalispell. Why are Elkin’s kids sent to foster homes in other towns? I know it’s small, but it’s not that small.”

“I’ve never heard of foster kids being sent out of town. Maybe they had family or something in the town they were sent to. I can ask Sergeant Daniels. His wife is the director of the county child and family services office. Who is Vanessa?”

“She’s a waitress down at the Center Street Café. She’s sweet. I’m sure I can find Melody’s last name, if you’d like. I’ve got to go into town and sign some forms I missed for the coroner, and then take them to the funeral home so they can release Peter’s ashes on Saturday.”

“Has he already been cremated?”

“Last Friday.”

Doug studied his face. “You didn’t want to be there?”

“No. This might surprise you, but the good memories I have of Peter aren’t that good, the bad ones are really bad.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Christopher set his forehead against Doug’s and shut his eyes.

“Can we get together for lunch?”

“Like a date?”

“Not *like* anything,” Christopher said, echoing Doug’s invitation to dinner on Wednesday night. “A date.”

“I would love to. Buy me lunch and I’ll make you dinner? I don’t get off until seven, though.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Doug kissed him good-bye at the door and hurried away. Christopher stood there, letting the warmth of Doug’s coffee radiate through his hands. He licked his lips and smiled like an idiot when he realized he could still feel the last tingle of their kiss. He wondered what it was about Doug that turned him into such a sap.

By NINE in the morning, Christopher had finished all of his paperwork with the coroner’s office and paid the funeral home to host Peter’s service on the following Saturday. He’d even managed to check in with his lawyer, which amounted to being told that the process had started and would still take another six to eight weeks, if the arson investigation was ever finished. After that, he found the high school and introduced himself to the secretary.

He was about to ask to speak with the principal when a familiar man in a blue baseball cap walked by, noticed him, and stopped. “Big-city cop,” he

said, pointing at him. "You can sure as hell run. I'm Chuck Peterson. I coach."

"What sport?" asked Christopher.

"Everything. Well, not everything. I don't coach the all-girl sports or cheerleading. It's damn near impossible to get teachers to come up here, so we're always short-staffed, even when we're just running two summer school classes."

"I'm Detective Christopher Hayes. Was that your little league team at the park? I saw you there."

"Yeah," the coach told him with obvious pride. "There's a good bunch. Most of them have been playing since they were four. Do you have a kid starting here?"

"No. I'm here in a professional capacity."

"But you don't work in Elkin," the coach said carefully.

"No, I don't. I'm investigating the activities of a registered sex offender from California," his brain supplied quickly. It was true enough. "You know, the FBI thing," he added.

"Is that what all the fuss has been about? That's grim, someone like that living in our town all these years. What can we do for you?"

"I'm trying to track down a girl who might have been abused by the subject of our investigation," said Christopher. "She would have been here about six years ago, goes by the name of Melody. I'm told she went to a foster home in Kalispell during her freshman year."

"I think I remember hearing about her. I don't recall her from gym, though. And like I said, I don't coach girls' sports. Give me a few minutes."

Soon the small office was filled with two secretaries, several teachers, the high school guidance counselor, the principal, and a guidance counselor from the middle school down the street. When he explained the patterns he was looking for, the staff was quick to come up with a list of students they'd had over the years who didn't fit in, got into trouble with the law at an early age, and displayed violent or sexual behavior in no way appropriate for their age. Melody Nolan was on the list.

"Were any of these other kids in and out of foster homes?" Christopher asked, scanning the list of names.

"A few," the middle school guidance counselor said. He pointed out ten names.

"Was Melody the only one who was sent to a foster home out of town?"

The counselor shook his head. "All but two went to other counties. Like you said, she went to Kalispell." He pointed to another name on the list. "Missoula," he said, then pointed to others. "Seeley Lake... Big Fork... Lolo..." With the high school guidance counselor's help, they ended up with eight children who had been sent to foster homes outside of Baker County.

Christopher had the secretaries help him find years of birth for each child, so he would know how old they were now. When he examined the list again, his brain saw the pattern before he even did the math. He rewrote the list on a new sheet of paper, this time ordered by their years of birth. There were two to three years between them, and the boys outnumbered the girls three to one. The oldest would have been twenty-two. Melody Nolan was next. That meant that twelve years ago, when Peter first moved to Elkin, the first potential victim would have been ten years old.

"Most of these eight went to out-of-town foster homes between thirteen and fourteen, didn't they?" Christopher asked.

"That's right. It's a hard enough age for kids who don't have problems at home."

"I've got to go talk to Detective Heavy Runner." He jumped to his feet with the list. "Thank you all. This is the best starting point we could have hoped for. If you think of any other children we should interview, please give us a call. Detective Douglas Heavy Runner is coordinating the investigation for Baker County."

"Sure. Can't you at least tell us who you're after? A lot of our parents are worried. It'd be nice to have something to tell them."

Christopher didn't want to be a hardass. These people had trusted him with privileged information, and he didn't want to clam up and tell them he couldn't talk about it after they'd done so much to help. He didn't want to make them worry without solid evidence, either. He settled for abbreviating the truth. "We're waiting to hear back from the FBI crime lab. Until then, we're still in the dark."

From the grim expressions around the room, he knew that wasn't enough.

"You've got classes in session?"

"Just remedial classes," the principal told him.

"It wouldn't hurt to be more careful than usual. Watch younger kids, especially kids who might not have parents picking them up after school. If you do see any suspicious activity, even among parents or individuals you

might know and respect, don't hesitate to report it to the sheriff's office."

"People we know? Someone here in Elkin?"

"I hope not," said Christopher morosely.

When he got outside, he checked his messages and found that Doug had already sent him a text saying he was going to be late.

He went by the sheriff's office anyway, hoping to find someone from the FBI who would be able to look into the list he'd compiled. Compared to the chaos of Sunday morning, the sheriff's office was practically deserted by eleven in the morning. The same young deputy he'd met before was working at the reception desk, and it looked like he was the only one there.

"Hey, how's it going?" he asked. "Are those FBI guys around?"

"Chris, right?" the young deputy asked.

Christopher cringed. "No. It's Christopher. But Hayes is fine. The FBI guys?"

"One of them just came in. He's back in dispatch with Daniels."

"The same Sergeant Daniels whose wife runs family services? Shoot, I really need to talk to both of them. Could you let them know I'm here?"

"Uh... yes...." The young man picked up the phone and bent down to look at a laminated piece of paper taped to the desk. He dialed three numbers and jumped as the phone beeped in his hand. He dropped the phone, picked it up again, and then set it back in the cradle. "That happened last time too. How 'bout I walk you back?"

"That would be great. Is everybody out looking for that Donovan kid?"

"Yes. I got stuck watching the desk. Again."

"Somebody's got to be here in case the world falls apart," said Christopher, with true sympathy.

He followed the young man through a series of teal-colored doors, down a long hallway, and through a locked door with the word "DISPATCH/DETENTION" painted in stenciled white letters. Through that door, they came out into an open platform with several desks and workstations arranged in a square. Two holding cells sat to the right of the platform along the far wall, and a small glass-walled office was set off from the workstations. The door was open, though, and inside two men were arguing.

"I told you we can't get a signal to them until they're down out of the mountains. The forest service is your only option, but even they've got to find them first."

“I understand that” came the annoyed voice of Special Agent Belkamp. “I’m just not quite clear on why it’s taking so long. You said the campground is less than ten miles away.”

“Ten miles as the crow flies. To get there by road, you have to go up and down switchbacks, on single-lane dirt roads. It takes an hour to drive up there, and nearly four hours to reach some of the more remote campgrounds. There are some deeper in that can only be accessed on foot or on horseback.”

“Can you tell me how long it’s going to take?”

“I sure can. It’ll take anywhere from one to twelve hours.”

“Sergeant Daniels.” The young deputy poked his head through the door, as if both men inside couldn’t see him through the glass, “Detective Hayes is here to see you and Agent Belkamp.”

“Thank you, Jackson,” said a very large man sitting at a cramped, tiny desk. “Come on in, Mr. Hayes, if you can fit.”

Christopher made it through the door, but that was as far as he could go without touching Belkamp. “This is cozy.” The glass-walled office was packed with filing cabinets, another desk was tucked in the corner, and computers were set up on both desks. There wasn’t enough room between the two desks for a single office chair to move around, but someone had stuck a second office chair in the far corner anyway. “We haven’t met yet. I’m Christopher Hayes. I’m....”

“You’re the runner with Heavy Runner,” the old sergeant said with a smirk. “Excuse me?”

“You got to admit, it’s funny. Am I wrong? The way he talked, I got the impression that you’re rather partial to running.”

“I.... Yes, I am.”

The sergeant regarded him with a closed-lip smile for a moment. “Not all of us are as oblivious or as blind as Heavy Runner likes to believe, Detective Hayes. What can I do for you today?”

“I was hoping you could tell me why Elk kids go to foster homes in other towns.”

“What?” The large man narrowed his eyes. He spun in his chair and folded his arms. “What the hell has that got to do with anything?”

“Well, I was talking to people earlier, trying to get a feel for whether Micah Donovan was a victim in this case or an accomplice. That led to talking to people about local kids who fit the pattern the subject in this investigation

followed when selecting and grooming victims. I've got a list of ten likely kids. Most are male, each one born about two to three years after the other, and school officials say eight of them were sent to foster homes in other counties around age thirteen, right when Peter Hayes would have lost interest in them. Micah Donovan is one of the few on the list who didn't leave Elkin by being sent to foster homes in other towns, but he's on the list. I'm not from around here, so I don't know if you have a shortage of foster placements or something. It struck me as strange enough that it was worth asking about."

"You put together a list of possible victims over the weekend," Belkamp translated, taking the list from Christopher.

"No, just this morning."

"How the hell did our recruiters miss you after college?" asked Belkamp.

"I thought you guys all had to be lawyers. The FBI doesn't invite many education majors to apply. Here's the list. What did your guys find out?"

Belkamp shook his head. "There are too many prints on the discs that match police employment records. Our lab guys need a fresh set of prints from everyone in the chain of custody. I need to take the prints from Heavy Runner myself. The database scans of his prints are crap and they've only got a badge number next to whoever took them. No certification of anything that they're even his. If they match, I need to get him to change his report so it explains why the hell he didn't have gloves on, otherwise nothing we take off of those discs will be admissible as evidence."

"He had gloves on."

"Did you see him with gloves on?" Belkamp asked cynically.

"You know I didn't." Christopher didn't like what Belkamp was implying.

"I saw him pull a stretched pair of gloves out of his bag, though."

"Let me see that list." Sergeant Daniels plucked the sheet of paper from Belkamp's hands. He read the names, his eyebrows rising a little more with each one. Staring at the paper, he picked up the phone, cradled it between his ear and shoulder, and dialed a number from memory. "Hey, babe," he said, after a moment. "When you have a spare minute today, would you mind coming down here? The FBI would like to interview some of your kids, but we're going to need help tracking them down."

He listened for a moment, and then he smiled. "No, I don't think they're current cases. In fact, even the two who are still minors look like they've gone to foster homes in other parts of the state." The woman's voice on the

other end of the phone got a bit louder. Daniels read off the two most recent names, listened for another moment, and then shook his head. “Are you sure? Because I remember these kids—they were in and out of here all the time—but I never arranged DOC transfers, and I don’t remember anybody else doing it, either.” After another moment, Daniels sighed. “Alright, I’ll check our files. Thanks, babe.”

When he hung up the phone, he shrugged his massive shoulders. “Looks like someone in the school wanted to sugarcoat things for their staff. These kids didn’t go to out-of-town foster homes. Maggie says they’re in the custody of the Department of Corrections. Apparently these two went to a boy’s penal camp in Darby, and this one went to the state mental hospital down in Deer Lodge.”

“Are you sure?”

Daniels nodded. “Maggie said she’d double-check,” he said with a soft grin. “But she’s usually right. And this one was just a couple months ago,” he said, pointing to the last name on the list. “Still, I can check faster.” He rolled his chair over to the tiny computer in the corner and pulled up the records of both boys with the Montana Department of Corrections. After a moment of stabbing at the keyboard, he sat back and glared at the monitor. “I’m going to have to pull the hard copies to track them down,” he complained. “Our records say they were released to family services caseworkers. I must have hit the wrong value when I was updating their status.” He scrolled down and then snorted. “Never mind. Greg hit the wrong values when updating their status.”

“The sheriff?” Belkamp asked.

“Yeah. He’s better with computers than he wants to admit, but if it isn’t point and click, he tends to screw it up.”

“Would you mind pulling the hard copies for me?” Belkamp asked.

“I will, but I can’t right now. I can’t go down to the basement until I’ve got another officer here who can take over Dispatch.”

“No one has so much as radioed in a traffic stop,” Belkamp pointed out. “And you said most of them are out of radio range anyway. I’m sure Hayes, here, can watch the radio.”

“Agent Belkamp.” Daniels sat back and rolled back to the radio. “I don’t think you understand quite what digging those files out entails. They’re in boxes, not filing cabinets. The boxes are stacked, floor to ceiling, in an unlit room in the basement. I have to find eight files spread out over twelve

years. It's a bit more than a ten-minute job. While I'm sure Detective Hayes is a perfectly respectable officer, he doesn't work here and he's still the subject of an ongoing arson investigation. Seriously think about what you just suggested."

"Besides," Christopher interjected, "it'll be days before you can get a current address on any of these kids. You know Micah Donovan is out there right now."

Belkamp opened his mouth, but shut it again when the radio cackled to life.

"Calling 386, 427" came over the radio. Christopher recognized the voice of Sheriff Brubaker. He sounded excited, almost giddy, over the radio.

"Go ahead, 427," Daniels said into the transmitter.

"Located the white Toyota Tacoma. You wanna guess our 20?"

Daniels rolled his eyes. "No, 427." He turned off the transmitter. "Days like this, I wish he would just stay in the damn office." He pushed the button again. "What is your 20, 427?"

"The parking lot at Lone Pine State Park," the sheriff hooted.

"Ten-four, 427. You are in service at Lone Pine State Park."

"Subject is in the truck," Brubaker responded. "We're 10-6," he added, telling Daniels they would be busy. Christopher knew he really couldn't say more. They weren't sure if they were going to talk to Micah, chase him, or arrest him—which course of action they settled on depended entirely on the kid's response.

Daniels sighed. "Ten-four, 427." He hit the space bar of the computer near the radio and typed a quick note in a long activity log. "This whole time the little shit was still close to town...."

Christopher was about to remind him that the kid probably didn't even know they were trying to find him, especially if he had been out camping. Before he could say a word, static crackled from the radio again. This time Brubaker sounded frantic, desperate. "Shit, shit, shit! We need two EMT units! Two ambulances! 10-100, I repeat, 10-100! Do you copy, 386?"

Christopher felt the world fading again, as though the part of his brain that was always spinning had heard and interpreted that transmission faster than his conscious thoughts could, and had slowed everything else down to lessen the blow. A 10-100 meant there was an officer down. Since Brubaker was the one who had called it in, that meant the officer he was riding with had been shot or stabbed. Connecting the dots fast, he realized that Micah Donovan must have been armed. He had opened fire on Doug and Brubaker

rather than talk to them. A second ambulance meant that either Doug or Brubaker had shot Micah Donovan.

Christopher shook his head, trying to focus, but he couldn't. A stabbing pain was ricocheting around his chest. It hurt so much he felt like he couldn't breathe. He was vaguely aware that the old sergeant at the desk was shouting into the telephone and talking into the radio at the same time, but whatever he might have been saying was muted and distant, as if he were trying to listen to it from underwater. Belkamp's severe expression hovered in his vision for a moment, and then he was being dragged out of the tiny office and into the sunshine. He was dragged a few feet and shoved into the passenger seat of a dark-blue sedan.

"Get a hold of yourself," said Belkamp, starting the car.

"Doug..." Christopher gasped.

"Hayes!" Belkamp snapped. "Take a fucking breath!"

Christopher did. He focused on just breathing, on pulling one lungful of air after another. As the air filled his lungs, the tunnel vision clouding his thoughts receded and he began to notice the sounds and sensations around him once again. The engine was running. The car was moving. The police radio in the car was buzzing with frantic traffic. Local police and fire crews responding, EMTs responding, a helicopter responding. Christopher tried to process all of the information coming over the radio, tried to piece together call signs and emergency codes that were different from the ones lodged in his head by years on the job.

"Just keep breathing," Belkamp said quietly.

With emergency lights flashing, they reached the parking lot and found it already filled with vehicles. Christopher was out of the car before it even came to a stop, scanning the crowd of people among the vehicles. He stopped when he saw Doug. He was on a stretcher, but awake, and being loaded into the back of an ambulance. Doug looked dazed, his dark eyes not focusing on anything. Blood covered the left side of his jacket, and his arm was in a splint. Doug was conscious, though, and as Christopher watched him disappear into the back of the ambulance, he found that he could breathe again.

The relief that washed over him made him feel light-headed. He couldn't lose Doug, not like that. How had he gotten so damn attached to someone he was just fucking? Maybe it was because Doug had the same dark hair and dark skin as his partner. The same build too.

As Christopher thought about both men, he realized that they looked a lot alike. Aside from the crooked angle of Doug's nose and the sad downward curve of his eyebrows, anyway. But Doug was everything Christopher knew his partner would never be, and everything he wanted. And Doug was just as alone as he was. Doug had made it very clear that he felt like he was too white to fit in on the reservation, and too brown to be accepted in Elkin. It was natural to want to reach out to him. None of that, though, explained how Doug had gotten so far under Christopher's skin.

Belkamp grabbed Christopher by the elbow and dragged him through the mess of vehicles and personnel toward a wide circle of emergency personnel. The ambulance crew was crowded around a stretcher, frantically trying to stop the boy's bleeding, but they weren't making any move to load their patient into the ambulance.

"Where are they taking them both? What hospital?" Belkamp demanded, flashing his FBI badge quickly.

"The deputy is going to the ER in Elkin," said the EMT. "We're waiting for an airlift from Kalispell Regional for him."

The blond boy Christopher had seen driving Peter's truck was on the lowered stretcher, his clothes soaked with blood. The blood was darkest over his right leg and in two spots on his chest. He had lost a lot of blood. An oxygen mask was over his nose and mouth, and several pairs of hands were applying pressure over the wounds in his chest.

Christopher was ready to step back, to give the ambulance crew the space they needed and to let them work without more of an audience, but the boy looked straight at him. He managed to lift his hand up and reached out toward Christopher.

"Do you know him?" the EMT asked.

He didn't know how he was supposed to answer that. He was too overwhelmed to make up something tactful. He just nodded.

"Go on." The man shoved him into a gap near the head of the stretcher.

Christopher knelt down and took the boy's hand. He saw the boy's lips move, then leaned close because the mask smothered whatever sound escaped from his lips.

"You look like him," Micah whispered again. "Sorry I couldn't do it. He said you could, though. Not your problem. But he said you could do it...."

"Can do what?"

"Stop him. That Indian got in the way...." The boy convulsed. He arched

his shoulders up, coughing violently. Drops of blood speckled the mask over his mouth. "Pete wanted to. That's got to count for something, right?" Another round of coughing left the mask covered in blood. It bubbled up out of the boy's mouth and pooled between his cheek and the seal of the mask. He let out a painful gasp, and then fell still. Christopher felt the fingers clutching at his hand go limp. He checked the boy's wrist for a pulse but didn't find one. He scooted back as one of the EMTs began to perform chest compressions frantically. He stood up slowly, resisting the urge to wipe his hand on his pants. The sticky blood coating his fingers wasn't going to feel any better on his pants.

Greg Brubaker appeared at Christopher's side and stared down at the dead young man. "What a fucked-up day," he said coolly. "I thought he was gone before the paramedics even got here. A shot of adrenaline or something, and he was awake. What did he say?"

Christopher shook his head and shrugged. "He said Pete tried, and that should count for something."

"Tried what?"

This wasn't the time or place to talk about that. Christopher just shrugged again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Doug winced as the surgeon pulled and prodded at the exposed muscle of his left bicep with a surgical needle. An IV was supposed to be dripping a small dose of morphine into his right arm, but Doug was beginning to suspect that the nurse had just loaded it up with saline and forgotten the drug itself. As the doctor tugged the thread tight, pain vibrated through his entire arm and into his chest. He hissed and panted, just to keep himself from making noise. "Are you sure it didn't hit the bone?" he asked again. He tried to sit up to peek inside the open flesh and into his arm.

“Yes.” The surgeon tightened another stitch in the muscle itself. “Soft-tissue injuries hurt. Without knocking you out, all we can really do is dull the pain.”

“I’m beginning to wish I had let you knock me out.”

“Too late now. You’re lucky the bullet didn’t fragment or explode. Hollow-point rounds are designed to break apart as soon as they hit something soft, so they can’t go straight through you. All of that kinetic energy coming to a stop in your arm would have made a shockwave that would have shattered the bone and crushed all of the tissue around it. I’d be doing a lot more than realigning your muscle and stitching the wound closed if it had.”

“Armor-piercing rounds.” Doug grimaced. “Yeah, I get it. I got lucky. Can I go home now?”

The surgeon laughed at him and pulled another stitch tight. “I’ve seen you come in with the search-and-rescue guys, so I know you’ve been through the EMT certification classes. Do you think I can let you go home tonight?”

“It’s basically just a big cut,” Doug argued, even though he knew it was pointless. “I’m totally coherent, and I know the symptoms of shock.”

The surgeon smirked and shook his head. “Not good enough. You were bleeding heavily when you got here, and your blood pressure hasn’t recovered yet. Besides, the strongest painkiller I can give you if I send you home is Vicodin. You’re going to want to stay.”

“I’m fine with Tylenol.”

“You won’t be when your entire arm begins to swell over the next few hours. It’s better if you stay. I can release you tomorrow, if your fiancée can keep an eye on you for a few days.”

Doug sat up so fast the surgeon nearly stabbed him in the arm. “I have a fiancée?” he rasped. In one very long second, the world spun and seemed to slip out from under him. When his head stopped spinning, he was flat on the bed again. Beside him, the heart-rate monitor was blaring. A nurse turned off the alarm and reset the monitor.

“She said she was. Your boss told us to call her. He said she was the only emergency contact you’ve got.”

Doug groaned. How had he forgotten to scratch out Brittney’s name as his emergency contact? Of course, he didn’t have any other name to scribble into that blank, so it didn’t really matter. But why the hell had Brittney called herself his fiancée?

“And since she’s a doctor, I figured I could release you tomorrow, provided

she's around to help you out for a few days."

"I'd rather be admitted."

The young surgeon began to stitch his skin back together. "I'll have someone tell her you're too drugged up to receive visitors tonight, if that would help."

"Please." After a few more tugging stitches, Doug took a deep breath. He had asked the ambulance staff and the nurses without any luck, but he had to know. "Any word on the kid? I know he wasn't brought here, but I know the EMTs gossip as much as cops do. Is he okay?"

The doctor stopped moving for a moment, then focused on Doug's arms. "I haven't heard anything definite," he said quietly.

Doug sat back and shut his eyes, trying to block out the pain from his arm and the train wreck of images that kept flashing through his mind. The damn kid had a gun. He looked like shit, with greasy hair and red-rimmed eyes, wearing that filthy leather biker vest over a stained white undershirt. He had also looked terrified. He'd stumbled out of his truck, falling backward and holding a small pistol in both hands. His entire body had been trembling, and Doug suspected that the kid had been too frightened to hear his warning to put the gun down. He had been calm, quiet, and tried to soothe the kid. When he saw the gun discharge, he fired. It hadn't been a conscious decision, just a reaction as the bullet from Micah Donovan's gun bit into his upper arm. The pain had been so overwhelming he hadn't been able to focus on anything else.

He had been hoping they had taken him and Micah to the same emergency room, but that would have been a major policy violation. Still, there was no policy saying that he couldn't find out how seriously the boy was hurt.

"Do you have any other family we could call for you?" the doctor asked after he finished the stitches.

Doug shut his mouth. He didn't like to say he didn't have anybody, but it was true. "Not right now."

"Then we'll get you admitted and let you get some rest." The doctor got up to leave.

"Wait," Doug called. "Is my boss here? Do you know if any other officers from Elkin are here?"

"The triage nurse would know. I'll have her pop back while we're getting a room for you."

It took another hour before the ER staff managed to get him admitted and

into a regular room. Then another hour before a nurse knocked on his door. "You've got a visitor."

Doug tried to sit up, fully expecting to see Greg Brubaker, or at least another deputy. Instead, Brittney walked in with a timid smile. Doug managed a polite smile, despite the fact the morphine made him want to kick her out. She might not be a member of the sheriff's office staff, but she was the county medical examiner, so she might be able to tell him something about Micah Donovan's condition too.

Her eyes were red and her mascara was a smeared mess. "Hi," she said, sniffing.

"That's two Mondays in a row now I've taken up a big chunk of your day. I think I probably owe you an apology."

She shook her head. She made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob, followed by another snuffle. "More than an apology. The last time we spoke, I left after acting like a raging bitch, and you have the nerve to go and get shot. That's about as tacky as it gets, you know. How are you feeling?"

"Sore. Worried. No one has been able to tell me anything about the kid. I know he went to a different hospital, but somebody has to know how he's doing. Have you heard anything? Do you know which hospital they took him to?"

She closed her eyes and her entire body began to tremble. "Oh, Doug," she whispered. "Didn't the sheriff tell you?"

"Tell me what?" he asked, his stomach twisting. She shook her head, but he had to know. "Tell me, Brittney. He's a kid."

"He died as they were waiting for the helicopter from Kalispell. I'm sorry, Doug, I thought you knew...."

"I shot him in the leg," Doug insisted, as if he could somehow argue the boy back to life. "I'm sure I shot him in the leg."

"Femoral artery," she said simply. "Sheriff Brubaker shot him too, in the chest."

If Doug had been more in control of himself, he could have kept it together. That was what he told himself, anyway. The knot in his stomach twisted and Doug instinctively bent in half. He felt the bile rise in his throat before he could stop it. He was vaguely aware that Brittney was rubbing the back of his neck and holding a plastic bin under his mouth. Somewhere beside him, an alarm was blaring. The world was still spinning, and his stomach reacted the way it always did to stress. He felt more hands on him as he

gagged on the bile in his throat, and then the entire world went black.

As Doug drifted into the darkness, he wondered if the kid had used him and Brubaker as his own noose. They had identified themselves as officers, they had warned him that they were armed—they'd warned him to put his gun down. They hadn't fired until the gun Micah Donovan was holding discharged. The kid had been wearing the same vest his lover had died in, and he was in the same place where his lover had killed himself. It was too much of a coincidence. Soon, the sedative they gave him drove even the most basic thoughts from his mind. In a stupor, his brain mixed up his memories of Peter Hayes's corpse and the boy's terrified face, until dead purple eyes and blond hair consumed him.

When he woke up, the hospital room was empty. Sunlight filtered through the tightly shut mini-blinds, and a dozen LEDs glowed from the monitor beside his bed. His arm felt like it was on fire.

As soon as he was awake, his day became an endless series of visits from doctors, nurses, psychologists, reporters, and his fellow officers. And Brittney. The doctors and nurses passed through quickly, measuring his vital signs, asking a few questions, and then moving on. The psychologists took turns asking if he had any concerns about the shooting and if he was ready to talk about it yet. His fellow deputies, at least, understood. They were willing to pretend that they came to make jokes about baseball and politics. Brittney came in four times. Each time, she struggled to make small talk, got nervous when her attempts at small talk fizzled, then left again.

Doug honestly didn't care. He was being rude by ignoring her, but he had no intention of apologizing for his behavior. He just couldn't focus enough, through the morphine, to deal with being polite to Brittney and process the knowledge that he had shot and killed the young man he had spent the past two days trying to save. The other deputies didn't get offended, but Brittney just didn't seem to get it. He was too caught up in his own thoughts to even notice when Christopher followed Agent Belkamp into the room, along with Brubaker and, once again, Brittney.

"Hey, Dougie," Brubaker greeted him with a wave. "Thought we'd come see how you were doing. Maybe see if you felt like you were up to giving a statement."

"You were there. You saw what happened."

"Come on, Dougie. Everything's got to correlate."

"A verbal statement is fine," Belkamp said gently. "I can take notes, and

then just have you sign them.”

Doug adjusted the bed so he was sitting up. “Does everybody in the world have to be here for this?” he asked, staring at Brittney. Christopher and Brubaker both shuffled toward the door. Brittney stubbornly stayed put. Christopher stopped at the door and held it open for her. “Ma’am?” He inclined his head toward the door.

Any other day, and in any other situation, seeing the look of outraged indignation on Brittney’s face would have made Doug smile. Now he was just too overwhelmed. “Get out, Brittney.”

“You can’t be serious!” She folded her arms and glared at Christopher.

“Ma’am, this is a serious matter.” Belkamp echoed Christopher’s tone perfectly. Doug noticed that their posture seemed similar too, as if they were partners who’d had spent years working side by side. He turned his head away, feeling like a complete bastard because he felt jealous. Micah Donovan was dead and he was acting like a lovesick idiot.

He looked at Christopher, silhouetted against the florescent light from the hallway, and realized just how accurate that assessment was. He had spent the entire day searching campgrounds with Christopher on his mind. When he saw the gun in Micah Donovan’s hand snap backward, all his thoughts had been focused on Christopher. Christopher was the one he wanted to be sitting there beside him. *Lovesick* summed it up.

“Fine.” Brittney stalked out, glaring at Belkamp and Christopher as she went.

Belkamp closed the door behind them and pulled a chair over to Doug’s bed. “She’s charming,” he said levelly.

“Please don’t rub it in,” Doug begged. He waited until Belkamp had a notebook and pen ready, then told him everything he could remember. He started with the shift briefing yesterday morning, and he stopped when the paramedics carried him away. He left Christopher out. Christopher had arrived on the scene with Belkamp, so the FBI agent obviously knew that he’d been there. Everything that happened to him after he left the scene, everything that happened in his head after he shot Micah Donovan, was irrelevant. Belkamp took notes quietly, and then he handed the notes to Doug. Doug read them and signed his name on the bottom.

Belkamp folded up the notebook and tucked it under his arm. “I’m sorry,” he said at last. “I know you probably don’t want to talk about it, but you should.”

“Thanks for the advice, but I think I’ll manage just fine.”

“Whatever. You want me to send Hayes back in? I can probably buy you guys a few minutes without your fiancée barging in.”

Doug shook his head fast. The last thing he wanted was to be alone with Christopher. He couldn’t imagine Christopher seeing him like this. He could face the rest of the world easily, because he didn’t give a damn what they thought about him. He had promised Christopher he would find Micah and make sure he was safe. He had utterly failed. He felt like he’d be sick again just from thinking about Christopher looking at him as if he was some kind of murderer.

“Are you sure? He’s just going to go back to moping in the hall if you don’t talk to him.”

“Moping?” Doug smiled at that. He could picture Christopher outside his room, leaning against the wall and trying his best not to fidget. “I... I can’t be around him until I’ve got my head straight, you know?”

Belkamp nodded. “You mind telling him that yourself? I might be able to persuade him to go back to his hotel to get some sleep, if he hears that firsthand.”

“I guess.”

Belkamp smirked and headed for the door. He opened it a few inches and slipped out. The two men traded places—Christopher slipped in sideways, then Belkamp shut the door fast. Doug stared at Christopher and the closed door, wondering if they had planned that little maneuver. Behind the door, Doug could hear Brittney’s muffled complaints already.

Christopher, his smile gone, stood nervously near the door. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“How’s the arm?”

Doug tried to shrug, but the movement sent a lightning bolt of pain through his body, piercing the happy fog of the morphine. Doug tried not to wince, but he couldn’t help it. Christopher was by his side instantly.

“Are words that much harder?” he asked, carefully pushing Doug’s shoulders back down. He ran his thumb over the stubble on Doug’s cheek.

Doug didn’t mean to shut his eyes, but the warmth from Christopher cut through the pain as though it wasn’t there. At that moment, all Doug wanted in the world was to enjoy Christopher’s touch, to sink into Christopher’s arms and forget everything. Forget both of their pasts, forget how trapped he felt being tied to his family’s empty ranch, and forget that he had just

killed Micah Donovan.

But it wouldn't do any good. Even if Christopher could make him forget for a little while, it wouldn't last. It couldn't last. When Christopher left, Doug would have to face it all over again, and he would have to face losing Christopher too.

The pain that bloomed in his chest at that thought caught him off guard. He'd known losing Christopher would hurt, but he hadn't expected the sheer agony the thought of losing him now evoked. It shouldn't hurt so much, especially when he was so drugged he felt drunk. "I can't do this," he whispered, without opening his eyes. "I just can't do this now."

Doug felt Christopher's fingertips pause and then withdraw. Doug turned his head away. He couldn't look at him. He knew he couldn't stop himself from doing or saying something ridiculous. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just can't."

"If that's what you need," said Christopher. The cold, passive tone in his voice made Doug wince again. There was no point in avoiding Christopher's gaze now. Doug knew his mask would be back in place again. "I'll let you get some rest."

The voices outside the door had gotten louder, and now Brittney was shouting. The door swung open so fast it hit the doorstep with a thud. "I said no!" Brittney shouted. "I don't care if you're with the FBI, the CIA, or even if you're the president! Doug's suffered enough because of him!"

"Brittney," Doug sighed, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Him!" She pointed at Christopher.

"Me?"

"As if your monster of a brother didn't cause enough harm in our town! You've got some nerve, coming here after everything you've done!"

"Everything I've done?"

"You put our firemen in danger trying to cover up just how evil your faggot brother was, and then you get Doug shot! You had the audacity to try to convince him your brother's accomplice was actually his victim, just so you could force Doug to shut him up for you! You knew he was a dangerous criminal and you sent Doug after him anyway! It's bad enough that Doug has to deal with having that innocent boy's blood on his hands, I am not going to just stand by and let you wreak more havoc!"

Doug gaped at her, hoping that this was all some drug-induced hallucination.

“I’m sorry,” Belkamp said with a smirk. “Was he an innocent boy or was he a dangerous accomplice? I thought there was only one other person involved in yesterday’s shooting, so I’m confused.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Christopher, more to Belkamp than to Brittney. He stood up straight and turned towards the door. “We all get carried away when we’re stressed. I was just leaving anyway.” Doug could hear the fake smile in Christopher’s voice, even if he couldn’t see it on his face.

“Do us all a favor,” Brittney said, glaring at him, “go back to California before you get anymore of our kids or police officers killed.”

Doug saw the muscles beneath Christopher’s clothes move, the hard knot of muscle over the man’s shoulder twitching. For one agonizing moment, when the world seemed to move in slow motion, Doug was worried that Christopher might hit her. But that, he realized, was what *he* wanted to do. Luckily, he and Christopher were very different men.

Then Christopher was gone.

“Chris!” he tried to shout. The choked shout he managed didn’t carry past the room.

Doug flung himself out of bed and toward the open door, pulling against the wires and tubes still attached to his body. He stopped for a moment and fumbled with the IV in his right arm. As soon as he moved his left hand to pry the tape up, pain exploded through his arm. It hit him like a sledgehammer and it dropped him just as fast.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE world moved on, even if Christopher wasn’t quite sure how. He found himself back in his hotel room, flipping through channels but not really watching anything on television. He had caught enough of the local news while he was camping out in the hospital waiting room to know Doug was the town’s newest hero. “... the type of officer everyone in the department aspires to be...,” Sheriff Brubaker said every time the news ran

the clip again. They also ran clips of Brittney McAllister, identifying her as his fiancée. All she managed for a sound bite was a muffled sob, lots of tears, and a quiet, “He’s my hero.”

Christopher turned off the television after he heard that clip. He wondered if the girl really was Doug’s fiancée, or if she was everything Doug had said she was, and was just trying to absorb some of the limelight from being associated with the town’s new heroic deputy. She could be both, Christopher realized. Doug had to have cared about her once, or he wouldn’t have been so hurt and angry when he told Christopher about her. Just like Ray kissing him wouldn’t have felt like being punched in the gut if Christopher hadn’t had a crush on the bastard for four years, Doug wouldn’t have been upset about Brittney McAllister breaking up with him if he hadn’t loved her.

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That didn't mean Doug had lied to him, Christopher told himself. It was more likely that Brittney was just moving in to catch some of the excitement and publicity. Even so, Doug might still care enough about her to jump at the chance to get back together.

He slumped back on the bed and draped his arm over his eyes. He couldn't blame Doug if he had done just that. Being straight—hell, even being able to pass for straight—would make Doug's life easier. For years, Doug had managed to fool almost everybody in Elkin. Either way, it shouldn't hurt this much to walk away from him.

It felt like someone was carving his heart out of his chest with a piece of broken glass.

It was his own damn fault. He got attached way too easily. It was just that Doug had the same dark hair he'd spent years drooling over, the same tan skin he'd spent years wanting to touch. How the hell had he not noticed how similar the two men in his life were? He kept telling himself it was just the dark hair and tanned skin. But if that was all there was to this fucked-up infatuation, then he could just go for a run and get over it.

He threw himself back on the bed, still in the same clothes he had worn for two days, and fell asleep. He woke up, managed to use the bathroom and make coffee, then went back to sleep again. The next day, housekeeping woke him up. He got more packets of filter-wrapped coffee grounds for the coffee pot, made more coffee, and tried to go back to sleep again. His stomach wouldn't let him this time. He got five Snickers bars from the vending machine down the hall and went back to his room. An hour later, when another knock came, Christopher wanted to ignore it. The room was clean and paid for, so they couldn't very well kick him out. When the knock came a second time, then grew into a loud hammering, Christopher tried to bury his head under a pillow.

Five minutes later, someone hammered on the door again. "Fine! I'm coming," Christopher said aloud. The raspiness of his own voice startled him. He hadn't spoken since he left Doug's hospital room, and he'd had nothing but coffee since. He squirmed out from under the pillows and went into the bathroom to get some water.

He didn't look into the mirror. He never did, if he could help it. The last thing he wanted was to see his own eyes and get another reminder that he and Peter were so damn alike. Doug's fiancée might have been a raving bitch, but she was right about him. This was all his fault. If he had ever

been able to find the courage to deal with his brother—if he had ever been able to stop running away—Peter would have been dead long before he ever began to groom children in this tiny corner of Montana. Doug wouldn't be sitting in the hospital right now. Micah Donovan wouldn't be in the morgue. After twenty years, he was still running away, just like Peter told him to. After getting another drink of water, he ran his fingers through his hair and went to answer the door.

The pounding had stopped. He opened the door and for a moment, dark hair and tanned skin tricked him. He gasped, almost reached out, and then stopped himself.

Ray Delgado was leaning against the wall in the empty corridor, tapping the screen on his phone. "Hayes, you need to turn your damn phone on," he said bluntly. When Ray looked up from his phone and saw Christopher's expression, he froze. "You look horrible," Ray whispered. Sympathy and pain mixed in Ray's eyes, but he smiled.

"What are you doing here?" Christopher asked, surprised at how genuinely happy he was to see his partner.

"Looking for you." Ray tucked his phone into a pocket. "You look like hell."

"I bet you say that to your coeds too," said Christopher.

"Nah." Ray smirked. "I'm incredibly charming with women." Christopher glared at him. "No, no, I didn't mean that the way you're thinking. I don't have enough of a track record with men to know what the hell I am with them."

Christopher didn't step out of the way, but Ray shoved his way inside anyway. "Come on, you need a run and a shower. You can tell me about your brother while we run."

"I don't feel like running."

Ray gaped at him, obviously getting worried now. "Beer, then. Although, honestly, a shower and shave wouldn't hurt. In a week and a half, you've managed to lose a brother I never knew you had, get involved in a federal investigation, and find a special guy. I want details."

"There is no special guy," Christopher lied.

"No fucking with me, Hayes. I must have seen that look on your face five, maybe six times. Not often, but enough to know what it means. Get your ass in the shower or I will put you in there, and I will probably molest you in the process!"

Christopher wanted to crawl back into bed, but he knew that Ray wasn't going to leave him alone to be miserable in private. He showered but didn't bother shaving, then slunk out of the bathroom in the same clothes he'd worn to the hospital. Ray was sitting on the bed, watching television.

"Clean clothes!" Ray shouted, when he saw him.

"I forgot to grab them."

Ray rolled his eyes and pointed at the TV. "That him?" he asked, as a still photo of Doug, decked out in climbing gear and sporting a glare that promised there'd be hell to pay if anyone pissed him off, was posted on the television.

Christopher shut his eyes. He didn't want to see the smug look he knew would be on Ray's face.

"He's a good-looking guy."

Christopher groaned. "It's a coincidence, all right? I like guys with dark hair," Christopher insisted. "I like guys who are tanned and dark, I always have. It's a fucking coincidence."

"A coincidence? That you turned me down and then went out a week later and picked up my doppelganger? Yeah, right."

"The fact that you both have black hair and brown skin does not make him your doppelganger. His face looks nothing like yours. And he's at least twenty pounds heavier than you."

"So you found a bad imitation. That's just sad, man."

"Delgado, I swear, I will kick your ass if you don't let it go."

"Like you could." His partner grinned.

Christopher stalked toward the bed, grabbed his partner's jacket in his left hand, and hauled him off of the bed. "Fine! Fine! You've got a thing for brunets, got it."

"Asshole," said Christopher, dropping him.

Delgado picked up the remote again and pointed it back at the TV. "Yeah, I see what you mean now. I'm way sexier."

"Like hell, Delgado. He's..." Christopher tried to look innocent. "He's..."

"I don't know." Delgado turned his head sideways. "He's awfully butch, isn't he? You got to admit I'm prettier."

"He is awfully butch," Christopher agreed. "And he's actually a nice guy. I don't have to guess at how he's going to stab me in the back every time he gets bored."

"Ouch. I'm not that bad, am I?"

“Yes. And he’s....” Christopher could only smile.

“You’ve got it bad, Hayes. Go get dressed, dipshit.”

Christopher shucked off his clothes and pulled on clean slacks and a T-shirt, moving as fast as his shoulder would allow. “It’s your fucking fault, you know. It would have been the last thing on my mind, considering what I was coming up here for, but you just had to go bion me. What the hell were you thinking?”

“You don’t want me to answer that,” said Ray, much too fast.

“If the word ‘threesome’ comes out of your mouth, I swear I’m going to hit you again.”

Ray shook his head and grinned, just as he always did when he saw a new girl he was determined to pick up. “I was thinking,” he said in a low voice, “that I was tired of dating you but having to find somebody else for sex.”

“We’re not dating, Delgado. We’re partners. Partners don’t date.”

“This might surprise you, Hayes, but I’ve never been able to stand hanging out with anybody from work after hours. The last four years have been weird.” Ray turned off the TV and looked at him seriously. “They’ve been great, but really fucking weird. I kept telling myself this is what friends do, what partners do. Since you got hurt, I realized I think of you as more than a friend. I began to realize that playing around didn’t feel right anymore.”

Christopher relaxed into a slouch once he got his pants buttoned. He pulled open the bathroom door and patted Ray on the shoulder. “You’ve come to terms with being a bastard. Good for you. I’ve heard acceptance is the first step toward recovery.”

“Ha-ha. You want know why I do it? What I realized?”

“I’m not so sure I do.”

“The two times I’ve stuck with the same person, you’ve done the same thing. You’ve asked me if things are getting serious, and then you started bailing out on me after work.”

“I figured you might want private time to actually get to know the girls. Or guys.”

“But I didn’t. I didn’t want that. The sex didn’t matter, the girls didn’t matter. The only thing that did matter was”—Ray shrugged and tried to smile—“being with you. I stuck to hooking up with girls because if I didn’t, I wouldn’t get to hang out with you after work the next day. When I saw you bleeding on that fucking sidewalk, I realized I’ve been in love with you for

a long time. I realized things would be perfect if I could just switch teams. I didn't have a clue about what sex with a guy would involve, though, and I didn't want to fuck things up with you by asking you to fool around with me. I didn't want you to think I was just curious, or that I just wanted to experiment and I was too embarrassed to pick up a guy. I was terrified that if I managed to get you into bed with me, then I wouldn't be able to go through with it. I actually had a nightmare about you getting upset, thinking I was just teasing you, and then never seeing you again."

Christopher stared at him, trying to decipher if he was serious, or if he was just being Ray Delgado. "So you used... what was his name... Ian?" Ray shrugged. "You used Ian to find out if you could get it up with a guy?"

"That makes it sound a bit harsh...."

Christopher narrowed his eyes.

"And it was. It was a shitty thing to do—to you and to him. Since then, the few times I've managed to sleep, I've had nightmares about seeing you shot again, this time as my lover. I don't think I could stand it. Seeing you get hurt was already a nightmare, just because I was in love with you. If we were lovers and you died because I couldn't keep up... that would be the end for me."

Christopher took in the look of misery and exhaustion his partner hid so well. "You couldn't have stopped the bullet, Ray. You weren't too late. You took the suspect down before I hit the concrete."

"I know that up here," he said, tapping his temple hard. "If you were just some guy from work, I would remember it while I'm asleep too. But you're not."

"You know that's precisely why partners don't date? Fucking hell, I thought they made you sit through this training the last time they tried to pair you up with a female officer."

"I know! I sure as hell didn't mean for it to happen!"

"I'm sorry, Ray. I don't feel the same way. If things had been different...."

Christopher ran his fingers through his wet hair. "We're partners. We're friends. That's all."

"What if I quit?" Ray offered, suddenly looking hopeful.

Christopher leaned back, stunned. Homicide had been Ray's goal from the beginning. He had worked his way up long before he had taken Christopher on as a trainee. They had both applied for the transfer to Homicide from

Gang Enforcement because it was all Ray wanted out of his career. If he wanted to try a real relationship badly enough to walk away from that, he was probably being serious.

For a moment, Christopher wished he could be that serious too. Two weeks ago, he would have leaped at the chance. He would have told Ray he was taking a desk job anyway, kissed him senseless, and ripped his clothes off. Two weeks ago, he hadn't even known Doug existed.

"And now I'm too late." Ray laughed. "That's just not fair."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He worth it?"

Christopher turned away. "Yes. He is. He's also totally in the closet, apparently engaged to the county coroner, and about as fucked up as I am. He also doesn't want anything to do with me, because the kid my brother was fucking opened fire on him. He had to shoot the kid. And I mean *kid*."

Ray stared at him, opened his mouth to say something, and just kept staring.

"Wow," he finally said aloud. "There's a lot in that sentence that I'm having trouble wrapping my head around."

"Come on." Christopher slapped him on the shoulder and went to grab his shoes and wallet. "I'm starved. I'll tell you about it over breakfast."

"It's six o'clock, Hayes."

"Yeah, so?"

"In the evening, man. It's 6:00 p.m. I think you might have missed breakfast."

They went to the same bar where Christopher and Doug had played pool on Christopher's first night in Elkin. Christopher needed food, so they sat in a booth and Ray just rolled his eyes as Christopher ordered enough food for five men his size. "Oh, and whatever he wants too," Christopher said, nodding toward Ray.

Christopher snickered when Ray sent an apologetic glance at their waitress.

"He'll eat it all, he really will."

"He was in last week, honey," the waitress said with a smile. "I've seen men eat five baskets of hot wings before, but I must say, he's the only one I've seen do it who still looks like he needs to eat more."

"Oh...." Christopher flipped the menu open again. "They do good wings."

"No! No more! Cobb salad, please," said Ray.

While they waited for their food, Christopher began to talk about Peter. Innocuous stories about growing up, about how Peter had taught him to ride

a skateboard, to read, and to swim. He didn't gloss over how his relationship with his brother fell apart. It never did any good to try and make it sound less horrible than it really was—every time Christopher had tried in the past, he had always come across as though he were apologizing for his brother's crimes, somehow trying to excuse them. He told Ray about how he lost track of Peter after his prison sentence was up, and about the series of events that had led to Doug Heavy Runner getting shot. He didn't talk about the time he and Doug had spent together. Doug had friends in this bar, and Ray knew Christopher well enough to be able to fill in the blanks.

"What the hell." Ray sat back. Their food had arrived while Christopher was talking, and Ray had nibbled on his salad and listened quietly. "Arson, officer-involved shootings, kiddy porn, and human remains.... No offense to this Doug guy, but his department is fucking incompetent."

"Keep your voice down, moron," Christopher whispered. "This is a cop bar."

"Thank you for clearing that up." Ray rolled his eyes. "I thought everyone was just wearing holsters and gun belts because this is the Old West."

"You know," Christopher said, laughing, "I don't think it is! I've seen more cowboy hats driving through Texas than I have seen here this entire week! Doug is an actual cowboy. He grew up on a ranch, with cows and everything, and the only thing he seems to own is a lot of baseball hats. That's got to be false advertising or something."

Ray pressed his lips together tight and wrapped his hand around his fork to keep from dropping it.

"What?" Christopher shoved half a cheeseburger into his mouth.

"A cowboy," Ray groaned. "You hooked up with a Montana cowboy."

Christopher allowed himself a huge, predatory grin when he saw the blush starting to creep up Ray's cheeks. "A Montana cowboy. He doesn't do that now, though. His ranch is huge, but it's totally empty. Nothing but open land and mountains. It's kind of creepy at first, how quiet it is."

"So he's just sitting on some huge empty ranch, being a stoic cowboy?"

Christopher shrugged. "He doesn't eat meat, so holding on to the ranch and not raising cattle's kind of... absolute, I guess."

Ray laughed and flung a crouton at him. "Seriously? A vegetarian Montana cowboy.... So the guy is a half-dozen walking contradictions. Man, I've got to get back home where people are a predictable kind of crazy."

"Tell me about it. Think you could stay through Saturday?" Christopher

asked.

“I’m not going to let you go through that fucker’s memorial service alone.”

“Thank you. Not that there’s likely to be a memorial service.”

Ray nodded slowly. “Yeah, I guess not. What do you want to do, then?”

“Throw the fucker’s ashes in a dumpster and go home.” Christopher finished most of the food he ordered and slumped back with a stuffed, satisfied groan. “I feel better.”

“Feel like running yet?”

“No. Not that much better.”

“Doug!” Someone shouted from the door.

Christopher looked up and saw that a dozen local police officers were filing into the bar. It was just after the seven-thirty shift change.

“Oh, sorry!” The youngest Elkin deputy, the one who hadn’t quite been able to route a phone call, came over. “You’ve got the same hair as a coworker of ours, and he was in here with him just last week. You related to Doug?”

“Ah, no. But I’ve been getting that a lot today.”

“How’s it going, Chris?”

Christopher cringed. He could just about put up with his supervisor calling him Chris. He could tolerate Doug calling him Chris. But hearing the nickname from a young pale man with blond hair and blue eyes just felt too much like stepping back in time. “It’s Hayes, Jackson. Hayes.”

“All right.” Jackson grinned. “We’re just not all that formal up here. You doing okay?”

Christopher thought about lying, but decided it wasn’t worth it. He settled for saying, “I’m sure things are worse for you guys. I’m just sitting here wondering how much more shit from my asshole brother’s life is going to come out before this is over. This is my partner, by the way. Raymond Delgado. Delgado, this is Jackson.”

“Nice to meet you.” Jackson took Delgado’s hand. He called several of the other officers over and introduced them. “You guys should come throw some darts with us, since Dougie’s still in the hospital.”

“I’m not going to be able to hold the darts any better today than I could last week,” Christopher reminded him.

“What?” Ray looked at Christopher.

Christopher waved Ray’s question aside. “Why is Heavy Runner still in the hospital? I thought he was going to be discharged yesterday.”

An older deputy snorted out a laugh. “Dougie’s always got to be the tough

guy. He decided to try to get out of bed while he was still hooked up to an IV and everything. Him and Brittney got into a big fight right there in the hospital. No one's talking about it, of course, but security escorted her out and now he has a concussion on top of a shot-up arm. Greg's already taking bets on how long they're going to last this time."

"Enough with the cop gossip!" one of the firemen Christopher had played basketball with called out. "Blood pressure drops when you try to stand up fast after you get hurt. He fell. He should have known better. How's it going, Hayes?"

Christopher was relieved nobody in the bar, at least, seemed to share Brittney McAllister's opinions about him. He introduced Ray to the men he could remember, insisted he didn't want to embarrass himself by trying to play darts or pool again, and waved Ray off when he said he'd play.

It was weird, realizing that the men around him seemed to know him better after a week than many of his coworkers ever did. Life in the city was very different. He lived in a building with hundreds of other people, but he somehow managed to feel completely alone. If Doug had been serious about Montana having a grand total of four people per square mile, he was far more isolated here, but it didn't feel like it. He wondered if every small town was like that, or if it was just this one. The only other place where he had been accepted instantly and without any apparent reservations was among the small community of runners who showed up at the same long-distance races year in and year out. That welcoming acceptance was one of the reasons he liked to run.

Today, though, the last thing he wanted was to feel like a part of the crowd. He tried to sink deeper into the booth. He eyed Ray's light beer enviously, wishing he hadn't volunteered to drive.

He managed a whole fifteen minutes before his body processed enough of the food to make his energy level rebound to its normal twitchy heights. He kept sitting still for as long as he could, but he knew it was a losing battle. He flagged the waitress down and ordered a cup of coffee.

"You're not up for a beer?" a gruff voice asked. Christopher shot up from his seat. Brubaker, having gotten rid of the crisp uniform in favor of blue jeans and a red T-shirt, was standing beside his booth. Christopher hadn't even seen the man approach, much less noticed him among the other officers in the bar.

"No. When I want a drink this bad, usually I want enough to knock me out

for the night. I'm okay to drive after one beer, but the mood I'm in, it wouldn't stop at one." He sighed miserably. "I'd like to get back to my hotel in one piece."

"Well, at least you're man enough to admit it. I like that about you— no bullshit."

"Men in our line of work have to spend enough time trying to interpret other people's bullshit. I figure the least we can do is be straight with each other."

Brubaker slapped the table and chuckled. "Damn right, especially with those feds hanging around. I'm going to show those tight-lipped sons of bitches, though. I'm going to get a warrant out for Lieder before they do."

"I thought he was out of town." Christopher felt like cursing. He might end up canceling Peter's memorial and chucking his ashes in a dumpster after all. If the minister who was supposed to perform the service was in jail, there wasn't much point. He smiled.

Brubaker snorted. "Micah Donovan talked to the paramedics. He didn't give us anything solid, but it's enough to arrest Lieder. He sold your brother his house real cheap, and the way that man caters to the kids in his church.... What kind of minister puts a skate park in a church?"

Christopher shrugged. Thanks to his own views on religion, he really didn't have much experience with churches. "It didn't look that bad when I drove by. There were no kids actually using it."

"Oh, that's the one outside. He has a half-pipe, ramps, and all kinds of crap set up inside the church! Parents love it, of course. Figure that even getting their kids inside the door is a step in the right direction, but it's damn weird."

"I suppose so."

"Which is why you're just the man I was hoping to run into. You were right there when Micah Donovan died."

It wasn't a question. If Brubaker really was as much of an old school police officer as he appeared, the man wasn't going to ask any questions he didn't already know the answer to.

"Yes. The FBI guy dragged me along with him."

Brubaker practically growled. "I cannot wait to see the end of them. I don't see why that interfering fruit can't just stick to digging through ashes. I can't believe that moron would drop you right in the middle of it like that. Did Micah say anything to you, before he died?"

“He was bleeding to death,” said Christopher quietly.

“I am aware of that. Did he say anything?”

He wouldn't ask a question he didn't already know the answer to. Christopher had been surrounded by paramedics, but he had been forced to lean close to hear what Micah had to say, so Brubaker might not actually know what the boy had told him. “He said I looked like my brother. Been hearing that a lot, lately. He also said, ‘Pete tried, that ought to count for something, right?’ and then he started coughing up blood.”

Brubaker stared at the table between them, his expression unreadable. “That's all he said? No kind of explanation?”

Christopher shrugged. It was easier than an outright denial. “He was coughing blood up into the ventilator mask. I'm surprised he managed to say that much.”

Christopher didn't know why he held back, but something in the back of his head stopped him from saying more. He had related the entire conversation to Belknap, and if Brubaker had read the man's report, he would know that Christopher was lying.

“Well, damn. I was hoping he might have said something.” Brubaker rubbed his eyes. “I really thought there wasn't a pulse. Fifteen minutes we were sitting there, waiting for the EMTs to respond. I checked three times.... This whole thing has gotten so screwed up that I hardly know where to go from here....”

“Interview Lieder,” Christopher supplied. “But you've already got that covered. Sometimes waiting overnight to sort things out is the hardest part.”

“Yes, it is,” Brubaker said.

“Have you heard anything about Heavy Runner?” asked Christopher. He kept telling himself that asking about Doug wouldn't make him sound like a jilted lover. Anybody would ask.

Brubaker shook his head. “He was supposed to be released today. He lives all alone in the middle of nowhere, way down on the reservation, so they might have decided to hold on to him until he can show them he can take care of himself.”

“Seemed like his girlfriend was going to take care of him.”

Brubaker didn't try to hide his chuckle. “That was my mistake. She's not his girlfriend, at the moment. They're one of those couples who break up and get back together again a dozen times over the years. But when she heard about him getting shot on the news, well, I figured she was the closest

thing he's got to a wife."

"It's got to be hard on him, being all alone."

"You don't know the half of it. It's one thing not to have any family, but that boy is stuck between two worlds. He has to run around like he's got a stick up his ass for anybody here to trust him, and all of his own folks treat him like an outsider. They're clannish down there. They don't like outsiders, they don't trust anyone with an education, and they honestly don't see any value in putting in an honest day's work."

Christopher nodded slowly, just to encourage him to keep talking. Most of what Brubaker was spewing had the air of prejudiced gossip, but you could tell a lot about a man from the type of stereotypes he repeated. Between the blank expression and the good-old-boy attitude, Christopher was having trouble figuring out if what he was seeing was an act or if Brubaker really believed the garbage pouring out of his mouth. His brain kept trying to tell him he should speak up, he should say something, call the man on the racial slurs and stereotypes. He wondered how often Doug had to listen to his own coworkers talk about his entire race like they were worthless. How often had he heard the same crap in high school? Often enough he had come to believe it was true.

Suddenly, he found that he didn't really care if there was a more sadistic version of Peter lurking in Northwestern Montana. He should care that out of all of Peter's potential victims, the only kid who could have easily talked was dead. He should care that the FBI was dragging their feet analyzing the prints found on those CDs. He should care about his job and his future. However, after two days of not knowing if Doug was all right, two days without him, all Christopher wanted was to work his way through this fucked-up little town and smack everyone who had ever made Doug feel like he wasn't good enough, wasn't white enough, to be a part of their town. If he could defend Doug, if he could beat the shit out of everyone who hurt him, maybe he could still feel some connection with the other man. But sitting here in Doug's bar, listening to Doug's boss gossip about him, was all Christopher could have.

After an hour of listening to stories about Doug, Brubaker tried to ask him about Micah Donovan again, but Christopher already felt like he'd sat still too long.

"You aren't going running in the middle of the night again, are you?" Brubaker asked.

Christopher shook his head. “No, I learned that lesson. I just feel like I need to move. I haven’t been running in almost four days, though, and that’s usually about the time I start going through withdrawal symptoms. I keep getting lost whenever I go for a run off the highway, but it’s better than sitting still.”

Brubaker smiled at him and shook his head. “I can’t even pretend I understand. But if you’re worried about getting lost, there’s a fourteen-mile-long walking path that the county put in along the old Northern Pacific railroad line. It runs along the north edge of town, and there’s parking at a couple of different parks along the trail.”

“Yeah? That sounds just about perfect. Heavy Runner managed to scare me out of going up into the mountains on my own, but I’m not crazy about running next to cars going seventy miles per hour, either. I think I’ll check it out in the morning.”

“Well, glad I could help,” Brubaker said with a half smile.

CHRISTOPHER knew he wouldn’t sleep that night. He had slept the entire day away yesterday, and with a huge dinner recharging his blood-sugar levels, he was bouncing off the walls by four in the morning. Having Ray in the room with him made it worse. Ray could sleep through anything, but Christopher didn’t feel right leaving the TV on. He finished sorting through all of his backed-up voice mail, then stared at the ceiling for an hour. He lasted until five o’clock before the walls began closing in around him and he had to move.

He put on his running clothes, grabbed his keys, and slipped out quietly. He loved running in the mornings, and even if it was too cold to run before the sun came up, it wasn’t too cold to explore. He was so distracted by the way the first soft hint of light filled the world around him that he didn’t notice the headlights that followed him out of the hotel parking lot.

He almost had the layout of the town memorized, so it didn’t take him as long as he expected to find the trail that Brubaker mentioned. It was paved, flat, and set back from the road by five feet of grass—perfect for the long, slow miles that Christopher needed to get his head on straight. He drank six sips from a bottle of Gatorade and sat down on the hood of his rental car. He watched the sun crest above the mountains to the east, watched the dark shadows of pine trees become amber-colored silhouettes, and finally he watched the shadows melt away.

He made it about a hundred feet down the trail before he heard the roar of the diesel engine behind him, coming up fast. He didn't move, though, since he wasn't on the road. When the grill of the truck hit him from the right, pain exploded through his calf and thigh. He felt his feet leave the ground, knew he was spinning, and then felt pavement, dirt, and grass beneath him. For a ridiculous moment, he thought he might have been better off jogging beside the highway.

A tall, heavy-set figure loomed over him, the man's heavy breaths crystallizing in the cold morning air. Hands grabbed him under his arms and dragged him over the dirt, scraping his shattered right leg in different directions. It hurt so much he screamed. The hands under his arms hoisted him up and tossed him, face-first, onto a cold metal surface. Christopher tried to turn his head, tried to see what was happening, but all he saw was the tailgate of the truck slamming shut by his feet. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his phone.

"Ah ah." The man took the phone from his hands. A surprisingly calm, friendly face smiled down at him. Sheriff Greg Brubaker gently turned Christopher's head toward him. "You really are just like Pete. You have the same eyes, the same face, and the same blond fucking hair. And you fidget when you lie, just like he did. It don't matter, though. Even if you'd told me the truth about what that little whore said to you before he died, it wouldn't have mattered. You see, I wasn't strong enough. I admit I let your brother, and his blue fucking eyes, corrupt me, but I'm not going to let you taint one of my men."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Doug wished he had a TV, a radio, or something else to make noise. He had always looked at his home as a place to come back to for food and a bed, rather than a place to spend time, so he had never bothered to buy a television. The swelling in his arm had gone down, and now it only hurt

when he bumped it or tried to reach for something. He knew he should try to rest, but the silence of his house began to get to him within a few hours of arriving home. He couldn't get away with going in to work, but he couldn't stand to stay home, either.

He thought about calling Christopher, but that was almost as bad an idea as trying to go to work. He couldn't risk the repercussions that would come from a real relationship. He couldn't risk the emotional entanglements, either. Realizing he was falling for the other man was his cue to back out. He just wished he had realized it sooner.

He was grateful to be in his own kitchen again, at least. The hospital food he had been willing to eat had consisted of oatmeal and limp salad. Even standing up long enough to heat up a can of soup wore him out, so after he ate, he climbed the stairs to his bed. If he couldn't handle standing up long enough to reheat soup, going for a hike was out of the question.

It only took a moment for the smell of stale sex, sweat, and Christopher to overwhelm him. He stripped off his clothes carefully and crawled into bed. He settled on his right side and forced himself to stay still, but he really wanted to burrow into the sheets and just wallow in all that was left of Christopher's scent. He dozed off a few times, and each time he woke up to that smell, he felt the pain in his chest lighten, felt the emptiness ebb away. Each time, as his drug-addled brain surfaced from sleep, he reached out into the cold sheets around him and tried to grasp the air. When his hands closed around nothing, he woke up and had to face reality all over again. By morning, he was more exhausted than he had been the night before. He wished he could rewind the past two weeks, go back in time, and avoid ever going into that bar at all. Then Christopher would have stayed a handsome face that Doug could steal glances at, not someone whose mere absence made Doug feel numb.

He showered and dressed, even though it took a ridiculously long time. As he was getting dressed, the smell of coffee surprised him. His coffee pot was far too old to have a programmable timer, so that meant either someone was in his house or he was hallucinating.

The scent reminded him so much of Christopher that he squirmed back into his sling and stumbled downstairs fast, his heart racing at the prospect of finding the other man in his kitchen. He heard the clank of pans from the kitchen and hurried in. The smell of bacon and a distinctly feminine shape

hovering over the stove sent a stab of pain through his chest. It wasn't Christopher.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Brittney said with a smile. "Do you know you don't have any food? I had to run to the grocery store before I could start on breakfast. You really should sell this old place and get a house in town. It's such a long drive to get to a grocery store in a decent neighborhood."

Doug collapsed into the dining nook, the disappointment hitting harder than he wanted to admit.

Brittney set a plate of sausage, bacon, eggs, and pancakes down in front of him, along with a cup of coffee. Doug stared at the plate then looked up at the short-haired woman, wondering how they had spent so much time together without actually getting to know each other. He didn't have to wonder long. In all of his memories of their dates and nights together, she had typically done all of the talking for both of them. He'd had to interrupt her just to contribute to the conversation, and while he didn't mind doing that when he had to deal with the public, it wasn't how his family had talked. Christopher's comfort with silence, despite the fact that his body defaulted to being hyper and twitchy, had given him a chance to actually share something of himself with a lover for the first time since his disastrous relationship in Miami.

"... Doug, you didn't answer me." Brittney was staring at him with raised eyebrows.

He hadn't even heard her. Just as he always had when she would manage the conversation for both of them, he'd tuned out what she was saying.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Do you want cream and sugar in your coffee?"

"Black," he said quietly. "Please. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to do something nice for you," she explained. She set a cup of coffee down by his plate, next to a glass of orange juice. "As an apology for how I acted in the hospital. I hadn't heard all of the gossip about the man from California. I didn't know he was a police officer, or that he was your friend. I'm sorry I upset you, and I'm sorry that I offended him."

The nervous, and strangely sincere, expression on her face surprised him.

"I know that we've had our share of problems, Doug, but I really think that... that we should try again...."

"I can't do this anymore," said Doug, surprising himself.

"Doug?"

“I don’t talk the way you do,” he said quietly. “I can fake it, but I don’t like to. The painkiller makes it hard. I’ve never been able to talk to you.”

“You have always been so quiet. I’ve never cared about that, though. You were like that in high school too. I figured it had to be a cowboy thing—that you just came from a family of strong silent men. Your father was always quiet too, but I remember your mom was a sweetheart.”

“Three years,” he said, laughing. “We dated three years, all in all, and we don’t know a thing about each other.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. I might be the only person in town who does know you!”

“No,” he interrupted her before she could keep arguing. “You don’t know anything about me, and I don’t know you. The only thing I know about your hopes and dreams is that you wanted to be a cheerleader in college, and that was nine years ago.”

“Come on, Doug, you know me. And I know you. You’re being ridiculous.”

“Am I?” he glanced down at the plate of meat and eggs again. “I don’t think I am. Can I trust you? I can’t. I know it. I don’t know why I’m even asking. You should go.”

“Doug, I know we’ve had problems, but if you can’t trust me, who can you trust? What is it?”

“Brittney....” Doug looked up at her, wishing he didn’t feel like such a freak. “I’m a vegan.”

“A what?”

“I don’t eat animal products. I haven’t eaten meat since I was sixteen.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! You raised beef cattle for a living! We went out to eat all the time in high school. You always ordered regular food!”

“I always ordered french fries and Dr Pepper,” he pointed out.

She opened her mouth to argue, and then she stopped. “That’s why there wasn’t any milk in your fridge, wasn’t it?”

He nodded slowly.

“What on earth do you eat? There’s nothing in your kitchen!”

“I admit, I need to go shopping....”

She stared at him for a minute, pressing her lips tightly together, as if she was trying not to giggle. “Dinner at my parents’ house must have been hell for you! My mom thought you hated her pork roast. Why didn’t you ever say anything? How could you think a little something like that would make a difference to me? I can whip up some oatmeal so you can at least get

something to eat. Really, to think you went all this time without telling anyone!”

She kept ranting, and Doug had to hold up his hand to slow her down. “It gets worse.”

“Worse?” She giggled. She picked up his plate and took it back to the counter, then started shifting pots around again.

“If this gets around, I doubt it will be safe for me to stay in Elkin....”

“Really, Doug, I don’t think avoiding meat is something people feel that strongly about. If you’re really worried about it, though, I can keep it quiet.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m gay.”

The pots stopped clanging.

“I know that’s not true, Doug.” She flashed him a flirtatious smile.

“I wanted to be straight in high school,” he admitted. “In college, I thought maybe I was just bisexual, but....” He shook his head hopelessly. “I’m gay.”

“You can’t be gay.” She laughed nervously. “No. You can’t be. We’ve had sex, Doug! Last time I checked I didn’t have a penis!”

“I’m sorry, Brittney. I wanted things to work between us. I wanted to be straight. I’ve spent my entire life being ashamed of the fact that I’m not. I just can’t pretend anymore. I can’t try pretending again. I can manage it for a few weeks, but then I start getting resentful and frustrated, and then I end up snapping at you when I can’t get a word in any other way, and it just goes straight to hell....”

“You....” She sat down at the table and took a long sip from her own coffee.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t act gay.”

Doug didn’t want to roll his eyes, but he couldn’t help it. “You know, leather pants and flamboyant mannerisms aren’t really a requirement for the label.”

“I mean, you hated shopping with me! If you’re gay, you’re supposed to be willing to go shopping!”

“I don’t hate shopping.”

“You hate shopping for anything other than climbing gear and ammunition! And parts for your truck!”

That made Doug smile. She had noticed some things after all.

She set her coffee down and folded her hands together. “Do you realize

what this means? It really was all your fault that things didn't work out!" After a moment of glaring at him, she relaxed and smiled. "Why didn't you ever say anything? If you hadn't become an asshole within two weeks of getting back together, every time we've gotten back together, we could have been friends."

"If anyone finds out, my life is over. You can't be a gay cop in a small town, Brit. You can be a gay cop in Miami, or I guess in San Diego, but working in Elkin is hard enough because I'm a Native American. The last thing I want is for everyone in town to think I'm not only a petty thief and drunk, but also a child-molesting faggot like Peter Hayes."

Her smile faded and she bit her lower lip. "I really shouldn't have said that..."

"No shit."

She shook her head. "I am sorry. You can't mean what you're saying, though. That would mean you're always going to be alone...."

Doug tried to shrug, but hissed as the pain in his arm exploded all over again.

"Stop that! If it hurts, don't do it!" Brittney snapped. She shook her head and picked up her coffee cup again. "Why does it matter, anyway?"

"Department barbecues," Doug said slowly. "They're bring-the-wife-or-girlfriend kind of events."

"They're also not vegetarian events! The only thing you could eat there would be corn on the cob, and that's smothered in butter half the time. You're better off just saying no thanks to the barbecues and finding somebody to spend your life with."

When she was quiet for a moment, Doug smiled. "I always bring a cucumber and tomato salad so I've got something to eat. They're all potluck."

"Stop avoiding the issue!"

"I've got to go to the department barbecues. They build camaraderie. When I get called to a bar fight, or to investigate a domestic disturbance that blows up, and I need back up, I don't want to wonder if anyone is going to show up or not."

"No!" Her friendly smile turned into a sharp glare. "They wouldn't dare! Besides, you're a hero, Doug! After the sheriff told everybody you're the best officer he's got, do you think a single one of them would treat you different just because you're gay? And if they do, so what? It's not your

fault if they're assholes. You shouldn't have to spend your entire life alone because they can't keep their nose out of your sex life!"

Seeing Brittney's wrath directed against the rest of the world, instead of toward him, was weird. Suddenly, he remembered why he had found her so attractive in high school. She was ferocious enough that she came across as masculine, in her own way.

"I would like it if we could be friends," he said quietly.

"It's bound to work out better than being lovers," she admitted. "But you shouldn't keep pretending. What if you meet someone you really like? If you're still telling the whole world you're straight, you could miss out on a chance to actually be happy." She shook her head when she saw the way his shoulders slumped. "You already have, haven't you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Who was he?"

Doug sighed. "The guy you scared out of my hospital room three days ago." Across the table, Brittney squeaked and covered her mouth with both hands. Her eyes bulged. "The tall guy from California? The one with the sun-bleached hair?"

Doug tried to shrug again. "I know it's stupid. As soon as he deals with his brother's estate, he'll be gone. He's just..." Doug shook his head. He didn't want to talk about Christopher, to remember just how hopelessly stupid he was being about this whole relationship. "He's perfect."

"Wow." She barked out a laugh. "You really are gay, aren't you? Because I don't think I've ever seen a smile like that on your face before. You love him."

"It doesn't matter."

"Like hell it doesn't! And I said such horrible things to him.... Did I mention that I am really very sorry?"

"You did."

"Well, I am. And I even screwed up my apology!" She went back to the stove and made Doug a bowl of oatmeal. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Liquor. Once I don't need the Vicodin anymore."

"Don't be an asshole, Doug. What are you going to do to convince Mr. Bleach Blond to stay?"

"He's got a job in California, a life in California. He can't stay. And he isn't exactly looking for a relationship, either. It was just supposed to be a casual thing, you know?"

“Casual? He camped out at the hospital when you got shot. He was there when I left the first night. He was still there when I showed up the next morning.”

“He’s a friend.”

“You ripped an IV out of your arm to try and go after him,” she pointed out. “I admit, that probably should have been a clue right there.”

“It would be weird to go after him all the way to San Diego. If you had a one-night stand that lasted for two weeks, would you relocate just on the off chance something might come of it?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. She set a bowl of oatmeal down in front of him. “You okay with the syrup?”

“Perfect.”

“If it were me, I think I’d try to stay in touch, to see what might grow. Long-distance relationships aren’t always an automatic failure.”

“He doesn’t want a relationship,” Doug tried to explain. “And we were getting awfully close to relationship territory. I told him I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Brittney actually pouted.

“It was the right thing to do,” Doug insisted. “I’ve been so lonely, for so many years, that I fell head over heels with the first nice guy I hooked up with. I don’t need your pity on top of it.”

“Tough. Friends get to feel sorry for each other.”

After they finished breakfast, Brittney helped tidy up the kitchen and then announced that she had to run. “You should come into town today, just to get out of the house. Oh! They arrested Reverend Liedes today. Of course, no one’s saying why, but everybody knows. And the judge won’t sign off on a warrant, so the sheriff is bitching about having to release him within twenty-four hours.”

“They arrested Liedes?”

“Yeah. You see things about priests molesting little boys on the news, but you never think it’s the type of thing that can happen in your own backyard.”

“I guess.”

He walked her to her car, shocked that they hadn’t ended up screaming at each other. He was even more shocked when she kissed him on the cheek. “You know, if it lasts for more than a week, it’s not allowed to be called a one-night stand anymore. It’s a rule. If you talk to Mr. Bleach Blond again,

apologize for me?”

Doug stood on the front step and watched until Brittney’s car was heading down the driveway. Then he grabbed his keys, locked the door, and headed to his truck. He couldn’t spend the entire day at home without going insane. He drove into town, taking it slow, and thought about Christopher the whole way. Would it be so bad to suggest they stay in touch? He didn’t have to tell the other man how he felt, and maybe after a few months of long e-mails and late-night phone calls, he could persuade Christopher to come visit.

He smiled when he imagined what Christopher must have gone through, trying to get on with life with his right arm out of commission. He could picture Christopher trying to manage a shower, or even to button his own pants, and failing miserably. If what he knew of the man held true, Christopher would probably put on that fake smile, reach for a pair of sweat pants, and pretend that was what he’d meant to do all along. He wouldn’t break down and swear at his bathroom mirror, like Doug had.

Doug felt his chest grow warm when he remembered the way Christopher censored his own curse words whenever there were kids around.

Somehow, Doug found himself turning into the parking lot of Christopher’s hotel. He knew it was a stupid idea, but he had to at least talk to Christopher about the bullshit Brittney had said to him at the hospital. He knew that Christopher already felt responsible for his brother’s crimes. Doug didn’t want him to feel guilty over Micah Donovan’s death too. Every police officer who carried a gun knew there was a chance he might have to take another person’s life. He felt sick when he thought about it, but he didn’t regret pulling the trigger.

Brittney’s words to Christopher, though, had been playing on repeat in his head since she’d apologized to him over breakfast. The idea that Christopher might actually believe her, believe he was responsible for Doug getting shot, was something Doug couldn’t live with.

He was just going to talk to him. He might invite Christopher out for coffee somewhere public, where Doug wouldn’t have any choice about keeping his hands to himself. When he knocked on Christopher’s door, though, no one answered. He knocked again, just in case, waited a few more moments, then turned to leave.

As he was turning away, a man covered in nothing but a towel and dripping trails of water pulled the door wide open. It was not Christopher. Doug stumbled backward, wondering if the painkillers were still in his

system. The man in the towel looked so much like him that they might have passed for brothers. "I'm sorry," Doug said fast. "I must have the wrong room."

"No," the stranger said, smirking. "You've got the right room. You're him. You're Doug Heavy Runner. And wow"—the man looked him up and down slowly, openly leering—"you are good-looking. I still say I'm prettier, but apparently butch is better than pretty. Where's he at, anyway?"

Doug glared at the almost naked man. He had black hair that was cut short, a square jaw, and dark-brown eyes. His skin was lighter than Doug's, and he was slimmer, but they did look similar. "You would be the asshole partner? Whatever, look, just tell him I stopped by, alright?"

"So he wasn't with you?" the man called, as Doug hurried away.

Doug practically ran down the hall. He hurried down the stairs, then stopped at the bottom when he began to feel light-headed. He shook his head and went back to his truck.

If he had been paying attention, he would have noticed Christopher's rental car wasn't in the parking lot, but he had been too nervous about the possibility of seeing him again. Maybe Christopher was right about them distracting each other.

Doug was surprised to see the street outside of the sheriff's office filled with vans and people. The names of half a dozen television stations were painted on the vans, and some had satellites mounted on their roofs. People in suits were milling about, so Doug drove around and parked in the employee lot. He rang the bell to get into the detention side of the building. After a long wait, the door buzzed as the pneumatic lock disengaged. "Thank you," Doug said aloud, knowing whoever was running the jail's master control room could hear him through the speaker in the door.

"You made it past the reporters alive!" Daniels shouted. He was on the booking platform, lugging two boxes of old paper files toward his office. "What the hell are you doing back already?"

"I can't sit at home anymore. Is it true that the feds arrested Reverend Lieder this morning?"

"Greg did last night," Daniels said quietly. Doug could tell from the look on the man's face that he wasn't happy about it. "Get your butt in here. If you're going to hang around getting in the way, I'm going to put you to work."

"Whatever you need," Doug volunteered.

“Man the radio. I have to tell Agent Belkamp you’re here. He needs to take a set of your fingerprints himself.”

“My prints? Are there chain-of-custody issues with the CDs I brought down?”

“He’ll explain it.” To Doug’s surprise, Daniels called the FBI agent on his own cellphone.

“Hey, it’s me. Heavy Runner’s in my office right now if you want to catch him.”

Doug gaped at the desk. It was so covered in files and paperwork he wasn’t sure he could find the radio. Daniels grabbed the receiver, tugged the cord free from the pile, and handed it to Doug.

“What’s all this?”

Daniels didn’t answer him. He set the two boxes down, sat in the rickety office chair, and leaned over to look at the files. The orange labels told Doug they were juvenile detention records. Daniels went through each file, flipped to the end, scanned the last discharge form, and reinserted it into the box. He went through the first box quickly, and then started on the second. Halfway through, the fast rhythm halted and he set one of the files carefully into the large stack on his desk. He pulled one more file out of the second box, then turned to the computer and typed the names on each file in fast. He put one of the files back and set the other one into a stack of what looked like a dozen files. Finally, he scribbled the name on the file on a sheet of paper, along with the name of the facility where the prisoner had ended up.

Doug recognized the name of twelve-year-old Collin Smith. “My graffiti artist,” he said absently. “Has he finally come home?”

“What?” Daniels asked.

Doug pointed to the file. He explained he had arrested the kid a few times, and when his mom came in to report that he had run away, Doug was the one who had taken the report.

“The mother thinks he’s runaway?” Daniels asked.

“Yeah. He has a hard time at home. He’s run away three times this year. Last time he was hiding out in a junked-out old van at a friend’s house. This time, I filed the missing persons report myself. It was only five, maybe six, weeks ago.” Doug grabbed the file before Daniels could answer and turned to the last page. The last page was a prisoner-transfer form showing that Sheriff Brubaker had released the kid to a social services worker

from Cascade County, over six hours to the east. Sheriff Brubaker had arrested the boy for vandalism one week after Doug filed the missing persons report, and instead of being released to his mother had been remanded to social services. “Oh. I didn’t think he was having that much trouble at home. Must have been when I had a day off.” Even as he provided his own explanation, something in the old sergeant’s question, something in his eyes, told Doug that something was very wrong. He turned back through the file. The missing persons’ report he had filled out was gone.

The door opened and then closed fast. Belkamp, looking a lot more flustered than he had when Doug saw him in the hospital, leaned against the glass door and shut his eyes. “This is a nightmare. The press is camped out outside the building waiting for a statement on Lieder’s.”

“His name’s not on the roster,” Doug said casually, motioning to the dry-erase board above the desk that listed each inmate in the detention center’s fifteen cells. Six of them were filled, but Lieder’s name wasn’t scrawled on the board.

“He’s being held in Missoula,” said Belkamp. “But that’s not going to stop them from camping out in front of the building. Can you move your arm enough to get me a scan of your fingerprints?”

“Yes. I had gloves on when I grabbed those discs. I never touched them without gloves on. My left forefinger touched the outside of the bag they were in, but that was all.”

Belkamp nodded. “Standard procedure with our lab is that when the prints taken from evidence bring up a police employment record, we get a new sample of prints from every officer involved in the chain of custody.”

“What?” Doug stood up so fast he jostled some of the files. Daniels scrambled to grab them and sighed when the paper settled securely in his arms. “Sorry. But the prints brought up a POST record?” The Police Officer Standards and Training office was part of the Department of Justice and ran the state police academy. They kept personnel and certification records for every police officer in the state. There should not be fingerprints linked to a police-employment record on those discs.

“Can you move your arm?” Belkamp repeated.

“Absolutely.”

“Come on, we’ll use the scanner out on the booking platform. It’ll be faster.” It hurt, but Doug managed to straighten and twist his arm enough to get a

decent scan of all of his fingerprints. Belkamp used the jail computer to e-mail them straight to the crime lab and was on the phone with his partner again before the e-mail screen reloaded.

“So what happened to my graffiti artist?” Doug asked, determined not to be put off.

Daniels looked at him seriously, but just pressed his lips tighter together. He picked up the sheet of paper he had been adding names to and shook his head. When Belkamp put away his phone, he stared at Daniels expectantly. Daniels handed him the list without a word.

Belkamp pulled out a folded sheet of notebook paper and compared the two. “This is suicides, runaways, all of them?”

Daniels shook his head. “Just the ones CPS is supposed to have, but that they say they never had.” He pulled out another sheet of paper, with what looked to be another twenty names on it. “These are the suicides and runaways I’ve found so far. The CPS list is a perfect match. There are twelve others who aren’t on the CPS list, but have never been found. Including Micah Donovan, and we know he is dead. Smith was reported as a runaway by his family and is supposed to be in Cascade County according to our records. Cascade County has no record of him at all.”

“What’s going on?”

Belkamp shook his head. “That fucker! One afternoon of chatting with people, and he gets a list of over half the victims! Don’t get too attached to your boyfriend, Heavy Runner, because I’m going to get him to apply with the bureau even if I have to bribe him.”

Doug sputtered and tried to think of something he could shout, some denial that wouldn’t make it all the more obvious that Belkamp’s casual accusation was true.

“Relax, Heavy Runner, he knows.”

“What?” Doug shrieked.

“Doug, I did your background check when you applied with us. It came up when I was talking to your captain in Florida. I don’t care what you do on your own time. Or who,” Daniels said flatly.

“As if it matters now? Are all of the signatures the same?” Belkamp asked. Daniels nodded grimly.

Doug glared at both men, and then picked up one of the files. The last page in each file, the final prisoner transfer in each record, was authorized and signed off on by Greg Brubaker. Each one listed the prisoner as being

signed over to various family-services agencies. Half of each form—the half that was supposed to be filled out by the receiving agency—was blank. No one had signed for the kids. No one had taken them. A form had been filed, and so as far as the sheriff's department was concerned, they had become someone else's problem.

Belkamp's phone rang, and he answered it before the ring finished. "Belkamp."

He listened for a moment and then nodded. "Right." He covered up the microphone and whispered, "Sheriff's prints," then he went back to his conversation. "Get me warrants. I'll call in the field agents who came up here with us, but we need to replace the entire agency. Ask around, figure out who to call! A single police officer got a thorough victim list after one morning of talking to people; you should consider following his example." Belkamp covered the microphone on his cell phone again and looked at Daniels. "What is your department's full complement of personnel?"

"Thirty-seven POST-certified officers, twelve detention officers, one receptionist," Daniels whispered.

"Our entire department?" Doug sat down on the desk itself and stared at the lists. "They're dead, aren't they? All the rumors about human remains you found in Peter Hayes's house were true. All these kids are dead."

Belkamp removed his hand from the phone. "Thirty-seven POST-certified officers, twelve detention officers, and notify both forensics teams." Belkamp closed his phone and rounded on Daniels. "I trusted you on this," he said softly. "Can I trust you both to keep your mouths shut? Not just until we get him into custody, but period. We're going to have to search everything here and, no offense, but I'm not terribly inclined to trust anyone else in this department at the moment."

"Greg Brubaker has been a friend of my family for fifteen years," Daniels whispered. "But Agent Belkamp, sir, I'm more worried about my wife at the moment. See, five of these are her kids. They're all *her* kids. If she ever handles their cases, they're hers. Once a month she does home checks and takes the kids on her caseload out for ice cream. She remembers their names, even when she hasn't seen them in years. When they grow up and have kids of their own, she organizes their baby showers or brings flowers to the hospital." Daniels shut his eyes, and Doug saw him trying not to tremble. "You find him. You sort this out. You do that. I'm going to stay here and maintain the safety and security of this facility until you find someone

capable of relieving me from duty. The only thing I intend to do after that is to go take care of my wife.”

“Contact Ronan, Pablo, Kalispell, and Missoula—they’ll have special-response teams willing to volunteer,” Doug whispered.

Daniels shook his head. “Jackson’s on the duty desk up front again. I suggest you have Detective Heavy Runner relieve him of duty until your own people can empty and secure the building. I can personally vouch for Detective Heavy Runner being able to keep his head straight when things fall apart. As for Greg... he called in this morning. He said he was wiped out after working through his weekend, so he was taking a personal day. I expect he’s at home, but I can’t say for sure.”

“Good enough. Come on.” Belkamp tapped Doug on the arm to get him moving. Doug winced, but got to his feet. He led the FBI agent through the almost deserted sheriff’s office while Belkamp phoned in his own people. They were working in the building, and they hurried to the front desk to meet them. By the time Doug got there, FBI windbreakers filled the entire lobby. A woman in a suit jacket and a man holding a video camera had also made it inside. “Get them out of here, now!” Belkamp shouted, gesturing to the woman.

Doug saw a dark-haired man in a suit being jostled toward the exit by an FBI agent. “Not him!” Doug shouted. “That’s Detective... ah, you know, I can’t remember. He’s one of the San Diego officers! Let him through!”

“Is he?” Belkamp arched both eyebrows.

“He’s Hayes’s partner. What’s going on?” Doug asked him.

The irritated-looking man straightened his jacket and muttered a string of Spanish curse words. “Again, all kinds of incompetent. I was just telling this boy that I need to file a missing persons report. He seems to think that someone needs to be missing for at least forty-eight hours, even if there’s evidence that they might be in trouble, before he can do jack shit. Your department is seriously lacking in professionalism, you know that?”

“You have no idea.” Doug took a deep breath and glanced sideways at Jackson. “Kid, go outside and look official. Keep reporters and anyone without an FBI badge out. Do not come back in right now.”

“But I’m supposed to—”

“Jackson, I was not making a suggestion!”

“I’m going!”

Belkamp turned to Christopher’s partner. “Who are you?” “Detective

Raymond Delgado, SanDiego PD.”

“And this missing person?”

“My partner went for a run early yesterday morning. He hasn’t come back yet.”

“Was he supposed to be back?”

“Yes. His long runs are usually around two hours unless he’s training for a race. When he didn’t come back yesterday morning, I figured he was with....” The man glared at Doug. “Well, a *friend*. This morning the *friend* told me that he hadn’t seen him, then the fucking imbecile bolted before I could say anything. I got worried, so I went looking for him. I found his car near a trail north of here. A block away, on the jogging trail, I found tire tracks, a pool of dried blood, his keys on the ground, and what appears to be blood-stained drag marks between the pool of blood and the back tire marks. It might not be two plus two, but it’s not exactly calculus.”

“He’s been missing since yesterday morning? And you suspect he’s injured?” Belkamp asked.

“Maybe I am overreacting,” the detective said, rolling his eyes. “Maybe there is an officer in this shithole who has a double-digit IQ— anything is possible. Given the preponderance of the evidence, though, I wouldn’t put money on me being wrong. Or on that little Boy Scout being literate. I recognize that you seem to have something blowing up in your face, but if it’s not a matter of life or death, I would appreciate it if you could point me toward an actual police officer.”

Belkamp’s mouth dropped open as he gaped at the detective. “How?” he sputtered, shaking his head. “Who the hell are you people? What’s so damn special about San Diego?”

Doug was amazed too. Knowing the things he knew about Christopher’s history with his partner, he had no idea how the man could look so calm and collected. He had seen Christopher do the same thing over the past week, but it still shocked him. He wondered if this man had learned the trick from Christopher or if Christopher had learned it from him.

The detective caught on fast. He shrugged and smiled the same seductive smile he had worn when Doug met him at Christopher’s hotel room. “We’re the San Diego PD,” he said smugly. “We’re ‘America’s Finest’. It’s our official logo.”

“Not ‘To Protect and Serve’?” One of the FBI agents laughed.

“No, that’s LA. It is customary to pick a logo that a department can live up

to, and Lord knows they do their best.”

“So, Chris has been in an accident?” Jackson asked. All eyes in the room turned to the young man. “What? I was just wondering!”

“Seriously, Jackson?” Doug asked, embarrassment seeping through his rising panic. “Why are you still here?”

“I’m going! But he seemed upset the other night in the Hay Loft, like there was something really wrong. The sheriff spent a good hour talking to him about what that Donovan kid told him before he died, though, and he said he was just fine afterwards. Or, he said he’d be just fine in the morning.”

Doug glanced at Belkamp, his stomach twisting and tightening just like it did when he lost his grip climbing. Suddenly he felt like he was in a state of free fall.

“Micah Donovan.” Belkamp nodded to himself. “All right, Jackson, get your ass back to this desk. Every phone call you make will be recorded. If you call anyone at all until you are relieved of duty, you will face federal charges!” Belkamp shouted. “Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Jackson squeaked.

“We need a full tactical response and we need it right now! Special response teams from any neighboring town, any neighboring jurisdiction! No local officers are to be involved, and you will all use cell phones to communicate! Absolute radio silence!”

Doug watched the crowd in FBI windbreakers swarm into action, each agent moving frantically to call for reinforcements or to arrange for gear and transportation. Across the crowd, he met the calculating dark brown eyes of Christopher’s partner, maybe Christopher’s lover, if the two of them ever got an opportunity to sort through their relationship. Looking into his eyes now, Doug saw a clear reflection of the terror seeping into every facet of his being. Whatever there may be between Christopher and his partner didn’t matter now.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Doug was glad when Delgado didn't ask where Doug was dragging him off to. He didn't protest, or even ask questions, when Doug unlocked his truck and shoved him toward the passenger door.

"Where is the rental car?" Doug asked, after he climbed up behind the wheel.

Delgado gave him a lopsided smirk and held up his phone. The GPS began to recite directions in an infuriatingly calm woman's voice. "I took the liberty of logging the coordinates as a waypoint."

"That's handy," Doug admitted. He started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot, following the GPS's directions to drive north.

"It keeps me from wandering around the parking lot for an hour after Chargers games."

"Hundreds of dollars for a phone just so you don't have to remember what row you parked in?"

"No. I remember where I've parked. It's just an expensive toy."

Doug huffed. It wasn't as if he wanted to start a fight with this guy. He didn't know why he was so disappointed that the man didn't take the bait.

"I just keep hoping that dipshit will keep his phone turned on, but he never listens...."

"If he's hurt, he wouldn't be able to use it anyway."

"True. And irrelevant," Delgado said in a singsong voice, pronouncing each syllable precisely. "If he had his phone turned on, I'd be able to get his location from the GPS on his phone."

"Is that even legal?"

The man rolled his eyes. "If he clicks on the little box giving me permission to do it, it's not illegal."

The GPS told him to turn again. "Are you saying your phone is set up to track your partner?"

"And friends and family. There's an app for everything these days."

“Yeah, yeah. Soon your phone will vibrate to remind you to take a shit.”

Delgado’s smirk grew into a full-blown smile. “My sister’s got an app that does that. She uses it for her toddler. Apparently it makes potty training a breeze.”

Doug couldn’t help chuckling, despite the gravity of their situation. He could imagine watching Christopher and this man bounce off each other. They were probably a great team. “Don’t suppose you thought to call the local hospital, see if he might have been in an accident?”

Delgado’s smile wavered slightly. “As of forty minutes ago, he was not in the hospital. I meant to call back, but that circus at your office made me forget all about it.” He made the call quickly, and Doug knew before he hung up that no one had brought Christopher to the hospital. When they found the rental car, Delgado showed him the tire tracks, the pool of blood that looked like it had only been left to dry for several hours, and the scrapes in the dirt. “I found his keys here, between these deeper tire marks.” Doug looked at the spot. It hadn’t been marked, but Doug wasn’t going to say anything.

“I took a photo of them before I grabbed them. Leaving them on the ground with the car insight seemed stupid.”

“This isn’t the kind of place where you need to worry about someone stealing the car.”

“Just people running down and kidnapping joggers, then? I mean, that’s a lot of blood.”

“It’s not actually as much as you’d think,” Doug tried to reassure him.

Doug looked up and down the trail. It ran between the railroad tracks and the road. On the other side of the tracks, the Flathead National Forest stretched away over the foothills and mountains. Across the road, a rumbling lumberyard was enclosed behind a chain-link fence. Doug circled around the tire tracks, scanning the ground for anything that might have been out of place. About ten feet past the puddle of blood, halfway under part of the hedge, was a familiar bottle of orange Gatorade. The cap was tight and it was about three quarters full. Over the weekend, he’d seen Christopher start each run with a bottle of Gatorade in hand. He would take six sips before beginning and finish the rest during his run. Doug thought he was joking, when he described the process, but Christopher really was that meticulous about it.

It was obvious from the scene that Christopher had been hit by a car while on

the jogging path. If the tire tracks marked where he was hit, and the pool of blood marked where he had landed, then he had been hit hard enough to send him flying about fifteen feet. The bottle had probably been in his hand, and it had flown another ten feet past the blood.

Doug focused on backcountry medicine, but he still had to keep his standard EMT basic certification valid. He knew when a pedestrian was hit by a car moving that quickly, a broken leg was almost guaranteed. If the blood was any indication, Christopher had at least one compound fracture. A small smear of blood about two feet from the puddle was probably where his head hit the ground. That meant a concussion on top of a badly broken leg. Wherever Christopher was, he needed to get to an emergency room.

The only consolation was that there wasn't enough blood on the ground to indicate Christopher was in danger of bleeding to death. Doug had to keep reminding himself of that. When he helped teach wilderness first-responder classes, one of the other instructors always liked to pour a few ounces of water out onto the ground, just to show their students how big a mess a few ounces of fluid could make when it spread out.

It wasn't enough blood for Christopher to bleed to death. If his wounds kept bleeding, though, it was more than enough to start him on the downward spiral that would lead to shock. Twenty-four hours with such traumatic injuries and no medical care meant shock was close to a certainty. Doug felt his stomach twist, but he forced himself to take a deep breath and calm down. There would be time to throw up later.

"Try the hospital again," Doug told Delgado. "Ask about anyone brought in yesterday with a broken leg. He might have been unconscious."

Delgado stared down at him, a look of sincere surprise on his face. He made the call, this time asking about any John Does with leg injuries.

"Nothing," he said, hanging up.

"If you can, look up the hospitals in Ronan and Kalispell and call them too."

Delgado did as Doug asked him to, shaking his head after each phone call.

Doug shut his eyes and resisted the urge to curse. "Well, we know he was hit by a large truck. There aren't all that many fifth-wheel pickups running around."

"Huh?"

Doug rose to his feet and went back to the tire tracks. "Two SUV or truck tires stopped here." He pointed to the tire marks where he suspected Christopher had been hit. He walked back several feet to where he believed

the truck's tailgate had ended up. "Here, there are two tires right next to each other," he said, pointing to two deep indentations in the dirt. They were side by side and only a few inches apart. A few feet away, where the other end of the truck's rear axle would have been, were two more parallel tire marks. "The truck was a fifth wheel. It's usually more of a commercial truck, used for towing and hauling heavy loads."

"So, it's distinctive?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I've really only seen one running around." Doug wanted to call Belknap and ask if they had gotten to Brubaker's house yet, and if he had found Christopher. It wouldn't do any good to call, though, since at best, it would be a fruitless effort, and at worst, it could be a potentially lethal distraction.

"Where do we find it?"

"We don't," said Doug. "The FBI is already working on it."

"The FBI?" Delgado laughed. "Even they can't get a description of the truck out of your head, and they don't move that fast. This is all one case, isn't it?"

Doug didn't know what the hell it was anymore. He'd been in the hospital or stuck at home all week. "The feds think so. The agent in charge said something about the suspect I shot Monday. It seemed to make sense to him."

"And they're going after him, right now?"

"That's what they said they were doing."

Delgado stared at him, as if expecting something more. "So it's a hurry-up-and-wait kind of thing?"

Doug grimaced. "Might as well go to the hospital," he suggested. "They'll transport him there, if they find him."

"That or the morgue."

"He hasn't lost that much blood!" Doug snapped.

"He hadn't lost that much blood yesterday morning. Who knows what might have changed? And why the hell would blood loss matter? Your suspect can just shoot him in the head."

Doug shook his head furiously, an absolute denial ready to spill from his lips. He bit it back. He kicked the dirt. "Yes, he can. Either way, I'd rather bet on the hospital. If you'd like to go hang out in the morgue, I'll drop you off on the way."

He jumped like a startled deer when the phone in his pocket rang. The

number was restricted, but he recognized it. “Heavy Runner,” he answered. “Where else would Brubaker be?” Belkamp demanded.

Doug froze at Belkamp’s question. “He wasn’t at home?”

“Negative. The house was empty. Where else would he be?”

“I... fuck it, I have no idea. He’s just my boss. I don’t know him that well. Did you ask Daniels?”

“He said something about a cabin, but he didn’t know its location.”

“I didn’t even know he had a cabin,” Doug had to admit. “But there should be property records....” He was grasping at straws now, and he knew it. Christopher didn’t have time for them to dig through property records at the county courthouse. “He has Hayes,” Doug whispered. “He’s hurt. Bad.”

“Are you sure? Are you absolutely positive?”

Delgado stepped in front of him, his eyes wide. Doug nearly ran into him. He’d been pacing without even realizing it. “I got a location, but it went offline again fast,” Delgado said. “Like he turned his phone on for a few minutes, then turned it off again.”

Doug looked at the phone the man was holding up. A GPS-style map was on the screen, and a tiny flag, with Christopher’s picture on it, was in a large green section of the map to the north. The small icon even listed his coordinates. “He’s in the Jewel Basin!” Doug shouted. “What the hell do you even use that thing for?”

“Trail runs,” said Delgado simply. “He leaves me behind after a few miles. This way, we can keep track of each other. It’s all GPS-based, so it works even if we lose the cellular signal. It logs miles, pace, and everything....”

“What are you talking about?” Belkamp roared in his ear.

“I’ve got GPS coordinates for Hayes’s location,” Doug said quickly. “And, yes, I’m sure!” Doug read off the coordinates.

Belkamp read them back carefully. “We’ll check it out.”

“You’re going to need a helicopter to get up there fast,” Doug told him. “It’s the Jewel Basin—it’s all dirt roads, most of them aren’t marked, and some places are only accessible on foot.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Belkamp asked.

Doug felt his stomach twist painfully. “No,” he whispered. “I’m not.”

“I’ll try to find a chopper. But for now, we’ve got to work with what we’ve got.”

The line went dead before Doug could say anything. He stared at his phone for a moment, trying to figure out what else he could do. He could call the

FBI agent back again, but every moment he spent on the phone with him was a moment wasted in the search for resources. There was no chance anyone who wasn't already familiar with the Jewel Basin would be able to drive in with a regular GPS and hope to find those specific coordinates. There were six different roads into the expansive wilderness area, but only one of them led to the small tracts of private land owned by hunters and fishermen. It was not the main road used by backpackers and hikers, and it was several miles farther to the north.

Doug's pacing brought him to the edge of the small pool of blood. He stared down at it and he knew there just wasn't time.

"Are you armed?" he asked Delgado without looking at him. "Yes."

Doug went to his truck, took off his jacket, eased his arm out of the sling, and pulled his Sig and harness out from under the seat. He gritted his teeth against the pain as he slipped the harness over his shoulders.

"You can't be serious," Delgado said. "You can hardly move."

"I'm right-handed," said Doug, checking the magazine and then inserting it. He had to press it against his thigh to get it to click into place. "Christopher has at least a compound fracture and a concussion. It's been twenty-four hours and he probably hasn't received any care. If he is still alive, he doesn't have much time. The feds aren't going to make it fast enough. They're at the suspect's house, on the other side of town, and even with the coordinates, they don't know the roads they need to take to get there."

"What about your department? You can't be the only police officer in town, and you're in no condition to be driving, much less running off like some damn cowboy!"

"There is no town police department. They were consolidated years ago," Doug rambled, trying to avoid explaining. Delgado just stared at him. He dropped his head and shut his eyes. "The suspect the FBI is trying to find—he's our sheriff. I've only been with the department for two years, and I honestly don't know if there are any other police officers in my department I can trust right now."

"The news said they had an arsonist and potential serial killer in custody. Why are they after your sheriff?"

Doug shook his head. "Sheriff Brubaker took that man into custody. He probably has nothing to do with it. This—" He pointed to the ground. "I'd bet money it's Sheriff Brubaker's truck."

Delgado gaped at him. "They're after your commanding officer?"

“Yes. So, you can either get in the truck and help me, or you can walk back to your car.”

Delgado was in the truck in a flash. “You know where we’re going?”

Doug nodded. “I know the general area. The final roads, we’re going to need those coordinates to pin down. But I can get us up there.”

“Right.”

As Doug drove them out of town, Delgado produced three different handguns from somewhere in his clothes, along with two small knives from his sleeves. He checked everything methodically, then replaced the weapons with a smooth, practiced ease.

“You carry all that on vacation?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t think San Diego was that bad....”

“San Diego is my home.” His voice was calm, but Doug picked up a hint of warning, and sadness, in Delgado’s tone.

When Doug turned off the main road, then turned again, following a discreet brown sign pointing to the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, Delgado went on. “I’ve got a big family,” he said quietly. “Including some cousins who take me being a police officer personally. When they finally got it through their heads that I really do work for the city and not for them, they took it very personally.”

Doug glanced sideways at Christopher’s partner, wondering how Delgado maintained such an easygoing personality when his own family posed the kind of threat that required him to carry a small arsenal, even a thousand miles away. Doug’s paranoia because of his ex seemed trivial compared to living and working in a city where even parts of your own family were your enemies.

“So you and Chris have been partners for a long time?” Doug asked, trying to give him an easy out.

“He lets you call him Chris?”

“He hasn’t objected to it.”

Delgado sniggered. “Four years. Before that, he was a patrol officer assigned to the gang unit. I worked Gang Enforcement for years, and he knew more about some of the Eastside gangs going into it than I did. It was novel, finding this cute little white boy who was more of a street rat than me.”

“Four years?”

“And you’ve known him for a week.”

“Two weeks now, almost.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That gives you so much more credibility than you had before the one-week mark.”

Doug couldn’t help but feel smug at the jealousy radiating from Delgado.

“I didn’t know my credibility was an issue.”

“Hayes is a bit like a kicked puppy,” said Delgado randomly. “He tends to avoid people because everyone he’s ever been attached to has hurt him. But it still doesn’t take much more than somebody throwing him a bone to make him follow them around like they’re the whole fucking world.”

“So,” said Doug, “you’re saying what, exactly?”

Delgado didn’t answer.

They turned off the paved roads and onto an unmarked dirt road. The truck rocked back and forth as Doug took the bumps and troughs in the road fast.

“Where are we?”

“About twenty minutes from Christopher’s mark on your map.”

“But there’s nothing up here....”

“That’s the point. It’s a wilderness area. Set aside for preservation, and for people to enjoy the outdoors.”

“Hm. Definitely not my thing.”

“We should be coming up on a few turnouts. I’ll need the GPS to know which way to go from here. Although most of the next roads are going to be too small to show up on a map.”

“They get smaller than this?”

“Logging roads, jeep trails, things like that. These are all privately owned tracts of land that were sold to hunters years ago. Half the time, there isn’t even an access road.”

Doug set Delgado’s phone on the dashboard, slowed down as they came upon a small turnout, and then turned right down a narrow trail. After another twenty minutes, the trail widened out a bit.

“Are you sure you’re not just driving us out into the middle of nowhere so you can cap your competition?”

Doug wasn’t sure if the man was joking or not. He couldn’t really be suggesting Doug would try to kill him. That was too ridiculous to believe. Given the fact that the entire sheriff’s department was going to be facing a massive FBI investigation to find out if any of them were accomplices to their serial-killer boss, Doug supposed he couldn’t blame him. He could

treat it like a joke, but that probably wouldn't do any good. The truth would do, he decided at last. "I'm not your competition. Christopher and I have spent the week fooling around. We've become friends, but that's all."

"Friends?"

"Friends with benefits," Doug said smugly. "But both of us know this thing between us has a built-in expiration date. It's not like he's going to hang out after he's dealt with all of his brother's shit." Doug didn't know why he felt the need to justify himself to this prick. He could feel the other man staring at him again.

"Friends with benefits," Delgado repeated.

"From what I've heard, you're the last person who should be criticizing us."

"Criticizing?"

"Try that active-listening shit again and I'm going to kick you out and make you walk home!"

Doug fumed silently while Delgado laughed. "Fine. Let's get him back alive and then we can fight over him," said Delgado.

He slowed down by another dirt road, pulled Delgado's phone off the dashboard, and then turned. They were within a half mile of the location Christopher's phone had transmitted. The trees on either side of the small dirt road were marked with bright orange signs. "Private Property" and "No Trespassing" signs hung from trees every twenty feet for nearly a hundred yards.

Doug watched their progress on the GPS, then pulled his truck to the side and killed the engine. "Diesels are loud," he said, in response to the expression on Delgado's face.

Delgado's curious look turned serious for the first time. He nodded once and got out of the truck, drew his sidearm, and held it in a low ready position. They would have to go on foot to avoid spooking Brubaker. If he heard an engine approaching, he might finish Christopher off—if he was even still alive.

If Christopher was dead, Doug didn't want to give Brubaker enough warning to escape into the forest. They also had no idea what Brubaker might have stockpiled in terms of weapons, explosives, and supplies. Things could escalate into a shootout, an endless standoff, or just plain explode.

Doug hopped out of the truck, hurried to grab his daypack, and then trotted to catch up to the other man. Delgado regarded the daypack with raised

eyebrows.

“Trauma kit,” said Doug. “And an emergency locator beacon.”

“Huh?”

“Push a button and the national search-and-rescue dispatch center sends help. It works from anywhere on the planet.” Doug let the corner of his lip turn up slightly. “Of course, I’m the one they’ll try to contact to organize local rescue efforts... so we’re probably fucked either way.”

“We can’t just call for help?” Delgado asked.

“I don’t know, can you?”

Horrified, Delgado poked the screen of his phone helplessly. “But....” He poked the screen again. “Do the mountains block the signal?”

“There are no cellphone towers. No one lives up here.” “But....” He tapped the screen harder.

“Don’t worry about it. Given the situation, I’m not sure who you’d call anyway.”

Delgado’s only response was a pathetic whimper.

“There is no cavalry up here. No overwhelming officer presence. The FBI might be coming to back us up. Or they might be lost six miles south. We’re on our own.”

Delgado slowed to a shuffle and slipped his phone into a pocket inside his suit jacket. The handgun appeared again, as if by magic. The man’s confident smirk returned so fast that Doug was impressed. He wondered if Delgado would have been so instantly willing to help back at the railroad tracks if he had known just what he was getting into.

“Quiet,” Doug hissed, drawing his own gun. He saw bits of white through the trees, where the road curved up ahead. He motioned toward the forest, dove into the underbrush, and made his way around a wide perimeter. Delgado followed, crashing through the shrubs and bushes like an elephant. Doug glared at him, but the other man was too caught up trying to detangle himself from a fallen tree limb to notice.

Doug slowed down and crept closer. The white coalesced into a large fifth wheel Dodge pickup, and it was definitely Brubaker’s. He recognized the license plate and the gun rack in the back window. A dark wooden structure that looked like a two- or maybe three-room cabin blended into the forest just ahead of them. He kept low and moved closer to the truck, scanning the forest around them and listening for any strange noises.

Their passage through the underbrush had silenced all of the birds and small

animals that normally made a racket in the forest. If Brubaker was listening, he would know something was off already.

Doug crouched lower when he heard the creak of a screen door. Through the brush, he saw Brubaker emerge from around the corner of the cabin. He looked amazingly calm as he walked down the wooden stairs with a bounce in his step. He swung a large white plastic jug on his finger as he headed toward the truck. Doug got a better view of the man when he climbed onto the open tailgate. He was dressed in blood-stained jeans and a heavy blue flannel shirt. If Doug hadn't known the blood was most likely his lover's, he might have mistaken Brubaker for any other deer hunter.

Brubaker opened up the childproof cap on the bottle and shook the contents out over the bed of his truck. Bleach, or possibly lye, Doug guessed. Doug watched him climb down and slosh a bucket of water into the truck bed, then climb back up again with a stiff deck brush. Brubaker bent down and began to scrub at the bloody mess left in the truck.

A touch at his elbow startled Doug, but he didn't make a sound. Delgado motioned around toward the back of the cabin. Doug nodded and then he slowly made his way toward the back. He kept listening to the scraping of the deck brush. He glanced back once when he noticed Delgado wasn't following him. The other man had taken cover behind a larger tree and was keeping an eye on Brubaker.

As soon as Doug cleared the corner of the cabin, he moved closer to the wall and peered through a filthy window. He could see the open door of the cabin through the glass, along with a small iron stove, a cooler, several speckled pots and pans, and three long shelves of dry goods. He saw no sign of Christopher.

Doug ducked down and shuffled to the next window. There, he saw a cramped bunk room with one large cot, a single sleeping bag stretched out down the center. Several plastic storage bins were stacked against the far wall. Around the next corner, Doug looked through the last window. From there, he could see across the length of the cabin to the first window he had come to. Crumpled on the floor, beneath the window in the main room, lay Christopher.

Blond hair and blood-streaked skin stretched out over a tangled, unmoving pile of limbs. Doug stared at the awkwardly splayed limbs and felt his world crumble. Through the grime on the window, he couldn't even tell if Christopher's body was in one piece. He tightened his fingers around his

pistol, squeezing the grip so tight his knuckles ached.

Christopher's chest rose slowly, so subtly Doug thought he'd imagined it. Then Christopher shifted, trying to roll from his side to his back.

Doug fumbled with his gun as relief surged through him and left him trembling. He didn't know how Christopher was still alive, but he was going to do everything he could to make sure the man stayed that way.

He put his pistol back into his harness, used his pocketknife to pry the window up, and pushed himself up into the window frame. It hurt like hell to put his weight on his left arm, but he forced his muscles to work. When he got in, he went straight to Christopher's side.

He already knew Christopher was breathing, so he checked his airway quickly and then felt for a pulse. His pulse was steady, but very fast. He was in the early stages of shock, but that was normal for the amount of blood he'd lost. Doug watched him take several shallow, slow breaths, and then began to assess his injuries, trying not to move him in the process. Christopher's entire right leg was swollen, from his hip to his heel, indicating several fractures. Part of his shinbone had torn through the skin, and the wound was still bleeding. He had several deep cuts and gashes along his hip and right side, and a swollen laceration along his right temple that looked like it came from the butt of a handgun. On the back of his head was a small bruise. Dried blood was matted into his hair over the bruise.

Christopher must have been conscious when Brubaker dumped him in the cabin, so he'd hit Christopher on the temple to knock him out. That was encouraging, because it meant the rest of Christopher's injuries hadn't been bad enough to leave him unconscious.

As Doug checked for swelling around his torso, Christopher's eyes cracked and fluttered open. Doug looked into his eyes, watched that beautiful shade of blue dilate and contract around his pupils, and slowly, finally, come to focus on him.

"Don't you dare die on me," Doug whispered.

A soft breath that carried a hint of sound escaped from Christopher's lips.

"Shush. Don't try to talk."

Christopher raised his left hand and touched Doug's cheek with his fingertips. "Only been a week," he whispered. "Why am I so crazy about you?"

"Shush," Doug said again. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Christopher's forehead. He tasted like salt and copper. "We have to get

you out of here.”

“I don’t think either of you are going to be leaving, Dougie. Hands on your head. Now.”

“Greg.” Doug took a deep, quivering breath. “What’s going on, Greg?”

“Hands on your head, Dougie.”

Doug slowly brought both of his hands up, fingers splayed wide. “I can’t raise my left arm any higher,” he whispered, trying desperately to force his arm up.

“Stand up.”

“Why did you do this, Greg?” Doug asked, rising slowly to his knees.

“Why?” The sheriff laughed. Doug was surprised. He expected the man to sound insane. Instead, he heard the same good-natured laugh he always heard coming from Brubaker’s office. “You expect a long drawn out explanation? Give me a bit of fucking credit, Dougie. Stand up. Hey, how’d you find us, anyway?”

Doug felt the gentle, slow tug at his holster. On the floor, Christopher still looked like he was on the edge of consciousness, but the fingers lifting Doug’s side arm and tugging it forward inch by inch were steady. Doug leaned forward, as if trying to get his feet under him. He brought one knee up and leaned forward more, until he felt the comforting bulk of the Sig slip free. He held his breath as Christopher tightened trembling fingers around the grip. Doug tried to meet Christopher’s eyes, but the blond man kept his eyes half closed, and his head stayed limp on the floor.

“Who else knows we’re up here, Dougie?”

“Everyone,” Doug said. At least he *hoped*. It didn’t even occur to him to lie.

“The FBI is coming, Greg. They know what you’ve done.”

“How did you find us?”

“I tracked his cellphone,” Doug said.

“What?” The man behind him laughed. “I barely turned the damn thing on for a minute, and I didn’t call anybody.”

“You’ve got to keep up with technology, Greg,” Doug chided.

“Drop your weapon or I’ll shoot!”

At first, Doug thought the voice might belong to Brubaker, but there was a trace of Spanish accent to it. At his feet, Christopher opened his eyes, and Doug saw a relieved, almost predatory grin on his face.

Doug turned to look over his shoulder. Brubaker’s revolver was still trained on Doug, but he was looking back over his own shoulder at Delgado.

“Another one! How dare you!” Brubaker shouted. “You come into my town! My jurisdiction! And treat me like a criminal! I will skin you and your little faggot partner alive!”

“Final warning,” said Delgado, with a calm he couldn’t possibly feel. “Drop your weapon or I will shoot.”

“He corrupted you too, didn’t he? The both of you! Everything him and his brother touch ends up turning just as rotten as they are! Infected! It’s all his fault!”

“His fault? You mean Peter?” Doug asked. He knew he shouldn’t push it, but he was curious. And the more they could divide Brubaker’s attention, the better their chances were of bringing him down.

“It’s all his fault!” The revolver swung down toward Christopher. “It was all his fault from the start! If he hadn’t fucked Pete over, if he hadn’t gone to the police, if I had just never met his fucking brother!” He adjusted his grip on the gun, bracing his shoulders for the kickback, and the world exploded. The sound of three guns firing at once made the walls of the cabin shake. Doug felt something wet splatter across the side of his face, saw Brubaker drop the revolver. A spot of deep crimson blossomed across Brubaker’s chest and he fell to his knees, then toppled forward. The life and rage had faded from his eyes before he even hit the ground.

For a long while, all three of them froze, staring at the fallen sheriff. The shot to the back continued to bleed. As the blood in his body, no longer driven by the pumping of his heart, succumbed to gravity, a pool of blood began to form around him. The exit wound from Christopher’s shot had left a hole the size of a softball in the top of Brubaker’s head, killing him instantly. It had to have gone in just under Brubaker’s chin, a difficult shot at the best of times. Christopher had managed it, despite using his left hand and being stuck on the floor.

“Ouch,” said Christopher.

“Are you hit?” Doug’s mind snapped back to reality. He was only too happy to have something to distract him from the hollow cavity in Brubaker’s head—and from the realization that whatever splattered across his face had come from that exit wound. Now was not the time to throw up, he told himself.

“Bullet hit the wall. I cut my hand,” Christopher gasped. “I got the grip wrong, sliced my thumb open. You?”

Doug shook his head.

“Ray, are you okay?”

Christopher’s partner was casually removing a pair of foam rubber earplugs from his ears. The smug look, the one Doug suspected was Delgado’s own version of Christopher’s too-bright smile, was back in place. “I’m good. You look like you got run over by a truck, though.”

“Funny you should say that... What the hell took you so long, anyway?” Christopher tried to laugh. His head rolled back down and his eyes dropped shut again.

Doug pulled the trauma kit out of his pack and began pulling out the few supplies he had, oblivious, for the moment, to the corpse just a few feet away.

“Get over here!” he shouted. “Locator beacon. Looks like a yellow stun gun. Take it outside and follow the instructions printed on the label. Leave it outside, and then get back in here.”

Delgado obeyed without question, and Doug was once again grateful for that. He could shift into first-responder mode more easily without an audience. He pulled up the lists and acronyms he used to memorize emergency first-aid procedures and went to work. All he could really do was assess Christopher’s vitals, try to stop what bleeding he could find, find a way to keep him warm, and wait for a helicopter. But at least it was something.

“Now what?”

“Get down here and hold this,” Doug replied, gesturing to the compress he was holding over the torn, bleeding muscle in Christopher’s calf.

“Is the bone supposed to be sticking out like that?”

“No. That would be why it’s bleeding. Press down and toward the center a bit, hard.”

“But it will hurt him.”

“Do you think he’d rather bleed to death? Press as hard as you can.”

Delgado knelt beside him and pushed down on the bandage with him. When he was satisfied that Delgado was applying enough pressure, he moved up to check Christopher’s pulse again. Too fast, but still steady.

“Is there supposed to be sand under this bandage?”

“Keep pushing down or I will hurt you! It’s a hemostat powder. It speeds coagulation. Now shut up!” Doug applied a bit of the same powder to the cut on Christopher’s thumb and then wrapped it in a bandage. He checked his pulse again, kept his fingers on Christopher’s wrist, and used his other hand to pull up his eyelids. His pupils were dilating normally.

Doug froze as he felt the fast rhythm under his fingers falter. He dropped over Christopher's chest, ready to begin compressions, and then felt the heartbeat beneath his hands again. It had just skipped a beat, and now it was beginning again, faster still. "Fuck." He looked at his watch, trying to count Christopher's heart rate. It was going too fast to count, but Doug guessed it was at least a hundred and sixty beats per minute.

Doug didn't even spare himself time for a deep breath. He scanned the cabin and dragged the larger cooler toward Christopher's feet. He hoisted Christopher's solid leg onto the cooler, bending it at the knee. Then he began searching for anything that would work as a splint to stabilize his right leg. The only thing close at hand was a long-handled ax. He removed his leather belt and harness, grabbed the ax, and hurried to Delgado's side.

Delgado stared, wide-eyed, at the ax. "Oh, hell no!"

Doug wanted to roll his eyes, but he just shoved him aside. He carefully positioned the ax handle beneath the worst of the swelling, centering it below the protruding shinbone, and strapped it to Christopher's leg as best he could.

"Oh," Delgado breathed. "Okay, that makes more sense."

Wishing he had something better, he carefully lifted the splint and leg together and braced the splint against the cooler. "Hold his leg up, hold it still, and keep pressure on the wound."

He ran into the bunkroom and returned with Brubaker's sleeping bag. He tucked it around Christopher's body as best he could, then he picked up Christopher's wrist and tried to measure his pulse again.

"He's tachycardic," Doug said aloud. "I can't even get an accurate count."

Then he remembered he didn't have a search-and-rescue team backing him up. He had a cop who normally only dealt with traumatic injuries long after the victim had already died. "Hypovolemic shock," he tried instead. When that also was met with a blank, pale stare, he felt like screaming. "He's lost too much blood. He's been in shock too long. He needs oxygen. He needs a blood transfusion. He probably needs a defibrillator. I don't have any of that."

"Shock? Bleeding-to-death shock?" Delgado began to shake.

"Shock. His body is trying to compensate for the blood loss. Less blood volume means the heart needs to beat faster to keep supplying all of the major organs with oxygen, because there's less blood to transport it. The faster the heart rate, the more the body is compensating for and the closer it

is to the point where it can't keep up. Tachycardia is a heart rhythm that's too fast. His is getting up toward two hundred beats per minute. All we can do is try to use gravity to raise his blood pressure. Unfortunately, his heart rate is also becoming irregular. Skipping beats, slowing down, getting faster... I'm more worried about cardiac arrest than shock at the moment."

Doug kept his fingers on the inside of Christopher's wrist while he spoke, focusing on the fast thrum of his pulse. It was slowing down steadily, with Christopher's legs elevated, but every thirty seconds or so, the rhythm fluttered.

"So do something about it!"

"All we can do now is keep his feet elevated, keep monitoring his heart rate, and start CPR if we need to."

"CPR?" Delgado shrieked.

"Just keep his leg steady and keep putting pressure on that bandage. It's helping."

Doug focused on the fast, fragile pulse and shut his eyes, trying to will Christopher's heart to keep beating. He knew it didn't work that way; he knew a whole chemical symphony went into regulating the nervous system responses that controlled the human heart. Nothing so naive as prayer or positive thinking would change it.

Doug prayed anyway. Prayed, hoped, and begged for any kind of divine intervention, for Christopher's heart rate to hold steady.

He toyed with the idea of praying aloud, just to see if Christopher would get angry enough to open his eyes.

When the rotary blades of a helicopter finally came into earshot, he raced outside to wave them down. Doug couldn't tell how much time they had lost, but within a few minutes of the first helicopter landing, another arrived, and then a dozen FBI vehicles. He watched the paramedics load Christopher—covered in an oxygen mask, soft splints, and bandages—into the helicopter bay and carry him off into the sky.

Then, the surge of adrenaline he had been riding, that had given him the control he so desperately needed, broke. His composure and focus broke. His sanity broke. His heart broke.

The people and voices swarming around him blurred together and he couldn't make sense of any of it. Someone was holding him by the shoulders. His arm throbbed with pain, but he couldn't force it to move anymore. The only thing clear was that there was a very good chance that

Christopher would die. Aman he'd hardly known two weeks. Aman he was never supposed to fall in love with. A man he couldn't live without. He fell to his knees as his stomach once again decided to fuck him over. Right there, in front of two dozen FBI agents, paramedics, and his own search-and-rescue team, he threw up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE beep was maddening. The pain was maddening. Every sound made his entire body throb. If Christopher had been able to move, he'd have been breaking things. Between the splint and traction system holding his leg in the air, the leather restraints holding his arms and torso down, and the handcuffs holding his hands to the bedrails, all the equipment in the room was completely safe from him. And that was maddening too. He had been in handcuffs since he woke up. In any fatal shooting, everyone involved was placed under arrest until a prosecutor reviewed the case and cleared the subject of any potential charges. In San Diego, Delgado had been in custody for a whole twenty minutes after shooting the suspect who was running from Christopher. The entire county was in chaos and a federal prosecutor had arrived overnight and taken over the case. Belknap promised he'd be cleared by morning, so the FBI agent had left Christopher in restraints and left so he could rest.

Christopher knew the policy, and it wasn't like he was planning on going anywhere, so he'd accepted it. It had turned out to be lucky. When, waking up from surgery, he'd been too groggy to say no to *a little something to help him sleep*, Christopher had received a dose of Valium that left him shaking and ready to tear the world apart. Things had just gone downhill from there.

"All right!" A cheerful surgeon hurried in with a bottle of clear medication. "Your EKG has been stable enough for the last few hours, so we've got the okay from the cardiologist to try something else to counteract

the sedative. I have something a bit milder, this time. It's a more potent stimulant than caffeine, but it should be less dangerous than a full-blown amphetamine."

"No more fun with electricity?" Christopher exclaimed. He winced when he heard his own voice. "Honestly, if an amphetamine will slow my heart down, I'm willing to let you shock me again."

"I want to try this first. Inducing cardiac arrest is not how I prefer to try to treat this kind of reaction." The surgeon injected the medication into the lowest port on his IV. "I really am sorry. It's very rare for that class of sedatives to have such strong paradoxical side effects."

Christopher really, really wanted to punch the doctor. "What does that mean in English? Or Spanish? Or, hell, I took French in college! Just not fucking Latin!"

"The irritability and rage are weird. Valium only has this effect on 1 percent of the population, you know. You have some very strange metabolic pathways. You really should report it as an allergy, get one of those bracelets."

"Yes, I feel extra special now, thank you!" Christopher slowed down as the adrenaline-induced urge to smack something eased. The crushing, vise-like pain his chest became a bit less crushing. "Okay, I think it's working."

The heart-rate monitor attached to him was beginning to slow down. The alarm attached to the machine, which had been driving him insane for two hours, stopped beeping. "Looks like your heart wanted a break just as much as you did. Better?"

Christopher let his head drop back as the pain in his chest eased completely.

The machine was quiet for about thirty seconds, and then it started beeping again. "Do you happen to know your normal resting heart rate?"

Christopher glanced at the monitor and nodded. "That looks right."

"Fifty-five beats per minute? Damn. You must keep in shape."

Christopher wanted to scream again, but this time the urge wasn't overwhelming. The sun was already coming up outside his window. He had spent the entire day in surgery, even though he couldn't remember any of it. Then, when he had finally come around, he'd been too exhausted to ask what they were giving him. Ten minutes after the first dose of Valium, which was supposed to help him sleep while he was stuck in handcuffs, he

had been wide awake with his heart and mind racing a mile a minute. He'd never felt pain like the ache in his chest. He'd been furious, frightened, and completely beyond controlling himself. If he had never been through a panic attack before, he might have actually hurt somebody. His frantic attempt to explain had resulted in security, leather restraints on top of the FBI handcuffs, and a dose of an even stronger sedative.

After that, his heart had begun to race so fast that the monitor hooked up to him, with wires going everywhere like he was a piece of stereo equipment, blared out an alarm. His chest hurt so bad it made his shattered leg seem just a minor ache, and he was rushed back to the emergency room. The ER doctor and surgeon agreed on another medication, which was supposed to stop and restart his heart. Somewhere in the panic, he'd agreed. He had been conscious for about fifteen seconds, after the rapid beeps on the EKG stopped cold and a single, endless alarm blared from the machine instead. He had just enough time to think that the sound of the EKG signaling his heart stopping sounded a lot like the dial tone on an old-fashioned telephone, and to watch the panic and mayhem as the ER staff broke out an electrical defibrillator.

When he woke up again, he was still tied down, his heart was still racing, and he still couldn't control himself. Thankfully, a very old doctor calmly said that they were beginning to think the reason his heart was going nuts was chemically based, and asked if he'd ever had any strange reactions to medications. At last, he had managed to explain that his brain didn't respond to sedatives and stimulants the way other people did. He had to pop a couple of Benadryl to get through most graveyard shifts instead of a pot of coffee. The doctor had also calmly explained that, without knowing how his body would react to other measures, the best thing they could do was wait for the Valium to wear off on its own.

Christopher's night had been a frenzied, panicked nightmare of pain, anxiety, and depression, and he couldn't control his reactions to any of it. Sometime in the night, he had made a joke about wondering if this was how people on PCP could sometimes keep fighting, even after being drenched in pepper spray.

"Your blood pressure is low too," the surgeon said cautiously. "Are you feeling light-headed?"

"You've pumped me full of six different drugs, nearly killed me with one of them, restarted my heart by electrocuting me, and then made me wait out all

of the side effects. Of course I'm light-headed. I haven't felt this bad since I finished Leadville."

"What's that?"

"It's a nasty hundred-mile trail run. It goes up, down, and around a slippery, snowymountain. Inthe dark."

"Really? A hundred miles?"

"Yes. Running up and down a mountain for twenty-four hours straight. I've runit twice. I hurt more now."

The doctor chuckled and finally shut off the alarm. "That would explain the slow heart rate. We're going to start you on a dose of Adderall every eight hours, so you can get some sleep. I'mgoing to keep the morphine on an automatic drip until you've gotten some rest, then we'llget youa buttonso youcancontrolit yourself. Sound good?"

Christopher tried to pay attention, but his mind was slowing down along with his pulse. He caught something about removing the restraints, and something about the FBI. "Hm? Hey, I didn't hurt anybody, did I? Other thanthe guyI shot inthe head, I mean."

The doctor grimaced sympathetically. "No, Detective. You were remarkably self-aware and controlled, considering the severity of the reaction. I'mjust glad we figured out that it was chemically induced. Ifwe had tried giving you another sedative, you probably would have had a seizure."

Christopher laughed. "Survive getting shot, getting hit by a car, and being kidnapped by a psycho just to die because I'm allergic to Valium. That would suck."

"You were lucky, Detective. Each time. You were lucky we managed to get it sorted out. With the abnormalities with your heart, our cardiologist didn't even know what type ofsurgery he should be prepping for."

"Myheart's fine."

"Your heart is abnormally enlarged. If you've run long distances for years, it's part of your body's natural response to the stress and it is just fine. We didn't know that when you were brought in. Between that, going into shock, and reactingto the Valium, the onlythingwe were sure ofwas that we couldn't fix it. You were also damn lucky that the first responder who found you took his job seriously. He not only got out a signal for an emergency evacuation, but he managed to stabilize you, without any equipment, before you went into severe shock. If anyone other than DeputyHeavyRunner had found you, I doubt you'd be here now."

“Doug Heavy Runner?” Christopher smiled. So Doug really had been there. He hadn’t been sure. He knew that he’d shot Brubaker, but everything else was a blur. “He’s got a great name.” He had a great heart too. And great eyes, silky hair, a great ass, and an incredible body.

“Definitely going to let you regulate the morphine yourself before you have any visitors,” the surgeon said, laughing.

Christopher tried to sit up, but the leather straps really were tight. “Did I just say...?” he asked.

“I didn’t hear anything. Shall I go ahead and list Mr. Heavy Runner under next of kin? He’ll be able to visit outside of normal hours if I do.”

Christopher smiled, but he was too tired and too drugged up to answer.

“Sleep.”

He wasn’t about to argue. He felt like he could sleep for days. He had a few flashes of consciousness, including a few times when he was aware of someone moving him, aware of brief moments when his head, ribs, and leg hurt so bad he couldn’t sleep. He slept through the restraints and the handcuffs vanishing. When he woke up again and found the handcuffs gone, he realized he really had slept for days.

The fact that he wasn’t handcuffed to the hospital bed when he woke up meant that the FBI had finished digging through the mess.

He was deliriously grateful for whatever combination of drugs they had him on. They dulled his wits until the endless questions that should have been racing through his head were nowhere to be found. He didn’t think he had ever known such quiet moments before.

It made him not want to wake up.

He was pretty sure, through the detached drug-induced haze, that there was nothing worth waking up for. Not anymore. The job was definitely behind him now. His right hand was still half numb, his sliced-up left hand made him pretty sure he’d have trouble holding a spoon, much less a handgun, and he wouldn’t be able to walk for a couple of months at best. He wasn’t as upset about not going back to work as he thought he’d be. Without Peter, there was no reason to go back.

The specter of Peter, the illusion of an enemy he had used to shape his life and career, was gone. Without all of the anger and pain cluttering his thoughts, he could recognize just how much he still felt like a frightened child, betrayed by the only person who had ever cared about him. Stupid and illogical as it was, all he wanted was for Peter to still be alive and to

hold him as he had when Christopher was a little boy. That was all Christopher had wanted that day in the alley too. All Peter would have had to do was comfort him, and Christopher would have forgiven him for everything. Then it would have happened again and again, and by the time he was eighteen, Christopher would have been just as bad as Peter had become.

Maybe, Christopher thought, Peter had told him to run away because he really did love him. Maybe Peter loved Christopher enough to protect him from everyone, including from himself. Christopher had always secretly hoped that was true. That was why he had never stopped running. As long as he could run, he had always remembered that Peter had at least loved him enough to tell him to run away.

When his brain surfaced from the detached miasma of memories and dreams, he woke up crying. He pulled himself together once he was fully awake, and he was glad he did, because a nurse came in to check on his vital signs a few minutes later. She smiled at him, told him that it was about time he woke up, and returned a few minutes later with a small plate of food. Even though he knew he should be hungry, he wasn't.

He stared down at his leg. The splint and traction system were gone, and now his leg was resting on the bed in a fresh fiberglass cast. It ran from his upper thigh to the bottom of his foot. At least it was a reasonable shade of navy blue. If Delgado was still hanging around, he would have ended up with hot pink.

Even though he should have been relieved, the realization that his partner was probably already back in San Diego made him sad. Peter was gone, his job was history, and as much as he wanted to believe that he and Ray would still be friends, police officers tended to hang out with other police officers. Ray might be willing to make the effort to stay friends, but in many ways, the job was the only thing they'd ever had in common.

Doug was probably out of the picture too. Doug didn't want him. If there had been any doubt of that before, there wasn't now. When he had seen Doug's chocolate eyes in the cabin, when Christopher had thought he was dying, he had blurted out exactly how he felt. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. If Doug had been frightened by the fact that things were turning into more than sex before, then Christopher's confession in the cabin was likely to have frightened him off for good.

There really wasn't anything left to wake up for. He shoved the tray of food

aside, lowered the bed back down, and tried to sleep again. He didn't quite drift off, but he was determined to fake it, at least. He wondered, while he lay there, if Peter had wanted to sleep forever too. Christopher knew better. Peter's life had probably been a nightmare—trapped on one side by his own guilt and trapped on the other side by an accomplice who was more psychotic than he was. Peter, Christopher knew, would have told him he was acting like a baby.

In every long race he had ever run, there were points where he hit rock bottom, moments where every muscle in his body was screaming at him to stop and he couldn't see any way to keep going until the end. He would never be fast enough to win, and he had never tried, but during those moments, he didn't remember what had possessed him to think just finishing a race was enough. During those moments, he had found that the only thing to do was to sit down, eat a candy bar, even if it ended up making him sick, and then keep moving forward. One step at a time, one inch at a time, even if he had to drag himself forward at a crawl. In the morning, he would pick himself back up and find a way to keep moving forward. If he couldn't pick himself back up, he would crawl. But not tonight.

"All done?" the nurse asked. He didn't move. "Oh." She took the untouched tray and left him in peace.

When he woke up again, he still didn't want to face the world. He refused to open his eyes, refused to move. He could tell from the light radiating through his eyelids that the sun was shining. Beyond that, he had no idea how many days had passed or what time it could possibly be.

"Would you quit that?" An irritated voice reached his ears.

"Quit what?" Ray's lightly accented voice asked.

"Stop playing with that damn thing! Are you physically incapable of sitting still?"

There was a long moment of silence. Then Ray asked, "Your book is so dull that you can't focus through my playing a game? I'm not sure if I should interpret that as a criticism of the book or of your literacy level."

That was definitely Ray. There was no mistaking the other voice. He had wanted to hear that voice for days. He had dreamed about that voice.

A soft knock came from the door. "Hey. He's still out? I thought they were going to stop medicating him yesterday." That sounded like Belknap.

"Drugged or not, he's tired. Let him rest." That was Ray again. "You know, we can give you a call when he wakes up. Hell, I can have him fax a report

to you once we're home."

"Quit being a dick," Doug said bluntly.

"Go fuck yourself."

"So glad to see you two are still getting along" came Belkamp's all-too-amused voice. "But I'm not here for a report. I figured Hayes might like to know what we've turned up about Brubaker and his brother. Oh, and I wanted to offer him a job."

"He's got a job," Ray insisted, his voice like ice.

"Oh, you don't need to pout. I talked it over with my director and we wanted to encourage all three of you to apply with the bureau. You're all wasted in local law enforcement."

"Are not," said Doug.

"It might give you and Hayes a chance to work together...." Christopher could hear the promise, and the leer, in Belkamp's tone.

"You're wasting your breath there. They're just fuck buddies," Ray snapped with a venom that was out of place for him.

"Jealousy doesn't suit you," Doug teased. His voice became low and serious.

"Look, I know it's messed up. We just met three weeks ago, and we've each been hospitalized for one of those weeks. I know he's going to leave. But... I'll take what I can get, and maybe... I don't know."

"And you call me a selfish bastard?" Ray's voice moved from one side of Christopher's room to the other. "I might not be able to offer him a happily ever after, but at least I'm honest about it!"

"We're not arguing about this again," said Doug. "He doesn't want a happily ever after. But I doubt he wants someone who's going to try and pick up his nurses when he's in the hospital, either."

"I did not *try*. I did. She's a sweet little thing too." It took a lot of willpower not to groan at that. He could hear the smugness and he knew the exact look that would be on Ray's face.

"So you're straight after all?" Belkamp asked.

How much had Christopher missed, he wondered, for that kind of question to come out so casually?

"I like sex," Ray tried to explain. "Girls are fun. Guys are also fun. I've noticed them before, but I never thought about doing anything about it until recently. I honestly didn't expect to like it more, but now I am definitely open to the possibility."

"You can explore the possibilities with someone else," Doug snapped. "He

deserves better than you.”

“Oh? He deserves a long-distance friend with benefits who’s going to drop him the instant things don’t go quite the way he wants at work? You’re not even a friend with benefits; you’re just a fucking doppelganger!”

“If that’s what you’ve got to tell yourself,” said Doug.

“Would you both shut up!” Belkamp shouted. “I can’t believe this. The two of you have been in this room every day for nearly a week, and you’re so determined to fight with each other that neither of you has noticed the many you’re fighting over is awake and laughing at you!”

Christopher stopped trying to hold his smile in check. He cracked his eyes open, preparing himself for the onslaught of pain the sunlight was sure to bring. When his head didn’t begin to ache, he relaxed and beamed at them.

“You are awake,” Doug said with a smile. “Are you thirsty? Hungry?”

Christopher shook his head. He didn’t trust himself to speak. Doug’s smile, cautious but still warm, made his heart flutter. Doug was using both of his arms, with no sling or bandages now, but he still looked worn out. His hair was a mess and his chin was covered with enough stubble to count as a beard. Christopher wanted to touch the stubble on his chin, to feel it against his lips. That smile was too damn inviting. He turned toward the door, where Belkamp was sitting on one of the round wheeled chairs. “What did you learn about Brubaker? What was the link?”

“High Desert State Prison in Susanville, California,” said Belkamp. “The maximum security unit.”

“Peter served time there.”

“Yes. He spent four of his six years there. Greg Brubaker was the graveyard shift supervisor for the unit during your brother’s entire sentence. Brubaker went on administrative leave about a month after your brother was paroled. There were allegations that he had engaged in inappropriate conduct with a trustee, but the inmate in question had left the prison by then and a thorough investigation proved to be impossible. They urged Brubaker to find another job, and he was even given a glowing recommendation so they could get rid of him quickly and quietly. He took a position with the Baker County Sheriff’s Office because he could start as a sergeant, even though it paid less than a job in California would have. And probably because corrections officers gossip just like police officers.”

“So how did Peter end up here?” asked Christopher.

“A later source, who I am choosing to believe is credible, reported that the

inappropriate conduct was a manipulative sexual relationship in which favors were exchanged in quiet sections of the prison. After he was released, your brother spent a few more years in California, until he was off probation. Once he was off paper, he vanished and turned up here. From what I've been able to piece together, they had a volatile sexual relationship for a few months before they picked up a local girl, chatted her up, and blackmailed her into performing for both of them. They developed a pattern in which Hayes would groom and comfort their victims, while Brubaker held the threat of jail time over their heads. Or they would travel to bigger towns and pick up runaways. The videos they made were never bought or sold, and they're not online, as far as our people can tell. Micah Donovan appears to have been the breaking point between them. Hayes fell in love and didn't want to share him, or to let Brubaker dispose of him. Brubaker began bringing Hayes and Donovan in on all kinds of charges, including his last DUI, which got him sent to prison for a few months. When he got out, Brubaker picked up Donovan, raped him, beat him, and left him on Hayes's bed."

"You found a victim?" Christopher asked, knowing that information could only have come firsthand.

"No. Forensics estimates we've found the remains of up to eighteen kids, scattered between Hayes's home, Brubaker's home, and the area around the cabin. Most we haven't been able to ID. You got IDs on eight of them, but it'll be a long time before we can sort through the rest."

"So who is your source?"

"Micah Donovan kept a journal. The last of those discs includes a couple of videos of Micah Donovan talking to the cameraman—I'm assuming it's Hayes. He told Donovan to run away, told him he knew somebody who could end things, but that Brubaker would kill them both if he found out."

"The kid didn't run very far."

"No, he didn't. The last entry in his journal, from right after the fire, talks about how Peter was wrong about his brother, how his brother was just another one of Brubaker's pawns," Belkamp told them.

"He saw us together at the scene of the fire." Christopher nodded. "Then he ran like hell. He ran away again when I saw him at the church."

"So he really was afraid for his life, up at Lone Pine. Brubaker was right behind me."

"No," said Belkamp. "Your instincts on that were right on. The last entry in

his journal is a suicide note, apologizing to his grandma and telling her to give his diary to the FBI. He went up to Lone Pine to kill himself.”

“Then Greg set the fire,” Doug went on. He sat down on the edge of Christopher’s bed. “Probably right after I introduced him to you at the track on Monday night. I was wondering why he wasn’t at the Hay Loft, after he’d invited you.”

“We’re concluding that he did. He was the only one with a motive who can’t be accounted for during that period. Shaffer said the fire was set with gasoline, which is easy enough to get ahold of and easy to store. Brubaker had three big jugs of it up at his cabin. He didn’t want a homicide detective inheriting all of the evidence left in that house. It didn’t do him any good, though. He underestimated everybody, from the local fire department to you. I think he really was expecting the fire department to hand the arson investigation over to him. When Shaffer was called in and you implicated Donovan as a potential suspect in the fire, he panicked and used his position to try to silence Donovan before he could talk.”

“And I encouraged it.” Christopher cringed. “I told Doug to find him.”

“The person who started the fire really was out to get him,” said Belkamp. “When Brubaker saw you talking to Donovan at the last minute, I think he assumed he could still stop everything from coming out. That, or he blamed you for all of it. Did he say anything to you?”

Christopher shook his head. “Everything is a little blurry now. He kept asking what Micah told me. And he ranted about Peter. I... I know this sounds fucked up, but I think he missed him, or he was upset that he was dead, anyway. They might know more,” he said, gesturing to Doug and Ray.

“He said if you hadn’t gone to the police as a kid, presumably if Peter hadn’t gone to prison, they never would have met. He felt like Peter turned him gay, turned him into a pedophile.”

“I just wish you two had managed to wound him instead of killing him. We’ve found a lot of bodies that might never have names attached to them, probably runaways he picked up somewhere else.”

“At least nineteen kids, counting Micah Donovan...,” Christopher whispered.

“The terrain is difficult up there,” Belkamp said softly. “Brubaker owned a five-acre tract of land in the forest, and his home is built on another two acres just south of town. It’s going to take a while before we can say it’s

onlynineteen.”

All four men were silent for a few moments. Even Ray put his everpresent phone away.

“What about Lieder?” Christopher asked.

“He’s visited twice,” Doug said. “He still gives me the creeps. The feds issued a press release apologizing for the arrest and thanking him for his assistance in finding the real perpetrator.”

“Why’d he visit?”

“Peter. He said he’s taken care of your brother’s ashes for now, and he’ll stop by to talk about it when you’re feeling better.”

“So, do you think you three might be interested in coming to work for us?” Belkamp asked.

“Join the FBI?” Doug asked. “I don’t know. After working with both of these guys, I don’t feel like I’m even playing in their league.”

Christopher watched his partner’s body language carefully, not because of the offer, but because of Doug’s comment. If Doug hadn’t impressed Ray, Christopher knew his partner wouldn’t hesitate to say it. He was not as comfortable dishing out praise as he was criticism, and from the way Ray pulled out his phone and refocused on it, he knew his partner thought Doug was selling himself short too.

“I don’t think you should, but not because I doubt your ability,” said Christopher. “Elkin is likely to lose all of its senior officers over this. Anyone they keep will be the same... what word am I looking for here, Ray?”

“Incompetent, impotent, narcissistic assholes who shouldn’t be trusted to serve as crossing guards?”

“Ouch. Man, I thought we were on the same page.”

“We are. You’re just too nice. What he’s trying to say,” Ray said as he looked up at Doug, “is that you’re the only officer in this entire town who appears remotely capable of doing your job. If you jump ship, the people of this town are fucked.”

Christopher nodded. His partner didn’t swear much, and he only did it when he felt embarrassed or threatened. Doug must have really impressed him for Ray to be irritated about it.

He watched Doug, who was looking from Christopher to Ray and back again. “That was a compliment, wasn’t it?”

Christopher nodded again. “More than you know.”

“Fuck you,” Ray muttered.

“Anyway,” Christopher said, turning back toward Belkamp, “I can’t. I’m looking at eight weeks in a cast, four weeks in a brace, then up to a year of physical therapy before I can even think about running. What about you, Ray?”

“Bring even more shame to my family? *Mi abuela*’s already banned me from Sunday dinners, you know.” Ray’s smirk grew into a bright, manic smile.

Christopher wanted to argue with him, but he wouldn’t do it in front of Doug and the FBI agent. Having met both the civilian side of Ray’s family and the organized-crime side, he knew Ray’s job had cut him off from what had once been a tight-knit and loving community of uncles, aunts, and distant cousins. He knew too well that when his partner said things with that bright smile on his face, he was just trying to disguise the fact that he was not lying at all.

He caught Ray’s eyes, trying to offer what support he could without embarrassing him. Oddly, his partner’s eyes were sparkling and smiling with mischief. Ray glanced at Belkamp and tried to discreetly mouth the word “gay?”

“Totally,” said Christopher aloud.

“Totally what? Would your family really be embarrassed by you joining the FBI?”

“Embarrassed, no. They would be ashamed and enraged,” Ray said with an even brighter smile. He slipped his phone back into his pocket, then stood up and stretched his arms over his head. “Tell you what,” he said, actually letting his hips sway as he walked toward the skinny FBI agent, “why don’t I buy you lunch, and maybe a beer, and you can spend a few hours trying to persuade me.”

Christopher had seen his partner do this a hundred times with girls. He just rolled his eyes. Doug’s mouth was hanging open.

“Persuade you?” Belkamp didn’t even try to hide his own interest. He stood up as Ray got close to him.

Ray slinked past Belkamp, into the open door. “Give me the whole sales pitch. Benefits... education and experience required... positions available....”

Belkamp took hold of Ray’s hip, a move that would have gotten any man a broken arm just a few months ago, and tugged him just a bit closer. “I can do

that. Of course, anything we discuss couldn't be considered a binding offer...."

"Good. I'll see you later, Hayes!" Ray tugged Belkamp out. He poked his head in a moment later, waved, and then pulled the door shut behind him.

Doug was still gaping. "Did he just...."

"Yes."

"Does he always...."

"Yes."

"But it's not even noon!"

"I told you he's an asshole," Christopher reminded him. "And he really is a great guy."

"I've realized that," Doug admitted. Doug ran his fingers over the back of Christopher's hand. "Even if I will never, ever admit it again. How much of that were you awake for?"

He saw the blush rise in Doug's cheeks and laced his fingers with Doug's. "You mean you and Ray sniping at each other? Ray can be an asshole, but...." Christopher shook his head. "What he said... I've always gone for the same type of guy," he explained. "I'm a sucker for the tall, dark, and handsome look. Aside from the hair and skin tone, you're nothing like him. I wouldn't have...." Christopher stopped. He couldn't say that he wouldn't have fallen for Ray the way he had for Doug. He wasn't going to make the same mistake he'd made in the cabin and scare Doug off.

"I mean," said Doug, "when I said that I would take what I can get?"

"I was awake for that," Christopher whispered. He let go of Doug's hand. This was it, the part where Doug told him he had meant what he said when he was the one stuck in the hospital bed. Where he told Christopher he was up for sex, but that was all. Christopher had definitely crossed the line into the "more than sex" territory at the cabin.

"If we can be friends, I'd like that," said Doug, taking Christopher's hand again.

"Friends...." Christopher agreed, feeling his chest begin to ache.

"But if there's a chance that this could turn into something, something more than hanging out, I want to try... I know this is insane, especially since we just met, but... I don't want this to end."

Christopher shut his eyes and tried to hold back the flood of emotions surging through him. "I don't want this to end either, but I can't drag you into my life right now. I don't know what's going to happen to me. I can't

go back to work, and I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to walk again, much less run. I've got more issues than anybody should ever have to deal with, and I've probably acquired a few more thanks to this nightmare. Plus, I live in California. It just wouldn't..."

"Chris." Doug tightened his grip. "I need to make this very clear, because I don't want to mess things up. I love you. I think you feel something for me too. If there's a chance you do, well, then, whatever your future might be, I want it to include me. I'll follow you to California, if you're willing to try. If you end up with more issues because of Brubaker, I want to help you through it. I want more than a casual weekend thing."

Christopher felt like he was suffocating. "You'd do that? You'd leave your family's land to be with me?" He was stunned. In the weeks they had known each other, Doug had seen the worst of Christopher. How could he possibly love him?

"I have held on to that land for two years and hated every minute of it. The only time I've felt at home in that house was when you were there with me. These past two years, I didn't even feel like I was really alive, just like I was letting time pass. I don't care enough about that ranch to let you walk away without at least finding out if we have a chance."

"You're serious."

"I'm a serious guy. And I've got my share of issues too."

Christopher stared at him, too overwhelmed to come up with anything to say. When he saw Doug's shoulders slump, saw the misery take shape in Doug's eyes when he took Christopher's silence for rejection, he pulled Doug toward him. "I am completely and totally in love with you. But I can't ask you to leave your home, and I'm not going to just walk away from mine. This is going to take time to sort out. Luckily, I have eight weeks of being an invalid, and then who knows how many months of physical therapy ahead of me. Think you could put up with a bedridden houseguest for a bit?"

"You're willing to stay? Bedridden? With me?"

"I never thought I'd like the sound of the word 'bedridden'," Christopher said with a smile. "Afterwards..." He shrugged.

"I've missed surfing," Doug admitted.

"I love your ranch," Christopher countered. "But I would love to see you surf."

"So long as we're together, I don't care. Either way, we've got time to figure it out." Doug leaned down to kiss him. The kiss started as a sweet

touch, a soft press of lips on his own, but then Christopher grabbed Doug's head and pulled him closer. He was starving for Doug's touch, for his taste. All it took was a single flick of Doug's tongue against his lips to drive Christopher's heart rate into a frenzy. He attacked Doug's tongue and tried to block out the damn beeping coming from the machine beside his bed.

"Mr. Hayes," his surgeon called from the door.

Doug drew back fast, squeezing his eyes shut. He was blushing so brightly Christopher wished he had a camera.

"When I said no strenuous activity, I didn't just mean you had to stay off your feet."

Christopher tried not to laugh. "Could you take all these wires off? My surround-sound system has fewer cords coming out of it."

"No. Not until the cardiologist says it's okay. If this is going to be an issue, I can try to get him to review the new EKGs right away. Detective Heavy Runner," the surgeon said as he nodded to Doug and then practically ran out of the room.

"I'm sorry," whispered Christopher, laughing.

"You are not!"

"I am, I swear! You just look cute when you turn all pink like that. I love seeing you blush."

"You're kind of cute when you turn pink too," said Doug. "Don't be sorry. I've wanted to touch you for days, but your partner growled at me every time I even touched your hand."

"Ray doesn't growl."

"Over you, he does. Besides, I wouldn't be surprised if it's all over town by now."

"But he just saw us! He hasn't even had time to go make crude jokes at the nursing station."

Doug pressed his finger against Christopher's lips. "Not him. I came out to my ex. The day Brubaker kidnapped you, oddly enough. She was pretty understanding, but she's never been good at keeping her mouth shut."

Christopher stared at him, trying to understand, but Doug's fingers were distracting him. He wrapped his tongue around one of them and sucked it into his mouth, nipping and sucking on him until Doug's eyes fell shut.

"That's not fair," Doug gasped, pulling his finger back.

"Does this mean I can kiss you?" Christopher asked.

"Anytime. You're worth coming out of the closet for."

Christopher tried his best to sit up, to claim Doug's lips again, but with his entire leg in a cast, he didn't have enough leverage. He settled for grabbing Doug's jacket and pulling him down instead. Christopher kissed his lips and said, "You're worth waking up for."

Christopher settled back on the bed, wondering how he'd ever found such an amazing guy, especially with his lousy track record. He had no idea what direction his life would go in now. He had to find something to do, he had to keep moving forward, but he and Doug could try moving forward together.

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A.J. T_{HOMAS} writes m/mromance, mostly for her own amusement. She

began writing as a child, but never attempted it seriously until later in life, penning naughty fan fiction and then original stories. Her time is divided between taking care of her three young children, experimenting with cooking and baking projects that rarely explode these days, and embarrassing her husband with dirty jokes. When she's not writing, she hikes, gardens, researches every random idea that comes into her head, and develops complicated philosophical arguments about why a clean house is highly overrated.

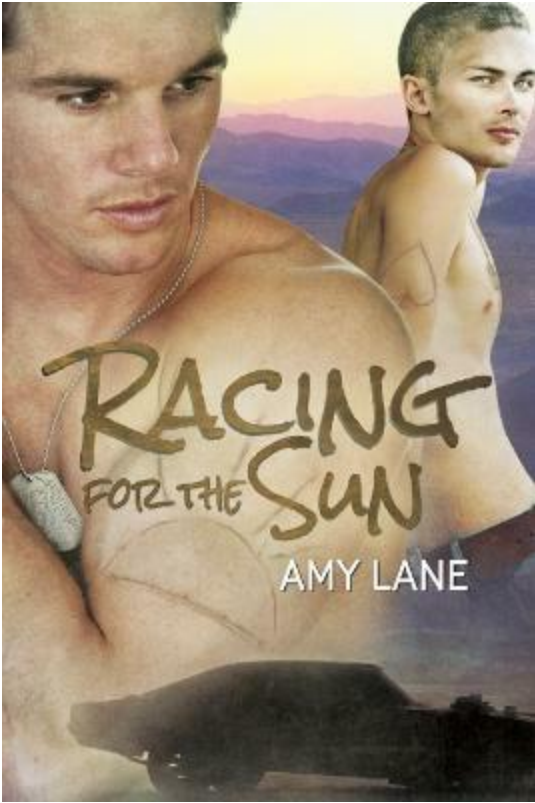
She has earned a BA in English Literature and has worked in a half-dozen different jobs, from law enforcement officer to librarian. Originally from the Northwest, she has traveled all over the United States and currently lives in California. If she ever stops moving around long enough to call any place home, her heart is set on settling down in the mountains of Virginia.

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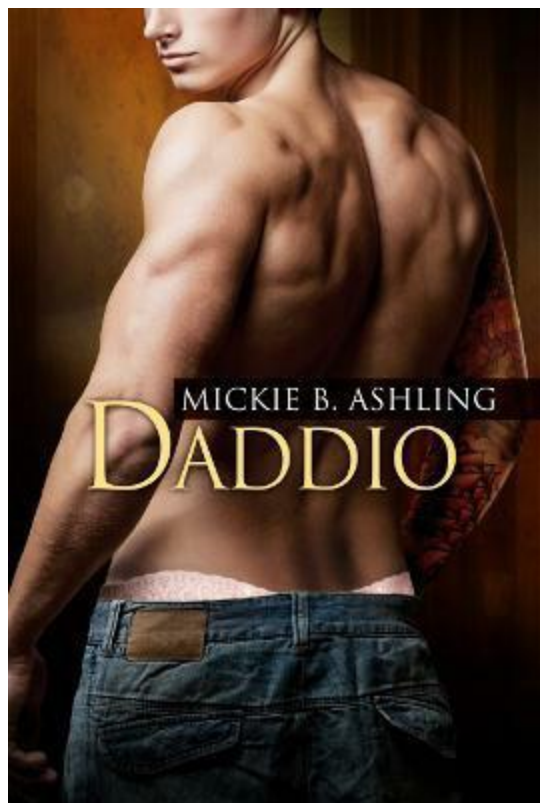
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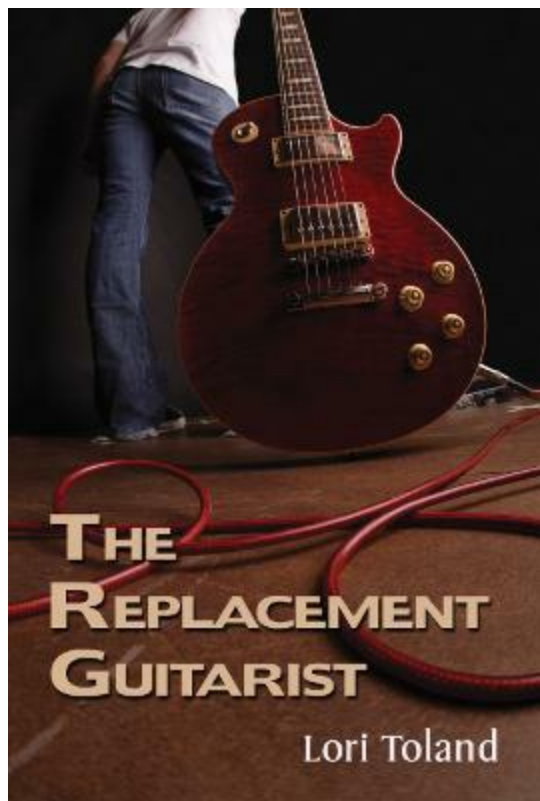
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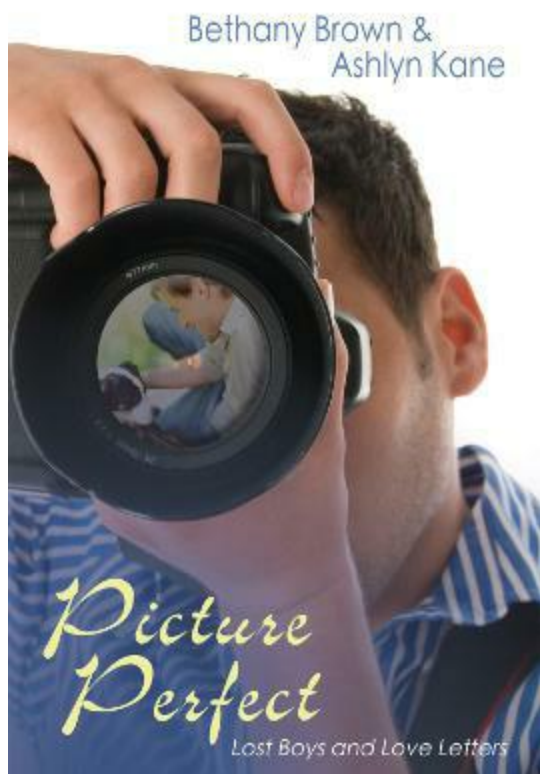
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