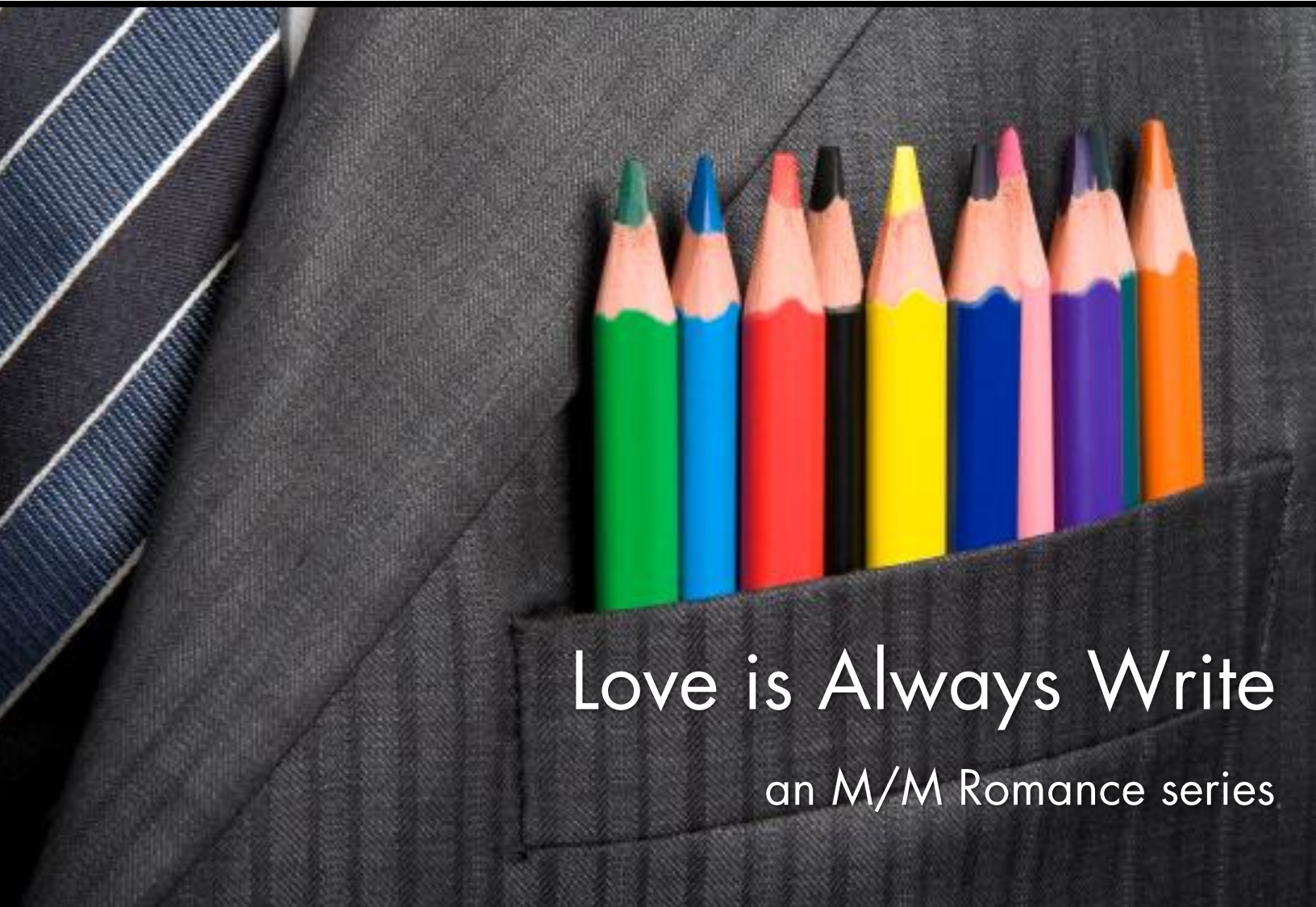




INTO DEEP WATERS

by Kaje Harper



Love is Always Write

an M/M Romance series

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Featured story:

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Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Is Always Write* promotion sponsored by the Goodreads M/M Romance group and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is *Love Is Always Write*?

The Goodreads M/M Romance group invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shined a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the Goodreads M/M Romance group (www.goodreads.com) and visit the discussion section: *Love Is Always Write*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution and Credit

This story contains strong language, some violence and explicit m/m sex.

It is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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INTO DEEP WATERS

story inspirations and info

Photo Description

Two young men stand in the riveted steel doorway of a ship. The one inside the doorway is young and classically handsome, hatless, with wavy dark hair falling over his forehead. His eyes are narrowed against the sunlight and a small smile hovers on his lips as he braces himself in the doorframe. The man in front of him is younger still. His attractiveness is more the flush of youth and good health than perfection of features. He grins, squinting in the brightness, dressed in the white hat and shirt of the WWII US Navy. Although the two men stand only casually close together, the sailor in front has one hand raised, over his shoulder, to keep a firm grip on the shirt of the man in the doorway behind him.

Request Letter

Dear Author,

We met onboard, both of us so very young - still in our teens - but we were old enough to serve our country. And against all odds, and the many risks involved, we fell in love and have managed to stay together for the last 60 years. Now, as our time together inevitably gets shorter and shorter, I can't wait any longer for the right to finally marry the man I've loved all these years.

Sincerely,

Bookbee

General Information:

genre: Historical

tags: historical ; military-men; first-time; coming-of-age; in-the-closet; coming-out; established-couples

word count: 63,485

INTO DEEP WATERS

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It is not possible for me to fully do justice to the men and women who served their country during the Second World War, and who then came home and picked up civilian lives and lived them long and well. This is especially true for the LGBT men and women, who faced hardships above and beyond those of other veterans. Within the constraints of time and skill, I have done my best here. Many people, including author Ensan Case and a retired Naval officer, have helped me try to get this right. Any remaining errors are my own. I hope those who are familiar with the history or with the Navy can accept my good intentions and enjoy the story despite its inevitable flaws.

CHAPTER 1

April 1942.

“Babies,” a deep voice growled in Daniel's ear. “They're sending us babies now.”

Daniel glanced over at George. The older man hawked and spat over the rail, his eyes fixed on the deck below. Daniel turned to see where George was looking. At the top of the gangway a group of new men stood at attention under the eagle eye of Lieutenant Matthews. Daniel sighed. They did look young. Maybe not the barrel-chested man on the end, but the rest of them. That freckle-faced towhead should have been on his bike delivering papers in some town in Iowa, not standing in a painfully clean uniform on the deck of a fighting ship. The guy beside him wasn't much older, maybe eighteen. He had straight dark hair, the winter-white skin of a city kid and the big brown eyes of a startled deer. Daniel had a sudden wish he could ship them all back home. And then go home himself.

He bent back down to his scrubbing. It wasn't like there was a choice for any of them. The Japs had forced this fight on America, and none of her native sons were backing down. At nineteen, Daniel wasn't that much older than those kids with their unstained sea-bags and wide eyes. He felt older though. Years older. Maybe decades. He might only have been on board ship for three weeks before the attack at Pearl, but everyone who'd been there was a veteran, after.

Matthews finished his spiel to the new guys and then handed them over to Chief Brown, who began leading them toward the hatch. Most of them followed along behind the Chief quickly like good little ducklings but the dark-haired guy paused, looking around. Those wide brown eyes swept over the ship like he was seeing something amazing, and then looked straight up at Daniel. Daniel realized he was staring back. The guy wasn't that good looking. He had kind of a big nose, thin lips, was tall and thin and gangly. But there was something so open in that wide-eyed stare Daniel felt a rush of protectiveness. If the guy really was that green, the next few months were going to knock the shine off him in pretty painful ways.

For a long moment their eyes met. Daniel grinned, and then let it shade just a little towards scorn, as befitted a seasoned crewman looking at a new recruit. Even from a distance, Daniel could tell the guy turned bright scarlet, before bending hurriedly to scoop up his seabag. As he rushed to catch up with the Chief, he tripped over something and stumbled. His bag dropped to the deck with a thump but he saved himself from a fall with a jerky stagger and wild windmilling of his arms.

Beside Daniel, George barked a laugh. "Wait till we put to sea. That one's gonna be falling down the hatches and puking his lunch."

"Maybe." Daniel paused in his scrubbing as the guy down on the deck knelt and ran his hand over the irregular furrow in the decking that had tripped him. He glanced up at Daniel, eyes wide and startled.

Yeah kid, that's what happens when a Jap plane comes in low, out of the sun, at daybreak. Daniel looked back expressionlessly. The young guy's flushed face slowly paled. He looked back down at the deck, and then stood, hefted his bag, and hurried after the Chief.

Daniel realized he'd been staring after the guy's ass as he disappeared down the hatch. Not good. He turned to George and sloshed some grimy water his way. "Hey. Your grapevine tell us when we'd be leaving and for where?" The navy didn't tell ordinary seamen anything, but George had some kind of uncanny nose for secrets. Sometimes he would share.

George gave him a grin that was missing a front tooth. "Why would I tell you?"

“Because you like me. And because you owe me a pack of smokes and I'll cancel the debt if your intel is good.”

“Now Danny-boy, you know what they say; loose lips sink ships.”

“There's nothing loose about me,” Daniel smirked. Then he paused as if reconsidering. “Loose morals, maybe.”

“Yeah. That blonde last night was a peach.”

“Wasn't she though?” They had been given a few hours of liberty. Not enough to go home from Frisco to San Diego, but enough to find a bar or a hotel room. And there were always girls available in the bars near the docks. Pretty, fresh-faced All-American girls who would just love to spend some time with a sailor serving his country. It was none of George's business if Daniel had taken the girl for a soda and then escorted her home. “Come on Georgie Porgie. Where are we headed?”

“Well...” George's voice lowered and he leaned closer. “If I *did* have any advance information, I might bet that we were leaving tonight and heading for the Bismarck Sea.”

“The Bismarck Sea? Never heard of it. What's out there?”

“Japs, for sure.” They looked at each other more soberly. Wasn't that the truth. The extra marines who had come onboard were sure as hell not there for a joy ride. Daniel scrubbed the deck half-heartedly. He had a sudden flash of the new guy, tripping over that seam in the decking. Weeks ago Daniel had cleaned up like this down there on the lower deck, and his mop had been red with blood.

He shook his head to clear it and his hand went automatically to his pocket to pat the little notebook there. When his watch was done he would draw a picture of that guy stumbling around down on the deck. A cartoon maybe, of that startled look when the guy realized he'd had an audience for his clumsiness. Daniel smiled a little, remembering those wide eyes. He could take that moment, record it with his pencil and make it about the good things. In the black and white world of his drawings, there was no place for red blood.

six hours later

Jacob slid his tray onto a table on the mess desk, and tried to look around casually. His stomach was too jittery to really want food, but on the principle of trying to blend in, he'd taken a full tray with the others on his watch. He slid into his seat, next to a couple of vacant ones, and let his gaze wander. Until now, he'd had no time to do more than figure out what his duties were going to be. As a result, he had only the vaguest idea of the layout of the ship, would be lucky to find his berthing area again, and was going to have to address everyone by rank until some names sank into his overloaded brain.

But he was here. Really here, onboard the *USS Gageway* and heading out to sea. The white-hot anger that had marched him into the recruiter's office two days after Pearl Harbor had muted into some kind of dogged determination to do his duty. It hadn't taken him long in Boot Camp to realize he was going to hate this. The crowding and the noise and the weapons practice, and people yelling at him to do more, faster, harder, don't think, don't plan, just do it. It was such a far cry from his studies and his books and his quiet well-planned life.

But he was committed now. And even if he hadn't signed the papers, he would still have to be here. Those battered sunken ships in the Hawaiian harbor demanded it.

At least they had taken a look at his background and assigned him as a pharmacist's mate. He'd barely started pharmacy college, but his studies so far and the years spent hanging around his father's store had given him some background knowledge. The wags in Boot Camp had claimed that the Navy in its wisdom would therefore make him a gunner or assign him to the commissary. He'd been relieved to see them proved wrong. It meant that in a fight, his duties were unlikely to include firing a gun. It was more than he'd dared hope for when he began training.

Other men were still straggling into the mess deck from watch duties further afield. Some were clearly veterans, with tanned skins and that easy slightly-rolling way of walking that spoke of years on the open sea. Many looked young, though. They laughed and chatted, eyes bright, faces confident. One young seaman aimed a playful punch at a taller man's jaw. He was fended off with a snicker and a sharp comment. All so easy. Jacob looked down at the mounds of food on his tray and sighed.

There was the scrape of a tray on the table next to him. He glanced over and met a pair of amused hazel eyes. He recognized the man. No reason he should have noticed this sailor, really, except that as Jacob had completed that graceful move where he nearly took a nosedive on the deck, he'd felt eyes on him. Looking up, embarrassed at already having demonstrated his unfitness for ship duty, he'd seen this man and an older veteran laughing at him. And now here the guy was again.

"Hi there," the man said, tossing a lock of dark curly hair off his forehead and extending his hand. "Saw you come aboard."

"Hello." Jacob shook hands and then picked up his fork to give himself something to do.

The man beside him dug into a forkful of potatoes, chewed briefly, and made a face. "Damn, Brandy's not back from leave."

"What?"

The man gave him a little grimace. "The cooks are a mixed bag. Brandy's the CS-C, the top dog. He makes sure this stuff's almost edible. Some of his assistants don't."

"Oh."

"Although this isn't the worst it's been."

"Um. Good."

"Man of few words, are you? Or still finding your feet?"

"Both I guess."

"Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it. First duty?"

"Yes."

"Well, welcome to the zoo. I'm Daniel. Daniel Acardi, Seaman Second Class, thank you very much."

"Jacob. Segal. Pharmacist's mate."

"Good to know you, Jake."

“Not Jake,” Jacob said quickly and then bit his lip.

“Jack?”

“Jake is my grandfather. Jack is my father. I’m the third.”

Daniel’s mouth formed a quick *oh*, and then he laughed. “Jacob the third. Better not say that here. Ever.”

“Huh?” Jacob had quickly learned that acting too high-toney would get you stomped on, but his name was just his name.

“The Boatswain is from Boston but he’s got an Irish accent you could cut with a knife.”

“So?”

“The Irish don’t do too well with ‘th’ sounds. If you don’t want to go through the war being called ‘The Turd’ you’d better not give him the chance to say it.”

“Oh!” Jacob blinked and looked down at his food. It seemed like there were pitfalls everywhere and he was doomed to put his foot in all of them. Belatedly he added, “Thank you.”

“You could come up with a nickname quick, before someone else does.” Daniel’s hazel eyes danced with mischief. “That was a pretty spectacular recovery you made on the main deck. How about ‘Dancer’?”

“God, no.” Of course it had been too much to hope that this gorgeous, self-assured guy would have failed to remember his moment of clumsiness. All he needed was a girly nickname to complete the humiliation.

“Maybe ‘Trip’? I like that. You could do a lot worse than ‘Trip’.”

“I can be Jake. Not like the old man is here anyway. I prefer Jacob, but if it has to be shortened Jake is okay.”

“Fair enough. I like Daniel, but you’ll find I’m called Danny, mostly.”

Jacob had a sudden impulse to say, *I’ll remember to call you Daniel*, but he kept silent.

Daniel took another bite of his potatoes and then mounded Salisbury steak and carrots on his fork. Jacob couldn’t just sit there looking at his food. He took a cautious bite of a carrot. It wasn’t awful.

“Yeah, you should eat,” Daniel said. “It's good policy. Get food when it's offered. Out at sea you never know when there'll be a storm or a drill or something to mess with chow times.”

Jacob's stomach rolled again, but he clenched his teeth and stabbed another bite.

“So, Trip,” Daniel drawled. “Talk to me. Where are you from?”

Jacob sighed. It was going to be a damned long war.

CHAPTER 2

May 1942

Daniel headed down the ladder, calculating his timing carefully. He was mentally kicking his own ass for doing so. Jacob was off duty in the sickbay in two minutes which meant that if Daniel walked a little more slowly, they would be heading toward the mess deck at the same time. Then it would be natural to sit together and talk. And the chance to shoot the breeze with Jacob Segal had somehow become the highlight of Daniel's days.

He slowed a little, well aware when Jacob's watch ended. Daniel noticed and pretty much appreciated everything about Jacob. Although he *was* trying to be good about not drawing what he saw. His notebook was filled with little sketches of all the other men, in every position and activity. Jacob was in there too, but not too often and not looking too pretty.

Not that Daniel hadn't done a couple of those sketches, but he'd ripped them up carefully and let the sea have them afterward. It was necessary for safety, but it still hurt a little. Those sketches of Jacob in his unguarded moments had been some of the best things Daniel had ever done.

He was a bit obsessed. He would admit that. He knew Jacob's watch duties, knew where the man was during every drill. Well, it helped that usually that was sickbay, but for man overboard and fire-and-rescue it wasn't. And for abandon ship, of course... Daniel pulled his thoughts away from that one superstitiously.

Daniel slowed still further. Men filled the passageway ahead of him, but none was Jacob. Perhaps he had ducked out of his watch early. The Doc was as easygoing a man as you could find aboard the *Gageway*. But Jacob was pretty

punctilious about his duties. Daniel hesitated and then reversed course.

The door to sickbay stood open. Daniel stuck his head in. A few corpsmen tended the patients, mostly men with the minor injuries that were inevitable when living and working on a moving surface. No sign of Jacob. Doc looked up from where he was bending over a bed to check the patient's heart. "Can I help you?"

"Um, I was looking for Segal?"

"Jake? He just got off watch. Left a minute ago."

"Okay. Thanks."

Daniel backed out into the passageway and put his back to the bulkhead while he thought. If Jacob had been heading for the mess deck he would have passed Daniel. No other route there. So he'd gone elsewhere.

Daniel knew he should just go eat his own chow. Searching the ship for Jacob tipped way over the line. But Jacob had been even more silent and uncommunicative than usual yesterday. Something was up and the idiot would just let it stew if Daniel left him alone. That much was painfully clear. Personal details had to be dredged out of Jacob bit by bit. Or sometimes Daniel could sneak a roundabout question into the conversation, when they were talking about the ship or Boot Camp or baseball.

If Jacob hadn't headed right, he had to have gone left. Daniel wandered off that way. As the minutes went by, the passageways cleared out. The first dog watch was underway, and the men who'd been relieved were settled in, eating, working or sleeping. Daniel turned a corner and stopped. This was stupid. Jacob could be anywhere. Probably he'd just gone to the head. Daniel had checked the nearest one, but there were others. There was no way Daniel would find him on a ship this size. He should just go get his own chow.

He turned another corner randomly and paused. A figure crossed his field of view up ahead, hurrying for the ladder. He knew that back by now. Had even sketched it a time or two. And maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but he turned and followed.

Jacob climbed the ladders with dogged speed. Daniel wondered if he was still on duty, but surely the doc would have said so. Above Daniel, Jacob stepped out the hatch and onto the open deck. Daniel hesitated and then followed him up and

out. Apparently Trip wasn't hurrying to some duty post after all because there he was, leaning on the port-side rail, staring out at the water. Daniel came up behind him slowly and then moved alongside, leaning his own elbows on the rail.

Jacob glanced over at him. There wasn't enough spray coming over the rail to explain his wet face.

Daniel said softly, "I can go."

Jacob just stared at him. Those brown eyes that had caught Daniel the very first day were wide and dark with hurt. After a second Jacob turned back to gaze out over the blue waters. Daniel heard him catch a ragged breath.

"Want to tell me?"

"I'm just being stupid. Homesick."

"You, my friend, are never stupid. And we all get homesick sometimes. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed. Not exactly. I just didn't want anyone to know."

"Am I just anyone?" Daniel didn't know he was going to say that until the words were out of his mouth. He thought his heart almost stopped waiting for the answer.

"No. You're Daniel."

The way Jacob said his name was some kind of answer. Daniel leaned lower on the rail, feeling for his next words. "I get homesick sometimes. Little things set me off. Like the time we got sugar cookies with our chow last week. They reminded me of my Mom's, except hers are so much better. I suddenly really, really wanted to be home, with my brothers and sisters squabbling over who got the first one and Mom slapping our hands because they were still hot, and my old dog lurking under the table hoping we'd drop one." He paused and swallowed hard because that was a little too close to the truth. For a moment he wanted nothing more than to go home. Back before the war. Before the shouting and the coldness and not fitting in, to that moment around the kitchen table. But even if he were getting on a train in Frisco right now, he would never have that back. And this was about Jacob, not him.

It must have been the right thing to say, though, because Jacob took a short

breath and said, "It's Lily's sixteenth birthday today."

"Oh. You want to be there." Daniel kept his eyes carefully fixed on the horizon.

He heard more than saw the motion as Jacob rubbed his sleeve across his eyes. "Yeah. I'd promised her... Well, before the war we'd always said we would take her out for a grown-up night on the town when she turned sixteen."

Daniel knew Lily was Jacob's younger sister. He'd heard a little about the society matron who was his mother and the stiff, business-obsessed man who was their father. Neither one seemed a likely candidate to make a pact to take a sixteen-year-old girl out dancing. "We?"

"Me and Brian."

"Brian?"

"My brother."

Daniel hesitated for a long heartbeat, because you didn't have to be a genius to hear the tension in that. But finally he said, "You've never mentioned a brother."

"He was on the Oklahoma at Pearl Harbor."

"Oh, Jesus!" Four words and Daniel was back there in the smoke and the explosions, and the feel of a solid deck shaking under his feet. He said through tight lips, "I was on the California."

He still wasn't looking but he felt Jacob grow rigid beside him. "You never said." After a moment Jacob added almost angrily, "I don't want to know anything about it."

"Wasn't going to tell you." Wasn't ever going to tell anyone.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well." Daniel turned slightly sideways, letting himself look at Jacob's face. "Your sister. Tell me about her. So she's sixteen now. Is she smart like you?"

"Yeah, maybe smarter, you know. I'm not that much."

"Bullshit, Trip," Daniel said roughly. "Quit selling yourself short. Is she dark and pretty too?"

He could have cursed himself aloud but Jacob just choked a laugh. “Dark anyway. And she didn't get the big Segal nose, lucky girl.”

Daniel liked Jacob's nose, it gave his face character, and now was absolutely *not* the time to say so.

“She likes to dance?”

“I don't know. She's kind of shy. That's why we said...” Jacob stared fixedly at the water. “Brian was the brave one. He would go out and do stuff, crazy stuff like borrowing Father's car without asking to drive a girl up to the river, or climbing the bridge rail to impress his friends. It was his idea.” Jacob gritted his teeth. Daniel could see the muscles of his jaw twitch. “We were going to show her a good time. She'd be safe with both of us chaperoning. But he joined up as soon as he turned eighteen. So then it was supposed to be up to me.”

“He was your older brother?”

“Younger. Ten minutes younger.”

“Jacob.” This time Daniel couldn't help reaching out. His fingers brushed Jacob's arm. Jacob jerked away roughly and Daniel dropped his hand.

Jacob was right. They were in public here. And Daniel didn't yet have the right to offer that kind of comfort.

“I was the older one. I was going to stay home, go to college, be the good son, you know. While he did duty to our country for both of us.” Jacob took a jerky breath. “An adventure. That's what he said the last time he was home before shipping out. It was going to be a grand adventure.”

Damned idiot. Daniel didn't think he'd ever been that naive, although even he sure as hell hadn't been ready for the bombs and infernos of Pearl. “There were a lot of us young guys on those ships.”

“Yeah.” Jacob drew another breath but it sounded less harsh than before. “So here I am, and Lily is having Mother's idea of a sweet sixteen, which means a formal party and all of the right people. Or at least those who like our money and don't mind that Father is a Jew.”

“Sounds like a grand time,” Daniel said dryly.

Jacob snorted. “Yeah. Hey, a silver lining to being at sea. I don't have to be

there for it, choking my neck in a monkey suit and being nice to people who can barely remember my name. Or who think I'd be a good catch for their daughters.”

“Well, I'm glad you're missing that.”

“Yeah, me too.” Jacob's pose eased and he leaned more comfortably on the railing. It put his shoulder close to Daniel's, and for a moment Daniel held his breath. But Jacob only said, “You think there's any chow left?”

“We could go see.”

“Yeah.”

But for a long time neither of them moved. Beyond the small floating confines of the *Gageway*, the waves of the blue Pacific rose and fell in endless progression. New Jersey, California, it all seemed a long way off in another world. Daniel straightened and draped his arm casually across Jacob's shoulders. “Come on, Trip. Let's see if those other bottomless pits on afternoon watch have left us anything.” He took it as a win when Jacob waited several seconds before shrugging off his arm.

CHAPTER 3

July 1942

The anti-aircraft guns chattered. In sickbay, Jacob braced himself with a hand on the nearest bunk as the *Gageway* lurched and recovered. Loud explosions off to port marked the near-miss impact of bombs from the buzzing planes overhead. Jacob's stomach clenched, and he swallowed back bile. God, he was a pansy. No one else in the room was acting like they wanted to duck whenever the noise got loud. He forced his attention back to his job, trying to ignore the way his muscles bunched and twitched with each loud noise.

Doc was his usual cool self, pulling out emergency equipment and setting up for casualties. At his station Jacob triple-checked the supply of morphine, sulfa powder and local anesthetics. The scream of a diving plane drew everyone's eyes up toward the decking overhead for a moment. There was a jolt and the rumble of a blast, and they glanced at each other. The PA speaker squawked and then called for damage control to a fire in turret number three. Jacob gritted his teeth. Daniel's battle station wasn't far from there. Still no reason the man had to be in danger from the fire. None at all.

Then the first casualties appeared in the doorway. Jacob looked over and swallowed hard. A man was screaming and cursing in a hoarse voice, barely staggering on two feet. The two men beside him half carried him in. Jacob's stomach heaved sympathetically. Then Doc called for morphine, his voice sharp and clear. Jacob stopped thinking. There was only room for the Doc's steady directions, and the corpsmen's competent hands. Don't look, don't think too hard. Jesus, don't smell things. Draw up syringes and hand over vials and sprinkle sulfa and don't think about it. Just do what you're told.

Two hours later he came back to himself. The explosions and jolting had stopped, and the deck guns had fallen silent. The sickbay was littered with men, some struck by fragments of metal, some with broken bones from being tossed around in the aftermath of explosions. The worst were four crewmen burned when a bomb struck the third turret and set off some of the powder. They lay in a morphine-induced stupor, clothing stripped off to expose oozing and blackened flesh and red blistered skin. As Jacob watched, Doc shook his head over the nearest and pushed another dose of morphine into a vein in the man's ankle. That was probably the only unburned few inches of skin on the man's body. Jacob's stomach heaved and he forced his nausea down with an effort. There was no time to be sick.

Doc waved at Jacob and he hurried over with more supplies. The work went on. Medics and corpsmen cleaned and bandaged wounds, straightened and splinted limbs, held down and reassured the men moaning in pain until the blessed relief of morphine could take effect. The worst of the burned men died an hour later. Jacob could only think it was for the best. He paused looking at the man's face, unrecognizable beneath the scarifying effect of the flames. Unrecognizable, but not Daniel. There had been just that first moment of agonized fear, but Jacob had known right away. Not Daniel.

Didn't mean that Daniel was all right though. The news from above decks washed through sickbay, garbled by third hand reports. There was no doubt that there were more deaths than that one burned man. Calm was returning to the ship. PA calls for fire-fighting and damage control and medical assistance slowed and then ceased. The *Gageway* steamed along, rolling no more than her usual in the ocean swells. With an intensity that scared him, Jacob suddenly wanted to see Daniel. Just see him, for a minute, and know that Daniel had come through

unharmmed.

Jacob clenched a fist on the edge of the counter and breathed though his nose. Surely Daniel was fine. It was a big ship. Reports said eight dead topside. Or ten or maybe twelve. But out of a crew this size the odds were still good. Great, even. This sensible realization didn't keep the thought of a fire a hundred yards from Daniel's station from hovering in Jacob's mind through the rest of the long night.

It was dawn before Doc told Jacob to go find his sack and get some rest. Gratefully he left the sickbay and its smells and its groaning men and stepped out into the passageway. Good sense would have sent him to his berth and sleep. He had abandoned good sense somewhere, because no way in hell he could go there yet. Anxiety and need would have sent him to Daniel's berth, but that would have been unforgivable. So he wandered the ship, staying out of the way of anyone moving purposefully in the early light. He ended up at his favorite spot on the port-side rail, looking out over the water. The sky was clear, with just a line of gold to the east marking the rising sun still below the edge of the waters. The limpid blue and lavender sky looked as if it could never harbor death and destruction.

When someone came to lean on the rail beside him, he didn't need to move or turn. Every inch of him knew who it was. He said, "I figured you'd be in the sack by now."

"I was waiting for you."

Daniel's voice was low and warm and surely didn't mean what it sounded like. In any case, there were men close by, sleeping in the hangars and out on the decks to escape the closed-in heat of the berthing areas.

Jacob said, "I'm glad you're okay. You *are* okay, right?"

"Yeah. Not a scratch. You?"

"I'm well enough. That is, I'm not hurt."

For few minutes they stood there, watching as the new day dawned. The sun rose above the water, trailing ripples of gold that faded into the greys and blues of the waves. The air was warming.

Daniel said, "Come on."

It was some kind of choice that Jacob didn't bother to ask why or where. He

just trailed after Daniel silently, down the hatch and deeper into the ship, until they fetched up against a door. Daniel stopped with his hand on it and raised one eyebrow. Jacob allowed himself one breath. Just one moment to think all the things that were going unsaid. Then he reached past Daniel and opened the linen storage locker door wide.

The storeroom was airless and hot and the space was tight. But it was enough for what they needed. Daniel stood close to him but not touching, and shut the door behind them. In the darkness behind the closed door, Jacob took a breath and dug deep for the nerve to do this. He raised his hands and put them on Daniel's chest, feeling the heartbeat under his right palm, the strength of lean muscle, the heat.

"I was so scared for you." He almost didn't recognize his own voice.

"Me too. For you."

"Sickbay's a pretty safe place."

"Nothing is safe from bombs that can punch all the way through the ship."

There didn't seem to be any answer to that. He rocked forward slightly. Daniel's hands closed on his biceps, steadying him, but not pushing him away.

"Have you done this before?" Daniel's voice was cool but it shook a little on the last word.

Jacob was suddenly glad he wasn't the only one scared to death here. "What are we doing?"

"This." Daniel pulled him close. There was just enough light from under the door to see it coming, to tilt his head and part his lips. Then Daniel's mouth closed over his.

Jacob had never felt anything like the touch of Daniel's mouth. He'd kissed girls, more than once. He even thought he'd gotten pretty good at it. But none of those kisses had shaken him down to his soul the way this one did. It was Daniel's lips and Daniel's taste, man and smoke and cigarettes and a strong flavor of mint. It occurred vaguely to Jacob that Daniel must have brushed his teeth recently, but that was irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was to have more. To open his mouth for the silken sweep of Daniel's tongue and to sway against him, feeling the

solid mass of his chest against Jacob's own. To sense the slide of Daniel's hands from Jacob's arms to his shoulders. Until the clinch became a hug so tight they had to break the kiss because there was no room between them. Daniel's arms clamped around Jacob almost too tight for breath.

“God.” Daniel's voice was a whisper against his hair. “God. Holy God. I was so damned scared. I've been in action before. Hell, I was at Pearl. And I was never as scared as I was tonight, not knowing where you were or if you were safe.”

“Me too. I was listening to the PA. You had to have been right in the middle of it.”

“Near enough.” Daniel loosened his grip enough for Jacob to draw a shaky breath.

“Now what?” Jacob couldn't resist sliding his cheek against Daniel's neck.

“I want to kiss you again.”

“Okay.”

Daniel cupped his face between warm calloused palms. His skin smelled like smoke and fireworks. Jacob thought from now on he would always love that smell. Daniel held him steady and kissed him. Slowly at first, and then warmer, wetter. Their tongues met and stroked. Daniel nipped at Jacob's lip and then Jacob pushed his tongue into Daniel's willing mouth. The soft moan Daniel uttered as he opened for him made Jacob's knees shake. He tightened his grip around Daniel's back and their hips pressed together. Daniel was as hard as he was.

When they finally broke the kiss Jacob was panting.

Daniel kissed his neck and then his brow. “Don't hold your breath.”

“Can't help it.” Jacob felt dizzy and off balance. He frowned. “So have you?”

“What?”

“Done this before?”

“Not really. Not for real. I did make out with another man a few times. Just enough to know this was what I wanted. Enough to scare myself silly by how much I wanted it. And that was nothing compared to you.”

“So you are certain you're...”

“Queer? Homosexual? Yeah. I am. Are you?”

He couldn't be. Jacob was his father's son and his grandfather's. It was his duty to come home and get married, to take over the Segal's drugstore chain and have a little Jacob the Fourth to run it in his turn. He couldn't be queer. But they were at war in the Pacific, thousands of miles from home. He might never get back there. And this man in his arms was waiting for an answer.

Jacob said, “Kiss me again.”

And Daniel did.

Minutes or hours later they separated. Jacob was achingly aroused. He couldn't ever remember wanting anyone this badly. Not the girls he had dated. Not even the nebulous dream-boys he had stroked off to when need overcame his scruples. He was also scared to death.

“What now?” he asked. Maybe Daniel would know. Maybe Daniel would just take over and move past all his fears and hesitations and make him go where they both clearly wanted to.

But Daniel's arms dropped to his sides. “Don't know. This is dangerous. Not that there aren't guys getting it on all over the ship in secret. I mean, there's not a girl in five hundred miles. Even the guys who aren't queer are willing to switch teams. Still it's risky.”

It was. Jacob's gut clenched. God, he'd sworn he wouldn't do this. He wouldn't take this kind of risk. His father was counting on him to come home, he had plans, a life. A careless moment could destroy all of that. And he'd seen... He swallowed hard. He'd seen the scorn and the anger and the disdain of the other men, descending seemingly without warning on someone who crossed the line. One minute the guys were laughing and then a curled lip, an insult, and the mood could swing. And prison. He couldn't even think about that.

But Daniel's taste was still in his mouth and he was harder than he'd ever been. And he could die tomorrow. None of that would matter if he died tomorrow.

“Too scary for you?” Jacob could hear the acid in his own voice, as the thought of never doing this again hit him. Suddenly this felt more necessary than breath. And Daniel was talking about backing off. Damn the man. After all, Daniel had been the one to start this. Daniel had brought them here to this hot

close darkness together.

“No. But...” Daniel cleared his throat. “Fact is, I've never done anything more than kiss. Well, and jerk off together. I'm kind of an amateur at this. And I want to make it good for you. I want that even more than I want to get off right now.”

Jacob's heart warmed, and he suddenly felt brave in the face of Daniel's hesitation. Dumb fool. He reached for Daniel's hand, feeling wanton and bold, and laid it over his aching groin. “You could show me that jerking-off technique.” It wouldn't take much. Just the heat of Daniel's palm on him almost made him come.

Daniel moaned softly and added his other hand. “Okay. God yes. Your hands on me too.”

They fumbled with each other's skivvies, freeing hard cocks from imprisoning fabric. Jacob took a sharp breath as Daniel's hands closed on him. Those rough palms slid over his sensitized skin, and he thrust his hips forward involuntarily, pushing into Daniel's tight grip. He reached down in his turn, and felt the warm silk-on-steel of another man's cock in his hands.

Jacob panted, his breath coming short. It was hard to concentrate, with Daniel's hands pumping him in fast firm rhythm. He tried to mimic the gestures. He wrapped his fingers around Daniel and squeezed, and then slid up until he felt a slick of liquid coat his palm.

Daniel moaned, “Close. God, close.”

Jacob suddenly wanted to taste Daniel's mouth, and feel his breath as he came. He leaned in, fumbling with his lips over Daniel's cheek and jaw. Daniel turned to meet him and their mouths touched. Jacob spared one hand to steady Daniel's face as they opened into the kiss. His other hand fisted over Daniel's length in a fast firm stroke, twisting over the head at the end of each pull. Daniel gasped almost silently and shuddered, and then the smooth sticky pulses of cum covered Jacob's hand. Daniel's mouth dropped open wide. Jacob shoved him back against the bulkhead, pinning him there with shoulder and hip, suddenly needing, wanting. He filled Daniel's mouth with his tongue, driving deep, and thrust hard into Daniel's hands. His climax caught him in a wave of electric shock, almost painful in its intensity. He buried his groan in Daniel's slack, willing mouth as he humped and

shook and came, and came, and came.

When his brain came back on line, he was slumped against Daniel, pinning him to the bulkhead. Daniel's arms around him held him safe. The smell of sex and smoke and skin filled his nose. He sighed and laid his cheek on Daniel's shoulder. "I could sleep now."

Daniel chuckled. "Oh, that's a compliment. I put you to sleep, do I?"

Jacob was suddenly too tired and too light-headed to respond to the teasing. He closed his eyes. "It's good."

"Yeah." Daniel held him quietly. "Can't do it often. We have to be careful."

Jacob sighed. He didn't want to think about that. He didn't need to have those voices start up in his brain screaming homo and fairy and all the things his father would say if he found out. He'd hoped to have more of this moment out of time, where it was safe to be with Daniel and the outside world could go hang. But Daniel was right. Jacob straightened and pushed away from him gently.

In the dim stifling-hot space, Daniel's expression was hard to read, but he held onto Jacob's shoulders. "I didn't mean..."

"No. You're right." Jacob reached for Daniel's wrists, then hesitated and wiped his palms on his thighs first, and lifted Daniel's hands off him. "We have to be careful."

"But not stop."

"Don't think I can. Not now."

Daniel blew out a breath. "Well, thank God for that."

Jacob wasn't thanking God for anything right now. He was too damned confused and tired. He'd prayed to God to take this unnatural desire away from him. Prayed to his mother's Jesus and his father's Yahweh and whatever nebulous God took care of folks who were neither good Christians nor good Jews. Instead God had given him Daniel. If it was some kind of test he was doomed to fail. "What do we do now, Danny?"

"You can remember not to call me Danny, for starters. Other than that... see how it goes, I guess. Find time to be together when we can."

“Odds are we'll be making landfall for repairs after this. We might get liberty.”

“Might.”

“If we get leave at the same time...” Jacob paused, not sure what he wanted to suggest.

“If we do I'll find a place. The guys all think I'm a hound dog anyway. No one will think twice if I ask about a cheap hotel.”

“Is that safe?” Despite having just come harder than he ever remembered in his life, Jacob felt his cock twitch at the thought of Daniel and a bed.

“I'll make it safe.” Daniel put one slightly-sticky palm against his cheek. “I swear, Trip. For you, I'll be more than careful so no one thinks twice about us. I want to be with you. Please?”

Jacob nodded slowly, feeling the rasp of his stubble over Daniel's hand. “Yeah, I want that too.”

CHAPTER 4

one day later

Sweat ran into Daniel's eyes, but he couldn't spare a hand to wipe it. He gritted his teeth. The roar of the guns just beneath him was beyond deafening, becoming a sound that crashed through his bones with each salvo. He clutched the two-handed wheel with a white-knuckled grip. The hard seat under him was becoming slick with the moisture running off his body.

“Match bugs,” Ensign Callais snapped tersely.

Daniel wrestled with the cranks to bring his guns' elevation to a match with the target bug. Almost... almost... there. The turret captain's buzzer sounded. Daniel jerked the trigger.

The guns roared, and the turret shook. Daniel slid sideways in his brass seat and braced a foot to keep himself steady. His head throbbed and his vision blurred for a moment. But by now this was instinct and reflex. Swiftly, Daniel lowered the guns for reloading. The men below him sprang into action. They wrestled with powder and projectiles in the damp heat. Daniel reminded himself it was worse for the men down there. Then the guns were loaded and he brought them up again, matching to the target.

Every ten or twelve seconds, they got off another salvo. From where he sat Daniel had no clue how successful they were at hitting the enemy. That wasn't his job. Other men chose the target. He just aimed at it. And pulled the trigger.

Crank, match, wait for the buzzer, pull. Lower, load, repeat. Over and over, the muscles in his arms and back screaming from the repeats. He'd heard that a newer ship would have servo-motors that would make this a piece of cake. It didn't matter. This was the *Gageway*, and he'd take whatever the old girl had to offer and work with it. Crank, match, wait, pull.

There was a loud clang, audible over the guns, even to his noise-stunned ears. The ship lurched and recovered. Callais said, "Shit," with no emphasis at all, and then, "Match bugs."

Crank, match, wait, pull.

Smoke drifted into the turret, acrid and sharp. Daniel blinked his smarting eyes and coughed. No one turned, no one faltered. Crank, match, wait for the damned buzzer, where's the damned buzzer – thank you, pull. He coughed again, more harshly. Around him others were doing the same. If there was fire threatening them, someone would have to say the word. Until then, they would do the job.

The smoke thickened, taking on a harsh odor, then gradually thinned again. The salvos from the other guns were more ragged but they still sounded complete. Then Lieutenant Sherman at the turret periscope said, "Got lots of flames and smoke. We hit something on that Jap."

Someone whooped, ending in a cough. Daniel braced for the next salvo. And then gasped and leaned against his wheels in boneless relief as the "Cease Fire" order came. Sherman moved far enough to call down to the gun chamber, "We pounded the hell out of them." The men below raised a cheer. Daniel slid out of his seat for a moment and stretched, opening and closing his hands to uncramp his fingers.

Around him people were talking, the officers giving orders and asking about damage, the men complaining and gloating in equal measure. It sounded like the damage control teams were busy. The damned smoke had to be coming from somewhere but no one was running out of their turret. So wherever the fire was, it was hopefully far enough away from their share of the powder. Daniel rubbed his

arm across his face, shoving his hair back irritably. It was getting too long, always in his face in the heat. He needed to find the barber soon and get it cut.

Sherman was back at the periscope, giving a play-by-play of the Jap cruiser, which was apparently staggering away trailing smoke. Betting had sprung up immediately on whether she would sink before she was out of sight or not. Daniel just shook his head good-naturedly at Geoff, declining the bet. He'd learned fast that sailors would bet on almost anything, but he kept his hard-earned money for the kind of bet he could control. Like poker.

Or for important stuff, like renting a hotel room. He let his mind drift to last night and the airless hot locker that was the best place he'd ever been in his life. A louder cheer rose from behind him but he ignored it. Ignored both parts of his brain, the one that was cheering the hits on the Japs, and the one that all-too-clearly recalled a crippled ship and flame and water and the screams of dying men. It was war. They were the enemy. This was payback, not a reason to hate his hands for pulling that trigger. He rubbed his stiff fingers together.

Jacob. Think of Jacob. Lucky bastard was probably far more comfortable than Daniel right now. Sickbay was the only part of the ship that had air-conditioning. Not that Jacob would necessarily be there if there were wounded men elsewhere on the ship. He might be wherever the fire was. Might even now be... *No, last night. Think about last night.*

That had been something else. A man's hands, a man's mouth. No, not any man's. Jacob's. With that shy smile and the dark eyes and that quick brain.

Daniel tried to laugh at himself. Like a guy's brain mattered when he was touching you and bringing you off. But it did, because that was Jacob. And somehow Daniel was sure it wouldn't have been like that, wouldn't have shaken him to his heart's depth like that, if it had been any other man. He remembered the neighbor's barn, the smell of hay and the slanted sunlight and two eager boys. Those past fumbling moments with Stuart, as heart pounding as they had been, were a superficial thing. A matter of opportunity and hard dicks, and the growing realization of why nothing else had felt right. But being with Stuart had barely touched the surface of Daniel's desires. One hour with Jacob had buried in deep.

This was dumb. It was stupid to get involved with someone, to care about anyone in this soul-numbing war. That was like opening yourself up to be flayed.

And yet how could you help it? They were all closer than brothers, these men he fought beside. And that one man, well, there was nothing brotherly going on there.

As the ringing in his ears eased, Daniel could hear running and purposeful shouting outside the turret. Damage control, getting a fire under wraps. He eased back into his seat, but crossed his arms, tucking his shaking hands under his armpits. He envied those men their purpose, to repair and not to deliver flaming death with the crook of one finger. He'd always hated shooting things. Even as a boy, when his dad had given him the .22 and sent him after the birds damaging the fruit, he'd hated it.

Not that the Japs didn't deserve every bit of whatever hellfire Daniel could deliver. They had asked for it. With a rain of bombs on an unsuspecting island, they had let themselves in for this. In the California's bent-metal screams as she sank, in Steve's blood, and Gordie's, and the fire that had taken so many other shipmates. For Red's missing leg and the gallant ships tossed like broken toys in the harbor they had asked for it. But he sometimes wished he hadn't been as good at matching bugs when they had tested the new recruits, back before he knew where that skill would place him.

The men in the turret were relaxing, as the order to resume fire didn't come. The chief petty officer leaned against the bulkhead, his tanned, lined face slack with fatigue. Daniel's fingers itched for his pencil. He wanted to sketch that, to catch those drooping eyelids and the deep grooves from nose to mouth and the way the man's shoulders slowly sank and eased. He committed it to memory instead. He'd draw it later.

Eventually they secured from general quarters. Daniel found George at his elbow as they headed toward the mess deck. The older man was sweat-stained and rumpled, but he still looked alert and tough as nails. The odd lassitude that had overtaken Daniel since he had taken his hands off the gun controls suddenly vanished. Anxiety clutched at him. He couldn't ask the most important thing first, but he could ask, "What's the word?"

George grunted. "We took some more damage to the number three turret, a fire that was damned close to setting off the powder, and a near-miss that buckled the plates port side near the bow. We'll be pumping out water the whole way to Australia, but it looks like we can stay on top of it."

“And the guys?” *Jacob?*

“We lost a few. I heard fifteen counting yesterday. A bunch more in sickbay. Nothing like what the Japs lost, I’m hoping.”

“Anyone we know?” He tried to be casual.

George just said, “Anyone we don’t know? Shipmates. I’m not gonna list the names. There’ll be a service in the morning.”

“Sorry.”

George smacked his arm. “That’s war. Let’s go get some chow while the getting’s good.”

Daniel nodded, and then remembered, “You said Australia?”

“I heard Townsville.”

“Do you know it?”

“It’s a decent port. Lots of flyboys there, ‘cause of the airfields, and they think they’re better’n us. But lots of girls too. And they all speak English. Well, Australian, which is even worse than that Cockney shit the London dames speak. But they’re cute and you can eat the food. We could do a lot worse.”

“You figure we’re going to get liberty?”

“I’d bet on it. Repairs are going to take at least a week. I figure they’ll let us loose to unwind.”

Daniel tried to hold back a grin, and then realized it was entirely appropriate, as long as no one knew what, or rather who, he was grinning about. “Can’t wait. We’ve been at sea too damned long.”

“You can say that again.” George hip-checked him out of the way to grab a tray first. “Gonna eat and sleep and rest up for it.”

Daniel tried to be subtle about looking around as he got his food and followed George to a table. The mess deck was full of sweaty, tired men. Some ate doggedly, bent over their trays. Some talked in excited voices, still a little too high and fast, hands moving in exaggerated gestures. A few stared at their food, as if the appearance of overcooked peas on a spoon was all-engrossing. Daniel searched for faces. Tom, from the next bunk over, check. Clarence, who’d been

there through Basic and the California and was still with him, check. Rog and Syl, laughing together.

And then there, between Mike and Badger, was Jacob. Unhurt, untouched. Eating slowly, a bemused look on his face. That was probably due to whatever story Badger was telling. Badger had an inexhaustible fund of them, each one dirtier than the last. From the grin on the man's face, he was closing in on a punch line.

Jacob looked up then and found Daniel's attention on him. And for a moment, Jacob's eyes just lit up. Daniel had always thought that was just a figure of speech, something the writers of dime novels put in to sound fancy. But the way Jacob's face went from dull fatigue to just bright and shining... holy God.

Daniel looked away quickly. That was dangerous. That could get them up to their necks in trouble if anyone saw it. But at the same time, that one look was the most precious thing Daniel thought he'd ever been given. He sat down beside George and pulled out his notebook from his pocket. He wanted to draw that, lock it in forever, but instead he began a little sketch of the Lieutenant glued to the periscope. He tried to catch the tension and the excitement in the man's body language. His fingers cramped on the pencil, but he shook them out and persisted, adding one careful line to another.

George said, "Food's getting cold."

"So what? It's peas and mash, cooked to death anyway. It might be better cold."

George bent over to look at the sketch. "Fuck, you're good at that. Artist in civilian life, huh?"

Daniel wasn't putting his ambitions out there to be seen. Anyway, he'd carefully buried all thoughts of where his life might go, locked away deep until the war was over. "Nope, just an amateur. It's just for fun." One more stroke of the pencil, a little smudge with the edge of his finger and it was done. He stowed the notebook away carefully. Paper was precious on board ship, and his fingers still itched to sketch Jacob. He made a silent vow then and there never to draw the man again. Not until it was safe. He bent over his food, suddenly ravenous even for the olive and tan glop on his tray.

But he knew, even without looking, the moment when Jacob bussed his tray and left the mess deck.

three hours later

Jacob clutched his pillow against his chest and stepped carefully between the men stretched out on the deck. Down below, the crew's berths were like an oven, smelling of sweat and smoke. If it was this bad in July, he dreaded to think what full summer was like. They were south of the equator so things should be reversed, right? July was like December or something. This should be the cool season, shouldn't it? He shook his head, unable to keep the thought straight.

Men dozed everywhere, some on mattresses dragged up from below, others with just a blanket and a pillow. The seas were calm, and a soft breeze eased the heat. There were clear spaces he could have parked his blanket, but he walked slowly, looking around. Eventually, in a small cranny well forward, he came across Daniel.

Daniel had chosen a secluded corner, where unevenness of the decking was unwelcoming to other men looking to stretch out and sleep. He sat silently, leaning against the plating of a turret, his pillow and blanket stuffed behind him. His knees were drawn up and he gazed up at the sky, where a half-moon played bluff between wisps of clouds. As Jacob watched he raised his cupped hands to his lips and took a draw on a cigarette, the glow hidden by his palm. Jacob made his way over and sat down carefully, his own bedding on his lap.

"Hey, Trip." Daniel's voice was soft and a little hoarse, as if he'd been coughing.

"Hey, yourself."

"Rough day."

"Oh, yeah."

Daniel leaned a little closer, until his shoulder brushed Jacob's. "You okay?"

Jacob shrugged, feeling the brush of his arm against Daniel's. "I'll live. It was..." He trailed off. He didn't have words for what it had been.

"At least this one is over." Daniel took one more drag, and then flicked the butt over the rail, his eyes still on the sky. "That moon up there, she doesn't care,

you know. Things happen down here, people die, ships sink, and she sails on all white and pretty. I think that's good, you know. That we don't matter too much, in the grand scheme of things."

Jacob wasn't so sure. People should matter, surely? Daniel's fey mood was strange, against the backdrop of steel, and guns, and sleeping men. "Are you... Did someone die?" Where Jacob watched from the sidelines, Daniel always seemed to be in a group. He knew a lot of the men.

"No one special." Daniel coughed and then slowly lowered his eyes to Jacob's face, his voice barely a whisper. "Well, I'm sure they were special to somebody. I was too busy being glad they weren't you."

"Me too. You, I mean. When a new casualty came in, I always looked."

Daniel sighed. "We are sad sacks, aren't we?"

Jacob wouldn't have said that. Confused, exhausted, with the echo of terrified hours still vibrating in his bones, but oddly closer to elated than sad. He glanced around at the empty deck space Daniel had found, and lowered his voice still more, feeling his way in this conversation. "Did you know you were...that way... before you joined up?"

"Oh yes. Since I was pretty young." Daniel's voice had dropped to a breath too. "You didn't?"

"Not 'till Basic. All those naked fellows. I'd figured I was just a late bloomer, and that was why I wasn't interested in girls. But then, damn, fit young men with no clothes on in the showers and in the barracks. When I wasn't exhausted and puking from all the running, or scared out of my wits from the chiefs yelling at us, I was thinking about ice-cubes and dead worms and anything I could to not spring wood every other minute. Even I couldn't deny it after that."

"I knew. From the time I was twelve. I had a...thing for this Mexican kid who came to pick the avocados. And half a dozen other boys after him."

"Did you ever do anything with them?"

"With guys you mean?" Daniel glanced around again and slid a little closer, his mouth near Jacob's ear, his tone muted and private. "Not really. Jerking off with some of the boys from school a couple of times. I think most of them were

normal, though. They just liked to jerk off in company.”

“No one special?”

“There was this one guy. Stuart. Lived down the road from us. We fooled around some. Necking. Hands. Not even as much as...” Daniel barked a soft short laugh that had nothing to do with amusement, and then quieted quickly. “His dad caught us, the third time we went at it in his barn. A few weeks later he was in the Army, and I was in the Navy. The military was going to make *men* out of us.”

“Do you...” *Do you miss him?* “Do you hear from him at all?”

“No. He wasn't that kind of friend. Anyway by the time his dad was done with us, I think Stu went running back to the normal side. He'll do his service, go home, get married and have a bunch of kids. Compared to his dad, mine was almost reasonable.”

“So your family knows.”

“In a don't-think-about-it way. My dad got mad, then he got cold, then he told me I had to get myself straight and serve my country if I wanted to be welcome back home. Of course that was before Pearl, or my mom might have had more to say about sending another son to war. My next-older brother had already joined up. My dad is hoping I'll come out of the Navy normal. My mom is pretending I never was queer in the first place. She sends me little stories about what pretty Maria Caroletti is doing.”

“She wants you to get married.”

“Of course. And give her more grandkids.”

Jacob said tentatively, “But you won't?”

“Make some nice girl really miserable? No.” Daniel shrugged. “I don't tell her that. Let her have the fantasy. After all it won't matter if I never come back.”

“Don't say that!” Jacob punched Daniel's shoulder hard with a closed fist. “Don't ever say that. You hear me?”

Daniel stared at him for a moment and then nodded. “Okay, Trip.” He paused. “You too, then. You promise me you'll make it through.”

Their eyes met, locked and then Daniel gave a soft laugh that was almost a

giggle. “God, sounds stupid, right?”

It sounded vitally necessary, but maybe yeah, stupid too. Jacob let himself relax back against Daniel's arm, leaning in a little more heavily. “What *do* you want to do when the war is over? Will you go back to the farm?” Daniel had talked now and then about the family business, raising fancy produce for the restaurant market. He hadn't seemed like his heart was in it, but the way he talked you could tell he loved his family.

“I don't think about that. I stopped looking that far ahead after... after a while. This war comes first. We have to win it, and it ain't gonna be easy, Jake.”

For once Jacob didn't protest the nickname. He could hear the tightness of Daniel's tone that belied the light words. “I know that.”

“Maybe you do. But a lot of the new guys don't. They come on board thinking that just because we're in it now the war is practically won. My dad used to talk about the Great War, and how that was the same. He and his buddies went over there thinking they would wrap it up fast and come home. But the Germans were tough. Maybe tougher than us. We won 'cause there were more of us. And now we're fighting them again. And the Japs are even worse than the Krauts. We're not gonna be home for Christmas.”

“We'll win it.”

“Have to. No other choice.” Daniel looked down at his hands, clasped loosely on his knees. “Gotta kill them and keep killing them until they go belly up. No other way.” He began rubbing his thumbs as if they ached.

Jacob didn't plan it. Reaching out was instinctive. He took Daniel's fingers between his own to massage them. Daniel made a soft sound of pleasure, and then abruptly drew his hands back. “Don't, Trip. We have to be careful.”

Jacob sat back, glad that the dim moonlight wasn't enough to show his blush. “I wasn't... it was just supposed to be friendly. Anyway I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Not like you.”

Daniel snorted. “Right. The expert. You know, when I joined up, the examiner asked me if I liked girls. I said yeah, I like girls a lot. And I do. They're pretty and soft and smell nice.” He dropped his voice again. “But they don't smell *good*.”

They don't make me want. I know what I am, seems like I always knew. But I'm no expert."

Jacob said carefully, "There were a couple of guys in Basic who were pretty open about it, at least when they were well away from the shore patrol."

"When I was there too. But you know they could only go just so far. A guy could camp it up, prance in wearing just a towel and preening, and the guys would whistle and catcall, say how he was hot stuff. It was okay as long as he was pretending to be playing around. But if they got the idea he was a real fairy, they'd make his life hell. And any kind of touching between two men, that was grounds for big trouble. Although I did hear sometimes about places you could go."

"I wasn't close to being ready to touch a guy in Basic. I was too damned shocked and scared to think about doing anything then. But you already knew what you wanted and the guys were there. And yet you never, um, dated?"

"I dated girls." Daniel tipped his head back and let his eyes droop to half-mast. He kept his voice barely above a whisper, a soft murmur that didn't carry far on the night air. "It was easier. Every time we went out into town there would be these girls hanging around. And a lot of them would flock around me. It was crazy."

Jacob looked at Daniel's profile in the pale moonlight and thought the girls were really pretty sane from his point of view.

"After a while I had a reputation as a ladies' man. If the guys got really pushy, ragging on me, I'd pick out the shyest pretty girl in the club and take her out. We'd have some fun, and then I'd take her home, maybe kiss for a while, and then I'd tell her about this girl back home I was being faithful to. I'd tell this girl how if I ever was going to stray it would have been with her, but she had to help me be strong. And I'd beg her not to tell anyone. Worked like a charm."

"You never... just tried it anyway? With a girl?"

"I couldn't. It was odd, being out with a gal. I'd watch her ass or her cheek and get hard and think 'this is it, I can do this'. And then she'd laugh with that high voice or brush her tits on me and..." He shook his head.

"And once training was over?"

Daniel glanced around and said in a whisper, "I thought maybe. Maybe in

Hawaii. The service club there had a room where you could sit and be around the guys, be quiet, listen to some records. It was supposed to be queer-central. But I didn't get up the nerve before the Japs hit. Afterward everyone was too busy and too sad. So I figured Frisco would be it. Go out with the fellows for a while and then sheer off and find someplace more friendly. But there was a gal flirting with me from the beginning, cute blonde with tits out to here." Daniel demonstrated with cupped hands. "So I did the same thing, took her out, had a good time, begged off to be honorable to the girl back home." His lip curled in self-disgust. "She wanted to do it anyway. She kept saying how my girl would never have to know, and it was unnatural to expect a guy to be celibate for years. She practically had her hand down my pants. But I couldn't go through with it."

"I'm glad," Jacob said, and felt himself blush again.

"Me too."

For a long time they sat silently. The ship rose and fell under them with the pull and ebb of the water. The deck hummed with the odd asynchronous spin of her screws, offset enough to avoid the steady rhythm that would call the Jap subs to her. Men a dozen yards away on the deck snored or muttered, a low restless backdrop. And yet in their little sheltered corner, Jacob felt like they owned a private world.

The clouds disappeared and the moonlight brightened. The waves got a little higher though, lifting the *Gageway* and then dropping her in a deep rocking motion. Daniel said, "We're headed for Australia."

"I heard that. Have you ever been there?"

"Nope. George says it's nice though. Some of the guys think we'll end up in Cid Harbour but George says Townsville and he's usually right."

A slightly deeper plunge of the ship under them made Jacob ask, "You figure we'll make it all the way there?" They could both feel the way the *Gageway* was wallowing, deeper in the water than usual.

"Sure. The pumps are keeping up, at least mostly. And it's only a couple of days."

"She'll need repairs."

“Yeah. We should get liberty for sure, maybe even real leave.” Daniel kept his head tipped up toward the sky and didn't look at Jacob as he asked, “You still interested in doing something?”

For a second Jacob hesitated. He could change his mind? He'd thought he'd committed, in that dark airless space with his face pressed against Daniel's skin. And now unexpectedly Daniel was giving him the chance to take it back. But it was only a second of hesitation. Because Jacob had looked at every burned, bleeding and broken man who had been carried into sickbay with only one thought. *Please, God, don't let it be Daniel.* And each time it hadn't been. Damned if he was going to waste that gift.

“Yeah. I'm still interested.”

“I'll ask, find us a place. Somewhere safe.”

“A hotel you mean?”

“Or a motel, something like that. That okay with you?”

Okay was a pretty tepid way of saying it. Jacob slid the blanket a little further across his lap. “That's fine.”

Slowly Daniel's body beside him slumped, becoming softer and heavier against his arm. “We should find a place to lie down,” Jacob said softly.

“Nah.” He had to struggle to hear Daniel's voice. “This is good.”

The deck was hard, there was no room to fully unbend his knees, and his ass was going to sleep. And they couldn't touch in any way that might look odd to the passing Damage Control guys, who prowled the deck for watching for stray lights. But Jacob held still, as Daniel dropped off leaning on his shoulder. His hand was under the corner of the blanket on Daniel's thigh, heat pressed to heat. And sitting there, exhausted, on a slowly sinking ship with Japanese subs out in the darkness and a thin pillow between him and unforgiving steel, Jacob thought he had never felt better.

CHAPTER 5

Three days later

The sun was low, glancing off the red rock faces of the hill behind the town. Jacob stopped for a moment, right there on the dock and let himself look. This was

Australia. He was halfway around the world from home.

Not that he hadn't been just as far from America on the ship. But the *Gageway* was home. Part of the good ol' US of A that carried them along, insulated from the world. Now there was nothing between his feet and the red dirt of another continent except the soles of his shoes.

He tugged his uniform a little straighter and tipped his cap back. Around him voices were raised, speaking English but in accents and phrases that almost lost the meaning in the strangeness. The other sailors on liberty streamed past as he stood fixed in place, drinking it in. The late afternoon sun was warm but not hot. The air was scented with familiar odors of sea and fish, but there was a tang that spoke of dry air and strange vegetation.

At the end of the dock, past the fence, there was a small crowd of locals. Some were apparently selling things, trinkets and fresh fruit and baked goods. A few of his shipmates clustered round, joking good-naturedly as they bartered for everything and anything. An unfamiliar fruit, a necklace of flowers, it was all good to men who had been cooped up on an old rust bucket for weeks where there was nothing new.

Well, other than Jap torpedoes and airplanes coming in without warning. Jacob shook his head and pushed his thoughts away from the men he'd helped get ready for transport. The battle was over. The slow sad service on the decks under an incongruously blue sky was behind them. The old girl had made it to port without sinking. This was Australia. And Jacob had better things to think about.

So did some of the other fellows, apparently. Among the vendors were quite a few women, dressed just a little low on top and a little high on the bottom. They chattered among themselves, casting glances at the disembarking sailors. And if the look was returned, they might saunter over to laugh and banter with one of the men. And perhaps wander off, arm in arm. It had been a long four weeks at sea.

Jacob suddenly spotted Daniel in a group of men further down the quay. One of the men pushed Daniel toward a pair of pretty girls standing by the gate. Jacob saw Daniel laugh, shove back with equal force, and then head toward the girls.

Jacob thought he should move on, not stare at Daniel. But he stood rooted, watching. The sunlight found the curve of Daniel's cheek and picked red

highlights out in his dark hair. Daniel tipped his head back, laughing at something the blond had said. His hat stayed perched perfectly on his curls, his teeth flashed white between parted lips. He slipped an arm around the girl's waist, bussed her cheek noisily and steered her toward the roadway to town.

Trust him. You have to trust him. And Jacob did, truly. He just wished Daniel had let him in on the details of the plan, rather than a hurried whisper of “Just start walking through town. I'll find you,” as he brushed past down the gangway.

Jacob looked down the road again. Daniel and the girl had already vanished. Nothing to do but follow directions. He struck what he hoped was a nonchalant pose and headed casually off the base. As he stepped through the gates, he was approached left and right. He shrugged off an old woman selling fruit, and a man with hammered silver jewelry. A dark-skinned grandmother offered some kind of pastry from a cart, and the aroma made his mouth water, but he shook his head.

A soft touch on his arm made him jump. “Hey, mate. Want some company? I could show you the town.”

He stepped back quickly, giving the blond girl a smile that felt false on his lips. “No, no thanks. Um, not yet that is.”

She shrugged. “You want something different? I've got some friends around. You like a little dark meat?”

“What? No.” He turned away abruptly and lengthened his stride. Her laughter followed him down the road.

The buildings in Townsville seemed to lean towards white and large. The trees were unfamiliar, their leaves a dusty green unlike the tints of a New Jersey summer. Winter, he reminded himself, it was winter here. The hill rose up behind the buildings, a double red-rock face that climbed sharp and tall, framed by the dull green of the softer slope that rose on the far side. Around him American voices, loud and excited, vied with slower drawling speech. He wanted to turn a corner and get away from the main drag, away from everyone and anyone. But even more, he wanted Daniel to be able to find him. He walked on slowly down the road.

It was almost twenty minutes before Daniel materialized at his elbow. “Got it. Turn left at the next corner.”

Jacob did so, vividly aware of Daniel walking casually at his shoulder. “What

was with the girl?"

"If you need good information, go to a good source. I asked her for the location of a motel that wasn't too nice but not too rough either, where the MPs don't roust people out. Someplace far enough that the whole crew won't be there. I figured she would know."

"And it took you fifteen minutes to ask one question? What did you do, sleep with her first?"

"What the hell?" Daniel stopped dead and stared at him. "What kind of question is that?"

"I don't know," Jacob said miserably. "I'm sorry. I'm stupid."

After a long minute a slow smile spread over Daniel's face. "You were jealous."

"You were slow."

"You were jealous of me and some doxie off the docks."

"Shut up."

"I like it." Daniel started walking again, and swayed just enough to accidentally bump his hip against Jacob's arm. "I want you all hot and bothered."

That wouldn't be a problem, Jacob thought. The sweat was already prickling in his eyes and his shirt clung to his back. His heart was pounding. It wasn't that hot, but he felt odd, a little woozy and disoriented.

"Breathe," Daniel said softly. "It's okay. Take a breath. We don't have to do this."

"I want to." He did. Although it was probably a good thing the motel turned out to be twenty-five minute's more walking. It gave him time to find his balance again.

Even just this was good. Walking with Daniel in a new place. Feeling Daniel steady beside him as they passed the big white buildings of the town center, and then the smaller ones away from the main roads, all built in some undefinable way different from New Jersey's styles. The occasional bird flitted in the trees along the road, and Jacob couldn't identify them by sight or song. The sun dipped lower,

falling to dance between the tops of buildings and trees, leaving Daniel's face now bright with golden light, now dark and shadowed.

They didn't talk. A bump of shoulders and nod of the head drew attention to a flowering shrub or bright-colored bird. Jacob's throat felt dry and his head was light but the sweat dried on his back and the soft breeze loosened his shirt.

Finally Daniel nodded at a place on their left. "Here."

Jacob looked at it. The small run-down motel could have fit on the outskirts of a New Jersey town. The sign promised private baths and low rates. The lit bulbs that ran around the outside of the sign were marred by a dozen dark ones, like a gap-toothed smile. Maybe it just wasn't worth replacing the bulbs, since it would be shut off at night for blackout. The door to the motel office was ajar, and a yellow bug-light burned above it, barely visible in the sunset glow.

"Okay?" Daniel asked.

"Yes. Fine."

"You wait here. I'll go get a key."

Jacob nodded silently. Daniel walked down the path, pulled the dusty door open and stepped inside out of view. Jacob fidgeted, staring around, trying not to look like a man waiting for his male lover to come out with a room key. *Jesus*.

Daniel reappeared and turned left, walking along the row of units. He gave Jacob just a tilt of his head in invitation. Jacob followed slowly. At the very end, Daniel fit the key into the lock. He turned it and then gradually opened the door, so that he was just stepping inside as Jacob caught up to him. Jacob followed him two steps into the room, and Daniel reached past to push the door shut. Jacob's hand brushed Daniel's as they both reached to turn the lock, and he made a sound that was supposed to be a laugh, but lost breath somewhere in the middle. They moved away from the door.

The room was tiny, with one double bed, a dresser, and a narrow door that presumably was the promised private bath. The furnishings were cheap, and the carpet was worn but not too dirty. The single window was covered by black drapes. The fading sun came through in filtered dimness, a single finger of light visible along one edge. Jacob went over and fussed with them, straightening the folds, lining them up well past the limits of the window. The single bright

sunbeam disappeared. He turned to Daniel.

In the darkened room, Daniel was just a moving shadow, lean and mysterious. Jacob laced his fingers behind his back and rocked on his heels, staring uncertainly. Then Daniel stepped toward the bed and snapped on the lamp. "Come here," he said softly.

Jacob went to him obediently. Close, and then closer, moving into Daniel's space as he would not have with any other man. He paused with only inches between them. Over those few remaining inches he could feel Daniel's heat, and smell his skin. The light from the lamp cast odd shadows along Daniel's cheekbones and lit his hazel eyes to amber. Jacob stood still, waiting, frozen.

Daniel reached out slowly and slid warm hands up his arms. Jacob shivered at his touch. As Daniel leaned in to kiss him, Jacob turned his head and leaned back. "What do you think?" His voice was high and breathless. "You figure there are other fellows from the *Gageway* doing this? We can't be the only two on that ship who were waiting for shore leave."

Daniel hesitated. He stopped moving forward but his fingers clasped Jacob's biceps. "You really want to talk about his now?"

"I'm just curious." Jacob shrugged free and turned away to glance at the door. "You know, about whether there are other queers on board. Seems like there must be."

"Well sure. A few I know of, and probably a bunch I don't."

Jacob turned back to him in surprise. "You mean you know some of them? For certain?"

"Jacob, they don't call that last table port-side on the mess deck the fruit basket for nothing. If you can't name at least three of the guys, you haven't been paying attention."

"Do they know you?" Jacob swallowed. "Do you think they know about me?"

"Probably. And probably not. It's kind of recognition, the way a man looks in your eyes or smiles that tells the tale. You don't look anyone in the eyes half the time, so you're likely safe." Daniel took a step to close the distance between them again. "Trip, it's okay if you don't want to do this."

“No. I want to.” He'd been hard for the last hour, thinking about it. He tried for a casual laugh. “I just don't know what the hell I'm doing.”

“Nor do I. Not really. But we're a couple of smart guys. I'm guessing we can figure it out.”

“You think so?” He meant it to be a joke but it came out breathless.

“I'm betting on it. We could start with this.” Daniel leaned forward and this time Jacob met the kiss halfway.

It was better than he remembered. Here in this quiet room, with the door locked and time suspended, Daniel's mouth filled his senses. He heard himself gasp, soft and needy, as Daniel caught his shoulders and drew him close. It wasn't perfect. They bumped noses, changing angles. His lips were bruised against Daniel's teeth. Daniel's tongue was wet as it traced from his lips to his chin. And yet even the imperfections made it real. He was here, in this place with Daniel. This was not imagination, not a dream, but wetness and heat and short breath and the strength of Daniel as they pressed together in the dim lamplight.

After a long time, Daniel broke the kiss and reached to brush Jacob's hair off his forehead. “What would you say to getting undressed?”

Jacob swallowed. “Yes?” His whole body was just about shrieking, *hell, yes!*

Daniel reached for the top button of Jacob's pants. “Help me out here.”

Jacob pulled his jersey over his head. “How can you be so calm?” he muttered.

Daniel's laugh was almost soundless. He let go of the button and held out his hands. His slim strong fingers trembled slightly.

Suddenly Jacob felt a wave of tenderness. That was so like Daniel, pretending to be cool when he was shaken. Jacob caught Daniel's hands in his own, kissed the tip of one finger and then sucked it into his mouth. He kept his eyes fixed on Daniel's as he worked with his tongue, licking and sucking. Their breaths caught in unison. Daniel's eyes darkened.

“God, that's too much. Stop. Let me...” Words failed them, but the tension was broken. They fumbled together, unbuttoning, kicking off shoes, stripping socks, Jacob's clothes and Daniel's falling discarded to the floor. Until they were both standing there in their skivvies.

Daniel reached over and pulled the sheets down on the bed. “Come on.” Slowly but without hesitation, he stripped off his underwear. Jacob's eyes were drawn inexorably to Daniel's hard erection, almost feeling rather than seeing the bob and pull as Daniel freed himself from the last of his clothing. Daniel held out his hand. “Come to bed, Trip.”

Jacob couldn't help dropping his eyes to the floor as he gave up that last vestige of his modesty. Naked, aroused and breathing shallowly, he climbed onto the other side of the bed.

“Very nice.” Daniel slid over toward him and put a warm hand on his hip.

Jacob kept his eyes on Daniel's strong hairy chest, “I'm not big like some guys.”

“You look perfect to me.” Daniel moved closer, shifting and sliding down to fit their bodies together, naked skin on skin. The next kiss was different. A simple kiss became something else when the press of Daniel's mouth was combined with the warm slide of his rough palms down Jacob's back, and the steel-in-silk poke of his erect cock against Jacob's hip. Jacob gasped and squirmed, trying to get closer still. The rasp of Daniel's hairy chest across his pecs and the hard weight of Daniel's thigh thrown over his hip felt unfamiliar and yet perfectly right.

Jacob pushed Daniel's shoulders to the mattress and wriggled over, trapping Daniel underneath him. Daniel gave a delighted laugh and fisted in Jacob's hair to pull his mouth down. Jacob kissed him almost blindly, driving his hips down against the yielding strength of Daniel's belly. Daniel's legs came up around his thighs. They thrust together in grunted asynchronous rhythm.

Jacob thought there must be something else, something he should be doing. He wasn't totally ignorant about sex, even if this was beyond his experience in every way. But he lost track of thought, of *should* and *ought to*, in the drive of his body against Daniel's. Every sense was overloaded. There were the sounds Daniel made, pressing back up in equally frantic demand. There was the wet eager plunge of Daniel's tongue in Jacob's mouth. There was the smell of man and sweat and cigarettes and salt water on skin. Daniel's hands moved from Jacob's hair to his ass, digging in with a force that would leave bruises, as they tried to get closer, harder, faster.

And then Daniel groaned deep in his throat, and Jacob felt the sticky slick of Daniel's cum spill between them. And it was enough, more than enough. Jacob arched his back, his mouth dropping open, as he came against Daniel's body in sharp, blinding arcs. The climax spasmed through him, taking away breath and sight. Until he dropped emptied and boneless on Daniel and was caught and held in the circle of Daniel's arms.

Slowly, their breathing eased. Jacob nuzzled in against Daniel's hair, hiding his face in the soft, dark strands. Daniel's arms eased their grip around him. One rough fingertip traced Jacob's back, from the nape of his neck to the hollow above his ass, and Jacob shivered in response.

Daniel's voice said dryly in his ear, "Well, I think we're queer all right."

Jacob choked. "You weren't sure?"

"I knew about me. You could have just had too many months at sea."

"Dummy." Jacob kissed his ear, the only bit he could reach without moving a muscle.

"So you're okay?"

"Not the word I would have used." Jacob shifted, becoming aware of stickiness, and a bruise on his ass, and the way his dick was pressed against a hard hip-bone. And yet it was blissful form of discomfort. It marked him, past the point of no return. "We should clean up."

"Right." Daniel didn't move a muscle.

After a long pause, since it was obviously going to be up to him, Jacob edged sideways, past the reluctant barrier of Daniel's thigh, and rolled over to sit up on the bed.

Daniel looked at him, splayed out in naked abandon. The lamplight caught the glisten of fluids on pale skin above his dark curls. The tan of his face and arms faded to light olive in all the critical places. Jacob couldn't pull his eyes away. Even Daniel's cock, softened and smaller against the groove of his thigh, was perfect.

"They said private baths. Do you think they meant it?" Daniel asked.

"I'll go look."

It was good to get up and walk across the faded carpet, rough under his bare feet. To go into the little bathroom, which had no bath but did include a tiny shower. Jacob closed the door for a moment and leaned across the sink, looking at himself in the mirror. *Who are you now?* His lips were redder and fuller than he had ever seen them, his cheeks were flushed as if sandpapered, his eyes looked back at him, large and dark, and a little dazed. *Who are you?*

Daniel stared at the closed bathroom door. The air on his sweat-damp skin began to feel chilled. He hesitated for a moment, not wanting to dirty the sheets, and then thought, *hell, they're used to spunk on the sheets, I'm sure*. He pulled the covers up over his body.

He wished Jacob had left the door open. Or stuck his head out and said, "Just gonna take a piss." Or done anything but disappear into silence.

Daniel was comfortable with who he was. Well most of the time. Sex with Jacob, even this fumbling frantic press of bodies they had found together, had been his goal for weeks now. Months. Hell, he'd practically worn out his right hand thinking about it. And it had been incredible. He'd come harder than ever before in his life. And then holding Jacob afterward, listening to Jacob's breathing slow down, feeling the pounding of his heart ease against Daniel's own chest – that had been heaven.

He was scared out of his mind that it hadn't been the same for Jacob. Maybe for all Jacob's eagerness it had been too much too soon. Maybe Daniel should have waited. Or maybe he should have dropped to his knees right at the beginning and figured out how to blow the man. Given him something familiar, something not so far from sex with a girl.

He slid his hand up and down his own thigh, feeling the roughness of his own curly hair, the hard shape of muscle. It had been exactly right for him, to have a body so much like his own top him, press him down into the bed and drive him over. No girl's soft perfumed curves had ever made him as hard as the slightest brush of Jacob's hairy leg against his own. So what would he do if Jacob wanted to walk away?

The sun was probably down outside. The light coming past the curtains had

faded. The lamp on the little bedside stand threw shadows on the wall. There was a rip in the shade. The odd curved shape it cast was like a seagull, or maybe a cormorant, broad wings spread. He was still debating the point when the bathroom door opened.

“There's a shower,” Jacob said.

“Do you want first turn?” Daniel asked carefully.

“I thought we might save water, squeeze in together?” Jacob blushed and looked down.

Daniel's laugh was more carefree than he could remember in months. “We could try.” He threw back the covers and rolled out of bed.

They did try, and had to give it up as impossible. Daniel stood outside the stall, half of him dripping wet, as Jacob hurriedly soaped and rinsed. When Jacob came out and tried to step aside, Daniel grabbed his arm and pulled him in for a kiss. He licked the water droplets off Jacob's upper lip and then handed him a threadbare towel. “Hold that thought. The first hotel we find with a decent shower, we'll do this again.”

He stepped under the meager trickle of water and washed rapidly, rapping his elbows on the tile as he scrubbed and rinsed. When he stepped out, Jacob held out a towel shyly. Daniel took it, gave his hair a rough scrub, dropped the towel on the floor, and reached for Jacob's hand. “Come on. We have hours left. Mustn't waste them.”

At the bed he pushed Jacob down on his back and climbed over him. Daniel straddled Jacob's thighs, weight on his hands and knees, and looked up and down Jacob's body slowly. Jacob's hands fluttered toward his groin, as if in some reflex of modesty, and then fell away. As Daniel watched, Jacob's cock rose and filled. That was so sweet, that his Trip got hard just from the look in Daniel's eyes. Deliberately, Daniel licked his lips, eyes fixed on Jacob's groin. Jacob's erection bounced in response. Mmm.

Daniel slid lower in the bed and bent to kiss Jacob's chest. Jacob said, “You don't... If you've never...” like he was trying to let Daniel off the hook even as his fingers twined into Daniel's hair. Daniel slid his lips over Jacob's pecs, feeling the soft ruffle of sparse hair against his mouth. Jacob was skinny, his ribs outlined just

beneath that fine skin, his belly concave. Daniel played across Jacob's body with his lips and tongue tip. Thoughts fizzed through his mind like champagne, that he had the right, the safety, the time to do this. That it was Jacob under him, with his shy dark eyes and that mouth. He licked one of Jacob's pink nipples and felt it crinkle under his tongue. Jacob's fingers tugged harder at his hair. Daniel looked up to find Jacob watching him.

“Daniel? Um...”

The man wanted to talk. Laughter bubbled in Daniel's chest, but sure, why not. There was time and safety for this too.

“What?”

“What you're doing. I, um, I like it.”

“I can tell.”

Apparently a blush could go all the way down to a guy's nipples. Daniel kissed the point where the red skin faded to pale,

“Yes, but, should I be doing something too?” Despite his deep flush, Jacob went on steadily. “I don't know the first thing about this, but it doesn't seem quite fair.”

Daniel smiled at him. “I'm no expert but I'll tell you what. How about you let me have fun first, and then it will be your turn?”

“This is *you* having fun?”

“Absolutely.” And that was nothing but the truth. There wasn't anything in the world better than this. Daniel used his fingertips and his mouth to explore Jacob's body. This was his new world of planes and valleys, of soft skin, pale from never seeing the light, of a smoke of dark coarse curls that held a man's musky scent even after a shower. He fingered along jutting hipbones and down deep grooves that arched from hip to groin. Jacob made a sweet, low sound as Daniel cupped his hard erection between his palms. Daniel bent and licked along one of those hip-grooves again and Jacob jolted, crying out softly as Daniel's tongue reached his shaft.

“You don't have to.”

“Hush.” Slowly, Daniel traced that hard shaft upward with his tongue, reveling

in the ridged satin of veins under fine skin. This. This was what he'd imagined, alone in the dark, so many times. In the memory of a dozen showers full of naked men, Jacob might not seem big, but he was fine and straight, and when Daniel closed his lips over the head of Jacob's cock the sound Jacob made was almost enough to bring Daniel off right there.

Daniel sucked him, slowly. He had no idea how this was supposed to go, but as best as he could he mimicked the motion of a pumping hand with his mouth. Jacob was leaking fluid, a sweet-salt taste in Daniel's mouth. As Daniel slid up and down, mouth as tight as he could make it, Jacob moaned with each motion. Daniel tried to go all the way down, choked a little, and slipped a hand around the base of Jacob's cock instead. His spit slicked Jacob's skin, his hand slid over that wetness, and he sucked hard, meeting his closed fingers with his lips to engulf Jacob in damp heat.

Jacob cried out and grabbed Daniel's head, shaking hard as his cock jerked and filled Daniel's mouth. Daniel swallowed valiantly, trying to take all of this, all that Jacob could give him. Vanilla and salt and a tang that was Jacob's own flavor slid over his tongue.

"Oh, God. Daniel. Oh, God," Jacob murmured. His hands fell away from Daniel's head to lie limply on the sheets. Gently Daniel let Jacob's softening cock slide from between his lips. He felt smug and tender and horny, all at the same time. He sat up enough to move alongside Jacob, kissing his way up from hip to chest to cheek. His mouth left little wet smears on Jacob's skin. Daniel liked that look.

"That was incredible," Jacob murmured. "You have no idea."

"I'm hoping to find out," Daniel quipped.

For just a moment, Jacob's whole body got rigid. Then he said tightly, "Yes. Of course."

Damn. Daniel gritted his teeth. If he said nothing, Jacob would almost certainly go down on him in return. Out of fairness. Which was worse than never getting blown.

He rolled onto his back and took one of Jacob's hands, guiding it to his aching cock. "Stroke me, Trip. That's all I want right now. Let me feel your hands on

me.”

“Really? Just that?”

“Just that,” Daniel lied. “I really have a thing for your hands.” Well, that at least was true.

But it was worth it to see Jacob's face brighten eagerly. Daniel lay back in his turn and let Jacob explore. And there was absolutely *nothing* wrong with having Trip's hands on him, having those male fingers stroke over his chest, rub across his nipples, and then trace down to take his hardness in hand. Jacob pumped him firmly, a little dry, a little too gentle.

Daniel grabbed one of Jacob's hands, pulled it to his mouth and licked it, and then put it back down on himself. “Harder, Trip.”

Ah. That. Daniel wanted to watch Jacob's face, but his eyes drifted shut as the pulsing heat of climax mounted. There. He was almost there.

Then Jacob's hands paused, squeezing, and Daniel felt a soft damp touch on the head of his dick. Daniel's eyes flew open. Jacob stared into his face, his gaze intent. Then, without moving his eyes from Daniel's, he lowered his head just enough to place another soft kiss on the slick head of Daniel's cock. And Daniel came in sheer blinding pleasure.

His semen shot out in thick jets, hitting Jacob's mouth and his cheek and dripping over his fingers. Jacob stared at him, eyes wide, as shiny cum slid down his face. Daniel held his breath, wanting that picture, just that forever. Then a last spurt caught Jacob under the chin. Daniel groaned in pleasure and then began to laugh in soft, hopeless affection.

“Look at you.”

Jacob colored again, but before he could back off or say anything Daniel sat up swiftly and grabbed him. He hugged Jacob tight, rubbing their cheeks together, feeling the sticky and the soft, the rasp of stubble and the warmth of skin. “God. You, Jacob. Look at you. Perfect. You're perfect.”

“I'm not.” Despite his words, Jacob put his arms around Daniel and returned the hug. “I'm really not. And I didn't do half of what you did.”

“Damned good thing. You'd have about killed me.” Daniel relaxed his hold

enough to find Jacob's mouth and kiss it. "We'll both get better at this, I'm thinking. With practice. Lots of practice. Although right now better doesn't seem physically possible."

Jacob was almost melting into Daniel's arms, muscles softer every minute. "It really was all right?"

"You're wearing the proof." Daniel laughed at Jacob's renewed color. "God, Trip, we're going to have to get you over this being shy thing. We'll have a problem if you blush every time I talk to you."

"Only when you say stuff like that." But Jacob shrugged free and swung around to sit on the edge of the bed. He turned his back to Daniel, reaching for the sheet to wipe his face. His shoulders were taut again.

Daniel cursed his big mouth and Jacob's skittishness. "I wouldn't say that when there's anyone around. Trust me."

"I know." Jacob wiped his hands too, and glanced over his shoulder at Daniel. "Now what?"

Daniel lay back down, stretching ostentatiously. "Depends. Are you more hungry, or more sleepy?"

"Not hungry."

"Me neither." Food was always available on board, even when they spent most of their time at general quarters. But real sleep had become almost a mirage the last week. "Come on then. Lie down." Daniel rolled on his side, and held out a hand, trying to look winsome. Some girl had once told him he was irresistible when he used that little-boy smile. "Come to bed, Trip. We have hours yet. I want to hold you while I sleep."

"If you're asleep, you won't even know I'm here," Jacob said grumpily, but he swung his legs back up on the bed and settled gingerly on his side facing Daniel.

"I'll know," Daniel said softly. "Roll over." He reached out, moving slowly so Jacob wouldn't spook, and turned Jacob over. Daniel slid in close, until his chest pressed against Jacob's back, while a safe six inches or so separated his groin from Jacob's ass. Jacob stiffened for a moment, and then relaxed when Daniel didn't move closer. Daniel nuzzled his face in against Jacob's shoulder and wrapped an

arm around his chest. "G'night, Trip."

He was almost asleep when he heard Jacob murmur, "Good night, Daniel."

Jacob lay still, listening to Daniel breathe in hoarse slumber against his neck. Jacob had been exhausted for the last three days, and then had the best sex of his life. Well, the only sex of his life that hadn't involved his own hand, but he couldn't imagine anything better. He should be snoring too. Instead he was wide-awake.

He wasn't used to sharing a bed. That was probably part of it. For all the close quarters on board ship, there was generally a few inches of personal space around him. This press of another man against him was strange. This wasn't even sexual, exactly. Daniel's naked chest was plastered against his bare back but it was more like a hug. But Jacob was suddenly claustrophobic under the weight of Daniel's limp, heavy arm. And it was hot, even with the sun down. He felt moisture trickling down the small of his back. His hair clung to his forehead, damp with sweat, or maybe other things.

Carefully he moved away from Daniel, inch by inch. Daniel slept on as their bodies separated and Jacob breathed in silent relief as the cooler air touched his shoulders. He lifted Daniel's arm, slipped out from under, and lowered it to the bed. Daniel muttered something and his hand moved randomly. Then he fisted in the thin fabric covering the pillow and stilled again. Jacob eased out of the bed and stood up.

It felt odd, standing there naked with someone else in the room, but it felt stupid to dress when the person was someone he'd had sex with. He settled for pulling on his skivvies. He walked silently to the window and pulled the drapes aside just an inch on one side. Just enough to allow him to put one eye to the gap and see out.

The sun had set while they were otherwise occupied. The sky was dark, and if there was any hint of lingering color it must have been behind him. In front of him was only darkness. A few stars were visible. He didn't recognize any constellations, and anyway it was the southern hemisphere so they would all be different. Stars had never been his thing. Brian had been the one with the

telescope, the one who talked about traveling to the moon, the one who knew all the constellations back when they were ten.

Which was about the last time he'd shared a bed with anyone, Jacob realized. Those nights when Brian had defied the lights-out rule to come crawl into his bed and talk and plan, while Jacob listened and tried not to fall asleep before his twin got done talking. Somewhere around the time they were both eleven or twelve they began to grow apart and the nighttime chats stopped.

Jacob wondered now whether it had had anything to do with him. With his being queer. He'd just assumed at the time that Brian had outgrown him. Brian had a lot of friends and wide-ranging interests that Jacob could no longer keep up with. But maybe it had been something else. Maybe Brian had sensed that Jacob was different. Maybe getting into bed at night with a brother who was turning into some kind of queer had felt wrong to Brian.

That was paranoia. Jacob knew it. Unfortunately once he'd had the thought he couldn't erase it from his mind. Brian had liked girls. He'd been just fifteen the first time he'd come home and bragged to Jacob about getting his hands under a girl's blouse. Sixteen when he'd apparently done a whole lot more than that. Jacob had nodded and applauded mechanically, and wondered why he himself was such a slow bloomer. Maybe Brian had felt some inking of why. By the time they were seventeen he'd stopped telling Jacob anything personal.

Jacob let the curtain fall back over the window and leaned against the wall. He closed his eyes. He'd made his choice. He'd thought this would be it. He was queer. He'd had sex with a man. He'd really, really enjoyed sex with a man. With Daniel. So why didn't he feel any different from when he walked in that door two hours earlier?

Why did he suddenly want to run not walk back to the ship and pretend this had never happened? Brian was dead. He would never know, never care. And Father and Mother... Jacob wrenched his thoughts away from that path. He was half a hemisphere away from home. Surely here if anywhere in the world he could be himself.

Daniel's soft voice said, "Jacob?"

He opened his eyes warily. Daniel hadn't moved, other than to roll up on one

arm. He lay stretched on the bed looking at Jacob, his eyes warm in the lamplight. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Nope." He clutched at the straw. "It's hot."

"It's been hotter on the *Gageway*." Daniel stripped the covers down to bare the mattress. He slid to the edge of the bed and patted the empty side of the mattress. "Come and stretch out at least."

Jacob reluctantly pushed away from the wall and eased onto the bed. He felt faintly ridiculous not taking off his shorts, with Daniel stretched out naked and gorgeous, but he left them on anyway. He folded his arms behind his head and stared at the circle of lamplight on the ceiling.

Daniel murmured, "You want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"You want me to suck you off again?"

Jacob could feel his whole body come to attention at the picture that presented, but he said, "No. Not right now. Thank you."

Daniel's laugh was short. "You want to go back to the *Gageway* and pretend you never met the queer guy who corrupted you?"

"No!" He turned to stare at Daniel. Daniel's eyes were calm but his mouth had a rueful twist. "I don't think that. Nothing like that. I told you I knew what I was halfway through Boot Camp."

"But?"

"I wish I wasn't." It came out in a rush.

"Ah. I can't help you with that. Being the same way myself and all."

"Do you ever wish differently? I mean, you seem so... so comfortable with it. So not bothered by it. Don't you ever think it would be easier to be normal?"

"Sure I do." Daniel's voice was bleak. "I stood in front of my father while he told me I was a degenerate and a disgrace to the family and that the Navy had damned well better make a man out of me or I wasn't welcome back home. Of course I've wished I was normal. But it's not going to happen. I've known since I was a kid that it was going to be boys for me. Or men."

“So what do we do?”

“Well, I know what I want to do.” Daniel sat up in the bed but made no move toward Jacob. “I want to get another three or four hours of sleep. And then I want to take you in my mouth again and give you the best blow job you've ever had.”

“I meant after that.”

“After that you can return the favor.”

“Daniel!”

Daniel sighed. “I don't know. If you mean long term, when we get home, what do we do, then I don't know. We have to be careful, that's for damned sure. If they catch us, it's not just a discharge, it might be the brig. Or even prison. But one thing I *do* know. There's a war on. Those men on the California, they didn't know on that Saturday night that by Sunday evening they would be dead. Normal or queer, it didn't matter. Given the choice, don't you think they would have rather had this, what we have in this room, than died without it?”

“I guess so.”

Daniel tried for a smile. “If I'm going to float around on the Pacific waiting for Jap planes and subs and torpedoes, then I'd rather have as much fun as I can along the way, before I buy the farm.”

“Don't say that. You're not going to die.”

“I hope not. But I wouldn't bet my last dime against it. And if I do, I want to go out knowing I actually lived first.”

Jacob nodded slowly. Then he kept just nodding, because it made sense and yet he couldn't wrap his mind around it. He wanted this. God, did he want it. He'd been thinking of nothing else whenever he had a private moment for the last few weeks. And yet he was still lying here staring at the ceiling while Daniel lay an arm's length away. What kind of coward did that make him? Why did the picture of his own father saying *degenerate* and *perversion* suddenly seem so real?

“Come on, Jacob,” Daniel said quietly. “Just get some rest. It's too dark to find your way across town now anyway. I won't touch you. Relax and sleep a while.”

Suddenly dizzy with fatigue, Jacob rolled on his side and tried to do as he was

told. The sheets were soft under him. True to his word, Daniel lay along the far side of the bed, a careful distance away. Jacob stretched out his legs, feeling almost as if the bed was swaying. His world was swaying. What was real?

All that time on the *Gageway* had taken him farther from his father's house and the store and his college classes than he had realized. And he wasn't sure there was a way back. He'd joined up in dogged determination to take Brian's place. To do his duty, to make the Japs pay, maybe to become the man his brother had been before returning home to the weight of his father's expectations. But every day he was drifting further from that course. Who would he be, by the time this thing was over?

Long minutes dragged by. Eventually Daniel said, "This doesn't have to go any further, you know. Being here with me, it doesn't commit you to anything." All trace of sleepiness had vanished from his voice. He sounded tight and controlled.

Jacob lay there like a stupid, silent log.

Daniel reached out carefully and switched off the lamp. In the sudden heavy darkness he said, "You should get some rest. Don't worry about things, all right? We can just be shipmates from here on. I won't tell. Lots of guys take a fling, maybe, and decide it's not for them. I know not everyone..."

"Shut up." Jacob hated hearing Daniel backing away carefully from demanding the things he had a right to expect after the last two hours. That tentative care suddenly made Jacob feel stupid. This was the man he had prayed for each time the *Gageway* shuddered from the near miss of a torpedo or rang with the strike of rounds against her deck. For a moment Jacob was back there in sickbay, with the smell of blood and shit. Back in the moment when they brought Troy in with his face a bloody mask, and his hair so like Daniel's. And as he ran to help, Jacob had felt the catch of his heart in his throat, the thought, "We never had the chance..."

Things might look different in the morning, but it was still night now, and they had both survived to come to this place. Jacob reached over, took one of Daniel's hands between his own, clutched it to his chest like a teddy bear, and tried to find that elusive thing called sleep.

CHAPTER 6

November 1942

The *Gageway* heaved and rolled in the grip of a powerful storm. With slowly improving skill, Jacob timed his steps down the passage so he only rarely rebounded off the bulkheads like a marble in a chute. His stomach lurched a little, but at least he wasn't one of the poor fellows who lay groaning from sea-sickness in their hammocks. There was nothing good to give them. The doc handed out ginger, and some of the fellows thought it helped. But there were a few of the men who had clearly joined the wrong branch of the service. A couple had even ended up in sick bay with a tube in their arms for dehydration from all the vomiting.

At least Jacob's watch was over. Working for four hours around those guys had come close to doing him in himself, even though he'd grown up with summers around boats on the Jersey shore. He'd had to make his way on deck and spend fifteen minutes in the fresh air and salt spray, until ordered below by one of the deck crew. The storm was continuing to pick up strength, and the decks were awash with water.

Jacob thought ruefully that this was his last clean uniform, now stiffening with salt to the knees as it dried. He would have gone back, undressed, and fallen into his berth but it was a Tuesday and they weren't at general quarters. Which meant that Daniel would be waiting for him in the linen storage locker. In four months they had found a rhythm for this... thing they were doing.

There wasn't much privacy and there wasn't much time. Some days the most they got was a brush of shoulders and a quiet hello, as they passed on their separate duties. Sometimes they were at general quarters for day after day, catching sleep with a pillow and blanket thrown down where they could find space, and didn't even have that much. But if there was no duty and it was a Tuesday, the storeroom was a small piece of heaven.

It was risky. Damned risky. That door didn't lock, although Daniel had a bit of wooden wedge they could jam in next to the latch. But since it opened outward, that wasn't as secure as it might have been. They mostly kissed, and touched, hands eager and becoming ever more skilled in bringing each other off rapidly. They stayed fully clothed, even though Jacob sometimes ached for the sight of Daniel's skin. Nothing too obvious. So that someone stumbling upon them might

turn a blind eye.

Actual sodomy was a different story. A couple of men had ended up in the brig, two months ago. They'd been taken off the ship in chains, headed for the stockade, and maybe a prison sentence. Jacob hadn't dared look them in the eye, for fear of what he would see. That night Daniel had cried, standing at the port rail. Jacob had been oddly grateful for Daniel's breakdown, because in trying to be the strong one for a change he'd gotten over the feeling that he might puke, or scream. He still sometimes remembered those men at odd moments, and felt his skin crawl.

So as much as Jacob loved the thought of dropping to his knees for Daniel in that small dark space, he was even more scared of it. And he'd never let Daniel do it for him. Even though after that night Daniel had been paradoxically angry enough to be fearless, and willing.

Willing. God. Jacob couldn't keep a smile off his face, thinking about their last leave. Daniel was a genius at finding them a place, passing Jacob a slip of paper with an address or directions. There was nothing better in the world than wandering down some dusty road under a foreign sky, the wind brushing unfamiliar scents across his skin, and rounding a corner to see Daniel lounging at ease outside a room. Strolling casually over a few minutes later to tap on the door. And being admitted to a private space and Daniel's arms, and usually minutes later Daniel's mouth.

Jacob sped up his steps and tried to steer his mind to icebergs and weevils and being naked in front of his great-uncle. Because if he kept thinking about Daniel he would be walking these halls with the biggest hard-on ever. He tugged casually at his pants as he passed a couple of radio operators, headed for the mess deck. Intent on food, they didn't give him a second look. Maybe there was an advantage to not being built too big. Now Daniel... Jacob loved the size of Daniel in his hands, in his mouth, once he got up the nerve to take him there... Damn, that was not helping.

He turned the corner, heading away from the main passageway. Only another hundred yards. The door beckoned to him, just one in a dozen like it. His patch of heaven. He put his hand on the knob, hearing a faint rustle of sound from inside. Daniel had arrived first, as usual. He pulled the door open.

Two faces stared out at him. Neither one was Daniel. He had just a moment to register Sutter's bulk bent over, Neil's bare ass white in the light from the passage, before he slammed the door shut again and backed away. *Shit. Shit!*

He turned and walked off as far as the main passageway before pausing to put his shoulders to the bulkhead. The ship heaved and dropped, as if trying to dislodge him. What now? He wasn't going to say anything, obviously. He wanted them to know that. He had a flash of the look on Neil's face, pale as a ghost looking back over his shoulder as Jacob stood in the doorway. *Shit.* The guy had to be scared as hell. But Jacob didn't know what to do about it.

And what if Daniel walked in on them? Right now they wouldn't be thinking much about why Jacob had been there, even if he had no good reason to be digging in the linen storeroom in the middle of a storm. But if Daniel showed up right after, well, with what they were doing they would probably get the right idea. Certainly Sutter would. He was older, and no fool. Jacob tipped his head back and winced as his motion combined with the roll of the ship knocked his noggin hard against the bulkhead.

"Trying to knock yourself out before we even get started?" Daniel's voice was soft with affection.

Jacob straightened fast. "No. God. This way." He reached for Daniel's sleeve and then dropped his hand.

Daniel followed obediently at Jacob's shoulder. "Problem?" he breathed.

"The space was occupied."

Daniel choked a little laugh. "Ah. Who?"

"Sutter and Neil."

"Neil's got a nice ass." Daniel's eyes twinkled as Jacob shot him a look of annoyance. He held up a hand. "I'm just saying so. Although I wouldn't have thought he would go with Sutter. What were they doing?"

Jacob pressed his lips together.

Daniel snorted again. "You're blushing. I thought I cured you of that. It must have been good."

"Um..."

“Really good?”

Jacob suddenly saw the picture again in his mind's eye, Sutter arched over Neil as the younger man braced himself on the bulkhead. The one pump of Sutter's hips downward, pressing deep, before they froze in the light. Jacob's breath caught. “It was pretty cracked of them, to take that kind of chance.” He wished his scorn didn't have an undercurrent of envy in it. He and Daniel had never done that, never even talked about it, although sometimes afterward, lying with Daniel spooned in his arms, he'd wondered if maybe someday they would.

“It was risky, anyway,” Daniel said thoughtfully. “Damn, I could drive nails and it seems like that's not in the cards for tonight.”

“Shut up,” Jacob said roughly. Because it damned well wasn't. The reminder of how easily they could get caught should have been ice water on his sex drive, but that little glimpse seemed to be having the opposite effect. And the sound of Daniel's regretful voice at his shoulder wasn't helping.

Daniel laughed. “We'd better split up. Won't be too long for us anyway. George says we're headed for Espiritu Santo, and some liberty.” Another deep roll of the ship that threw both of them against the starboard bulkhead made him add, “As long as this storm doesn't decide to become a hurricane.”

Jacob straightened, rubbing his shoulder. “Where the hell is Espirit whatever?”

“How would I know? As long as there are hotels, I don't care.”

“Mm.” Jacob could agree with that. Join the Navy and see the world. All he wanted to see was the inside of some safe little room. That would be better than the storeroom even if it did mean waiting. Which brought his mind back to where it had been. He said carefully, “Have you ever thought about trying...?”

“Trying what?” Apparently the heating of Jacob's damned fair skin was giving Daniel a clue, because his steps slowed. There were voices up ahead. Daniel said softly, “I guess I've thought about it. You?”

There was no time and it was certainly not something he was going to talk about in an open passageway. But before he stepped away from Daniel to head back to his own berth, Jacob nodded. Maybe a little too hard, because Daniel's chuckle followed him down the passageway.

He was stripped to his skivvies and about to turn in when a big hand tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and found himself looking at Sutter.

“Can I have a word with you somewhere?”

Jacob hesitated, wondering for just a moment if the grim expression on Sutter's face could be a threat. The man was huge, hard-muscled and black-browed, with a good ten years and probably fifty pounds over Jacob, and the penalty hanging over Sutter was a serious one, if Jacob had intended to tell an officer what he'd seen.

But Sutter dropped his hand and just stood there stiffly. Jacob nodded. He followed Sutter through the room, being fended off, sometimes good-naturedly, sometimes with impatience as the ship's motions jolted him into the other men. He noted with envy that Sutter instinctively matched the pitch and yaw, picking his way between the hammocks to the door.

Sutter turned to port-side, working his way aft until they found a secluded spot. The growl of the laboring engines, and the creaks and groans of the old ship as she flexed in the high seas, covered their voices. Sutter put his back to the bulkhead and cleared his throat. “So. I don't know what you thought you saw...”

Well, that was easy. Maybe Jacob could finish this right now. “Nothing. Didn't see a thing.”

He turned away but Sutter's big hand wrapped around his forearm. “Wait.”

Jacob glanced down at the grease-stained fingers on his arm, and Sutter let go quickly. “Sorry. Sorry, I just want to talk to you.”

“Look, you don't need to worry, all right? I'm not going to say anything. Tell Neil...” He bit off his words, but Sutter sighed harshly.

“So you did see.”

Jacob shrugged.

“Look, I know it looks bad and you probably can't stand to be around me but he's just a kid, all right? If you say anything, if you even start treating him badly...”

Jacob shook his head, searching for the right words without exposing himself. “There's a war on. We're all stuck on this rust bucket for weeks at a time. Personally I don't care if he fucks goats, as long as he does his share of the job. It's

none of my business. No one will know different from me.”

“That's pretty big of you,” Sutter said gratefully. “I can stand the heat, if it comes out, but it would about kill him.”

“Might think about somewhere safer than a locker then,” Jacob suggested irritably. He wanted the hell away from this conversation.

“Yeah. That won't be necessary. It won't happen again, I swear it. Just don't say anything and I promise, that will be the last time.”

There was something so wrong about this big hard man supplicating him. Jacob muttered, “Not my business,” again and turned away abruptly. At the corner he looked back. Sutter was staring after him, anxiety not fully erased from his face. Jacob cursed under his breath and staggered his way back to his bunk.

four days later

Daniel stretched out on the double bed carefully. He hoped Jacob wasn't too far behind him, because he was nervous, and each minute of waiting made it worse. It was warm, but not unpleasantly so. A light rain outside made it humid though. On the wall by the door a tiny lizard clung to the whitewashed plaster. It had been motionless since Daniel entered the room, only the slow blink of its eyes showing that it was alive. Its grey and black mottled body was almost lost in the shadows. The light was dim, with the overcast hues from outside filtering through the curtains.

Daniel sat up again, kicked off shoes and socks, and put his hands to his shirt. And then let them drop away. Sometimes Jacob liked to do that, both of them laughing at his fumbled haste. And Daniel was torn between impatience and the desire to slow things down. He'd let Jacob decide. He pulled his little notebook out of his pocket and licked the stub of his pencil to blacken it. The little lizard took shape with just a few strokes, the flat disks of its clinging toes and the curve of its tail cleanly delineated.

He was working on getting the shine in those swiveling eyes down on paper when there was a soft tap on the door. Daniel stuffed the notebook hurriedly back in his pocket and went to pull it open. Jacob squeezed through, his hair and clothes dark and sopping. Daniel shoved the door shut and leaned in for the first kiss.

“Oh, yeah,” Jacob murmured after a long, breathless time. “Been waiting for that.”

“Me too.” Daniel locked his hands behind Jacob's neck and did it again. So good. So right, that soft welcoming heat of Jacob's mouth. Their tongues tangled, stroked, and then Jacob drove into his mouth as Daniel gave way. Daniel whimpered, and the heat that rushed through him was welcome. Over Jacob's shoulder he saw the damned lizard blink at him. He broke the kiss.

“What?” Jacob asked.

“I don't want an audience.”

Jacob's blank stare become comprehension as Daniel reached past him and unhooked the little gecko from the wall. Jacob pulled open the door a crack, and let Daniel put the little fellow out. For a moment the gecko sat on the doorstep, peering out at the rain, and then it scurried off. Daniel pulled the door tight and locked it.

As he turned, Jacob slid to his knees and pressed his mouth over the bulge in Daniel's trousers. “Get naked,” Jacob growled. “Now.”

Between them they stripped off Daniel's pants and skivvies, laughing as he wobbled, tugging the fabric over his ankles. Jacob tossed the clothes over his shoulder and turned to take Daniel deep into his mouth.

Daniel gasped. There was something so decadent, so perfectly desirable about the innocent sexuality of Jacob, fully dressed and on his knees. Maybe innocent was the wrong word for a man who currently had his mouth stuffed with Daniel's erection. But there was still something about Jacob that brought it to Daniel's mind. He stroked Jacob's wet hair, fighting to hold still and not get too wrapped up in this.

He tugged on one dark strand. “Trip. Wait.”

Jacob pulled off, his mouth wet and glistening. “What? I want this. You can return the favor in a minute.”

“I had something else in mind.”

Jacob paused, his hands sliding up and down Daniel's hairy thighs. “What?”

Daniel couldn't say it. But he stepped away and stripped off his shirt. Then,

naked and hard, he went to the bed. The little fabric bag was on the night stand, and he pulled out the small clay jar and set the lid aside. And then got on the bed slowly, rolled over onto his stomach, and raised his ass in the air.

He heard Jacob suck in a startled breath, but Daniel had buried his face in his arms and he didn't look back. There was a soft rustle of fabric as Jacob undressed. Then the bed dipped as Jacob's weight jostled it. Daniel closed his eyes. He could feel Jacob moving up alongside him, not between his parted legs. He waited.

When the touch came it was a slow sweep of Jacob's hand along his back, from lowered shoulders to the base of his spine. He shivered under that touch.

"Are you offering what I think you are?" Jacob's voice shook slightly.

"Yeah."

"We've never done that."

"About time don't you think?"

Perhaps his attempt at nonchalance didn't come off as well as he'd hoped, because Jacob responded by leaning in to kiss his neck and then rub that sweet mouth softly down to his jaw. He kept his eyes closed.

"Are you sure you want to?" Jacob whispered in his ear.

"Do you?"

"Hell, yes!"

Daniel took some comfort in the vibrant intensity of those two words. At least he hadn't got it all wrong.

Jacob's hands slipped over Daniel's ass, stroking him, cupping his buttocks in warm palms. "I'm scared I'll hurt you."

"I'll let you know," Daniel told him. "I think... just go slow, and use that oil in the jar."

Jacob slid off the bed, and went to pick up the jar. Even with his eyes shut, Daniel could smell the green herbal fragrance of the massage oil. Then Jacob was back on the bed, between Daniel's legs this time. He moved up, his ankles brushing against Daniel's calves. Daniel was shaking a little, hovering between need and anxiety. And at last there was a touch of Jacob's fingers, slick with oil,

sliding slowly lower down the smooth fissure of Daniel's ass. And brushing against him, right there.

Daniel moaned and arched his back, trying to get more pressure. He was as hard as he had ever been. Jacob's fingertip circled him gently. "Does that feel okay?"

"Feels amazing." It really did. He hadn't realized, even during his personal explorations of his own ass, anticipating this moment, that there was such a connection between anus and cock.

"What do I do?" Jacob's voice was low and rough.

"Um, just push some oil in there, I think." It was weird and awkward and he wanted to get on with it. He tipped his ass higher.

There was the sound of Jacob getting more oil and then a tentative pressure that didn't quite open him. "Are you sure this is all right? It won't hurt?"

"Bigger things come out."

"Oh, that's romantic." But Jacob pushed harder, right there. Daniel gasped as the tip of Jacob's finger broached him.

Jacob jerked back immediately. "Sorry."

"No." Daniel freed a hand to reach back, fumble for Jacob's arm and guide him back into place. "That was good. Just exactly right. Do it again."

The touch was a slow pressure, building against his sensitive tissues and then suddenly slipping inside. He bit back a cry that might have made Jacob back off again, and arched into Jacob's hand. The oiled finger slid deeper in.

It was an odd sensation. He felt full, as if he might take a crap, even though he had carefully done so not long ago. And yet there was a slowly building heat that was completely different. Jacob's finger pumped against him slowly and he followed the motion with a sway of his hips.

Daniel whispered, "Is it... ugly? Looking at that?" It felt wonderful.

Jacob laughed hoarsely. "Watching you take my finger has to be the sexiest thing I've ever seen. You're gorgeous. And I'm going to last about twelve seconds when we finally do this."

“Do it now, then.” Daniel suddenly wanted to be there. He wanted Jacob inside him, intimately connected, no more waiting. “Fuck me, Jacob.”

Jacob gasped and jolted against him. “Oh God, I want to. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” He wasn't really sure. But it didn't matter. “Just use lots of oil. I want you in me.”

“Jesus Christ almighty.”

Daniel laughed in helpless arousal. “He'll have to wait his turn.”

Jacob's hand pulled out and smacked Daniel's ass hard. “Don't blaspheme. Wow, look at you. All shiny and ready.”

The oil gurgled, and the scent of greenery rose. There was a soft wet rub of skin on skin, and Daniel turned his head to look back. Past his own body he caught just a glimpse of Jacob's oiled hand stroking over his own erection. Then Jacob moved closer and Daniel squeezed his eyes shut.

This pressure was different, broader and more rubbery, but with inexorable hardness behind it. Daniel breathed through it, trying to will his body to relax. Jacob's cockhead slid against him, rubbing sensitized skin, slipping over his hole. Jacob said, “I don't know. You're tight.”

“Keep trying. Don't stop.” And just when he'd decided they were doing this wrong somehow, Jacob's cock slid into him.

They both gasped. It did hurt, but not like he'd been afraid of. Stretch and burn, and a fullness that made him bite his lip not to push out on it. He lost the reflex, straining, and then gasped again as his outward push let Jacob slide in deep.

“Holy wow.” Jacob put both hands on Daniel's hips, holding him still. “Wait. Wait.”

“Can't.” Daniel whined and shifted, needing to move. “Please.”

“I'm gonna come if you do that.”

“That's okay. I don't care. Do it. Do me.”

“Oh Daniel.” Jacob flexed somehow, and the thick hardness of him slid inside Daniel, rubbing and pressing. And the painful burn was becoming heat of a different kind. Daniel arched himself, shoving back with his hips. He grunted as

Jacob pulled back and thrust in, and then did it again.

“Okay?” Jacob's voice was tight with effort. “Is that okay?”

“More,” Daniel grated out. He fisted his hands in the sheets and braced his arms as Jacob's thrusts got harder and deeper. There was a climax building inside him, fast and racing upward. The slide of Jacob's cock suddenly became an arrow of heat in his ass, that deep rub like a static charge that sizzled over his nerves. Over his own harsh panting he heard the smack of Jacob's hips against his own buttocks, but he felt only that near-painful climbing intensity as Jacob brushed inside him over and over.

Jacob groaned Daniel's name and jerked spasmodically, his fingers digging into Daniel's hips. Daniel knew that chant of “God, Daniel, Daniel, God, holy God.” The thought that Trip was coming inside him, inside his body at last, almost did it. Daniel hovered painfully on the threshold, hard as iron and shaking, while Jacob collapsed on his back.

“Touch me,” he groaned. He would have done it himself, but his arms and legs were trembling and he almost didn't dare move. “Please, Trip, touch me.”

“Touch...?” Jacob sounded dazed. But then praise be, he reached around and under without moving, without lifting his weight from Daniel's back, still deep in Daniel's body. His fingers closed on Daniel's erection. A little awkwardly, fumbling his touch, but it didn't matter. With Jacob on him and in him, and stroking over his rigid cock, Daniel tipped over the edge. He came in long shaking waves that began in his cock and spread to his ass. Each one clawed its way through him, intensifying the stretched heat that was Jacob inside him. Until he almost screamed, and then sobbed as the last wave died.

Slowly and gently Jacob separated them and eased Daniel down onto the sheets. Daniel was still shaking. His breath caught as his ass cramped a couple of times, and then he sighed as the tension ebbed out of him. Jacob cuddled in against his back, enfolding him in strong arms.

“Are you okay? I didn't hurt you?”

Daniel chuckled, and pressed a kiss against Jacob's arm. “Not a bit. That was the best yet.”

“Yeah, for me too.”

Daniel moved a little, restlessly. He didn't want to leave this, the shelter of Jacob's arms, but he felt odd and loose and sticky. And urgent. "Let me up, Trip."

Jacob let go at once and sat up to lean over him. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Never better. I promise. I just need the head."

"Right." Jacob trailed after him, looking faintly anxious, as he went to the little attached bathroom and took care of the aftermath. Daniel finished, bent over the sink and splashed some water on his sweaty face. When he looked up, Jacob's dark eyes were peering apprehensively into his in the mirror.

Can't have that. He turned and pulled Jacob into a long wet kiss with lots of tongue. When he let go, Jacob looked more dazed than apprehensive. That was better. Daniel said, "Damn, I can't wait to try that again. Might not be tonight but I hope it's soon."

And he felt Jacob relax just that fraction more in his arms. Daniel kissed his cheek, his neck, his shoulder. "Your turn to clean up, Trip. Because once I've had a nap I want that cock of yours in my mouth. But not after..."

"Ew." Jacob wrinkled his nose, and they stared blankly at each other for a moment, and then burst out laughing. Arms around each other, they giggled helplessly. Daniel pressed his face against the sweat-damp skin of Jacob's neck and just breathed him in.

CHAPTER 7

February 1943

The world could change in a heartbeat. One moment Daniel was dozing in his hammock, sleepily thinking back to their last liberty in a way that had him groping lazily under his sheet. The next moment there was a hell of a loud bang and he was thrown bodily to the deck. He hit with a force that nearly knocked the breath out of him. Around him, other men grunted and yelled, and in a couple of cases screamed, as they did the same.

"What the hell?" Daniel scrambled to his feet. The PA was calling for general quarters, siren wailing. Then the sound hissed and died. Daniel yanked on trousers and shirt, as everyone in the room cursed and struggled. Some began dressing swiftly, others ran out shirtless, heading for their stations. Some sat dazed

on the deck. Mike, one row over, was cradling his arm in his hand, his face twisted in pain. There was another explosion, and the ship leaped sideways. Daniel grabbed for a hold, caught something and clung on as the *Gageway* heaved and rolled and then seemed to recover.

Daniel struggled for the door, stepping over blankets and unprepared men. He swung himself out into the passageway. There was a haze of smoke, and the motion of the ship was wrong, a wallowing plunge worse than after the hit back in May. The smoke thickened as he struggled toward the ladder. The deck was developing a definite tilt, bow-end down. The space was tight, and filled with confusion. Daniel climbed toward his station. Then another explosion racked the *Gageway*, and he slammed against a bulkhead and then down on his back. He rolled over, trying to stand, and only made it as far as his knees. For a long time he knelt on a deck, no longer sure which one he had reached, shaking his dazed head.

Someone grabbed him through the smoke and stuffed a life-jacket into his hands. "Put that on."

The man was gone before Daniel could respond. Daniel stayed kneeling for a minute to work the kapok jacket over his arms, fighting to fasten the straps with oddly numb fingers. Then he struggled to his feet and resumed his climb. He must have been shaken by his fall, because he found himself on the main deck with no clear memory of how he got there. The deck was at an angle listing to port as well as bow down. Crackles and crashes sounded from below, whether from fire or damage or things breaking loose as the ship continued to roll, he didn't know.

"Abandon ship!" Lieutenant Sherman appeared in the confusion. His voice was high-pitched but steady. "The PA's not working but the Captain's passed the order to abandon ship."

The list to port was steadily getting worse. Already the port rail was down to the water. Some men climbed the slanted deck, heading for the starboard rail. Some huddled in indecision looking at the dark water creeping higher. Lights below flickered and went out, and the ship swiftly became dark except for the red glow of fires. Daniel peered forward, towards the sickbay, and the fires. As the old ship continued her roll he walked up the deck, and then crawled. A spare life-jacket tumbled past and he freed a hand to grab it mechanically. A moment later he gave it away, forcing it into the hand of a man who sat dazed on the heeling deck.

“Put that on.”

The man didn't respond, didn't even look at him. Daniel cursed and wrestled it around the man as best he could. Only just in time, as the next lurch and roll of the dying ship pulled them apart. The last Daniel saw of the man was his body tumbling down the slanted deck toward the waiting water. No way to help. Daniel forced himself upward toward the starboard rail. He grabbed a lifeline and held tight as the port side dropped out from under him.

For a long moment the ship stood on her beam. The men clinging to her starboard rail could see the long rust-red expanse of her hull above the water. Then slowly and inexorably she began going down. The cold Pacific waves rose ever higher, and almost gently floated them off the ship.

The water was foul with oil. Daniel choked and gagged, fighting to keep his eyes and mouth above the surface. He swam blindly, trying to move away from the ship and the fires and the sucking slip of the water as she went under. Several times he paused to vomit, acid and water and oil filling his mouth with rank slime. The sky was pitch dark and a steady rain fell. The same rain that had sent him down to his quarters to sleep. Some nights he and Jacob had managed to find places to drop a blanket or a mattress near each other, up on deck out of the stifling heat down in the hull. Daniel wished with every fiber of his being that this had been one of those nights.

No telling where Jacob was, in this heaving mass of water and men and debris. Sickbay was – had been – toward the bow, where he'd heard the first explosions. But Jacob's berth was further astern and he should have been off watch. Anything could have happened in the confusion. Daniel remembered on board the California, how one man died while another standing next to him came through without a scratch. A wave splashed his face, breaking him out of his thoughts. He swam doggedly on. When he finally let himself rest and looked back through stinging eyes, he could see no sign of the *Gageway*.

He tried to turn slowly, treading water to raise himself higher. The rain made the scene waver and fade, and his eyes itched and watered. He blinked away burning tears, and more filled his eyes. *Damned oily water making him tear up that way.* He blinked again hard. Each time he crested a swell he tried to spot a light, a hulking patch of darkness, anything that might be the remains of his ship.

But the only fires were a few low smoldering patches of debris on the surface of the water, and they soon went out.

Something slammed into Daniel from behind and then slid roughly along his arm. He hooked his fingers into it, and found he had hold of a rough wooden crate. It was battered and empty, but still rode high on the waves. He hauled his chest up on the uneven boards, glad of the chance to get his face further clear of the foul water. But even from that perch nothing was visible nearby.

He wondered if anyone had got the rafts or the boats launched. Drills made it seem easy, but drills didn't include fire and wounded men underfoot and decks slick with oil and steeper than San Francisco streets. If any of the boats were out there they might be sweeping the area for survivors.

Daniel figured he was probably better off than many of the men who had to be out there in the dark water. The fall that had rung his bell had been a minor thing. He wasn't hurt. He had a life-jacket and even the crate for added buoyancy. He tipped his head skyward and forced his eyes open, letting the rain rinse them. After a moment of thought he opened his mouth too, rinsing and then swallowing.

Rescue was surely coming. The *Gageway* hadn't been sailing in convoy, so it wouldn't be immediate. But surely even with how fast she'd gone down, there had been time for a radio operator to get off an SOS. And if she didn't show up at her destination, there would be a search. They only had to hold out for a few hours. Maybe a day. The kapok vests were good for forty-eight hours or more before becoming waterlogged. The ocean temperature at this latitude wasn't the killer it was in the seas around Europe. He would be fine.

Others wouldn't though. He couldn't see them in the dark, but Daniel knew that out in that sulfurous, debris-strewn water, men were dying. He'd seen men in those last minutes on the crippled ship who clearly had injuries and burns. Some of his shipmates had no doubt failed to grab life-jackets, like that poor slob on the deck, and without one they would last only as long as they had the energy to stay afloat. And he couldn't think about them, couldn't let his thoughts go there, because somewhere out among those men was Jacob. Hopefully he was unhurt and cocooned in grey kapok, or even better on a boat or raft somewhere. Somewhere.

It wasn't just Jacob. So many names and faces flashed through his mind. But

they came back down to that one... *God. Trip.*

For a minute Daniel just put his face on his crossed arms on the damned crate and shook. Daniel had made it off safely. There was no reason Jacob couldn't have, and yet... There was Jacob and George and Clarence and Tom and Rog and Syl and even Badger with his damned stories, and they couldn't all be alive out there in the dark, filthy water. And if one of them was dead, any one of them, then it might be Jacob, and Daniel wasn't sure how he would survive that.

The rain slacked off minutes, or maybe hours, later. With the easing of the wind and rain, Daniel could hear the sound of men's voices in the darkness. He oriented as best he could and began kicking in that direction, propelling himself and his unwieldy crate forward. The first man he came across was dead.

At least there was no doubt. The body bobbed, kept afloat in its life vest, but half the face was missing and no blood flowed. The hair was short and blond and unfamiliar. The arms trailed limply. Daniel was about to swim past and then thought better of it. He swam over closer. The corpse was wearing a life vest and there would be men out there without one who were still alive.

It was gruesome work getting the vest off the corpse. Daniel almost gave it up twice, especially when his crate threatened to float away. But eventually he had the thing freed. Clutching a strap in one hand, he resumed his awkward progress without looking back. He wasn't sure if the body would sink or float, but he knew he didn't want to see it.

The next time he crested a wave, there was a hint of light in the sky. He thought he could make out shapes in the water ahead, although it was still hard to tell men from debris. Over the next fifteen minutes the light gradually brightened. There was no doubt some of those dark forms were men.

Daniel kicked his way forward steadily. His legs were beginning to feel numb, and sometimes he wondered, in the ebb and wash of the waves, if he was actually making progress. Sometimes he heard a shout or whistling, as the men ahead tried to communicate over the distances. He didn't bother to try to call back. His throat was raw from salt water and stomach acid. His lips were raw and chapped. He swam doggedly.

Then the wash of a wave tipped him over and down the slope towards a small

group of men. They were clinging together, holding a cork life ring. In the dim light of dawn they all turned to him. He kicked his way closer, searching the faces eagerly. None was Jacob. Of course not.

A couple of the men were vaguely familiar, men he had shared a chow call or a crowded deck with. They looked back at him, their faces drawn and tight. There were five of them. He saw that two had no life-jackets. As much as he wanted to keep his spare, just in case, it would be wrong. Although there was something wrong with passing one jacket to two men. Nonetheless, he held it out. "Here."

"You take it, Gary," one of the men said roughly to the other. "You're not going to make it much longer with that leg." When the other man hesitated, he added, "I'm ten times the fucking swimmer that you are anyway."

The other man took the kapok and struggled into it, before resuming his position around the ring. A dark-skinned older man said to Daniel, "Hey, you seen anyone else what made it through?"

"Nope. You fellows seen anyone?"

"Not to talk to."

Daniel wanted to ask more, to name names. But there didn't seem to be much point.

"You think a message got out?" One of the other men asked. "You figure the radio boys did the job?"

"Had to have," Daniel said, more confidently than he felt. "There was plenty of time."

"Yeah. Had to."

A wave rose and broke between them with a fine mist of spume off its crest. When it sank he was ten feet further away. The dark man said, "You could join on with us. But there's not much room."

There really wasn't, with five crowded around the cork ring. Daniel saw the man without the life-jacket slip a little lower into the water. He shook his head. "I've got my wooden yacht here. I'm doing okay." At some point that man's arms might give way. Daniel didn't want to be there, safe in his own vest watching. He let the rise and fall of the waves push them apart for a while, and then gathered the

energy to push forward again.

The sun cleared the horizon. At first its warmth was a blessing on Daniel's chilled skin. But it didn't take long for his eyes to start stinging from the strong light, and the salt-crusted skin on his lips burned. He ran his tongue over his chapped lips again and again, without relief.

The sea seemed to be playing tricks on him. There were men all around him now, and as the sun climbed he would catch glimpses of them, just a couple of swells over. But time and again he kicked his way over a crest to find only empty sea on the other side of it. His eyes burned. He began keeping them closed for long periods at a time, letting the painful glow of the sunlight on oily water recede, before taking another look.

There was a lot of debris. Cans of lard and peanuts, pieces of broken wood, a shirt, still buoyed up by air trapped beneath it. He saw a trio of onions bob past and thought briefly of grabbing them. But the thought of onion juice on his blistered mouth made him wince and he let them go by. When something bumped his arm in one of his closed-eyes periods, he thought it was another bit of debris. Until a voice said, "I don't think he's dead."

Daniel opened his eyes painfully. Beside him one of the inflatable rafts floated, very low in the water. The man who had tapped him with the tip of a paddle peered down at him. "Are you injured?"

Daniel had to try twice before he got out a clear, "No."

"All right." The man, an ensign from his insignia, hesitated and then added, "I'd let you on board except..."

"You're pretty full already."

"Yes. And if you're not injured and you have a vest, there are others worse off."

"Sure." It made sense. No point in hassling the young ensign. The kid looked younger than Daniel. Younger even than Trip. Daniel said, "Just... can you tell me? I'm looking for some of my friends. Tom Granby. Clarence Mills. Jacob Segal, the pharmacist's mate. Sylvester Brown. George Dianopolis. Rog Vespian." The names rolled off his tongue and he bit his sore lip to halt the flow. The ensign shook his head but from the crowd in the raft someone said, "George is

dead.”

“You're sure? He's an older guy...”

“Dianopolis, yeah. I'm sure.”

“Damn.” Daniel said it quietly and without emotion. He didn't feel a thing except disbelief, that of all the people he would have expected to make it through disaster unscathed, George was the first one gone. The first one he knew about. “Jacob Segal? Do you know him?”

No one did. Or none of the men still able to say so. There were a few men who had clearly been fished wounded out of the sea, and lay groaning in the bottom of the raft, beyond even hearing Daniel's question.

“Are there others nearby?” he asked instead, and then, knowing it was pathetic, “Do you think a message got out, sir?”

The young ensign nodded vigorously. “I'm sure it did, sailor. They'll find us any time now.”

“Right.” It had been stupid to ask.

The ensign pointed south, or what was probably south given the position of the sun. Although Daniel wasn't sure of the time of day or much of anything else. He was pointing off to the left, anyway. “There are a lot more of the men that way. About two hundred yards and on. Several dozen.”

“Thanks.” Daniel didn't have to ask why the two men wielding paddles in the raft were going the other way. He thought one more man would swamp the thing, for all the ensign's talk of loading on more wounded. Easier to say no if there was no one nearby to hear you.

It was past noon when he blundered into the first group of floating men. They all had life-vests, thank God, although some were injured and clearly failing. Daniel floated among them for a while. Geoff from his turret crew was there, and they spent a moment in conversation, but had no news for each other. Among the injured was one of the quartermasters, and even as Daniel listened to Geoff's account of his own escape from the ship out a port and up a dangling line, the quartermaster gave a rattling gasp. One of the men closer to him reached over, fumbling on his neck for a pulse. After a minute the man shook his head.

Daniel let himself drift away from the group and went back to his searching. It was futile. He knew it was. In this vast sea were no doubt hundreds of men, scattered over a broad area. The ship had been making good headway right up to the moment she went down. Given that the men probably left the ship one after another and not all at once, they must be strewn along the path of her last few minutes, which could be several miles of sea. And then with the waves and the winds and the men's own efforts, Jacob could be anywhere. But Daniel kept looking.

The sky became dull and overcast by mid-afternoon. It was a blessing, easing the fierce heat that blazed down on them. The dimmer light didn't bore into his eyeballs as fiercely either. He'd paused to take off his shirt and drape it over his head and shoulders earlier. Even so, his skin felt tight and raw, and he was glad for the shade.

He found more men, some dead, some living. He kept collecting life jackets from the dead. It was the only constructive thing he could do out here. He didn't think anything of it until he found himself sobbing and cursing at a corpse, as he struggled to untie the water-swollen knots in the ties of its vest. He already had two spare vests in hand at that moment. After a long moment spent retching and choking back to some kind of sanity, he left the corpse with its jacket and swam on.

At some point he lost the crate. It had been slowly sinking and breaking apart, never meant to withstand a full-grown man yanking it about. When the slats came off the frame, he let the bits float away and tucked an extra jacket under each arm instead. An hour later, he had parted with both of them to men in greater need. He swam on.

Twice he heard the sound of an airplane somewhere in the skies overhead. Each time he tipped his head back, straining his eyes against the light, turning in a slow circle. But he caught no sight of the planes. Either they were flying above the thickening cloud cover or they were further away than he realized.

He drifted towards a small group of men who floated in the water, all holding onto a rope that tethered them together, when one of the men screamed. It was a shrill, strange sound. The man waved an arm, let go of the rope, and then disappeared from view. The man who had been next to him yelped and then cried out, "Shark!"

As if called together out of nowhere, fins appeared in the water. Daniel noted one going past, a scant ten yards from where he floated. The dark triangle had a white tip on it, and the sheer size was impressive. Another man cried out and was pulled under. Blood drifted in the water, reddening the surface as the sun began to break through again. The heat poured down. It was like a scene from hell.

Men shouted and beat the water, trying to scare the sharks away. Others yelled at their shipmates to be quiet, that they were just making matters worse. A raft in the distance lifted and tipped under the weight of men trying to climb up inside it. Daniel turned his back and closed his eyes.

There was nothing he could do. The sharks would either get you or they wouldn't. A ship would show up or not. The sun and the waves and the salt in cracked skin and the blistering heat were constants. He tried to think back, to lose himself in memories. First of the little hotel room in Townsville and Jacob, flushed and startled in the aftermath of their first time ever. And when that got too painful, with not knowing where Jacob was now, he let his mind drift back further.

He was just trying to remember if the first dog they'd had on the farm was the collie or the bull mastiff when something bumped up against him. He reached out irritably to push away the debris and touched fabric. Another corpse in another fucking life vest. He opened his eyes reluctantly to look, and found himself gazing at Jacob.

His first thought was that he was hallucinating, or dreaming. His second was that Jacob was dead. But then Jacob muttered and flailed an arm out, striking Daniel on the chest, and he knew it was real.

"Jacob, by all that's holy, Jacob, it is you." He pulled Jacob close and kissed him, oblivious to anyone watching or the pain of his cracked and bleeding lips, or anything except the feel of Jacob under his mouth. Jacob was in his arms, moving and alive, but he didn't kiss back. After a moment Daniel pulled away. "Jacob? Trip?"

Jacob mumbled, softly and then stronger. "Daniel. I'm looking for Daniel. Have you seen Daniel?"

"This is me," Daniel said firmly. He wrapped his arms around Jacob from behind, pulling the man in close, and laid his cheek against Jacob's. "Trip, it's me.

I'm here.”

“Daniel?”

“Yeah. It's me.”

“Are we rescued?”

Daniel's heart lurched but he answered steadily, “No. We're not. Not yet.”

“No. 'Course not.” Jacob sighed like a sleepy child.

Daniel let go with one arm to pull the shirt off his head and drape it over both of them. Then he wrapped Jacob tightly in his arms again. He said in Jacob's ear, “How are you? Are you hurt?”

“Not sure.”

He kept his voice calm. “Not sure where?”

“My back. Left leg. I think it was the left. Big gash there, was bleeding for a bit, I think. Doesn't hurt much now. Can't feel it now.”

“You'll be okay.” Daniel tried to slide his hand down from Jacob's hip to find the damage, but his own numbed fingers didn't tell him much. Jacob shuddered at his touch and he stopped. It wasn't like he could do anything anyway.

Screams rose again in the distance. Daniel pulled Jacob in closer against him.

“What's that?” Jacob asked. “Someone's hurt?”

“Sharks,” Daniel muttered before he could think better of it.

“Christ!” That sounded almost like the old Jacob. “Are you sure?”

Daniel thought about the slow sinuous underwater glide of the predators, heralded only by the passage of those triangular fins. “Yes.”

Jacob struggled suddenly, ineffectually. “Let go! Let me go.”

“What?” Daniel loosened his hold but didn't release Jacob.

“I'm bleeding. I know I am. You need to get away from me.”

“Oh. Fuck that.”

Jacob twisted, clipping Daniel's ear glancingly with a blow aimed back over his shoulder. “Get away. The sharks smell blood, you idiot. They'll be coming.”

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You want me to be responsible for making you shark bait?" Already Jacob's struggles were weakening.

Daniel pulled him in close again, tipping them back to get Jacob's mouth further clear of the oily water. "If you're shark bait then so am I. Sorry, Trip, you're stuck with me. So if you don't want to lure those sharks over here to eat both of us, quit kicking around and making the bleeding worse."

Jacob subsided with a grunt. "That's dirty pool."

"All's fair..." Daniel didn't complete the thought. "So hold still. I've got you."

Jacob shuddered against him. "This is just a hallucination you know." His voice was harsh and he coughed drily. "The sun. You're not really here."

"I'm hallucinating too then."

"Nice to go crazy with company."

"I had other places in mind to go with you, but I can do crazy if you want to. I'm agreeable."

"It really is you."

"Last I checked."

"God." Jacob tipped his head back on Daniel's shoulder. Daniel reached up and readjusted his shirt to screen them from the blazing light. For a long time they were silent. The clouds began to gather again, and Daniel blessed them and cursed them in even measure, for the shade and for hiding the men in the water from passing planes. No way to win. Eventually Jacob said, "Curly's dead. And the Doc."

"I'm sorry." Daniel didn't know who Curly was, but from the tone of Jacob's voice he was important.

"I thought you were dead too."

"Too stubborn, my Dad always said."

"Thank God. You figure they'll find us?"

"Have to. We'll have been missed by now. And the radio boys know their job."

Someone had to have gotten off a call.”

Jacob sighed and then stiffened in Daniel's hold. He said in a different voice, “You think they'll find us before the sharks clean up?”

Daniel followed Jacob's line of sight and saw it too, a dark triangular fin cutting the surface of the waves not fifty feet away. As the swells rose and fell the fin circled, moving to their left. He felt Jacob trying to turn and follow it.

“Hold still,” he murmured in Jacob's ear, clamping tight with his arms. “They follow movement. And you don't want to start bleeding. Hold still. If we're just floating debris, they may ignore us.”

“How do you know?” Jacob stilled obediently.

“George.” Daniel heard his voice shake and clenched his teeth. “George told me.”

“Okay.”

The fin cut through the water at an angle, arcing around them. It was a big one. No white tip on it, but there were plenty of other sharks in these waters. A larger wave lifted and dropped them and he lost sight of it.

“Damned thing is behind us,” Jacob muttered.

“I know.” Daniel tried to breathe shallowly, but he knew his heart was racing. Could a shark hear that, through the water? Was the drumbeat of his pulse like a dinner gong, calling those wicked rows of teeth to come feed? Jacob was still as stone in his arms.

After long moments the fin appeared again, off to their right. It circled again, gliding smoothly, and then dipped below the surface.

“Damn,” Jacob murmured. “I liked it better where I could see it.”

“No kidding.”

They waited, barely breathing, through moments as long as eternity. Somewhere under the water the shark was swimming. Perhaps circling below them, looking up at their legs. Daniel wondered if they looked like a wounded seal or a dolphin to shark eyes. Or had the war taught these wicked fish that men were just as good? Time ticked by in the pounding beats of his heart.

Minutes passed. And more minutes. Eventually Jacob whispered, “Do you think it's gone?”

“Maybe.”

The sun dropped lower. The water sucked at their bodies, splashed over their faces. Oil and salt ate at their skin. It stung in the cuts Daniel didn't even remember getting. He wondered how Jacob could stand it on an open wound. He knew better than to ask.

Jacob said, “You think they'll send us home after this?”

“Not a chance. Not unless we end up half dead. They'll clean us up, patch our cuts and bruises, and stick us back on another ship.”

“Together?”

“Shit.” Daniel thought for a moment of separation, of what it would be like to know Jacob was out there on some other ship, under the Japanese guns, out of reach, out of ken. He'd thought hell was not knowing where Jacob was in the ruins of the *Gageway*. Apparently there were going to be variations on hell. “I hope so. How many ships can be in port looking for crew at any one time? Sure, we'll be together.”

“I'd like to go home.” Jacob's voice was almost dreamy. “I'd even like to see my Dad again. For a little while. But mostly I want you. I want to go home with you.”

“Sure. We'll take care of the Japs and we'll do that.”

“Really?” Daniel had to strain to hear the words. He didn't like Jacob's light, dreamy tone. “I live in Jersey and you're a California boy. Home is far apart.”

“Where you are is home,” Daniel said urgently in his ear. “Hold on here for me and I swear, when I get back to the States I'll go wherever you like.”

“Thirsty,” Jacob whispered. “Lips hurt.”

“I know.” Daniel maneuvered them until he could reach Jacob's mouth with his own. He licked those chapped lips, tasting salt and oil, not sure if it was helping. But gradually the oil taste at least faded. Jacob sighed softly against his mouth.

“Jacob?”

There was no answer. Jacob hung limp in the life vest, legs brushing idly against Daniel's in the deep water.

"Shit. Trip, don't do that. Don't you pass out on me." Daniel shook him lightly and then blew hard in his ear. Jacob jolted and made a small sound.

"There. There you are. Stay with me, buddy."

"Tired."

"I know. And you can rest. I have you. Just don't go out on me. All right? We'll get rescued soon."

"Mm."

"I promise. And when you're better we'll go out on the town. Go to a nice restaurant, right? We'll have a steak with all the trimmings and then I'll find a good hotel. A place with nice sheets and a chocolate on the pillow and everything. I'll take you to bed and you can fuck me until neither one of us can stand. We'll find one with a shower big enough to share. Just you and me and warm clean water."

"Got 'nuff water."

"There you are. That's my Trip. Okay, no water. Just a bed. You and me and a big bed."

"Orange juice?"

"Sure. We'll drink a Buck's Fizz."

"Wha'?"

"Two parts orange juice, one part champagne. You'll love it. We'll sip it in bed. One glass between us."

"Sounds good."

"Of course it does." Daniel squinted at the overcast sky. The sun was low, maybe an hour or so 'till sunset. Night was the enemy. Without a light, there was no chance they would be spotted in the dark by ships or planes. The fall of darkness would mean another eleven hours to survive before hope of rescue.

He licked his dry lips and went on, half whispering, half croaking, telling Jacob anything he could think of. He talked about home and his family, the farm, his brothers and sisters. He talked about joining the Navy and every dumb thing he

ever did in training. His throat was raw and dry, and thirst was moving from a distraction to a fucking obsession, but he plugged along. Once in a while he'd get a grunt or a whispered word from Jacob and know that Trip was listening to him. It was all Daniel could offer, the only thing he could do for his man, to remind him that he wasn't alone here in the water.

Sometimes they saw other men or rafts in the water, but never close enough to call out to. There was less floating debris, and none of it food that Daniel could see. He was beginning to really regret those onions. Although they might make a man throw up, eaten raw, in which case Jacob would lose more moisture than he'd gain from eating them. Jacob seemed half-unconscious anyway. Daniel let his regrets go.

He had his eyes closed, not wanting to see the moment when the sun dipped below the horizon, when Jacob stirred against him. "Hey, Daniel. Is that...?"

He opened his gummy eyelids painfully, scanning for a shark, or a body, but Jacob was staring further in the distance. And there, almost fading into the grey of water and clouds, was a ship.

Daniel held his breath as she steamed towards them, slowly getting bigger. They could only see her from the top of each wave, and it was like one of those old flip-books. Each turn of the page, the hull was a little bigger and a little clearer. Daniel closed his eyes on the down-swoop, and then held them as open as he could, not wanting to even blink, when they crested.

"Is she one of ours?" Jacob rasped.

He hesitated, not wanting to be wrong. He didn't want to give false hope, although at this point even a Jap ship and captivity would be welcome, if it got them out of the water. But as she approached, he could be certain. "Yeah. Yes, she's ours. Look at her!" He coughed as a wave splashed acrid water into his open mouth. But it couldn't dim his mood.

Darkness was beginning to close in. As the ship got nearer, a powerful searchlight broke out from her deck. Daniel could hear the men in the water shouting and calling and screaming off to his left. He saved his breath and his energy. No one on a ship would hear them over the sound of the screws. But a ship approaching in these waters with the lights on had to be looking for them.

And what a beautiful sight.

“Almost home,” he murmured in Jacob's ear. “Stick with me just a little longer.”

Overhead there was the buzz of a motor and then a PBV float plane dropped down out of the cloud cover. It flew low over the water, off to the west of Daniel and Jacob. Daniel could see it clearly against the fading light in the sky. There were objects dropping from the belly of the plane. Life-jackets perhaps, rafts, provisions. Daniel licked his lips in hopeless reflex, wondering if they were dropping fresh water. *It doesn't matter*, he reminded himself, *we'll be on board that ship soon*.

He wondered if the plane would land, but after a couple of passes it rose again. Either the water was too rough or the light too uncertain for the pilots to risk it. Jacob made a small hopeless sound as the plane climbed toward the clouds. Daniel pressed his cheek to Jacob's, nudging his eyes back to the approaching ship. “There, Trip. That's our ride home.”

“Right.”

The ship slowed and then hove to, about a half mile off. In the gathering dark, it was hard to see what was happening, but the movement of lights suggested a boat was being launched. The ship wasn't large and seemed low in profile, a destroyer escort, he thought. Daniel couldn't remember how many boats she would have or what size of crew would be there to man them. But anything was better than that long day of struggling men in an empty sea. Glimmers of brightness dipped and moved.

Down in the troughs between waves it was dark now. Each time they sank, the water surrounded them in a wet salty hole of blackness. But when they rose, there were still lights and motion to be seen. Time passed in the rise and fall of darkness and hope. Daniel was past talking now, but he held onto Jacob, shifting his grip when hands and arms got numb but never letting go. Jacob mumbled a couple of times, sounds that made no sense.

Then there was suddenly another ship on the horizon, showing almost no lights. No telling in the darkness if it was friend or foe. Daniel strained his eyes, blinking hard. The newcomer passed the escort and stopped much closer, bringing

up her lights as she did so. It was another larger destroyer escort. Daniel had studied the hulls of ships once, their own and the enemy's. Once he would have known her approximate displacement and maximum speed and a host of other things about her. Now all he knew or cared about was that she was refuge and the promise of safety, less than a couple of football fields away.

Men in the water around them shouted out again. On one rise of the waves Daniel saw what appeared to be a boat, with lights shining onto the water. Then he did yell and wave, one arm for Jacob and one whirling his shirt above their heads. It took two plunges into the waves, shouting and choking together, for him to regain sense. He conserved his energy on the down swoop, resting his arm. On the rise he waved again, yelling with a force that cracked the sore tissues of his throat, waving that shirt like a banner. Again. Again. Again. Jacob was a silent, dead weight in his grasp now, the soggy kapok just barely keeping his mouth above water. Again. Again.

The boat crested a wave, much closer than he expected it and he almost screamed. He yelled, "Here. Over here! Wounded man!"

A swimmer came up to him, cutting through the water in smooth strokes. He reached Jacob's side and felt towards his neck for a pulse. Daniel knocked his hand aside. "He's fine. He's alive. He just fainted. We need to get him on board."

The man placed three fingers against Jacob's throat below his jaw anyway, and then said, "Yeah. He's still with us."

Daniel almost let go in the relief of hearing those words. It had been a long time since he had dared to check. The boat came closer, riding high on the swells. The swimmer guided them toward the stern, helping Daniel tow Jacob. Daniel tried not to think about how still Jacob was. They were rescued. It would be all right now. One last effort and he could rest.

Daniel and his fellow swimmer struggled to lift Jacob's limp body out of the waves. Men reached down over the stern, hands stretched toward them. Then a lucky wave raised them enough at just the right moment and the waiting men grabbed Jacob's hair and the shoulder of his vest. His weight was lifted out of Daniel's hands. At the last moment he remembered to let go, staring up in the harsh glare of the lights as Jacob was hauled up and over.

Daniel almost lost it then. Fatigue and sorrow and pain hit him there in the water like a dark club and the world wavered around him. A voice in his ear yelled at him, "You're next. Come on, buddy, help me out here." From somewhere he found the reserves to stretch his arms upward. The man beside him grabbed him around the hips, heaving up and sputtering as he was driven under in return. But fingers gripped Daniel's wrists successfully and he was hauled over the stern, raw skin scraping painfully over metal, and down into the belly of the boat.

There were other survivors there already. Daniel felt a tepid curiosity about whom. But the darkness was closing in again and he had time for one last thing. He squirmed forward toward the bow as far as he could, following a pair of limp bare feet he would recognize even if they were a hundred times more battered. The men moving Jacob set him down on his side, with an extra life-jacket tucked under his head. Daniel moved up beside him, and braced himself between Jacob and the side, cushioning Jacob against the rock and plunge of the boat. He fisted one hand in the waistband of Jacob's skivvies, not caring any more what it might look like, and let himself go under.

CHAPTER 8

Four days later

Jacob thought he remembered something important. Something about Daniel shouting in his ear. He tried to open his eyes, but they were crusted and dry. A damp cloth wiped over them and a man's soft voice said, "Try again now."

He blinked repeatedly, until the blur of dark and light above him resolved into a man peering down. He tried to speak and only croaked. He licked at his lips, feeling cracked and peeling skin under a tongue that did little to moisten them. The soft voice said, "Here. Let me." And the damp cloth swept over his mouth with blessed coolness. He tried to catch a corner of it in his lips and suck on it, but the man took it away. A moment later, though, a small trickle of fluid seeped into his mouth. He swallowed eagerly and was ashamed of the pitiful whimper he made when the water was withdrawn.

"You can have more in a minute." The man standing over him bent closer. "You look a lot better this morning."

"Morning?" It came out hoarse and garbled, but the man nodded.

"I don't remember." And then he did. The *Gageway*, shaking and tilting as explosions wracked her. Fire in the passageway and equipment breaking loose as the gallant ship began to roll. Then water and pain. Somewhere in there he thought he'd seen Daniel. He remembered a long dark time with nothing but the taste of oil in his mouth and the sound of Daniel's voice in his ear. Unless he'd been dreaming that. He coughed, trying to clear his throat.

"Daniel. Acardi. He was in the water with me. I think."

"Lie still."

Jacob didn't realize he had been trying to sit up until the pain whipped white lightning through his lower back. He gasped at the intensity of it. For a moment there was no possibility of thought or even breath, just waves of pain.

When he could stop panting and breathe again the man said, "You have to hold still. Doc thinks you have a couple of cracked vertebrae, in addition to the hip. I've given you more morphine. It should hit you pretty fast."

"Hip?"

"The Doc will be along to talk to you later. He'll be glad you're finally awake."

Jacob's head felt heavy and swollen, like his brain was two sizes too big for his skull. But the pain was slowly ebbing. He managed to repeat, "Daniel?" through gritted teeth.

"Almost half the crew survived. Hopefully your friend was among them. I don't have the names here." The man's hand pressed gently on his shoulder. "Anyway you should rest, get better. The Doc will stop by later."

Jacob wanted to say he would get better much faster if he could just find out about Daniel. But his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth and his lips felt numb. He let himself drift. He thought he could remember an echo of Daniel's voice. "Where you are is home." He closed his eyes to hear it better.

The doc did stop by some undefined time later. Despite the cushioning blanket of the morphine that examination hurt worse than anything Jacob could ever remember. At the end of it the doctor looked down at him soberly. "Well, you're a lucky young man. With time and care, you should heal. That hip may never be quite the same, but barring infection you won't lose the leg."

Jacob must have looked shocked because the doctor frowned. “We talked about that two days ago. You don't remember?”

“Two days?” He struggled to work spit into his dry mouth and ask more clearly, “How long have I been here?”

“Three days. You came in on the *Incentry* with a lot of the other men from the *Gageway*.”

Jacob coughed again, a dry hack that hurt his throat and his back and his chest in equal measure. When he could, he asked, “Is there a list? Of survivors?”

The doctor's eyes softened. “Sure. I'll get someone to find it for you.”

Jacob clenched his teeth together avoid asking for it immediately. It wouldn't change anything to know about Daniel sooner rather than later. Except for maybe loosening his chest so he could breathe. Instead he asked, “What happens now?”

“You're headed home, son. That broken hip is going to be slow to heal, and you lost some muscle with the cuts on your thigh. And that back of yours needs strict rest in a body brace. It's a miracle you came through it without more nerve damage. But by the time you see that harbor in Seattle you should be over the very worst of it. We'll have you back to wherever is home for Easter.”

Daniel is my home. “What about the others? My shipmates? Do you know...?”

“There were a lot of injured.” The doctor sighed. “You'll have company on that trip home. Of the men who came through it all right, some of the officers are already gone. The other sailors will ship out soon, I expect. I'll send a corpsman over with that list and I know some of the men have been visiting friends here in sickbay. You can ask around – I think everyone's accounted for, one way or another.”

“Thank you,” Jacob said faintly.

The doctor bent and squeezed his shoulder. “Don't worry, son. You're out of it now and you'll live to tell the tale. You'll even have a couple of nice scars to impress the girls back home.”

The doctor moved on down the row, and Jacob tried not to listen to him explaining stump care to the man in the next bed whose bandage-swathed leg

ended just below the knee.

Jacob was lucky. He knew that. He had a sudden memory of Doc's body crumpled against the bulkhead. Doc, with his patient and caring hands, dead in an instant. Jacob closed his eyes to blot that picture out. As long as Daniel was alive, then Jacob was among the lucky ones for sure. But he shut his mind off and counted, by twos and by threes, fumbled and misdirected by the morphine haze, as he waited for the corpsman and the list.

After the man had come and gone he cried, as quietly as he could, without moving his aching body.

The tears ran down his cheeks and into his ears. His chest ached with it, with pain for all the names that were not on that list, and with joy because that one most vital one was safely there. After a long time he slept.

The next time he opened his eyes, Daniel was looking down at him. His face was almost perfectly calm but those hazel eyes were intense and bright.

"Daniel," Jacob said in a moment of perfect contentment. It was Daniel, looking sunburned and drawn tight, but perfectly Daniel.

"Hey, Trip." Daniel blinked and managed a smile. "That's better. You were sleeping like a baby last time I was here."

"You should have woken me."

"You were pretty out of it. You needed the rest."

For a minute they looked at each other. That time in the water was still a jumble to Jacob, but he remembered bits and pieces. "You found me. You stayed with me."

"Pure luck." Daniel's voice was casual, with a glance at the beds on either side. The look in his eyes was not.

Jacob breathed, "Yeah." Luck didn't come any purer than that.

"I can't stay long," Daniel said. "They're handing out reassignments this afternoon."

"You're leaving." Jacob cleared his throat and glanced at his neighbors too. On his left, the bed that had held the man with one leg was empty. On his right, the

man with burned hands slept deep in drugged oblivion. "I'm glad you're okay but... I'm going home."

"I know." Daniel looked as lost as Jacob could ever remember. "What do we do now?"

Jacob tried to think through the morphine haze. "We write."

"Well of course but," Daniel dropped his voice, speaking almost under his breath, even though that guy in the next bed was dead to the world. "We can't say much. The censors read 'em."

"So we use a code. Just so we know..."

"Sure. Like the weather." Daniel's smile was a ghost of its usual self. "When I say it's sunny that means I want your hot mouth on me."

Jacob rolled his eyes left and right. It was probably safe.

"When I say it's rainy I want to suck you. When I talk about snow, I want you deep inside me till I feel you all the way up in my throat."

"Jesus," Jacob breathed. "The mouth on you."

"You corrupted me."

"Not likely. So what do I write about if I want you to, you know, do me?"

"Earthquake. And about as likely."

"Oh God, don't make me laugh." He bit his lip hard against the pain in his back.

"Sorry. I'm really sorry."

"No. It was good."

Daniel looked down at him seriously. "You'll send me your address, wherever you end up. You'll let me know if you move. If you get a telephone you'll send me the number."

"Sure."

"And write about how you do in whatever hospital you end up in. How your back is. It would be normal to tell a pal that kind of stuff."

"You're the one going back out there against the Japs." *And I'm so damned*

scared for you. He couldn't say it, didn't have to.

Daniel nodded slowly. "Can't make promises. But I'll be careful as I can. I'll write when we hit a port. And when it's over, I'll find you."

"You damned well better."

From the doorway of the ward an orderly called, "Two more minutes and then visiting hours are over."

Their eyes met in dismay.

"The scuttlebutt says most of us are shipping out tonight."

There were no words strong enough for that. Jacob gritted his teeth.

"If it's wrong I'll be back tomorrow."

"Can't count on it."

"No."

"Damn those Japs!"

"Planning to."

Jacob worked his free hand out from under the blankets and raised it a little. It took more effort than he expected. Daniel clasped it between both of his and lowered their grip into the screening bedding. For a long moment they said nothing, just looked at each other. Jacob tried to memorize this moment through his drug-addled fog. Tried to lock in the sight of Daniel's eyes and the way his over-long hair fell across his forehead, the shape of his jaw and the feel of his strong hands. It was no doubt the morphine that made him mumble. "I need to look at you. I'm scared if something... I'm scared I'll forget."

Daniel took a breath and then said, "It's probably safer with you anyway."

"What is?"

He disengaged their hands carefully. Jacob wanted to protest. What could be worth losing the last moment of touch they might have? But Daniel reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small snapshot. "You have your wallet?"

"In the box under the bed. What is that?"

Daniel reached under the bed and pulled out Jacob's wallet, the leather stained

and stiff with salt water. He tipped his hand toward Jacob, the picture half-hidden in his palm. It was a photo of the two of them, standing together in a doorway on the *Gageway*. In the picture Daniel was inside the room looking out, handsome and smiling, one lock of hair straying onto his forehead. In front of Daniel, Jacob himself stood grinning awkwardly, squinting a little in the light, one hand reaching back over his shoulder to fist in Daniel's shirtfront.

"God. Where did you get that?"

"Remember that newspaper reporter that was shipping with us, Nelson? I don't know when he took it but apparently he kept his camera in a waterproof bag and he's the kind of guy that didn't lose it despite sinking and sharks and all. He came up to me yesterday and gave me that."

"God," Jacob repeated. It was a great picture of Daniel. It was just perfect, even if Jacob himself looked like a moron. "Do you have a copy?"

"Nope." Daniel wrapped a stiff wrinkled dollar bill around the picture and tucked it carefully into Jacob's billfold. "There. Now you won't forget me when you get Stateside."

"That wasn't what I meant."

"I know." Daniel bent and stowed the wallet away.

At the front of the room a corpsman rang a bell.

Daniel stood abruptly, as if jerked upward by strings. Jacob reached toward him, regardless of the screaming stab it sent through his back.

Daniel gripped his hand, briefly but hard enough to turn his knuckles white. Then he let go.

"So long, Jacob. Have a good trip home, you lucky bastard."

Around the room, other men were getting up, shaking hands, touching shoulders, even faces. Nothing unusual about the two of them. Jacob wanted to say something, something special, something that would carry both of them through the months to come. God, maybe even years. But his throat had closed up completely. He blinked hard, staring fixedly at Daniel's face.

Daniel's perfect mouth tilted into a wry smile. "I know," he said softly. And then he turned and made his way out without looking back.

Minutes later, maybe hours later, the ward nurse came by and looked down at Jacob's face. "You look like you need more pain medication, sailor."

That wasn't really what he needed, but Jacob quite willingly let her bring the doc over to drug him into oblivion.

CHAPTER 9

November 1945.

Jacob slid the shoebox out from under his bed and lifted it to his lap. He hadn't indulged in this for a week now, but Thanksgiving was almost upon him and he wasn't feeling strong tonight. He untied the string and slid the lid off carefully. The thin paper in the box shifted as he carefully turned it over and emptied the contents into a pile on the coverlet. Not a lot of letters, for two and a half long years. It was almost ritual now. He read from the bottom to the top.

March 14, 1943

Trip, I hope your back is good enough for you to get around some by now. We're somewhere I can't say, and it's not as cold as where you are. But I'm still thinking about you back there the States. I bet there's still snow. Here sometimes it rains a lot. Then there are bright sunny days. Sometimes both in less than an hour's time. Good thing we don't have earthquakes. It's been a quiet few days and we've had actual leave but we ship out again tonight. Don't know how long. Best. D

May 26, 1943

Glad to hear you got home safely. Your letters caught up with me as I sat on a tropical beach with a beer. Warm beer, unfortunately, and not an icebox in sight. But still the first I've tasted in a while. Not a bad life, right? We've been mainly acting as a taxi for Marines. Those boys are tough, but some of them are so damned young. I don't think we were ever that young. Well, maybe you were.

Be sure you work hard for the torture-warden therapist – I want to go cheer in the bleachers at a ball game with you when I get home. I'm glad your hip is getting better. And I guess by now you're out of the hospital and home with your folks. Sure, I could see it might be hard to live at home, but it's probably the best place right now. Especially if they've rigged up that room on the ground floor like you said they were going to. Let your mom spoil you for a bit. I wouldn't say no to

some of my mom's cooking about now.

It's sunny here but a rainstorm rolls in every afternoon. There's something to be said for a little rain every day.

Your friend, D.

July 4, 1943

Hi Trip, No Fourth of July fireworks for us. We've got the real thing. Adds meaning to the phrase bombs bursting in air. Don't decide too quick about not going back to college, right? Sure working for your dad right away has advantages, but you should make sure it's what you really want. Anyway, I'm happy to hear you get out of the house now and are feeling useful again. I'm sure he's glad to have you taking an interest. But it doesn't mean you're locked in for life. Nothing new here. This war's gonna spoil me for beach vacations though. Steady sun and heat. Every other kind of weather would be welcome. D

November 28, 1943

Hey, Trip. I hope you had a good Thanksgiving with your folks. I was thinking of you on the day, no doubt stuffing your face with pie and turkey. The Navy tried to set out a spread of sorts for us, but heavy seas and Navy cooking being what they are, it wasn't a total success. I hope your little sister's cooking is improving. She may marry a rich guy and never need to touch a pan, but I think it's wise of her to learn how. Can't wait for this thing to be over. Maybe I'll visit you. She can bake me an apple pie, and I won't even care if she remembers to soften the apples first.

It must be frustrating to still need the crutches. But you should take it as slow as you have to. Remember, a guy home safe on crutches is still a guy who came home safe and a joy to the folks who care about him. Try not to get too impatient.

By now I'm betting the folks at home have heard about the battle of T. I won't write anything the censors might have to cross off, but holy God, just being in the boats in support of the men on the beach was a new meaning of hell. I came out of it fine. The Japs did fire back at us but mostly missed. We lost Badger, though. You remember him? Kane says Badger was beginning to repeat all his stories by now so no big loss. Then Kane went off and blubbered for about an hour. This is hard stuff.

So I'm well, wishing for a bit more rain and snow to cut the heat. If anyone ever advises you to retire to a tropical climate, don't do it.

Yours, D.

The pictures that had come back from the Tarawa beaches, the sheer numbers of the dead and wounded, had said what Daniel wouldn't put into words. It had been damned painful to write back the casual condolences and support of a friend. Jacob had ached to give Daniel more.

Jacob leafed through a dozen more pages. The letters got even shorter as time went on. Between the pages he could almost feel the suffering Daniel witnessed paring Daniel down to bare bones. He hoped the man had managed to eat and sleep. Clearly, he'd survived through it all. But his words had become sparse. No more mention of shipmates by name. Either there was no one left around Daniel whom Jacob would know, or the steady toll had been too much to share. Jacob picked up the most recent four.

March 21, 1945

Hey Trip, glad you're not here. Things have been pretty hot and heavy at the beaches. And those Marines get younger every day. Or maybe I'm just getting older. We're winning, island by island, but the cost is so high. I was out in the boats trying to get the wounded out of the water. Grabbed a kid's arm and it came off in my hands. He was dead anyway.

Keep writing. I need to know there's a sane world somewhere not filled with blood and death. At night I dream of gentle slow rain washing all the blood away. It helps some. D

May 9, 1945

We just got the word of victory in Europe. The whole ship broke out cheering and there was an orgy of hugging. Pity there were no girls around to make it a real orgy. At least it bucked us up. The Japs may be a different breed, and it won't be easy, but with the US of A turning all her attention to us here in the Pacific we will get it done. Did you kiss anyone when you heard the news? I just imagined my girl back home, thought about kissing the hell out of her mouth and other unmentionable parts. I hope you celebrated and had similar thoughts, even if you don't have a girl right now. It was sunny all day as if the weather was celebrating

with us. Too hot though, and no rain, more's the pity. But sun can be good too. Now it's time for us and the poor damned Marines to dig down deep and line up the next beach to be won. God help us all, because the Japs won't. D

June 16, 1945

There was a man in town today when we got liberty. We came across him in a bar, drinking like a fish. He reminded me of someone I used to know. Anyway, I asked him why he was trying to drink himself under the table and he just started talking. He's a doctor. He'd been working in a Jap internment camp that was liberated. He started talking about it and he couldn't stop. Words just came pouring out of him like shit from a sewer. I don't understand how human beings can do that to each other. First the Krauts and now the Japs, treating people worse than animals. After a bit I helped him get drunk enough to pass out and several of us carried him back to his hotel. I wish I could go back in time and know enough not to ask him that question. We are doing the right thing in this war. They have to be stopped. But there is no end to the pain. Sorry to be such a sad sack, but some days it's hard to see the end of this. I do know it will come, though, so don't worry. I'll be home before the snow flies. Of course it never snows in California, so that's pretty safe. D

Sept 8, 1945

Jacob, I had a letter I was going to send you, about how they announced the surrender and we all just about came apart. But I ripped it up. Met a guy yesterday who had pictures from Nagasaki. Holy Christ. He was showing them around, bragging about American fire power and how the Japs got what they deserved. But dear God, those pictures! All I could think about was the destruction. The deaths. That was a city full of civilians, women and kids and little old grandfathers. And not a tree left standing. Those pictures burned the hate right out of me. All I want now is to go home. D

Jacob stowed the letters carefully back in the shoebox and laid the snap of himself and Daniel over them tenderly. The corners of the snapshot were softened from handling, but Daniel still smiled out of it, eyes narrowed at the sunlight, looking like a movie star, with his shirt securely in Jacob's grip. God, Jacob wished he could still feel what that was like, to have Daniel beside him. He wasn't forgetting the man, but sometimes when he closed his eyes he could no longer

bring Daniel's voice or his touch back clearly. It had been too damned long.

It must have felt even longer to Daniel out there in the Pacific. The first few letters came with little pictures all over them, sketches of the guys sleeping, of the cook stirring a big pot with a cigarette in his mouth, the long column of ash threatening to fall into the soup. There was a sketchy cartoon of a sailor tripping over a rope, a drawing of a gull perched on the railing that was so real Jacob thought he could almost feel the bird's feathers. Gradually the pictures had petered out. The last few letters were just bleak words on paper. That scared him more than the contents. A world where Daniel wasn't drawing anything must be pretty close to hell.

It had been over two months since that last letter. Not the longest gap he'd ever lived through, but the war was supposed to be over now. Surely the mail should be improving. He would try to write again. Something lighthearted and fun. Nothing about the pain he still had or the difficulty sleeping or how scared he was that something would happen to Daniel, alone and still vulnerable a world away. He would write about Mrs. Dankowsky downstairs and the pot of borscht and the cat. He bent awkwardly, holding the side of the mattress, and slid the box back under.

As he made his way to the kitchen table there was a knock on the door. He sighed and reversed course. No doubt the very same Mrs. Dankowsky. He wondered what the cat had gotten itself stuck in now. So far he had removed its head from a tin can and its paw from a mousetrap, and had the scratches to prove it. Although both of those had been better than giving the soup-covered cat a bath. The cat had a death wish. Jacob reflected that if he lived with Mrs. Dankowsky, he too might long for oblivion.

Jacob pulled the door open and stared blankly at the disheveled, tired-looking man on his doorstep.

"Hey, Trip. Long time no see."

"Oh, God." He froze. He had pictured this a thousand times. He had imagined saying something witty, followed by guiding Daniel inside for a hug, a passionate kiss, romantic words. And instead here he stood, struck dumb like some tourist looking at the Empire State Building. Like a man looking at something too wonderful to really be true. He reached out slowly, noticing without caring that his hand was shaking.

Daniel caught it in his own, and the touch of those familiar strong fingers broke the spell. Jacob lurched forward, ignoring the pull in his hip that turned it halfway into a fall. Daniel would catch him. There was no fear left in him.

Then he buried his face in Daniel's neck and Daniel's arms wrapped around him. He pressed his nose into that familiar skin, inhaling the smell of sweat and man and stale cigarette smoke. It took a moment to realize Daniel was murmuring in his ear, "Jacob. Trip. It's okay buddy, it's okay. Let's back up three steps so we can close the door, all right? Three steps, Trip."

He let himself be guided backward, blind and stumbling because he wouldn't lift his face from the home it had found against Daniel. Daniel's arms supported him, wouldn't let him fall. The door shut with a thump he felt through his body, and they were safe and together, and he fell apart. Two and a half years of pain and fear and being alone just poured out of him in deep tearing sobs.

This wasn't what he'd planned. He was crying like a baby and couldn't stop. Couldn't fucking stop. What right did he have to cry? It was Daniel who had been through so much. It was Daniel who had written of death and dismemberment and horror as if they were part of his daily routine. Jacob had planned to be supportive and take care of his man, and instead here he was, barely able to stand, letting Daniel hold him up. He gasped and choked, trying to get a grip.

"Hush, Trip, hush." Daniel's hand cupped the back of Jacob's head, cradling him. His other hand rubbed slow circles on Jacob's back. As Jacob shook with racking gasps, Daniel kissed his hair. "It's okay. We're safe now. You can let it out."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." His voice wobbled uncontrollably and he fought for control, biting his lip hard. He didn't feel anything, but he could taste the copper-sweet tang of blood in his mouth.

"I'm not sorry about a thing." As Jacob's shudders diminished, Daniel eased back and framed Jacob's face with his warm hands. Jacob met those hazel eyes and his breath caught. Daniel slowly leaned in and kissed him.

Oh, God, this was sweet. This was right and real and where he belonged, here in Daniel's hands. Any doubts that might have crept up on him in the years apart vanished with the touch of Daniel's mouth on his. They kissed slowly, leisurely.

There had never been enough time for this. There had never been enough safety. Now he licked at Daniel's lips, remembering his touch, his taste, and Daniel opened for him on a sigh. Their tongues met, caressed. Daniel angled his head a little more to fit them perfectly together.

They pulled back at last, mouths only a whisper apart, looking at each other. Then Jacob broke free of Daniel's hands and pulled himself together enough to drag a sleeve over his wet face and glare at the man. "So, not that I'm not glad to see you but what? You couldn't find enough change to make a simple phone call? No word for over two months, you bastard, and the last thing I knew you were still in Japan. And then you just turn up on my doorstep? No wonder you about gave me a heart attack."

A small smile turned Daniel's lips upward. "Is that what you're calling it?"

"Damn you."

Daniel shrugged, a small weary motion. "Yeah, I could have called. But I figured why bother. It wouldn't get me here any sooner."

"I could have been ready." *I could have washed the sheets and stocked up on oranges for you. I could have been prepared enough not to break down like a sissy girl when you appeared at my door.* "I could have come to the coast to meet you."

"Oh right. And then we could have spent four days on the bus coming back across the country, carefully not touching each other. Bad idea."

"True." Jacob took a closer look at Daniel. He was wearing civilian clothes, a crumpled white shirt and grey trousers that had long since lost their crease. He looked pretty grey himself, with dark circles under his eyes. "If you didn't look so damned good I would say you looked like hell."

"It was a long ride. I don't think I slept more than a couple of hours here and there. Three different buses, and for what it's worth, Kansas has some of the most boring scenery on the face of the planet."

Jacob glanced around. "Did you bring your stuff?"

"Out on the landing. I kind of dropped it when you tackled me."

Jacob knew his face was red. "Sorry."

"I'm not. I'm really, really not. But I want to get it now, and then I want to go

to bed. And I want to just hold you and sleep.” Daniel took a deep breath. “The first two days on the bus, all I could think about was getting naked with you. I was going to just strip off and drop face-down on the bed and beg you to do me. Round about St. Louis, I started fantasizing about just you and a bed and sleep.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I'm exhausted and dirty and I smell. Tell me you don't mind.”

Jacob's mouth was dry. “I don't mind.”

“Tell me you have a bed.”

“I bought a double size.”

“Thank the Lord. A practical man. Let me get that bag and then you can lead me to it.” Daniel went to the door, opened it, and dragged in his battered and stained seabag. He shut the door and Jacob brushed past him to set the deadbolt. He reached to take the bag and their hands touched. It should have been nothing, but his whole body tightened in response.

Daniel looked down and then gave him a tired grin. “Down, boy. Give me about six hours of sleep and I'll take the compliment and do something with it.”

“Sleep as long as you need to,” Jacob said fiercely. “It's only seven. I have twelve hours before I have to get ready for work. And just having you here...”

Daniel nodded slowly. “So is the head somewhere around here? Or do you have to share?”

“Nope. One of the reasons I picked this place.” Despite the two flights of stairs he had to drag his bum leg up. “Private bath. Not big, mind you, and the hot water tank is pretty small for the building. But up here it's just us. This way.”

Jacob led the way through the kitchen and pointed at the bathroom door on the left.

Daniel ducked in, closing the door. Jacob went on into the bedroom. The big bed waited for him. For them. Finally he would have Daniel there to share it. He pulled off the sheets, and quickly replaced them, stuffing the dirty ones in the hamper. He heard the toilet flush and paused wondering if Daniel would shower. But the door opened and Daniel came into the room. Jacob's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Daniel was naked, carrying his dirty clothes in one hand.

Daniel dropped the clothes in a corner, walked the three steps to the bed a little stiffly, and half fell into it. "Oh, God, that's heaven. It's big, it's soft and it's not moving." He rolled over, rubbing his face on the pillow. Jacob watched him, hopelessly hard and aching. Daniel's eyes were closed. Jacob stood frozen.

After a minute, Daniel cracked open one eye. "Come on Trip. Get in here. I want to hold you before I fall asleep. Want to hold you and not dream and wake up with you here."

Jacob moved his hands slowly to his belt. He stripped down to his shorts and then hesitated. Daniel was naked, but Jacob felt odd getting fully undressed when he was so completely and obviously aroused, and Daniel wasn't. And yet, it might be even more odd for Daniel to be the only one naked. Jacob slowly pulled his shorts off and tossed them with the rest. He moved to the bed and pulled the covers out from under Daniel's limp body. Carefully, not jostling the mattress, Jacob slid in beside him and tented the covers over them.

"Mmmm." It was a wordless mumble. Daniel rolled toward Jacob and slid an arm over his chest and a leg across his thighs. "Yesss." Moments later Daniel's breathing got slower and louder. Jacob felt Daniel's muscles go soft and his weight was heavy on Jacob's hip. Jacob shifted position so his bad leg was free and slid an arm across Daniel's back.

It was only seven and he was anything but sleepy. In the low light filtering through the curtains, he lay and looked at the man in his arms. This was Daniel, and yet it wasn't.

The last time they were together, in that sickbay in the Pacific more than two long years ago, there had still been something of the boy about Daniel. Now he was very clearly all man. There were deep pale lines in the tanned skin around his eyes and on his forehead, the legacy of years spent squinting in the Pacific sun. He'd always been fitter than Jacob, but now Daniel's body was fined down. He was too thin, really, but it was all hard sinew and taut muscle, without an ounce of fat. There was a pink healed scar across Daniel's left shoulder, and another one higher on his neck near his ear. Jacob shuddered a little, thinking about all the vulnerable structures that lay under there. An inch up and to the left, and that wound might have hit the artery. Daniel hadn't even mentioned it.

Jacob realized Daniel hadn't seen Jacob's own scars yet, where they traced his

hip and thigh in a cross-hatch of ragged lacerations and neat surgical repairs. No doubt they both also carried wounds that didn't show on the outside. Daniel especially. What had he seen that had taken away the art in his fingertips and put that deep crease between his eyebrows even in sleep? What had he perhaps had to do? Jacob yearned to smooth the frown away, but he didn't want to wake Daniel out of his exhausted slumber.

Jacob's foot was going to sleep. He wriggled around until he had Daniel spooned against him. Daniel's smooth warm back pressed up against his chest. Daniel's ass was round and firm, pushed into Jacob's groin. And nothing was going to happen for hours. Jacob thought about ice cubes, about girls, about the cut on Daniel's neck that must have almost put the man in a watery grave. That one did it, took just enough of the edge off. *He's here. He's alive and in my arms. The rest can wait.* Jacob hugged Daniel more tightly, letting his hopeless erection nestle futilely and oh so wonderfully against Daniel's ass, and closed his eyes. This was his new definition of paradise.

CHAPTER 10

Daniel woke to a strange, artificial light slanting in through unfamiliar curtains. For a moment he lay still, listening for the sounds of men around him snoring, coughing, talking. He waited for the roll and sway of his berth. But he was wrapped in warmth and unmoving quiet, and one person breathed soft and slow against his hair.

Jacob. Daniel had been so out of it when he arrived last night, he'd almost wondered if he had imagined it. It could have been just a dream as it had been so many times before, waking to find himself back on board a ship. Except that really was Jacob's arm draped across Daniel's chest, and Jacob's morning wood pressed against the small of his back. And Daniel's own was trapped uncomfortably against the mattress.

Daniel shifted uneasily. He was suddenly bombarded by a host of sensations. There was his own smell, the rancid mix of sweat and travel on his skin. He hadn't shaved in two days. He needed to pee. And despite the optimistic erections they were both sporting, he suddenly felt off balance. It had been a damned long time since they had turned to each other easily in a motel bed. He needed to think about the sex thing with his brain back in working condition.

He moved cautiously sideways, easing Jacob's relaxed arm over his hip and down gently to the sheets. Daniel slid his legs out of the bed and sat up slowly. Then he froze as Jacob's eyes popped open.

“Where y' goin'?” Jacob mumbled.

Daniel dredged up a smile. “Gotta hit the head.”

“Oh, 'kay.” Jacob blinked sleepily and pushed up on one elbow to look at his alarm clock. Daniel followed his eyes. Five-thirty, and Jacob had said he usually got up at seven. They had time for... whatever.

Jacob's smile was still sweet innocence despite the underlying heat. “Don't take too long.”

Daniel's eyes dropped. “I thought I would shower and shave, you know. I smell rank.”

“Not to me.” But Jacob dropped back onto the pillows. “Sure. If you want to go ahead. Use my towel. And my razor if you like.”

Daniel shook his head. “Got one in my bag. Get some more sleep. I'll be back in a bit.”

In the bathroom he took care of business and shaved carefully, not looking himself in the eyes in the mirror. He turned on the taps full blast and stepped into the shower. The hot water pouring over his head was clean and bountiful, and he sighed with pleasure. Fresh water wasn't plentiful on board a ship, even in today's relatively modern era. Then after he'd hit dry land, the best he'd managed on the trip was a quick scrub of his pits in the dirty bus-depot bathrooms. This was glorious. He shampooed his hair twice, and then soaped himself well. The sliver of soap slipped from his fingers and he bent to retrieve it. Water ran up his nose and he snorted and shook his head, palm on the tiled wall. And suddenly became aware of his position.

He had a flash of their last time on the *Gageway*, *standing in the little storeroom, bent over just like this. Both of them so horny and nervous, pressed together fully dressed.* He had come, hard, just from the rub of Jacob's body against his ass and the brush of the man's hand over his pants. And had wondered then what it would be like to actually fuck like that, standing up.

Might find out soon. That should make him eager, right? Not scared.

He turned his back to the spray. What if he couldn't do this? What if he'd forgotten how? That first time had hurt, a little, but the pain had been minor and pretty much lost in wanting Jacob so badly. They had both been more than ready, after all that time on board ship without the chance to touch. Jacob had been fumbling and eager, but slow and gentle in spite of Daniel's own impatience. But there had only been one other chance for them to do... that, before the Japanese sub had done its dirty work. It had seemed easy back then. They had been so naive. What if things were different now?

Daniel put a hand to his own ass, pressing a finger inward. He'd done this often enough in the last two years, a furtive touch in a rare private moment. He'd usually sucked his fingers wet or soaped them and touched himself, remembering, imagining Jacob. But the real thing would be different. Jacob was older now. What if in this civilized apartment on those nice clean sheets, things were different?

He reached for the soap and then paused, remembering the times it had made him itch and burn afterward. He pressed a second wet finger beside the first, but without lubrication two fingers stung and he stopped. What if he farted? What if he had to take a crap? He'd sat on the can for five minutes this morning without success. What if when Jacob got in there...

Daniel turned back to the spray, letting it wash over his closed eyelids and run down his cheeks. He tried to steady his suddenly rapid breathing. He ran his hands up his face and back over his hair and found that they were shaking. His knees trembled.

This was crazy. Out there in the bedroom was the man he loved, the man he had waited almost three years and traveled across the country to see. And here Daniel was standing in the shower as it turned cool and then cold, being a chicken. He clucked at himself, his voice hoarse. *Dumb chicken. Go out there.*

The water suddenly shut off. He blinked his eyes and found himself starting right at Jacob.

"Falling asleep in here?" Jacob's voice was gentle and indulgent. "You can just come back to bed and sleep some more. We have all the time in the world

now.”

Daniel could have gone along with that story. But one of the things he'd decided, in the long hours staring out at the Kansas scenery, was that he was going to try to play this straight. Try to give Jacob the truth about his messed up brain when he came adrift. Because even on that bus there had been moments when he almost bought a ticket to head back the other way. So he shook his head. “Panic attack.”

“About the war?” Jacob's dark eyes filled with concern. He reached for Daniel's wet shoulders and Daniel pressed back into the shower out of reach.

“Not the war.”

“About...?” After a long pause, Jacob said carefully, “Us? Me?”

“Not you. Well, sort of. It's crazy. I'm crazy.”

“Tell me.”

Suddenly the question that desperately needed answering floated to the top of the heap. Daniel had traveled all this way, and never called. He'd arrived here at Jacob's home and walked in and just assumed. He hadn't asked. And he needed to know. “Do you still want me?”

“Jesus Christ, what kind of question is that?”

Daniel bit his lip and waited, shivering a little as the water trickled from his skin.

“You mean it.” Jacob's eyes got big. “You really aren't sure?”

Daniel shrugged one shoulder and turned away from Jacob's face, reaching for the towel. He failed to get there as Jacob moved in close, locking him in a tight embrace.

“Don't do that, Daniel,” Jacob whispered against his skin. “Don't second guess this, us. I've been waiting three years for you to come home.”

“It's going to be hard,” Daniels said perversely, because at the same time he was leaning into Jacob's body. “Being together, being queer. It'll be hard.”

Jacob hugged him tighter and said, “I don't think I have a choice about being queer. And you used to like it hard.”

Daniel choked. "That's my line."

"Then say it, damn you. Say you want me."

"I want you." He mumbled it against Jacob's skin. "I do. I've been waiting too."

Jacob eased him back toward the bedroom, pausing to scoop up the towel with one hand. "Come on then. Let's get you dry and go on from there."

Daniel let himself be guided over toward the bed and wrapped in scratchy terrycloth. "Your towels are worse than the Navy ones," he muttered through suddenly chattering teeth. "How cheap are you?"

Jacob rubbed the cloth over Daniel's arms roughly, his eyes bright. "Father said if I didn't live at home, the rent had to come out of my salary. I didn't want to spend a lot of money on other things. I've started saving for a house."

"Oh." Daniel sat abruptly on the edge of the bed.

Jacob eased down beside him. Daniel had noticed that for all Jacob's cheerful letters about his recovery, he still moved like an old man. Jacob asked, "Too much?"

"No." He tried again with more conviction. "No."

"Here, get in and warm up again." Jacob lifted the covers and pulled Daniel underneath them. Daniel dropped the towel on the floor and followed his lead. They lay face to face under the blankets. Jacob pressed his warm feet against Daniel's cold ones. "You're like ice. I should have warned you, the hot water is seriously limited here."

"I'm okay." He was warming up rapidly. The bed was a cocoon of safety, and Jacob was like a stove radiating warmth. Daniel tested the temperature of his own hand on his thigh and shivered. He tucked his hands under his arms rather than reach for Jacob. But Jacob caught his wrists and pulled Daniel's hands against his chest cradling them between his palms.

"Here. Give me those." He chafed Daniel's hands lightly.

"Trip?"

"Yeah?"

“Kiss me?”

Jacob smiled and moved closer. His mouth hovered over Daniel's. Daniel shut his eyes. Looking at Jacob made it too much. He parted his lips as Jacob leaned in, and lost himself in the touch and taste of Jacob's kiss.

They moved slowly and carefully, light touches of lips on lips. Jacob let go of Daniel's hands to gather him closer, and Daniel complied, fitting them together from shoulder to thigh. He slid his hands up Jacob's back. He felt Jacob's palms press against his spine, right above his ass. He opened his mouth more for the kiss.

Jacob moaned and thrust his tongue into Daniel's mouth, his fingers digging into Daniel's ass-cheeks. His cock was jutting up against Daniel's belly but they just rocked together in a slow rolling motion, as they explored each other's mouths. Eventually Jacob pulled back a little and laughed softly. “You missed me. You really missed me.”

“Hell, yes.” Daniel slid sideways so their dicks lined up against each other. They both gasped at the slide of hot hard flesh on flesh.

“Missed you too. Missed this. Missed everything.” Jacob moved his mouth to Daniel's neck, sucking hard until Daniel whimpered. Jacob slipped lower, disappearing under the covers. Daniel felt Jacob's wet tongue slide over his collarbone and slide down to circle his nipple. Daniel threaded his fingers into Jacob's hair, and pushed back the covers. He wanted to see this. He needed to watch Jacob's mouth on him.

Jacob licked and nibbled, sucking Daniel's nipples to aching peaks. He began moving from one to the other, using lips and teeth. Daniel tightened his fingers in Jacob's hair, pushing his head downward. Jacob chuckled against his skin, tracing with his open mouth lower over Daniel's hip.

“You don't have to,” Daniel choked, even as his brain had no room left for anything except *Please, please, please*.

Jacob didn't bother to answer that, just turned his head to put a wet kiss over the swollen leaking head of Daniel's cock. Daniel moaned. “Oh, God.”

Jacob closed one warm hand around the base of Daniel's aching shaft and began licking, slowly, from his hand up and over Daniel's slit. A bead of precum welled up. Jacob glanced at Daniel, his eyes bright, and swiped the flat of his

tongue over it. Daniel's whole body shuddered.

“Won't take much of that,” he said hoarsely.

“Good.” Jacob bent over him and closed his mouth around Daniel. Daniel bucked up helplessly, clenching his fingers in Jacob's hair. Jacob's mouth was slick and hot, and he was doing something with his tongue that Daniel didn't remember from their rushed sessions in the past. Something that made Daniel's eyes cross and just about blew the top off his head.

“Have you been practicing?” He gasped. “Oh, God.” Jacob bobbed his head down deep and pulled upward, sucking until his cheeks hollowed.

Jacob let the head of Daniel's dick slide out of his mouth with a wet pop and smiled that angelic smile, more sweet than debauched despite the smear of precum on his lip. “Bananas came back on the market recently.”

“Oh, Jesus.” The image of Jacob in the kitchen, practicing fellatio with a banana, caught Daniel between laughter and need.

Then Jacob lowered his head again and there was no room for the laughter. Daniel eventually worked his way past pure sensation to the thought that he should be doing something besides whimpering and moaning, “Trip, God, Trip.” He tugged on Jacob's hair. “You. What about you?” They had worked out how to do each other simultaneously, back in the Pacific.

Jacob nuzzled in against his balls and sucked one into his mouth. He hummed, the vibration sending shivers through Daniel's groin. Jacob pulled back, opened his mouth to release Daniel's stretched sac, and muttered, “Later. You can do me later.”

“Oh, God. Okay.” He couldn't argue with that, didn't want to while Jacob was worshiping Daniel's cock with mouth and hands and hot breath and that gorgeous serious intent. So he let it go, all the concerns and the anxieties and whether this was fair for their first time after so long, and just let himself feel. Feel something so good, so right, that it wiped out everything else. He whimpered and moaned, grabbing the sheets with his free hand so he wouldn't fly away. Jacob's head sped up under Daniel's grasp, sucking Daniel in wet deep pulls. Heat arced through Daniel's groin, tightening his balls and throbbing in growing intensity beneath his cock.

“Coming. Trip.” He tugged in Jacob's hair. Jacob grunted and tightened his hand on Daniel's shaft, sliding on spit, his mouth and tongue driving Daniel up unbearably. Daniel cried out, and came in shaky pulses that burned out of him into that beloved mouth. He opened his eyes that had somehow squeezed shut and looked down at that sight. Jacob with Daniel's softening cock still slipping between his lips. His Jacob, his Trip, with cum on his chin and his dark hair mussed, his lips swollen and red and his eyes glowing like suns.

“Jesus.” Daniel reached down with both hands and hauled Jacob up. He needed that weight on him. Needed the press of Jacob's body over his own or he might float away. He kissed those lips, and opened willingly for Jacob's tongue, still flavored with the bitter salt tang of Daniel's cum.

Jacob kissed him and then nestled in, pressing his face into Daniel's shoulder. Daniel wrapped his arms around him.

“You're amazing.” He could feel his pulse still pounding in his ears. “Holy Christ, you are amazing.”

Jacob chuckled against his neck. “Three years of planning.”

“Time well spent.” Daniel rubbed his cheek over Jacob's hair. “Give me a minute and I'll return the favor. Well, maybe ten minutes.”

“No rush. I got off just doing that.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yeah. You may need to wash your leg.”

“Were you humping me?” He needed something light. Needed to get back into his game.

Jacob snorted. “Like a dog, Danny boy.”

“Don't call me that.” The retort was automatic. He softened it with a stroke over Jacob's back. “Seriously, that was... the best.”

“Give *me* about ten minutes and we'll see if we can top it.”

“When did you get like this?”

“Like what?”

“So... certain.” *So confident, so much more adult than me.* “You were the one

who was holding back, before.”

“Yeah, I was.” Jacob's voice was soft and low. “I'm sorry.”

“No. I didn't mean that. It's okay.” *You were a miracle even then.* “I was just surprised that you slipped back into it so easy now. More than all the way back.”

Jacob was silent for a moment. Daniel felt him breathing, the rise and fall of their chests against each other, just a little out of sync. Jacob said, “Do you want to go slower?”

“No. I don't. Hell, Trip, I don't know what I'm saying.”

“Maybe it's lack of sleep.”

“And lack of food. Yeah maybe.” It would be good to think this odd second-guessing was just his brain running low on fuel. He made an effort to find the old Daniel who had made the first move in that dirty little room in Townsville. What would he have said then? “Maybe you sucked my brain out of my dick with that blow job. My turn.”

He rolled abruptly, his arms around Jacob to pull him underneath. He spread his weight over Jacob's belly and chest, pinning his wrists to the bed on either side of his head. Jacob stared up at him, startled, and then began to smile. “What did you have in mind?”

“Gonna start by kissing the smart right out of your mouth.” He bent over Jacob and mashed their lips together. This wasn't any soft romantic kiss. He started it hungry and it got hungrier. They moaned into each other's mouths, tongues pressing, battling for primacy. Daniel pulled off to kiss the angle of Jacob's jaw, rough with morning stubble. His teeth found the edge of Jacob's collarbone and he bit, hard enough to leave marks.

Jacob jerked underneath him. “What the hell?”

“You're mine.” Suddenly that was important to say aloud. “Don't worry. It won't show above your shirt collar. But I want you to know you're mine.”

“You fool, of course I am.”

“And don't forget it.” He moved lower. His tongue traced the scattering of hair across Jacob's chest, and then followed the trail downward. He let go of Jacob's wrists and moved his hands to those tight nipples, pinching and tweaking

them as he sucked Jacob's belly above his dark curls.

Jacob panted, bucking his hips up against the weight of Daniel's chest. His cock stood rigid inches from Daniel's mouth. Daniel blew a breath on it and then returned to sucking up marks on the soft skin of Jacob's abdomen. There were scars on Jacob's thigh and hip. He thought he might kiss them, might touch and soothe them, but in the end he did what he had learned to do with his own scars. Ignore and move on. He nuzzled Jacob's belly, stroked Jacob's chest, and then slid downward again towards those dark soft curls, constantly moving but never touching Jacob's dick.

"Daniel. Daniel. Christ, I need... I need..."

"What, Trip?" Daniel licked a line up the groove from Jacob's groin to his hip and ignored that taut erection beside his cheek.

"Bastard," Jacob groaned. "More, I need something. Your hand, your mouth..."

"My ass?"

Jacob froze for a moment. "You want to?"

"Do you?"

"Oh, God, yeah. I wasn't going to ask."

"You didn't ask. I offered." He slid to one side off Jacob's hips.

Jacob's hand caught his arm. "Do you really want to? For you and not just for me?"

"Oh yes." Daniel saw doubt still in Jacob's eyes and added a truth. "I used to dream about it, some nights onboard. Sometimes I'd lick my finger and push it up in there and wish it was you inside me."

"Damn."

Daniel rolled over and then pushed up to his knees. "You got something to use for slick though?" He wanted this, he really did. But spit was not going to be enough.

Jacob reached to open the drawer of his bedside table and pulled out a small bottle. "Massage oil. Like what we used that night in Espiritu Santo. I've been saving it ready." He uncapped the bottle and the scent rose, herbal and sweet.

“Okay.” Daniel spread his thighs and buried his face in his arms. He felt vulnerable and wanton and unbearably aroused, presenting his ass to Jacob this way.

Jacob moved to kneel between his legs. Daniel was expecting the touch of oil on his ass, so he was caught by surprise when Jacob pressed a kiss against his spine right above his tailbone. The whimper Daniel made was a damned silly noise coming from a grown man, but Jacob groaned in response, and bowed over him, kissing his way up Daniel's back.

Daniel whispered, “Fuck me, Trip.” If he had to wait much longer he was going to come just from the anticipation. “Fuck me. Please. Now.”

“Yeah.” Finally Jacob's finger breached him, slick with oil. He arched against the pressure, and whined in his throat as Jacob added a second finger.

“Too fast?”

“Hell, no.” It wasn't. The stretch and burn were lost somewhere in the sensations rolling over him. He freed a hand to reach down underneath himself and fist over his own dick. “More. Come on Trip. More.”

“Jesus.” It was an exhaled breath. Jacob's fingers pulled out. Daniel felt a hand on his hip as Jacob balanced himself to reach over and set down the bottle. And then there was that sweet pressure of Jacob's cock against his entrance. Daniel whined, arching his back, trying to get through that first entry. For a moment Jacob steadied him, holding him still against the slide of Jacob's cock over his skin. Then Jacob moved one hand to guide himself and pressed home.

It stung and it burned, and then it didn't. It became just fullness and heat. Daniel thrust back with his hips as Jacob drove forward. Daniel groaned aloud at that sensation that nothing else gave him, the feeling of being taken, being held and filled and used and fucked. His hand fell away from his dick as he braced himself. Jacob began thrusting, slow and deep, each drive accompanied by a little roll of his hips that fit them tighter and tighter together.

Daniel closed his eyes. This was better than the first time. Hell, better than the second time which until now had been his definition of perfect. His awareness narrowed down to just the feel of Jacob sliding slowly out of Daniel's body and then driving home. Then Jacob pulled all the way out.

Daniel cried out softly at the loss. He twisted to look over his shoulder. “What the hell? Trip?”

“I need to change positions.” Jacob's face was flushed with more shame than arousal. “I'm sorry. It's the damned hip. Kneeling...”

“Hush. Don't be sorry.” Daniel sat up and tugged Jacob into a wet sloppy kiss. “How do you want me?”

“On your side maybe? Right side, and I can spoon behind you?”

“Sure.” Daniel lay down with his back to Jacob and raised his left leg. There was a moment of fumbling as they fit themselves together this new way. Then Jacob's hands spread Daniel's ass, and Jacob's cock sheathed itself deep inside him.

“Ngh.” He wanted to use words and tell Jacob how right this felt. But the sensations were robbing him of language and breath and thought itself. He reached back for Jacob's hip and pulled while slamming backward. Jacob's pelvis hit Daniel's ass hard. For a moment they froze, as tightly joined as was humanly possible. Then Jacob grunted and began to move. Daniel's hand fluttered near his groin, but he fisted the sheets instead of touching himself. There was no need. Under the driving weight of Jacob's body, Daniel spiraled upward. Each thrust sent fire through his rock hard cock, driving him into the bunched sheets. Each withdrawal made him moan and clutch the bed. Jacob picked up the pace, his fingers digging into Daniel's thigh.

It was all good, all the parts of it, the fabric brushing his cock, the hand pinching his thigh and the hard cock that filled and stretched him almost past bearing. The drag and burn deep inside and that magic something that was the end of each stroke filling him with fire. Jacob's breath on his neck, and Jacob's laboring grunts and the sound of his body hitting Daniel's ass. Man-sweat and cum on the sheets and the herbal smell of the oil. Daniel shuddered and came, in a blinding rush that went on and on, emptying him into this big clean bed under Jacob's weight. Dimly he heard Jacob cry out, and felt the jerking force of Jacob's climax. And then he was slipping slowly back down, weightless in the morning light, with his lover deep in his body and the new day dawning.

CHAPTER 11

April 1946

Daniel felt something touch his hand and a reproachful voice said, “You fell asleep smoking again. Gonna set something on fire.”

“Steel doesn't burn,” he mumbled, and then came awake on a surface far too soft to be a deck.

He opened bleary eyes to see Jacob looking down at him, trying to hide anxiety. With a groan, Daniel sat up on the couch and rubbed his hand across his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Three a.m.”

“What the hell are you doing up?”

“Keeping you from burning down the building, apparently.” There was a hint of asperity in Jacob's voice. Daniel watched as Jacob ground the cigarette out in a saucer filled with butts. “At least let me buy some real ashtrays, and maybe try to stay awake if you're smoking.”

“I'm quitting. I promised I would quit.”

“You don't have to. I can live with it. If you need to...”

“I don't *need* to. I like it. And the docs say it's good for a person. But I know *you* hate it so I'm gonna quit.”

“Daniel, if it helps you sleep or something, it's okay.”

“Nothing helps me sleep.” He regretted the words before they were out of his mouth.

Jacob asked softly, “Bad dreams again?”

“You have to really sleep to dream.” Which in retrospect did explain the not-sleeping. He rubbed his eyes. “Look, go back to bed. You'll be getting cold out here.” They were having a cold snap, and the apartment felt chilly. Daniel rubbed his arms and shivered.

“Will you come? We could help each other warm back up?”

“Maybe in a while.”

Jacob sat on the couch beside him. “Do you want to talk about it? I mean, I'm no psychologist or anything, but it seems like it's getting worse and not better. And I was there.”

“Not really. Not at the end. You don't know.” He didn't *want* Trip to know, didn't want to take the last shine off that innocence Jacob still had. As bad as the sinking of the *Gageway* had been, it had been nothing compared to Tarawa and beyond. Besides, Jacob didn't remember much of the sinking anyway. Lucky guy had been unconscious for half of it. Daniel shifted restlessly on the couch. “Anyhow, I don't want to talk about it, or think about it. I just want to go on from here.”

Jacob sighed. “Did you at least have a good time out with your friends tonight?”

“It was okay.” He'd gone out drinking and dancing with a couple of the boys from the restaurant where he was a waiter. They were young and carefree and the bar had been dark and loud with music. “It was good.”

“I would have gone with you, you know.”

“Those guys are young. They don't know anything about the war except rationing and scrap drives. It's easy to be around them and just forget for a while.”

“So I'm either too ignorant or not ignorant enough for you to want to be with me?”

Daniel gritted his teeth. “Yes. Sometimes that's exactly right.”

“Oh.” Jacob's eyes showed his hurt.

“Trip.” Daniel reached out as if to touch him and then dropped his hand. “Look, I didn't mean it like that. I need to find my own way. It was...” He didn't want to say what it had been. He stood abruptly. “I'm going to go out and walk.”

“Wait and I'll get dressed.”

“No!” That came out sharper than he meant it to and he saw Jacob flush and look down. “No. You go to bed. You're a working stiff. You have to get up and go to the store in a few hours. I just need to move around a bit, breathe some fresh air, clear the collywobblers from my brain.”

Jacob tried a smile. “Is that what you have in there?”

Daniel *hated* that smile. The one that said Jacob was scared and trying to seem reassuring, because Daniel was broken. Daniel wasn't broken. Well, maybe a bit bent. He snorted and the thought improved his mood just a hair. “Seems like it

sometimes. I'll be back soon. Don't worry."

"Okay. Just... be careful? It's pretty deserted at this hour."

And that brought the irritation rushing back. "*I want it* deserted. I'm a Navy veteran. I think I can take care of myself."

"Okay."

Daniel strode to the closet and pulled out his jacket, stomped into his shoes, fighting the laces, aware of Jacob staring sadly after him. He headed out the door, pausing only to be sure he'd relocked it behind himself, and then hurried down the stairs. He kept his steps as quiet as he could in consideration for the neighbors. Two flights down and then he let himself out into the cool night.

There was a little moon out, enough to walk by even when a streetlight was out. He wandered aimlessly. Somehow he found he had lit another cigarette and he took a deep drag on it, hand cupped around it in old reflex. Somewhere a dog barked. On the next street over he could hear traffic, even at this hour of morning. A poor fellow with shiftwork, maybe, or some lucky bastard just coming back now from a moonlight sail on his yacht.

He shook his head at his jealous fancy. No one with a yacht would be so much as driving through this neighborhood. Although Jacob could have had a yacht. Well, a boat anyway. More than he had right now with Daniel. Daniel wasn't sure just how much money Jacob's father had.

Well, of course he didn't know because he'd never even been to the man's house. Sometimes he felt like Jacob's dirty secret, kept locked away in a tenement, never allowed into Jacob's daily world.

So maybe Daniel did go out at night with the boys too often and too late. Maybe he did drink and smoke more than he should. He needed a life too. Something that wasn't just working the tables and waiting for Jacob to come home. Something that filled his head and kept him too busy for memories.

He lit a second cigarette from the first, and turned another corner. The buildings got a little bigger and a little dirtier. A man leaning against a stoop railing glanced his way. Daniel gave him a hard stare, and after a long moment the man melted away into the shadows. The sound of Daniel's footsteps echoed loudly in the dark street, and he tried to walk more quietly. He rounded another corner.

The cigarette burned down to his fingers and he paused to crush out the butt in the gutter. Jacob was right – falling asleep with the things was dangerous. And not just to himself. He tapped the pack against his hand. One left. He could save it. Or he could smoke it now and resolve to quit. He'd tried to quit a couple of times to please Jacob, but it never lasted. Daniel put the last cigarette between his lips and struck a match. As the light flared, he thought about flames rising from a smoldering couch and moving through the apartment to where a sleeping Jacob lay. That. That image would be his talisman. He would quit so he never woke to that.

Never again to flames and screaming. Never again to people he cared about, hell, people he loved, hurt and dying, with absolutely nothing he could do about it. To the sound of shells, the bright fire of explosions and the spray of water and men calling out for help... He stopped to take a breath.

It was damned unfair. He'd lived through that. He'd made it back with no more than a scratch or two, and started a new life with Jacob. And the war had followed him here. Not too badly at first, but more and more lately it invaded his mind. Images mostly. If he closed his eyes they played out on his lids like a motion picture. Hands reaching from the water. Men writhing in a boat, their pain distorting faces young enough to be Daniel's little brother Johnny. A plane spiraling into the drink, trailing black smoke, and no parachute in sight.

Jacob didn't know what Daniel had seen, had done. He was glad, fiercely glad, that Jacob didn't know the worst of it. But his lover's fumbling attempts to help made Daniel snap and snarl. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to think about it. But Jacob kept pushing and pushing, offering to listen, offering God knows what comfort. And trying not to look hurt when it didn't help. Daniel was sleeping on the couch half the time these days, in an effort not to wake Jacob with his restlessness. And instead of being grateful it was one more thing Jacob whined about.

No, not whined. That was unfair. But he did complain. Then Daniel yelled back at him and... He took a long drag on the cigarette. Oh boy, these were going to be hard to give up. But he would. He would do that and he would apologize to Jacob one more time and try again. It was kind of amazing that Jacob was still with him. Another man might have had enough of his moods and his disappearances by now and sent him on his way. The thought made Daniel shiver

and turn his feet toward home.

When he arrived, he let himself in the door quietly. But Jacob was still up, sitting on the couch. They said together in one voice, "I'm sorry."

Daniel kicked off his shoes and dumped his jacket. Three long strides took him to Jacob and he dropped to his knees in front of the couch. "I've been grouchy as a bear. I'm so sorry."

"Hush." Jacob ran a hand over his hair and Daniel grabbed it and pressed his forehead to it. Jacob's other hand landed on his head. "Hush, it's all right." Jacob's voice was soft. "I've been nagging at you, I know."

"For my own good. I do see that. I just don't know how to fix things."

"I had an idea," Jacob said tentatively. "You might be mad though."

"Tell me." He couldn't promise not to be mad. His temper rose so unpredictably these days. But he would try hard.

"Come see." Jacob stood and led the way into the bedroom. The bed had been moved to make a little more space. In the corner of the room, Jacob's desk had been cleared. On top of it was a slanted board. It looked like the slab they'd put under the sagging cushion on the armchair, but it was set up like a drawing board. Next to it was a jam-jar with pencils and pens, and on the angled surface of the board was a stack of blank white paper.

"What's that?"

"For you to draw." Jacob caught his upper arms and turned Daniel to face him. "Hear me out. I don't think I've seen you put pencil to paper since you got home."

"It was a dumb hobby."

"It was a hell of a lot more than that. You know, when I got your letters from the Pacific, even before reading them, I would look at the sketches. They were the heart of you. But then they stopped."

"Things got a little busy," Daniel said sarcastically, his eyes caught by that stack of white. He twisted free of Jacob's grip and locked his hands behind his back.

"That never stopped you before. I've been thinking about it a lot. I think you

need to draw. Maybe not the war. But something. It's like there's stuff inside you trying to come out. And if you don't let it out it's poisoning you. It keeps getting worse. Back on the *Gageway* you grabbed a pencil every chance you got and put stuff on paper. I just thought maybe it would help.”

Daniel stared at the slant board and said nothing. He felt frozen, encased in ice.

“Okay, maybe it was a dumb idea. I was trying to help. I wish I could help. Just don't get mad at me.”

And that little quiver in Jacob's voice cracked the ice. Daniel turned to him. Jacob's eyes were bright with unshed tears. “Oh, damn.” Daniel wrapped his arms around Jacob. “You do help, Trip. Honestly you do. I'd probably be dead without you.” He kissed Jacob's mouth roughly. Then he kissed him again, wetter and harder. How many days since they'd made love? Between him coming in late and Jacob getting up early it had been too many. But there was something even more urgent. Because Jacob must be exhausted, and Daniel's hands were reaching out for something different.

He stepped back. “I'll try. You may be right. After all, you're so damned smart.” He tried to give that a sarcastic twist but it just came out straight. “You should get back to bed and maybe we should move the desk to the other room.”

“No. Let's not. Unless my snoring will bother you.”

“You don't snore. Much.”

“Then stay here. I don't mind the light. You know I can sleep through anything. I like having you close-by.”

“Okay. You sleep.” He took a long rough breath. “I'll scribble. At this point it can hardly do any harm.”

Jacob kissed his cheek, and then went and crawled into bed. Daniel moved slowly to the desk. He tilted the lamp to get a more even light on the pages. Then he put all but one sheet on the floor and centered that one on the slant board. Jacob had stuck some straight pins in the side of the board. Daniel pinned the sheet of paper neat and square to the surface. Then removed the pins and set it at an angle. He sat down and slid the chair in close. Slid it back a couple of inches.

From the bed, Jacob's breathing was too silent for sleep, but he didn't move or speak. Daniel picked up a pen. Set it down and picked up a pencil. *Coward. What are you waiting for?*

His hands trembled and he hesitated, holding his breath. He felt like some kind of drug fiend, ready to fall back into his addiction. Needing this so badly, but so scared of what might come out if he let himself start. If he let those images behind his closed lids come out through his hands. He set the tip of the pencil to the paper.

He didn't have to draw the war. Maybe he could stay with something easy. No sinking ships or dead Marines. He smoothed the paper, feeling a slight roughness of the board underneath. He'd have to get a flatter one. Then he sneered at himself, remembering having to draw on water-wrinkled paper held in the palm of his hand. He was getting awfully fussy all of a sudden.

Without volition, the pencil tip moved. Daniel watched, feeling like an observer as the drawing took shape under his hand. It was Jacob, a young Jacob leaning on the rail of a ship, that bright look of discovery on his face as the continent of Australia came into view. The pencil limned the way his hair blew off his face and caught the bright look in his eyes.

On the bed behind Daniel, under the soft scritch of graphite on paper, the sound of Jacob's breathing slowed down into sleep.

CHAPTER 12

March 1947

Jacob cautiously pushed open the apartment door, wondering why it was ajar. That door stood between their refuge and the world. It was always shut, usually locked. He looked more closely at the handle. A tiny red smear of what might be blood made his breath catch.

"Daniel?" He closed the door behind him, listening. There was water running in the bathroom. Jacob dropped his hat on the couch and headed that way. "Daniel?"

There was a muffled "Hmph?" from the bathroom. At least Daniel didn't sound panicked. Jacob looked in.

Daniel had his face in the sink, running water across his cheeks. At Jacob's touch on his back he looked up and grimaced. Jacob stared. A long thin laceration, maybe more like a deep scratch, ran down Daniel's cheek from ear to jaw. The skin around it looked puffy and red. Daniel pressed his hand over it, eyes stormy.

"Daniel, what the hell happened?" His heart in his mouth, Jacob grabbed Daniel's wrist to pull his hand away and inspect the damage. But then his eyes were caught by a very familiar-looking set of parallel scratches down Daniel's wrist. Jacob's panic began to subside. "Mrs. Dankowski's cat?"

"You didn't warn me."

"I told you it was a nasty cat."

"You didn't tell me it was the spawn of Satan."

Jacob couldn't help grinning. "You heard my stories."

"I thought you were exaggerating."

Jacob kissed Daniel's unwounded cheek. "Let me go see if we have any ice in the freezer. It will make that feel better."

Daniel followed after him to the kitchen. He took the towel-wrapped ice cubes that Jacob held out and pressed them to his cheek. "I'll be scarred for life," he muttered.

Jacob pushed the towel aside momentarily to take a look. "I don't think it's that deep."

"I meant mentally. I'm going to develop a mad fear of cats. I'm going to see them lurking everywhere. Pretty soon I'll be holed up in one cat-free room gibbering to myself."

"What did the spawn of Satan do this time?"

"It's all your fault." Daniel brushed past Jacob to reach into the refrigerator and pull out a bottle of beer for each of them. "You've been too nice to tell the old bat to go elsewhere when she needs a hand. So when little Beelzebub gets into trouble the first thing she does is show up on our doorstep. And where were you, huh?"

Jacob slipped the opener under his bottle cap and popped the lid. The first

swallow went down smooth and easy. He set his bottle on the counter to take Daniel's and open it for him. "I was out working to keep you in beer actually."

"Oh yeah. Right."

Was there a hint of bitterness in Daniel's voice? Jacob said quickly, "Not that your job doesn't help too. It's not your fault waiting tables doesn't bring in much. I know you'll land an advertising position soon. Your art class teacher said..."

Daniel reached out and put the curve of his beer bottle against Jacob's mouth. "Hush. I'm not worried about it. You can go on supporting me in the manner to which I've become accustomed for a bit yet."

"Okay." Jacob still wasn't sure if that was real indifference in Daniel's voice or a facade, but he was more than willing to let the subject drop.

Daniel took a long pull on his beer. "Ah. The person who invented beer should be knighted, or maybe given a sainthood."

"They were probably a pagan. You were telling me about the cat."

"Oh, yeah. So Mrs. D was all upset and begging me to help her."

"So of course you said yes."

"Well, you weren't here."

"We've already established that it was my fault. Get on with it."

"So we went down to her place. The damned cat had been in a dresser drawer, and when Mrs. D opened it, the cat squeezed over the back of the drawer into the space behind it."

"So you just have to take out the drawer." Jacob had done far worse for this cat.

"You'd think. Except when Mrs. D went to do that the cat stuck its head back over the back of the drawer and got stuck somehow with its neck between the back and the divider. We couldn't pull the drawer forward without decapitating it. We couldn't push it back because the cat was behind it with its paws in the rails."

Jacob couldn't help snorting.

"Oh yeah, it's funny when it's not you."

“What did you do?”

“Well I figured we could just knock the back off the drawer, and that would free the little monster's head. So I reached in there with a hammer and tapped it off the sides. Mrs. D was screaming in my ear not to hurt the cat. The cat was yowling so at least I knew I wasn't strangling it. I hit my thumb. The back fell off and the cat wiggled out, savaged my hand and shot off out the bedroom door.”

“Um, your face. Was that Mrs. D?”

“Hell, no. She was delighted. We're both such lovely young men. She has two lovely nieces too. They will be visiting for several weeks at Easter. We should all have dinner together.”

“Oh, God. I hope you headed her off.”

“I tried.” Daniel took the towel away from his cheek and tried to see his wound in the shiny surface of the toaster.

Jacob pulled him away. “You're still beautiful.” He shoved the towel back into place. “Keep that there. Cat scratches swell like a son of a bitch. What do you mean, 'tried.'?”

“I couldn't get a word in edgewise. She told me you'd never let her feed you because it wasn't proper for a single man to eat in a widowed woman's house. But with the two of us and the two girls it would be completely proper. And she's going to make her famous cabbage rolls.”

They stared at each other in mutual dismay.

“And then as she was showing me out, the damned cat launched itself off the top of the door where it had been lurking and landed on my head.”

“Oh, my.”

Daniel's voice was developing a stifled giggle. “So I was dancing around, trying to dislodge the animated toupee of Satan, and the cat was digging its claws in my face, and she says, 'Ooh, Mr. Acardi, Fluffy really likes you. I hope you'll come back soon.'”

Jacob shook with laughter. “Maybe next time she'll ask for you instead of me. I could live with that. Do you think her nieces are anything like her?”

Daniel sobered and his eyes got wide. “Oh God, Trip. How long until Easter? And how fast do you think we can find another apartment?”

Jacob just shook his head, stepped forward and wrapped Daniel in a bear hug. Love and laughter bubbled through him. “Housing is hard to find right now. We may be stuck.”

“Do you think she would be offended if I asked her to lock the cat in the bedroom during dinner?”

Jacob snorted. “Hell, yes. Fluffy loves you.” He rubbed his cheek against Daniel's hair. “Are you really going to hate cats from now on?”

“Nah. I like cats. Most cats. Anyway we had barn cats that would make Fluffy look like a social butterfly. But you can be in charge of fending it off if it makes another run at me.”

“I'll protect you from the nasty pussy.”

“And from the two lovely girls?”

“We'll protect each other.” Jacob put a hand under Daniel's chin and guided him into a quick kiss. “You're mine. The girls can go find their own men. You're taken.”

Daniel smiled into his eyes, and made the kiss deeper. Jacob cooperated willingly. He was losing track of the conversation, and losing his breath and maybe his mind. He pushed Daniel up against the counter and closed his eyes. End of the work day and coming home to this. He didn't have words for the feeling in his heart. He only knew he wanted to keep it forever.

November 1947

Daniel looked up from his book as Jacob came into the living room. He smiled and put down the novel. “Hey, you're home in good time for a change. Well, good time for you.”

“Thanksgiving tomorrow. The store will be closed.” Jacob came over and bent to kiss him briefly.

Daniel caught him with a hand in his hair before he could straighten. “Hey, what kind of kiss do you call that?”

Jacob obediently opened his mouth for Daniel to plunder. It was a very nice kiss, but Daniel thought his man still seemed a little distracted. He let Jacob go and stood up, stretching out his shoulders.

“Come on, Trip. I think I'd better feed you. There's hot soup on the stove and some bread from the bakery down the street. And then we can discuss what to have for dessert.”

Jacob's smile was perfunctory. Daniel felt a little lurch in his gut. He had a suspicion where this was coming from but he hoped he was wrong. He led the way toward the kitchen. Jacob detoured to the bedroom instead. Daniel stirred the soup gently, listening to the familiar sounds. Since Jacob had become assistant manager of the store, he wore a suit to work every day. That sound was Trip fighting to undo the Windsor knot that he inevitably tugged too tight. That was the clink of hangers as he put his suit jacket in their closet. That was the thump of dress shoes.

Daniel turned as Jacob came into the kitchen. That was more like his man. Wearing his dress shirt open at the throat and wrists, and bare feet under the cuffs of his grey pants, Jacob looked like the young sailor instead of the buttoned up businessman. Daniel went to him and grabbed his open collar, pulling him in for a better kiss. It started distracted too, but Jacob's resistance had never been high and he was breathing hard by the time Daniel released him. And that wasn't the only thing that was hard.

Daniel grinned. “We'll eat first. I don't want you fainting from lack of food.”

Jacob nodded. He hung around at Daniel's elbow as Daniel sliced bread. Daniel smacked at him as he filched a piece of loose crust, and for a wonder, the man went to actually make himself useful and get bowls out of the cupboard.

“Hey, you made dessert.”

Daniel glanced over to where Jacob was admiring the pie cooling on its wire rack. “Keep your mitts off that. It's for Thanksgiving tomorrow.”

“Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah.” Daniel smiled. “I figured even if it's just the two of us, I didn't want you to miss all the great food you say your mother usually makes. So I did a cherry pie earlier and that's the apple.”

“Oh.”

That was not a good *Oh*. Daniel carefully set the ladle in its rest on the stove and turned to look at Jacob. “You did tell your parents you were spending the day with me.”

The silence was eloquent.

“You didn’t.”

Jacob’s eyes dropped to the floor.

“Dammit, Trip, look at me. What *did* you say to them?”

Jacob’s eyes met his, wide and dark. “I said I’d come home. Just for dinner. Not for the whole day. I told them I would only stay for the meal and maybe an hour or so more and then...”

“No.” Daniel slapped his hand on the counter with enough force to bruise his palm. “No, Jacob.”

“I’m sorry, Daniel, I know I said I would try to get out of it.”

“Yeah, you did. I understood that you went without me the first year. At that point they’d never even met me. They had no idea.” He had understood, even if it had hurt like hell. He’d watched Jacob walk out the door and leave him alone on the holiday just two days after he’d chucked everything he’d had in California to be with the man. But at least they had agreed on it together. And the night after had mostly made up for it. “Then last year your mother was sick over the holidays, and we agreed you wouldn’t worry her. But this year everyone is healthy as an ox. You promised me.”

“I didn’t promise. I said I would try to talk to them. But you know Father; he has this idea of how family has to work, and Thanksgiving dinner with all the family in our places around the table is part of that.”

“No, I don’t know your father, do I? Because he doesn’t want to know me. And I’m not your family, apparently.”

Jacob took two quick steps toward him, grabbing his forearms in an urgent grip. “You’re better than family, Daniel. You know that. You’re the other half of me.”

“The half you leave at home when you go dine with the rest of them. Unless you finally persuaded them to invite me?”

“I'm sorry.”

Daniel shrugged his hands free of Jacob's grip and moved away from him. “You can't do this. This is not okay. I am not going to sit home waiting while you go to your parents' house and celebrate the holiday and make small talk and pretend I don't exist.”

“Then I won't,” Jacob said urgently. “I'll stay home and tell mother I'm ill and...”

“To hell with that.” Daniel turned away for a moment. His eyes prickled and a bitter taste rose in his mouth. “You tell them the truth. Tell them you want to spend Thanksgiving with the man you love. Tell them if they want to see you from now on, I get to come too.”

Jacob whispered, “I can't do that. You know I can't. I think Father knows, I'm sure he knows about you. But he's never going to admit it. If I start making ultimatums he won't back down. He'll throw me out. And it's not just the family. It's my position in the store, my career.”

“Then you can find another job. The Depression is over. There's work to be had. And I'm doing okay. I got the nod for a big men's fashion layout for one of our best clients. They're talking about maybe giving me a raise. We can get by.”

“Get by, maybe. But no one else is going to give me a position as a manager right now; maybe not ever if he blackballs me. And he'd be furious enough to do it. And it won't be just that. He'll forbid Mother and Lily to see me. I'll lose everything.”

“Except me,” Daniel said softly.

Jacob's eyes were anguished. “Are you asking me to choose between my family and you? Right now?”

“I chose. Back when I landed in San Francisco and came here without even stopping home first. Back when I called Mom and Dad and told them the Navy had found me a man I loved and that was the most it had done for me, I chose.”

“And they said don't come home,” Jacob said with returned heat. “Remember

that? They said they didn't want any queer perverts in their home.”

“Jesus, do you think I've forgotten?”

“No. Daniel, no, I didn't mean that. But how can you want me to do the same? Mother and Father will let me go on like this, like one of the family, if I don't rub their nose in it. A few holiday meals, the occasional party or gathering over there. Is that too big a price to pay for peace and getting to see my parents and my sister?”

Was it? Daniel wondered if he really was being unreasonable. Was it selfish of him to want Jacob to put Daniel's needs ahead of his parents' demands? Was there something wrong with him that he couldn't just go along with this? Last year Jacob went to the Segal house and ate a little and made his mother happy. And then he came home to Daniel. Why couldn't that be enough this year?

Daniel wished he had the answer to that question. Because this year if Jacob walked out that door to spend the holiday with people who pretended Daniel didn't exist, he thought it might be the last straw. Maybe when Jacob came home, Daniel wouldn't be there.

He yanked off his apron and tossed it on the counter. “I have to walk.”

“What?” Jacob reached for him as he went past and Daniel dodged aside.

“Don't worry. I'll be back.” He strode to the door and unlocked it, not even stopping for his coat.

Jacob stood irresolutely in the kitchen doorway, as if he wanted to follow and didn't quite dare. “It's cold out there Daniel.”

“And icy. I know.” He glared at Jacob. “So don't you dare follow me. You know you don't do well on ice with your leg.”

Jacob startled. Daniel felt a little glow of shameful satisfaction. They never talked about the leg. Daniel was good at never seeming to notice when Jacob was limping. But maybe it was time to drag everything out into the open.

He ducked out the door, pulling it shut behind him, and clattered down the stairs. The hallway smelled heavily of cabbage and onions again. Mrs. Dankowsky must have been cooking up a storm. He and Jacob had been saving money for a house, hoping to move soon.

Daniel strode through the lobby and pulled open the outer door. There were good reasons for Jacob to want to keep his job, for sure. The money was for both of them. And really Daniel didn't want to separate Jacob from his family. He wasn't sure why this Thanksgiving together felt so vitally necessary.

It was cold indeed. It didn't take many steps for Daniel to regret the impetuosity that had kept him from taking the time to grab his coat. But still he didn't turn back. There was a small park down the street. It was just a scrubby little lot with a weed-choked lawn and a few bushes. But in that park there was a bench under the boughs of an old elm tree. Sometimes Daniel needed to sit there for a while.

The slats of the bench were hard under his thighs, and the chill quickly seeped through his clothing. The streetlight barely lit the park and the tree branches moved in hushed waves against the dim sky. Daniel's mind went back to that night in the Pacific Ocean before he found Trip. In that long dark nightmare of fear and loneliness and pain, he had known everything would be all right if he could just find Jacob. So how could he be thinking about leaving him?

And yet how could he stay? He'd been telling the truth when he said he'd put Jacob first. He'd neglected his family and not even gone to the job interview he'd been promised in San Francisco. And when his father's reaction over the phone, after a moment of being glad he'd made it home alive, was to say he hoped Daniel was over the queer nonsense, Daniel hadn't hesitated. Jacob had been worth giving up all the rest. It hurt like hell to think he wasn't worth the same to Jacob.

So were things really bad enough to leave the man? Daniel clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering and wrapped his arms around himself. He'd told Jacob how much being put in second place hurt him. Did it have to be an ultimatum? Standing in front of two homemade pies, it had felt like the end of the world if Jacob turned him down. But it wasn't. The end of the world was when he'd thought there was no more Jacob in it. Nothing was worse than losing Trip.

Daniel's throat tightened and a sob rocked his chest. God, he was a fool. Sitting here in the dark on an icy park bench, crying because his man wasn't willing to let his whole life go to hell. That just showed that Jacob was sensible, right? Thinking ahead to the plans they'd made. Plans which did depend on Jacob keeping that job and his salary, and maybe rising to be store manager soon.

So maybe he and Jacob weren't quite on even footing. Probably a lot of relationships were like that. There was always someone who gave a bit more to keep things cheerful. He could do that. He didn't have to leave Jacob just to make some stupid point when he would probably never find any man willing to meet him exactly halfway. He shivered, the chatter of his teeth not quite hiding another sob.

He should go back and tell Jacob...

A coat warm with body heat wrapped around his shoulders. "You damned fool," Jacob murmured, sitting down beside him on the bench.

Daniel hiccupped and turned to frown at him. "What about you, walking on the damned ice after I told you not to?" At least Jacob was pulling on a coat of his own.

"I didn't have a choice."

Daniel leaned against his shoulder, suddenly weary. "I'm sorry Trip."

"No," Jacob interrupted. "Damn you, don't say that."

"What?"

"Don't apologize. You were right."

"I think I should treasure this moment," Daniel said, trying to be whimsical. "Right about what?"

"Right about everything. Right about the fact that I'm being unfair, that I can't expect you to always take a back seat when Father makes some demand of me. If holidays are for family, well you are my family. There's no one I want to be with more than you. I'll tell Mother and Father that either they set an extra place at the table for you, or I won't be there either."

"Really? You'll do that?"

"As soon as we make it home," Jacob said stoutly. "I was going to telephone and do it before I came after you. So I could say it was done. But I thought that if you'd decided to walk instead of sit I didn't want you to have too much of a head start."

Daniel said into the darkness, "I'm glad you didn't tell them yet."

"Huh?"

“I don't want you to.”

“I don't understand. I'm ready to do it. I want to. You're everything, Daniel. I may love my family and my job, but not compared to you.”

“That's all I needed,” Daniel realized. “For you to be willing. I don't need you to actually do it. You were right too. I want that little house with a garden that we're saving up for. I want you to be happy in your work and be invited to your baby sister's birthday. I don't need you to lay down an ultimatum for your father. I just needed to know that you would.”

“I would. I will,” Jacob insisted. “It's the right thing to do.”

“One version of right.” Daniel stood up and reached down to put a hand under Jacob's arm. “I happen to like the version of right where you go butter up the man whose money is going to pay for us living in luxurious sin. And then you get up from his dinner table and come home and fuck me silly.”

“You're sure?” Jacob took Daniel's arm as they navigated the icy sidewalk towards home. “You want me to go to dinner tomorrow?”

“Go eat with them. Be the dutiful son. Then come back to our place for dessert.” Daniel tipped his head sideways so Jacob's hair brushed his face. It was as close as he could get to a kiss out here. But there were only a few hundred yards to home. “Although maybe we can rock the boat just a little. What do you think your mom would do if you brought a cherry pie with you and told her I made it?”

Jacob's smile was slow and just a little wicked. “I don't know. I think we might just have to find out.”

CHAPTER 13

March 1, 1951

Jacob set down the phone and turned to Daniel. He could feel the broad grin stretching his cheeks.

“What?” Daniel demanded.

“It's a girl. We're uncles.”

“Lily? She had the baby? That's excellent! They're okay?” Daniel came and

gave Jacob an enthusiastic hug.

“They're fine. That was Michael on the phone. Lily wants us to come see the baby.”

“Us?” Daniel frowned slightly. “You should absolutely go. But I imagine your parents will be there. You don't need me along.”

“Daniel.” Jacob grabbed his sleeve and then leaned in for a kiss, prolonging the moment even if Daniel didn't know it yet. Daniel kissed back willingly but distractedly. Jacob let him go and stepped back so he could get the whole effect. “They want us both to come. Michael said Lily specifically told him so. He said, 'The kid needs to see her two uncles.' They named her Hannah Danielle.”

“They...” Jacob saw it hit Daniel, the puzzlement and then the wonder. “Danielle?”

“Yep.”

Light dawned in Daniel's eyes and Jacob hugged himself with happiness and silently blessed his sister and her husband. He knew Daniel missed his own family, sometimes missed them a lot even though he had cut himself off from them willingly. Just last month Maria, the only sister to keep in touch, had written about another baby in the family, and there had been pain in Daniel's eyes as he carefully put the letter away. So bless Lily and Michael for this.

Daniel's smile blossomed. “We should go see the kid. Maybe bring her something, right? It's a Thursday so Dorsey's is open late. We could stop on the way and get a stuffed bear or something. And something for Lily too.”

“Sure. We can do that.”

“So what are you waiting for?” Daniel strode over to the hall closet and yanked the door open. “Come on, Trip. Get a move on. You may be queer, but even you should know better than to keep a lady waiting.”

Jacob followed him out the door towards the car. The lilacs along the driveway were coming into bloom. Their scent lingered on the air and the setting sun gilded Daniel's dark hair. They were uncles. But would never be parents. Jacob blinked back tears of joy and pain.

He remembered sitting down with Lily at her kitchen table, two weeks ago.

She had taken his hand with a serious look on her face. He'd frozen for a moment, wondering if there was something wrong with her or the baby. But then she'd said, "I need to talk to you about names."

"Huh? You want my advice?"

"No. I want to tell you what Michael and I decided."

"Okay."

"You know we were going to give the baby Brian's name. Harry or Hannah, after Michael's grandmother. And then Brian or Briana."

He'd said, "Okay," again, although it caught in his throat.

Lily rubbed his hand gently. "But we're not going to do that. The next baby will named be for Brian. I haven't forgotten him, and I do want to honor him. But this child I want to name for my new brother. Michael's not Jewish. We don't have to stick to traditions and dead people's names. So this baby's second name will be Daniel. Or Danielle."

He had just stared at her. He barely felt the tears on his cheeks. Lily leaned forward and kissed his damp skin, although she had to work around her swollen belly and the table to do it. "We love him like a brother, Jacob. And Mother and Father have been so hard on you both. I don't think he knows how important he is. I want him to know."

Jacob had raised her fingers to his lips. He'd never kissed his sister's hand except in play and mockery, but he did it now. "Thank you."

And today Hannah Danielle was born.

Ahead of him in the fading March sunshine, Daniel yanked open the driver's side door. "I'm going to drive," he called gaily to Jacob. "At your pace, the kid will be in college before we get a chance to see her."

Jacob rounded the car and got in the passenger side. "At least with me driving, we'd have a chance to live to see the graduation," he grumbled. But his heart was as light as the golden air and the world was filled with sweet perfume.

June 1952

Jacob glanced up as the door to the house opened. Daniel tiptoed in, clearly trying to be quiet. The effort was spoiled by a poorly judged motion that slammed the door behind him.

Jacob ostentatiously ignored the loud bang and turned back to the book in his lap as if it held his whole attention. As if he didn't notice that Daniel was smiling and dressed up in his favorite shirt. As if he didn't see the way Daniel's hair was mussed in the back...

"Hey, you didn't have to wait up," Daniel said. He wandered into the living room and dropped onto the sofa beside Jacob. He smelled of beer and cigarettes and cologne.

"I was reading," Jacob muttered. He meant to get up with dignity and head to bed, now that Daniel was home. But he heard himself say acidly, "While you were out God knows where until one a.m."

"You knew where I was," Daniel said. "Cliff was having a couple of us from the firm over to celebrate winning the High-Style clothing account. I told you that. Didn't I?"

"No." Jacob put a bookmark in his novel and closed it carefully. That was what he'd suspected, though. That Daniel was off somewhere with Cliff and his friends, having a good time. Well, other than the moments when he'd thought Daniel was dead under a train somewhere. "You didn't tell me."

"Well, I would have if I'd seen you in the last two days. You're a fine one to talk about being out late. What time did you get home for dinner last night? Ten o'clock, wasn't it?"

"That's different. I was working. You know we had that problem with the zoning on the new store. Father's been busy with that all week and someone had to pick up the slack."

Daniel muttered, "Yeah. I forgot. That was this week's excuse." He stood up quickly and had to reach for the arm of the sofa to balance himself.

Jacob grabbed his sleeve and tugged him back down. "What do you mean, this week's excuse?"

Daniel sighed and ran a hand over his hair. "Look Trip, let's not do this, all

right?” He leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes. “You're tired and I'm a little drunk. I don't want to fight.”

“I'm not fighting,” Jacob said stubbornly. “I'm just asking why the fact that I work late now and then makes it okay for you to disappear and show up at one a.m. smelling of someone else's cologne.”

Daniel's eyes opened abruptly and he sat up. “What exactly are you implying?”

Jacob dropped his eyes before the fire in Daniel's gaze. “Nothing. I'm just saying I would have liked to know where you were. And who you were with. There's this modern invention called the telephone. It works very well.”

“Cliff doesn't have the money to be on the telephone. And since when do I have to account to you for what I do and who I visit?”

Jacob shrugged irritably. “I just like to be informed if you aren't going to show up for dinner.”

“Tell me you cooked.” Daniel shoved his arm away roughly. “Tell me you cooked dinner and waited for me. You can't, can you? Not like I did five times in the last two weeks.”

“I can't cook. You know that.”

“Oh, now I get it. You waited for the little woman to come home and make dinner for you and had to go hungry. Poor you.”

“I had a sandwich. And you're not the little woman. Damn it, that's not the point. I was worried.”

“Well if you listened to a damned thing I tell you, you wouldn't have been. Because I did tell you. Yesterday. I remember clearly now. I told you at breakfast that I was going over to Cliff's with Darren and Stevie and their friends. And you said to count you out.”

Jacob frowned. It rang a faint bell. “That was tonight?”

“Yes.”

He set the book carefully on the coffee table. “Well, maybe you did say something. I don't remember. I don't know why you want to hang about with that

crowd anyway.”

“They're fun.”

“They're flaming fairies. Honest to God, Daniel. They chatter like magpies and one of them is always breaking up with another of them, and the ones who don't have a man of their own are always making a play for you. They're like the worst stereotypes of gay men. What do you see in them?”

“They're fun,” Daniel repeated slowly. “They're light-hearted and they love art and they're pretty brave to be so open. And they're queer like me.”

“You're not like them. I'm betting Cliff had make-up on, didn't he?”

“So what? In the privacy of his own home he can look like Ginger Rogers if he wants to. Who the hell are you to sneer at him?”

“I'm not sneering. I just don't like him and that whole crowd you hang out with since you started working at Chambers & Bradson. I worry about you. It's not good to be obvious these days. Things are getting worse for men like us, not better, the last few years. You may not have noticed but...”

“So I should avoid my friends because they're too queer for you.”

“It's not safe. You don't pay attention to politics so you may not realize, people are getting crazy out there. It's not just the Commies. It's immigrants and actors and queers and anyone else they want to harass. It's like we're going backwards. If you hang about with people like Cliff, you could find yourself being arrested one of these days.”

Daniel drawled, “So... you're trying to protect me by keeping me away from Cliff?”

“Yes!”

Daniel just looked at him. Those hazel eyes that Jacob adored were steady and just a little sad.

The words were dragged out of Jacob. “He has a crush on you.”

“I don't return his interest.”

“I know but...” Jacob tried to find the anger he'd been nursing all evening. All he found was the worry. He looked down at the floor. “You work with him, you go

out places with him. You say he's fun, and I know I haven't been much fun lately."

"You haven't been around much lately."

"I wish you wouldn't spend so much time with him."

"What do you really think is going to happen?"

"I don't know."

"You don't trust me."

Even Jacob could hear the hurt in that clearly. "No. I do trust you. I know you won't do... anything with another man. Not while we're together."

"What then?"

"I'm worried you might want to."

Daniel shook his head slowly. "What in God's name would give you that impression?"

"He follows you. He flatters you and bats his eyelashes and laughs at your jokes and pats your arm. You two talk about art and French novels and films and things I don't know much about. All *I* do is go to work and stay there for fourteen hours and then come home and fall into bed. Half the time lately I'm out cold by the time you're done showering. I guess I'm scared you'll start wanting to be with him more than you want to be with me."

Daniel laughed softly. "You are such an idiot." He leaned in to kiss Jacob's cheek and then his mouth. Jacob wanted to protest being called an idiot but his mouth was otherwise engaged. After several long minutes, Daniel pulled back. "I want you. I have since the first time I kissed you. Hell, since the first time I saw you. That doesn't change just because you've had your nose to the grindstone until you can't see past the shavings."

"Is that even a real saying?"

"Does it matter?" Daniel stood and held out a hand to him. "Tell you what. Let's spend a little time together right now. Remind ourselves why we put up with each other."

"It's one a.m."

"Do you care?"

“No.” Jacob got up and gave Daniel his hand. He let his lover draw him down the hallway to the bedroom.

“You know,” Daniel said, raising his hands to his shirt buttons. “There's one way to make sure I never so much as think about Cliff.”

“Huh?” Jacob couldn't think when the lamplight was picking out the flat planes and curves of Daniel's chest.

“Fuck me silly. Wear me out until I have no room to think about anyone else.”

It was one a.m. And he had to get up before six, and he'd spent thirteen hours at work today, not including the drive. But he thought nothing had ever sounded more appealing than that request from Daniel. “Oh yes.” He stepped forward and put his hands on that hot hard flesh. “I can do that.”

“And not worry any more about Cliff?”

Jacob knew it wasn't that easy. But maybe he could find more time to be with Daniel. And in his heart he knew Daniel would never go behind his back. Maybe Jacob would never have as many interests in common with Daniel as Cliff did. But he looked into his lover's flushed face and realized he had one thing that Cliff didn't have. Daniel's complete and rapt, lust-filled attention. Jacob moved closer and gave Daniel a fast rough kiss with a world of promise in it. “Cliff who?” he said.

February 3, 1959

Dear Jacob,

You were right. I think I have to say that about once a decade so you might want to make note of the date.

I should have just brought you with me.

I thought maybe without Dad here to loom over the scene, Mom and the others might accept me, or at least pretend they did long enough to get through this. But somehow Dad dead is worse than Dad living here. It's like Mom is trying to make any past trespasses up to him by being the perfect wife now. Not one word comes out of her mouth that Dad couldn't have said himself. The first thing she asked me when I walked in the door was, “Do you have a girlfriend yet?” After eighteen

years away, half my life, that's the biggest thing she wants to know.

Of course I said no, I have a lover, the same man I've been with for seventeen years. You would think I'd stabbed her. If it wasn't for Maria, I'd have walked right back out again and come home. But my baby sis calmed me down and then she calmed Mom down. She's a born peacemaker. I'm staying with Maria and her husband, who is a pretty great guy. But just until the funeral. They don't need my help with Dad's stuff or the farm. And I don't need them watching me like I'm going to steal something or seduce the children. I changed my train ticket for an earlier one. Expect me back on the eighth, Trip.

God, I can't wait to get home.

Yours, Daniel

CHAPTER 14

June 28, 1969

Daniel frowned across the room at his friend Philip, who had commandeered the loveseat. “You don't read anything without looking at a published review first? Never pick something up just because the cover caught your eye?”

Philip stretched out long legs in carefully tailored trousers and shook his head. “My time is too valuable for that.”

“Honestly.” Phil's lover Eddie passed behind him and swiped at the back of his neatly arranged hair. “Could you be any more pretentious, baby?”

“Try me,” Phil called after Eddie's back as the younger man headed for the kitchen.

From where he had dropped onto the couch, Jacob laughed. Daniel pushed back his chair from the table and got up to cross the room to Jacob. Then he paused, his eye caught by a flicker of silenced motion on the television set that was visible through the open door of the study. He stopped halfway to Jacob to watch intently.

Jacob was the first to notice his abstraction. He stood and came up behind Daniel. “What is it?”

Daniel nodded toward the set. “Isn't that the Stonewall Inn? Can we turn up the sound?” The picture showed a crowd of people in the streets, jostling and

waving, in front of the brick facade of the New York City bar with its familiar vertical sign. He and Trip had joked once or twice about checking out the place if they went to NYC, but they never had. On screen, the light levels flared as something flamed on the dark street.

Eddie paused on his way toward the living room with more drinks and turned to look at the screen. "Yeah, it's the Stonewall. We've never been there, although of course one hears things. It hasn't been open that long. What, a couple of years maybe? But enough is enough. I don't really want to hear about that anymore." He set the tray of drinks firmly down on the coffee table.

"Hear about what?" Daniel went over and turned the knob on the set. The sound hissed and then came on louder. "...since early this morning. Several homosexuals were arrested and four police officers were injured in the riots. For a while today, quiet reigned and it seemed as if the violence and rioting might be over. But now the crowds have begun to gather again. Fires are burning in the trash barrels and..." Phil shoved Daniel out of the way and snapped off the television completely.

"What did you do that for?" Daniel demanded. He reached toward the set and Phil grabbed his hand and shoved it away.

"I don't want to see it. I'm up to my eyeteeth with that mess. They're damned fools!"

"Who are?" Daniel turned to Eddie. "We went for a drive in the country and ended up spending the day. I haven't heard anything."

"You haven't?" Eddie went over to the newspaper rack and pulled out the *Times*. He unfolded it and passed it to Daniel. Jacob stood with his chin on Daniel's shoulder as they read an account of the previous night's rioting at a gay bar with growing wonder and anger and excitement.

"They actually did it," Daniel said. "They fought back against the cops. Holy cow, I never thought I'd see the day."

"They're idiots!" Phil snatched the paper away and folded it with hands that shook a little. "They have no idea what they're doing. They'll set the whole homophile movement back decades! How can we ask to be taken seriously, to be treated as equals, when we have men in dresses doing line dances and singing

about their pubic hairs while the police arrest them?”

“They did *what*?” Daniel couldn't help grinning. “I didn't see anything about that.”

“Phil's been following the accounts all day and ranting about it,” Eddie said. “I made him put it away so we could have a nice quiet dinner with you two.”

“And I don't want to give it one more moment of my attention,” Phil snapped. “It just makes me sick. People are going to think that's who we all are. Men with curls and makeup and dresses and the boys from the park, burning and breaking things. It will just make them angrier. And they'll come down even harder on all of us. We were making slow progress, our way. And now this!”

“Can we just turn the television back on for a little while?” Jacob asked. “I'd like to see what's going on right now. Just for a minute.”

Phil slowly said, “If you must,” and it was Eddie who said, “No.”

“What?” Daniel stared at Eddie.

Eddie folded his arms. “No. You're just going to get Phil all riled up and he'll be pacing and yelling all night. Enough is enough. If you want to get all excited about gay boys whooping it up on the streets of New York until the police beat some sense into them, you can just do it at home.” He tried a winning smile. “Come on, boys. I brought the drinks. Let's all just have a nice evening together, okay? We don't get to see the two of you together half often enough. Let's enjoy it.”

Daniel and Jacob followed Eddie back to the living room. But Daniel couldn't settle into a discussion of books and films and where to go for vacation, when out there on the New York streets gays and lesbians were standing up to be counted. He lost the train of conversation time and again. After about a half hour, Jacob stood. “Listen, we're going to cut this evening short. We'll have to do it again soon.”

Eddie looked at them sadly. “You're thinking about that stuff going down in New York.”

“Yes,” Daniel said. “It's... It feels important. That's our people out there.”

“Not my people,” Phil snapped. “The Stonewall is full of drag queens and

fairies. They're exactly the people we *don't* want the movement associated with."

"They're gay," Jacob said firmly. "Like us." He stood, pulling his keys from his pocket. "Thanks for the dinner. We'll see you again soon."

At the car, Jacob shoved the keys into Daniel's hands. "You drive."

Daniel glanced over at him as they pulled out. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know."

Daniel mused, "I don't think I've heard you say that before."

"What?"

"*Gay like us.*"

"Maybe I should have."

At home they turned on their own TV and watched the coverage, as riots and arrests continued through a second night. When they finally snapped off the set, Jacob sat silently on the couch. Daniel tried to figure out what Jacob was thinking. Phil was right, in a way. The violence was having a backlash, with commentators railing against the actions of militant homos. Or laughing at them and ridiculing the protesters as commando queens. But it was exciting too. Energizing. Like a whole lot of being careful and holding back was finally being loosened and thrown off.

"You're not thinking of going to the city," he joked to Jacob, maybe only half joking because the impulse to get up and go join in was stronger than he would have expected.

Jacob shook his head silently, eyes on the blank screen. Then he got up and walked stiffly out of the room. Daniel stared after him with concern. A minute later Jacob came back with two framed photos in his hands. "Which one do you think?" He held out the pictures for Daniel to see.

Daniel looked at them. One was a snap of the two of them on a hike, flushed and a little disheveled from the climb, arms around each other with the vista behind them. The other was a formal picture of Daniel. It wasn't his favorite. Jacob had asked for photos a year ago for his birthday, and Daniel had gone to a studio to oblige him. Something about the photographer had been intimidating, though. The result had been a series of poses that Daniel thought made him look like a

waxwork or something. But Jacob had chosen this one and framed it and kept it beside their bed.

“For what? You know how I feel about the portrait, so if whatever you're planning would get it out of the bedroom I'm all for it. I even depress myself in that one.”

“I want one for my desk at work.”

“You what?” Daniel stared at him.

“Monday. Monday I'm going to walk into the office and put your picture on my desk, and put both our names down for the Fourth of July picnic.”

Daniel stood and went over to him. Carefully, he tried to take the pictures out of Jacob's hands. “Listen, Trip, you don't want to be hasty.”

Jacob held onto the frames stubbornly. “I'm not being hasty. God, I should have done it years ago. I'm going to tell Father either he accepts me the way I am, with you or...”

“Or what? Are you really ready to quit if he says no? Listen, honey, I love that you want to do this. And I hope someday soon you will. But are you sure you want to do it now? You know your dad is talking about retiring soon. And he'll either pick you or that tight-assed bastard Davidson as company President when he leaves. You've worked damned hard and given up a lot for the company, for a lot of years. Do you really want to give him a reason to dump you now?”

“I don't care.” Jacob looked at Daniel but his eyes were glazed. He seemed to be looking past Daniel at something distant. “It's been too long already. That's what those riots are about, you know. Just too much for too long. Too many people telling us we're crazy and wrong and degenerate and denying us our rights. Those men in the bar weren't hurting anyone. They were just trying to live their lives. And yet the cops have the right to walk in and bust them and throw them in jail, just for who they are. For who we are. And it won't stop until people see that being gay isn't just about The Stonewall and drag queens and rent boys. It's about the vice president of a pharmacy chain and a gifted commercial artist.”

“Ooh, now I'm gifted. How sweet of you.” Daniel leaned forward to kiss Jacob's cheek but the humor fell flat. Jacob just stared intently down at the two pictures.

“Well, if you're seriously going to do it,” Daniel said, “Then do it right. Take the one with the two of us. That way I don't look like your deceased second cousin or something.”

That jerked a laugh out of Jacob. He looked up to meet Daniel's eyes. “You're okay with this?”

“I've been waiting for you to come out for two decades. I'm delirious. Okay, given that you've waited this long I did think you might wait another year or two until you had the brass ring. But I can see why you need to do it now. We'll be fine. The mortgage is more than half paid off. My job is pretty secure, even of the camera boys are slowly taking over from the real artists. We have some savings. So even if your father does throw you out, we'll get by.”

“Thanks.”

Daniel pulled Jacob into a hug. “You're welcome. Now you'll have to give me something nice, since I'm allowing you to finally mention my name to your father and co-workers.”

“You're batty.”

“You love me anyway.”

“I do.” Jacob turned in his arms and tipped his mouth for a kiss. He held one photo in each hand as he leaned in. Their mouths met.

Daniel kissed his Jacob wet and hot, trying to show his approval for this risky and long-awaited step. The practical side of him had suggested waiting. But the other half of him, maybe the other nine-tenths of him, was screaming and cheering like his team just won the World Series. He put one hand behind Jacob's head, to steady his mouth for plundering. With his other hand, he sneaked the formal portrait out of Jacob's slackened grip and dropped it in the wastebasket.

Oops. That crack suggested broken glass. Jacob pulled back and winced. “I liked that picture.”

“I'll get a new one taken.”

“It won't be the same.”

“I promise, working with a photographer who doesn't remind me of my high-school principal will be worth me being a year older and uglier in the picture.”

“You never get uglier. You're one of those guys who's going to look sexy when you're eighty.”

“What about now?” Daniel nibbled his way down Jacob's neck, loving the way Jacob tilted his head to give his marauding mouth better access. “Am I sexy now?”

Jacob laughed into his hair, and shoved a very hard cock against Daniel's hip.

“Come on,” Daniel said. “Bedtime. I'll find you a better place to put that thing you're poking me with.” He took the other picture out of Jacob's hand, and stretched over to set it safely on the bookcase. He wrapped an arm around Jacob's shoulder. “It'll be there on Monday morning if you still want it. Come to bed now.”

In the bedroom, Daniel reached for Jacob's shirt, slowly opening the buttons. Jacob sighed with pleasure and reached out to return the favor. Jacob slipped his fingers under the waistband of Daniel's slacks and teased him with brief touches. Daniel kissed Jacob's shoulders and pushed his shirt down gradually. It had been a long time since they had stopped to savor this before-getting-completely-naked part. He ran rough fingers over Jacob's nipples to make him gasp.

Jacob was still slim. Where many of the men his age were getting a spare tire, Jacob still had a flat belly and prominent hipbones. Daniel ran his hands up Jacob's sides and under his shirt, stroking the long lines of his back, enjoying the smooth heat under his palms and the soft brush of cotton shirt over his wrists. He gripped Jacob's belt loops and pulled their hips together, grinding roughly against Jacob. Jacob moaned and pushed back eagerly.

Daniel unbuttoned Jacob's slacks and shoved them down. He dropped to his knees to mouth over those hipbones and down toward Jacob's groin. Sure Jacob's skin was a little less tight than the boy Daniel had touched that first time in an Australian hotel room. There were a few extra dark freckles scattered on his belly. Daniel kissed each one leisurely. And a few of those curls were touched with grey. But the man was still damned edible. Daniel pushed the slacks lower and bent in to nuzzle against Jacob's balls. Jacob moaned and put his hand in Daniel's hair. But when Daniel would have moved in on his target, Jacob bent and lifted him up.

“Not like that.”

“You're turning down a blow job? Stop the presses.”

Jacob said softly, “I want you to fuck me.”

“Really?” Daniel grinned and cupped his face to kiss him thoroughly. When Jacob was properly breathless, Daniel broke off and added, “I could probably do that. If you make it worth my while.”

“More worth your while than letting you fuck me?”

“Okay, I admit, not a hardship.” He let his voice go soft. “You're sure that's how you want it?”

“Yeah. It's been a while. Too long.”

Daniel pretended to flip through a calendar. “There. February 1953 – a rare sighting of Jacob's upturned ass.”

“Ass yourself. It hasn't been that long.”

“Maybe not.” Daniel reached out and finished taking Jacob's shirt and pants off him. Jacob kicked off his briefs too. The man was still so good to look at. Daniel was losing his train of thought. There was something he wanted to say... oh, yeah. “Long enough that you'll feel it tomorrow.”

“Good,” Jacob said almost fiercely. “I want to feel it into next week.”

Daniel grunted, feeling his cock jerk at the words. “Could be arranged.”

“First you have to get naked too.”

“Could also be arranged.” Daniel stripped off his disarrayed clothing fast, suddenly too eager to mess around with making it slow and sexy.

Jacob fell on the bed and rolled over on his knees. “You want my ass in the air?”

Daniel smacked him once lightly, and then again, for the pleasure of that rounded flesh under his palm. Jacob's bad hip might not make it all the way through a hard fuck in this position, but Daniel wasn't about to turn down the offer. He reached into the drawer for the lube and climbed on the mattress between Jacob's legs.

Daniel's breath shortened as Jacob rocked back, rubbing against him. He set his hands firmly on Jacob's hips, ignoring the ridges of scars under his left hand,

and leaned forward to kiss his way down Jacob's back from the nape of his neck to his tailbone. Jacob whined and spread his thighs wider apart. Daniel bit him, hard enough to leave a circle of pink on the pale skin of his ass-cheek. He let go with one hand and opened the lube, putting a dollop in each hand.

Then he began his all-time favorite occupation: lubing up Jacob Segal while slowly driving him crazy. He used his slippery fingers to stroke Jacob, inside and out, trapping him between probing finger and the hand on his balls. Jacob jerked back and forth between Daniel's hands, seeking more of both. Daniel added a second finger and held still as he felt Jacob clench in response and then slowly relax to it. He curved his fingers to find the spot better and stroked over Jacob in small circles of firm pressure.

"Now, go now, you teasing bastard," Jacob ground out. He shoved backward with his ass, driving Daniel's fingers deeper, and moaned in response to that touch.

"One more." The third finger was tight. It really had been a while. But the noises and thrashing movements he was drawing from Jacob as he worked him were all eagerness.

Okay, maybe that had been his *second* favorite occupation. Because when he withdrew his fingers and guided his cock into place, he couldn't help making some noises of his own. Jacob was tight and hot and fucking him was going to bring Daniel off like a firecracker in about ten seconds flat. He leaned his weight in and grunted as he slipped deeper.

Jacob panted, an explosion of breath to mark each drive of Daniel's hips. Daniel leaned on his back and wrapped his arms around underneath, pistoning forward in short hard thrusts. Each one drew a grunt from his throat and built the fire in his groin. He felt the wet tip of Jacob's cock brush against his forearm where it crossed Jacob's belly. He freed his hand to take Jacob in his grip and rub him.

"Over," Jacob gasped.

"What?"

"Want to roll over. Want to see your face."

"Yeah." Daniel pulled out and helped Jacob flip to his back. Daniel grabbed a couple of pillows and stuffed them under Jacob's ass to raise him. Then Jacob

spread his legs wide and Daniel guided himself into place. Then somehow, the sex became different.

That hard driving rhythm that had burned through both of them became a slow easy rocking in. Daniel watched Jacob's face. So many times, so many years, and it would never be enough. He loved this, watching Jacob's mouth drop open and go slack. Watching his eyes widen, pupils dilating, the little smile lines at the corners fading as Jacob got lost in the feel of Daniel's cock deep inside him. Jacob stroked himself, almost languidly, matching the long slow pull and thrust that Daniel was using.

Daniel looked down at the apex of his stroke to the place where their bodies merged, where Jacob was open and stretched around him and he was buried to the hilt in Jacob. For a long moment Daniel froze, just looking at that sight. Then he raised his eyes to Jacob's dark ones and went crazy, slamming hard and fast into Jacob until they both gasped and groaned and cried out, coming together.

Daniel eased his way out of Jacob's ass as soon as he could see and move again. He guided his lover's shaking legs down to the bed. He put his hands over Jacob's left hip and thigh, rubbing and massaging at the scarred and damaged muscles. Sometimes Jacob forgot to protect himself in the heat of the moment, and was really sore afterward. Jacob moaned under the caress of his hands, but it sounded like pleasure, not pain. *Good.*

“You okay, Trip?”

“Mm. Gonna feel that tomorrow, all right.”

“In a good way?”

“Oh, yes.” Jacob reached down and pulled Daniel up beside him. “The leg is fine. Leave it and let me hold you.”

Daniel settled happily into a spoon, with Jacob's softening cock nestled in the small of his back. Jacob kissed his ear and folded hairy arms over Daniel's chest. Daniel tugged on his arm hair playfully, skating over the surface of the deep joy that was welling up inside him. “Here's a grey hair, old man. And another one.”

“Who just turned forty-seven? You're two years older than me right now. Old man.”

“I'm ageless. A classic.”

“Like a Model T.”

Daniel laughed happily and clasped his arms over Jacob's to hug them around himself more tightly. “God, I love you.”

There was a pause. They didn't say it often. But Daniel felt the soft warmth of truth in it when Jacob said, “I love you too. And I'm ready for everyone to know it.”

“We've been fine for two decades, hon. You don't have to do anything different.”

“Maybe we've been fine. But I'm ready to do better.”

“You know I love you whether you ever put that picture on your desk or not.”

“I know.” Jacob kissed his neck softly. “I do know that. I don't deserve you and I don't know what you see in me, but I know my screw-ups don't change it. You love me. But how can I stay safe in hiding when everyone else is standing up to be counted? I want you to be proud of me too.”

“God.” Daniel tipped his head back so his cheek brushed Jacob's face. “You don't have to do anything different. You were in my sights from the moment you did that jitterbug across the deck, that first day on the *Gageway*.”

Jacob sighed. “We were so damned young. I was dumb, you were gorgeous.”

“Shush.” Daniel turned in his arms to kiss him. “I'm still gorgeous. And we're still young.”

“And I'm still dumb?”

“I didn't say that. Did I say that? Unless you keep talking about how you don't deserve me because that *is* dumb.” Daniel squirmed back into the spoon and pulled Jacob's arm close. “God, what kind of man are you? I just fucked you into the bed and you want to have a heart to heart chat? You're supposed to roll over and go to sleep. Don't you read the women's columns in *Cosmopolitan*?”

“Why the hell would I read *Cosmopolitan*? For that matter why do you?”

“Cliff likes it. He reads it aloud to the whole office,” Daniel muttered. “Get some rest, Trip. Because tomorrow is Sunday and we have the whole day together.”

And if you think this wore you out, just you wait till morning.”

“Big talker.” But Jacob sighed and his body softened against Daniel's back.

Ten minutes later Jacob was asleep, snoring softly as he had begun to do lately. But Daniel lay awake, wandering back in his mind to the big steel ship and the excitement and the fear and the deep blue waters of the Pacific. And when he finally slept, he found himself coming awake at the smallest sound outside. At the third awakening he gave it up as a bad job and eased out of Jacob's slack hold.

In the dim kitchen, he put on the kettle and made tea. He wanted black, but he took the chamomile, because he'd promised Jacob to try it on his bad nights. The steam was fragrant and soothing, with the sweetness of honey in it. He held the cup, staring down into it, until it cooled enough to drink. Eventually he carried it to the living room and settled on the couch. Each small sip eased him. On the bookcase, the picture of him and Jacob sat waiting, for Jacob to follow through on Monday. Or not.

On the mantle, among other framed photos, was a small black and white picture, a little creased around the edges, matted up big enough to frame. *We both were young. And you, Jacob, were damned beautiful.*

2 days later

Daniel put his lunch into his case Monday morning and checked through his portfolio for the D'Abrico account sketches. Jacob had risen an hour earlier, grabbed coffee and headed off to work. His kiss on Daniel's cheek had been swift but not perfunctory. After the door closed behind Jacob, Daniel had sat at the table, finishing his breakfast, sipping his coffee and not looking at the bookcase in the living room. Then he had cleaned up the kitchen and made his lunch, and now there was nothing left to do but head out that door. In fact he was damned close to being late for the art department meeting.

Coward. He and Jacob had watched news coverage off and on throughout Sunday. They had talked about everything and anything, except this. Everything except whether Jacob was really going to follow through and stand up to his father.

The idea made Daniel feel strange. Elated and sick to his stomach at the same time. How much worse must Jacob feel? Daniel could count on the fingers of one

hand the number of times he'd even met Jacob the Second. Lily's wedding, because she'd insisted Trip bring him. Baby Hannah's birthdays a couple of times. Outside the newborn nursery when her sister Briana was born.

Each time the older Jacob Segal had gazed through Daniel coldly as if he didn't even exist. Daniel thought it was some kind of miracle that his Trip had grown up under that icy stare and still become the loving man he was. Loving and brave, and Daniel had to know just how much courage Jacob had walked out with today. Slowly he went into the living room and looked. The photo was gone.

It was a good thing art could engross him so completely. As it was, he still found himself looking at the clock over the studio door every twenty minutes. *Now the supplier meeting Trip had gone in early for should be done. Now there was enough time for the older Jacob to have looked though the weekly sales report and read his paper, like Trip said he did every Monday. Now enough time had passed that if Trip was going to do it...*

Daniel stopped trying to time it and put his full energy into worrying, between brush strokes. He could imagine everything from success to disaster. Well not quite everything. Picturing Mr. Segal saying, "How lovely. He'll be like a second son to your mother and me..." Nope. Even Daniel's agile brain couldn't wrap itself around that. But every shade from indifference to disaster. Some form of disaster was probable. Even so, he was surprised when he looked up and saw Jacob standing in the doorway.

Jacob's face was closed and unreadable. It didn't look like jubilant success. And he was here in Daniel's workplace instead of his own, at ten-forty-five in the morning. Daniel laid his pen aside, carefully capped the ink, and got up. Jacob disappeared back into the hallway as Daniel wound his way to the front of the room.

Daniel tapped on the senior layout editor's desk as he went by. When Andrew glanced up Daniel said, "Taking a break. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

"Sure." Andrew's attention went right back to the pages on his desk.

Jacob was standing at the end of the hall, staring blankly out the little window above the stairs. Daniel put a careful hand on his arm. "You okay?"

Jacob turned to him and his dark eyes were damp. He tried to say something

and clamped his lips closed on a sob.

“Damn.” Daniel grabbed him by the sleeve and tugged him into the slightly more private confines of the nearby washroom. “What happened, Trip? Did he fire you?”

“No.” Jacob choked and stared down at the floor. In a hoarse voice he said, “I told him I wasn't hiding us any more. I told him you were my lover for the last twenty-six years and I was through treating you like you didn't exist around him. I was putting your picture on my desk and you were going to come with me to all the family events and he either had to live with that or throw me out the door. The bastard looked at me and said, 'What you do with your life is your own affair. But if you're going to try to bring him home for the holidays you'll have to ask your mother first.'”

“So? That's good, right? You still have your job? Did he say Davidson would get the promotion over you?”

“He didn't even mention it. Just told me we had a meeting with a drug company representative at noon. And to close the door on my way out.”

“I don't get it.” Daniel put his arms around Jacob. He could feel the man trembling. “He's going to live with it. Why aren't you happy?”

Jacob stared into his eyes. “Twenty-six years. I waited twenty-six years! I should have done it long ago. How many times have I left you home alone while I ran out for some family thing? Remember those first five years? I had every holiday meal with the family for five *years* before I stopped going over there for more than a quick hello. If I'd had an ounce of spine, I'd have stood up to him back then. I don't know why you even stayed with me.”

“Because I love you.” Daniel kissed him. “Loved you then. Love you now. Trip, you can't beat yourself up for that. Just because your father is willing to accept me now doesn't mean he would have then. People change. After twenty-six years he's probably finally given up hope that you just need to find the right girl to give up this homo nonsense. He's bowing to the inevitable. But twenty-six years ago I'm betting he would have thrown you out.”

“You think so?”

“Definitely. Look at my mother. Even ten years ago, she still didn't want me

in her home. And now this Christmas she sent me a card and a family picture.”

“You said it was to show off all the great-grandchildren.”

“Well yeah. But even writing my name and address on a card is a giant leap forward. And the picture – that was like saying I’m still family. But it’s been a long road to get this far. So don’t regret that you didn’t put your foot down with your father earlier. It might well have been a disaster. Let’s just be happy you still have your job.”

“I am, I guess.” Jacob sniffed and wiped his hand across his nose. “Damn. I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

“Do I look like I care?” Daniel ran a hand over Jacob’s carefully groomed hair to muss it, and then pulled him in for another kiss.

The door to the bathroom opened and Daniel’s co-worker Ken walked in. Jacob would have jumped back, but Daniel locked his arms tight. Ken glanced over at them. “Hey, Daniel, is that finally Jacob?”

“Yeah. You haven’t met him yet, have you?” Daniel eased off enough on Jacob for him to get a hand free. “Ken Brower, my lover Jacob Segal. Jacob, Ken works with me in the art department.”

Ken stuck out a hand. “Good to meet you, Jake.”

“Likewise.” Jacob shook hands and then stood dazed, leaning into Daniel, as Ken peed, washed his hands, and nodded their way as he left.

“How many gay guys do you work with?”

“A few. But Ken isn’t one of them.”

“He’s not? He seemed so okay with us.”

“He’s a good guy. He believes in live and let live.”

Jacob sighed. “Things are changing, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. Someday I’m going to introduce you as my husband.”

“Really? You want to get married? I know some of the guys do that.”

Daniel chuckled. “Aren’t I romantic, proposing to you in a bathroom. It’s a good place for propositions but not proposals.”

“Your workplace lavatory is probably not the place for propositions either,” Jacob said tartly.

“Don't worry. My break is almost over. I don't have time to get carried away.” Daniel cupped Jacob's cheek in his hand. “I'm not proposing. And I don't see any need to have a fake wedding. But someday, *someday*, it's going to be legal for us to do the real thing. And on the day that New Jersey allows us to be married in the eyes of the state and the whole world, that day I *will* propose to you.”

“You're a dreamer.” But Jacob's eyes were bright with something that wasn't tears.

“You already knew that. It's a nice dream.”

“It's a wonderful dream. Unlikely but wonderful.”

“Have faith.” Quickly, because he really did have deadlines, Daniel leaned forward and kissed Jacob again. “So are we good? You're going to keep your job and I'll come eat canapés and watch the rockets' red glare with you next week?”

“Yes.”

“And you're going to get out of here so you don't miss your twelve o'clock meeting?”

Jacob glanced at his watch. “Damn! Yeah, I have to hurry. I'll see you tonight. I'll try to get out early.”

“Me too.”

Daniel followed Jacob out the bathroom door. He stood watching as Jacob hurried toward the elevators. The accordion door opened and a couple of people got out. Jacob stepped on board and then stopped, looking back at Daniel. Ignoring the guy in the elevator, and the couple who were moving off down the hallway, Jacob called out, “See you in a few hours, honey.” For a moment Daniel got a glimpse of his lover's face, at once embarrassed, even appalled at his own boldness, and yet happy. Then the doors closed and he was gone.

As the people in the hallway turned to glance at Daniel, their expression ranging from curiosity to distaste, Daniel tried to wipe the smile off his face and failed miserably. It appeared that Jacob was taking his coming out seriously. And it might be a lot of fun to watch. He thought about the first time he would cross

the hallowed threshold of the Segal house. He wondered if Jacob's mother would faint. He probably should be worried about all the implications. But as he hurried back to his drawing board and six views of an expensive little black dress, he knew his smile had become a full-out grin. His Jacob was finally out.

CHAPTER 15

September 7, 1988.

Jacob watched indulgently as Daniel walked up and down the row of metal cages. Inside each one of the cats responded to Daniel's cooing overtures in their own fashion, from aloof indifference to one skinny brown tabby who rubbed against the bars in a frantic ecstasy of purring. Daniel peered and smiled and reached in to stroke proffered cheeks with his fingertip. Finally he turned to Jacob in front of a small dark cat. "This one, don't you think?"

Jacob looked at the chubby tortoiseshell Daniel had chosen. "Sure, if you like her. You don't want the tabby? I think he's in love with you."

"He's a cat slut. He loves everyone. And he's too needy. I'm betting I'd never have a painting without cat hair rubbed all over it if we get him."

"True."

"This girl is perfect." Daniel waved the shelter worker over and she agreed to bring the round little cat into a viewing room for them. Inside the room she put the cat into Daniel's arms and left them there. Daniel rocked the cat gently, and she put up a soft paw to pat at his cheek.

Jacob watched them. He had a sudden flash of memory – Daniel holding Hannah for the first time in Lily's hospital room. There had been that same look on Daniel's face. Instant connection. Instant love and wonder and joy. Hard to realize Hannah was all grown up now. Hell, her daughter Lori was a teenager now. Life went by too fast. But Lily had given them the chance to be involved with her girls so generously, letting the two of them into Hannah and Briana's lives. And Daniel was the one who never forgot a birthday, never missed a concert or dance recital. He blinked hard as Daniel stroked the little cat in his arms.

"We should have done this a long time ago. Or even gotten you a dog. Are you sure you don't want a dog? You're a man of leisure now, you would have time for it."

“Nope.” Daniel rubbed his cheek against the cat's head and laughed as she butted him back. “This is good. We were both busy before. And I couldn't have a dog. Not after watching Snap go downhill and just die when we lost Morris.”

Jacob sighed and carefully put away memories of their friend Morris, his long slow painful decline, and the few weeks they had fostered his elderly and half-blind Yorkie, before the dog followed its master into the dark. “Yeah. I get that. So this is the one?”

“Yep. Although I'm going to change her name.”

“She's an adult cat. Isn't it a little late for that?”

Daniel grinned at him. “Trip, she's a cat. She doesn't care. She's never, ever going to answer to it anyway, even if we call her Your Highness. But Bambi is seriously too girly for her. She's a little tomboy kitty. I'm going to call her Gage.”

“Isn't that a boy's name? Not that it matters, like you said.”

“It's her name. For the *Gageway*. Because somehow when I looked at her I remembered that first month with you on the ship. You made me want things I never figured I'd have. Like one forever guy, in a house with a garden and a little cat in the window. And now look at us.”

“Yeah.” Jacob had a moment of pure unadulterated satisfaction. Here they were. The house was paid for. Daniel was retired and finally had time to paint the way Jacob had always thought he should. Lily's girls were all healthy. He and Daniel had even gone to California for Maria's first grandchild's high-school graduation and at least six of the relatives had been kind to them.

Sure the Segal stores were scrambling a bit to compete with the big chains. As company president he was working longer hours than ever now, when he'd hoped to be easing out of the business. And his hip wasn't great. Just thinking about it made him wince and lean on his cane a bit more. But if he thought back to those hours in the foul debris-strewn waters of the Pacific, drifting in and out of consciousness and aware of nothing but Daniel's steady rasping voice in his ear, then yeah, life was just about perfect.

“Next you're going to tell me we should get two cats,” he said, trying to sound annoyed. “So they can entertain each other.”

“Let's not get carried away.” Daniel put the little tortoiseshell down on the ground, where she wound herself in and out of his legs, and then began patting at his shoelace. “Why don't you go find the attendant and tell her we've made a decision, while I hang out here with Gage.”

“Bossy man.” Jacob moved in to claim a kiss in the privacy of the room. Not that it mattered so much these days, but old habits die hard. Daniel turned to him eagerly, responsive as ever. Yeah, that was good. Jacob stepped back. “I'll tell you what. Why don't *I* go check out the paperwork while *you* stay here and keep our girl company?”

Daniel opened his mouth to protest, parsed the wording again, and laughed. “Good plan.”

“Only kind I have. She'll actually be your cat, after all. You can feed her and brush her and clean up after her. And wipe it up when she pukes, because all cats puke. And shed. Which means you get to vacuum too.” Jacob gripped his cane firmly, and turned to the door.

As he stepped out, he heard Daniel say softly to the cat, “Don't you mind Mr. Grouchy Pants there. He loves you already. You heard what he said. You're our girl, Gage.”

Jacob laughed silently to himself, and limped off down the hallway to pay for their girl's liberation from kitty jail.

May 7, 1992

Daniel reached across the bed to shake Jacob's shoulder. “Come on. Time to get up. We have to be at the hospital by six thirty.”

Jacob burrowed deeper into the covers. “I don't see why they have to take someone who's already looking at surgery and make them wake up at this ungodly hour of morning too. It's adding insult to injury.”

“Hey, I'm getting up too, and I'm not even having the surgery.”

“You can if you want to.”

Daniel pulled the covers back firmly. “At least this way the fasting won't be as big a deal. Come on, lazybones, get yourself showered.”

“I’m going already.”

Daniel winced internally to see how slowly Jacob moved, getting out of bed. You could tell just from the stiff guardedness of his stance how much his back and his hip hurt. The docs said there was nothing to be done about the back, but hopefully the hip replacement would at least help some. God, he hoped so. Jacob hated taking medications but lately Daniel had noticed the pill bottle going steadily downward.

At least he was healthy enough even at sixty-eight for the docs to call him a good candidate for the surgery. Jacob had resisted that too for a long time. But two falls in the last month when they had tried to take their usual walks on the uneven trails in the preserve had done it. Daniel was really glad. He could definitely do without the feeling of his heart in his throat each time he watched Jacob go down just too far away to catch him.

However, being glad didn't mean his stomach wasn't doing little loop-the-loops this morning. Being a good candidate didn't mean something couldn't go wrong. It was general anesthesia and bone surgery. And that hip was a mess from the old injury even before the arthritis. In fact the first doctor had thought the bone wouldn't stand up to a replacement insert. This new guy seemed confident though. Daniel firmly locked away all negative thoughts and headed for the kitchen.

Jacob came in fifteen minutes later, hair damp and tousled, leaning heavily on his cane. With his wet hair darker than its usual wont, and a trace of sleepy softness still in his face, he looked younger. So familiar. Daniel looked at him silently, choked by the wave of affection that rose into his throat. His Trip. His for fifty years now, depending on when you were counting from. His for a lifetime, anyway.

And for another thirty years to come, he told himself firmly. He cleared his throat. “Here, hon. I poured you a lovely glass of tap water.”

“Not even the good bottled stuff?” Jacob took the glass and sipped at it.

“We’re out.” He would have to do a shopping run before Jacob came home. Well, he’d have time. A week, the doctor said, between the recovery and spending a few days in rehab. There were so many things Daniel still had to get. The wedge cushion and a raised seat for the toilet and all. He took a deep gulp of his own

water.

Jacob looked at him curiously. “You already had breakfast?”

“Sure. Didn't want to make you jealous.” But he couldn't meet Jacob's eyes.

Jacob's gaze sharpened. “You did eat, right? I don't smell any coffee.”

“Didn't feel like coffee this morning.”

“Honey, you need to eat.” Jacob gimped over to him and gave him a hug. “I don't know if you're fasting in sympathy or what, but stop it. If you faint from low blood sugar and break a hip we'll both be in trouble. And I can at least smell your good coffee even if I can't have any.”

“You're sure?”

“Oh, Daniel.” Jacob put a hand under his chin and tipped his face up so their eyes met. Jacob still had those big dark eyes that had grabbed at his soul that first morning on the *Gageway*. Except now the bastard knew the effect they had on Daniel. “Danny boy, you can't do this for me.”

“Don't call me that.” The private joke couldn't make him smile this morning. *I would take your place if I could.* Trust Trip to see what he was doing, intentionally or not, better than Daniel knew it himself. By now they each had each other's number. “Okay. But time is short. I'll just grab a bagel.”

“Make coffee too. Make the Amaretto. You can put it in a travel cup for the car. I can smell it on the drive in.”

“Sure.” Daniel got busy with the grinder and the filters, brewing a big cup. Trip was right – he would no doubt be glad of it. Behind him he heard Jacob moving around, slow hesitant steps and the squeak of rubber cane-tip on the linoleum. “This will take a minute,” Daniel said. “Why don't you sit down. Take a load off.”

“I'll be doing enough sitting for the next month or so.” Jacob's footsteps paused. “Hey cat, get out from under my feet, you parasitic hairball.”

Daniel smiled down at his coffee filter. “She loves you. She's worried about you going away.”

“She loves the treats I give her. She has barely three neurons to rub together.

In a week she won't remember who I am."

"Sure she will. Remember when you went to Seattle? She was thrilled to see you back."

"She was thrilled to see the dried shrimp."

"Well, that too. She's a cat. She'd be a traitor to the breed if she didn't hold out for material rewards. But she slept on *your* chest instead of mine for a week."

"That was a compliment? I thought she was trying to smother me in my sleep so she would have you all to herself again."

Daniel snorted. "You are such a cynic."

"You're such a romantic."

"Yeah. Isn't diversity grand?"

"Yes." Jacob's voice was soft. Daniel turned to look. Jacob was staring at him with such warmth in his eyes. But when he caught Daniel's gaze he smiled and let it turn to heat. "Turn around again. I want to look at your ass for a bit before we leave."

"It's a good thing *one* of us is a romantic." He turned obediently, wiggling his butt at Jacob as he lifted the cone off the mug and tossed the filter in the compost. Sixty-nine years old and his man's eyes still lit up like that. There was something to be said for lust as well as romance. If you'd asked him forty years ago about old guys having sex he'd probably have scoffed. But that heat was still there. Even if it was mostly a matter of hands and mouths these days. Although, hey, if Jacob's hip was better they might try something else again.

But even though his mind wandered through the possibilities they might get back if Jacob's hip stopped hurting, sex was not the main thing on his mind as they prepared to leave. He jiggled the car keys in one hand. His other hand firmly clutched the file folder with all those essential papers that might, just might, give him the right to be with Jacob if anything went wrong. He saw Jacob take a last look around. Those dark eyes paused on the wall tile they had installed together, the floor they had refinished last year, the little dark-furred cat curled up on the kitchen windowsill. And Daniel held his breath for just a moment and prayed. Because he and Trip both knew, the world could change in a moment.

CHAPTER 16

July 25, 2011

Jacob woke to the sensation of someone pressing a gas mask over his nose. He swung randomly (but not too hard) with his arm and swore under his breath. As expected, his bleary eyes opened to find the brightest hazel pair in the known universe looking down at him.

“You need to wear the damned thing,” Daniel said. “It does no good sitting on the nightstand.”

“It bugs me.” Jacob shoved the CPAP sleep-apnea mask in Daniel's fingers away irritably. “I'm done sleeping now anyway, you know. It does no good when I'm awake.”

“Well, aren't you the grumpy bear this morning.”

“Just because I'm not all bubbly and perky at seven a.m. does not make me grumpy. I'm eighty-seven years old. I'm allowed to wake up slow. And you're not the one having your nose rubbed raw every night. I can't sleep with it.”

“Wear it for me.” Daniel put on an exaggerated pleading face, big eyes under his bushy silver eyebrows. Then his expression melted into something tender. “That apnea is hard on your heart. Wear it for me because I want you around until you're a hundred and seven”

“Damned blackmailer. Okay, okay, I promise, I won't take it off once tonight.”

Daniel bent and kissed him lightly. Jacob kept his mouth shut, because morning breath took on a whole new dimension when you slept with your mouth open all night like he did these days. But Daniel's tongue tip touched Jacob's lip and Daniel tasted of mint and love. Unwillingly, Jacob smiled. “You still know how to ungrump me.”

“There's more where that came from. But you have to get up and shower and brush those teeth first.”

“You're such a romantic.”

Daniel's smile was bright. “You have no idea, babe. Wear something nice for me today. That new blue shirt and your black jeans – you look good in those.”

Jacob struggled upright in the bed and carefully slid his legs out. “Don't look good in anything,” he muttered to himself. Daniel just laughed and headed out to the kitchen. Jacob watched him go. Sometimes it was just a little unfair that Daniel was still slim and active and only a little bent in the shoulders. Where Jacob had twenty pounds he knew he was never going to lose, and the damned cough, and the millstone of a cane he now was once more committed to trail with him everywhere.

But then Jacob would think it through and be glad with all his heart that Daniel was so healthy for eighty-nine. Because it meant Jacob would go first. He was never going to have to wake up to a morning without those hazel eyes in it. He'd prayed a lot of prayers over the years, large and small, but for sixty-nine years now that had been first on his list - *don't let me lose him*.

He struggled to the bathroom, leaning on the stupid cane and took care of business. The shower had rails and a seat, and he hated, *hated*, that they were necessary. How many years had it been since he had put Daniel up against the tiles and pounded his ass? Way too many, anyway. *Never happening again*. Growing old seemed to be full of never-again moments. Although there had been that time in the plague years of the late eighties when even being young and beautiful had been no protection whatsoever.

God, he was morbid this morning. He pulled his mind back to the business at hand. The water was nice and hot. He shampooed his hair carefully. At least he had Daniel beat there. Jacob's hair might be close to pure white now, but at least he still *had* all his hair. He rinsed carefully and got out. The towel he wrapped around himself was new and thick. Daniel had clearly been shopping again. The man did love his luxuries. Jacob sat carefully on the toilet to dry himself. Thank God all the years of working had given them a cushion that let Daniel indulge himself in small ways. Jacob wanted Daniel to have everything good.

When he got to the kitchen Daniel was cooking oatmeal, singing softly to himself as he stirred the pot. Jacob went up behind him and wrapped an arm around his waist. Daniel leaned back for a moment against his chest, and that familiar weight was sweeter than the brown-sugar smell of breakfast. Jacob rubbed his cheek carefully against Daniel's thinning hair. Then Daniel bumped him away with his ass.

“Go sit. It's almost ready.”

Jacob pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and eased his way into it. His hip was sore this morning, but his back was good. One never knew. He reached out and pulled the pillbox toward him, flipping open the lid for the compartment labeled *SAT AM*. Heart pill and water pill, arthritis med, and the vitamin and the fish-oil capsule that Daniel swore was good for him. And two more supplements besides, that friends had convinced Daniel would keep Jacob going strong. Jacob hated taking pills. It always felt like he was choking. But he never told Daniel that. He reached for the apple juice set at his place.

“So are you up for going for a drive this morning?” Daniel asked.

“Not if you're driving.”

“Please. I am still a great driver. But as it happens, Lori and her husband are taking us out for lunch and a boat ride.”

“They're getting you on a boat?”

Daniel laughed a little ruefully. “I told them about our anniversary tomorrow. They thought it would be romantic.”

“What anniversary? We always celebrate in November.” The day he has opened his front door and found Daniel, skinny and exhausted but dressed in civvies and *safe*, on his front step.

“I decided we should celebrate twice. Once on November twenty-first, and then July twenty-sixth. The day of that first kiss. Because you know, I was certain right then that you were the man for me, if we only lived through it all.”

Jacob had been too, but he had a reputation to uphold. “Hah. Complete nonsense. You thought I would be a good shag.”

“Well that too. You were a good kisser.”

“In your imagination.” Jacob grunted. “Okay. Sure, we can celebrate twice.” Get a few more in. “Whatever makes you happy. Don't expect a gift though, springing it on me like this.”

“Oh I don't. But it will be a nice day. Breakfast coming up.”

“Be careful with that hot pan.” Daniel might seem ageless but his fingers were

gnarled with arthritis.

Daniel scooped oatmeal with a sunny smile, and brought over two plates topped with full bowls and sliced fruit. He set Jacob's in front of him with a profession flourish that dated back to his days as a waiter, before the advertising job had come through. "Don't teach your grandpa to suck eggs."

"You know you're dating yourself with that phrase."

"You can suck something else then." Daniel managed a little swing of his hips.

Jacob bit into a slice of peach. How many years, how much time and age and infirmity, and those words from Daniel still made his dick sit up and take notice. He licked the peach juice off his fingers slowly, with languid movements of his tongue.

Daniel laughed. "None of that, big boy. Your grandniece will be at the door in twenty minutes and the days when we could get each other off in ten standing in the kitchen are long gone. Eat your nice oatmeal."

They cleared the table together, with Jacob handing things to Daniel to put in the dishwasher. This kitchen was smaller than the one in their beloved house, but not as tiny as that first apartment after the war. Things changed. Things stayed the same. His fingers brushed Daniel's passing him a mug.

Daniel looked good this morning. Not that the man ever looked bad. It was a little unfair, how Daniel cruised through life looking like he should be in movies, making Jacob's heart leap with every new year. Even the way his hair was receding over his temples was distinguished-looking. And that silver-grey shirt he had on was Jacob's favorite. Jacob stole another kiss and then sighed as the doorbell rang.

Lori was at the door early, with her husband Bruce. Even though it was July, and warm enough to not need jackets, it still seemed to take forever to get out of the house. Shoes and his cane and his cell phone and his wallet. Bruce lent an arm to help Jacob down the single step from the front door, and Daniel spent five minutes wrestling with the persnickety deadbolt, before coaxing it shut. Jacob could have done it faster – his fingers at least worked – but he started down the walkway instead. Daniel caught up with him at the car and eventually they were ensconced in luxury in the back seat of the sedan, as Bruce pulled out of the

townhouse drive.

Jacob looked out at the other units in the complex. It was a senior residence, the kind of place he had disdained not too long ago. But they offered weekly cleaning services, and a walk-in clinic on the corner, and a physiotherapist who made housecalls. It had been the right choice. Still his mood improved as they turned the corner and headed out of town.

The summer morning was sunny and warm. There were blossoming bushes and beds of bright flowers and the leaves were green and thick. His mind swung back to ports in the Pacific, and the smell of eucalyptus and salt, and the call of unfamiliar birds in the trees. He shook his head. Wandering again. It happened too often these days. He wasn't senile. Far from it. But his mind seemed to like to travel back in time, and he would come to himself minutes later having completely lost track of the conversation. Daniel used to razz him about his senior moments, but come to think of it, he hadn't done so for a long time now. Jacob spared a minute to wonder if that was a sign he really *was* having bad senior moments.

Daniel took his hand in a warm grip. "So, feel up to a little walking later?"

"Sure." His back was good. The hip was just an annoyance. Anyway, whatever Daniel needed today Jacob would try to deliver. "You have plans?"

"Maybe."

They sat quietly watching the world roll by. In the front seat, Lori and Bruce listened to some kind of pop on the CD player. Jacob didn't know the group, but it was relatively pleasant and not playing too loud. He still had his hearing, thank God. Now *Daniel* sometimes needed to ask for a repeat, but if getting deaf helped him sleep through noises at night that might be a blessing. Sixty-five years after the war and the man still sometimes jolted awake at a noise from outside, reaching for Jacob and muttering about a kapok. Some things apparently dug themselves too deep in the brain to ever go away.

Jacob sat up a little as they crossed into New York State. "Hey, Lori girl, where are we headed?"

"It's a surprise," Daniel said. "Simmer down and enjoy the ride."

It was almost two hours before they pulled into an unfamiliar marina. When he opened the car door, Jacob could smell the sea. It washed over him in a flash of

familiarity, fish and weeds and that odd salt-water tang. How long since he and Daniel had gone to the shore? A few years, he thought.

Bruce reached down to Jacob's elbow and helped him get up and steady himself. His back gave a twinge, after the time spent sitting but he ignored it. He took a couple of careful steps and nodded.

Daniel at his side said, "Doing okay, old man?"

"Watch who you're calling old. I seem to remember you have two years on me, at least for another two months."

"We're both old." Daniel took his arm. "Come and see."

They walked slowly toward the docks, Daniel fitting his pace to Jacob's. There was an assortment of boats moored in the slots. Jacob saw everything from battered looking houseboats to sleek yachts. Ahead of them, Lori and Bruce turned along the shore, and then made their way up one long concrete pier. At the end, a group of people looked up as they approached.

Jacob recognized Hannah and Michael, and Brianna with that new man she was seeing, Mihail something. Shannon and her boyfriend. And Austin and Carl and even Eddie, leaning on his walker. Jacob jerked to a halt and whispered fiercely to Daniel, "What the hell is this?"

"This is our wedding."

"What?" Jacob yanked his arm free of Daniel's to turn and stare at him. "Just like that? Daniel, you don't do surprise weddings. It's just not..." He struggled to explain what it wasn't.

Daniel smiled. "We've talked about it for years. I know you were holding out for Jersey to pass a law. You always said you wanted to stand up in front of a justice of the peace and do it right and legal or not do it at all. But we're not getting any younger. New York has passed the law and we don't have to be residents. And baby, I don't want to wait any longer."

Jacob shook his head slowly, trying to get a grip on the sudden turn the day had taken. The sudden turn his life apparently had taken. Daniel stood watching him with a small indulgent smile, waiting patiently. Daniel had always waited patiently for him to do the right thing. Now Daniel said, "We don't have to. It can just be an

anniversary party, if you like.”

In all those years, every time he'd caught up to where Daniel was, it had felt right. He said, “I want to marry you. I always have.”

“Is there a reason not to do it today, with our family and friends all here?”

“Your family isn't here.”

“Maria can't travel any more. The rest of them don't much care. Anyway you gave me your family.”

“I don't have a ring for you.”

“I have two.”

Jacob smiled slowly. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Since it began to look like the law might pass. Hannah did most of the legwork.” Daniel took his arm again. “Come on, Trip. Let's do this thing. I want to call you my husband before we die.”

Jacob yanked him close, clutching him hard even though it threw them both off balance. “Don't. Don't say it like that.”

“Okay. I want to call you my husband for at least a decade or two. Better?”

“Yes.” He adjusted his cane and they began walking again. The crowd at the end of the slip came toward them with greetings and hugs. Eddie was looking damned old, despite being a couple of years younger than Jacob was. They hugged carefully, aware of each other's infirmities. Eddie whispered against his cheek, “I wish Phil could have hung on long enough for this. But I'm glad I get to see you and Daniel do it.”

“Me too.” Jacob's eyes were damp as he pulled back. Damned wind in his face.

Eventually they got sorted out, and headed up a shallow gangplank onto the waiting boat. Jacob walked carefully on the ridged boards. Wouldn't it be just like him to fall in the drink on his wedding day? They got Eddie on board even more carefully. Jacob said to Daniel, “Why a boat? You hate boats. And as steady as I am these days I'm likely to fall over in the middle of our vows.” For a moment he heard that phrase, *our vows*, echo in his head and missed what Daniel replied.

“Huh?”

“I thought it was fitting,” Daniel said. “I don't know. Hannah suggested it and I was going to say no and then yes just kind of popped out. It kind of closes the circle, back to where we began.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, we're just going out on the bay. It's a lovely day, almost no wind. There shouldn't be much chop. And you're not that old yet.”

“You said that on purpose.”

“Don't chicken out on me.”

“I'm not.” Jacob surprised himself by reaching out and taking Daniel's hand. “Definitely not.”

The shore slipped away from them as the boat headed out onto the water. Daniel was right, the harbor was damned nearly a pond this morning. The sun glinted off the small swells, and the light motion of the boat moved through Jacob in a long-familiar way. For a moment the years rolled back. How often had he stood and watched the shore get smaller? Although never holding Daniel's hand in his. And usually he'd been too busy to moon about watching. He shook off the nostalgia.

“So how is this going to work?”

“The pilot's going to stop in the middle of the bay. That guy in the grey suit is a Quaker recorded minister. He's going to officiate. You say you do. I say I do. Sign the form and it's done.”

“How romantic.”

Daniel brushed a kiss against his cheek. “Just like you.”

Jacob snorted, and leaned a little closer to him.

It took about twenty minutes to reach whatever spot the pilot had decided was appropriate. The motor shut off and there was silence. Jacob could hear the water against the hull and the high cries of the inevitable gulls wheeling overhead. The other guests had gone into the cabin, leaving the stern rail to him and Daniel.

Daniel turned to him. “Out here or in there? Hannah did some decorating, but

we can admire it while we eat lunch afterward.”

“Out here.”

“Be right back.”

Jacob leaned his elbows on the rail, standing askew to ease his hip, and looked out over the water. So many years ago, he had looked over the rail of a ship at the shoreline, with San Francisco rising behind the water, and wondered where his life was going to go. And how long it would be. *Very short* had looked like a distinct possibility back then. Then five minutes later he'd caught his first glimpse of Daniel, and fallen not into love but into intense humiliation. Now sixty-nine years later his life had been long and full, and that mocking guy with the dark hair had become the beat of Jacob's own heart. He would have never guessed it.

He heard the movement of people coming to the open deck at the stern, but he kept looking out at the bay, until Daniel stepped up beside him and touched his arm. “Ready?”

He was going to grump something, but at the last moment he changed his mind. He put a hand on Daniel's cheek, and just held it there. An old man's hand with gnarled knuckles and prominent veins, resting against the soft wrinkled face of another old man. Well, they had lived through enough to deserve their old age. Then Daniel turned towards him to lean into his hand, and Daniel's eyes hadn't changed at all. “I've been ready for sixty-nine years,” Jacob said quietly.

Daniel leaned into the warmth of Jacob's hand on his cheek. Those gestures from Jacob were still so rare in public, he treasured every one. He looked into Jacob's eyes, still dark and beautiful even with silver lashes and slack lids. That was still his Trip in there. Always would be.

“So,” he said. “Shall we finally end the suspense?”

Jacob nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

Daniel put his hand over Jacob's for a moment and then stepped back and turned around. Jacob moved up beside him. Their friends and family stood in a rough semi-circle around the deck. In front of them the minister stood with his hands clasped together. Daniel said, “Hannah?”

She came to him, her eyes sparkling, dressed up in one of those floaty bright-colored dresses she loved to wear. He pulled the little box out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Would you hold onto those for us, honey, until we need them?"

"Sure, Uncle Daniel." She smiled happily.

She looked like Lily in that moment. Daniel felt a brief pang of loss for the sweet girl who had been more sister to him than his own. But this was his Hannah, the closest he would ever come to his own child, and it was good to have her sharing this moment. "I'd give your Uncle Jake his to hold onto but he'd probably drop it."

"You're the one who's butter-fingered lately," Jacob muttered. "And don't call me Jake."

Daniel grinned at him. "Oh yeah, I remember now."

The minister asked, "Are you gentlemen ready? Turn and face each other."

Daniel turned, and then there was no one in the world but Jacob.

The minister's voice floated around them. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the joining of these two men in marriage. Through many long and full years, they have stayed true to one another. They have lived life side by side. Now before family and friends, and under the eyes of God, whose love for all his creation is surely infinite and unbounded, they will take their vows.

"Daniel, take Jacob's hands."

Daniel reached out. There was a moment's hesitation, as Jacob balanced his cane against his leg. And then their fingers met in a firm clasp.

"Daniel, do you take Jacob to be your lawfully wedded husband. To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, so long as you both shall live?"

In Daniel's nightmares he had been struck dumb or fallen over dead at this moment. On this sunny July morning on the quiet waters of the bay, his voice rang out clearly. "I do."

"Jacob, do you take Daniel to be your lawfully wedded husband. To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, so long as you both shall live?"

For a long moment time froze. Then Jacob smiled at him. "I do."

The minister turned to Hannah. "You have the rings."

Suddenly time seemed to move swiftly. The minister was saying a line about the rings as Hannah put the smaller one into Daniel's palm. He slipped Jacob's ring over his finger, relieved that it slid easily into place. Then Jacob took Daniel's hand in his and tried to work his own ring on. Daniel's knuckles were swollen and knobby with the damned arthritis. Jacob rotated the gold circle gently, trying to get it over the joint. Daniel wondered if he'd underestimated. He hadn't wanted to buy the ring too big. It had fit when he'd tried it on in the cool of the store.

Jacob slipped the ring up and pushed it firmly down, but it hung up on the loose old-man skin of Daniel's knuckle. Daniel looked at Jacob, feeling the tears prickling at his eyelids. It was really no big deal if he had to have it made bigger. He didn't know why it mattered so much that they get his ring on right now. He should just give up and tell the minister to skip this part. He pulled his hand back, trying to see if he could do it himself. And failed. And swallowed hard.

Jacob looked into his eyes. Then Jacob, his quiet reserved Jacob, gave him a grin. "It's a pity the lube is in my other pair of jeans," he said clearly. He reached out, brought Daniel's hand to his mouth, and licked wetly over Daniel's knuckle. And with a twist and a shove, and a little pain that Daniel welcomed, slipped the ring over his knuckle and nestled it in where it belonged.

Jacob took Daniel's hand in a warm firm grip and turned to the minister. "Is there anything else?"

"Just that by the power vested in me by the State of New York I pronounce you legally married. You may kiss your husband."

Jacob kissed him. Just a sweet simple kiss, like a man coming home where he belonged. And it was done.

Friends and family clustered round to congratulate them. The minister spread the certificate out for them to sign, with Hannah and Eddie as witnesses. More congratulations. Hands shaken, cheeks kissed. Eventually they stood there, Daniel's arm around Jacob's shoulders, in the late morning sunshine.

Briana's new man came over to them. "That was beautiful," he said. His deep voice held a trace of some unfamiliar accent. "I would like to offer you something.

It is a custom among my people.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow.

The man brought out a short piece of red ribbon. “When a man and a woman, or man and man today, say their vows, they take a lock of each of their hair and braid it into a ring. Custom says if you keep that ring hidden safely, where no other human hand can touch it, then your love will endure. I know you and your husband have no need of this but I would like to offer the braiding anyway. As a keepsake, perhaps.”

“You should take him up on it,” Briana said at his elbow. “Mihail does some amazing weaving and braiding.”

Jacob shrugged. “Why not? Although neither of us has that much hair.”

“It will be well,” Mihail said. “I have worked with short hair of a man for the braiding before.”

Briana found scissors from somewhere and she and Hannah snipped a lock from near the top of Daniel's head, and the side of Jacob's, with much more pondering and giggling about where there was enough hair than Daniel felt was really necessary. Mihail laid the hair out on the table and worked with surprisingly deft fingers. Jacob's hair was silver. Daniel's still held a hint of his old chestnut-brown, making it a little darker, a copper tint. The strands wove together out of Mihail's hands in a little band. The man took the red ribbon and tied the ends, tucking the free wisps in to form an amazingly perfect circle. He placed it in Daniel's hand.

“Thank you.” Daniel eyed it lying on his palm, close to that new gold ring Jacob had managed to get on his finger.

“You must put it somewhere safe. Custom says no eyes but yours, no hands but yours, should come upon it.”

“That's a pity,” Jacob said. “It's actually pretty, the way you wove it.”

“So we keep this safe from human hands,” Daniel said slowly, “And the marriage lasts?”

“Yes.” Mihail smiled wryly. “Of course it is only superstition.”

“Do we have to keep it with us? Where we can see it?”

“No. Some couples bury it in the ground under the roots of a tree, where the tree will grow over it and keep it safe. Hair lasts a long time and does not easily decay.”

“Hmm.” Daniel thought about it and then closed his hand over the ring. “Come on, Trip.”

“What?” But Jacob followed him willingly.

Daniel went to the rail and looked down. It was only a bay, the water calm and blue, but it held the salt of the ocean and had at least three hundred feet of depth below the hull at this point. “Like this,” he said. “Hold out your hand, Jacob.”

Jacob did so, and Daniel pressed his palm to Jacob's with the ring between them. “Out over the side.”

“Are you sure?” Jacob allowed Daniel to guide their mated palms over the rail and above the water surface.

“Safer than a tree, for us.” For a moment they stood, hands pressed together, over the soft swells of the Atlantic. Then Daniel said, “Let go.”

As their hands parted, the ring fell. For a moment it floated on the surface of the water, catching little glints of sun in the interwoven silver and copper strands. Daniel reached for Jacob's hand again, and laced their fingers together, watching it. He wondered if he'd made a mistake. He wouldn't want it to wash ashore somewhere. But before he could say they'd better fish it back out, the ribbon saturated and began to sink. Slowly the ring of their entwined hair slipped below the surface. Another moment and it was gone from sight, heading downwards, carrying his love and Jacob's down safely this time, into deep waters.

THE END

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***Author bio:** Kaje Harper grew up in Montreal and spent her teen years writing, filling binders with stories about what guys like Starsky and Hutch really did on their days off. But as life got busy, the stories began to just live in her head. The characters grew up, met, endured, loved, but rarely made it to paper. Serious authorship got sidetracked by ventures into psychology, teaching, and a biomedical*

career. And by the challenges of raising children.

*Then around 2006, when the kids were more independent, her husband gave her a computer she didn't have to share. She began putting words down in print, just for fun. Hours of fun. Lots of hours of fun. The stories began piling up, and her husband suggested it was time to try to publish one. MLR Press accepted her first book, *Life Lessons*, which was released in May 2011. Kaje now has several novels and short stories in print, including *The Rebuilding Year*, a contemporary m/m romance released by Samhain Publishing in March 2012. She currently lives in Minnesota with a creative teenager, a crazy little omnivorous white dog, and a remarkably patient spouse.*

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