



Lawyer on My Case

a novella of short stories by
Janice Jarrell



Copyright © 2021 by Janice Jarrell

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum



To Cathy, my best friend and editor.

CHAPTER I

THEY'RE NOT COPS!



“Colin, please!” Joshua begged. He reached to try to grab Colin’s sleeve as he paced their living room, but Colin jerked away.

“Leave me alone, Josh!” he snapped, then grimaced and shot his husband a contrite look. “I’m sorry, baby. Just let me work through this. Go to David and Nates’ house. Just let me...”

“I’m not going *anywhere*,” Joshua said, then he sighed and bowed his head. He’d never seen Colin this distraught. Seldom seen him this beside himself with rage. He had been seething with white-hot anger for hours, ever since he heard the news from Minneapolis.

Joshua had tried repeatedly to calm him with no success. Finally, he simply sat and watched as Colin strode through the rooms of their house, cursing and venting his fury. Joshua said little other than to murmur his understanding and support. He knew there was little else he *could* do. Colin had to work it out. He had to process his wrath in his own way and in his own time. Eventually he would wear himself out. This kind of intensity couldn’t last forever.

“Jesus!” Colin spat out through clenched teeth, still stalking through the rooms of their house, unable to cease his relentless pacing. “I want to fucking beat those bastards within an inch of their worthless lives!”

JANICE JARRELL

"I know, honey. I know. But you can't. You can't do anything. They've been fired. There's an investigation going on. They won't get away with it."

"You don't know that!" Colin spat out. "We've seen it before, Josh. Cops – well fuck that, I won't call them cops because they're not! They're not cops. They're not police officers! They're murderers! And that's how they need to be treated!" He wheeled to face Joshua, his teeth bared in rage. "We've seen them get away with it!"

"These guys won't," Joshua said, trying to keep his voice level.

Without warning Colin jerked to a halt and stood stock still, his eyes fixed on the windows leading to their front yard and the Rivanna River beyond. For several seconds he was silent. His breathing slowed. His face twisted into an expression of profound grief and Joshua saw his beautiful honeyed-green eyes fill with tears. He rose slowly from the couch and approached Colin with measured movements. "Colin?" he whispered, taking his arm. "Honey, come sit down with me."

Colin stumbled to the couch and sank down beside Joshua. The volcanic rage had suddenly drained away leaving only a crushing storm of anguish which roiled in his chest like a ball of fire. A pain he could barely contain, barely endure without crying out.

"Sweetie," Joshua whispered. He reached to brush the tears from Colin's cheeks. Colin was still staring straight ahead of him, silent and motionless. Gazing into their unlit fireplace while tears tracked down his face in a slow, steady stream. He seemed only dimly aware of Joshua's presence, totally focused on some excruciating inner vision.

Joshua felt his own eyes burn. Felt his own throat ache and tighten. Colin's obvious agony was almost more than he could bear. "Sweetie, please talk to me," he murmured, pressing his forehead to Colin's shoulder.

"I keep thinking about Jerry," Colin whispered, his voice shaking and thick with tears. "He died being a good cop."

"I know, baby," Joshua whispered, reaching to stroke Colin's hair, struggling to hold back the sobs which threatened to overwhelm him. Jerry Burgess was a campus police officer and Colin's friend. He was killed in the line of duty only a few short months ago, and Colin had summoned every ounce of strength he possessed to stand honor guard at his friend's casket.

"He could have done a lot of things the night he was killed," Colin said, his voice shaking. "He could have drawn his piece and shot the guy. He could

have pulled back and called for backup which would have escalated the situation out of all control. But he didn't. He tried to reason with the perp. He tried to be one of the good guys. He played it by the book. And now he's dead and his three kids have no daddy."

"Colin, god, honey, please don't do this to yourself," Joshua moaned. Again, he reached to brush his fingers across Colin's damp cheeks. "Please, honey. You're going to break my heart."

"I hate those guys, Josh," Colin ground out, his teeth once again clenched tight. "I fucking hate them! Do you know what guys like that *do* to cops like Jerry? Cops like *me*?" He lowered his head and swiped his sleeve across his face. "They make it twice as likely that people won't trust us. Won't come to us. Won't listen to us. Won't *believe* us."

He leaned back and raised his face, staring at their ceiling with its oaken beams. "They make it twice as likely that we'll end up dead." He sat up and wheeled to face Joshua. "D'you know why I love being a cop?"

"I know some of it," Joshua replied.

"I love being a cop because it's an honorable profession. You fight for what's right. You fight for decency and justice. Serve and protect. That's what we do... or at least what we're *supposed* to do." He lowered his head and Joshua's hand fell away. "Where the fuck was the honor in what those assholes did? Where was the decency? The protection? The service? The *justice*?"

"Colin," Joshua said, once again cradling his husband's face in his two hands, "there was none of course. They are the worst of the worst and you're right. The damage they do to honorable police officers like you - like Jerry - is incalculable."

"It's like he died for nothing."

"No. He did *not* die for nothing! Colin, listen to me!" Joshua once again held Colin's face between his palms and forced him to meet his eyes. "You have to fight, Colin! You have to keep fighting for what you believe in! You have to keep on being the decent, honorable man you are! You can't ever stop. You can't let animals like those guys turn you bitter. You can't let them defeat you. You have to fight for Jerry and all the other cops just like him who are good, decent men who would never *ever* engage in that kind of brutality. You have to keep being Colin Campbell. Don't let them change you, Colin. Please don't." His last words were choked out in a trembling voice and Colin quickly wrapped him in his arms and held him close.

JANICE JARRELL

“You,” Joshua whispered against Colin’s shoulder, his voice still quaking, “are the warrior. The perfect line which never wavers.” His arms tightened around Colin’s neck, clutching him close. “Please, please don’t let the ugliness of the world change you.”

Colin nodded then breathed out a soft laugh. “Well, not so perfect maybe.” He drew in a shuddering breath and leaned back. “I guess I had to get past the rage,” he mumbled, his fingers brushing across Joshua’s damp cheeks.

“Five stages of grief,” Joshua murmured. “For you anger usually comes first.”

“I’ll tell you something,” Colin said, wrapping his arm around Joshua’s shoulder and drawing him close. “On this one I will *never* get to acceptance. Not fucking ever!”

“I wouldn’t want you to.”

Colin nodded, then kissed Joshua’s cheek, before rising from the couch and moving toward the dining room.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to call Lenny,” Colin said. “I want a meeting. I want a union meeting. I want a discussion about this. I want the guys at the station to have a chance to talk about how they feel.” At the dining room table, he turned and threw Joshua a wan smile. “Not everyone has their own personal shrink to help them through this kind of thing.”

“I can have a couple counselors come to the precinct to talk with any of the cops want to see them,” Joshua said. He rose and walked to Colin’s side. “Grief counselors. There are probably a lot of cops who feel the way you do. They need the chance to vent. To talk about their feelings. Tell Lenny I’ll send some people tomorrow if it’s OK with him.”

“Will one of them be *you*?” Colin asked, holding his phone in his hand.

“If you want me to be there, I’ll be there.”

“Do you even have to ask?” Colin said, then hit the speed dial to talk to his boss at the campus police station.

Joshua returned to the couch and fell onto it while Colin spoke to his Lieutenant. He felt as emotionally drained as he knew Colin felt, but he also felt a glimmer of hope. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling, then closed them, drawing in slow, even breaths until he felt Colin sink to the couch beside him.

“He’ll call the meeting,” Colin said. “And he said to bring the counselors.”

He half turned on the couch and drew Joshua close in his arms. “Christ, Josh, I feel fucking exhausted.”

“Let’s just stay home today and watch TV. Something easy on the eyes and on the emotions.”

“Whatever you want, honey. I can’t even think straight right now.”

“How about ‘School of Rock?’” Joshua suggested. He turned sideways and gazed at his husband. Colin’s face was pale. His lower lip still quivered, and his brow was furrowed. He was still struggling with the pain and anger. He was still fighting his way back to the end of grief’s journey... acceptance. And though Colin would never ‘accept’ what had happened in Minneapolis, he *would* achieve an acceptance of his role in this ongoing story. He would do what he could. And Joshua would be by his side.

Colin glanced at him and gave him a small smile. “School of Rock sounds good.” He wrapped Joshua tight in his arms, holding him so close that Joshua could barely breathe. “Thank you,” Colin whispered, his voice once again thick with tears. “I love you so much.” He released Joshua from his embrace and swallowed hard.

“And I love you,” Joshua replied, then grabbed the remote. “A little Jack Black?”

“Good for what ails you,” Colin murmured, then settled next to Joshua, one arm around his shoulders, holding him close against his side. He turned his head and buried his face against Joshua’s dark curls. Then drew in a deep breath and allowed himself to relax against his husband’s body. Peace was a long way off. But it was coming. Colin could see it, like a glisten of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It was there, steady and unswerving.

And it had a name.

CHAPTER 2

THE GAY COP



Joshua wasn't entirely happy that Colin had returned to the University of Virginia Police Department. Even as a one-day-a-week, reserve officer, the job still carried risks. But Joshua also knew how much Colin had missed being part of that elite brotherhood, and he didn't stand in his way when he wanted to return.

Colin loved being a cop. To him it was the most noble profession on Earth. He was proud to wear the blue uniform of a police officer and had done everything in his power during his decade on the force to represent what was highest and best in law enforcement.

Colin was the first to admit he was a zealot about his work on the campus police force. Joshua had witnessed his almost-obsessive desire to bring perpetrators to justice firsthand when he worked with him as a Title IX consultant.

And yet, for all his zeal and toughness, Colin had never once been cited for mistreatment of any subject under his control. He refused to give alleged assailants that kind of power over him. When abused with foul language or even physical resistance, Colin only smiled and restrained his subject. "Keep it up, asshole," he'd snarl into the perpetrator's ear. "You're only hurting yourself because I'm not giving your lawyer any fucking ammunition!"

He was a legendary law enforcement officer on the university campus, a decorated hero who had offered up his life to save a university student. Fellow

officers from both campus and city police forces liked and respected the big Irish cop and were happy he was back among their number.

"I suppose Lenny's jumping for joy," Joshua said that night at dinner, referring to Colin's friend and supervising lieutenant, Lenny Anderson. "Having his number one cop back again."

Colin scoffed. "I doubt I'm his number one cop," he muttered. "But, yeah. He wanted me back." He leaned toward Joshua and grinned. "I think he missed me!"

"Lenny's a good guy," Joshua said, gazing past Colin's shoulder and out the window. Lenny had been forced to come to Joshua on the day Colin was shot and give him the news that the man Joshua loved lay in a hospital emergency room, near death. Joshua never forgot it. Nor did he forget how deeply affected Lenny was by Colin's injury.

"He really loves you, Colin," Joshua said, turning to look at his husband.

Colin pursed his lips and nodded. "We've grown tight over the years," he said. "I'll always be grateful to Lenny." He arched his brows and met Joshua's eyes. "Ten years ago, when he hired me, it wasn't all that common to have an out-and-proud, gay cop on the force. He took a big chance. Not everyone in the squad was jumping with joy about me wearing the shield."

"Were there any incidents?"

"No. Not really. But there was..." Colin paused and grimaced. "There was resistance."

"Other cops wanted you fired?"

"Not fired maybe. But reassigned? Kept in a back room tagging evidence? Posted on a crosswalk helping old ladies across the street? Yeah. Maybe that."

"But not sergeant in charge of the Assault Unit," Joshua said.

Colin laughed. "No. Definitely not that. That I had to *earn!*" He leaned back in his chair and stared down at his empty plate, thinking. Then he huffed out a soft laugh. "I came in to work one day and found a picture of a naked woman taped to my locker."

"You're kidding!"

"Dead serious. And someone had written on it: 'Don't knock it until you've tried it'."

"That's fucking disgusting! Did you remove it?" Joshua asked.

"Nope," Colin said, then chuckled and got to his feet. "Left it there. But the next day I brought in a picture of a really hot, naked guy and taped him

JANICE JARRELL

right underneath her.” He shot Joshua a grin as he wandered toward the living room couch. “I wrote on the naked woman: ‘One and done’. And on the guy, I wrote: ‘Tried it. Liked it.’” He fell onto the couch, still laughing. “I never did find out who taped the naked lady to my locker, but the next day both pictures were gone.”

“Did Lenny ask you not to mention the fact that you’re gay when he hired you?” Joshua asked, sitting down beside him.

“No. He said to do my job and be the best cop I could be and everything else would take care of itself.”

“A wise man, your boss.”

“I know for a fact that several cops went to him and complained.”

“About working with a gay officer?”

“Yeah. They didn’t *know* I was gay at first, but eventually it came out and there were a few whiners. Someone saw me at McCafferty’s or someone who knew me told some cop: ‘That guy’s GAY!’ I dunno. I know I didn’t mention it. But anyway, they found out.” Colin smirked and shrugged. “I didn’t give a damn one way or the other.”

“But you also didn’t brag about all the chicks you were banging.”

“I suppose that could have been a clue, yeah,” Colin said, a touch of irony in his voice.

“What did Lenny say when the other cops complained?”

Colin laughed out loud. “He asked them if I had hit on any of them, which, of course, I hadn’t. And when they said ‘no’ he said: ‘then what the fuck are you whining about? Get back to work!'”

“And what if you *had* hit on them,” Joshua blurted out. “That would have been fine if you’d been straight and hitting on a female officer I suppose.”

“Maybe,” Colin admitted. “But that was a long time ago too. Things have changed a lot since then.”

Joshua scowled and Colin wrapped an arm around him, laughing. “Relax. I never had any real problems. I know there are gay cops who *have*, but I haven’t. After a couple years of working with me they saw what I was made of. I went out on calls with them. We went through tough moments together. I had their backs, and they knew it.”

“I feel bad for the guys who had problems,” Joshua said. “Tough enough to be a cop but to be harassed for being a gay cop? That sucks.”

“It happens,” Colin said. “But I think they knew better than to try that

with me right from the get-go. I made it pretty clear that I took no shit. Not from anyone. I mean, there were guys on the squad who avoided me and didn't want to work with me. But Lenny didn't give them a choice in the matter. If we were assigned to be partnered up, they could whine about me being gay all they wanted, but Lenny just told them to get their bigoted ass back to work."

Joshua burst into laughter. "We need to invite Lenny and Susan over for dinner."

"Now that you mention it," Colin said, "that's not a bad idea. Or take them out to dinner."

"I know there's not a cop at that precinct who doesn't love you," Joshua said to him. "When you were shot, they were *all* there offering me their support. Every last one of them."

"Well, I've been there ten years now," Colin said. "Once I was promoted to the assault squad, I really came into my own. They could see the kind of cop I am but also the kind of man I am." He drew in a deep breath. "There are circles within circles in a squad room like mine. Inner circles. Circles of trust. Some people are inside the circle. Some aren't." He wrinkled his nose. "The 'blue wall' is more than an expression. Believe me, it exists."

"I thought that expression mostly related to cops not snitching on other cops."

"It does. That's called the 'blue wall of silence'. And yeah, it doesn't often get broken. Even by me."

"You wouldn't speak out if you saw another cop using excessive force?"

Colin's eyes darted to a place just beyond Joshua's shoulder. "I don't know. I'd probably talk to him myself first. Try to warn him off. If the behavior continued, I might take it to Lenny privately, just between him and me. Don't know if my first move would be to call internal affairs, though I might do that eventually if nothing else worked."

"I'm a little surprised to hear you say that," Joshua told him, lacing his fingers with Colin's. "I know how much you hate that stuff."

"It's got nothing to do with how I feel personally. I fucking hate it when cops behave that way. It sickens me. It's dead opposite to the oath we swear when we put on the badge. But to openly to go the press or something about another officer's conduct? To take it public?" He grimaced. "I dunno, Josh."

Joshua remained silent, his brow furrowed.

“You need to understand something about the ‘blue wall of silence’,” Colin said, his suddenly locking with Joshua’s. “Ordinary street cops who see some Nazi cop abusing citizens...” He hissed out a disgusted breath. “They might *hate* that shit. I know *I do!* But a thug cop like that? You can *count* on the fact that he’s already drawn a slew of complaints for excessive force. Complaints which have been *ignored* by internal affairs, the police union, supervisors, precinct captains, chiefs of police, city council members, AND the mayor! You think the guys higher up the ladder didn’t *know* that guy in Minneapolis was an abusive jerk?” He hissed out a disgusted breath. “Believe me, they *knew*. They’d known for *years!* And they did nothing.”

He turned away again, frowning. “So, some poor sap who just happened to be there at the time should throw away his career in law enforcement to rat that asshole out? When he knows it’ll be ignored by city leadership *anyway*? When he knows he could be *fired* for doing so? When he *knows* that piece-of-crap abusive cop will still be wearing his badge and busting innocent civvies in some high-end precinct while *he’s* transferred and left to pound the pavement in the most run-down, violent part of town with the label of ‘rat’ hanging over his head?”

“My god, Colin!”

“And not only that,” Colin continued, “other cops will threaten him, tell him they won’t come to his aid if he needs backup, leave dead rats on his porch with a note that says ‘we know where you live’, bully and revile him, make his job a living hell, and even threaten his family.”

Joshua’s mouth fell open.

“Everything I just mentioned has *happened* to cops who spoke out about abusive policing,” Colin told him. “Every single thing. More than once.” Colin scowled and sucked in a deep breath. “It never happened at our precinct,” he told Joshua. “But I know for a fact it’s happened at precincts over at city police.” He took Joshua’s hand.

“It’s not as simple as bad cops/good cops, Josh. It’s more complicated than that.” He shook his head and turned away. “Guys who stay silent aren’t just assholes protecting bad cops. Sometimes what they’re protecting is their livelihood. Their safety. Their *families!* And even their *lives!*” He stared into Joshua’s eyes. “It’s not a black-and-white situation. If an abusive cop and the guys with him get caught on a body cam or videoed by some citizen and the whole blame gets dumped on them with NO focus on the responsibilities

going higher up the ladder, nothing will change. It's a systemic problem. Busting a few rogue cops won't fix a damn thing."

"Colin, that's just horrible. Honestly, I had no idea."

Colin scoffed out a laugh. "Most people don't." He leaned back and sighed. "The campus cops I work with know me well enough that they'd never pull that crap in front of me. And guys I hire? To work in my department? They get the 'come to Jesus' talk on day one. I let them know that *any* complaint of excessive force will be pursued with due diligence and taken all the way to the top. They know I'm not fucking around. I won't stand for it."

"I'm proud of you, sweetie," Joshua whispered, leaning against Colin's shoulder.

"I have the respect of the guys in my department," he said. "Wasn't always that way. I had to earn it. I had to stand up." He furrowed his brows in thought. "About four years after I was hired, the campus police force was asked to send a troop to march in the gay pride parade."

"Did you?" Joshua asked.

"The general consensus at the time was 'no' so there was a meeting about it. A union meeting. I stood up and said: 'I'm marching. If you don't want to walk beside me, fine. I'll walk alone. But I'll be walking in uniform. Cops shouldn't discriminate. If I march with the straights, I march with the gays. Period.'"

"What happened?" Joshua asked, clutching his arm.

"We walked," Colin told him. "A couple guys stood up when I made that statement and said something like: 'Colin's always had my back and I'm going to have his'." He looked at Joshua and smirked. "So, that year there was a troop of campus cops marching in the gay pride parade for the very first time. And we've marched with them every year since then."

"So, you being there has facilitated a lot of change," Joshua said, leaning against his shoulder.

Colin shrugged. "Maybe. Once I made the assault squad, cops started bringing gay assault victims to me, asking me if I'd talk with them. Telling me they figured the victim would be more comfortable talking with me than with them." He turned toward Joshua and kissed his dark hair. "And about that time, I started giving informal talks to the LGBTQ groups on campus. Talking about prevention, responsibility, that kind of stuff."

"You're quite the legend on that campus."

Colin scoffed. “I’m a gay cop. There’s a lot of baggage that goes along with that, not all of it good. Early on, some of the guys came up to me and asked me if they could talk frankly with me about something, so I said, ‘yeah, sure’. They said they were surprised to find out I was gay because they thought all gay guys were either flouncy, campy, feminine types, or leather-wearing, whip-carrying, rough trade.”

“God,” Joshua muttered in disgust and Colin laughed out loud.

“Oh, Josh, don’t be like that! They asked because they genuinely wanted to *know*. They knew *nothing* about gay men or the gay lifestyle. I’m probably the first gay guy they’d ever talked to...at least as far as they knew. I had to educate them that to the fact that there *are* no stereotypical gay *types*. That gay men are exactly like straight men except for who they’re attracted to sexually.”

“Straight guys!” Joshua complained with a wink.

“Believe it or not I had just as many problems with gay guys.”

“Why?”

“Ach,” Colin husked out, a disgusted rasp in his voice. “There’s a whole ‘thing’ attached to being a cop. Some of the guys at McCafferty’s would hit on me just because I wore the uniform. It’s a turn-on for some of them. They had no clue what I was really like as a person, nor did they care. I could have been a complete dick. All they saw was the uniform. The shield. The handcuffs. The GUN!” Colin grimaced in disgust.

“They wanted you to pull out the cuffs and have a go, huh?”

“I suppose. I have no idea what they wanted because I never took them up on it. I had a few friends at McCafferty’s, and those are the guys I hung out with. I didn’t branch out.” He wrapped his arm tighter around Joshua. “Eventually I stopped wearing the uniform to the pub. It just wasn’t worth it.”

“Well you *are* gorgeous in that uniform,” Joshua said, nestling against Colin’s side. “Can’t say I blame them.”

Colin grunted out an unintelligible reply.

“But then you’re gorgeous without the uniform,” Joshua murmured against Colin’s ear.

“And just what are you fishing around for here, Joshua?” Colin said, smiling as he turned to gaze into his husband’s eyes.

“I guess I’m one of those guys who gets turned on by a sexy cop.”

“I’m not wearing my uniform,” Colin said, smiling down at him.

“I have a good memory,” Joshua muttered, half turning to press himself against Colin’s side.

“Careful now,” Colin said, nuzzling against his cheek. “You’ll wake the dragon.”

“Yeah, you tell me that all the time, but so far he hasn’t proven to be much of a problem.” Joshua pulled himself erect and straddled Colin’s lap, cupping Colin’s gorgeous Irish face between his palms. “I know how to handle him,” Joshua whispered.

“Yeah,” Colin chuckled. “And exactly what are your plans for him today, hm?”

Joshua’s fingers slid into Colin’s hair and fisted there. He tilted Colin’s head back until his face lifted toward Joshua’s then bent to brush his lips against Colin’s, adding the glide of his wet tongue when Colin’s lips parted on a swift inhale.

“What are my plans for him?” Joshua breathed out, still brushing his lips across Colin’s mouth, still dipping his tongue to touch Colin’s in a wet caress. “I plan to make him extraordinarily happy.” He felt Colin’s lips curve in a smile and felt his fingers slide underneath Joshua’s T-shirt and travel up his spine and back down again, fingernails grazing his skin in a delicate caress that raised gooseflesh over his entire body.

“It’s damn near time for bed anyway,” Colin murmured. “Let’s go upstairs.”

Joshua clambered off Colin’s lap and drew him to his feet. “Yeah. Making love on this couch is damned awkward.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Colin said chuckling.

“I’m really glad you decided to become a police officer,” Joshua said as they climbed the stairs hand in hand.

“Why so?”

“Because if you hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met you working Title IX.”

Colin drew Joshua into their bedroom, then turned to face him. “You know what? I don’t think it would have mattered. I would have found you. Somehow. Some way. I would have found you, Joshua.”

Joshua bowed his head, feeling the sharp sting of tears.

“You are I were as inevitable as the sunrise,” Colin said, drawing Joshua into his arms. “No power on Earth—no circumstance on Earth—could have

JANICE JARRELL

kept us apart.” He kissed his husband, pressing Joshua’s body hard against his own. “So gay cop or no, we would have ended up together.”

Joshua looked into his husband’s eyes and smiled. “You know what? I believe you.”

Colin bent to kiss him again. “I always win, Joshua. You know that. I always win.”

CHAPTER 3

THE ANNIVERSARY



Colin had been unusually quiet all through dinner. He responded whenever Joshua spoke to him and smiled when it seemed to be called for, but he initiated no conversation and left the table as soon as he was done eating.

Joshua frowned and called after him: “Colin, do you want dessert? There are a couple slices of pie left from last night and a bit of ice cream in the fridge.”

“Nah, babe, I’m good,” Colin replied. He pulled his phone from his pocket and, as Joshua watched, he called someone as he moved through the kitchen and out the back door to the porch where his exercise equipment stood silent. Joshua heard him say: “Hi, Mom. How’re you doing?” Then his voice faded as he continued outside.

“Now that’s damned odd,” Joshua muttered as he began to gather up their dinner dishes. *He doesn’t want pie? Since when? He’s been awfully quiet. And now he calls his mom and doesn’t let me talk to her?* “Yeah,” Joshua said as he sat the dishes in the sink. “Something’s wrong.”

He wandered to their enclosed back porch and looked out the window. Colin stood in the middle of the yard with his back to the house, still talking on the phone. He spoke for a long time, then lowered his phone and began to turn.

Joshua moved away from the window but was waiting in the kitchen when Colin re-entered. “How’s your mom?”

“Oh, she’s fine. She says ‘Hi.’”

“Why didn’t you let me talk to her?”

Colin shrugged and moved past him. “I dunno. Didn’t think of it.”

Joshua followed him to the living room and sank down on the couch next to him. “Colin, you know how pissed you get at me when you know something’s bothering me and I don’t talk to you about it?”

Colin shot him a sideways glance. “Yeah?”

“Well I’m getting that exact same feeling now.”

“You think I’m pissed at you?”

“Stop it.”

Colin dropped his eyes and drew in a long, deep breath. “Josh, it’s not a big deal.”

“Then you should have no trouble telling me about it.”

Colin coughed out a short, mocking laugh and his head gave a quick flick. “Clever boy.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Josh, it’s...” again, he breathed out a short, pained sigh, then turned to face his husband. “There’s absolutely nothing you can do about it.”

“That doesn’t justify keeping it to yourself.” He grasped Colin’s arm. “Please, Colin. Please don’t shut me out. I’m the guy...remember?”

Colin’s head dropped, but a small smile touched his lips. For a moment he said nothing, simply stared down at the floor and drew in a few long, slow breaths. Then his head rose, and he met Joshua’s eyes. “Today is the anniversary of Kathy’s death.”

“Oh god, baby,” Joshua whispered. “I’m so sorry. I wish I’d known.”

“Why?” Colin asked, falling back against the couch, his eyes lifting to stare at the oaken beams crisscrossing their ceiling. “Nothing you could have done about it. It’s just a day. I’ll get past it.”

“How’s your mom?”

Colin shrugged. “She’s coping. She’s going out with some friends tonight. But, it’s on her mind of course.”

“Of course it is.” Joshua pressed his forehead to Colin’s shoulder, hugging his arm. “And you’re wrong that there’s nothing I can do about it. This day is important. It deserves some memorial.”

“Josh, I don’t want that. I just want to get through the day and think about it as little as possible.”

“How’s that working out for you so far?” Joshua asked.

“Not that great.”

“May I suggest something?”

Colin shot him a sideways glance. “What?”

“Trying to ignore days like this seldom works. It’s too big. It’s too much a part of everything you are.”

“I keep reliving it, Josh. Opening that damned bedroom door and seeing...” He shuddered, and his voice trailed off.

“OK. Let’s do something to honor her life. Then maybe you can stop thinking about her death. Let’s do some small—I dunno—some small ceremony.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing big. Let’s light a candle for her. And...and...I’ll say the *Kaddish*. The Jewish mourner’s prayer. It’s short. Only take a minute. *Kaddish* means ‘holy’. Let’s sanctify this day. Let’s let some light into this dark place.”

Colin stared into Joshua’s eyes for a long time, then leaned forward and kissed him. “God, I love you, Joshua,” he whispered. “I love you so damn much.”

“Then you’ll do it?”

“Yes, my love. I’ll do it.”

Joshua nodded, then kissed Colin’s cheek. He rose and went to the kitchen, returning moments later with small glass candleholder. “This is just a little votive candle. I keep it in the kitchen in case we lose power. But...it’s pretty. Will this do?” he asked, holding the candle out for Colin to inspect.

Colin nodded. “Of course, it’ll do.” He rose and moved to Joshua’s side as he sat the candle on their mantle.

Joshua lit the small candle, then turned and extinguished the living room lights. The candleholder was adorned with small Jewish symbols, and its light danced over their faces to illuminate the space around them with a radiant glow.

Joshua reached for Colin’s hand as they stood together before the flickering flame. Then he spoke in a voice as soft and low as the candle’s light.

Glorified and sanctified be God’s great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will.

May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon; and say, Amen.

He heard Colin murmur: “Amen.”

May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity.

Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

Both men said “Amen” then for a moment there was silence. Joshua looked up and saw that Colin’s cheeks were damp. He took his husband in his arms and pressed his face against Colin’s chest. “I love you too,” he whispered, his voice fierce in the darkened room. “With my whole heart and soul, I love you.”

Colin nodded, his arms tightening around Joshua’s body, pressing them together until not a molecule could have passed between them. “Thank you. Thank you for this.”

“Thank you for letting me do it,” Joshua replied. He led Colin back to the couch. “Do you want the lights on?”

“No,” Colin said. “Let’s leave it like this for a little while.” He lifted Joshua’s hand to his lips and kissed it. “Hey, did you notice that your mourner’s prayer doesn’t say one word about dying or death?”

Joshua laughed. “It’s a weird thing,” he muttered, then glanced at his husband. “But you know how weird Jews can be.”

Colin laughed. “Yeah, I learn something new about that nearly every day.”

“Kathy brought her own special blessing into the world, her own special holiness. And it’s hard to heap praise on God after he’s taken that special holiness away from us.” He slid his thumb across Colin’s damp cheek. “The prayer changes our perspective. It turns our eyes away from ourselves. From our internal grief and anger...from our inner darkness and points us outward toward the future, toward the light and the blessings of God. And in that light, there is redemption and healing.” He shrugged. “Or at least that’s what my grandfather taught me.”

“Samuel,” Colin murmured.

“Yes. Samuel. He said the Kaddish five times a day for all the people in the camps who didn’t make it out like he did.”

Colin nudged Joshua. “Turn around.” He drew Joshua across his lap and into his arms, then nestled them close together, kissing his hair and then his lips. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet him.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet Kathy. But I honestly feel like I’ve come to know her through you. And you know Gramps through me. We carry them both inside us. They’re part of who we are.”

Colin made no reply, simply held Joshua closer in his arms, staring in silence at the flame which danced and flickered on their mantle. “I liked the part about creating peace for us.”

Joshua nodded, his head resting on Colin’s chest. “Peace is the opposite of grief, I think. It comes with the last stage of grieving. Acceptance.”

“I’ve felt guilty about that part...the acceptance. It’s like not caring that she’s gone.”

“No, my darling, it’s not. It’s *accepting* that she’s gone and that you may always feel sad about losing her, but at the same time realizing that her spirit moves forward with you as long as you remember her. That’s why little moments like the one we just shared are important.”

Colin squinted down at him. “Thank you, Dr. Josh.”

“Hey,” Joshua huffed, elbowing Colin’s ribs. “It’s not bad advice just because it comes from a psychologist.”

Colin chuckled softly. “I never would have believed it,” he murmured against Joshua’s hair. “That on this day of all days I could feel peace. And even a little joy.” He lifted Joshua in his arms until their eyes met. “But I do and it’s because of you. Because you’re wonderful. Because you’re loving and giving and wise. You take me to places I could never, ever reach without you.”

“Colin,” Joshua whispered, his voice choked.

“It’s the truth. Your love has done more to heal me than any amount of therapy could ever do.”

Joshua touched Colin’s cheek and kissed him tenderly. “Thank you. My love—my life,” he whispered. “But the therapy is still a good thing.”

“Maybe,” Colin murmured, nuzzling against Joshua’s dark hair. “But it’s sure not the only thing.”

“Did Kathy like pie?” Joshua asked.

Colin snorted out a laugh. "That's a damned weird question."

"Well we've already discussed Jewish weirdness so..."

"Yeah. She loved pie just like I do. We'd ask for birthday *pies* instead of birthday cakes, which drove our mother nuts."

"Then let's finish off the pie in her honor."

Colin nodded, his face still pressed against Joshua's dark curls. "If you like."

"Makes me nervous when you say 'no' to pie."

"Well, I don't want that," Colin said, then lifted Joshua in his arms. "OK, bud. Get up and we'll go polish off the pie." He got to his feet then turned to Joshua and took his hand as they stepped toward the kitchen. "I think *you* want pie," Colin teased as they walked, "and you're using me to get it."

"As you already pointed out, I'm a clever boy."

They sat at their small kitchen table as they ate their pie and ice cream.

"Feels odd," Colin muttered.

"What does?"

"Celebrating this day. I've always kind of felt like it was my....I dunno...brotherly duty to feel sad on this day."

"And I'm sure you do. So does anyone who remembers what happened to her on this day. But is that what you think Kathy would want? For you to be sad? For you to turn away a moment of joy and peace? For you to turn down *pie*?"

"No. She wouldn't want me to be sad. And she *REALLY* wouldn't want me to turn down pie!"

"Then here's to Kathy," Joshua said, lifting a forkful of pie.

Colin echoed his gesture. "To Kathy," he murmured. Then he cocked his head and stared at Joshua, his gaze thoughtful. "Tell me, Dr. Josh. Do you think she'd mind if I ended this day by making love to the one I love more than life itself?"

Joshua smiled and took his hand. "Well, I didn't know Kathy. But my educated *guess* is that she'd be happy you *had* someone to make love to who you loved more than life itself."

Colin stood and used his hold on Joshua's hand to draw him to his feet. "Then let's blow out the candle and go upstairs," he said, his voice barely a whisper as he drew Joshua close to him. "Because what I'm feeling right now

is a ton of gratitude and a very powerful need to make someone I love very, very happy.”

“I doubt you’ll have to look far to find that someone,” Joshua whispered in reply.

They moved together toward the stairs, and as they passed the mantle, Colin blew out the candle. “G’night, sis,” he muttered. “I love you.” He slid his arm around Joshua’s waist, and they moved up the stairs together.

CHAPTER 4

LOVE LETTERS FROM JOSH



“What’s your most prized possession?” Joshua asked.

“My wedding ring,” Nate replied without a moment’s hesitation.

“I’d have to say that too,” Colin echoed. “Followed closely by this.” He pulled a pendant from around his neck, extending it for all to see. “It’s the emblem that was on our chuppah. The Star of David wrapped in the Celtic cross. The one his mother had designed for us.”

Joshua nodded. “I’m with Colin one hundred percent.”

“Hmm,” David mused. “Well, I love my wedding ring. But my most prized possession—or rather *possessions*,” he amended quickly, “are the letters Nate wrote to me when he and I lived on opposite coasts. I treasure those letters beyond anything else in my life. I came to know him through those letters; we grew close though writing to each other.” He paused for a moment then continued. “Maybe the distance made it possible for us to be more open, more honest. But I can follow the path of our love’s growth just by reading them in order. They still give me a thrill.”

Nate leapt to his feet and pressed a kiss to David’s cheek. He whispered something into his ear, then settled on his lap. “Well, I *am* a good writer.” He kissed David again, then turned to Joshua. “You must treasure Colin’s love letters the same way.”

“I don’t have any,” Joshua replied. “He never wrote me a love letter, or any other kind of letter, come to think of it.”

“I don’t like putting things in writing,” Colin mumbled.

“What!” Nate spouted. “You afraid he’ll *sue* you?”

“Hey!” Colin responded. “He never wrote me any either.”

“Well, none that I actually *sent*,” Joshua murmured, drawing a darting glance from Colin.

“You wrote me love letters but didn’t send them?”

Joshua shrugged. “I wrote them more for me than for you. To, well...vent my feelings, I guess. Given the way we parted I didn’t think you’d care to read them.”

Colin growled out an unintelligible response and turned away scowling, staring into the fireplace.

“Give them to him now,” Nate suggested, noting Colin’s somber expression.

“Do you still *have* them?” Colin asked, spinning toward his husband.

“I think they’re in Glencoe,” Joshua told him. “In my dresser drawer.”

“I want those letters,” Colin blurted out.

“Oh, Lord god,” Joshua moaned.

“What?” Nate asked. “You don’t want him to read them?”

“I was pretty—well—*emotional* when I wrote them. They might be a little,” he squirmed, his face flushed, “embarrassing.”

“For whom?” Nate asked. “Him? Or you?”

“Me mainly,” Joshua admitted. “I honestly didn’t think anyone would ever read them, so I was pretty, umm...” He shrugged, his voice trailing off.

“Open and honest?” David suggested.

Joshua grimaced. “More like blunt and explicit.”

“I want those letters,” Colin repeated.

“Honey, *why*?” Joshua said, leaning toward him. “I was pretty upset when I wrote them. I was just...spewing. Trying to ease my broken heart. They weren’t really meant to be read. They were...” he shrugged again, “...therapy.”

“Did you go into detail about what a dick he was?” Nate asked, nudging Colin with his elbow.

“No!” Joshua said. “Of course not! He wasn’t a dick.”

“I *was* a dick,” Colin disagreed, leaning forward to poke Nate back. “I was a *huge* dick.”

“Now you’re just bragging,” Nate teased.

Colin reached for Joshua’s hand. “I won’t read them if you’d rather I didn’t,” he told his husband. “But I will say this. There’s no amount of emotional openness and honesty, even blunt and explicit honesty, that you need ever find embarrassing. Not with me.” His hand tightened and he drew Joshua closer. “And I’d genuinely like to know what you were feeling back then.”

“Oh god, Colin,” Joshua groaned. He grimaced and bowed his head, then felt Colin’s hand tug him closer.

“I want to read them,” he repeated.

“Fine!” Joshua said, sagging in defeat. He husked out a noisy sigh. “Next time we’re in Glencoe I’ll give them to you.”

“Oh, I cannot *wait* to hear what’s in those letters,” Nate said with a grin.

“You honestly think I’d tell you what’s in them?” Colin asked him, then dunked two fingers into his glass of beer and flicked the liquid onto Nate’s face. “Forget it!”

Nate wiped his face, laughing. “You don’t know that. Wait ‘til you read them. You might want to broadcast them to everyone you know.”

“Not unless he wants to spend a month eating bread and water for dinner,” Joshua muttered, slumping in his chair. “I don’t even want *him* to read them let alone anyone else.”

“Unless you absolutely forbid it, I’m reading those letters,” Colin declared.

“Well, I won’t forbid it,” Joshua said, his voice heavy with reluctance. “But I won’t be doing the dance of joy either.”

“How many are there?” Nate asked.

“Only a few, three or four. I may have thrown some of them away.”

“Josh!” Colin protested.

“Well, dammit, Colin, I never expected you to read them! I told you. They were just... therapy.”

“We gotta plan a trip to Glencoe.”

“Oh god help me.”



BUT IT WAS WEEKS BEFORE THEY EVEN DISCUSSED A TRIP TO GLENCOE AND only then because Colin's birthday was approaching, and Joshua's family wanted to celebrate it with him. Much to Joshua's relief, Colin hadn't mentioned the letters since they'd first discussed them with David and Nate, and he secretly hoped they'd slipped his mind. *Maybe I can manage to avoid this whole embarrassing chapter*, he thought.

When they finally arrived at the Abrams family home, Joshua carried his suitcase up the long staircase which led to their bedroom while Colin lingered behind in animated conversation with Joshua's mother and brother.

"Jessica baked you the most beautiful cake," Bracha told him. "I can't wait for you to see it!"

"You guys are so good to me," Colin said, then kissed her cheek. "Thank you."

"And I might even let you win a game of chess this trip," Joshua's brother teased. "As a birthday present, you know."

"Oh, Abel, please spare me your bull..." He glanced at Bracha and hastily changed the ending, "...crap. I kicked your Jewish butt last time we were here. You leaned too hard on the 'King's Gambit' and it cost you, bro."

Joshua looked down at them from the top of the stairs and smiled, then lugged his suitcase into the bedroom. He tossed it onto the bed, then on impulse moved to the dresser. For a moment he stood before it in silence, then slid the top drawer open. Tucked far in the back underneath a pile of socks lay a packet of papers wrapped in a red ribbon. Joshua hesitated, then drew them out and stared down at them, startling when the bedroom door burst open to admit an excited Colin.

"Hey bud, guess what!" he blurted out, tossing his suitcase next to Joshua's. "Jessica baked me a cake!"

"Well, you had to know she would," Joshua replied, laughing. He shoved the letters to the back of the drawer and shut it before Colin could notice. "Do you want to unpack now?" Joshua asked. "Or wait 'til after dinner." He turned toward Colin and glanced at his watch. "Probably won't be long 'til we eat."

Colin flopped onto the bed and sat motionless, staring at Joshua. "What I want, my dearest husband, is for you to stop sandbagging me and give me those letters."

Joshua winced and let out a frustrated sigh. "Dammit, Colin!"

“What! C’mon, Josh. How bad can they be?”

Joshua wrinkled his nose. “Have you ever done anything deeply embarrassing?”

“Well, there’s the time I puked on your shoes in McCafferty’s parking lot,” Colin admitted with a grin. “But, shit, I don’t dwell on that kind of stuff. Everyone does embarrassing things at some point in their lives. And anyway, why should love letters embarrass you?”

“Because they’re not *just* love letters,” Joshua told him. “They’re me having an emotional breakdown in writing because the man I loved broke my heart.” He shot Colin an exasperated glance. “God, I’m sorry I ever mentioned them.”

Colin frowned and got to his feet. He walked to where Joshua stood and laid both hands on his shoulders. “Look,” he said, “I don’t want you upset. If you’d really prefer that I not read them, then I won’t.” He shook Joshua gently. “We’ll have a ritual and burn them in the fireplace or something. Just to mark the occasion.” He pressed his lips to Joshua’s forehead then flashed his dimples in a quick grin. “It’s my birthday, baby! I want you to be happy!”

“Actually, your birthday was last weekend. We spent it in Situate at your mother’s house, remember?”

“This is my *second* birthday.”

“How many do you get?”

“As many as I damn well please.”

Joshua leaned against Colin’s chest and was enveloped in two strong arms which pulled him close. For a long moment he rested there, drawing in long, deep breaths, luxuriating in the feeling of Colin’s body pressed tightly against his own. *He’s so damned good to me*, Joshua thought.

He leaned back and stared up at Colin for a moment, then abruptly spun to face the dresser. He pulled the it open, grabbed the packet of papers, wheeled back to face Colin, and held them out. “Here.”

“I thought you didn’t...”

“I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you. Because you’re wonderful. And because it’s your second birthday and I don’t have any other gift to give you.” He extended the letters toward Colin. “Take them.”

Colin frowned and tilted his head, gazing at Joshua, his expression thoughtful. “Are you sure?”

“Take them,” Joshua said, jamming the letters into Colin’s hand. “Now go sit on the driftwood and read them ‘cause I don’t want to be around.”

Colin tapped the letters against the palm of his hand, still gazing at Joshua. “OK. If you’re sure it’s what you want.”

“Go,” Joshua told him, then pushed him gently toward the door. “Just be sure no one else sees them!”

“I didn’t think *I’d* get to see them,” Colin told him, moving out of the bedroom and down the stairs. “I sure as hell wouldn’t let anyone else read my letters.” At the bottom of the stairs Colin turned and looked up at Joshua who stood at the top of the steps, leaning on the railing. For a long moment he didn’t move, then he threw Joshua a salute and strode toward the front door.



DARKNESS WAS FALLING BY THE TIME COLIN RETURNED TO THE HOUSE. JOSHUA was helping Jessica set the table for dinner, engaged in a lively discussion over whether or not Jessica would sit with the family on this occasion.

“You *know* Colin will want you there,” Joshua said, placing silverware next to each plate.

“What that sassy Irishman wants and what he *gets* are two different things!” Jessica snapped.

“C’mon, Jess,” Joshua coaxed. “It’d really make him happy if you sat with us. You know you *are* part of this family.”

The housekeeper scowled at him for a long moment, then sighed. “I’ll sit with you after I serve,” she conceded. “But only because it’s Colin’s birthday.”

Joshua smiled and hugged her just as Colin strode into the dining room. “You making him work for his supper?” he asked, hugging Jessica as well.

“He’s been setting the table for me since he was this tall,” Jessica told him, her palm nearly level with the floor.

“Give a call when you’re ready to serve,” Joshua called after her as she moved into the kitchen. “I’ll come help.” He turned back to Colin. “You hungry?”

“When am I not hungry?” Colin asked, then extended his hand. “Come with me for a minute.”

“Oh god,” Joshua moaned softly.

“What?”

“Are you going to make me talk about those letters?” Joshua asked as they strolled into the living room. “Do you have a million questions?”

Colin fell onto a sofa and pulled Joshua down beside him. He huffed out a noisy sigh and for a moment simply gazed into Joshua’s eyes. Then he pulled the packet of letters from his jacket pocket and held them out. “No. I don’t have any questions. And I’m not going to make you talk about them. But I do want to say that I’m really sorry for how badly I hurt you with my stupid Irish temper tantrum.”

Eyes lowered, Joshua reached with tentative fingers to accept the packet of letters. He caught his upper lip between his teeth and lifted his eyes to meet Colin’s. “Colin, you don’t have to...”

“I know,” Colin interrupted. “I know you don’t expect an apology and would never ask for one. But what I did to you back then was just plain wrong.”

“It was a reaction to the emotional pain you’d been suffering for twenty years,” Joshua replied, his voice gentle. He stretched out his hand and his fingers traced a slow path along Colin’s cheekbone. “The O’Malley case brought back all the feelings you had when you lost Kathy. The feelings you’d been suppressing since her death.”

“Didn’t justify verbally beating the shit out of you. You didn’t deserve that.”

“It’s not about that. It never was. It wasn’t personal. It wasn’t me you were yelling at. I was just a stand-in for all that you’d been through.” He shrugged and feathered his lips across Colin’s. “I didn’t take it personally, Colin. Even then. I knew there were other factors at work.”

Colin nodded. “Thanks for letting me read them.”

“I’m not sure I did you a favor.”

“No, Josh. I’m glad I did. There were consequences to the actions I took that day, and I needed to recognize them.” He hesitated for a moment, then kissed Joshua’s cheek. “And I needed to apologize for them.”

“Some fucking love letters,” Joshua muttered, his voice husky with sorrow.

“Those letters were overflowing with love,” Colin insisted. He laced their fingers together and fell back against the couch. “Didn’t you tell me once that with great love comes the possibility of great pain?”

Joshua arched his brows and shrugged his agreement. “I prefer to demonstrate my love painlessly.” He leaned against Colin’s body and felt his husband’s arms tighten around him. “Happy fucking birthday,” he muttered and glanced up when Colin laughed aloud.

“Oh, stop it. Those letters didn’t hurt me. Just made me realize how lucky I am.” He shook himself, brows furrowed in aggravation. “I should have listened to my heart rather than my pride and come to Glencoe the minute I had your address. Would have prevented a lot of the pain you went through.”

Joshua grunted his acceptance of Colin’s words, then sat up when he heard Jessica’s voice coming through the house intercom.

“Joshua I’m about to serve. Everyone else, come sit.”



THE BIRTHDAY DINNER WAS A JOYOUS SUCCESS. JESSICA’S GREEN AND WHITE multilayered cake was a celebration of all things Irish, and Colin couldn’t stop praising it. And when the family sang “Happy Birthday” to him, tears welled in his eyes.

“I’ll get the ice cream,” Jessica said after the song. “You can cut the cake.”

“Wait a second, Jess,” Joshua said, rising to his feet. “I have something to say first.” He drew in a deep breath then smiled down at his husband. “In Jewish tradition,” he began, then bent towards Colin, “which I know you love so well, a birthday psalm is usually read to the honored guest.” He swallowed hard. “The psalm used is the one which signifies the year the birthday boy is entering...” Again he leaned towards Colin, “...which for you would be your thirty-sixth year.” He lifted a piece of paper, then glanced around at his family. “I’m only going to read part of the psalm because David does tend to go on and on, but to me this is the most fitting part. “And,” he added, “this a modern rendition.” He glanced down at Colin and read:

*“God's love is meteoric, his loyalty astronomic,
His purpose titanic, his verdicts oceanic.
Yet in his largeness nothing is lost;
Not a man, not a mouse, slips through the cracks.
How exquisite your love, O God!”*

*How eager we are to run under your wings,
To eat our fill at the banquet you spread
as you fill our tankards with Eden spring water.
You're a fountain of cascading light,
and you open our eyes to light.
Keep on loving your friends;
do your work in welcoming hearts.
Don't let the bullies kick me around,
the moral midgets slap me down.
Send the upstarts sprawling flat
on their faces in the mud.”*

HE LAID THE PAPER DOWN AS EVERYONE EXCEPT COLIN APPLAUDED. HE SAT, gazing up at Joshua, tears now sparkling on his cheeks.

“I know it’s probably blasphemy to say that, to me, this psalm speaks with perfect clarity about how I experience your love. But that’s exactly how I see it, Colin. Your love and protection are the banquet you offer, not just to me, but to anyone you care about. Your love is exquisite, and I am always eager to run under your wings. Your love opened my eyes to cascading light. And I hope you always do your work in my welcoming heart.” He bent and kissed Colin who slid his fingers into Joshua’s curls. “*Ani ohev otcha,*” Joshua whispered. “Happy birthday, my magic man.”

“*Ta`mo chor i stigh ionat,*” Colin murmured in response, his voice choked with tears.

The family all applauded, and Jessica handed Colin a silver cake server. “OK. Now cut the cake and start putting the pieces on those cake plates. I’ll get the ice cream.”

They ate Colin’s magnificent birthday cake, accompanied by green mint ice cream, then Bracha handed Colin a wrapped gift. “From us,” she told him. “Happy birthday, Son.”

Still feeling a bit overwhelmed, Colin leaned close and kissed her. “Thanks, Mom.”

In the package was a set of silver cufflinks fashioned as a Celtic knot. “Wow!” Colin said as he examined them. “They’re beautiful! Thank you.”

Jessica's present was a green Irish wool trinity cap, which Colin immediately donned, before jumping up to hug and kiss her in thanks.

"Spiffy!" Joshua said, laughing. "It looks perfect on you!"

After finishing their dessert, the family wandered into the living room. "Game of chess, bro?" Abel asked Colin as he and Joshua fell onto the sofa, but Colin shook his head.

"Not right now." He turned to face Joshua. "I need to go upstairs and get something. OK?"

Puzzled, Joshua nodded and watched as Colin got to his feet. "I'll be right back," he said, then ambled toward the stairs.

"Where's he going?" Bracha asked, glancing up from her glass of brandy.

"Dunno," Joshua replied. "Said he needed to get something."

The family chatted while Colin was gone, catching up on the latest happenings in their lives, and what they had planned for the future. Every few minutes Joshua glanced toward the stairs, but it was over a forty-five minutes before Colin returned.

"There he is!" Bracha said, smiling as her son-in-law entered the room.

"Took you long enough," Joshua complained, laughing. "I was about to come looking for you."

"Yeah, sorry," Colin said, then held out his hand to Joshua. "Come with me for a minute."

Surprised, Joshua shot a glance at his mother, then got to his feet and followed Colin as he led Joshua through the kitchen, stopping only to kiss Jessica who was clearing away the dinner dishes, before leading Joshua outside to the patio.

He hit the switch which bathed the area with soft golden light, then sat down on the stone wall which enclosed them, drawing Joshua down with him. For a moment he simply gazed into his husband's eyes, then he breathed out a soft sigh and lifted Joshua's hand to his lips.

"Colin, is something wrong?"

"No. Nothing's wrong. I just have something to give you. Something I wanted to give you privately." He withdrew a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and held it out. "Here. This is for you."

Clearly puzzled, Joshua took the paper from Colin's hand. "What it is?"

"Read it and you'll see."

Joshua unfolded the paper in his hands and read:

JANICE JARRELL

My dearest husband,

You let me read the love letters you wrote after I broke your heart, and it nearly broke mine to know how much damage my misplaced anger did to the most wonderful man I've ever known.

It's not just that I blew my Irish top. It's not just the awful things I said to you that day. It's not just the terrible accusations I made. It's so much more than that. Chief among my sins is the knowledge that I waited so long to come to you when I knew from the moment you left, that I could never, ever live without you. That I let my fear and pride stifle the voice of my love and need for you.

Josh, I was desolate after you left. I'd been fooling myself for months, trying to fight the feelings that grew more profound and intense every day we were together. Trying to pretend that they were something else. That they weren't that one thing I feared more than any other: love.

But it was love, Joshua. Almost from the day we met...it was love. I was so lonely back then, Josh. I confessed this to you on our wedding day. So sad. My life was a failure in every imaginable way. I knew no joy. I knew no happiness. My only satisfaction came from those rare moments when I could bring some criminal to justice, but even those moments were overshadowed by the knowledge that there'd be another case the very next day, and that these brief flashes of fulfillment were external events that could never touch the man I was inside. I'd go home to that dreary little apartment and try not to think about how dark and lonely my life had become.

I tried to fight my feelings for you, Josh. But from the very first, being with you illuminated me. Not with bright flashes of light, but with a warm glow of belonging that I hadn't felt since I was a child. You made me laugh! Me, who rarely ever cracked a smile. Who rarely ever felt even an instant of gladness. You taught me the sweetness of intimacy. Me, who fled from closeness like a devil flees holy water. Your sweet smile. Your gentle, kindness. Your dry, brilliant wit. Your constant, steady presence at my side, flooded my heart with feelings that both healed and terrified me.

You never asked for a thing. I knew you loved me. I could see it in your beautiful, brown eyes. I knew you wanted more. Wanted my love in return. But every time I saw the love glowing there in your eyes, I was gripped by a panic that nearly stopped my heart. What if I offered you my heart and you rejected it? What if I lost you and had to go through that heartbreak again?

So, I ran. I treated you with coldness and rejection. I know how much it hurt you, Josh, and there is nothing in my life that I regret with more bitterness.

Your love is my greatest treasure. You lifted me out of the darkness which had

imprisoned me since the day my sister died. You healed my heart when I had long ago given up any hope that it could be healed. You brought happiness and love to a man who had long since turned his back on such things, thinking that they were not meant for him. You filled the emptiness inside me with the warmth of your love. And there are no words which could ever adequately express my gratitude.

I won't ask for your forgiveness. I know I don't have to. You understand. You always have. That's one of the many blessings your love freely offers without me having to do a thing to earn it. Those blessings are just there, a part of the man you are. My love. My life.

I can't promise you that I'll never hurt you again. You know me well enough to know what an empty promise that would be. But I do promise you this: we will last forever, and I will love you every day of my life just as I love you at this moment...with all my heart and soul.

I will always be... your Colin

Joshua lowered his hands into his lap with infinite slowness. He stared straight ahead of him, but Colin could hear his breath catching in his throat.

"I thought," Colin whispered, "I figured...you know, that you deserved a love letter too."

Joshua turned and pressed his face to Colins shoulder, his body shaking with sobs he tried hard to suppress. "Oh god, Colin," he breathed out, wetting Colin's shirt with his tears. "Oh god, sweetheart, thank you."

"Well, I didn't mean to make you cry," Colin said, wrapping Joshua in his arms.

Joshua leaned back, wiping his face with his forearm. "Well, what did you think that letter would do to me, you big Irish doofus?" He swallowed hard and forced back his tears, though his breath still shuddered in his chest. "Now I understand what David meant," he whispered, his hand lifting to cradle Colin's cheek as he clutched the letter to his chest. "This is the greatest treasure of my life."

"Awww," Colin said, nuzzling against his cheek. "And here I thought my dick was the greatest treasure of your life."

"It's a close second," Joshua said, knuckling Colin's ribs. "And stop joking. I'm serious."

"I needed you to smile," Colin told him lifting his chin. "I don't like to see you cry."

"Those were tears of joy, my love. Of happiness and gratitude."

JANICE JARRELL

“Well, in that case...” Colin muttered, then wrapped Joshua tight in his arms and kissed him, hoping that the tenderness of his lips on Joshua’s could convey the depth of the love he felt for this gentle Jewish man. He slid his lips to Joshua’s ear. “I meant every word,” he whispered.

For a long moment they stared into each other’s eyes, then Colin blew out a breath and got to his feet. “And now, my beloved husband, I’m going to give myself a birthday present by walloping Abel in a game of chess!” He drew Joshua to his feet and kissed his cheek. “Care to bear witness as I kick your brother’s weenie ass?”

“I’d love to,” Joshua told him. But as they wandered toward the house, Joshua drew Colin to a halt and turned to face him. “Happy birthday, my love,” he said. “I hope we’re still blowing out your candles when you turn eighty.”

“You can take that one to the bank,” Colin replied, then tightened his hold on Joshua’s hand and drew him toward the door. “C’mon. I want more cake!”

CHAPTER 5

TERMS OF ENDEARMENT



“What endearment does Colin use most often?” Nate asked as he and Joshua shared dishwashing duties after dinner.

Joshua laughed. “Well, I don’t know if you’d call it an endearment. What he calls me *most* often is ‘bud’.”

“You’re right. I’ve heard him use that a thousand times while talking to you.” Nate wrinkled his nose. “Not all that impressive as endearments go.”

Joshua smiled and sat a newly dried plate on its stack in the cupboard. “He means it as one I think.” He shrugged and shot a glance at Nate. “You know Colin. He’s not all that into mushy talk.”

“So, he *never* uses an endearment with you? *On* you? However the fuck you say it?”

Joshua laughed again and gave Nate a gentle slap with the dishtowel. “Oh, he does. But usually only in private and they’re not what one might think of as normal endearments. He calls me his oak. He calls me his beautiful Jewish boy. Stuff like that.”

“But no ‘darling’ or ‘honey’ for you, huh.” Nate handed a wet plate to Joshua. “That’s the last of it,” he added, nodding toward the now-empty sink.

“He does call me those things,” Joshua said. He began to speak again, then stopped.

“During or *after* the sex?” Nate quipped with a quick grin.

“What’s the damned holdup in here?” Colin asked, striding into the kitchen. “I thought you two were doing dishes, not plotting to overthrow Yugoslavia.”

“I don’t think Yugoslavia is a real country anymore, and for your information we’re discussing important stuff here!” Nate blurted. He grabbed the dishtowel from Joshua and snapped it at Colin’s ass. “Like the fact that you never call him by pet names.”

“Like what?” Colin asked, snatching the towel from Nate’s hand. “And cut that out!”

“Like ‘honey’. Or ‘baby’,” Nate replied.

“Or ‘sweetums’?” Colin said, in a lisping, faked baby voice. “Or ‘snookums’?” He perched on the counter. “I call him pet names at times.”

“Like ‘*bud*’?” Nate asked, leaning against Colin’s knee. “That not an endearment, you big, dumb Irishman.”

Colin shoved Nate off his leg. “It is to me.”

Nate scoffed and leaned against the counter. “Bud?” he asked, and nudged Colin’s knee with his elbow. “BUD?”

Joshua leaned against Colin’s shoulder from the other side. “Nate, leave him alone. I know what it means when he calls me ‘*bud*’. It’s his way of saying ‘sweetheart’.”

“Then why doesn’t he just say ‘*sweetheart*? ’” Nate asked.

“I call him ‘*a thaisce*’,” Colin offered, his Irish brogue heavy on the words.

“What does that mean?” Nate asked.

“What the fuck!” David burst out, entering the kitchen with a deck of cards in his hands. “Am I playing solitaire now?”

“David, what pet name do you call Natey here?” Colin asked.

“Is *that* what’s going on here?” David asked, then shook his head and laughed. “Why am I even surprised.” He sighed and tossed the cards to the kitchen table before seating himself in a nearby chair. “I call him ‘honey’ sometimes. Or ‘baby’.” He squinted at Nate. “What other ones? Can you think of any?”

“‘Babe,’ ” Nate replied. “You call me ‘babe’ a lot. I don’t think you even realize how much you use that one.”

“Could be,” David said.

“What pet name does he call you?” Joshua asked David.

“Oh, he calls me ‘honey’ and ‘baby’,” David said, then paused in thought.

“‘Sweetheart’, sometimes.” He scowled and his gaze swept over the three other men. “How the hell did *this* get started?”

“Wait!” Nate said, wheeling back to face Colin. “I want to know what *a thaisce* means! You never told me.”

“It means ‘my treasure’, you nosey little twat,” Colin replied, applying a noogie to the top of Nate’s head.

Nate wriggled out from under Colin’s hand and plopped onto David’s lap. “That’s actually pretty sweet.”

“And what pet names to you call *him*, Josh?” David asked.

Joshua’s brows narrowed and he gazed down at the kitchen floor. “Well, I call him ‘Irish’ all the time, but I don’t think of that as an endearment.”

“More of an indictment,” Nate said, then winked at Colin. “*Kidding!*”

“I call him...” Joshua began, then coughed out a noisy breath and stopped.

“What?”

“This is all getting more than a little embarrassing,” Joshua said.

“You’re making him blush, Nate,” Colin laughed. He wrapped both arms around Joshua and hugged him tight against his chest. “G’wan. Tell them what you call me.”

“I call him my ‘yedia’,” Joshua said, his voice low.

“What does that mean?” Nate asked.

“Yedid means beloved,” Joshua replied, then turned and nuzzled against Colin’s neck.

“I think it wonderful that you two express affection for each other in your ancestral languages,” David commented. “To me it gives a very special meaning to the words.”

“Which already have a very special meaning,” Joshua added.

“He says you’re not into ‘mushy talk’,” Nate said to Colin.

“I don’t suppose I am,” Colin agreed, then coughed out a frustrated sigh. “To me all that ‘sweetie’, ‘honey’, ‘baby’ stuff just seems forced and phony.”

Joshua laughed softly and stared down at the floor, shaking his head.

“That doesn’t seem to bother you, Josh,” David observed.

“Why should it?” Joshua replied. “He doesn’t *need* to ‘honey’, ‘sweetie’, ‘baby’ me, though he *does* call me by those names fairly often. He *shows* he his affection for me every single day in ways that go way beyond terms of endearment.”

"Such as?" Nate asked, squirming on David's lap.

"Sit still!" David told him, tightening his arms around Nate.

"Such as..." Joshua began, then glanced at Colin who gestured encouragingly. "Such as complimenting me on the dinner I fixed him. Such as remembering anniversaries which I totally forgot, like the anniversary of the first time we kissed in McCafferty's parking lot. Such as complimenting the fresh flowers I put on the table. Such as surprising me with little gifts like breakfast in bed, or one red rose, or a huge Hershey kiss. All that means more to me than pet names."

"Colin fixes you breakfast in bed?" Nate said, clearly astonished.

Colin grinned. "I know how the toaster works."

Joshua laughed, then leaned forward and kissed Colin's cheek. "I like 'bud,'" he said, then kissed Colin again.

"I've heard you call him 'honey,'" Nate told Josh.

"Yeah. I do call him 'honey'. I also call him 'sweetheart' or 'baby' now and then. But that's me. I'm more comfortable with mush than Colin."

Nate made a scoffing noise then turned to Colin. "You see such endearments as phony?"

"I see them as trying to make one word into a statement about your feelings. I call him 'honey' so that means I love him? Actually, it doesn't. I've heard guys call their wives 'honey' while the woman in question was still bleeding onto the carpet from his fists. I want Josh to know how cherished he is without me having to use any of those..." he grimaced and shuddered, "...descriptors."

For a moment there was silence, then Colin jumped off the counter. "When I tell him 'I love you' I say it with intent. It carries the full force of every feeling in my heart. It carries an absolute commitment to everything those words mean in my life." He turned to Josh. "I," he said, pointing to his own chest, his voice low and heavy with feeling. "Love," he said, laying his hand over his heart. He was silent for a moment, then rested his hand over Joshua's heart. "You," he finished.

Joshua's eyes welled with sudden tears and he kissed Colin tenderly, one hand cradling his cheek.

Colin grinned and reached out to ruffled Nate's hair. "I don't think I have to add 'honey' to the end of that sentence for Josh to know I mean it." He

pointed to Joshua, who was swiping his sleeve across his damp cheeks. “As you can see.”

“You make an excellent point, Colin,” David said. “But my counterpoint would have to be: can’t you do both? If you’d added the word ‘sweetheart’ to that beautiful declaration of love, would the meaning have been diminished? Maybe it would have added something to the moment.”

Colin wheeled to face Joshua. “Would it?”

Joshua’s hand caressed Colin’s face. “No,” he whispered. “The moment was perfect just as it was.”

Colin turned back to David and grinned. “And there you have it. Right from the horse’s mouth.”

“All I’m saying,” David continued, “is that those words indicate a special intimacy that’s reserved just for your significant other.”

“So does ‘I love you’,” Colin replied.

David scowled and shook his head. “My point is, those terms of endearment are meant for that special someone in your life and them alone. You might call me ‘bud’, but I can’t ever see you calling me ‘honey’ or ‘baby’.”

“Have I ever called you bud?”

“Not that I can remember, no,” David replied.

“And you probably never will,” Colin said. He pulled a chair closer to David’s and sank into it. “Josh is the only one I call bud.”

“And he *does* call me things like ‘sweetie’ and ‘baby’,” Joshua said. “And even ‘darling’. He just doesn’t often do it in front of others.”

“Why?” Nate asked.

Colin drew in a breath and stared straight ahead of him for a long time. Then he turned to Nate. “Do you have any idea how much time I spent sitting alone in McCafferty’s before Josh and I hooked up?”

“I doubt you spent much time *alone*,” Nate replied.

“More than you might imagine,” Colin said. “But my point is this. In all that time how many times do you think I was called ‘baby’, or ‘hot stuff’, or ‘handsome’, or ‘honey’? Care to guess?”

“A billion ga-jillion?” Nate teased.

“Pretty much,” Colin said, nodding. “Hey, handsome,” he quoted in a deliberately phony sexual growl, “wanna come back to my place? Hey there, baby, wanna go out back for a while?” He shuddered and turned back to Nate. “Made me sick to my stomach.”

"So, you've had a totally different experience with regard to those words than the rest of us have," David observed. "Interesting. And a little sad."

"We walk into that bar now," Joshua began, "and a lot of those same guys are still sitting there. Do you think they need to hear him call me 'honey' to know he's *with* me?" He shook his head. "They don't."

"Is it really sad that I reserve my use of those words for the times when Josh and I are alone?" Colin asked. "Or does it make those moments that much richer and more meaningful." He wheeled to face Nate. "How do I feel about Joshua?" he demanded.

"You adore your husband," Nate replied. "I know that, Colin."

Colin shrugged. "And District Attorney Colin Campbell rests his case."

"The moments when Colin uses terms of endearment are private," Joshua said. "Moments meant just for us. He's incredibly romantic and loving when we're alone, and that includes liberal use of all the endearments you've mentioned."

Colin rose from his chair and took Joshua in his arms. He caressed Joshua's upswept cheekbone with the back of his fingers, then stepped behind him and wrapped both arms around his waist, his chin resting on Joshua's shoulder as he drew him tight against his body.

"You're comfortable using those pet names in front of everyone, David," Joshua continued. "They flow easily from you because open affection flows easily from you."

David cocked his head and nodded. "I would agree with that. At least it does *now*. Wasn't always that way."

"But from the time his sister died, Colin's heart was shut and barricaded behind walls of tempered steel. He kept his feelings locked behind those walls for twenty years."

David looked up at Joshua, his lips pursed, and nodded. "I understand. But..." he waved his hand at the two of them, "look at him now. He's not having any problem expressing emotion."

"Well, he's always less uptight when we're with the two of you. But voicing all that 'honey', 'baby', 'sweetums' stuff isn't all that easy for him. It feels like an affectation. Like he's putting on a show. And to him, that's just wrong. He can't say that kind of stuff with real feeling in front of others. He's just not *there* yet. Maybe he will be in time, who knows? Maybe someday he'll have found enough healing that those feelings can flow from him with ease and

comfort. But, he's not there yet." He turned and kissed Colin tenderly. "And frankly, I don't care if he never gets there. What I already have is more than I would ever have believed possible."

"How long have you two been together now?" Nate asked. "Two years? Longer?"

"Over two years," Colin mumbled, his lips pressed to the back of Joshua's shoulder.

"Going on three years now," Joshua said. "Right?" He rolled his eyes back toward his husband who nodded.

"OK. I'm going to ask a stupid question," Nate said. "Please don't take offense."

"Nate," Colin drawled out. "C'mon, man, this is us!"

"Before I met Colin and came to know him and love him, I'd never before heard of survivor's guilt. I feel embarrassed to admit that." He glanced up at Joshua. "Will he ever be healed?"

Joshua smiled at his friend. "He's healed *now* far as that goes. And he'll continue to heal just like I will. Just like you and David will." Joshua leaned back against Colin and touched their cheeks together. "He's made tremendous strides." He turned his head and kissed Colin's cheek. "And he'll make more as time goes on."

"Back a few years I couldn't even say 'I love you' to my mother," Colin said, half laughing. "When I said it to Josh that day in Glencoe it felt like I was prying the words out of my mouth with a crowbar. It hurt. It was terrifying. But I knew he'd never come back to Virginia *unless* he heard those words, so I pushed through the pain and fear and said them."

"Now you say 'I love you' to him just as easily as saying pass the salt," David observed. "I'd say that's damned near superhero level evolution."

"Well," Colin said, mugging. "It's *me* so..."

"Hell, he's even said it to me," Nate added.

"I didn't have friends back then either," Colin said. "Oh, one or two, like Jeff or Lenny. But it was rare. Friendship was another experience I had to open up to."

"Had to have been a lonely life, Colin," David said.

"Sorta," Colin muttered, nuzzling against Joshua's shoulder.

"Well, OK," Nate said, getting to his feet. "Given all that I won't tease you anymore about not calling Josh 'snookums'."

JANICE JARRELL

“I do call him ‘sweet cheeks’ every now and then,” Colin said with a snicker.

“Over my *strenuous* objections!” Joshua said, knuckling Colin’s ribs.

“Pleases spare me the details of that particular conversation,” David begged. He got to his feet and grabbed the deck of cards from the table. “So, are we playing cards or not?”

“We are,” Colin declared. He moved from behind Joshua and stepped toward the living room with David.

“So,” Nate said, linking his arm with Joshua’s, “you don’t like being called ‘sweet cheeks?’”

“Would *you*? ”

“Any term of endearment is a good one, I say.”

“Good! When he’s in the mood to use ‘sweet cheeks’, I’ll send him to you.”

Nate shot a sideways glance at Joshua. “Please don’t!” And, laughing, they trailed their husbands into the living room.

CHAPTER 6

THE CHILD WE WANT



It was a sunny autumn day. Colin and Joshua were spending the afternoon at David and Nate's home, along with David's two daughters, Sarah and Deborah. David grilled hamburgers and hot dogs while Nate, helped out by the girls, whipped up a potato salad. Colin and Joshua had contributed a fruit salad (made by Joshua) and a case of Murphy's Irish Stout (purchased by Colin). The picnic table on the patio sagged under the weight of the various desserts and snacks everyone had contributed. Joshua had bought a dozen *sufganiyot*, Colin's favorite Jewish sweet, and was now forced to stand guard over them to save a few from Colin's eager fingers.

After dinner they all lounged near the patio. The girls rummaged in David's garage, going through various boxes, while the four men drank stout and picked at the snacks.

Colin was munching his fourth *sufganiyot* while he and David compared notes on various university professors, ranking them on a scale of one to ten for obnoxiousness. "Meyers is the one the students complain about most," David said. "His contracts class is reportedly a huge pain in the ass."

"Now see, I *like* him," Colin countered. "I get along great with Meyers. The ones doing all the whining don't bother to study. He nails them every time and believe me he's not nice about it." Colin tipped his beer can to his

lips and drained the remains. “Frankly, I enjoy the fuck out of it. Those asshats have it coming.”

“Says the guy with the 4.5 GPA,” Joshua observed from the chair beside Colin’s.

Colin grimaced and shot him a sour look. “I don’t have a 4.5 GPA,” he grumbled. “I wish I did.”

“Daddy!” Sarah called, running toward David with her sister right behind her. “Look what we found!” She carried a baseball bat, a cap adorned with a Little League insignia, and several baseballs.

“I found gloves!” Deborah said, laying them on David’s lap.

“Huh,” he huffed, then laughed. “These are from my Little League days. My god, what boxes are you girls going through?” He motioned to the paraphernalia. “Better put it back. I’ll donate it to Goodwill one of these days.”

“Play ball with us, Dad?” Sarah asked, tugging on her father’s arm.

“Oh no,” David laughed. He hugged his daughter and kissed her cheek. “My baseball days are long over.”

“I’ll play with you!” Colin said, jumping to his feet. He snatched up the baseball cap, which was four sizes too small for him and jammed it over his sandy locks, then grabbed the bat. “You girls put those gloves on, and I’ll hit a few to you.”

“Colin...” David began, his voice cautionary, but Colin waved away his concerns.

“Relax, Dad,” he said, grinning. “I’ll loft them some easy ones.”

David’s eyes remained fixed on Colin as he and the two girls trotted to the spacious back yard, but Colin was as good as his word. He barely swung the bat as he hit soft line drives or easy-to-catch pop flies to the two girls, accompanied by a ceaseless barrage of teasing encouragement.

“Get it, Sarah!! That’s it! Whooooo Hooooooo!! All-star catch! Grab it, Deb! You got it! Wow! Another Carl Yastrzemski in the making!”

David smiled and shook his head then turned to Joshua who was watching his husband, his handsome, angular features alight with love. “He’s great with kids,” David observed. “Did you two ever discuss having children of your own?”

Joshua turned to face him, his brow furrowed. “We have. It wasn’t a long conversation, but we both kind of felt the same way.” He pressed his lips together and once again turned to watch Colin playing ball with David’s two

daughters. “And you’re right. He is great with kids. Hell, why wouldn’t he be? He’s a kid himself in many ways.” He sighed and turned back to David. “But our sense of things as far as kids go is that...” He laughed softly and dropped his eyes. “This is going to sound so damned selfish but, truth to tell, neither of us wants to share the other with *anyone* else. Not even a child.”

David nodded but gave no response. “Which would make us pretty bad parents I would imagine,” Joshua continued. “Kids need a lot of attention. Kids *deserve* a lot of attention. But we just don’t want to give it.”

“Colin doesn’t want a son he can teach to play ball?” Nate interjected. “I’m surprised. I figured with his gigantic ego he’d be all gung ho about the thought of procreation.” He grinned and nudged Joshua. “Wouldn’t you like a pint-sized version of Colin running around the house, breaking things, and making more noise than a freight train?”

Joshua smiled and shook his head. “*One* Colin running around the house making more noise than a freight train is all I can handle.” He shot Nate a look. “I don’t want to share him,” he said, his voice low but heavy with feeling. “I honestly don’t, Nate.”

“Then your decision is a wise one,” David said. “Though I bet your mothers will be sad to hear it.”

“Ha!” Nate barked out, reaching past Joshua to grab a handful of potato chips, “I know my mother is in high heaven having David’s daughters to grandparent.” He stuffed the chips in his mouth and mumbled around them. “I think the girls are the only reason they come to visit.”

Joshua seemed to consider this, then his shoulders lifted in a soft shrug. “I dunno. We’ve never talked to them about it. I suppose they *would* like to be grandparents. But that’s not a good reason to take on that kind of responsibility.”

Colin and the girls eventually wandered back to the patio and David sent them off with the baseball equipment. “Put it all back in the same box,” he told them, then turned to Colin. “It was fun watching that, Colin. Thanks. You’re great with them.”

“So why don’t you want one of your own?” Nate asked, poking Colin with his index finger. “Josh says you don’t want kids.”

Colin grabbed a can of beer from the ice-filled bowl where the stouts were being chilled then turned to Nate and grabbed his finger. “Stop poking me,” he grumbled. He sank into the chair next to Joshua’s took a long, slow swallow

JANICE JARRELL

before turning back to Nate. “It’s not that I don’t want kids,” he said. “It’s a great thought. But when I move past the thought to the reality of that decision, I know in my gut that it’s a bad idea.”

“Why, Colin?” David asked, leaning toward him. “You’re wonderful with children. You’d make a great dad.”

“Maybe,” Colin replied, gazing thoughtfully toward the garage where Deborah and Sarah could be heard chattering. “But I can’t see me being both a great dad and a great husband. I only have so much ram to give over when it comes to that kind of thing, and to tell you the truth, I want to dedicate it all to Josh. I don’t want to share myself with anyone else.” He shot a look at David. “Which would make me a pretty bad father.”

David nodded. “Seems like you two have made up your minds. I’m sorry to hear it because I think you’d be amazing fathers. You have so much love to give.”

“We do, David,” Colin said, leaning toward him. “Both of us do. But it’s not about that. It’s about what we want to *do* with that love.” He drew in a deep breath then leaned back in his chair. His gaze swung to Joshua who was watching him closely. “The child we want wouldn’t mind that they didn’t come first in our lives. The child we want wouldn’t be harmed by the fact that we’d both love someone else more than we’d ever love them.” He averted his eyes and shrugged. “The child we want doesn’t exist and in fact it *shouldn’t* exist.” He lowered his head, staring down at the crisscrossed tiles covering David’s patio.

“But the child we want *does* exist, Colin,” Joshua insisted. He leaned forward and rested his hand on Colin’s arm. “The relationship we’ve built together *is* our child. Children are a by-product of the love two people share. Our relationship is that by-product. It *is* the child we want to nurture and care for. Offspring can mean something other than giving birth to a human child.” He turned to David. “We’ve discussed becoming big brothers to a disadvantaged kid, and I think that’s the direction our ‘parenting’ will go.”

David nodded. “It’s a good choice, Josh. And some disadvantaged kid will be getting two wonderful big brothers. I know you two will do a lot of good for a child who otherwise wouldn’t have known that kind of love and acceptance.”

“Well, it’s a way for our love—our relationship—to extend itself to a child who might need the kind of support we can offer,” Joshua murmured.

"I still want them to have a bratty boy all their own," Nate added, his voice mournful.

"But Natey-baby," Colin said, reaching to scrub his knuckles through Nate's dark hair. "We've got *you* for that! You're the brattiest boy I know."

"So, shall I come live with you for a while?" Nate asked, grinning. "Run around your house and break things while Colin chases me down and tries to convince me to play ball—*which I have no intention of doing EVER?*"

"You'd leave me to go play ball with Colin?" David asked, eyes wide in pretend shock.

"Huh!" Nate scoffed. "Not likely."

Colin leaned back and laughed, then reached for Joshua's hand. "Time to go, bud. We both have studying to do tonight."

"Colin, take some of these stouts," David said, then laughed as Colin shoved several cans of beer into his jacket pockets and tucked a couple more into Joshua's. "How's it feel now that you're both in college?" he asked as he and Nate walked them to the door followed by Deborah and Sarah.

Colin wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "It's fine. I'm proud of him. And we're finding a lot of common ground in what we do." He bent toward Sarah as she reached for his hand.

"Bye, Uncle Colin," she said, leaning against him. "Come back and play real soon."

"I will, sweetie," Colin said, bending to kiss her hair.

"You want him to have a son?" Joshua asked Nate, nodding toward Colin who was now hugging Deborah. "Myself, I think he'd be just as great with a daughter."

David nodded. "I was thinking the same thing." He nudged Colin. "Anytime you want to playact at parenting, feel free to borrow them."

"Oh, Uncle Colin!" Sarah chirped, still holding Colin's hand. "Let us come home with you!"

Colin laughed. "Not today, sweetie. Uncle Josh and I have to study. But another time. I promise."

Once they arrived at home, Joshua walked to the kitchen with Colin trailing behind him. He checked the back door while Joshua opened the refrigerator and deposited the cans of stout. "Want to hand me yours?" he asked as Colin turned toward him.

"Oh, yeah," Colin said, reaching for the beer cans in his pocket. "Forgot I

JANICE JARRELL

had them. Here, babe.” He handed Joshua the stout then leaned against the counter, watching, as Joshua put them into the fridge. “You’re positive, aren’t you?” he asked.

“About what?”

“About not wanting kids.”

“Positive,” Joshua replied. “In fact, I’d say absolutely positive.” He shut the refrigerator door and paused, staring at his husband. “Why? Are you having second thoughts?”

“No.” Colin’s brow was furrowed, and he reached to take Joshua’s hand. “Like you, I’m absolutely not having second thoughts.” He ambled into the living room and collapsed onto their sofa, pulling Joshua down beside him. For a moment he was silent. “Everyone else wants it *for us*,” he said finally. “And a part of me agrees with them that we’d both make great dads.” He grimaced. “Is there something wrong in not wanting it, Josh?”

Joshua laughed and carded his fingers through Colin’s sandy hair. “No. There’s not one thing wrong in not wanting it. We might be great at a lot of things that we wouldn’t choose to do. A child is a *huge* commitment. A lifelong commitment. You and I have already *chosen* our lifelong commitment, Colin. We’ve chosen each other.”

“I don’t want you to have any regrets,” Colin told him. He cupped Joshua’s chin and lifted it until their eyes met. “It’s an important issue, and I want to be sure we’re on the same page.”

Joshua’s eyes fixed on Colin’s, his gaze steady. “We are,” he assured him. “I will have no regrets, Colin. I don’t want children. I just want us.”

Colin smiled and wrapped both arms around Joshua’s body, drawing him close. “Truth to tell, baby, I’m glad. I like kids. I enjoy kids. But I don’t want to invest the kind of time it would take to raise kids.” He turned and looked into Joshua’s eyes again. “Maybe someday we’ll wish we’d taken a different road. But honesty? I doubt it.”

“I doubt it too,” Joshua said. “I know what’s important to me. I know where my happiness lies. And it’s in you, Colin. It’s in us.” He smiled and kissed his husband tenderly. “I’m still falling in love with you,” he murmured, pressing his forehead against Colin’s. “And I don’t think I’ll ever never stop. That’s what I want to nurture, Colin. As I said at David’s, that’s the child I want.”

“Believe me, Josh, that’s the child I want too. The life you and I share, the

one we'll be building for the rest of our lives. As far as procreation goes, to me, that's as good as it gets." He kissed Joshua's cheek, then shot him a rueful look. "Still falling, huh?" he teased, nuzzling against him. "Wow. I must be a pretty impressive dude!"

"You don't know the half of it."

"Well, why don't we go upstairs, and you can *show* me the rest of it."

"I thought we came home early to study," Joshua teased, arching an eyebrow. "What about that? Hmm?"

"Plenty of time to study *after*," Colin replied.

"Now see, that's why I'm still falling," Joshua said, rising to his feet. "Because you never run out of good ideas."

Colin's arm wound around Joshua's neck as they climbed the stairs to their bedroom. "And I promise you, baby...I never will."

CHAPTER 7

ONE OF THOSE DAYS



Colin walked in the door and stopped just inside, listening. Hearing the unmistakable sounds of dinner being fixed, he smiled and moved toward the kitchen, pausing only to drop his heavy backpack on the couch.

Joshua was standing beside the stove, a wooden spoon in his hand, mixing a deep-dish skillet filled with a gorgeous chicken stir-fry. “Oh, you are just too wonderful,” Colin told him, as he moved close to him from behind and placed both hands on Joshua’s hips. “It smells great, babe,” he murmured, bending to nuzzle against Joshua’s hair.

Joshua turned and smiled, then without a word, edged around him and moved to the counter. Colin turned to watch him, a puzzled grimace sliding onto his face. *OK, he thought, that was weird. He didn’t even look at me.* He watched as Joshua pulled two plates from the cupboard and carried them to the dining room table, then pursed his lips and ambled after him.

“You OK?” he asked as Joshua sat the plates in front of their respective places.

“Sure!” Joshua replied without even a sidelong glance.

“Stop!” Colin said, as Joshua tried to move past him to the kitchen.

“Huh?”

“I said *stop!*” Colin repeated. He grasped Joshua’s wrist. “Stop right now.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop fixing dinner. Stop setting the table. Stop doing everything.”

“Colin...”

“C’mere,” Colin muttered, tugging on Joshua’s arm, drawing him toward their living room.

“Colin, I can’t. The stir fry will...”

“Turn it off,” Colin snapped, releasing his arm. “But come straight back because you and I need to talk.”

Joshua stood, staring down at the floor. He started to speak, then hesitated and groaned out a sigh instead. He shot a sidelong glance at Colin, gauging his mood. Then, seeing the hard, green glint in his eyes he sighed again before moving toward the kitchen.

When he emerged, Colin was sprawled on the couch, stretched out to his full length with both feet resting on the coffee table. He crooked his finger at Joshua, then pointed to the spot next to him. “Get over here.”

Joshua winced, but settled on the couch next to his husband and leaned back, tilting his head to stare at their oak-beamed ceiling.

“You going to tell me what the hell is going on with you?” Colin asked, half-turning to gaze at Joshua’s upturned face. “Because this right here...” he said, moving his index finger back and forth between the two of them, “...is pissing me off.”

“I know,” Joshua stammered out. “I know and I’m sorry. God, I can be such a twat at times.” He turned toward Colin. His head was bowed but he laid his hand on Colin’s chest. “I had a really bad day at work today. It hit me hard and I’m not handling it well. I’m sorry.”

“What the fuck, Josh? What happened?”

“I have a patient and her young daughter in the hospital,” Joshua told him. He lifted his head until their eyes met. “Her husband beat the hell out of both of them.”

“Were you at the hospital?”

“Yeah, for about three hours.”

Colin nodded and wrapped his arm around Joshua’s shoulder. “OK. I get it. That had to be hard for you. You were *triggered* and all that psychobabble. But Jesus, Josh, why be chilly with *me*? ”

“I didn’t want to be,” Joshua said. He turned his head and pressed his face to Colin’s shoulder. “What I *wanted* to do was run to you and wrap myself around you and never let go.”

JANICE JARRELL

Colin tipped Joshua's chin up until their eyes met. "What you *actually* did was the exact opposite."

"I was just trying to, I dunno, chill out a little. I didn't want you to think I was a wuss."

"Why would I think that?"

"Because you're the alpha male in this family who says crying isn't your style and who doesn't *get* all clingy and weepy," Joshua said, then raised his eyebrows and made a comical face. "Whereas I, on the other hand..." He let his sentence trail off.

"So, you feel all clingy and weepy?" Colin asked, barely able to suppress his smile.

"Not weepy. But a little clingy maybe."

"So? Cling away. I'm sitting right here. That's not a good excuse for giving me the cold shoulder."

"Honey, I never meant to do that," Joshua said. He lifted his hand and cupped Colin's cheek. "I just wanted to get my shit together before I reacted all over the place in front of you and I went too far in the other direction."

"Is the little girl alright?"

"She's—she'll *be* alright," Joshua said. "The abuser is in jail and hopefully that's where he'll stay. But I don't know. If the mom doesn't press charges..."

"Won't matter," Colin interrupted, his voice tight. "The state will charge him no matter what *she* chooses to do." His brows furrowed as he gazed at Joshua. "You think she'll take him *back*?"

Joshua shrugged and leaned against Colin's chest. "I don't know. She's still pretty out of it and she's in shock. But if she did, she wouldn't be the first."

"Jesus!" Colin spat out. "What the fuck is *wrong* with those women?"

"She's just scared. And she..." Joshua grimaced and shrugged again, "...*loves* him."

Colin reared back, his eyes narrow and blazing with anger. "How the *FUCK...*" he began but Joshua placed a hand over his mouth.

"I know," he said. "Believe me I understand why you feel the way you do. But, Colin, it's not that cut and dried. Maybe he wasn't always that way. Maybe she remembers and loves the man he was *before* he started abusing her and hopes that man will come back. Maybe he's had his own trauma to deal with and she's trying to understand and help him. Show him he's worth

loving. There are a million reasons why women stay with someone who is an abuser. And some of them are perfectly valid.”

“No, no, no,” Colin said, shaking his head. “Not when it involves child abuse.”

“I agree,” Joshua said. “And when I talked to Deborah today, I got the sense that she was done. I hope I’m right.”

Colin’s face had darkened as he stared into their unlit fireplace. “I still can’t...” he began, then stopped and shook himself.

“What?”

“Nothing. Never mind. Just a thought that I don’t want to finish.” He turned to Joshua and tried to smile. “Weren’t you making my dinner? Didn’t I smell a stir-fry?”

Joshua nodded, then wrapped both arms around Colin’s neck and held him close, his face pressed against Colin’s broad shoulder.

“Listen,” Colin said, his voice a low rumble in his chest. “Don’t ever pull away from me like that. You’re always telling me to use words, well you need to use them too. Don’t hide from me, Josh. I don’t deserve that.”

Joshua peeped up at him, his face somewhat sheepish. “You’re right. And I am sorry.”

“What if I felt all needy and clingy. Wouldn’t you want to know? Would you want me to hide it?”

Joshua quirked a brow and gazed at him. “I consider that highly unlikely.”

Colin shrugged. “Why?”

Joshua turned and stared at him, his face twisted into a dubious squint. “*You?* All needy and clingy?” He shook his head. “Come on, Colin.”

“Oh? And when I come home and drag you onto the couch and snuggle you in front of the fire, what do you think *that’s* about anyway?”

“I—I,” Joshua stammered. “I don’t know. I just thought you were being nice to me or something.”

“I’m being nice to *me*,” Colin told him. “Jesus, Josh! What the hell is wrong with you?”

Joshua quirked his brow and gave his head a quick shake. “No one knows.”

“If being close to you didn’t make me feel better when I’ve had a crap day, why the hell would I be with you in the first place? My life isn’t always perfect,

Josh. Sometimes I need to feel my husband close to me. It makes me feel better. It makes me feel happy and loved. Does that make me a pussy?"

"Of course not!"

Colin shrugged. "Well you can't judge yourself that way without judging me that way too."

Joshua turned away and stared down at the floor. For a long time, he was silent, and finally Colin nudged him with an elbow. "What? You disagree?"

"No. In theory I don't disagree at all." He turned to face his husband. "But, Colin, we are two different men. We're not identical in how we see and experience life. You've told me ten thousand times that crying's not your style. I see nothing wrong with crying. You care tremendously about being a winner. Me? I don't care all that much about winning. You're a tough, alpha-type man. I'm not. You respect strength." Colin opened his mouth to speak but Joshua held up a hand and stopped him. "You've told me many times that you think crying is a sign of weakness."

"Only when it's me *doing* it," Colin replied flashing his dimples in a quick grin.

"I thought if I acted all clingy and needy, you might see me as weak." He peeked up at Colin through his lashes. Colin's head was cocked to one side and his face wore an expression of sour disbelief. "No?" Joshua said, half laughing. "My god, that's some *expression* on your face."

"You deserve it. What you just said to me is such utter bullshit. Having a needy moment because you've had a bad day doesn't make you weak. To me, being able to express that stuff is part of your strength."

Joshua lowered his head, then he leaned back and gazed at his husband. Colin was propped against a corner of the couch, both feet still resting on the coffee table. He was wearing the white cabled sweater that Joshua had gotten him for Chrismukkah which beautifully enhanced his handsome Irish face and tousled sandy hair. "God, you are so fucking beautiful," Joshua whispered, still laughing softly.

"Big fuckin' whup," Colin snorted.

Joshua relaxed against Colin's body, wrapping both arms tight around him, and buried his face against the white sweater. "Please don't be mad at me," he mumbled, his voice muffled against the wool. He heard Colin snicker and felt his arms tighten, drawing him close.

"You amuse me, Joshua, because for a shrink you occasionally spout the

most asinine fucking nonsense, particularly about our relationship,” Colin muttered. He slid his fingers into Joshua’s hair, tangling them in the dark curls. “But,” Colin murmured against Joshua’s ear, “I adore you anyway.” He pushed Joshua to arm’s length. “I am not able to admit it when I feel scared or needy. I can’t let myself cry. I’ve suppressed that kind of emotion for years, ever since Kathy died.” He leaned closer to Joshua. “Those feelings scare me,” he said, emphasizing every word.

Joshua met his eyes, his own eyes wide with shocked surprise. “I’m serious,” Colin continued. “I worry about my masculine image. I’m afraid if I started crying, I’d look like an idiot. My ego won’t let me express that stuff. I don’t have that kind of strength.”

“You’re the strongest man I—”

“Stop,” Colin interrupted. “Just stop. In ways you’re right. I am strong. But being able to admit it and express it when you’re feeling *not* so strong, requires a *special* kind of strength.” He leaned back. “So why on Earth would I judge you as being weak when you’re strong enough to do what I *can’t* do?”

Joshua fell forward, once again pressing himself against the firm muscles of Colin’s chest, sighing in bliss when he felt Colin’s arms close around him. He squirmed on the couch turning until he lay, cradled in Colin’s arms. “Fine then,” he muttered, his arms twining around Colin’s neck. “I’ll just take advantage of your generous nature and cling to my heart’s content.”

“We lie like this all the time,” Colin commented. “But today you call it ‘clingy’. Why?” He laughed softly, stroking Joshua’s hair. “Let me make it clear right now, though, that this does not absolve you of your responsibility to finish my dinner. That chicken stir-fry smelled amazing.”

Joshua laughed and rubbed his face against the soft white wool. “It’s done,” he murmured. “I just have to reheat it if it’s gone a bit cold.” He burrowed against Colin’s body, pressing his face against his husband’s throat, inhaling deeply, loving the scent of Colin’s skin combined with the clean fragrance of his sweater. “But not yet, OK?”

Colin smiled and breathed out a soft laugh. “I’m happy right where I am.” He nuzzled against Joshua’s hair. “And I’m happy with you right where you are. I’m in no rush.” He tipped Joshua’s face to his and kissed him several times, molding their mouths together in deep kiss after deep kiss, his tongue slipping between Joshua’s lips in a slow, wet glide that drew a whimpering moan from Joshua’s throat.

“And another thing you might want to remember when you’re engaging in these flights of fancy about me,” Colin murmured, continuing to kiss Joshua between every word, “is that I *like* being protective of those I care about.” He leaned back and lifted his eyebrows, mugging comically. “Appeals to my male ego. Did that ever occur to you? Hmmmm?” He rubbed his nose against Joshua’s. “So maybe you’d be doing me a favor by telling me you need my strong, protective Irish self to hold you in my strong, protective Irish arms. Hmmmm?”

Joshua laughed and hugged Colin tight. “OK, Irish. You win. You’re right and I was a twat.”

“You’re seldom a twat,” Colin muttered, nuzzling against Joshua’s cheek. “But I always win, Joshua.” He leaned back and winked. “You should know that by now.”

Joshua laughed again, nuzzling against Colin’s shoulder. “You were snippy with me.”

“You had it coming, and you know it.”

Joshua nodded then sighed again and nestled closer in Colin’s arms. “I did.” He carded his fingers through Colin’s hair then cradled his face between both palms and kissed him. “Thank you for this,” he whispered.

Colin tilted his head and quirked his mouth in an expression which registered both amusement and annoyance. “Yeah,” he drawled out, his voice edged with sarcasm, “because making out with you on the couch is such a huge problem for me.”

Joshua huffed out a laugh, still nestled close in his husband’s arms.

For a long moment there was silence, then Colin stirred. “Josh? Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course!”

“Well, it’s really a... I dunno, kind of a personal question. Maybe even offensive”

“You’re my husband, Colin,” Joshua said, leaning back to meet his eyes. “You can ask me anything.”

“Why did it take your mom so fucking long to leave your piece-of-shit, abusive father? How could she let you stay in a situation where that bastard was hurting you that way?” He sat up on the couch, turning Joshua to face him. “Don’t get me wrong. I love your mom. Always have. But I don’t think I

will ever forgive her for letting that happen to you, Josh. I'm not sure how *you* can.”

Joshua smiled and looked into Colin's eyes, his own eyes slanted in loving wonder. “And just how long have you been carrying *that* around inside you?”

“Long enough. Answer the question.”

Joshua drew in a deep breath and shoved Colin back against the couch. He twisted his body until he once again lay cradled in Colin's arms, his head resting against Colin's chest. “OK, if we have to talk about this, I want to be cozy while we do it.”

“We don't have to talk about it.”

Joshua caressed Colin's cheek. “Oh, I think we do.” He drew in a deep breath. “She stayed because she kept hoping he'd get help. That he'd change. He wasn't always that way. He had some bad luck and lost his job. Took the only one he could find which paid next to nothing. He was married to a woman who came from a very rich family, and believe me, my grandfather—much as I love him—wasn't shy about letting my father know that he wasn't giving *his* ‘little girl’ the quality of life she was accustomed to. My father felt like a failure. He felt unworthy. He was filled with self-loathing. He started to drink, and that's when the abuse began. The more abusive he got, the more he drank, and the more he drank...etcetera, etcetera. Mom kept begging him to join AA and get help. But he never did.” He glanced up at Colin. “It's a pretty common story.”

“Tough shit,” Colin blurted out. “He doesn't get my pity. Not now. Not ever. You don't take your self-loathing out on a six-year-old child.”

“Honey, I agree. I've talked to Deena about it a lot, and I sometimes think I became a psychologist just so I could learn how to forgive my mother.”

Colin lifted Joshua in his arms and held him close and tight. “Have you?”

Joshua stared past Colin's shoulder for a moment, then drew in a deep breath, and turned to meet his husband's eyes. “Yeah. Actually, I think I have. She and I have talked about it. She's told me how sorry she is about ten thousand times. Believe me, she still hasn't forgiven herself. Not one iota.”

“Maybe she shouldn't,” Colin muttered.

“She was young, Colin. She had two little kids and nowhere to go.”

“She had your grandfather.”

“She didn't want to,” Joshua's eyes dropped and was silent for a moment. “She hated the very idea of asking Gramps for help,” he said finally. “He

didn't know about the abuse. He only found out about it when Dad put us in the hospital, and I would imagine that the conversation she had with Grandpa after that happened was the most painful experience of her life. Gramps was wonderful, but he was also hard as nails and tough as old shoe leather. I'm sure he didn't spare her feelings.

"Good for him!"

"Honey, please don't be bitter towards her," Joshua whispered, clasping Colin's face between his palms. "It would break her heart, Colin. She loves you so."

"I'm not, Josh! I don't think I'll ever fully forgive her, but I do understand." He kissed Joshua tenderly, then pressed their cheeks together. "I'd die for her, you know that. Her or Abe."

"I do know that, but please don't use that phrase." Joshua's arms tightened around Colin's neck and for several minutes neither man spoke, then Colin blew out a long breath.

"OK, have we just about covered everything? Because I'm fucking starved."

Joshua shook with laughter, his face pressed to Colin's shoulder.

"And you know how much I *love* these in-depth conversations."

"Yeah. About as much as you'd love a high colonic," Joshua teased, still giggling.

"If my stir-fry's ruined..." Colin warned, easing Joshua into an upright position.

"It won't be."

"I'm just saying." Colin got to his feet and stretched. "I will not be a happy Irishman if you have to start my dinner all over again."

"I won't. But if we did, I'd take you *out* to dinner. I'd even take you to the Outback and buy you a steak." Joshua rolled off the couch and wandered toward the kitchen. "I can tell you in about ten seconds," he said, disappearing from Colin's view. "Nope!" he called out from inside the kitchen. "It's fine. Just need to heat it up."

"Well," Colin muttered sprawling out on the couch, "I know for a fact you're good at getting things hot, so..." he snuggled into the cozy pillows and yawned, "... get on with it."

CHAPTER 8

TEXT MESSAGES



Text message from: Irish Hottie

Hey, bud. Can't make it for lunch. Tied up with study group. Don't be pissed.

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY

I'm not pissed. Yet. Will you be here for dinner?

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: IRISH HOTTIE

Depends. What R you fixing?

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY

NOW I'm pissed. ☹

(TWO HOURS LATER)

Text message from: Irish Hottie

R U really pissed? Sorry. Phone was off.

JANICE JARRELL

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY
☺ ☺ ☺ Gotcha! Isn't it always?

(HALF-HOUR LATER)

Text message from: Irish Hottie
Not funny, Joshua!

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY
C'mon. It's a lil funny!

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: IRISH HOTTIE
I'll deal with you once I'm home.

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY
Oh yeah? How!

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: IRISH HOTTIE
I have a long list. Phone going off. Contracts.

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY
You made a contract with ME too!

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: IRISH HOTTIE
He's scarier than you are. Workin' on that list.

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY

Does this list involve anyone getting naked?

(ONE HOUR LATER)

Text message from: Irish Hottie

Sorry. Phone was off. Getting naked is #1 on the list!

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY

Liking this better all the time.

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: IRISH HOTTIE

OMW. Save me some time and b naked when I get there.

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY

Let the licking begin! 😊

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: IRISH HOTTIE

That's just mean! Trying to drive here!

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: PRETTY JEWISH BOY

ILY

TEXT MESSAGE FROM: IRISH HOTTIE

ILY2. C U Sn.

CHAPTER 9

CONVERSATIONS AT THE CABIN



Joshua was sprawled on his back in front of the fireplace while Nate sat cross-legged on the floor next to him twitting him about whatever intimate detail of Joshua's life happened to pop into his mind.

"You really didn't mind him becoming a cop again?"

"Would it matter?"

"Yes, it would," Colin inserted from the sofa where he sat eating popcorn. "I told you I wouldn't do it if you didn't want me to."

"Yeah," Joshua muttered. "And all the while your eyes were shining like Princess Petunia gazing at Prince Charming and you were damned near giggling with glee!"

"I seldom giggle," Colin replied. "In fact, I'm seldom gleeful, but the fact remains, Joshua Campbell-Abrams, that I told you, not once but several times, that I would not take the job if you didn't want me to."

"You were dying to put those blues on again," Joshua said, his eyes rolling back in his head to look at his husband.

"Maybe so, but I still would have said 'no' if you'd objected."

"And been miserable for weeks."

"And pouted like a high school senior without a prom date," Nate added.

"The fuck!" Colin blurted, half laughing. "When have you ever seen me pout?"

“Ha!” Nate spewed out, spinning to face Colin. “How about the time when Joshua bought you a walker to help you get back and forth from the bathroom. You acted like he’d offered to dress you in tights and a tutu.”

“It’s a device for old ladies!” Colin protested.

“It’s a device for people who can’t walk on their own,” David chimed in, “which, by the way you *couldn’t* at the time!”

“Bah,” Colin muttered, then shot a glance at Joshua who was snickering under his breath. “And stop laughing! This isn’t funny!”

“The thought of you in tights and a tutu is fuckin’ hilarious,” Joshua replied.

“Whatever happened to my sweet and adoring young husband?” Colin asked mournfully. “I’m sensing a certain lessening of reverence lately. An upsetting lack of worshipful adoration in your attitude towards me.” He leaned toward Joshua, eyebrows arched. “Where is that angelic and ever so pliant young psychologist who once looked upon me as his knight in shining armor?”

“He’s still here,” Joshua said sitting up to turn toward Colin. “He’s just feeling sassy at the moment.”

“Do I have to get out my whip?” Colin threatened, his face creased in mock anger.

Joshua snorted out a laugh.

“Oooo,” Nate cooed. “Can we watch?”

“No,” Colin snapped. “Whip time is private.”

“Yeah,” Joshua said, laughing. “So private that even *I* haven’t seen it.”

“He doesn’t have whip? Oh, I *am* disappointed!”

Colin snickered and tossed a handful of popcorn at Nate. “Can you see me using a whip on Josh?”

“Whipped *cream* maybe,” Nate offered, throwing the popcorn back at Colin.

“Would you two stop that,” David barked. “The last time you got on this kick I was picking up popcorn for weeks!”

“Now there’s a suggestion with some merit!” Colin said, eyeing his husband. “Whipped cream, Josh?” He licked his lips and moaned in delight, his eyes rolling up in his head in pretend ecstasy. “The thought of that gorgeous olive skin slathered with several inches of whipped cream? Mmmmm-

mm!" He rubbed his hands together and leered at his friends. "You might not see us for *weeks!*"

Joshua shook his head, his body shivering with soft laughter.

"That's quite an image, Colin," Nate said. "You lie awake nights thinking this stuff up?"

"You planted that one in my head, rabble-rouser," Colin muttered, turning to stretch out on the couch. He began to amuse himself by tossing popcorn into the air and catching it in his mouth. Then after a moment he sat up and turned to his husband, his face creased in a frown. "Josh, are you really OK with me being a cop again?"

"Of course, I am!" Joshua said, chuckling. "You're not taking anything I say to Nate seriously, are you?"

"I wouldn't be OK with it!" Nate blurted. "I mean, *Jesus!* The last time he was a cop he damned near got killed!"

"It's just one day a week, Nate," Joshua explained. "He's doing community outreach to victims of assault and their families. It's important work."

"And never, *ever* climbing into a squad car and dashing off to play hero," Nate replied, his voice acidic with sarcasm.

Joshua shot a glance Colin's way, but his husband was ignoring Nate and staring straight at him. "I wouldn't do that, Josh," Colin said, his voice low. "I absolutely wouldn't."

"It's a valid concern," David chimed in. "You're a type A personality, Colin. It would be hard for you to back away from the action."

"Anymore, Davy, I'm more of a B plus-Type personality," Colin said with a quick grin. He fell onto the couch, once again stretching out on his back. "Do any of you honestly think I'd dash headlong into a situation that could get me shot...*again?*"

No one spoke and Colin turned his head to gaze at them. "Believe me, I wouldn't."

David breathed out a long sigh. "You getting shot was not anything *I'd* ever want to relive, so I'm glad to know you feel the same way."

"Did...did it *hurt?*" Nate asked Colin, his voice hesitant.

Colin laughed and sat up to face his friend. "I don't *remember* a lot about the moment I was shot," he said. "Just fuzzy, vague flashes." He huffed out a breath. "I imagine I was in shock. I remember lots of blood. Shannon Nash's face. His voice yelling at me. Stuff like that." He arched his

eyebrows and sighed. “The real pain came later, when I was trying to recover.”

“He *yelled* at you?” Nate asked in surprise.

“Nate,” David warned, then tilted his head toward Joshua who had turned away, his head bowed. “Enough.”

“I’m sorry, Josh,” Nate said, reaching to touch his arm. “That was stupid of me.”

Joshua lifted his head. “Shannon yelled: ‘*Eyes on me!*’” he explained to Nate. “To try to keep Colin conscious and alert.”

“It didn’t work,” Colin muttered. “And it’s OK if Nate asks questions. Lots of people ask cops about being shot,” he snorted out a rough laugh. “Or about shooting someone.”

“You’ve never done *that* have you?” Nate asked. “Shot anyone?”

“No. Only drawn my gun one time in ten years. Hell, I didn’t even draw it the day McManus shot me. Didn’t have time.”

“What was the one time?” Nate asked, then turned when David nudged him. “He said it was OK to ask him!”

“I went to a frat house with one of my staff, responding to a call about a rape in progress.”

“Jesus!” Nate blurted.

“Yeah. Nasty stuff. When we got there one idiot pulled a piece and pointed it at my partner. So I pulled mine and pointed it at *him*. Told him: ‘If you so much as *twitch* I will splatter your motherfucking brains all over the wall.’” Colin snickered and shrugged. “He was just engaged in some frat boy bravado. He dropped the piece like it was red hot.” He wrinkled his nose and smirked. “Dirty language will do it almost every time.”

Nate shuddered. “I wouldn’t be a cop for all the money you could pay me.” He glanced at Colin. “Was the girl OK?”

“She was fine. She hadn’t been raped. It was all just drunken, doped-up frat house fuckery.”

“Colin, are you going to be OK going from being a cop to being a prosecutor?” David asked.

“Sure! Why wouldn’t I be? I’ll be working the same side of the street. Just at a different level of service.”

“I think he’ll make a great prosecutor,” Nate said. “And he’ll *look* so damned good doing it! Juries will love his hot Irish ass.”

Colin scowled. “I plan to win my cases using facts and relevant law, not my stunning good looks.” He waggled his head back and forth. “Although...” he drawled out, seeming to consider, “being hot as fuck can’t hurt, and there *will* be ladies on those juries.”

“Not to mention the occasional gay boy,” Nate added.

“Hell, don’t limit me to gay boys,” Colin said with a chuckle. “I had plenty of straights hit on me when I was single.”

“Wanting to experiment?” Nate asked.

“Wanting something I suppose,” Colin replied. “I never asked what.”

“You just fucked them senseless,” Nate continued with a grin.

“Some of them,” Colin said, then glanced at Joshua. “That was all a long time ago.”

“Oh, stop shooting him the ‘husband’ look,” Nate teased. “Josh knows you’d never fool around on him.”

“Josh does,” Joshua said, nodding.

“I have all I can do to keep *him* satisfied,” Colin said with a wink. “He’s a cock hound!”

“I most certainly am NOT!” Joshua responded. “And when have I ever been *pliant*?”

“Where the hell did *that* come from?” Nate asked, turning to look at him.

“He’s responding to something I said ten minutes ago,” Colin said, chuckling. He leaned toward his husband, shaking his head. “Oh, you *used* to be. Pliant and obedient to my will. It’s sad how far I’ve fallen.”

“Obedient?” Nate said, eyes wide as he stared at Joshua. “Really, Josh?”

“How did you make that work, Colin?” David asked. “*I’ve* never managed it!”

“Oh, I have my ways,” Colin smirked.

“Colin, stop it,” Joshua said, laughing and blushing at the same time.

“What!” Nate demanded. “What’s your trick, Colin? Josh? What is it?”

Joshua smiled and shook his head but gave no response. Colin laughed out loud and reached to ruffle Joshua’s hair. “All I have to do is take my shirt off and he’s putty in my hands,” Colin bragged to Nate. “Completely submissive to my will.”

Joshua shot his husband a look and shook his head. “You’re a twat, d’you know that?”

“Am I wrong?”

“You might be the *next* time you try it.”

“He’ll be fitting you for a collar next thing we know,” Nate teased, and Colin burst into laughter.

“Oh, good lord, Nate, don’t encourage him,” Joshua implored.

“Hey, nothing wrong with a little Sub/Dom play,” Nate said.

“Nate...” David said, his voice rising in warning.

“Uh oh,” Colin said, grinning. “You’re letting too many cats out of the bag there, Natey-baby.”

“Oh, good lord,” David moaned.

“Hey! If Josh can talk about his come-covered vegetables, I can talk about Sub/Dom play.”

“Josh *didn’t* talk about come-covered veggies,” Joshua protested. “Colin did!”

“And didn’t we decide in that delightful conversation that my come is absolutely delish?” Colin asked, waggling his eyebrows at Joshua who moaned and bent forward, burying his face in his hands.

“Please stop, please stop,” he begged in a sing-song voice while Colin fell back onto the couch, convulsed with laughter.

“WE didn’t decide *anything* that day,” Nate added. “YOU may have decided that, but don’t include us in your vanity exercise.”

“I am NOT vain!” Colin objected. “I’m—I’m confident.”

“I don’t see Josh as the obedient type,” David remarked, leaning back in his chair. “He’s not that stupid.”

“And why would that be stupid, Professor?” Colin asked, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

“Because,” David said. “If he was some submissive, obedient little slave boy, you wouldn’t want a thing to do with him. In fact, you wouldn’t have been attracted to him in the first place. Certainly not attracted enough to trail him all the way to Glencoe to get him back. Josh knew that.”

“Yeah?” Colin said, scooting closer to his husband. “Is that right, my olive-skinned, Jewish love? Did you know that?”

“I knew it within five seconds of meeting you,” Joshua said.

“Is that a fact,” Colin stated, still chuckling.

“You respect strength,” David chimed in. “It’s no accident that your pet name for him is ‘my oak’. You’d never respect some docile little wussy-boy who let you walk all over him.”

“No weeping willow for *you*,” Nate added with a snicker.

Joshua snorted out a laugh. “I will say this though,” he said turning to gaze at his husband. “There’s no question of who’s the head of our household.”

“Really!” Nate said, shooting Joshua a look.

“There’s only one alpha wolf in any pack,” Joshua said. “Would *you* want to fight him for that position?” he asked, tilting his head toward Colin. “God knows I don’t!”

“Even if you disagree with him?” Nate asked.

“No. If I disagree with him, I say so. But for the most part...” Joshua screwed his face into a look of amused surrender, “I go along with what he wants.”

Nate’s brows furrowed and Joshua laughed out loud. “You may not believe this, Nate, but I *like* it that he takes the lead. I *like* it that he’s strong and decisive. I am way too damned wishy-washy. Ask *me* what we should do, and you’ll get ‘Gee, I dunno’, ‘Well, maybe’, ‘But on the one hand’, ‘But on the other hand’, and three hours later we still won’t have a decision.” He jerked his thumb toward Colin. “With him it’s just: ‘We’re doing THIS!', and I heave a huge sigh of relief and go, ‘Great!’”

Colin laughed and leaned over to press a kiss to Joshua’s hair. “It works out perfectly,” Joshua continued, “because I’m actually glad that he takes over and makes the decision.”

“Unless you disagree with it,” David chimed in.

“And if I do, I say so.” He glanced at Colin who was watching him closely. “He always hears me out. He’s always willing to compromise.” He reached to take Colin’s hand. “And that’s why I’m totally happy for him to make the decisions. Because I know my thoughts and feelings will never be ignored.”

“But what if they were?” Nate asked.

“Now you’re just lookin’ for trouble,” Colin said, reaching to poke Nate with a finger.

“If they were,” Joshua said, “that would require a whole other discussion. But that’s never been the case.” Joshua got to his feet, then sat down next to Colin and linked their arms together. “There’s a reason why the alpha wolf is the alpha wolf,” he said, his voice low. “Because he’s earned it. The rest of his pack know they can trust him.”

“So, I have a pack of one?” Colin asked, smiling at Joshua.

Joshua nodded. "Sorry, baby. It's just me."

"No need to say you're sorry, because you are all I want."

"Just too goddamn smarmy," Nate moaned.

"Oh, shut up, you. I've heard you be just as smarmy with your own husband," Colin said, laughing.

"Yeah, but saying it is different from having to *listen* to it," Nate said with a wink.

"I love my husband," Colin said, draping his arm around Joshua's neck. "And I don't give a flying fuck who knows it." He shook his head, his handsome Irish face twisting into a disgusted frown. "I've seen people look all disgusted when I kiss him in public. You know what I do? I kiss him again. With twice as much tongue. And I hope and pray to *god* that one of them comes over and starts quoting Leviticus in my face. Hope and pray to GOD!"

"Colin," Nate said, reaching to touch his arm. "You *know* better than to think that I was..."

"Oh, of course, I do, Nate," Colin said. He rested his hand on Nate's arm. "Of course, I do. Don't be silly." He heaved out a huge sigh. "It just reminded me, that's all." He hissed out a breath through clenched teeth. "There's not much that makes me angrier. I want grab those assholes and drag them over to where my husband is standing, and point to him and tell them: 'You scummy, bigoted rat-fuck bastard! On your best fucking day, you couldn't touch his *shoes* if you stood on the tallest building on the face of the Earth.'"

"Colin," Joshua murmured, lacing his fingers with Colin's. "That stuff doesn't happen all that often."

"Colin, those people are frightened fools," David said, reaching to take Nate's hand in his. "We terrify them. We challenge all those archaic beliefs they've been clinging to since they were forced into some Sunday school class and spoon-fed narrow-minded dogma with their milk and cookies."

"Fuck 'em!" Colin spat out.

Joshua slid his hand into Colin's hair, carding his fingers through the thick sandy curls as he leaned against Colin's shoulder.

"This," Colin said, pointing to Joshua, "is the sweetest, kindest, gentlest, most caring human being I have ever encountered. He is brilliant, compassionate, and spends his every waking hour in service to people who are in pain...including me." He turned and kissed Joshua's cheek. "No one gets to disrespect him. Not in front of *me!* I won't fucking stand for it!"

"I feel the same way about David," Nate said. "I totally agree with you, Colin. I hate that kind of insulting bullshit. I hate it!"

David heaved out a long sigh. "Hey," he said, wrapping his arm around Nate's shoulders and hugging him close, "all four of us sit here today as married men. Beside our husbands. Beside the one we love and have chosen." He tilted his head and smiled. "Things are a lot better than they were."

Colin scoffed and leaned back on the couch, pulling Joshua against his side. "I won't have my husband looking around to see if someone's watching before he kisses me—in public or out of it. No het couple would do that, and by god *we* won't do it either."

Joshua touched his cheek. "Colin, don't get your Irish up about something that may never happen again."

"Oh, it'll happen again all right," Colin muttered.

"Will fretting about it keep it from happening?"

Colin shot his husband a frustrated glare, but Joshua only shrugged. "Then why stew over it? If it happens, we'll handle it. If it doesn't..." he shrugged and grinned, "we'll handle it."

"I think you should demonstrate all the PDA you want," David said. "I know I do. I don't even think about it. I always hold Nate's hand when we walk down the street. Doesn't even cross my mind *not* to. If anyone's giving us nasty looks, I don't even notice it. And to me, that's the best way to handle that kind of bigotry. Don't even dignify it by acknowledging its presence."

"They're the ones with the problem," Nate added. "Not you."

Colin glanced at them and scowled, an unintelligible growl coming from his throat, causing Joshua to laugh out loud. "The famous Colin Campbell growl," he said, still chuckling.

"Can you translate that into English?" Nate asked.

"That's the thing about the Colin Campbell growl," Joshua said. "It can mean so *many* things!"

"Campbell-Abrams," Colin corrected under his breath.

Ignoring him, Joshua went on. "It can mean, 'If you're smart, you'll back the fuck away!'. It can mean 'I agree with you, but I still don't like it!'. It can mean 'I've had a bad day so don't fuck with me!'" He hugged his husband tight and grinned. "The Colin Campbell-Abrams growl transcends language. It can fit any occasion. I've also known it to mean 'Damn, you're hot! Get over here and get naked!'"

“Wow!” Nate exclaimed, using David’s shoulder to leverage himself to his feet. “I hope that’s not what it meant *this* time.”

Colin shot him a look but said nothing.

“Entertaining as this chitchat may be,” Nate said, both arms around David’s neck from behind. “It’s past time for dinner and I’m hungry.”

“Whose night it is?” Colin mumbled. He shoved Joshua over on the couch until he could lie down and put his head in his lap.

“It’s Gardener-Reese night,” David said. He sighed and rose to his feet. “OK, Nate. Lead on. We’ll see if we can create a meal that’s as fascinating as this conversation.”

“Fat chance of that,” Colin said, squirming on the couch to get more comfortable.

“And why is that, Irish?” Nate asked, as David dragged him toward the kitchen.

“Because I won’t be involved.”

“Arrogant little twat!” Nate shot back over his shoulder.

Colin snickered and nestled against Joshua’s thigh. “I’m not little,” he mumbled.

Joshua laughed and shook his head while David and Nate disappeared into the kitchen. “I love these conversations,” he murmured, then stroked his husband’s hair and smiled.

“Joshua,” Colin said, capturing the hand that was smoothing his sandy locks, “I want your word that you don’t object to me being a cop again.”

“I don’t,” Joshua told him. “I object to you getting *shot* again, but I assume you object to that too.”

“Ha!” Colin blurted out. “In fucking spades! And that’s not going to happen.”

Joshua nodded but said nothing.

“I know, I know,” Colin said, waving away Joshua’s unspoken response. “I can’t promise that. But, Jesus, Josh, I can’t promise that I won’t get hit by a meteor either, but I *can* say with a fair amount of certainty that it’s highly unlikely!”

Joshua nodded and bent to press his lips to Colin’s, lifting him in his arms to cradle him close. “I know,” Joshua whispered. “And I do believe in you, Colin.” He sighed and nuzzled his forehead against the sandy scruff on

JANICE JARRELL

Colin's cheek. "It would all be so damned easy if I wasn't completely, hopelessly, eternally in love with you."

"Well, I wouldn't change that even if it did give you peace of mind."

"Want to go help with dinner?"

"No. But I *am* willing to hang out in the kitchen and watch *them* fix dinner while I entertain myself by tormenting Nate!"

Joshua laughed then bent and recaptured Colin's waiting mouth, slipping his tongue between his husband's lips in a slow, damp penetration that drew a quick inhale from Colin's chest.

"On the other hand," Colin murmured. His hand found the back of Joshua's neck and drew him into another deep, delicious meeting of lips. "Mm," he murmured. "Staying here and necking with you is an even better idea."

David stuck his head into the living room and opened his mouth to speak, then seeing them passionately kissing on the couch, he closed it again. "Nah," he muttered, and stepped back into the kitchen. "We'll have to manage without their help," he told Nate.

"Why?"

"They're, uh..." he winked at Nate, "...occupied."

Nate scoffed out a laugh and rolled his eyes. "Imagine my surprise."

CHAPTER 10

REASONS TO LOVE



Colin lounged at the end of the couch. His crossed ankles rested on the coffee table and he was amusing himself by tossing a baseball into the air and catching it. “What were you in love with?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Joshua asked. He was seated at the other end of the couch, a thick, heavy textbook in his lap. “What was I in *love* with? When?”

“I was an asshole all the while we were dating, if you can even *call* it dating. More like occasional fucking. I was a jerk ninety per-cent of the time. I never gave you much in the way of emotional... *anything*. The only intimacy we had was sexual and I was quick to disallow *that* every chance I got. I saw other guys right in front of your face. So, what the hell were you in love with?”

Joshua turned to face his husband. “Have you looked in the mirror lately?” He smirked in Colin’s direction, then winked.

“Oh, knock it off!” Colin said. He sat up and set the baseball on the table, then leaned toward his husband. “You’re not that shallow. It would take more than good looks to win your heart. At least to the point where you’d still be in love two months after a huge blow-up.”

“I understood the blowup,” Joshua said. He set his textbook on the coffee

table and scooted closer to where Colin sat. “Why are you asking me this stuff?”

“Because I want to know. What do you mean you understood the blowup?”

“I understood that there was something special about the O’Malley case. That it touched you on a personal level. I knew my Title IX report would set you off. I had no idea of *why* it was personal to you. I just knew it was.”

Colin nodded, his expression thoughtful.

“I don’t understand this line of questioning.”

“I want you to tell me what you were in love with.”

Joshua stared hard at him. “You really don’t know.”

“No. I don’t.”

Joshua’s head nodded in a slow, measured movement. He took Colin’s hand in his, then lifted it to his mouth and pressed a kiss to his palm.

“I was attracted to you from the moment I met you,” Joshua said at last, his voice low. “Who wouldn’t be? You were and *are* incredibly handsome and charismatic. You were the kind of cocky, confident, larger-than-life guy I typically fell for, only to get my heart severely broken. I would imagine anyone who met you was attracted to you, gay *or* straight.” His hold on Colin’s hand tightened. “But that was before I spent months as a Title IX consultant working with you. That’s when I stopped being attracted to you, and actually fell in love with you.”

“So, watching me hassle drugged-up frat boys made you fall in love with me?” Colin said, showing his dimples in a quick grin.

“Had nothing to do with frat boys,” Joshua said. “It had to do with discovering the kind of man you are *inside*. The real Colin Campbell. The man who lurks beneath all the fancy window-dressing. And believe me when I tell you that coming to know *that* Colin Campbell was nothing short of astonishing.”

Colin tilted his head and cocked a quizzical eye.

“Who *knew*?” Joshua said, his voice filled with warm affection. “Who *knew* that underneath that brash, arrogant surface there lurked a gentle, compassionate soul who would become a guardian angel to the assault victims who stumbled into his office.” He shook his head and used his hold on Colin’s hand to tug him closer. “It was an amazing thing to witness.”

“You’d hold their hands and tell them everything was going to be alright. You’d tell them you wouldn’t let anything hurt them.” He shook his head.

"And they believed, Colin! I could see those terrified people begin to rise up out of the ashes of their experience. I could see them begin to find themselves again after the horrible abuse they'd suffered. I could see them begin to heal right in front of my eyes because they believed in the big, tough Irish cop who said he wouldn't let any harm come to them."

"Josh," Colin whispered, "I wasn't all that – that," he bowed his head and Joshua saw a flush rise on his cheeks.

"Yes," Joshua said, leaning closer to him, "you were." He smiled and cradled Colin's chin in his hand, lifting his head until their eyes met. "You *were*," he insisted. "I was there, Colin. And I remember thinking as I watched you that you'd missed your calling. That you should have been a psychologist. Because you knew exactly what to say to help those sad, broken people find their voice again. You knew exactly what to do to help them realize that they were not to blame for the horror they had experienced. That that they might be victims, but they were not defeated. You were kind. You were gentle. And that's what I fell in love with."

Colin gazed into his eyes, his look steady, brows slightly furrowed. "Josh, you're making me sound heroic, and I wasn't."

"You were to the people you helped," Joshua replied. "You were every *bit* a hero. I saw it every day, Colin. I saw it in their eyes. I heard it in their voices. I saw it in their body language. You'd walk away and their eyes would follow you, their faces awestruck. They'd come into that police station battered and beaten. Bleeding. Bruised. Terrified. And I watched while you turned them back into functioning human beings ready to take their lives back, and in many cases ready to take on the bastard who'd done this to them. You gave those people the courage to fight."

"They had the courage," Colin said, his voice soft. "I just helped them realize it."

"And you think that's *nothing*?" Joshua asked. "That's one of the hardest things on Earth to do when someone's been assaulted. Help them find the strength to fight back."

"Didn't always work," Colin mumbled, staring down at the floor.

"No. Some of them couldn't fight anymore. Some of them couldn't deal with the added anguish of going through a prosecution. But even then, you didn't make them feel as though they'd failed. You let them know it was OK to say 'no' - to acknowledge that they couldn't take anymore."

Colin reached to caress Joshua's cheek. "God, Josh, I didn't expect – I mean this wasn't why I asked the question." He grimaced and averted his eyes.

"Yeah, I know," Joshua said. He bent forward and kissed Colin's cheek. "But what did you *think* I was going to say? That you had a cute smile and a great ass? Well, you did, and you DO. But that's not what I fell in love with. And that's not what *kept* me in love."

He drew in a deep breath through his nose and exhaled it slowly. "Every single one of those victims was your sister," he murmured, reaching to, once again, clasp Colin's hand. "I didn't know it then because I didn't know about Kathy. I didn't know all you'd gone through. I knew there was *something* lurking in your past. I knew you were in all kinds of pain. I knew that pain was what kept you from loving me."

"I loved you," Colin said quickly. "Almost from the day we met."

"Kept you from letting me love *you*, then," Joshua corrected. "You fought those feelings like a...,"

"... a wounded animal?" Colin suggested, cutting him off.

Joshua nodded. "Like a wounded animal. That's exactly what you were, and you had been for years." A shallow sigh escaped his lips. "God, Colin. It hurt me so much. To know you were suffering. To love you the way I did and to know you'd never let me help you."

"Well," Colin drawled, reaching to wrap Joshua in his arms and draw him close, "I wouldn't exactly say *never*." He grinned and kissed Joshua's lips, then settled him against his side. "You appear to have gotten through to me."

"Yeah!" Joshua spouted, laughing. "By sneaking out of town in the dead of the night leaving no forwarding address. Some strategy!"

Colin shrugged and pressed a kiss to Joshua's hair. "Whatever it takes."

Joshua turned slightly, a handful of Colin's T-shirt caught in his fist. He pressed his face against Colin's shoulder and drew in a deep breath. "So, you know what I was in love with now?"

"Yeah. The kindness and compassion I directed at everyone but YOU."

"You were never *unkind*," Joshua said. "You were honest. Bluntly honest. And truth to tell after a while I began to think maybe you were protesting a little too much."

"Is that a fact," Colin said, grinning.

"I mean tell me we're not in a romance *one* time or even several times,

OK. But to tell me every single time you *see* me? To deliver the same exact ‘this is only a sexual thing’ speech twenty-five days in a row? I began to question your sincerity.”

Colin threw back his head and laughed out loud. “You did, huh!”

“I did. I mean how many fucking times did you have to *say* it? Took all the strength I had not to suggest that you simply record your speech and play it back every time you saw me. Just to save yourself the bother of spewing it out all over again.”

“Oh, such a fucking smart ass!”

“Well, one does begin to wonder after a while.”

“Clever of you to keep your mouth shut,” Colin said, still grinning.

“Yeah. I figured all it would earn me was emotional demerits and a week without a phone call.”

“Emotional demerits? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Oh, don’t pretend you don’t know!” Joshua said, leaning away from Colin. “Anytime I’d get too emotional or too mushy you’d give me that sour-as-fuck look and be all pissy for the rest of the evening. And, of course, I’d get the ‘we’re not in a romance’ speech at least three times. And, yeah. You’d punish me by not phoning me for days on end.”

“You saw me almost every day at work!” Colin protested.

“Oh, you knew exactly how to freeze me out there too. You’d be ‘too busy’ to talk, or ‘too busy’ to have lunch, or ‘too busy’ to discuss a case.”

Colin snickered and ducked his head.

“Riiight. Don’t act all innocent. You know what I’m talking about.”

“Hey, I said at the onset of this conversation that I was a jerk ninety percent of the time!”

“Not ninety.”

“Humph!” Colin huffed.

“You were just scared.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me *that?*” Colin asked with a smirk.

“Oh, yeah, RIGHT! Tell the big, tough, alpha-male Irish cop that he’s terrified of love and intimacy. Wouldn’t THAT have gone over big!”

Colin nuzzled his face against Joshua’s shoulder and cackled like a loon. “Scaredy-cat!” he teased.

“You’re goddamned right I was. You wouldn’t have spoken to me for a month.”

The smirk disappeared from Colin's face. "I really was an arrogant son-of-a-bitch at times wasn't I."

"Like I said," Joshua told him, "you were just scared of love." His brow furrowed and he dropped his eyes.

"I was afraid I'd lose it again. And I was *so* afraid of losing it that I *lost* it."

"Odd how that works," Joshua replied, then poked Colin's ribs.

"Took me awhile to even figure out *why* I was so fucking miserable," Colin mused. He scoffed out a laugh. "Jeff is the one who nailed it for me. Jesus, he really gave me a going over."

"Good for Jeff."

"He kept telling me some other guy would get you." Colin glanced at Joshua and shuddered. "That's what really put the fear of god into me. I mean it was hard enough to swallow my pride and go to Illinois to win you back. But to show up there and discover you didn't *want* me anymore? That you were with somebody *else*?" He grimaced in fake horror, wide-eyed. "Talk about a crushing blow!"

Joshua laughed. "Oh yeah, fat chance of that."

Colin stared at him in silence for a long moment. "That was the moment I realized I was in love with you," he said finally. "Because that was the moment I realized I was more scared of losing you than I was of crawling to Glencoe and begging you to come home."

Joshua shot him a look. "You didn't *crawl OR beg!* I know it was hard for you though. Coming to Glencoe. Telling me about your life, your sister, your feelings."

"Not as hard as..." Colin ground out a noisy sigh and stopped. "Not as hard as other things. Like realizing how badly I'd treated you."

Joshua shook himself. "That wasn't the man you were. I knew that. That was just one, overwrought moment." He touched Colin's cheek. "I knew the man you were."

"The one with the great heart," Colin murmured, nuzzling against Joshua's hair.

"Exactly."

"And that's what you were in love with."

"And that's what I'm *still* in love with."

"My great heart rather than my great bod."

"Well, I'm in love with that *too!* But great bods fade after a while. Good

looks fade. None of that external stuff lasts forever. But you'll have that great heart for the rest of your life."

Colin stared into his eyes and nodded. "I'm glad you believe that. And for what it's worth I believe the same about you." He leaned back a bit and grimaced as if lost in thought. "Boil it all down - I just got lucky."

Joshua stared down at the floor but said nothing. After a while he huffed out a sigh and turned to face his husband. "I have to tell you, Colin, that the whole premise of this conversation bothers me."

"Why?"

"Because love doesn't respond well to reason and logic. Reasons why I love you? How about the incredible *joy* I feel anytime you walk into a room? How do you define that?"

"That's... attraction."

"No! It's not! Well, it's not *merely* attraction. There's something to be said for the chemistry that exists between two human beings. The indefinable *something* that draws you to one person which didn't even *exist* for ten thousand others no matter how good looking they might be! It takes more than physical attraction to send an electrified message to every atom in your body that *this* person will bring something magical to your life."

"Now you're going to tell me that we're soulmates," Colin said, his voice filled with humor.

"You don't think we are?"

"Josh, I think I love you and I think I always will. But *soulmates*? Hell, baby, I'm not even sure I *have* a soul!"

"Well you do. I've seen it, and it's gorgeous." He grabbed Colin's shirt in his fist and pulled him closer. "The most powerful experience we've had as a couple are... *when*? The times when we've been the closest. Isn't it when we make love and look into each other's eyes as we come?" He shook Colin gently. "I'm I wrong?"

"Other than when we said our wedding vows, no, you're not wrong." Colin said.

"That's two souls touching," Joshua whispered.

"That's two guys *coming*," Colin responded, then chuckled and nuzzled against Joshua's cheek. "I'm teasing you," he said, then hugged Joshua tighter and breathed out a frustrated sigh. "But please don't make me get into some

metaphysical discussion about how we were together in past lives and are one soul in two bodies and all that rot.”

“You think it’s *rot*?”

“I think it’s nebulous!” Colin blurted out. He released Joshua and leaned forward. “That stuff is as unsubstantial as a cloud. What I feel for you has substance, Josh! It’s not just some imaginary, maybe it exists - maybe it doesn’t bullshit! It’s as solid and real as this tabletop,” he said, slapping his hand against top of their coffee table.

“Are we soulmates? Who *cares*? And you know what I’d feel if I were given hand-to-god proof that we *weren’t*?” He wrinkled his nose and stretched making an odd squeaking noise before leaning toward Joshua once more. “I’d feel *nothing!* Absolutely nothing. Wouldn’t change one damned thing. All that soulmates stuff is blather. It’s just... *words*.” He glanced at Joshua from beneath long lashes. “Sorry.”

Joshua laughed out loud. “You don’t have to be sorry. I will remind you, however, that you DID ask the question. What was I in love with? Remember?”

“And being soulmates is part of that?”

“Well... no. It’s just how I feel.”

“And I just called it ‘rot’.”

“You also called it ‘blather’! But maybe it IS rot.”

“Maybe I’M rot!”

Joshua doubled over laughing. “You’re not rot.”

“I can think of times when I walked into a room and you definitely did NOT get some kind of electricity charged, joy-filled thrill!”

Joshua shook his head, still laughing softly. “Doesn’t mean I loved you any less. Yeah. You’re right. I’ve seen you stumble down the stairs, hungover from last night’s get-together at McCafferty’s, smelling like stale stout, dressed in yesterday’s underwear, farting, and belching, and grumbling with puffy, red eyes and a pissy attitude. But I still loved you just as much as I did the day we got married.”

“Yeah... but no joy-filled thrill for *that* guy, huh,” Colin chuckled. “I bet *that* scenario is not what you’re in love with.”

“Well, you’d be wrong,” Joshua told him. “It IS what I’m in love with because it’s *you*, Colin! No, you’re not always perfect any more than I am. But my love for you doesn’t depend on that. Who you are at the core of your

being is what I'm in love with. And that doesn't change. That good, decent man is always there... even when he smells like last night's stout."

"But he's not nearly as appealing," Colin teased, nudging Joshua with an elbow.

Joshua doubled over, laughing, then turned and wrapped his arms around Colin's neck. "I kinda like you like that."

"Belching and farting and smelling like stale stout?"

"Well, eventually you take a shower," Joshua said, "and if I love and accept you at times like that, maybe you'll do the same for me."

"I seldom see you like that," Colin said with a snicker. "I go overboard with the stout more often than you do." He wrinkled his nose. "A lot more often."

"And I tend to be a screaming, gay, drama-queen a lot more often than *you* do."

"I think you're kinda cute when you're all het up and spewing," Colin told him, smoothing his hair.

"*Het up and spewing?*" Joshua exclaimed, clutching Colin, laughing even harder. "Oh my god!"

"Yeah. You're like a gay version of 'I love Lucy'."

Still laughing, Joshua knuckled him in the ribs. "Now that's just *mean*."

Colin grabbed Joshua's hand and bowed his head, laughing too hard to reply and for a moment they tussled on the couch, Joshua still trying to knuckle Colin's ribs, Colin warding him off. Then they relaxed and Joshua spun sideways until he was lying across Colin's lap, held close in his arms. He carded his fingers through thick, wavy strands of sandy-blond hair and gazed up at the face he adored. His index finger traced a line along the arch of Colin's cheekbone, and he smiled. "I love your freckles."

"Well, that makes one of us," Colin drawled out, quirking an eyebrow as he made a comic face.

Joshua drew in a quick breath and tightened both arms around Colin's neck, pulling him tight against his chest. "Please don't ever go away," he said, his voice a breathy gasp.

"What the hell are you talking about? Go away *where*?"

"Just don't ever go away," Joshua half-moaned, his face pressed to Colin's shoulder. "I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear a life without you."

"Josh," Colin murmured. He tried to ease Joshua back, but he clutched Colin closer, refusing to let go.

"Don't let me go, Colin," he begged. "Hold me. Please hold me tight."

Colin frowned but tightened his arms around his husband, his fingers slid up the back of Joshua's head and closed around his dark locks. Not tight enough to hurt him. But tight enough to let him feel all of Colin's strength gripping him. "Honey, honey," he whispered. "I'm right here. And I promise you, I'm never going to let you go. Not ever."

He knew what this was. He could feel Joshua shaking in his arms. There were still those odd moments when the old panic struck his husband, paralyzing him with fear. Those unexpected moments when the dark memories took over and the terrors of the past recaptured him. "I'm right here, Josh," Colin murmured against Joshua's ear. "Right here with you. Real and solid and not going anywhere."

He rocked Joshua in his arms until he heard his breathing slow and felt the trembling ease, then cupped Joshua's chin and lifted it until their eyes met. "Where the hell would I go?" Colin asked. "And more to the point *why*? This is where I want to be, Josh. Here. In our home. With you. Trust me, I'm not going *anywhere*." Again, he quirked an eyebrow. "Why do I have to keep *telling* you that?"

"Because I'm an insecure Jew and I need to keep hearing it?" Joshua replied, leaning into Colin's touch.

"Yeah? Well knock it off. Because you know what that kind of talk does?" He lifted his eyebrows and peered at Joshua.

"Uhhh, makes your dick go soft?"

Colin tilted his head and smirked. "And you know you don't want *that!*"

"Heaven forbid," Joshua muttered, then nestled once again against Colin's shoulder.

"Where is this coming from, Josh? A minute ago we were laughing our asses off, and now you're clutching me like I'm stepping off a cliff."

"I dunno," Joshua muttered, his face pressed against Colin's shoulder. "Moments like that when we're so happy...."

"... naturally lead to thoughts of me disappearing from your life," Colin finished smoothly.

"I'm so sorry, Colin. It just hit me from out of nowhere."

"No need to be sorry, but you know, yet again..."

“Makes your dick go soft.”

Colin’s shoulders lifted in a shrug and he mugged comically. “Nothin’ I can do about it. Just a natural reaction.”

Face still pressed to Colin’s shoulder, Joshua shook with laughter. “Amazing how many things affect your dick that way,” he said finally.

“I’m a sensitive soul,” Colin said, then nudged him. “Get up. I’m hungry. Let’s go grab pizza or something.”

“I can cook.”

“No,” Colin replied, heaving himself to his feet. “In your weakened condition god knows what that might do to you.”

“I’m not in a weakened condition!”

“Sure you are,” Colin told him. He grabbed Joshua’s arm and pulled him toward the door, snagging his keys from the table as he walked. “Look’it you! You’re melting down! You think I’m about to evaporate! You need sustenance. You need pizza.”

“You mean *you* need pizza and I gave you a good excuse to have it,” Joshua said, following Colin out the door and down the porch steps.

On the porch, Colin stopped and turned to make sure the door was locked, and Joshua laced their fingers together. “I’m sorry,” he muttered.

“For what?”

“For my insecure moments,” he squinted at Colin, feigning guilt. “Has to be annoying.”

Colin wrinkled his nose then moved toward the porch steps, pulling Joshua along by their joined hands. “You keep on forgiving me for the times when my short fuse blows and I stomp around the house yelling like a madman at whatever’s pissing me off and I’ll have no problem overlooking your odd insecure moment.” He turned when he reached his car door and pulled Joshua forward into his arms. “Now, knock it off. Enough with the deep thoughts. It’s giving me a headache.”

“And yet again I remind you that YOU started this.”

“And now I’m ending it,” Colin said, then gently shoved Joshua toward the passenger side of the car. “Get in.”

Joshua climbed into the car and fastened his seat belt as Colin revved up the engine and backed from their driveway. As they started down the gravel road towards town, Joshua claimed Colin’s hand again and clasped it tightly. “Do you know now what I was in love with?”

JANICE JARRELL

“Sorta,” Colin replied. He shot a quick look Joshua’s way. “Thanks. Truth to tell, I wasn’t conscious of the qualities saw in me back then. Not really.” He shrugged. “I was just doing my job.”

Joshua laughed softly. He lifted Colin’s hand to his lips and kissed his knuckles. “I know you probably won’t get this, but that’s the thing I loved most. You weren’t aware of it. You were just being *you*.”

“And that’s good thing,” Colin said, grinning.

“My beautiful Irish love, that’s the *best* thing.”

CHAPTER II

NO DANGER THIS TIME



Joshua walked into the University of Virginia campus police station and glanced around. He was meeting Colin for lunch, and in his arms was a bag filled to the brim with the cheeseburgers, chili fries, and onion rings he had picked up on his way there. Seeing no one in the outer office, he walked to Colin's cubicle and stared down at his unoccupied desk.

A voice from behind spun him around. "Hey, Josh. Good to see you."

He reached to shake the offered hand of Colin's close friend and supervising lieutenant, Lenny Anderson. "Hi, Lenny. Where is he? I was supposed to meet him here for lunch." He hoisted the bulging bag of food and laughed. "It was his turn to pick what we eat, so naturally this thing is filled with cheeseburgers and chili fries." Again, he glanced around. "Where is he?"

Lenny's eyes darted to Colin's desk, then back to Joshua. "He...uh...well, he..."

"What, Lenny? Where is he?"

"Well," Lenny began, "a call came in and it involved a frat house where Colin's done business a few times..." He glanced up at Joshua, his face twisted in a guilty grimace. "The guys asked him to go along and he went."

"Was it a dangerous call?" Joshua asked.

"Nah. It was a disturbance call so it's unlikely that there'll be any real problems. But there's never any guarantee..."

“... that it won’t *get* dangerous,” Joshua finished for him. He studied the bag of food in his hand and frowned when he saw that it was shaking. “Have you heard from them?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean a damn thing,” Lenny said. “They rarely ever check in.” He nodded toward the chair near Colin’s desk. “Sit down. Relax. He should be here in a few minutes.” He laid his hand on Joshua’s shoulder and guided him to Colin’s desk where Joshua sank into the chair.

“Thanks, Lenny.”

“Josh, I’m sure there’s no need to worry. If there’d been a problem I would have heard.”

Joshua nodded, then spun toward the door as it burst open admitting a group of campus police officers, all laughing and chattering at the same time.

“Hey, Lenny!” One of them called as they entered. “No arrests but a few tickets. We confiscated a bunch of low-level drugs and one unlicensed pistol. Good haul!”

Colin turned toward his desk and froze when he spotted Joshua. He patted a fellow officer on the shoulder. “Talk to you later,” he muttered, then moved toward the desk where his husband waited.

“Hey, bud,” he said. He bent to press a kiss to Joshua’s hair and nodded toward the bag on his desk. “That lunch?”

“Filled to overflowing with everything you requested,” Joshua teased, his eyes fixed on the bag of food. “Food guaranteed to clog your arteries and stop your heart.” He opened the bag and began removing the contents, still avoiding Colin’s gaze. “You hungry?”

“Josh,” Colin said, his voice roughened.

“Yeah?” Joshua replied.

“Josh, look at me.” Colin dragged a chair to his desk and fell into it. “Josh!” he said again.

“I’m fine, Colin. Let’s eat.”

Colin’s hand cupped Joshua’s chin and lifted it until their eyes met. “We should talk.”

“We should *eat*,” Joshua replied, shoving Colin’s hand away. “I’m fine. We don’t need to talk about this.”

“Josh, clearly we do. D’you think I can’t tell when you’re upset?”

“I’m a little upset, yeah. But not with you.”

“There was no danger, Josh,” Colin assured him, then quirked his mouth in annoyance when Joshua burst into laughter.

“Now where’ve I heard *that* before?” Joshua exclaimed. He picked up a cheeseburger and held it out to his husband. “Just eat. If you insist that we discuss this, fine we’ll discuss it. But not here and not now. Tonight, after you get home.”

Brows still furrowed, Colin picked up his cheeseburger and took a bite. “I didn’t even go in,” he said, chewing. “I was outside yacking with some students.”

Joshua bowed his head and nodded, his eyes averted. “Colin, can this please wait ‘til we’re at home?”

“I don’t want you driving back to your office all antsy and het up,” Colin muttered.

Joshua laughed and shoved a container of chili fries at his husband. “Here. Drown your worries in that. I am *not*—as you so eloquently put it —*het up*.”

Colin’s face twisted in a skeptical grimace. “Horse shit.”

“Again, eloquently put.”

“C’mon Josh.”

“Colin, I’m fine.”

“Josh, there was no danger.”

Joshua froze, staring at the wall in front of him. After a long moment he sat his cheeseburger down. “There was a gun,” he said, his eyes still fixed on the wall above Colin’s desk.

“I wasn’t in the building,” Colin assured him. He reached to grasp Joshua’s arm. “I was outside. I didn’t even know they’d found it until we were on our way back.”

Joshua pressed his lips together then turned to face his husband. “This time,” he said, his voice a monotone. “You weren’t in the building *this time*.”

“Josh...”

“There was no danger *this time*,” Joshua continued. “Look, I’m fine not discussing this. But if you insist then let’s discuss it and not play word games. You asked me right up front if I minded you working part-time as a cop and I supported your decision. We talked about the fact that you’d be going out on calls now and then, and we both agreed that there was no way in hell you could promise that there’d be no risk. So please, for fuck’s sake, spare me the

phony nonchalance. Finding a gun *is* a big deal! The fact that this particular situation didn't turn lethal doesn't change that. And you can't EVER tell me a thing like that without adding the words '*this time*.'" He leaned toward Colin, his eyes narrow. "It didn't turn lethal *this time!*"

Colin ducked his head, his lower lip caught between his teeth.

"Anytime you go on a call you risk walking into a deadly situation and you damned well know it. You also know the risk gets exponentially higher anytime there's a firearm involved." He drew in a quick breath and glared at his husband whose eyes were still fixed on the floor. "Not two weeks ago a cop one county over was shot and killed during a traffic stop!" Joshua spat out. "So, kindly spare me the fucking bullshit!" He huffed out a rough sigh through clenched teeth. "Now can we *please* just eat our lunch, because this is the last goddamn conversation I want to be having in a room full of cops."

"OK," Colin muttered. "OK, Josh. I get it." He frowned at the cheeseburger in his hand and tossed it to the desk with a grimace. "I'm sorry."

"This is pointless," Joshua said, shooting to his feet. "Clearly neither of us is in the mood to eat, so I'm going back to work. I'll see you tonight."

"Josh, wait," Colin began, rising as well.

"No," Joshua said, wheeling away from him. "I won't wait! I'm done." He stalked through the police station's outer office and out the door with Colin following close behind him.

"Josh, please wait," he said, grabbing Joshua's arm. "Don't be all pissed about it."

"I'm not pissed because you went on a call," Joshua spat out. "I'm pissed about your 'it was no big deal, Josh' bullshit! It's insulting! And furthermore, it's a lie and you damned well know it!" He yanked his arm free of Colin's grip. "Don't fucking talk to me like I'm other fucking people!" he raged. "I'm the one who sat beside you for days while you struggled for every fucking breath! I don't deserve to be talked to like I'm some fucking ignorant douche!" He drew in a hissing breath and leaned so close to Colin that their faces were nearly touching. "*It was a big fucking deal!*" He spun away and stalked toward his car without looking back.

Colin watched him go, then grimaced and blew out a long sigh. "Fuck!"

"Hey," a voice behind him called. "You OK?"

Colin turned to see Lenny standing at the door, holding it open as he

waited for Colin to speak. Colin shrugged and shook his head. “Yeah, I guess. I was stupid and now he’s pissed.”

“Pissed that you went on the call?”

“No. Pissed that I tried to shine him on about it instead of taking it seriously.”

Lenny scoffed out a laugh. “Yeah, well I can’t see that strategy working with Josh.”

Colin huffed out an ironic laugh and moved toward the building. “I need to go home, Lenny,” he said. “I want to be there when he gets home from work, and I want to have dinner waiting for him. And maybe flowers...and candy.”

“And a blow job?”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

“You think you can schmooze him into forgiving you?”

“Oh, hell no! That might work as for openers, but after that I expect to do a fair amount of groveling.”

Lenny held the door as Colin strode through it and followed him back to his desk. “Colin, you can’t talk to Josh that way. You can’t minimize the risk involved in this work and expect him to swallow it. Not him. Not Josh. He went through too much. You guys confiscated a firearm today. You can’t expect him to shrug that off.”

“I was stupid,” Colin muttered, grabbing his keys then snagging his leather jacket with one finger. “I’ll make it up to him.”

“Stop on the way home and buy some knee pads,” Lenny advised with a grin. “You’re gonna need them.”

Colin snickered as he shrugged into his jacket. “Maybe they’ll have a buy one, get one sale going on.”

“Only if your luck changes,” Lenny said, patting Colin on the back as he moved toward the door. “See you, buddy.”

Colin waved without looking back.



WHEN JOSHUA GOT HOME THAT NIGHT THE HOUSE ON THE RIVANNA RIVER was dark, and he wondered for a moment if Colin was even home. But as he

moved up the steps leading to their porch, he saw Colin's shadowy silhouette racing to open the door for him.

"Hey," Colin said, taking a step back as Joshua entered. "Glad you're home."

"Look," Joshua began, his head bowed. "I'm sorry about today. I guess I..."

"No. Josh, stop," Colin interrupted, taking his hand. "C'mere a minute." He drew Joshua toward the kitchen.

"I smell pizza," Joshua said, throwing Colin a small smile.

"And that's not all," Colin replied. He drew Joshua into the darkened room and flipped on the light. At the center of their kitchen table a dozen long-stemmed red roses rested in a crystal vase. Next to them, several boxes of candy were scattered haphazardly. "I couldn't remember which ones you liked best," Colin muttered. "So, I got them all."

"Wow," Joshua breathed out. "You certain ticked all my boxes. Chocolate covered cherries, peanut butter cups..." He turned to Colin and laughed. "*KitKat bars?*"

"I thought you loved them!"

"I DO love them! I'm just shocked that you remembered."

Colin threw him a sheepish look and shrugged.

"Shit, Colin. Now I feel awful. I was a dick at the station today."

"No. You weren't. You were right. I was trying to minimize the situation, schmooze you into blowing it off because I didn't want to upset you." He wrapped both arms around Joshua's waist and drew him close. "But you were right. Anytime there's a firearm involved in any way, it's a big deal." He kissed Joshua's cheek. "I shouldn't have made light of it."

"I can't..." Joshua began, then shook his head and pressed his face to Colin's chest. Both fists clenched, clutching handfuls of Colin's shirt. "Colin, I can't..." he began again, then stopped, his breath catching.

"I know, baby. You can't be bullshitted where that kind of thing is concerned. You've seen too much. You've been through too much." He nuzzled against Joshua's cheek, rocking him in his arms. "Lenny really chewed me out after you left. Told me 'You can't talk to Josh that way'."

Joshua shrugged and leaned back, drawing in a deep breath. "And it's also possible that I was overreacting a bit."

"You're entitled."

“Maybe, but it’s still unnecessary and annoying.”

“Lenny wanted me to greet you on my knees offering up a blow job along with the flowers and candy.”

Joshua bent over, laughing, both hands gripping Colin’s arms. “An entertaining notion, but not really necessary,” he told his husband, then nodded toward the pizza boxes on the counter. “Ready to eat? As I recall we didn’t finish our lunch.”

“I can’t eat until I know I’m forgiven.”

“We’re both forgiven I hope.” He grabbed a plate and moved toward the steaming pizza boxes. “How many kinds did you get?”

“Four I think.”

“Holy crap, Irish, we’ll be eating pizza for a month!”

Colin began piling slices onto his plate. “Wanna bet?”

CHAPTER 12

BACK IN THE BLUES



Joshua was standing at the kitchen counter pouring two glasses of orange juice when he heard the unmistakable sound of handcuffs being opened and closed. Without turning around he lifted his head and smiled. “You gonna use those on *me*, big boy?”

“Only if you’re a *bad* boy,” Colin replied. He moved to where Joshua stood and pressed himself against his back. “You been a bad boy?” he asked, his voice a blood-slow rasp against Joshua’s ear.

“Not so far today,” Joshua said, leaning back against his husband’s body. “But I’ll be available later if you’re in the mood to turn me *into* one.” He spun to face Colin, then pushed him to arm’s length, his eyes sweeping up and down Colin’s muscular frame. “God *damn*,” he breathed out. “You are *so* fucking hot in those police blues.”

“Still a sucker for the uniform huh, bud,” Colin said, grinning. He twirled the handcuffs once around his index finger then snapped them to his belt with an expert flick of his wrist.

Joshua’s only response was a soft laugh and a helpless shrug.

“Well, I don’t have time to accommodate you now,” Colin said, picking up a glass of juice. “But if you’re here when I get home...” He arched an eyebrow and winked.

“Count on it.”

Colin finished his juice then swiped his hand across his mouth and beckoned to Joshua pushing himself away from the counter where he'd been leaning. "C'mere," he muttered. "Give me a hug. I gotta go."

Joshua wrapped his arms tight around Colin's neck. "See you tonight," Colin said. He started to back away, but Joshua didn't release him. He hung on, his arms tightening, drawing Colin closer.

"Josh?" Colin said. He grabbed both of Joshua's hands, tugging them down. "What's up, bud?" He kept Joshua's hands in his, refusing to let him go. "Josh! What's up!"

"Just..." Joshua shook himself and husked out a noisy breath. "Just be careful out there, OK?"

"Josh," Colin purred, whispering Joshua's name as one long, soft, drawn out syllable. "Baby, I'm gonna be at a desk doing community service outreach with assault victims and their families. Not exactly dangerous duty."

Joshua nodded. "I know. I'm just...saying! That's all."

Colin lifted both of Joshua's hands to his lips and kissed them. "You love me in the blues and you hate me in the blues," he murmured against Joshua's fingers.

"*I know* you in the blues," Joshua said, then sighed and stepped back. "I know what you *say* you'll be doing, Colin, and I'm sure you're being honest with me. But I also know that emergencies come up. It's a police station. Things happen. Bad things. And if a campus cop needed help...if one of them got...got..." he drew in a sharp breath "...injured, you'd be out the door and gone before anyone could blink."

Colin pressed his lips together. He drew in a deep breath and blew it out. "OK. I won't try to tell you that can't happen. You're a cop's wife and you know damned well it can."

"I'm not a cop's *wife*!" Joshua protested in a huff.

Colin smirked and wrapped both arms around his waist. "OK. Cop's husband. Same thing. You know what can happen..."

"Because it already has," Joshua broke in.

"Right. It already has." Colin pressed his forehead against Joshua's. "All I can promise you is that I won't take unnecessary risks." He lifted his head, then tipped Joshua's head up to meet his eyes. "And I promise you this too, and this you can take to the bank: I remember what we went through when I was shot. I will always do everything in my power to be certain we never go

through that again. And you are always, always, *always* in my mind and heart, Joshua. My primary goal in life is that you're never hurt that way again."

Joshua nodded. "OK, then," he breathed out. "Have a great first day back."

Colin nodded, then bent and pressed his lips to Joshua's, molding their mouths together for a very long time. Then he turned and moved down the hallway to the closet. He opened the gun safe, removed his weapon, turned the safety off and then on, checked that there wasn't a bullet in the chamber, then holstered his weapon and strode out the front door.

Joshua stood staring after him, his teeth clenched. "*Goddamn it!*" He truly did love the sight of Colin in his police officer's uniform. At the same time, he never once saw those starched blue garments without his mind flashing to the horrifying day over a year ago when he had seen those same articles of clothing scattered on a trauma room floor, soaked in Colin's blood.

The image no longer haunted him the way it once had. Time and therapy had helped him, and he had begun to heal from the aftereffects of that terrible event. But anytime Colin donned the blue uniform, that image still flashed in front of Joshua's eyes, quick and unexpected like a bolt of lightning on a clear, sunny day.

He knew he would never be free of that image or of the fear that tightened his chest any time Colin walked out the door wearing that blue uniform. No amount of therapy could remove that weight from Joshua's stomach. It lay there, dense and unyielding, heavy as a stone. *I could lose him*, Joshua thought. *I damn near did lose him*. That awareness—that fear—was something he would have to live with for the rest of his life.

He had breathed a huge sigh of relief when Colin retired from the campus police force. He thought they were safe. He thought he could breathe again. He thought he'd never again feel the jagged edge of anxiety that sliced through his chest anytime he saw Colin walk out the door dressed in his police officer's uniform. The blade in his heart. The knowledge that he may have just seen his husband alive for the very last time.

But Colin was Colin, and when his former supervising lieutenant, Lenny Anderson, offered him a one-day-a-week position working for the campus police, he couldn't turn it down.

Joshua shrugged into his overcoat and picked up his briefcase. He had a long day ahead of himself. Half his day would be spent at the Rainier Clinic

where he was head of the Trauma Division, the rest would be spent at the Center for Clinical Psychology, seeing patients as part of his training as a forensic psychologist. He wouldn't have time to fret about Colin. But he also knew he'd fret anyway.

When he arrived home that night, Colin's car was not in the driveway. He started fixing their dinner, hoping that following his normal routine would dispel any anxiety he might be feeling. They'd spoken earlier, and Colin said his first day back was routine but enjoyable. Nothing in the call gave Joshua cause for concern and he forced himself to focus on preparing their grilled chicken. Nonetheless, he sagged against the counter, feeling his entire body wilt with relief, when he heard Colin's car pull into the driveway.

He reached the front door just as Colin walked through it and threw both arms around his neck, gripping him with every ounce of strength he possessed, his face pressed against the cool smoothness of Colin's leather jacket.

"Hey, bud," Colin murmured. He held Joshua close for a moment, then tried to back away. "Josh, let me get rid of this weapon."

Joshua's head gave a taut shake, holding Colin even tighter.

"It's OK," Colin said. "It's OK, baby. I'm home now. I'm right here with you." He rocked Joshua in his embrace for a long time before he finally felt Joshua relax in his arms, his forehead pressing against Colin's chest. Colin lifted Joshua's chin until their eyes met. He tried to speak, but couldn't and bowed his head, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"Sorry," Joshua blurted, taking a step backward. He tilted his head toward the hall closet. "Go ahead."

Colin huffed out a noisy breath then moved past Joshua and down the hall. Once his gun was safely stored, he trailed his husband into the kitchen and moved to stand close behind him. "Hey," he said, wrapping both arms around Joshua's waist. He propped his chin against Joshua's shoulder then turned his face to nuzzle against his cheek. "Do we need to have a conversation, bud?"

Joshua shook his head but gave no other reply.

"Josh? C'mon, baby. You and I don't play each other like this. Talk to me."

Joshua picked up two plates, now filled with food, and moved toward the

dining room. “What’s to say, Colin? I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted that way.”

Colin scowled and trailed after him. “Josh, wait.” He grabbed Joshua’s arm and turned him to face him. “I don’t want you to be afraid.”

Joshua scoffed out a laugh, then sat the plates on the table and gestured to a chair. “Let’s eat.”

Colin took his seat then reached to grab Joshua’s wrist. “I’m serious. I don’t want you to be afraid!”

“You don’t get to say that!” Joshua blurted out, yanking his wrist from Colin’s grasp. “You don’t get to ask for that, you really don’t, Colin. I don’t care what you want, that’s just not on the table.”

“Josh...” Colin began, but Joshua cut him off.

“No, Colin. Stop right there. You wanted to be a police officer again, and I fully supported that decision. But included in that decision is the fact that I now have to live in fear. You’re a cop. I’m going to be afraid. That’s what *you* have to live with.”

“I can say ‘no’ to it,” Colin said, leaning toward Joshua. “I can quit. Lenny would understand.”

“No!” Joshua protested. “I don’t want that!” He caressed Colin’s cheek. “Colin, there isn’t a police officer’s spouse anywhere on planet Earth who doesn’t feel fear when the one they love walks out the door dressed in those police blues. Not one. If you love a cop, you’re going to be afraid. That’s just the way it is.” He shook his head. “I don’t want you to quit.” He met Colin’s eyes and leaned closer to him. “But I do want you to stop asking for the impossible.”

“So that’s the burden I have to bear,” Colin muttered. He picked up a fork and stared down at his plate, toying with his food. “I have to live with the fact that what I do scares the hell out of you.”

Joshua motioned to Colin’s plate. “Don’t play with it. Eat it.” He picked up his own fork and shrugged. “Look. I’m not paralyzed with fear. I’m not so filled with anxiety that I’m dysfunctional. It’s not like that.”

“Humph,” Colin grunted, still staring at his food. When he looked up at Joshua his brow was furrowed. “Do you want me to change into something else,” he asked, his hand gesturing to his uniform.

“Why? I love you in your police blues.”

“Doesn’t make you anxious?”

“You look incredibly handsome,” Joshua told him.

“It used to give you panic attacks.”

“It doesn’t anymore.”

Colin nodded, still frowning, then returned to his dinner.

“I will say this though,” Joshua added, his voice thoughtful. “I still see that image. I think I always will. It flashes in my mind every single time. Just for a half second, but I still see it.”

“My uniform on the floor of the trauma room,” Colin muttered.
“Drenched in my blood.”

“Yeah.”

“This is certainly a cheerful dinner,” Colin commented causing Joshua to burst into laughter.

“It’s fine,” he said, reaching to grasp Colin’s hand. “It doesn’t affect me the way it used to. It’s just a memory. It’s there for a second, I dismiss it, and it goes away.”

Colin coughed out a dubious sound, his face twisted in doubt. “C’mon, Josh.”

“Don’t you have images like that?” Joshua asked. “You’re a cop. You’ve seen awful stuff. Don’t any of those memories ever flash in front of your eyes?”

“I suppose,” Colin grumbled, still scowling, his eyes averted.

“Well...” Joshua said, then shrugged. “That images flashes in front of my eyes at times.” He tightened his grip on Colin’s hand. “It’s not just *your* uniform that does it. If I see *any* police officer’s blue uniform that images flashes in my mind.” He shrugged again. “And I suspect it always will.”

“Well, that’s just *peachy*,” Colin muttered, his voice edged with sarcasm.

“That’s just the way it is,” Joshua said.

“Josh,” Colin said, “you know, don’t you, that the likelihood that I’ll be injured again while I’m on duty is practically zilch.”

Joshua tilted his head back and barked out a mocking laugh, then met Colin’s eyes, his own hard as steel. “It’s the ‘practically’ that turns that sentence into *art*.”

“I’m serious!”

“So am I!” Joshua snapped. “If statistics and logic had any role here, your reassurance might mean something, Colin. But my fear doesn’t come from a logical place. If I could ‘logic’ myself out of being afraid I’d look at statistics

regarding airplane crashes and relax. But I don't! I've got white knuckles every time I fly! Because logic doesn't figure into this!"

Colin rasped out a sigh.

"Things like fear and doubt and insecurity don't respond well to statistics," Joshua told him. "So, your argument is rubbish."

Colin leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over his knee. He made no reply, and instead stared out the dining room window, his face sullen.

"You can't have it both ways," Joshua told him. "I know that's what you want, but you can't have it. If you're going to be a cop—and you *are*, you've made that much clear—then I'm going to be afraid every time you don the blues."

Colin grimaced, and his scowl deepened.

"Colin, it's not like you're going out the door to shuffle paper in an office somewhere. You're not a bank teller. You're not a checkout boy at a grocery store. You're a cop, and you're going out the door to deal with the ugliest, most brutal side of humanity."

Colin tapped his fork on the kitchen table, his gaze still focused beyond their dining room windows to where the Rivanna River flowed. "When I was at work today," he muttered, "I had a *very* different image in my head about what was going to happen when I got home tonight."

Joshua laced their fingers together and laughed. "That can still happen. I'm always up for a make-out session with my sexy cop."

Colin arched an eyebrow. "Yeah? All this talk of death and blood-soaked uniforms hasn't dampened your enthusiasm?"

Joshua shook his head, still chuckling. "Nothing dampens my enthusiasm for making love with you, Colin. Nothing."

"I still don't like it. I don't like knowing you're scared."

"Talk to your fellow officers. Ask what *their* spouses feel! I think you'll discover that I'm not unusual in that regard."

Colin growled out an unintelligible response.

"As long as you're going off to work with a gun on your hip, I reserve the right to feel anxious about it. If I'm tough enough to live with it so are you."

Colin stood and began to gather up their dirty dishes. "OK," he mumbled. "I suppose you're right. And I *have* talked to other officers about it and you're right about that too. Their wives, their kids, they all feel fear and

stress about what we do.” He shot Joshua a look. “You should form a support group at the clinic.”

“You know what?” Joshua said, following him into the kitchen. “That’s a damned good idea. I’m amazed it doesn’t already exist.” He grabbed Colin’s arm. “Will you ask Lenny about it? Ask if it’s OK for me to start at your precinct?”

Colin sat the dishes in the sink then turned and wrapped both arms around Joshua’s waist. “Of course I’ll ask him. And I’m sure he’ll say yes. He’ll probably sign Susan up right on the spot,” he added, referring to Lenny’s wife.

“I’ll talk to Miranda about it tomorrow,” Joshua replied, then cradled Colin’s face between his palms. “I hope you’re not mad at me.”

“For what?”

“For being a scaredy-cat.”

“You’re not a scaredy-cat,” Colin murmured, then bent and kissed him, then kissed him again, his tongue sliding slow and delicious around the outline of Joshua’s mouth. “You’re as brave a man as I have ever met. You married *me*, didn’t you?”

Joshua’s only response was a soft chuckle.

“Don’t get much braver than *that*,” Colin said, then slid his damp mouth down the long slope of Joshua’s throat. “What say we go upstairs?” He murmured against Joshua’s skin. “And I’ll let you get me *out* of these police blues that give you so much anxiety.”

“Sounds like a deal,” Joshua said, his breath growing shallow and uneven.

“Mm,” Colin moaned. “It does indeed.” He tightened his arm around Joshua’s waist and drew him toward the stairs. “And if you’re a good boy I’ll even let you borrow my handcuffs.”

“Thought only *bad* boys got to use those,” Joshua teased.

Colin laughed. “There are times when being both is a good thing.”

“And this is one of those times?”

“You bet your gorgeous ass it is,” Colin said, moving them both up the stairs to their bedroom. “C’mon, my love. Let’s make some new memories. Some better ones.”

CHAPTER 13

GOING ON A DATE



Joshua was sprawled on the couch, slouched so low that his head was halfway down the back cushion. His legs stretched across the width of the coffee table.

“Do you want to lie down?” Colin suggested, chuckling. “You can put your head in my lap.”

Joshua rolled his eyes up to peer at his husband. “Tempting though that idea is on *many* levels, no. I’m just moping. Ignore me.”

Colin nodded and reached to take Joshua’s hand. “What’s wrong, bud?”

“Nothing really. Just...” He shook himself and grimaced, “I’m frustrated and sick of this quarantine life. Sick of watching this country slide into the crapper. Sick of fretting over this goddamned virus. Just...sick.” He pressed Colin’s hand to his lips. “I’m being a whiney little bitch. I say again, ignore me.”

“I’m not going to ignore you. What I *am* going to do is take you out on a date.”

Joshua wrapped Colin’s hand in both of his and pressed it to his chest. “We can’t go on a date,” he muttered, his voice despondent. “McCafferty’s is closed. All our favorite restaurants are closed. Our two best friends are recovering from COVID-19. We can’t even get take-out without masking up like we’re prepping for a bank robbery.” He pressed Colin’s hand to his

lips and sighed against it. “How the hell are we supposed to go out on a date?”

“Sit up,” Colin demanded. He grabbed Joshua’s arm and pulled him into an upright position. “You just be ready tomorrow when I get home and don’t ask questions.”

“When you get home from *where*? ”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Colin, what are you going to...”

“Didn’t I just tell you not to ask questions? ”

“But... but...”

Colin pressed his index finger to Joshua’s lips. “Shh!” Joshua’s mouth opened, but before he could speak Colin raised his eyebrows in warning and once again laid his finger over Joshua’s lips. “Shh!”

Joshua closed his mouth as he stared at Colin, a perplexed expression etched across his handsome, angular features. *I don’t know what he’s got in mind*, he thought. *But whatever it is, he’s keeping it to himself*.



AS THEY SIPPED THEIR COFFEE THE FOLLOWING MORNING, JOSHUA LAID A HAND on Colin’s arm. “Listen, do you need your study for anything pressing this afternoon? I’ve got two online counseling sessions scheduled, and I’d like to do them there if I may. It’ll only be a couple of hours, and it would at least give the appearance of privacy.”

“First off,” Colin said, “it’s not *my* study. It’s ours. So, of course I won’t mind. I won’t be here anyway. I’ve got a couple errands to run.” He quirked his brow. “What time will you be done?”

“Around three. Why?”

“Don’t plan anything for after that.”

“And yet again...why?”

Colin leaned toward him and grinned. “Because I say so, that’s why.” He glanced at his watch and grimaced. “I’ll go clear the desk for you, then I gotta scoot.” He stretched out his hand toward Joshua’s chest, and when Joshua followed it with his eyes, Colin flipped his nose. “See ya later, bud.”

While Joshua watched, Colin bounded up the stairs and into the study. “I’ll clear all this crap away,” he called down.

"You're calling your beloved research study 'crap'?" Joshua teased from the foot of the stairs.

Colin strode out of the study and down the steps. "For these purposes, yes." He nodded toward the study door. "You're all set." He pressed a quick kiss to Joshua's cheek, barely breaking stride, then grabbed his leather jacket and moved to the door. Before opening it, he spun to face Joshua and stabbed an index finger at him. "Be ready! You hear?"

"Anytime after three," Joshua replied. "I'll be ready. But Colin, can't you just tell me..."

"No!" Colin said, cutting him off. He tossed his keys into the air and caught them, then strode through the door and onto the porch. "Be ready!" he called back, his voice growing more distant as he trotted to his car and got in.

"What in the *hell* is he up to?" Joshua wondered aloud.



HIS COUNSELING SESSIONS WENT SMOOTHLY, AND HE WAS CARRYING HIS computer and a manilla folder filled with notes back downstairs when he heard Colin's car pull into the driveway. He peered out the dining room window as he deposited everything on the table and saw Colin bounding toward the porch, a huge grin lighting his handsome Irish face. Joshua turned just as the door burst open.

"You ready?" Colin asked. "I told you to be ready!"

"Honey, I'm ready," Joshua replied, walking toward him. "But what the hell am I ready for?"

Colin grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the door. "You'll see. C'mon!" Then he hissed out a frustrated breath. "Damn!" he blurted out, then nudged Joshua toward the door. "Go on, Josh. Wait for me in the car. I have to get something." He moved toward the kitchen, slowing only long enough to once again nudge Joshua toward the door. "Go on! I'll be right behind you."

Joshua left the house and ambled toward Colin's car, taking his time, peering over his shoulder as he moved to try to catch a glimpse of what Colin was doing. All he managed to see was a hazy shadow, which darted from the kitchen and toward the front door. "Go on!" Colin urged as he left the house, clutching a shopping bag under his arm. "I'm coming." He paused long

enough to lock the door, then moved toward his car where Joshua stood waiting.

“What the hell’s in the bag?”

“Just never you mind,” Colin muttered, pressing the button to unlock his car. “You’ll find out soon enough.” He placed the shopping bag on the floor behind the driver’s seat then got into the car.

Joshua clambered in as well, then shot Colin a sharp glance and inhaled deeply. “Good lord above, it smells fantastic in here!” He spun to peer into the back seat, but Colin gently punched his shoulder.

“Now, now,” he said, shaking his finger. “No peeking.”

“I can *smell* the food,” Joshua told him. “It’s making my mouth water.”

“It damned well *should*,” Colin chuckled. “Came from Silk Thai.”

“Our favorite Thai restaurant?”

“The very same,” Colin replied. “You’ll also find a six-pack of Murphy’s back there. But we can’t open them ‘til we stop.”

“Aren’t you the one who’s so fond of telling me that there’s not a cop in this state who’d actually give you a ticket?”

Colin glanced his way and grinned. “Could be. But I’m not in the mood to put it to the test. Not today.” He took Joshua’s hand in his and lifted it to his lips, kissing Joshua’s knuckles before lowering their joined hands to the console.

“Where are we going?”

“Someplace I’ve never been, and I don’t think you have either,” Colin said. “Now just sit back and relax.” He dropped Joshua’s hand and reached to where his phone was attached to the dashboard and tapped the screen twice.

Music began to play, echoing through the extremely expensive speakers Colin had added when he purchased his car. The opening strains of the first song caused Joshua to tilt his head back and laugh. It was the Irish group The High Kings singing one of Joshua’s favorite Irish songs, “Fields of Athenry”.

“Wow,” he said, grinning at Colin. “I get the High Kings? This is some occasion.”

“It’s a date,” Colin informed him.

Joshua shot him a disbelieving look. “A *date*?”

“You dared me,” Colin said, guiding the car onto the I-64 expressway. “And you know I can’t let that stand.”

“How did I dare you?”

“You said we couldn’t go on a date,” Colin said. “And I am in the process of proving you wrong.”

“Sweetie, I didn’t mean to...”

“Nope,” Colin said. “You can’t take it back now. You challenged me.”

“Can I ask where we’re going on this date?”

“You can *ask*,” Colin said, shooting him a quick grin.

“C’mon, babe. Where’re we going?” He smiled as the music changed to their favorite Chicago song “We Can Last Forever”. “Is this a compilation? Did you do this?”

Colin smiled. “Of course, I did! Got all our favorite songs on it. And I’m not telling you where we’re going. But relax because we’ve got about an hour’s drive ahead of us.”

“Won’t the food get cold?”

“Nope. It’s in thermal bags. Camala at Silk Thai loaned them to me.”

“What’s in there? C’mon, Colin,” he plead, reaching to clutch Colin’s arm. “Tell me.”

Colin heaved a huge sigh. “Fine! If you insist. The menu for tonight consists of a chicken satay appetizer, followed by a main course of massaman curry and pad thai.”

“Colin, it sounds wonderful!”

“And,” Colin added, shooting him a dimpled grin, “there’s another bag back there containing a blueberry pie and a pint of butter pecan ice cream.”

“I hope that one’s in a cooler!”

“It is.”

“Colin, no matter where we end up, this is a really sweet thing for you to do.”

“I’m a really sweet guy.”

“You’ll get no argument out of me.”

They chatted easily as they listened to the compilation of songs that Colin had programed for them to enjoy until finally Colin left the freeway and steered the car onto the Blue Ridge Parkway, one of the most scenic routes in all of America.

“It’s so beautiful here, Colin,” Joshua said, his face pressed to the window. “It reminds me of Ireland.”

“That’s why I wanted to bring you here.” He tapped Joshua’s shoulder. “What would be your idea of a *perfect* date?”

“You and me, alone in our home, snuggling on the couch while we watch a movie.”

“Really?” Colin asked, shooting Joshua a sidelong glance, wrinkling his nose. “That doesn’t seem like enough. I mean, I agree with you,” he added. “That’s my idea of a perfect date too, but it doesn’t feel like I’d be giving you anything really special.

“You’d be giving me *you*,” Joshua said. His eyes dropped and even through his olive skin, Colin could see him flush.

“I want to give you more than just me.”

“*Just you?*” Joshua said, turning sideways in the seat to face him. “*JUST you?*” He breathed out a soft laugh. “Colin that’s everything. Having you is...*everything*.”

Colin started to speak but Joshua cut him off. “When I was in Glencoe after we fought...” He stopped and drew in a breath, began to speak, then stopped again.

“Say it.”

“You can’t *imagine* how much I missed you. How I longed for even the sound of your voice. I tried to figure out ways I could call you and listen to your voicemail message without you knowing it was me, but I couldn’t come up with a way to do it.” He shot a glance at Colin and his flush deepened. “It’s embarrassing to even say that.”

“Why?” Colin muttered. “I felt exactly the same way. Though I was much less inclined to admit it, even to myself.”

“I never thought I’d see you again,” Joshua said, his voice low.

“And then there I was,” Colin replied. “Sitting there big as life drinking tea with your mom.”

“I thought you’d come to Chicago for work and only looked me up to apologize for yelling at me.”

Colin laughed aloud. “Right. When have I *ever* apologized for yelling.”

“Many times.”

Colin huffed a breath through his nose. “I’m sure you must be talking about somebody else.”

“Right,” Joshua laughed then paused in thought. “I was beating myself up internally for feeling this huge burst of joy and hope when I saw you sitting there.”

Colin laughed again then shrugged. “I figured you’d toss me out on my Irish ass.”

Joshua’s face quirked comically but he gave no response.

“Well, I knew one thing,” Colin said, smirking. “I had every intention of bringing my ‘A’ game that day. I was gonna throw every bit of Irish charm I could muster at you until you gave in.”

“I’ll tell you something,” Joshua said his words measured. “If you hadn’t said those three little words, I’d still be in Glencoe.”

“*What* three words?” Colin questioned, laughing.

“Well now, you just have to *guess*.”

“Let’s have sex?” Colin suggested.

Joshua scoffed and rolled his eyes but remained silent.

“Well, you pried them out of me so what are you complaining about?”

“*Pried* them out of you?” Joshua objected, laughing himself.

“You really weren’t going to come back with me unless I said ‘I love you?’”

“Absolutely not. And wipe that smirk off your face.”

“Me?” Colin teased. “Smirk?? He leaned forward in the seat, peering at the road ahead of them. “We’re almost there.” He shot another sidelong glance at Joshua. “After telling me that being with me is everything you weren’t gonna come back with me unless I said ‘I love you?’”

“Being with you *is* everything, Colin. But without those three words...” He shook his head and fell silent.

“Yeah? Without those three words?”

“I guess...” Joshua began, then stopped. “I guess I wouldn’t have believed you really meant it. I knew you didn’t want to say those words. Didn’t want those feelings. That’s why I left in the first place.”

“I thought you left because I blew my stack at you.”

“I left because you wouldn’t love me. Because you wouldn’t let me love *you*. Every time I tried you nearly bit my head off.”

Colin snickered. “Yeah, well, that’s what you get for falling in love with an Irishman.” He pointed to his right. “There it is!” He pulled the car into a nearly abandoned lot and parked in front of a high stone wall.

“Ravens Roost Overlook,” Joshua said, reading from a plaque. “I’ve heard of this place.”

“Yep,” Colin said. “Best view in Virginia, or so I’ve heard.” He got out of the car and opened the door to the back seat. “I’m taking you out to dinner,”

he told Joshua, then handed him a shopping bag. “Here’s our plates and silverware.” He pointed to a nearby picnic table. “You want to set the table while I bring the food?”

“And the beer!” Joshua reminded him, grinning.

“Damn right,” Colin muttered, fumbling with several thermal bags.

Joshua laid out their dinnerware while Colin removed several still-steaming containers and arranged them on the picnic table. “There!” He said finally, gazing down at the results of their combined effort. He lifted his head and smiled at Joshua. “Doesn’t that look great? You hungry?”

Joshua stared at him for a moment, then strode to his side and wrapped both arms around his neck. “Oh my god, you are so fucking wonderful,” he whispered against Colin’s neck, his voice choked. “My heart nearly stops beating in my chest when I think about how much I love you.”

“Well, we sure as hell don’t want *that!*” Colin said, rocking Joshua against his body. “C’mon, bud. Your food’s getting cold, and I didn’t do this to make you cry.”

“I’m not crying,” Joshua mumbled. He swiped his damp cheek against Colin’s shirt then moved to sit down at the picnic table.

They sat facing each other, taking their time as they ate, relishing each of the delectable dishes which Colin had ordered. “God, the *smells!*” Joshua exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Colin replied, “and not just the food. The air here smells amazing.”

“We haven’t had a lot of fresh air lately.”

“Not nearly enough,” Colin agreed.

Joshua reached to take his hand. “This is the best date we’ve ever been on. I don’t know how to thank you for this, Colin.”

Colin smirked as he laced their fingers together. “Well, I actually have a couple ideas in that regard.”

“Smart-ass!”

Colin stood and drew Joshua to his side. “C’mon. Let’s check out the view.” He led Joshua to the stone wall, beyond which lay the breathtaking vista of the Shenandoah Valley. The ground fell away in a dizzying precipice only a few feet from the wall and Joshua grabbed Colin’s arm as he moved to perch on it. “Baby, please don’t!”

“You don’t want to sit on the wall?”

"Uh, well," Joshua stammered, then tugged Colin back another few inches. "Among my many failings is a fear of height. Can we just look at the valley from here? I'm scared for you to sit on that wall. If you fell..." His voice trailed off and his eyes dropped. "I'm sorry."

Colin laughed and wrapped both arms around him. "Why be sorry?" He turned them both to face the view before them. The sun was setting and the entire valley beneath them was lit with a golden glow. "Looks just as good from here," Colin said, then pressed a kiss to Joshua's temple. "We don't have to sit on the wall. That's not a prerequisite for this date. I wanted you to relax and enjoy yourself, not struggle to cope with your deepest fears."

Joshua wrapped both arms around Colin's waist and they held each other close as they watched the sunset, with Joshua's head resting on his chest while Colin hummed a soft, wordless melody. "Perfection," Joshua whispered. He lifted his face to receive Colin's kiss and tightened his arms to press their bodies even closer. "Thank you," he whispered finally, his fingers moving to caress Colin's face. "You're the most wonderful man alive, and I am so blessed to be your husband." He drew in a trembling breath. "And please believe me, I love you with my whole heart and soul."

Colin kissed him again. "Why wouldn't I believe you?" He nuzzled against Joshua's cheek. "I was never a big fan of true love," he murmured finally. "Made fun of the idea of lovers who were 'meant to be'." His fingers tangled in Joshua's dark curls. "But you made a believer out of me, Josh. We belong together, you and I. We truly *are* 'meant to be'. And as much as I tried to fight off it when we first met? Now I can't imagine my life without you, without your love to support and guide me. I'd be a lost soul."

"Never gonna happen," Joshua murmured, his words muffled against Colin's shoulder.

"Well, that's sure how I see it," Colin said, chuckling. He inhaled a deep breath then blew it out and pressed his cheek to Joshua's hair. "You ready to go home? It's getting dark."

Joshua looked up at him. "And when we get there? Does this date have to be over?"

Colin lowered his head and gave a soft laugh. "Only if you want it to be."

Joshua rested his hand against Colin's face, his thumb moving in a delicate sweep along the arch of his cheekbone while his eyes remained fastened on Colin's. "Kiss me," he whispered.

Colin's arm tightened around Joshua's waist, pulling him tight against his chest. He covered Joshua's open mouth with his own, his tongue a silken touch against Joshua's, a soft moan escaping his throat as their kiss became more intimate, more impassioned. This was theirs. This was more theirs than anything else could ever be. This closeness. This unity which flowered into being the very instant their lips met. The belonging which Colin had felt with none other, and he clutched Joshua closer as they kissed again and again under the golden glow of the setting sun.

Joshua drew in a shivering inhale, his lips still pressed to Colin's, their soft fullness sipping at his own as if feeding from the sweetness of Joshua's mouth. "I don't want it to ever be over," he whispered against Colin's lips. "Not ever."

"It won't be," Colin whispered in reply. Then drew in a long breath and took a half step back. "But we need to get going, sweetie. It's getting dark." He smiled and leaned closer to press one last kiss to Joshua's lips. "But when we get home..." he began, then arched his eyebrows in a suggestive smirk.

"More pie and ice cream?" Joshua suggested, grinning.

"Oh, I think I can do better than *that*," Colin promised, drawing Joshua toward the picnic table. "Let's grab our stuff and hit the road."

"And then continue our date?"

"For as long as we live, my beautiful Jewish boy. I promise. For as long as we live."

CHAPTER 14

THE BEARD HAS TO GO



It was a time like no other, and COVID forced Colin and Joshua to cope with unforeseen changes in their daily routine. They weren't able to see their friends as much as they would have liked. They wore masks when they went to the store. And, since they both dealt with the public, the routines at their places of employment had been significantly altered.

Joshua still saw patients, but most of his counseling sessions were now done online to protect both he and his patients from possible infection. Joshua didn't mind these changes. He understood that flexibility was required during times like this. There was *one* change to his daily life, however, that he did mind—and in fact he minded a lot: Colin wasn't getting his beard trimmed.

He'd always worn a beard, of course, or at the very least, a bit of sexy shadow. And far from seeing it as a problem, Joshua loved Colin's facial adornment. To him, the bit of nutmeg-colored scruff on Colin's face created a dark and dangerous look which Joshua found enticing and—truth to tell—arousing.

But during the current global pandemic, his regular visits to his favorite stylist had been curtailed and Colin's beard had grown wildly out of control. It's not that it wasn't attractive. Joshua still found it pleasing in a 'wild-man-of-the-mountain' sort of way. But Colin's overgrown stubble had grown coarse and bristly, and *that* was the cause of his unhappiness.

That evening, Colin was sitting on the kitchen counter chatting with him as he prepared their dinner. ‘I’ve got something to show you,’ Joshua told him as he lowered the heat under their stir-fry.

“Something fun?” Colin asked, grinning.

Joshua offered no reply. He unbuttoned his shirt and removed it, then pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed both garments to a kitchen chair, causing Colin to grin widely. “Ooo! It IS something fun!”

Joshua turned to face him, eyebrows raised, pointing to his chest.

“What the fuck?” Colin asked, reaching to run his finger over a rough, reddened patch of skin next to Joshua’s right nipple. “What happened here?”

“*You* happened here!”

Colin threw him a puzzled glance, then drew in a quick breath, his eyes wide. “Did *I* do that?” He slid off the counter and peered more closely at the red irritated area marring Joshua’s creamy olive skin.

“Well who the fuck *else*?” Joshua reached to slide his knuckles over Colin’s beard. “And believe me, that’s not the only place rubbed raw.”

Colin reared back, his brow wrinkled in confusion and Joshua laughed out loud. “You, my dearest husband, tend to go exploring in places which I’d rather not have—uh—shall we say, *sandpapered*? ”

Colin snorted out a laugh. “Do you mean...” He frowned and waved his hand in the direction of Joshua’s crotch. “Show me!”

“Aw, come on!” Joshua responded, taking a step back. “Show you! You don’t believe me?”

Colin gestured with his fingers. “C’mom, bud. Put up or shut up.”

“Oh, for the love of fucking...” Joshua grumbled, lowering his jeans and briefs while Colin squatted on the floor, his face level with the area which Joshua claimed had been... *irritated* by Colin’s unkempt brush.

“Hmm,” Colin muttered, peering closely at Joshua’s crotch. “Does look a bit tender,” he said, rubbing his finger across the scraped and reddened skin.

“A *bit*?” Joshua snapped. “And stop rubbing! That hurts!”

Colin glanced up and wrinkled his nose, a sheepish expression on his face. “More than a bit?” he offered.

“We have to trim that beard,” Joshua insisted, drawing up his jeans and briefs.

“How?” Colin said. “Neither of us knows how to do it right. And I’m not shaving it off.”

“Fine. Then as of now, your visits to *that* particular area of my body are on indefinite hold.” He fingered the inflamed skin on his chest. “That beard of yours is *rough!*”

Colin wrapped both arms around Joshua’s waist and nuzzled against his cheek. “And you have such *tender* skin.”

Joshua grimaced and pushed him to arm’s length, then reached to recapture his T-shirt. “I could have skin made of *leather* and I’d still be scraped raw by that bristle of yours!”

“You’re cutting me off?”

“No,” Joshua chuckled as he adjusted the T-shirt around his shoulders. “Of course not. Just restricting access. That stubble of yours has to stay away from sensitive areas.”

“You love my scruff,” Colin murmured. He threw an arm around Joshua’s waist and hauled him in again, pressing him to his chest. “And you damn well know it.”

“I do when it’s a reasonable length,” Joshua countered. “But right now, you bear a striking resemblance to Grizzly Adams!”

“And you don’t find that hot as fuck?” Colin asked, flashing his dimples in a grin.

“I don’t deny it *looks* hot as fuck,” Joshua replied, reaching yet again to rub his knuckles across Colin’s beard. “But it doesn’t *feel* all that great when you’re scouring my skin with it.”

Colin took a half step back, then hopped back onto the kitchen counter. He stared at his husband, his lips twisted in a scowl. “Damn.”

Joshua snorted out a laugh. “We’ve got a beard trimmer. Let me try to hone it down a bit.”

“Have you ever done that before? Trimmed a beard?”

“No, but I’ve watched a video and I’ve trimmed the garden hedge in Glencoe. How much different could it be?”

“Josh!”

“Hey! Anytime I get my hair cut, you’re standing a foot from the scissors giving step-by-step instructions to Valerie and generally annoying the fuck out of anyone within earshot.” He rolled his eyes and mimicked: “Not that much! That’s too short!!”

Colin snickered. “You know how I feel about your curls.”

“I do. And now you know how I feel about that cactus you’re wearing on

your face.” He gave their dinner a stir then turned off the burner with a quick flick of his wrist.

“Well, I’m wounded,” Colin fake-moped from his spot on the counter.

“Oh, you are *not*,” Joshua replied. “You’re blowing smoke trying to get a rise out of me.”

“You lookin’ for an ass whuppin’?” Colin growled out, leaning toward Joshua, face twisted in a fake glare.

“Now, there’s a thought!” Joshua replied, then wrapped both arms around Colin’s neck and kissed his scowling lips. “I haven’t had a good ass whuppin’ in days!”

“I shouldn’t tease about stuff like that,” Colin muttered, then returned his kiss and sighed. “OK, bud. If you think you can do it without mangling me, you can trim my beard.”

“How hard could it be?” Joshua asked again, stepping back to let Colin hop off the counter. “And tease all you like. Anyone who knows you would know it’s a joke.”

“Still,” Colin said, drawing Joshua after him as he moved toward the stairs, “it’s not anything to joke about, you getting an ass whuppin’.” He moved into the bathroom and rummaged in a drawer for a moment, drawing out an electric beard trimmer. “OK,” he said, holding it out to Joshua.

“Sit,” Joshua instructed, pointing to the toilet. He plugged in the trimmer then waved it in front of Colin’s face with a confident flourish. “Let’s do this!”

Colin’s eyes widened and he lifted both hands. “Now take it easy, Josh,” he cautioned. “Don’t go nuts. This is a *trim*, not a scalping!”

“Oh, relax,” Joshua said. “I’ve watched a video on how to do this. And stop *squirming!*”

Colin made a frustrated growling noise in his throat and tried to sit still. “Goddammit, Josh!”

Joshua said nothing but he applied the beard trimmer with careful precision. Due to the YouTube video on beard trimming he felt reasonably confident in his method. “I’m not taking much off,” he assured his husband. “Just enough that it’s no longer a lethal weapon.”

Colin scoffed. “Now that’s overkill, right there.”

Joshua bowed his head and leaned against Colin, shaking with laughter.

“Dammit, Josh, serious up!” Colin barked, pushing Joshua’s shaking hand away from his face. “Jesus! Talk about lethal weapon!”

"My god, you're a whiney little bitch!" Joshua teased, still chuckling. "You'd think I was trimming your crotch hair!"

"You're not getting anywhere *near* my crotch with that thing," Colin muttered.

Joshua took a step back and bent over, once again breathless with laughter.

"C'mon, Josh," Colin grumbled. "This isn't funny."

Joshua controlled himself with an effort and went back to carefully moving the trimmer over Colin's beard. "My god," he said after a while, "this thing was even longer than I thought. No damned wonder my skin's scraped raw."

"How much are you taking off?"

"You'll still have plenty of beard left, trust me."

"Wait! Stop, Josh. I want to look." Colin pushed the trimmer away, then stood and gazed into the mirror, turning his head to view Joshua's work from various angles. Then he smirked and nodded. "Not bad, bud. How much more are you going to take off?"

"Not much. Just let me get it even."

Colin glanced down. "Jesus!" he yelped. "There's a ton of hair on the floor!"

"I told you! That shag on your face was long! And I wouldn't have minded the length if it hadn't felt like a goddamn Brillo pad against my skin." He stepped back and admired his handiwork. "There! That's a definite improvement."

Colin leapt to his feet and peered into the mirror, once again examining his face from multiple angles. "Hm," he huffed. "Not bad, bud. Not bad at all." He spun and yanked Joshua into his arms, rubbing his cheek against Joshua's face. "How's that feel?"

"Pretty damned good," Joshua muttered, winding both arms around Colin's neck.

"So is your dick still a forbidden area?"

Joshua rubbed his nose against Colin's. "Well, I won't know for sure until we test it," he murmured, his voice low and seductive.

Colin tilted his head back and laughed, then tightened his arms around Joshua's waist and slid his lips to Joshua's throat. "Well, our bedroom's only a

few steps away.” He leaned back and peered into Joshua’s eyes. “I’m game if you are.”

“Sex with *you*? I’m always up for that...uh, so to speak.”

Colin laughed again and dragged Joshua from the bathroom and around the corner to their bedroom. “Should I give you the ‘we don’t have sex, we make love’ speech?”

“We have sex, Colin,” Joshua replied. “We have *lots* of sex!”

Colin laughed and peeled off his T-shirt, then shook it, watching as his removed facial hair drifted to the floor.

“Colin!” Joshua said, laughing too. “Don’t shake the damned thing. Now your beard is everywhere.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Colin teased, then grabbed Joshua’s arm and pulled him onto the bed beside him. “A little bit of *me* floating all over our house.” He snickered, his hand gliding over Joshua’s chest and down his side as he bent to kiss him.

“Mm,” Joshua moaned, his eyes drifting shut as he lost himself in the feeling of Colin’s soft, full lips pressed to his. “So good,” he murmured, his lips parting just in time to feel Colin’s tongue slide over them, licking his mouth in a slow, unhurried motion, as though it were a sweet treat to be savored and enjoyed.

“I think,” Colin murmured, his lips sliding from Joshua’s mouth to his throat, then lower, “that I should inspect the spot where I injured you.” He peeked up at Joshua and winked. “You know, kiss it and make it better.”

“Good idea,” Joshua replied, his breath catching in his chest. “But you may have to do lots of kissing ‘cause I was lots of injured.” He heard Colin snicker, then gasped as Colin’s big hand wrapped around his growing erection, followed only a moment later by a hot, wet mouth and a warm, slippery tongue. “Fuck!” Joshua gasped, his hand falling onto the bed, fingers gripping the sheets tight. “God, Colin!” Joshua cried out, arching his back as Colin’s hand began to move, each stroke sending white-hot pulses of raw pleasure to every atom in Joshua’s body.

“You seem to be recovering nicely,” Colin said, lifting his mouth from Joshua’s erection.

“Goddammit, Colin!” Joshua hissed out through clenched teeth.

Colin laughed and held out his hand. “Give me some lube.”

“Come up here,” Joshua panted out. “And I’ll give us both some lube.”

"Awwww," Colin cooed as he settled himself at Joshua's side. "This one was going to be just for you."

Joshua reached to one side and grabbed a large tube of heated lubrication. "Screw that," he muttered, then pressed a kiss to his husband's lips. "Hold out your hand."

Colin rolled to his side and held out his hand. "Fill 'er up, bud."

Joshua laughed and squeezed a large dollop of the slippery lubricant into Colin's hand, and then into his own. "Now," he whispered, turning to face his husband.

"But I thought I was supposed to test out, um...sensitive areas," Colin said, grinning as he nuzzled against Joshua's neck.

"Consider it tested," Joshua said, then slid his slippery hand over Colin's rigid erection and squeezed, smiling when he heard Colin gasp.

"Jeez, Josh!" Colin sputtered, then sucked in a ragged breath and reciprocated, gripping Joshua's hardness in his slippery fingers. "Mm," he moaned, his open mouth pressed to Joshua's neck, licking, biting, sucking the sensitive skin beneath his lips while his hand began a quick, rhythmic stroke.

This was one of their favorite ways to make love. They clutched each other close, lifting their heads now and then to share a wet, hauntingly slow kiss while their hands moved in ever more rapid strokes bringing each other to the edge of completion, then slowing as they both gasped for breath.

"Christ, Josh!" Colin moaned at last, biting down on Joshua's shoulder as he surrendered to the pleasure of release. "Ohh, god, baby so good!"

Joshua gasped, coming over Colin's fist in rhythmic pulses, sucking in air in quick, shallow pants as the pleasure consumed him.

"Colin," Joshua breathed out, his mouth pressed against Colin's sweat-dampened shoulder. "My beautiful Irish love."

"Mmm," Colin moaned in reply, still gasping as lightning quick after-jolts of pleasure shook him. "Jesus, Josh!" He kissed Joshua's hair, then lifted his hand. "Uh...is there a towel nearby?"

Joshua gave a soft laugh. "Bedside table. Bottom shelf."

Leaning over the side of the bed, Colin fumbled around until he found the towel, then sat up and used it to dry his hand before tossing it toward Joshua. "There you go, bud."

"Where you going?" Joshua asked, wiping himself quickly, then tossing the

towel toward their bedroom door. “Come back here.” He grabbed Colin’s arm and drew him back down beside him. “Don’t get up yet.”

“OK,” Colin said, leaning over him, smiling. “I’m happy to stay here as long as you like.”

Joshua’s arm wrapped around Colin’s body and drew him close. He pressed his face against Colin’s bare shoulder and molded their bodies together, nestling against him. “I want this. Just for a minute. I need to be close to you.”

“Happy to oblige,” Colin murmured. He tightened his arms around Joshua’s body. “Is everything OK?”

“Everything’s wonderful,” Joshua said, his voice muffled against Colin’s skin. “And I want to lose myself in that for a moment.” He sighed and kissed the skin beneath his lips. “The world’s so fucked up right now. There’s so much *bad* out there. So damn much to be scared of.” He looked up at his husband through long, dark lashes. “This is where I feel safe,” he whispered. “Right here in your arms.”

Colin nodded and bent to press his lips to Joshua’s forehead. He didn’t say anything for a long time, but rocked Joshua in his arms, humming some soft, wordless tune until he felt his husband’s body grow loose and relaxed against him. “This is where you *are* safe, my beautiful Jewish lad,” he murmured finally. “And you always will be.” He rubbed his cheek against Joshua’s. “How’s the beard feel?”

“Soft and wonderful,” Joshua replied. “I’m glad we did this.”

“Me too.”

“Thanks for trusting me.”

Colin nodded and brushed several stray curls from Joshua’s forehead. “You do know don’t you that I would never, ever let anything harm you.”

Joshua smiled and lifted his head to kiss Colin’s throat. “I do know that. But even *you* can’t do battle with a global pandemic.”

“Wanna bet?”

Joshua laughed, his face still buried against Colin’s shoulder.

“COVID-19 wouldn’t stand a chance against me,” Colin muttered. He tilted Joshua’s face to his and kissed him. “You think our dinner’s gone cold?”

“If it has, I know how to get it hot again.”

“Yeah, you’re good at getting things hot. Especially *me!*”

Joshua laughed and sat up, spinning to perch on the side of the bed.

JANICE JARRELL

“C’mon, Irish,” he said, reaching to grab a pair of sweatpants from the floor.
“Let’s go heat up our dinner.”

Colin stood and pulled his jeans on over his bare skin, then reached to grasp Joshua’s arm. “You *are* safe with me, Joshua.”

Joshua stared into his eyes for a moment then leaned forward to kiss him.
“Don’t you think I *know* that?”

“OK, then. Let’s eat.”

“And *then*? ”

“And then whatever you damned well please.”

CHAPTER 15

PLAYING IT SAFE



Colin was leaning against the back of the couch chatting with David. “Yeah, I feel bad for Danny,” he said, referring to the owner of their favorite pub, McCafferty’s. “That pub is his livelihood and now it’s been ordered closed because of this damned virus.”

“Bad enough we have to practice social distancing and can’t hang out together,” David said with a chuckle. “But to close down an innocent pub? That’s cruel!”

Colin laughed, then coughed and waved his hand in front of his face. “Jesus, Josh!” he spouted, moving away from where Joshua stood, a can of spray disinfectant in one hand and a damp cloth which reeked of bleach in the other. “Didn’t you just *do* that an hour ago?”

“Yeah, but that was an hour ago,” Joshua muttered. He threw Colin an apologetic look then shrugged and ambled toward the kitchen, spraying everything in sight.

“What’s wrong?” David asked.

“Ohhhh,” Colin drawled out, his voice husky, “it’s Josh! He’s been hosing this place down with disinfectant for days. It smells like the bottom of someone’s pool in here and I can’t get him to quit!” He walked out the front door and onto the porch, sucking in deep lungfuls of fresh air. “That’s better!”

“Colin, don’t be annoyed with him,” David advised.

“I’m not annoyed,” Colin replied. “I just wish he’d stop! I mean, Jesus! How sterile can one house *be*? And what were you saying about Danny?”

“I was about to suggest we take up some kind of collection for Danny to help him financially until this virus starts to recede and he can reopen.”

“Good idea,” Colin replied. “I’ll start reaching out to guys I know, and you do the same.”

“And I mean it about Josh,” David cautioned him.

“You can’t breathe the *air* in there!” Colin said, half-annoyed, half-amused. “He’s choking me to death with all that bleach and Lysol.”

“It’s something he can control,” David said.

“What?”

Colin heard David sigh heavily. “This situation is out of control and he knows it,” David continued. “That kind of thing scares Josh. He doesn’t like it when things are out of control. But he *can* control how clean and sterile your house may be, or at least he thinks he can. When he’s—as you put it—hosing down your house with disinfectant, he feels like he’s doing *something* to keep the two of you safe. It gives him the sense that he has a little bit of control in what is essentially an uncontrollable situation.”

“Hmm,” Colin grunted out with a grimace. “I’ve kinda been giving him shit about it.”

“Well, I can understand. I hate the smell of that stuff myself. But he’s scared, Colin. He’s battling a global pandemic with a can of Lysol spray. Go easy on him.”

“Now I feel like shit,” Colin grumbled. “But, yeah. When you put it that way, I understand why he’s so OCD about it.” He glanced toward the house where he could see Joshua’s shadowy form moving around in the living room. “I’ve got to try to calm him down a little before he asphyxiates us.”

“Is he going to work?”

“No. The clinic cancelled all their counseling sessions for the next couple weeks. And his group therapy sessions are *definitely* cancelled, at least for now. So, we’re both here at home, binge-watching Netflix and playing Mass Effect until our eyes glaze over.”

“Go for a walk or something. Give him something else to think about.”

Colin chuckled. “Oh, I can do *that* all right.”

David scoffed. “Well, OK, yeah, that’ll work. But what will you do with the twenty-three and a half hours left in the day?”

“I’ll think of *something*.”

“Good luck with that. I’ll call you back about Danny.”

“Yeah. I’ll start a list. Talk to you later.” He ended the call and moved toward the front door pausing to take a deep breath before he entered. As he stepped into the living room, he saw Joshua running a damp cloth over the wooden archway that led to their dining room. Colin puffed out a long breath and strode toward him.

“Hey,” he said, taking Joshua’s arm. “How about taking a break. You’ve been running yourself ragged and I feel sure there isn’t one flat surface in this house you haven’t scoured within an inch of its life. Stop. Sit with me for a minute.”

Joshua looked up at him, his brown eyes wide. “You think I’m nuts don’t you.”

“No. I think you’re wonderful.” He tugged on Joshua’s arm, leading him to the living room, then gently pressing him down onto the couch. As he stepped back, he deftly removed the cloth from Joshua’s hand. “I’ll take this for now.” He sniffed it and wrinkled his nose. “Bleach?”

“It kills bacteria and viruses,” Joshua explained.

“Not to mention Irishmen,” Colin said, with a smile and a wink.

Joshua averted his eyes and sighed. “I know how annoying I must be.”

Colin left the couch and wandered to the front door just long enough to toss the bleach-soaked cloth outside, then he returned to Joshua’s side. “Let that thing air out,” he said, then wrapped his arm around Joshua’s shoulder and drew him close in his arms. “Would you do me a favor and just relax for a minute?”

Joshua sighed and turned sideways so that he could nestle against Colin’s body and was warmly embraced in return.

“I just spoke to our guru of all things righteous and good,” Colin said, nuzzling against Joshua’s dark hair.

“And what did Professor Gardener have to say?”

“He said I should go easy on your compulsive need to scour our home free of any and all evil, nasty germs that may be lurking nearby.” He felt Joshua’s body quiver with soft laughter. “He also said that disinfecting our home with those noxious liquid cleansers is your way of trying to exercise a little bit of control in the midst of a fairly uncontrollable situation.”

Joshua nodded and buried his face against Colin's shoulder. "The professor's a pretty smart guy."

"I know he is," Colin said, tipping Joshua's face up until their eyes met. "But I want you to listen to me. OK?"

Joshua nodded.

"If I thought for one split second that you were in danger, I'd be brow-beating Adam Casey morning, noon, and night to get us tested and taken care of. I'd be beating down the doors of every urgent care in Charlottesville. I'd be a mental and emotional wreck. I'd be fuming with rage every minute of every day. I'd be plotting eighteen different ways to get us to the North Pole or somewhere relatively safe. I would *not* be sitting here all relaxed and happy, playing Mass Effect and binge-watching Supernatural!" He tightened his hand under Joshua's face. "You get me?"

Joshua laughed and grabbed Colin's wrist, pulling his hand away. "I do get you, Irish." His hand cupped Colin's cheek and kissed him tenderly.

"I'd never let anything happen to you, Josh," Colin promised, his voice low and rich with feeling. "Never. So, you know when you need to worry?"

"When I see *you* start to worry?"

"Exactly!" He leaned back and flashed his dimples in a grin. "Do I look worried?"

"No. Quite the opposite."

"OK, then. Enough with the constant spewing of bleach and Lysol. I might not catch the coronavirus but I'm pretty damned sure I'm in danger of lung disease from sucking in Clorox fumes."

Joshua cocked an eyebrow and shrugged. "Just trying to keep you germ-free, Irish."

"I have several ideas in that regard," Colin said, hauling Joshua across his lap until he was cradled in Colin's arms.

"Do tell!"

"Well, first off, did you know that sweat kills bacteria?" He leaned back, nodding with a pretense of sage wisdom, eyebrows lifted, smirking in a smug half-smile. "Did you know that DOCTOR Josh?"

Joshua fell forward onto Colin's chest, shaking all over with laughter. When he lifted his head, he was wiping tears from his eyes.

"Sooooo...." Colin began leaning close enough to rub his nose against

Joshua's. "If you *really* want to kill some germs..." he tilted his head toward the stairs, "... come upstairs with me and get *sweaty*!!"

Still choking with laughter, Joshua wrapped both arms around Colin's neck and kissed him with fierce passion. When he finally leaned back from their kiss, he nuzzled Colin's cheek. "I'd be thrilled to be a soldier in your war against evil bacteria," he said, his voice firm, then kissed Colin again. "I have the feeling we're gonna make a great team."

"I get that same feeling," Colin said, gently lifting Joshua off his lap and rising to his feet. He took Joshua's hand in his and lifted his arm toward the stairs as if holding a sword aloft. "Evil bacteria beware!" he cried out. "Colin Campbell's army approaches. Thou are doomed!"

Still giggling, Joshua followed Colin up the stairs. "There's not a bug alive who'd stand a chance against you," he told his husband as they moved into the bedroom.

"Damn right!" Colin said, jerking his T-shirt over his head. "Now get into uniform and let's go to war!"

"Uniform?" Joshua asked as he tossed his jeans and briefs into a corner.

"Get naked and get into bed," Colin said in a stage whisper.

"As you wish, my general!" Joshua said.

Colin grabbed him around the waist and together they tumbled onto the bed. "CHARRRGE!"

CHAPTER 16

COLIN VS. COVID



Colin and Joshua were self-quarantined for all social activities outside their essential work hours. The Rainier Clinic where Joshua worked was still seeing patients, but only on rare occasions did they meet in person. His counseling sessions now took place through Zoom or other online services. Colin was helping out during the day at the campus police station. His reserve duty there had begun as a one-day-a-week position but quickly escalated to several days a week when the COVID-19 crisis forced several officers to self-quarantine at home, leaving them shorthanded.

Their offices had set up social distancing areas and provided them with masks, however they worried constantly about each other's exposure. The entire process was a pain, but they both realized that this was part of what one signed up for when they chose a service-oriented profession.

Colin set up a rigidly enforced 'when we get home from work' routine. They both stripped off their work clothes and threw them into the washing machine, then took a shower. Colin refused to exchange even one embrace or welcoming kiss until this evening ritual had been completed. Joshua doubted that their cautionary measures did much to protect them from the global pandemic, but Colin insisted that they stick to them nonetheless. Both their work locations had loosened their dress codes. Colin and Josh were now allowed to wear casual, easy-to-wash clothes rather

than the police officer's blue uniform or spiffy suit they'd worn pre-COVID-19.

"You? Doing laundry? *You?*" Joshua teased the first time he saw Colin standing, wet and naked, in the laundry area, shoving his jeans and sweatshirt into the machine.

"Hey! I do laundry plenty," Colin grumbled. "And back off, Josh! I don't want you anywhere near these clothes until they're clean."

Now, dressed in their flannel pajamas, they lounged on the couch with Joshua's head in Colin's lap viewing episode after episode of whatever TV program was currently on their radar. Colin had recently developed a fondness for *The Walking Dead*, and though Joshua usually missed half of every episode because he turned away from the screen, Colin laughed like a loon through every gruesome slaughter.

"One more episode then head to bed?" Colin suggested, carding his fingers through Joshua's hair.

"Sure. You want another beer before we start?"

Colin nodded and gently lifted Joshua off his lap. As Joshua moved toward the kitchen Colin's phone sounded a familiar ringtone and he reached to grab it. "Hi'ya, Natey-baby!"

"Colin!" Nate cried. "Colin, oh my god. Oh my god!" His voice was filled with panic and Colin leapt to his feet.

"Jesus Christ, Nate, what's wrong!"

Hearing him, Joshua hurried back into the living room, a bottle of beer in each hand. "What is it?"

Colin shook his head and spoke into the phone. "Nate! Calm down! Take a breath and tell me what's wrong!" He hit the speaker button and set the phone on the coffee table as he collapsed back onto the couch.

"Colin," Nate croaked out, his erratic breath echoing through the receiver. "Oh god, Colin, David's got it!"

"Got *what?*" Colin asked, while Joshua collapsed onto the couch beside him, moaning. "Oh, god, no."

"The virus! He's got COVID!" Nate cried. "Oh god, Colin." His voice was breaking. He was on the verge of tears if not outright hysteria.

Colin and Joshua exchanged a quick glance and Joshua leaned forward.

"Nate, take a breath. I mean it! Stop talking and take a deep breath. Do it now."

They both heard Nate draw in a long, trembling breath and let it out.

“Now *slowly*, tell us what happened...starting with where you are.”

“We’re at the hospital,” Nate said, sounding somewhat calmer. “He started coughing and spiked a fever, so I brought him in. I know I wasn’t supposed to but...” He stopped talking and they heard him gasp in a quick sob.

“Is Adam there?” Colin asked quickly.

“Yes. He’s with David now.”

“OK,” Colin replied. “Nate, that’s a good thing. In fact, that’s a great thing.”

“Are you sitting down, Nate?” Joshua asked.

“No. I’m standing in the lobby. You know...the lobby where we...the lobby where you...”

“I know where you are,” Joshua interrupted. “I want you walk over to the chairs and sit down.”

“What did Adam say?” Colin asked.

“He made me leave!” Nate cried. “He wouldn’t let me stay in the ER room with him. I don’t know, Colin! I don’t know!”

“Nate?” Joshua said. “Are you sitting down?”

“Yeah.”

“OK, I want you to take another deep breath and try to relax just a little.”

“Colin, they won’t let me stay with him! They’ll make me leave him! He’ll be alone! I can’t bear that, Colin!”

“Nate, stop it!” Colin snapped. “Stop it right now! You don’t have a clue what’s going to happen. They may not even admit him! Was Davy having trouble breathing?”

“No, not much anyway. Only when he was coughing.”

Joshua nudged Colin with an elbow. “Should we go down there?”

“NO!” Nate cried, overhearing. “No! David would have a fit if you came down here. He didn’t even want me to call you. Please, don’t, Josh. He couldn’t stand it if he thought he put you two in danger.” Nate’s voice was choked with tears. He was nearly sobbing with every breath.

“OK, Nate, I want you to stop talking and listen to me,” Colin said, his voice low and filled with authority. “Are you listening?”

Joshua glanced at his husband as Colin bent over the phone, then leaned his head against Colin’s shoulder, shivering with a rush of awed admiration.

He'd heard Colin use this voice before. Many times. This was the voice he used when talking to assault victims. This was the voice that calmed and reassured them. This was the voice that let them know they weren't alone, that a powerful force was beside them and would not let harm come to them.

"I'm listening, Colin," Nate whispered, his voice still shaking.

"We know *nothing* yet. And until we *do* know something there is no reason to panic. Right now, David needs us to stay calm. That's how we can help him best. By staying calm. Josh and I are right there with you, Nate, and we're going to get through this together. As soon as Adam decides what's best for David, we'll start to make plans. I doubt they'll admit him. You said he wasn't having trouble breathing, and those are the people who get admitted. You listening, Nate?"

"Yes. I'm listening," Nate replied, his voice much calmer.

"Good. Now once they send him home with you, which is what I'm *sure* is going to happen, I want you to make a list of things you need. Medicine, food, things to drink, snacks, toiletries, household stuff, movies to watch, whatever you think you'll need. Then you need to send that list to me and Josh. Got it?"

"You can't come over, Colin!" Nate insisted.

"We can't come IN, but we can get the things on your list and leave them outside the door."

"Oh. OK."

"So right now, all we can do is wait for Adam to finish checking David out. He's young, Nate. He's strong as an ox. He has NO underlying health issues. School is shut down, so he has plenty of time off to rest and get well. And he has us to get him anything he needs."

"Oh, wait, Colin! Adam just walked out. I gotta go!"

"Call me back!"

"I will," Nate replied, and the phone went dead.

"Jesus," Joshua breathed out, reaching to take Colin's hand.

"Yeah. This fucking thing has now officially hit *way* too close to home," Colin muttered. He grabbed his beer from the coffee table and leaned back on the couch, tipping the bottle to his lips.

He had barely swallowed the brew when his phone rang again, and he quickly grabbed it.

"Nate?"

“Adam said I should take him home. He said—hang on, Colin...*what?*”

“Nate, what’s going on?”

“Colin,” David’s voice broke in, “you and Josh are not to come anywhere near our house!”

“Hi, Davy,” Colin said, grinning at Joshua. “How’s it going?”

“Do you hear me, Irish?” David said, then broke off, and Colin heard the muffled sound of coughing. After a moment David spoke again. “I’m not kidding, Colin. Bad enough I’ve exposed Nate.”

“Professor, save your breath *and* your strength. You’re going to need both of them. Josh and I ARE going to be coming to your house to bring you and Nate whatever supplies you need. So just get that through your head. We won’t come IN. We’re not stupid! We’ll leave your groceries on the stoop outside the door. Now go home, and let Nate take care of you. You just focus on getting well. Now let me talk to your husband.”

“Thanks, Colin,” David muttered. “Thanks for calming him down. He was pretty upset.”

“We’re *all* pretty upset,” Joshua said. “Professor, please just rest and focus on getting well.”

“Adam said I’m showing mild symptoms and he gave Nate...” He broke off to cough again, the sound muffled against his arm. Colin heard him draw in a breath. “He told Nate what to do and what symptoms to look for should things get worse. I worry about him, Colin.”

Colin heard Nate in the background. “Davy, come on! Let’s get you into the car.” Then he heard, “I’m here, Colin. I’m taking him to the car.”

“Nate, send that list! Send it as soon as you get David settled. We’ll get everything you need and bring it over.”

“OK, buddy,” Nate said out. “Talk soon.”

“Love you!” Joshua called out. But Nate had already hung up.

Colin and Joshua looked at each other, then fell back against the couch, staring straight ahead into their unlit fireplace. Colin glanced at Joshua and gestured to the television. “Turn it off, would you, babe?”

Joshua complied, then threw the remote to the table. He wheeled and pressed himself against Colin’s chest, sucking in a gasping breath when he felt Colin’s arms wrap around him, drawing him close.

“Jesus, Josh, am I an asshole for trying to figure out when we last spent time with David?”

“No,” Joshua replied. “Of course not. But we’ve all been social distancing for almost two weeks, so I doubt we’re in danger.” He looked up into Colin’s eyes and shrugged. “We deal with the public on a daily basis. If we get it, it won’t be from David.”

Colin pressed his lips together. “Dammit!”

“What is it?”

“Josh, we’ve both been exposed. Neither of us can go in to work tomorrow. We have to self-quarantine until we can get tested. We’ve now officially had contact with someone who has the disease. You know what the rules are. We have to stay home.” He turned to look at Joshua. “Your eyes are as big as saucers.”

“I’m scared, Colin.”

Colin nodded and pressed a kiss to Joshua’s hair.

“I’m worried about David. But I’m also worried about Nate and everyone else we love, especially our mothers,” Joshua moaned against Colin’s chest.

“Well, you said Abe is working from home so he’s with your mom.” He leaned back and looked into Joshua’s eyes, his face twisted in a grimace. “I tried to talk my mom into coming here and staying with us, but...”

“Yeah, I did too,” Joshua replied. “But you know her. She won’t leave that house.”

“I have to try to get her some help,” Colin muttered.

“If she’ll let you,” Joshua said with a chuckle. “Dealing with your mother has helped me realize where you get your stubborn streak.”

Colin lifted his eyebrows and breathed out a soft laugh. “Yeah. Dad was a lot more pliant.”

“At the very least we need to call them once or twice a day,” Joshua said. “As much as it might annoy them.”

Colin snorted out a laugh. “And it will,” he said. “You can count on that much.”

“Your mom’s staying home, isn’t she? She promised me she would.”

“Yeah, but she’s not happy about it.”

“We should go there and teach her how to FaceTime or Skype with her friends.”

Colin shot him an amazed glance. “Great idea, baby. But we can’t. We’ve been exposed. Anyway, let’s deal with David and Nate first.” He sighed. “We can’t even go to bed ‘til we get them settled.”

It was almost forty-five minutes later when Nate called.

“I just sent you a text message with the list you wanted,” he said.

“How’s David?”

“Asleep at the moment,” Nate breathed out a shaky sigh. “He tried to talk me into *leaving!* What the fuck is wrong with that man!?”

“He’s worried about you, Nate.”

“Yeah, well fuck that! I gave him the kind of tongue-lashing that only I can deliver and reminded him *pointedly* about the whole ‘in sickness or in health’ thing.”

Colin laughed out loud. “Hang on,” he said. “I’m reading your list. Are you sure this is all you need?”

“All I can think of right now.” Nate drew in and expelled a deep, trembling breath. “I’m scared, Colin.”

“We’re *all* scared, Nate. All of us. But we’re going to get through this together. Trust me. I’m taking this fucker on with every ounce of strength I possess. Fucking COVID-19 is no match for a pissed off Irishman.”

Nate laughed. “You’re too much.”

“We’ll call you when we’re at your house, and we’ll leave the stuff on the stoop.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you guys.”

“Yeah? Well...same here. Sit tight. We’ll be there in a bit.”

“Love you, Colin. You and Josh both.”

“Love you too.”

Colin puffed out a breath and handed the phone to Joshua so he could read the list. “Let’s go, bud.”



IT TOOK THEN OVER AN HOUR TO FILL THE ITEMS ON NATE’S LIST AND required trips to several local stores, but they managed to get nearly everything. They pulled into David and Nate’s driveway and saw a light in the living room window.

“Let’s put this stuff on the stoop,” Colin muttered. He shut off the car and both he and Joshua grabbed the bags filled with the items Nate had requested and lugged them to the front door. As they sat them down, Colin could glimpse Nate behind the front door’s stained glass, peering out at them.

He took Joshua's arm and they both stood several feet away from the stoop, then Colin yelled: "Nate!! Get your ass out here!"

The front door inched open and Nate appeared in the doorway wearing a mask. "You two shouldn't be here!"

"Oh, shut the fuck up," Colin said. "For Christ's sake, Nate! We're standing ten feet away from you and we're all wearing masks. How's Davy?"

"He's in bed resting, but still coughing like crazy."

"Well, we bought you four different kinds of cough medicine."

"Adam gave us a ton of cough medicine," Nate said, grinning. "You guys are amazing."

"We added a few items of our own," Colin said. "Some porn, several tubes of industrial-strength lube, and just for you Natey-baby, two boxes of Little Debbie's Boston Creme Rolls. Enjoy!"

Nate bent over laughing. "Thanks, Colin, though I doubt we'll need the lube for the foreseeable future."

"Hey, don't count David out. The man's got *game*!"

"Nate," Joshua added, "please don't forget to take care of yourself! Take all precautions. And if you get scared, call us. Any time. Day or night. We're always here for you."

Nate bent and began to gather up the bags. "Thanks, you guys. You're the best."

"Call us tomorrow," Colin called as he and Joshua moved toward his car.

"Call us anytime," Joshua added.

Colin opened the car door, then grabbed Joshua's arm and pointed up to David and Nate's bedroom. David stood in the window blowing kisses their way. "Get back in bed!" Colin yelled, stabbing his index finger toward the window.

David flashed them an 'OK' and turned away.

Colin and Joshua got into the car, and as Colin backed out of the driveway, Joshua sighed and rested his hand on Colin's arm. "God, Colin, if we lost him..."

"Stop that!" Colin barked. "Stop that right fucking now! We're not losing *anybody*! Not anybody!" He pulled the car onto the road then took Joshua's hand in his own. "You get this straight right now: I am not letting this goddamned thing take out *either* of us *OR* anyone we care about. If I have to pound this fucking bug into submission with my bare hands, I'll do

it, but we're not losing ANYBODY!" He glanced at Joshua. "You hear me?"

Joshua gave a soft laugh and shook his head in wonder at the man he had married. "I hear you, sweetheart."

"NO ONE!" Colin barked out.

"Listen," Joshua said, "I think I should call Trent and Jeff. Let them know."

Colin nodded. "You do that. Tell them to keep in touch with us so we can all make sure Davy and Nate have everything they need. If we get tied up, they may have to help out."

Joshua nodded and pressed Trent's number.



DURING THE NEXT FEW DAYS DAVID'S CONDITION WORSENERED, BUT NEVER TO the point where he experienced serious difficulty breathing. Colin and Joshua talked with Nate several times a day, often using a Skype session which included David when he felt up to it. Adam had snuck a couple surgical masks into Nate's pocket and given him instructions on how to put them on and clean them for reuse.

"Lookin' spiffy there, Natey-baby!" Colin joked when he saw Nate wearing his mask.

David was also wearing a mask, but they could tell by his crinkled eyes that he was smiling at Colin's teasing remark.

"Hey!" Nate said, "you're talking to a medical professional here, you ditzy-assed Irishman! I'm a goddamned first responder!"

"Far as I can tell you're the *only* responder, so I wouldn't get too full of yourself," Colin teased.

"How are you guys doing with supplies?" Joshua asked.

"I've got a list ready for you," Nate told him. "Trent dropped off a box of DVDs last night, and David's been having a ball going through them."

"Porn?" Colin said, flashing his dimples in a grin.

Nate snorted out a laugh. "No porn," he said. "A bunch of Avenger movies and other superhero stuff."

"Trent gave up his *superhero* movies?" Colin said, clearly astonished. "Well, I'm impressed. He must really love you, Davy."

"I don't know about that," David said, then turned aside and coughed into his elbow. For a moment afterward he inhaled short quick breaths.

"David?" Nate said, his voice anxious.

"I'm fine," David said, then patted Nate's arm.

"You got that list ready?" Joshua asked. "We need to get to the store while there's still something on the shelves."

"Come with me," Nate said. He carried the phone from the bedroom and down the stairs. "It's down here."

"Nate, how is he? I mean how is he *really*?" Colin asked.

Nate sat down at the kitchen table and stared into the phone. Colin and Joshua could both see the dark circles around his eyes, and his face was haggard.

"Are you getting any sleep?" Joshua asked.

"Not much," Nate replied. "He won't let me sleep in the bedroom with him, so I'm sleeping in the spare bedroom right next to ours. I've got a baby monitor hooked up in there, so I can hear him." He shook his head sharply. "I'm not going any further away from him than that, and I think he knows it." He looked into the phone at his two friends. "Or at least he's quit ragging on me about it." For a moment he was silent. "It's hard, because I'm really so afraid. Anytime I hear him coughing I hover over him, scared to death, 'til I hear he's breathing OK." He shook his head and both Colin and Joshua could see tears well in his eyes. "And the fever is really hard on him. He has nightmares and just drowns in sweat. I bet he's lost ten pounds. It's just awful to see him like this," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Nate, I'll come over there and spell you tonight if you want," Colin said. "Give you a chance to get some rest. You could sleep while I watched over him."

Joshua shot Colin a quick, frightened look and Nate laughed. "You just gave your husband a heart attack."

"I mean it, Nate."

"I know you do, Colin, and I love you for it. But I'm not risking you too. Besides, David would wring my weenie little neck. He's said from the beginning that none of you is allowed to come over here."

"Nate, you have got to get some rest."

"Colin, would *you* rest if it was *Josh*?" Nate asked. Colin's head dropped and he grimaced. "You know damned well you wouldn't."

“Maybe we could hire a nurse,” Joshua suggested. “Just for a couple days. ‘Til you catch up on your sleep.”

Nate laughed. “Oh yeah. Right. Some nurse is going to walk right into a house where a COVID-19 patient lives.”

“They might,” Joshua told him. “It’s what they do, Nate. I’m going to make inquiries.”

“You should let me come over,” Colin insisted. “I’ll wear a mask! I’ll wear rubber gloves. I’ll stay as far away as possible. This fucking bug can’t take me out, you can count on that. Just for a few hours so you can get some rest!”

“You’re not going without me,” Joshua told him, gripping his arm. “So get that through your Irish head right fucking now. If you go, I go.”

Colin shot him a look and opened his mouth to speak. “End of discussion!” Joshua barked out.

“You guys can’t do that,” Nate insisted. “David would have a fit!”

“David might not even know,” Colin said. “We’ll come at night when he’s asleep. We won’t go in the room unless he needs us.”

“He’ll know, Colin,” Nate said, laughing. “Are you kidding me? David is nobody’s fool. He WILL know! And he’ll rip me a new one.”

“Would Adam give us a couple of masks?” Joshua asked Colin.

“I could call him and ask.”

“And maybe a couple hospital gowns too. Some protective equipment.”

“Josh, the people working there *need* that stuff. We can’t take it from them.”

Joshua clutched his arm and nodded. “You’re right, of course. I’m sorry.”

“Colin, you can’t come over here!”

“Nate, you have got to get some rest!”

“Colin, I WILL! But not by risking you and Josh! I won’t allow it!”

“Nate...” Colin began but Nate cut him off.

“No! Absolutely not! Colin Campbell, you stay your Irish ass at home. So far, David’s symptoms are mild. He’ll probably get through this without a problem. But I won’t risk having you or Josh get this thing and end up having *major* issues. I just won’t!”

Colin sighed and grimaced. “And you call *me* stubborn!”

“I love you so much for being willing to put your neck on the line for us, Colin,” Nate said, his voice thick with tears. “But the only thing that would make things worse for David is if he thought he’s helped to spread this to

either of you. I told Trent the same thing. He offered to come over and give David some mild PT to help with the body aches.”

“He did?” Colin said. “Well I’ll be go-to-hell.”

“He’s a great guy,” Joshua murmured.

“If you just get the stuff on the list it’ll be a huge help. Please don’t make things worse for me by making me have to worry about you and Josh too!”

“OK, OK,” Colin muttered. “I’ll do it your way.”

“Nate, do try to get some rest tonight,” Joshua said. “We’ll call you when we’re outside with your supplies.”

“OK, guys. See you later. Bye.”

Colin turned his phone off and shot Joshua a quick glance. “You pissed I offered to go over there?”

Joshua burst into laughter. “I’m amazed it took you this long. But I am going to make inquiries about a nurse going in to spell Nate a couple times a week anyway.”

Colin fell back against the couch, his handsome Irish face twisted in a grimace. “I hate just sitting here. Not doing anything to help them!”

“We’re NOT just sitting here!” Joshua reminded him. “Every item that’s gone into that house for the past week has been carried there either by us or by Trent and Jeff. It’s not like we’ve deserted them!”

Colin clenched his teeth as his grimace deepened. “I fucking *hate* this motherfucker!” he spat out. “I want to rip it to pieces with my bare hands!”

Joshua smiled and turned sideways on the couch, sprawling across Colin’s lap, both arms wrapping around his neck. “I love you so much,” he whispered, feeling his eyes burn with tears.

“Hey,” Colin murmured, tightening his arms around Joshua’s body. “What’s this?”

“I just love you so much. You’re so brave. You’re so strong. You *would* take it on with your bare hands wouldn’t you.”

“I’m *pissed*, Josh,” Colin said, and pressed his lips against Joshua’s hair. “I’m as scared of this thing as anybody else. But not for myself. I’m scared for *you*. I’m scared for all the people I love. And it pisses me off to be so helpless. To not be able to DO anything! To not be able to protect you!”

“First off,” Joshua said, “you *do* protect me! You’re obsessive about washing your hands, showering after you come home, wearing a mask at work, washing your clothes as soon as you get home. That’s ALL protecting

me, Colin! And as far as the ones we love go, we're doing all we can," Joshua reminded him. "And we'll do more if it becomes necessary."

"What I wonder is what we'll do if Nate becomes symptomatic," Colin muttered, his voice sullen.

"If that happens, we'll have to take stronger measures," Joshua replied. "If we have to move into David's house to care for them, we will. We'll take every precaution. But we won't leave them alone. Period."

Colin nodded and eased Joshua off his lap. "C'mon, bud. On your feet. We have shopping to do."



DAVID HAD GOOD DAYS AND BAD DAYS. NATE CALLED THEM ONCE IN THE middle of the night, terrified because David's breathing had become erratic, but before Colin and Joshua could take any action, David woke up and used his inhaler and the problem subsided. Joshua made inquiries, and with the help of Dr. Adam Casey they located a nurse willing to spell Nate twice a week during the night so that he could get some rest.

They spoke every day over Skype and continued to bring them bags filled with medicine, groceries, and any other supplies they needed. They'd stood outside in the yard and talked to Nate through the screen door after he'd taken the bags inside, and sometimes David talked to them through the upstairs bedroom window. Colin would tease Nate and bring him ridiculous sex toys which he insisted Nate review for him, and on one memorable occasion he stood in the yard and sang "Fields of Athenry" to David as he listened through the open bedroom window.

Nate had not shown any symptoms, but even when David's symptoms began to subside, they refused to let Colin and Joshua enter their home, aware that he could *become* symptomatic at any time for weeks after David recovered.

"You do know, don't you," David said during one Skype session, "that you two have been a godsend. Nate just can't wait to show me whatever insane sex toy you brought for him, and we laugh our asses off. You just can't know how good that's been for us, Colin. To have that chance to relax and laugh together. It would have been ten times harder without you guys."

"You're our best friends," Joshua said. "You're important to us. Of course, we've been there for you, David."

“Where’s Nate?” Colin asked.

“He’s lying down. He had a bit of a headache.” David sighed. “He’s tired. He probably hasn’t slept one night straight through since I got this thing.”

Behind him they heard Nate’s voice, hesitant and trembling: “Davy?”

David wheeled to face him, and Colin and Joshua saw him reach to take something from Nate who was out of view of their screen. “Oh, *fuck!*” David spat out.

“David, what is it?”

David turned toward them and held a thermometer in front of the screen with a trembling hand. “Can you read this?” he asked, his voice rough.

Colin snatched up the computer and drew it close to their faces. The thermometer read 103°F. “Oh, goddamn it to hell!” Colin spat out, tossing the computer back to the coffee table.

“Guys, I have to go,” David said, reaching to shut down his computer even as he rose.

“David, mask up!” Colin shouted. “There’s no evidence that you can’t catch this thing twice.”

“Oh my god, Colin,” Joshua moaned, falling back against the couch.

“Call Adam!” Colin yelled, but their computer screen was already blank.

Stunned and grief stricken, Joshua stared straight ahead, feeling his eyes well with tears. He felt Colin surge to his feet and turned just in time to see him snatch up an empty coffee mug and hurl it against their fireplace with explosive force. “Colin!” Joshua rose and grabbed his husband’s arm. “Honey, that won’t help! And you just broke your favorite mug.”

Colin jerked away and strode toward the kitchen. “Josh, leave me alone for a second! Let me...just...just give me a minute!”

Joshua fell back onto the couch, and after a moment of steady, even breathing he grabbed his phone and called the nurse who had been spelling Nate at night twice a week. David was much better, but he was not fully recovered. And if Nate had contracted COVID-19, they were going to need more help, especially at night. He was discussing various options with her when Colin walked back into the living room.

“Sorry,” he muttered, then knelt and began to pick up the pieces of his shattered mug. “My John Wayne mug,” he mourned.

Joshua spoke a few more words to the nurse then laid his phone down. “I’ll get you a new one.”

“What are you doing?”

“I arranged for the nurse to spend a bit of extra time with them. She’s going to call David to set things up.”

“Thanks, baby,” Colin muttered, then frowned and stared down at the pieces in his hand. “That probably did a lot more to help than this.” He sighed and tossed the fragments into a nearby trash basket.

Joshua turned to Colin, his eyes wide. “God, Colin.”

“Don’t fucking freak out on me, Josh. I’m freaked out enough as it is right now, and if you go too...” He drew it a shuddering breath. “I won’t be able to cope.”

“You have to,” Joshua told him. He gripped Colin’s hand and his eyes dropped, fixed on the floor beneath his feet. “Because that’s the only way I’ll be able to stand it.” He dropped Colin’s hand and sighed.

“I’m calling Adam,” Colin said, grabbing his phone.

“Colin, what can Adam do? He’s probably swamped.”

“He can get UN-swamped, god dammit!” He spun away from Joshua. “Adam? You got a minute? Yeah, yeah, I know. But—but—*Adam, just listen, god dammit!* We think Nate may have contracted COVID, and you know David’s not fully recovered yet.” He stood listening to Dr. Casey’s response and bounced on the balls of his feet. “OK. OK, Adam. You’re the best, man. I’ll call him right now. Thanks, buddy. We will, believe me.”

He spun back to face Joshua, hit a number on his cellphone. “He said to give David his private number. He’ll do an online session with them.” He moved to the couch, lifting the phone to his ear. “David?? Listen to me! Get something to write with. You got it? OK, here’s Adam’s private number. It’s 434-793-3324. He said for you to call and he’ll arrange an online meeting with you and Nate so he can evaluate him. How is he?” Colin stood, silently listening and nodding. “OK. Call Adam then get back to me. You know the drill. Make a list of anything you need. OK, buddy. We’ll be here. Oh, David, wait!! Josh arranged for the nurse to spend a bit more time with you guys. She’ll call you later. OK?” He nodded and blew out a long sigh before tossing the phone to the coffee table. “OK. He’s going to call Adam. He said Nate is scared, but not feeling too badly as yet.”

“God, I love how decisive you are. How quickly you get something done.”

“It’s called ‘panic’,” Colin mumbled. “Typical cop mentality. Gotta’ *DO* something.” He flopped onto the couch beside Joshua and tilted his head

back, staring up at their oak-beamed ceiling. “Christ, Josh...” he murmured, his voice trailing off.

“He’ll be OK,” Joshua assured him. “He’ll get through it. David’s well enough to take care of him, and the nurse will be there, and we’ll be there too if it comes to that.” He took Colin’s hand. “I know how much you love him.”

“Nate?” Colin responded, then wrinkled his nose. “Oh, he’s OK.” He winked and kissed Joshua’s cheek. “No more than you do.”

“Maybe. But you two have a special relationship. *No one* gets away with what Nate does with you. He can say *anything* to you, and you not only don’t get pissy with him, but you also actually listen to him.”

“He’s annoying as fuck,” Colin grumbled, shooting Joshua a sheepish glance.

“At times,” Joshua admitted. “But you love him anyway. In fact, I think you love him *because* he’s annoying as fuck. You like how he stands up to you.”

Colin hissed out a disgusted sigh. “Goddammit, the worst part of this fucking thing is that I’m so fucking helpless! I can’t DO anything!”

Joshua shook his head in wonder and laughed. “Colin, that’s just not true. You are constantly doing things to help David and Nate. Constantly! You need to be kinder to yourself, my Irish love. You need to recognize your own wonderful qualities.”

“I’m *already* an arrogant bastard,” Colin replied with a quick grin. “You want my ego to get even bigger?”

“I’m not talking about the show you put on at times,” Joshua said, lacing his fingers with Colin’s. “I’m talking about the real man. You fall all over yourself to be good to the people you love. Especially at times like this.”

“Maybe, but that wasn’t my point. My point was that I can’t do anything to *protect* any of you from this goddamned plague. I can’t keep it *away* from you. I couldn’t keep it from infecting Davy and Nate, and I can’t keep it from infecting *you!*” He glowered at the fireplace and husked out an angry sigh. “I can’t protect you, Josh. And that makes me fucking crazy!”

“The fact that you’re not superhuman makes you crazy?”

Colin’s brows furrowed and he shot Joshua a sullen look. “I don’t like to lose.”

“You haven’t! You’ve fought this virus like a veritable tiger, and you’ve won more battles than you’ve lost.”

“Couldn’t keep Nate from catching it.”

“Some things just aren’t possible, even for an Irishman.”

“Humph!” Colin scoffed, his mouth twisted in a grimace as he stared up at the ceiling.

Joshua rearranged himself until he was lying, sprawled, across Colin’s lap, then relaxed against his chest as Colin’s arms tightened around him.

“What’re you after here, bud?” Colin teased. “You hounding me for sex again?”

“I am not.”

“Well, that’s bad! Have I gone and lost my sex appeal?”

Joshua looked up from where he lay cradled in Colin’s arms and slid his fingers into the sandy waves that fell over Colin’s forehead. He watched in silence as they floated through his fingers and back to their resting place against Colin’s skin. “No, you have not,” he whispered finally. “And you damned well know it.” He nestled against Colin’s shoulder, and for a moment, he turned his face into the soft fabric of Colin’s sweatshirt. “Hard though it may be to believe,” he muttered, his voice muffled by the cloth, “there are reasons why I might want to feel your arms around me that are totally unrelated to sex.”

“Is that so,” Colin murmured, lifting Joshua higher in his arms.

“It is,” Joshua replied. “When I feel your arms around me, I feel safe—cherished.” He turned and glanced up into Colin’s eyes. “And why are you making that face?”

“Because I want you to *always* feel that way, not just when we’re like this...nice though this might be.”

“And most of the time I do,” Joshua said. He reached to twine his arms around Colin’s neck and gave a soft moan of contentment when Colin held him closer, pressing their bodies together. “But sometimes I just need...” He shrugged. “I don’t know. I need *this*.”

“Sometimes I need this too,” Colin murmured, then sucked in a quick breath. “Though I *am* sad to hear that you don’t want to have sex with me anymore.”

Joshua’s body shook with laughter. “Yeah,” he chuckled, “I’m sure you’re devastated by that utterly ridiculous assumption.” He lifted his head from Colin’s shoulder. “What man have you ever known who *didn’t* want to have sex with you?”

“Oh, there’ve been a few,” Colin replied, smirking.

“You even managed to get some straight guys interested,” Joshua mumbled, nestling against Colin’s shoulder. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

“One or two.”

“Humph,” Joshua scoffed, then drew in a deep, relaxing breath.

“Don’t fall asleep there, bud,” Colin said, nudging his arm. “We might have to go out again if David and Nate need anything.”

Joshua squirmed and gave a reluctant groan. “Don’t wanna move.”

Colin chuckled and lifted him in his arms until he could press a kiss to Joshua’s forehead. “Be that as it may. We might have to.” His phone chimed a familiar ringtone, and he gently moved Joshua off his lap. “Get up, bud. That’s David.”

He grabbed the phone and switched it to speaker so that Joshua could hear too. “Well?”

“Adam is convinced he’s got COVID,” David said, his voice weary. “We’re going to the testing site tomorrow just to be sure, but it’s pretty much a foregone conclusion at this point.”

“Oh god, Davy, I’m so sorry,” Joshua moaned.

“We’ve talked about this,” David replied. “We figured this was going to happen.

“Do you need anything?”

“Actually, no,” David said. “You guys were just here yesterday with a grocery run. We’re good. I’m gonna switch bedrooms with him for the time being, put him in the master.” He exhaled a heavy sigh. “He’s scared, Colin, and you know Nate, *nothing* scares him, not even you. But...right now he’s really scared.” David drew in a trembling breath. “And seeing it just breaks my fucking heart.”

“Just stay calm for him, David,” Colin said, his voice low. “If he sees that you’re calm, it’ll calm *him*. He’ll only get panicky if he sees that *you’re* scared, and I know you *are*, but you can’t show it.”

“I won’t, Colin,” David told him.

“It breaks our hearts that we can’t be there with you,” Joshua said, his voice catching.

“The only thing that could possibly make this shitshow worse for us is if we thought we’d passed it on to *you*,” David told him. “Stay the hell away unless you’re dropping off groceries...and I MEAN it!”

Colin sighed. “OK, buddy. Call if you need anything. Anything at all.”

“I will. We love you guys. Bye for now.”

“We love you too,” Colin murmured, then sighed and tossed the phone to the coffee table. “Fuck COVID to fucking hell and back,” he muttered, his teeth clenching around his words.

“He’ll be OK, Colin. He’ll have David and the nurse, and we’ll be there if they need us.”

Colin gave no reply, his teeth were still clenched, and he stared, grim-faced, into the unlit fireplace, drawing in air in unsteady breaths.

Joshua linked their arms together. “He’ll be OK, sweetie,” he whispered.

Colin nodded then hissed out a livid breath. “The thought of Nate being scared...” He snapped his head in a frustrated shake.

“I know. I know it torments you that you can’t be there to buck him up and make him laugh and comfort him. But he’s got David. And right now, we have to trust that his husband will be his strength.”

“And I do,” Colin muttered. He wrapped his arm around Joshua’s shoulders and drew him tight against his body. “There are a lot of chapters in our life together that I’d be happy to re-live.” He turned to Joshua, his lip curled in a sneer. “This chapter will *not* be one of them!”



THREE WEEKS LATER JOSHUA ENTERED THEIR HOME JUST IN TIME TO SEE Colin shut his laptop and set it on the coffee table. “David and Nate?” he asked, bending over the back of the couch to kiss the top of Colin’s head.

“Yeah,” Colin said, reaching behind him to hug Joshua. “Nate’s gone three days with no fever and is chomping at the bit to get out of the house. So to preserve his sanity, David’s going to take him for a drive.”

“We’re lucky that they both had relatively mild cases,” Joshua said, flopping onto the couch beside his husband.

“And that neither of us has caught the damned thing.”

“And that a vaccine is just around the corner.”

“Better than around the corner...actually here.”

Joshua nodded. “I’ll tell you what,” he said, his voice thoughtful. “After this, I have a much greater appreciation for the place that our friends have in our life.” He turned sideways on the couch and sprawled across Colin’s lap. “I’ve really missed our times together.”

Colin lifted Joshua higher in his arms and held him close. “I have too. I’m really looking forward to the first time the six of us can hang out again.”

“Or when the four of us can go to the cabin together,” Joshua mused.

“Those days will come, baby.”

“I know. And you’ve been a rock through this, Colin. You took it on like the warrior that you are.” He touched his husband’s cheek. “The perfect line that never wavers.”

“Unless he’s smashing his John Wayne mug against the fireplace,” Colin muttered. “As always, your opinion of me is skewed. Twisted, no doubt, by your admiration for my hot, well-muscled bod.”

Joshua laughed and nuzzled against Colin’s shoulder. “Let me up. I have to fix dinner.”

“I’ll help.”

Joshua stood up, then reached to card his fingers through Colin’s sandy hair. “You always do, my love.” He took Colin’s hand in his, and together they strode toward the kitchen.

ABOUT JANICE JARRELL



ABOUT JANICE JARRELL

My name is Janice Jarrell. I am a 78-year-old retired grandmother who lives in Port Angeles, WA. From the time I was six years old I knew I loved the idea of M/M romance. I started writing it even back then! But ripped the pages up and threw them away because back then such thoughts were NOT allowed! Thankfully I finally found the Internet and discovered that they're not only allowed, they're encouraged and LOVED!!

After many years of writing slash fan fiction I finally stepped into the world of original character novels and in 2018 I published my first contemporary gay romance novel, Love's Magic. I've been in love with M/M romantic fiction my whole life and am thrilled to finally be writing original character novels rather than limiting myself to fan fiction. Love's Magic, Love's Trials, and Love's Glory are compelling tales told by characters who live out their roles with passion, fervor, and integrity. I hope you enjoy reading their stories as much as I enjoy writing them.

Finally, I need to ask you a favor. If you're so inclined, could you please leave a review for Lawyer on My Case? Loved it, hated it, however you feel, I'd enjoy your feedback. As you may know, reviews can be tough to come by these days. You, the reader, have the power to make or break a book's success. Please follow me on Instagram, and Facebook for the latest updates, previews, giveaways and tons of new videos!

- Website: <https://bit.ly/2ImV9b8>
- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/lovesmagiconline/>
- Facebook Readers Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/166977024170839/>
- Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/janice.jarrell.5076>
- Goodreads: <https://bit.ly/2IChQ7a>
- Pinterest: <https://www.pinterest.com/c/boards/>
- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC89jsKCw8elwFBMiDgKJHvQ>

I can be reached at revolutionary.heart43@gmail.com and would love to hear from you.

All the best always...

Jan